

A woman with short dark hair, smiling, is seated next to a black Steinway & Sons grand piano. She is wearing a black lace top and a long black skirt with a large, vibrant floral pattern in pink, orange, and yellow. The piano is a dark grand with gold-colored hardware and the Steinway & Sons logo on the fallboard. The background is dark, and the floor is made of light-colored wood.

LORELT

Fantasia Nègre

The Piano Music of Florence Price

Samantha Ege

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|----|---------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | Fantasie Nègre No. 1 in E Minor | 10:04 |
| 2 | Fantasie Nègre No. 2 in G Minor | 08:13 |
| 3 | Untitled Sketch: No. 1 | 02:43 |
| 4 | Untitled Sketch: No. 2 | 01:25 |
| 5 | Untitled Sketch: No. 3 | 02:26 |
| 6 | Fantasie Nègre No. 3 in F Minor | 09:14 |
| 7 | Snapshots: Lake Mirror | 03:00 |
| 8 | Snapshots: Moon Behind a Cloud | 03:40 |
| 9 | Snapshots: Flame | 03:03 |
| 10 | Fantasie Nègre No. 4 in B Minor | 10:06 |
| | TOTAL | 53:56 |

In 2009, numerous pieces by Price were found in her summer home in St. Anne, Illinois. These discoveries filled many of the gaps in Price's known catalogue of around 300 compositions. With the exception of *Fantasie Nègre* No. 1 in E Minor, all of the music on this album was found in this trove.

Fantasic Nègre

‘Fantasy’

The faculty or activity of imagining impossible or improbable things.

(Cambridge English Dictionary)

‘Fantasie’

A title often given to pieces of no fixed form, implying that a composer wishes to follow the dictates of imagination.

(Oxford Dictionary of Musical Terms)

Fantasic Nègre translates to ‘Negro Fantasy.’ ‘Negro’ pertains to how Florence Price articulated the African heritage of her mixed cultural background, while ‘Fantasy,’ as both a general and musical term, conveys the effusive outpour from Price’s imagination onto the page. But its shades of meaning do not end there. *Fantasic* is German. *Nègre* is French. Price’s national voice is American, with the stories of the enslaved guiding its tone.

Price had faith that a very beautiful and very American music could emerge from the melting pot, just as, she believed, the nation itself had done. This album explores the melting pot metaphor in Price’s kaleidoscopic pianism, with pieces that display euphonic blends of African

American folksongs and German Romanticism, light sketches of fleeting moods and moments, and vivid snapshots that burst with French Impressionistic colour.

Layers of autobiography also abide in *Fantasic Nègre*. It captures the fortitude of a composer who imagined space for herself in the classical realm while the entwined racism and sexism of her society deemed this improbable, even impossible, for a Black woman. It extends to my own aspiration as a pianist to interpret this glorious repertoire and join the rich legacy of Black women who studied Price and her craft.

Fantasic Nègre is my realisation of a history that I have longed for, and to which I now belong.



Florence Price composing at the piano in her summer home in St. Anne, Illinois.

Florence Beatrice Price

(1887–1953)

Florence Beatrice Price was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, on 9 April 1887. Her father, Dr James H. Smith, was a dentist and her mother, Florence Irene Smith, was a teacher and musician. The Smiths belonged to Little Rock's Black bourgeoisie. Music flowed through the household and, by the age of four, Price was playing the piano and composing.

In 1903, Price enrolled at the New England Conservatory of Music and graduated three years later with two degrees: one in piano teaching and one in organ performance. During her time at the conservatory, she studied composition with George Whitefield Chadwick. Under Chadwick, she explored African American folk inspirations in her music. Her continued interest in this area aligned her to a long history of composers (from Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and Harry T. Burleigh to R. Nathaniel Dett and Nora Holt) who channelled their African heritage into classical forms.

Price returned to the South soon after her studies. She married a lawyer named Thomas Jewell Price. They had three children: Tommy (who died in infancy), Florence Louise and Edith Cassandra. Race riots and routine lynchings forced the family to uproot, join the Great Migration, and head northward to Chicago. There, Price found a vibrant community of African American musicians, composers, critics and sponsors.

In 1932, Price received two first-place Rodman Wanamaker Music Awards: one for her Symphony in E Minor and one for her Sonata in E Minor. 1933 saw the Chicago Symphony Orchestra give the world premiere of her first symphony, led by conductor Frederick Stock. Price's colleague, an African American woman named Maude Roberts George, entered a contract with Stock to ensure that this historic performance would come to fruition. This led to Price's recognition as the first African American woman to have a symphony performed by a major national orchestra.

