

Uncaged: Contextualizing and Appreciating the  
Art Songs of Florence B. Price

by

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Submitted to Dr. Brian Horne  
of the Jacobs School of Music in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Music,  
Indiana University,  
July 2016

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*When he beats his bars and he would be free.  
It is not a carol of joy or glee  
But a pray'r that he sends from his heart's deep core  
But a plea that upward to Heaven he flings,  
I know why the caged bird sings!*<sup>1</sup>

Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Sympathy" (set by Price) resonates with Florence Price's struggle for acceptance as a black female composer. In a 1943 letter to Sergei Koussevitsky, Price stated "To begin with I have two handicaps—those of sex and race. I am a woman; and I have some Negro blood in my veins."<sup>2</sup> Though starkly aware of the social barriers facing her, she went on to request that Koussevitsky and many of his contemporaries view her music with fresh eyes. Today, the classical vocal canon excludes works by black female composers such as Price, and this can be attributed to the "caged" status of her artistry. Although Price broke new ground with the 1933 premiere of her *Symphony in E minor* with the Chicago Symphony, her treasury of sophisticated songs has been largely forgotten. In addition, scholars have not completed the work of placing Florence Price's song repertory in the context of the overall development of the American song idiom. An exploration of Price's wide-ranging stylistic influences reveals that Price not only followed an "Americanist" framework as suggested by Ruth C. Friedberg but created a uniquely incorporative aesthetic.<sup>3</sup> This aesthetic transcended the limitations of race and gender, and bridged the gap between European song composition (largely French and German lineages) and black vernacular music. By expanding the narrative of Price's

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<sup>1</sup> Florence B. Price, *44 Art Songs and Spirituals: Medium/High Voice*, ed. Richard Heard (Fayetteville, AR: ClarNan Editions, 2015), 119-121.

<sup>2</sup> Florence B. Price, *Florence Price Symphonies Nos. 1 and 2*, ed. Rae Linda Brown and Wayne Shirley, vol. 19, *Music of the United States of America* (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 2008), xxxv.

<sup>3</sup> Ruth C. Friedberg and Robin Fisher, "Settings by Six "Americanists,"" in *American Art Song and American Poetry* (2nd ed. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012). 49-65.

compositional style, exploring her milieu, and through analyzing some of the songs most representative of her innovation I hope to build a foundation for further research surrounding the contributions of black female composers during the New Negro Renaissance. An exploration of Price's life and influences provides valuable context for analysis.

*The Life and Social Milieu of Florence Price*

Her Life

Florence B. Price was born "Florence Beatrice Smith" to Dr. James Smith and Florence Irene Gulliver in 1887.<sup>4</sup> Price had the benefit of having a black father and a mulatto mother. Dr. Smith was a successful dentist in Little Rock, AK, which was known as a haven for black business owners during Reconstruction.<sup>5</sup> Price's fair skin and upper class status no doubt afforded her a certain level of social mobility. From 1903 to 1906 she attended the New England Conservatory where she studied composition with George Chadwick.<sup>6</sup> She graduated a year early with highest honors earning a Teacher's Diploma in piano and a Soloist's Diploma in organ studies.<sup>7</sup> After finishing school, Price returned to Arkansas to teach piano and organ lessons.<sup>8</sup> After her father's death, she became head of Clark Atlanta University's music department in 1910.<sup>9</sup> In 1912, she left her job and returned to Little Rock to marry attorney Thomas Jewell Price.<sup>10</sup> During her second stint in Little Rock, Price maintained a private studio and gave birth to two children.<sup>11</sup> Though she gave up her university position, she still maintained interest

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<sup>4</sup> Price *Symphonies*, xvi.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, xx.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii.

