

Fantasia Nègre: The Piano Music of Florence Price

Start time: 7.30pm

Approximate running time: 105 minutes including a 20-minute interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Programme

Florence Price *Fantasia Nègre* No 4

Florence Price *Fantasia Nègre* No 3

Margaret Bonds *Spiritual Suite*

1. The Valley of the Bones
2. The Bells
3. Troubled Water

Florence Price *Fantasia Nègre* No 1

Vítězslava Kaprálová *Sonata Appassionata* (UK premiere)

1. Maestoso
2. Theme and Variations

Florence Price *Fantasia Nègre* No 2

After initially bonding over a mutual obsession with Florence Price in 2018, Elizabeth de Brito sits down with Samantha Ege to talk about her ground-breaking work championing Black female composers.

A pianist and scholar, Ege first heard of Florence Price and Margaret Bonds in 2009, when their powerful music stopped her in her tracks as an undergrad exchange student at Canada's McGill University. It was in 2016 when she performed a recital on Women in Music at the British High Commission in Singapore that this passion actually lit the path to her career as a concert pianist, and she's been combining her research and performance of marginalised composers ever since.

In 1933, Florence Price became the first Black female composer to have a symphony premiered by a major national orchestra, when the Chicago Symphony Orchestra played her Symphony No 1. At the same concert, her friend and contemporary Margaret Bonds also made history as the first Black female soloist with the orchestra. (She would later go on to premiere Price's Piano Concerto too). Florence Price and Margaret Bonds together were leaders in the Black Chicago Renaissance movement in 1930's USA. There was a real uplifting of Black folk songs during this era, with both Price and Bonds paving the way by incorporating them into Western classical music. Their pride in their history and determination to create a new modern Black voice created music that still resonates today. In a period of so much strife and uncertainty this programme has a resounding theme of friendship and support. *Fantasia Nègre* No 1 in E minor, which you'll hear at the end of the first half of tonight's programme, is dedicated to Margaret Bonds, and in turn *Spiritual Suite* shows the legacy of Price's influence.

At the same time as Price and Bonds were making waves in the US, Vitezslava Kaprálová was a rising star in the European composition scene. Her career was tragically cut short by her death at just 25 years old, yet she left an enviable body of great work behind.

Ege presents the UK premiere of Kaprálová's extraordinary *Sonata Appassionata*.

Why did you choose these pieces for this recital?

The *Fantasia Nègres* are the cornerstones of my new album and it was my ambition to have the complete set. *Fantasia Nègre* No 3 in F Minor was previously thought to be incomplete, only the first two pages were identified. Through my research into the Price archives at the University of Arkansas, I was able to identify the rest of the music and then reconstruct the entire piece. Having a whole narrative can be so rare for historical Black women. Presenting the four *Fantasies* is a way of presenting a complete voice around Price, just like we have the complete etudes of Chopin. It's the same with the now complete *Spiritual Suite* by Margaret Bonds.

Kaprálová's music really speaks to my soul. I chose Kaprálová's *Sonata Appassionata* because it is such a meaty work. As a musicologist, I am definitely known for my work on Florence Price and Margaret Bonds, but I'm a pianist

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too. As a pianist, I want to show my versatility and breadth of interests. Presenting this lesser-known work that resonates so deeply with me is a really important way of connecting with an audience.

What is a *Fantasia Nègre* and why is it so unique?

The *Fantasia* is a familiar genre for pianists. It's free flowing, expansive, a very magnificent display. This is Price claiming her identity as a brilliant composer of classical literature. *Nègre* relates to Negro, a term not used today, but used in the past and claimed with pride by Black people. I use the term Negro as a term of empowerment, to keep Price in the spotlight in her own terms. These pieces are between 8 to 10 minutes long, covering a variety of pianistic challenges. You'll hear these cascading patterns, very technically virtuosic ideas. The first *Fantasia* is based on an actual spiritual, *Please Don't Let This Harvest Pass*. The others are based around original themes. *Fantasia Nègre* is Price creating this genre that really showcases African American folk melodies and idioms.

Up until last year only 'Troubled Water' from *Spiritual Suite* had been published. This piece is so often performed and recorded but what is it about the *Suite* as a whole that's so special, and what does it mean to perform it?

In the past, I'd only performed 'Troubled Water' on its own so it's really exciting to present the entire suite. We don't have many easily available piano works by Bonds. Showing this sense of complete narrative and the legacy of Price's influence in her music is really important as a next-gen composer of the Black Renaissance. 'Troubled Water' is such a captivating piece but I also think it needs a little bit of build-up. By playing the whole spiritual suite, you get a feel for what Margaret Bonds is doing. She takes these Negro spirituals and situates them in this very diverse pianistic language, including the blues, jazz, classical forms and very romantic gestures. It does create a nice sense of build-up to this spectacular finale.

Florence Price has received a lot of attention over the past year but why is she significant?

She was significant because in her own time people knew that she was important. This isn't just us retrospectively looking to elevate a Black woman because of the lack of attention Black women have in classical music today. During her time she was celebrated, particularly within Black classical music communities, but also the white mainstream orchestras championed her work. She was in dialogue with them and they recognised her genius.

Lots of the literature just talks about Margaret Bonds as a student of Price. Can you tell me more about her importance as a composer and pianist?

Whilst Margaret Bonds was a student of Florence Price, they became friends and colleagues. Bonds took flight, moving to New York and studying at Juilliard before moving to LA. She had her own vision as a composer, writing for many genres in classical music. Bonds was also a trailblazing virtuoso pianist and recorded many pieces for public radio. Bonds persevered despite numerous challenges and left us a great many beautiful works.

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Performers

Samantha Ege piano

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