Price found great support in a network of Black female classical musicians who, like Price, lived in Chicago's South Side neighbourhood. Maude Roberts George continued to support Price's programmes and assiduously covered her musical triumphs in Chicago's Black press. Composer-performer Margaret Bonds debuted works such as Price's *Piano Concerto in One Movement* and *Fantasia Nègre* No. 1 in E Minor. Bonds' mother Estella even opened her home to Price and her children following Price's divorce.

Beyond Chicago, Marian Anderson rendered Price's art songs on the world stage, while Eleanor Roosevelt praised Price's contributions to American music. However, racial and gendered discrimination ultimately precluded Price from nationwide and international acceptance in the classical mainstream during her lifetime.

Price died on 3 June 1953. The South Side had remained her home but her final resting place was an unmarked grave in Lincoln Cemetery, outside of the city. The lack of ceremony to commemorate Price's life is striking; but the deaths and dispersals of Price's advocates lend

some insight into the quietness of her demise. Price's coverage in the local Black press waned from 1940 onwards, which was the year Maude Roberts George abruptly withdrew from public life following a catastrophic accident. Additionally, by this time, Margaret Bonds had left for New York. Estella joined her shortly after. Poor health and a diminished professional network shrouded Price's final years.

And yet, Price's music endured. After her death, Price's daughter, Florence Louise Robinson, fought to bring her mother's works to greater renown. African American practitioners enshrined Price's art songs in the canonic repertoire. Mary Dengler Hudgins and Barbara Garvey Jackson established the Price archives at the University of Arkansas. Jackson, as well as the musicologist-performers Rae Linda Brown and Helen Walker-Hill, published scores, books and articles to boost the scholarly study and concert performance of Price's music. It is because of such individuals, institutions, communities and canons that Price's legacy lives on.

The Fantasies

Fantasia Nègre No. 1 in E Minor was composed on 9–10 February 1929 and inscribed, “To my talented little friend, Margaret A. Bonds.” As with the other piano solo fantasies, No. 1 begins with a slow, stately introduction, replete with Romantic pianistic gestures, from broad chords and cascading notes to rapid flourishes and pensive phrases. The main melody comes from the Negro Spiritual ‘Sinner, Please Don’t Let This Harvest Pass.’ It features the idiomatic musical language of the enslaved and circles the five notes of the pentatonic scale: E G A B D. The theme is always recognisable, but its accompaniment varies with each iteration. Sometimes we hear thin lines, other times we hear thick textures. Sometimes the accompaniment aligns to the beat, other times it dances around it. The fantasia’s folk-dance evocations led to its premiere as a ballet in December 1932. Katherine Dunham led her troupe of Black female dancers. Price and her dedicatee, Margaret Bonds, played a two-piano version for the occasion.

Fantasia Nègre No. 2 in G Minor was composed in March 1932. Price did not write the exact date on the manuscript and the performance history of this piece is hard to trace. But we can imagine that Price wrote the second fantasia in a similar vein to the first. She opens with a slow, majestic musical statement before introducing a melodic theme that is, again, based on the same pentatonic scale as her first fantasia, but transposed into a different key: G B^b C D F. The melody is Price’s original creation. She evokes the spiritual sound world, using the five-note construction to convey the tone of the mournful yet hopeful. Like the first fantasia, the form is not a strict one. What follows is a fluid theme and variations: the main melody is always identifiable, but it ebbs and flows in a sea of musical ideas. Price invokes the language of the German Romantic tradition, as her use of rippling figurations, rich harmonies and dense chords show. No. 2 gives us a glimpse into the more intense and introspective side of Price’s compositional personality.

Fantasia Nègre No. 3 in F Minor was composed on 30 March 1932. Its performance history is presently unknown, and it appears incomplete in the Price archives at the University of Arkansas. The first page contains the title and a grand opening that affirms its place among the other fantasies. The second page introduces an original theme, built upon the five characteristic notes: F A^b B^b C E^b. As with the other fantasies, the theme is sometimes encased in the minor key and at other times is harmonised in a major key. The second page ends in A^b major. No other pages follow. To find the rest of the music I had to imagine what Price might say next. Judging by the other fantasies, I expected to find loose pages of music that returned to the original minor key. But there was nothing. I re-examined the manuscript and realised that Price had more to say in the key of A^b major. I then looked for pages that continued in this key. I had to remember that fantasies carry no fixed form and that there were wider possibilities. I was then able to identify the missing half of the piece. Price's surviving papers gave me everything I needed to reconstruct and complete the third fantasia.