in composition. She wrote piano teaching pieces. Eventually, she experimented with larger compositional forms and took advantage of the growing list of foundation prizes for musical composition.<sup>12</sup> She continued educational pursuits through the late 1920s, and took many trips to Chicago Musical College to continue studies in composition.<sup>13</sup> Owing to her husband's burgeoning law practice and the 1927 lynching of a middle-class black man in Little Rock, the Prices relocated to Chicago. The 1930s yielded Price's most well-known and eclectic pieces including the Wanamaker Prize-winning *Symphony in E minor* (1932-33) and *Piano Concerto in One Movement* (1934).<sup>14</sup> Price went on to pen over 300 compositions, including forty-four published songs.<sup>15</sup> She was the mentor to the talented pianist and composer Margaret Bonds, and served as a major presence in the National Association for Negro Musicians (NANM).<sup>16</sup> She was well-respected by her contemporary black artists. She and William Grant Still were well acquainted, since they were both from Little Rock, AK, and she wrote "My Soul's Been Anchored in de Lord" and "Trouble Done Come My Way" for the great contralto Marian Anderson. Most notably, though, she was the first black woman to have a work played by a major orchestra. Her example shone as beacon to future black composers such as Undine Smith Moore, Margaret Bonds, Betty Jackson King, and others. Though Price died in 1953, her legacy lives on through the works of these black female composers. Price's resume certainly inspires

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiv.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, xxviii.

<sup>15</sup> James Greeson and Dale Carpenter, *The Caged Bird: The Life and music of Florence B. Price*, narrated by Julia Sampson, (2015; Little Rock: University of Arkansas Press, 2015), DVD.

<sup>16</sup> *Price Symphonies*, xl.

For a more detailed biography of Florence Price, refer to Rae Linda Brown's biographical sketch found at the beginning of her new scores of *Symphonies 1 and 3*. Scholars of Price are indebted to the biographical research conducted by Brown at the University of Arkansas's Archives of Price's letters, autograph scores, and compositional sketches.

confidence in her abilities as a composer. Why is it, then, that her songs are so rarely performed today?

#### “New Negro” Aesthetics

Alain Locke’s “The New Negro” is widely considered to be the fathering text of the Harlem and Chicago Renaissances.<sup>17</sup> The guiding principle of Locke’s text is racial uplift by means of social capital. This social capital is gained by blacks making contributions to American art, culture, and commerce at a level comparable (or exceeding) their white counterparts. In *The Negro and His Music* Locke posits that Negro Spirituals must be the basis for successful black contributions to classical music. Since Locke was not trained as a music theorist, his aesthetic values are limited to direct quotations of the spirituals. Locke was not alone in his hypothesis, though. In “The Souls of Black Folk” W.E.B. DuBois spends an entire chapter describing the power of what he calls the “Sorrow Songs.”<sup>18</sup> Locke had this to say about New Negro music:

Folk song is a hardy growth; art music, a sensitive one. As Negro music progresses to its maturer [sic] stages, it will require more sun and air than rain and sub-soil. Without favorable nurture and appreciation [sic] it can never attain full stature and flowerage. Cultural opportunity and appreciation are just what for the moment the Negro musician critically needs, especially the creative musician, and to the degree that these are extended, the future development of Negro music will be possible, and only to that extent. Certain it is, that with proper encouragement and sober cultivation, Negro music can enrich both our national and our racial culture. We have seen how it already has.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music and Negro Art: Past and Present*, (New York: Arno Press, 1969).

Locke’s *The Negro and His Music* is the major aesthetic text regarding music of the Negro Renaissance. Though Locke was not a music scholar, he was a prolific philosopher and cultural critic. He was the first African American to earn a PhD from Harvard University, and taught at Howard University for most of his life.

<sup>18</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, "XIV. The Sorrow Songs. Du Bois, W. E. B. 1903. *The Souls of Black Folk*," <http://www.bartleby.com/114/14.html> (accessed June 19, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Locke, 140.

As noble as Locke's intentions may have been, they bear the odor of class privilege, and the entire text ignores jazz, blues, and ragtime as a tool for racial uplift. The concert spirituals of Burleigh are certainly more attractive to the black elites of the New Negro period, but what of the blue collar blacks of Harlem and Chicago? Locke was not completely pleased with Price's *Symphony in E minor* because it did not directly quote Negro Spirituals.

