

Who was ... Florence B. Price?

Florence Beatrice Price (née Smith): composer

Born: April 9, 1887 in Little Rock, AK

Died: June 3, 1953 in Chicago, IL

Florence Beatrice Smith was the younger of two surviving children of Dr. James H. and Florence Irene Smith. A third child died at a young age. Dr. Smith was a prominent dentist, with both Black and white patients, and a well-known community activist in Little Rock, Arkansas. Florence Irene Smith (née Gulliver) was an amateur singer and pianist, a music teacher and, later a successful businesswoman. Both of Florence Irene Smith's parents had mixed black-white ancestry.



Florence Beatrice, known as Bea or Bee within her family, was very successful throughout her time in school. She attended Little Rock Capital High School where she studied Greek, Latin, algebra, and history as well as music. She graduated as valedictorian at age 14. She then studied music at the New England Conservatory in Boston and graduated in 3 years with a Teachers Diploma in Piano and a Soloists Diploma in Organ. At the time, it was typical for students to complete one of these diplomas in 4 years.

Florence Beatrice married Thomas J. Price, a successful attorney, in 1912. The couple had three children – Thomas, Jr., Florence Louise, and Edith Cassandra. She divorced Mr. Price in 1931 after the family had moved to Chicago and Mr. Price became abusive. She married Arnett Pusey, a successful business executive in Little Rock, shortly after her divorce. The couple separated in 1934 but did not divorce. Ms. Price died from a cerebral hemorrhage in 1953 in Chicago at the end of a 10-day hospital stay.

Seven things to know about Florence B. Price

1. Racial identity. While at the New England Conservatory, Ms. Price “passed” as Spanish for a year. At the insistence of her mother, who was concerned about discrimination in Boston, she listed her hometown as Pueblo, Mexico instead of Little Rock. However, she did not “pass” after that. In fact, throughout her career her music showed a strong racial identity as an African American. Her work was influenced by European composers of the Romantic Era, such as Dvorak and Tchaikovsky, and by African American spirituals and folk songs. Describing her own music, she said “Having Colored blood in my veins, and having been born in the South, I believe I can say that I understand real Negro music as well as if not better than the music I studied in the East” (referring to the New England Conservatory).
2. Overcoming obstacles. As a young girl, Ms. Price briefly considered studying medicine but saw insurmountable obstacles for a Black woman living in early 20th century America.

Instead, she pursued a career as a composer at a time when “serious” music was dominated by men (including Copland, Elgar, Stravinsky, and Bernstein). Despite the “handicaps” of being a woman and Black, she went on to have a prolific career. She composed works for orchestra, chamber ensembles, piano, organ, and voice; she wrote songs and popular music; and she arranged spirituals for both voice and instrumental performance. She was also a frequent performer as a pianist and organist – including work as a church organist and as an accompanist for silent movies. And she was a well-known music teacher who had a particular talent for writing teaching pieces for children. Click [HERE](#) for excerpts from several of her compositions.

3. The Great Migration. Ms. Price joined the [Great Migration](#), moving from Little Rock to Chicago in 1925. The reason for the move was very personal. After the alleged killing of a young white girl by a Black man, local whites wanted to respond by killing a young Black girl. The Prices were a well-known and prominent family in Little Rock and worried that their youngest daughter might be a target of white retribution. In Chicago, Ms. Price had perhaps her most productive period, joining in the [Chicago Black Renaissance](#) that included artistic luminaries such as Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Louis Armstrong, and Mahalia Jackson.
4. Breakout. As a composer, her breakout came with the 1932 Rodman Wannamaker Competition, established by the Robert Curtis Ogden Association and the National Association of Negro Musicians to provide prizes to African American composers. Ms. Price won first prize for her recently completed Symphony in E Minor (\$500) and for her Piano Sonata in E Minor (\$250) plus “honorable mention” for two other compositions. The awards brought her national recognition. One result is that Frederick Stock, then conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra premiered her Symphony in E Minor during June of 1933 as part of the [Century of Progress International Exposition](#) held in Chicago. It was the first composition by a Black woman to be performed by a major orchestra.
5. Marian Anderson. One of Ms. Price’s spiritual arrangements, “My Soul’s Been Anchored in the Lord,” was arranged for, and made famous by, Marian Anderson. Ms. Anderson sang the song many times throughout her career, from her 1939 performance on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to her 1957 tour of Russia. Click [HERE](#) for an early recording of Ms. Anderson singing the song.
6. Rediscovery. Ms. Price has experienced a musical rediscovery. After her death in 1953, her music was largely forgotten until a 2009 when a trove of her musical manuscripts and other documents were found in an abandoned and dilapidated house slated for renovation in St. Anne, Illinois, a small town (approximately 1200 people in 2020) about 75 miles south of Chicago that Ms. Price had used as a summer home. The trove included many pieces that had been considered lost, including Symphony in D Minor, her fourth and final symphony. Her full catalog of music was published in 2019 and in 2021 Laura Downes, a classical pianist, began [Rising Sun Music](#) with the goal of “reflecting a stunning array of musical voices that redefine the American canon,” voices that included Ms.

Price. And the Catalyst Quartet featured Ms. Price in volume 2 (2022) of its [Uncovered](#) series.

7. [Caged Bird](#). The title of a 2015 documentary about her is [Caged Bird: The Life and Music of Florence B. Price](#). The title echoes *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, a 1969 autobiography by Maya Angelou. The phrase “caged bird” is taken from *Sympathy*, an 1899 poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar in which the poet says that the caged bird’s song is “not a carol of joy or glee but a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core.” Click [HERE](#) for the words of the poem. Click [HERE](#) for a recitation of the poem by Maya Angelou.

Connecting the dots

Florence B. Price does not stand alone. She is part of a long line of American Black composers of “serious” music, from Francis Johnson (1792-1944) to George Walker (1922-2018) to Wynton Marsalis (1961-present). Click [HERE](#) for a list of Black composers who have influenced classical music history and [HERE](#) for list of contemporary Black composers who are worth listening to.

To learn more about Florence B. Price

1. Rae Linda Brown (2020). *The heart of a woman: The life and music of Florence B. Price*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
2. [Caged Bird: The Life and Music of Florence B. Price](#). Available to rent or purchase through Vimeo.
3. Michael J. Cooper (n.d.) [Biography of Florence Beatrice Price](#). [florenceprice.com](#).
4. Alisha Lola Jones (2019). [Lift Every Voice: Marian Anderson, Florence B. Price and the Sound of Black Sisterhood](#). NPR.
5. [Price, Florence B., 1887-1953](#). [encyclopedia.com](#)
6. Alex Ross (January 29, 2018). [The rediscovery of Florence Price: How an African-American’s works were saved from destruction](#). *The New Yorker*.