Fantasia Nègre No. 4 in B Minor was composed on 5 April 1932. Price received an honourable mention for this piece from the 1932 Rodman Wanamaker Music Contest. On one of her manuscripts, she marked the work 'Out of the Crucible,' which seemed to foreshadow her own triumphs over adversity. (She took first prize with her piano sonata and first symphony, and made history a year later with her Chicago Symphony Orchestra debut.) The fourth fantasia received its Chicago premiere on 15 June 1937, but by that time it had undergone several revisions and simplifications. The original fantasia, however, is colossal. Price presents a ceremonious, suspense-building opening, before introducing an original folk-inflected theme based on the familiar five notes: B D E F[#] A. The variations are expansive, and the accompaniment is technically demanding. A light and lyrical middle section in F[#] major unfolds, like a Romantic song without words. Such writing is a signature of Price's compositional idiom. The original and complete version of the fourth fantasia reflects the diverse and unfettered palette of Price's artistic expression.

Sketches & Snapshots

While looking for the second, third and fourth fantasies, I came across three additional untitled (and undated) pieces for solo piano. They were numbered in a way that suggested an incomplete set: No. 2: *Andantino Cantabile*, No. 3: *Allegro Molto*, and No. 4: *Allegro*. As I played through them, I heard three self-contained miniatures, each with their own story. They displayed another dimension of Price's compositional voice, beyond her Black folkloric style. I began to think of the three works as untitled sketches: three scenes open to the interpretation and imagination of the listener. *Untitled Sketch* No. 1 was, to me, the image of pastoral tranquillity: a garden stroll, an afternoon frolic and a return to calm. *Untitled Sketch* No. 2 represented play and boundless energy. *Untitled Sketch* No. 3 was restless, with its 5/4 time signature and ever-searching melody. Even in her most lightly drawn sketches, Price's expressivity abounded.

Price assembled *Snapshots: Lake Mirror, Moon Behind a Cloud* & *Flame* as a suite on 13 October 1952. Price composed *Flame* on 14 January 1949. Later that year, on 6 February, Price's colleague and fellow pianist Marc

D'Albert gave *Flame's* New York premiere. A few months afterwards, she wrote *Moon Behind a Cloud* (17 July). *Lake Mirror*, composed in 1952, completed the set. *Snapshots* captures the natural elements of water, air and fire. Price's musical language echoes the style of Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel that acquired the label Impressionism. Dreamlike temporalities and ambiguous tonalities (coloured with whole-tone scales and extended harmonies) aptly portray the aqueous, amorphous and luminous characteristics of each movement. In *Lake Mirror*, a shimmering melody rises to the surface as countermelodies in lower voices form an undercurrent, assisting the movement and flow. The hazy harmonies, fluctuating tempo and varied rhythms in *Moon Behind a Cloud* conjure up the enigmatic mystique of the night-time sky. *Flame's* relentless chord changes, vigorous rhythms, and bold dynamics bring the suite to a fiery close. *Lake Mirror, Moon Behind a Cloud* & *Flame* are snapshots of auras, atmospheres, colours and contours. They are some of Price's last musical expressions before her death in 1953.



An undated photograph of Florence Price in later life with her daughter Florence Louise Robinson looking at flowers in an outdoor garden.

Acknowledgements

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The Ambache Charitable Trust is active in raising the profile of women composers.

Sleeve notes by Dr Samantha Ege

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Florence Beatrice Price photos
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Samantha Ege

Dr Samantha Hannah Oboakorevue Ege is a musicologist and pianist. She was born in Guildford, Surrey (which is also where this recording was made) and shares Nigerian and Jamaican heritage. She started playing the piano at the age of three and learnt about Black women in classical music sixteen years later during her undergraduate study at McGill University. Florence Price was the subject of her PhD at the University of York, UK. After completing her doctoral studies, she was appointed the Lord Crewe Junior Research Fellow in Music at Lincoln College, Oxford. There, she continues to develop further writings and performance-based research on Price. *Fantasia Nègre* is her second album. She released *Four Women: Music for solo piano by Price, Kaprálová, Bilsland and Bonds* in 2018 with Wave Theory Records.



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