Mrs. Price's work vindicates the Negro composer's right, at choice, to go up to Parnassus by the broad high road of classicism rather than the narrower, more hazardous but often more rewarding path of racialism. At the pinnacle, the paths converge and the attainment becomes in the last analysis, neither racial nor national, but universal music.<sup>20</sup>

Price's musical language in the *Symphony* incorporated juba dance rhythms, African drumming, and extended syncopation. Price's symphonies—a Eurocentric form which embodies the ideals of the European Enlightenment Era—are steeped in her Afrocentric musical references. Price's fusion of both aesthetic fields embodies a more nuanced understanding of racial uplift. In fact, Price said "It seems to me to be no more impossible to conceive of Negroid music devoid of the spiritualistic theme on the one hand than strongly syncopated rhythms of the juba on the other."<sup>21</sup> Price attempted to bridge the divisions of class that actually led to the movement's demise in the 1930s.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 115

<sup>21</sup> Rae Linda Brown, "William Grant Still, Florence Price, and William Dawson: Echoes of the Harlem Renaissance," in *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance: A Collection of Essays*, by Samuel A. Floyd, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 82.

Price's 1940 letter to Koussevitzky was one in a series of letters written to prominent conductors of the day. It is believed that Price desired to have a premiere at Boston Symphony, the city of her alma mater. This dream was unfortunately never realized.

<sup>22</sup> Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 133.

The Harlem Renaissance began to wane in the 1930s, but the Chicago Renaissance lasted from the 1930s to the 1950s. The critical difference in this movement was the influence of the Great Migration on the expansion of musical forms in Chicago. The influx of freed slaves seeking the security of the industrial workforce in the northern metropolises in the late 1800s led to a comingling of southern and northern musical styles, especially in the more easily accessible Chicago area. The country blues and slave songs more peacefully existed side-by-side in Chicago Renaissance culture than in the Harlem Renaissance. Moreover, the Chicago flowering was marked by extensive community organizing and arts patronage spearheaded primarily by black female philanthropists and public school teachers. Price's music reflects high and low musics and similarly engages with both classes of black folk. My analysis of "Sympathy" will exemplify her ability to paint a broader picture of the black musical experience during the New Negro Movement.

The New Negro movement espoused a clear narrative of the place of the Negro woman. One author said, "Alain Locke's archetype appears to be not only decidedly male, but also exceedingly optimistic."<sup>23</sup> In Du Bois' "The Damnation of Women" he cited great female artists and the importance of suffrage, but ended with a re-emphasis of motherhood as a primary role.<sup>24</sup> An article in *The Messenger* charged black women to "create and keep alive in the breast of black men, a holy and consuming passion to break with slave traditions of the past."<sup>25</sup> These three narratives relegate black women to the role of a "race woman" who must put her innovation aside for the betterment of black men. There is a sense of trickle-down racial

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<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Wilks, "Black Modernism in Retrospect: Dorothy West's New (Negro) Woman," in *Race, Gender, and Comparative Black Modernism*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 146.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

economy at play in the narrative of the “New Negro.” The Negro Renaissance philosophers carried a sense that if the talented and privileged upper classes proved themselves equal to whites, the resulting cultural capital would trickle down to lower-class blacks. The rhetoric of the time period explains much of Locke’s mixed reaction to Price’s symphony. In relation to the New Negro movement, Price cannot be called a major leader. She was tethered by her status as a woman and her taste for a more nuanced style of composition than the male New Negro aesthetic called for. Her compositional style embodies a black nationalistic aesthetic which embraces black folk music and brings it into dialogue with Western art music. Rae Linda Brown expressed this sentiment in her research on Florence Price’s orchestral music. She said, “Her [Price’s] particular style demonstrates that an African American composer could transform received musical forms yet articulate a unique American artistic and cultural self.”<sup>26</sup> Running parallel to movements within the black intellectual community was an equally compelling dialogue about art song.

