

# Samantha Ege: Black Renaissance

## Music, Lives and Legacy

**Start time:** 7.30pm

**Approximate end time:** 9.20pm, including a 20-minute interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

### Programme

#### *Introduction*

**Robert Nathaniel Dett** 'The Day Break Charioteer' from *Tropic Winter*

*Reading: Zenobia Powell Perry speaks about studying with Robert Nathaniel Dett (2003)*

**Zenobia Powell Perry** *Homage*

*Reading: Helen Hagan in the 'Philadelphia Tribune' (1915)*

**Helen Hagan** Piano Concerto in C minor (arr two pianos)

**Samuel Coleridge-Taylor** *Moorish Dance*

*Reading: Florence Price reflects on American music (1938)*

**Nora Holt** *Negro Dance*

*Reading: Florence Price letter to Serge Koussevitzky (1943)*

**Florence Price** Piano Concerto in One Movement (arr two pianos)

**The Black Renaissance was a vital movement in the early 20th century. Tonight we celebrate that legacy through music and words.**

In the United States, the first half of the 20th century was a time of great musical impact which celebrated African American folk tunes and spirituals while incorporating them into late 19th-century Romantic practices. It was a period of cultural rebirth that brought together different aspects of life such as music, theatre, art, dance and literature. This era was known as the Black Renaissance. Tonight's recital, *Black Renaissance: Music, Lives and Legacy*, celebrates the great pioneers of this time including Florence Price, Nora Holt and Helen Hagan – in addition to Robert Nathaniel Dett and Zenobia Powell Perry.

This creative period influenced composers in the UK, too: most famously, the prominent British composer and conductor Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875–1912). He exhibited extraordinary musical talent at an early age and went on to study at the Royal College of Music alongside Gustav Holst and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Elgar was a great admirer. Many of his compositions embraced African continental and diasporic cultures, such as *Moorish Dance*, Op 55 (1904). Samantha Ege reflects that the term 'Moor' has 'developed derogatory connotations in relation to people from North Africa. However, this composition restores pride and power with its grandiloquent style and expressive gestures.' The piece begins 'with a suspenseful piano opening in a minor key that bursts into a forte flourish.' It features a 'highly syncopated main theme before a rhythmic passage that imitates the sound of horses that medieval Northern Africans rode.'

Meanwhile in the United States, singer, composer and music critic Nora Holt (c1885–1974) was born in Kansas and was the first African American to receive a master's degree in music in 1918. During her European travels, Holt's manuscripts were lost or stolen, which is why, out of some 200 compositions, only two self-published pieces remain, including *Negro Dance*. The work exhibits characteristics of a ragtime with its rhythm and jolly spirit.

Praised by Nora Holt for her 'extraordinary attainments and wonderful fortification of technique and musicianship', Helen Hagan (1891–1964) was an American pianist and music educator from New Hampshire. She was the first known Black woman to graduate from Yale School of Music in 1912. The same year, Hagan performed her C minor Piano Concerto with the New Haven Symphony Orchestra.

The concerto opens with a bold minor theme featuring grand chords in the piano's lower register and intricate passage work. This is followed by a second theme which showcases the tender side of Hagan's compositional voice.

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She went on to perform the two-piano arrangement of her concerto, which brought praise for her virtuosic skill. It was common for concertos by Black Renaissance composers to be arranged for two pianos due to discrimination, limited access to orchestras and a lack of resources in Black classical communities.

The Concerto in One Movement by Florence Price (1887–1953) was also arranged for two pianos; she gave its premiere in Chicago in 1934. It's dedicated to Price's friend and patron Helen Armstrong Andrews. It comprises three distinct parts: a grand introduction followed by a virtuosic cadenza, a lyrical adagio section, and an allegretto which draws inspiration from the African American juba, a folk dance that was popular in the years before the Civil War.

Black Canadian American composer Robert Nathaniel Dett (1882–1943) was also influenced by African American spirituals and folk songs and used them as the foundations for his piano and choral works. Dett drew influence from Samuel Coleridge-Taylor as well as his contemporary Percy Grainger. In a letter to the latter, Dett wrote of his seven-movement suite, *Tropic Winter* (1938) 'I am rather proud of this suite, as I think it represents an advance in musical thought for me ...' The work strays from Dett's previous folk influences and 'The Day Break Charioteer' features a notably modernist approach.

One of Dett's students was the Oklahoma native, Zenobia Powell Perry (1908–2004). In 1990, Perry wrote *Homage* for the 90th birthday of her teacher, fellow composer William L Dawson. The main theme comes from one of his favourite spirituals – I Been 'Buked and I Been Scorned. Samantha Ege points to the use of 'blue notes to flavour the harmonies'. At the close, Perry revisits one of the earlier, blues-inflected passages 'as if to show that the music has not strayed too far from home'.

What does she want the audience to take away from this recital? Samantha states: 'It's one thing to learn about a composer's biography and to understand the social, cultural and political conditions they were living in, but it's another to hear their voice under your fingertips,' she reflects, 'to feel connected through the responsibility you have to interpret and communicate their intentions to an audience who may or may not be familiar with their music. So along this journey, I also want to share with you what inspires me about the repertoire, what I like about how it sounds and how it feels to play.'

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## Performers

**Samantha Ege** piano  
**Artina McCain** piano  
**Adjoa Andoh** narrator

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