#### Art Song Developments in Modernist America

The aesthetic identity of art song of the early-mid 1900s was expressed in two distinctive strains: Americanism and traditionalism.<sup>27</sup> Americanists such as Price, William Grant Still, and Arthur Farwell included Anglo-American folk music, Spirituals, and Native American melodies in their songs. Adversely, George Chadwick and Charles Griffes fell into the traditionalist camp. George Chadwick’s education in Leipzig with

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<sup>26</sup> Rae Linda Brown, 1986. "The Orchestral Music of Florence B. Price (1888-1953)," in *Black American Music Symposium: August 9-- August 15, 1985, Ann Arbor, 1985*, 58-62, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan), 58.

<sup>27</sup> Friedberg, 49.

The “two-strain” theory was posited by Friedberg and Fisher in reference to “traditionalists” vs. “Americanists.” Price was included as an “Americanist,” but the author characterizes her style as traditional.

Rheinberger grounded him in a largely Brahmsian harmonic sensibility. Griffes heavily borrowed from French Impressionists with his languid piano lines. As a pupil of George Chadwick, Florence Price no doubt benefitted from extensive counterpoint and orchestration exercises rooted in a European systematic approach to musical composition.

Douglas Moore, Ernst Bacon, Still, Price, and other song composers were striving to create and define a distinctly American sound in art song. The educational options were limited mostly to teachers educated abroad in Germany or France, and these composers took their formal education and attempted to infuse it with new techniques. These techniques ranged from the borrowing of pentatonic melodies in Farwell's *Native American Songs*, to the concert setting of "My Soul's Been Anchored in da Lord" by Price.

Black composers of the time fell into the "black nationalist" school of composition. This school is thought to be spearheaded by Harry Burleigh's success in concert spiritual arranging during the 1910s and 20s. His spiritual settings became so popular that they quickly became set pieces for recital encores and final groups. Spirituals had made their way into the concert hall, thus black composers had made their first foray into racial uplift of the spirituals. To this day, the spiritual settings of Burleigh are performed with far more frequency than his art songs. The natural next step in a black nationalist lineage was the use of spiritual melodies as motivic material as in Still's *Afro-American Symphony* (1930). Price experimented further with creating "pseudo-spirituals" such as "At the Feet o' Jesus" with text by Langston Hughes. Price sets Hughes's dialect poem with an equally vernacular music complete with pentatonic melodies and Gospel-inflected grace notes (see Figures 1 and 2). As Bethany Jo Smith expressed this sentiment, saying, "The black art song is neither completely assimilated into white America, nor

is it solely rooted in African tradition. Instead it is an art form drawing from both American and African literary, musical, cultural, and social traditions.”<sup>28</sup>

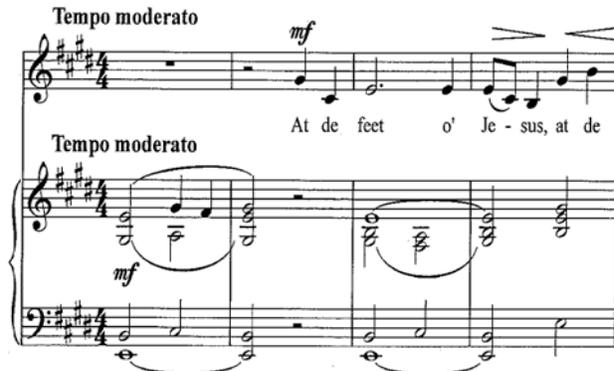


Figure 1: "Feet o' Jesus" Pentatonic Theme<sup>29</sup>



Figure 2: "Feet o' Jesus" Gospel (la-sol) Grace Note<sup>30</sup>

Price continued the black nationalist agenda by setting prominent black poets like Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, and James Weldon Johnson. Smith labels Price as a “traditionalist,” by virtue of her expressive melodies, use of chromaticism within a diatonic framework, and use of text painting.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, she showed compositional variety that shifted appropriately with the expressive mode of the text. In “Hold Fast to Dreams,” for

<sup>28</sup> Bethany Jo Smith, "Song to the Dark Virgin: Race and Gender in Five Art Songs of Florence B. Price," (master's thesis, University of Cincinnati, 2007), in OhioLink Electronic Theses and Dissertations, [http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc\\_num=ucin1186770755](http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=ucin1186770755) (accessed May 18, 2016), 40.

<sup>29</sup> Price *44 Art Songs*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>31</sup> Smith, 44.

example, Price begins with a piano prelude reminiscent of church organ music in a spry D-major. The setting juxtaposes a nearly saccharine accompaniment to “Hold fast to dreams” with a sudden Debussy-like diminished sequence on “for if dreams die” (see Figures 3 and 4). Her ability to bring such adverse musical topics into a cohesive musical whole is the treasure of Price’s art song style. This ability to link vernacular and European musical traditions is mirrored in the works of Ives, and later with Copland’s *Old American Songs*. Without the adventurous experiments of composers like Price, it is hard to imagine the distinctly “American” sound of Copland.

Figure 3: "Hold Fast to Dreams" Organ-like Accompaniment<sup>32</sup>

Figure 4: "Hold Fast to Dreams" Mediant Sequence with Tritone Dissonance<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Price 44 *Art Songs*, 48.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

*The Patchwork Influences of Price: A Stylistic Exploration*

Aldrich Adkins posited a theory of black art song stylistic periods by musical sophistication and political agenda.<sup>34</sup> The first period (1900-34) songs were simplistic, and second period songs (1934-49) embodied “protest and vindication,” and composers began to incorporate black musical idioms in an economical and sophisticated fashion.<sup>35</sup> Adkins’s proposal is intriguing as it links compositional style to the political agendas of the time. He assigns the following characteristics to early 20<sup>th</sup> Century black art song:

1. Misplaced rhythmic accent or extended syncopation
2. Use of a minor scale with a raised or omitted sixth scale degree
3. Modality or pentatonicism<sup>36</sup>
4. Flatted third or seventh scale degrees
5. Use of a major scale with a flatted seventh scale degree
6. Overlapped antiphony
7. Repetitious melody and rhythm<sup>37</sup>

These characteristics are exhibited in Price’s art songs and spiritual settings. The style characteristics listed above reflect a general “troping” of Euro-logical forms that reflects the inherent identity of being black in a white-dominated society. Price’s various musical influences afforded her a compositional flexibility that allowed her to occupy white and black space effectively.

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<sup>34</sup> Aldrich Wendell Adkins, “The Development of the Black Art Song” (D.M.A. thesis, University of Texas, 1971), 3, quoted in Smith, 43.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> The use of the pentatonic scale is not unique to black folk music, but appears in Appalachian folk tunes as well. However, the scale is ubiquitous throughout Negro Spirituals and the art song repertory of Price. The pentatonic scale offers a flexible harmonic field where leading tones can catapult the harmony across the circle of fifths. The simplicity and flexibility of the pentatonic scale allowed Price to apply late Romantic and Impressionistic harmonic extensions without creating ineffective dissonances.

<sup>37</sup> Adkins, 90-92, quoted in Smith, 45.

## Musical “Africanisms:” Black Rhetoric in Music

Of the extensive list provided by Adkins, perhaps the most representative embodiments can be found in rhythm or drumming and black preaching. These cultural artifacts of the black community readily express the spiritual and philosophical undertones of black music.

*Rhythm: The Ever-Beating Drum*

An exploration of black musical style is impossible without reference to the drum. Drumming’s significance as a rhetorical device is rooted in African storytelling and the ring shout. Pervasive syncopation as a rhythmic device is a consistent reference to Price’s black roots. Other composers’ failure to tap in to this powerful spiritual device garnered negative feedback from white audiences. Olin Downes of the *New York Times* once criticized Nathaniel Dett’s choir, saying, “Some negro spirituals are wildly dramatic. Often they have rhythms and phrase lengths which cut entirely free from white traditions. Could not certain of the harmonizations have been less formal, more exotic?”<sup>38</sup> Samuel Floyd theorized that the New Negro Renaissance failed to tap into the mythological lifeblood of Africanism, because it “expected ideology to replace myth.”<sup>39</sup> There is an inherent authenticity in Price’s musical language that is deeply rooted in an African rhythmic sensibility. Anthropologist and author Zora Neale Hurston expressed the importance of “dance possible” rhythms to an authentic Negro aesthetic.<sup>40</sup> Price

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<sup>38</sup> Jon Michael Spencer, *Re-searching Black Music* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 93.

Spencer calls for a “theomusicology” that acknowledges the inextricable spiritual connotations of black music interpretation. His framework is one that is integrative of a culture, religion, and societal constructs within the black community.

<sup>39</sup> Floyd, 133.

Floyd posits that the “New Negro” failed to meet the requisites of modernity. Its appeal to black aristocracy kept it from garnering widespread and long-lasting appeal.

<sup>40</sup> Judith Tick and Paul E. Beaudoin, “Zora Neale Hurston on ‘Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals’” in *Music in the USA: A Documentary Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 508.

incorporated the juba dance in her piano piece of the same title, and clung to a pervasive sense of rhythmic energy in her spiritual settings. In this way, Price engaged with the vernacular music of the day—blues, jazz, and gospel—which relied on syncopation as an emotional and spiritual tool.

### *Black Preaching—Black Rhetoric*

Cornell West once suggested “black preaching and black musical performance are the most representative black art forms of ‘literature.’” Since black knowledge historically exists within an oral tradition, this assertion is compelling. Black preaching provides a lens into an important aspect of a black aesthetic—repetition. As Price’s setting of “Song to the Dark Virgin” shows, she took liberties with repeating certain fragments of text for affect. As the refrain “I have a dream” was repeated at key moments in Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous speech, black artists use repetition as a powerful rhetorical device.

### From Church to Conservatory: Eurocentric Influence

#### *Formative Years in the African American Presbyterian Church*

As a girl, Price was exposed to classical music not only through community teachers, but through the Presbyterian Church. In order to remain in fellowship, Black Presbyterians were not allowed to veer from the highly Germanic Presbyterian hymnals. Black children were encouraged to perform and study classical music. In fact, many impressive concerts and recitals grew from this tradition.

In 1841, The First African Presbyterian Church performed Haydn's oratorio *Creation* with a 55-piece black populated orchestra and 150 black voices. According to the Presbyterian Historical Society, concerts of this magnitude were encouraged by governing presbyteries of black Presbyterian churches.<sup>41</sup>

Her early exposure to classical music and hymnody shows in her pervasive use of pedal tones and organ-like accompaniment patterns. Undoubtedly, she developed her ear for melody and lyricism from hearing sophisticated vocal concerts such as ones by singer Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield ("The Black Swan").

### *Conservatory Education*

Price's studies with George Chadwick are evident in her adherence to mostly symmetrical formal structures. One sees a pervasive use of Exposition → (tonic and dominant relationships) → Development (relative minor and exploration of distant keys) → Recapitulation (tonic with a coda) formal structure in her songs, which is a sort of loosely applied sonata principle within the small-scale form of song composition. Within Development sections, she develops motivic materials in more distant keys, but always arrives back at tonic. Chadwick shows a similar penchant in his symphonic writing, and was chided for elaborating on too many motives. He was also a well-trained organist, and insisted on a strong knowledge of counterpoint and harmonic convention in his groundbreaking theory textbook.<sup>42</sup> Price benefitted from one-on-one work with Chadwick, because she was more than likely encouraged to strive for invention

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<sup>41</sup> Shana Thomas Mashego, "Music from the Soul of Woman: The Influence of the African American Presbyterian and Methodist Traditions on the Classical Compositions of Florence Price and Dorothy Rudd Moore." (DMA diss., University of Arizona, 2010), in The University of Arizona Libraries UA Campus Repository, [http://arizona.openrepository.com/arizona/bitstream/10150/193978/1/azu\\_etd\\_11355\\_sip1\\_m.pdf](http://arizona.openrepository.com/arizona/bitstream/10150/193978/1/azu_etd_11355_sip1_m.pdf) (accessed December 18, 2015), 17.

<sup>42</sup> G. W. Chadwick, *Harmony: A Course of Study*, (Boston: B. F. Wood Music, 1925). Chadwick revolutionized the idea of the American conservatory environment, and divorced it from a European model. As Dean and professor at New England Conservatory, he wrote *Harmony* to reflect the composition exercises taught in his courses.

within a structural framework. The songs exhibit a sense of economy and structure juxtaposed with invention.

When listening to settings of Dunbar and Hughes, a clear influence of jazz (or French Impressionism) is evident.<sup>43</sup> Her use of chord extension and tritone substitution makes reference to the experiments of Debussy and Milhaud. Milhaud's music was quite popular during her time in conservatory, and was considered the "new music" of the time. One must also wonder if her use of extended chords and polychords are influenced by Gershwin or Messiaen. There are no documented interactions with these composers, but Price's harmonic references are certainly far-reaching.

*"The Caged Bird:" An Analysis*

An appropriate way to explore Price's style is to look at an exemplary song that exhibits her various musical influences (see Appendix A for a full score of "Sympathy"). From both the perspective self-referential narrative and as a compositional exercise "Sympathy" is a treasure trove of musical materials.

The Text

*I know what the caged bird feels, alas!  
 When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;  
 When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,  
 And the river flows like a stream of glass;  
 When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,  
 And the faint perfume from its chalice steals –  
 I know what the caged bird feels!*

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<sup>43</sup> Carol Ritter, "Cultural Influence of Organ Music Composed by African American Women," *College Music Symposium* 55 (2015): [http://symposium.music.org/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=10872:cultural-influences-of-organ-music-composed-by-african-american-women&Itemid=124](http://symposium.music.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=10872:cultural-influences-of-organ-music-composed-by-african-american-women&Itemid=124).

Carol Ritter's article on the organ music of Price (and other black female composers) quotes several sources referencing Price's association with late Romantic harmony and jazz. She asserts, "Jazz harmonies and rhythms were also incorporated into many of her works."

*I know why the caged bird beats his wing  
 Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;  
 For he must fly back to his perch and cling  
 When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;  
 And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars  
 And they pulse again with a keener sting –  
 I know why he beats his wing!*

*I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,  
 When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore, –  
 When he beats his bars and he would be free;  
 It is not a carol of joy or glee,  
 But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,  
 But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings –  
 I know why the caged bird sings!<sup>44</sup>*

Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Sympathy" was published in *Lyrics of the Hearthside* in 1899, and embodies Dunbar's lyrical style. In these poems, Dunbar attempted to show that he could employ sophisticated literary devices in his poetry just as white poets could. Unfortunately, Dunbar's poems written in dialect afforded him more widespread appreciation during his life. The poem portrays imagery of a caged bird who longs to be free. The poem is highly descriptive of natural beauty—a prominent feature of Victorian poetry. However, rich symbolism lies below the surface of the text.

Signifyin(g) combines circumlocution and double-speak that is often used to avoid directly stating controversial words and instead substitutes more socially "appropriate" speech. Black writers often used euphemism to address topics such as slavery and lynching in their works through using words such as trapped, caged, burning, aflame, etc., as a way to discuss these themes without the explicit comprehension of whites. Binary oppositions were also used as a way to express racial difference...<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> "Paul Laurence Dunbar's Sympathy: A Study Guide," Cummings Study Guide, <http://cumingsstudyguides.net/Guides4/Sympathy.html> (accessed June 16, 2016).

<sup>45</sup> Smith, 69.

Smith draws from Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *Signifying Monkey*. Gates posits the theory that the signifyin(g) trickster trope can be used as a method of African American literary criticism. The idea of trickster characters is rooted in African storytelling traditions in which the trickster uses doublespeak to communicate important morals.

Dunbar's poem is about oppression and freedom, as well as pain and hope. In the first stanza, the speaker asserts their knowledge of "what the caged bird feels" as it looks out into the open air of welcoming springtime. Stanza 2 brings darker imagery of blood, pain, and scars. The focus of the poem switches from the joy of the outside world, to the turmoil of "caged-ness." The second stanza calls the listener to understand "why the caged bird beats his wing." Essentially, the plight of blacks trying to overcome the oppression that strangles them. At the end of the second stanza, we know that caged bird has not given up yet. Finally, in the third stanza the speaker understands "why the caged bird sings." Though the bird is beaten and bruised, the glimmer of hope that lies within its battered breast calls out a lyrical prayer. This is the prayer of hope that has kept blacks on the path of perseverance since slavery—the hope of faith in God.

The poem's rhyme scheme is abaabcc, and the meter is iambic tetrameter. The regular rhyme pattern lends the poem to a lyrical verse-refrain structure. Price groups every two lines with the same melodic material, and leaves the final line as a refrain. Price's musical setting of the text expresses the idea of "caged-ness" and of a sterling hope to be found in faith.

#### The Music

"Sympathy" is composed in ternary form, with the B section centered in the relative minor of C-minor. The A section begins with an organ-like prelude with pedal tones in the left hand. This organ accompaniment prevails through the A-section. The harmonic progression is I6-ii7-IV6/4-I-vi-V4/2(add 9)-I for both parallel periods. The RH "la-do" motive in m.6 and m.10 is reminiscent of the modal quality of Spirituals (see Figure 5). This brief emphasis of C-minor in the RH provides a foreshadowing of the pain to come in the B-section. That motive is the first vestige of black music in an otherwise Euro-logical framework.

la---do--la (temporary Cm feeling)  
a tempo

*mp* *p*

Figure 5: "Sympathy"--"La-Do" Motive (m.m. 5- 7)<sup>46</sup>

At "When the first bird sings," the melody descends chromatically with "blue note" accentuations (see Figure 6).

8 *cresc.* ..... *mp* *rit.* *a tempo* *mf* *E<sup>b</sup> E<sup>b</sup>0/B<sup>b</sup> D<sup>b</sup>/F C7/B<sup>b</sup> (Bbm) (pt)*

spring - ing grass And the riv - er flows like a stream of glass; When the first bird sings and the blue note *b7* (pt)

*cresc.* ..... *mp* *rit.* *a tempo* *mf* chromatic descending bass

Pedal V

*E<sup>b</sup> I - ii<sup>o</sup>/vii D<sup>b</sup> I6 - V7/iii vi*

Figure 6: "Sympathy"-- Blue Notes and Chromatic Descent (m.m. 8-11)<sup>47</sup>

The chromatically descending bass line leads us to a C-minor deceptive cadence on "steals." Price employs complex diminished and other predominant harmonies to lead the listener to the next phrase (see Figure 7).

<sup>46</sup> Price 44 *Art Songs*, 116.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

12 *dim.* *rit.*

first bud opes And the faint per-fume from its chal - ice steals

(pt) DC

D<sup>b</sup>: viio--V7/IV--I---V7/III---F: i<sup>11</sup>-----ii6---V/iii---Eb: V7-----vi

Figure 7: “Sympathy”-- Harmonic Progression to Deceptive Cadence (m.m.12-14)<sup>48</sup>

“I know what the caged bird feels” is accompanied by I6-IV-I6-ii7-I6/4 and the final phrase cadences on “feels.” Rhetorically, the subject’s hopes (accompanied by E-flat major) are dashed by the downward spiral brought on by their blackness expressed with the “blue notes” of the “When the first bird sings” phrase. Moreover, the melodic line steadily rises until the chromatic descent.

Price sets the B-section in C-minor, and transitions the meter from simple 4-4 to complex duple (12-8 time). “Blood is red on the cruel bars” is accompanied by i-iv-vii<sup>o</sup>/V-vii<sup>o</sup>/VII, a risqué harmony for the time period. Price utilizes the flexible nature of diminished and augmented sonorities to catapult the harmony across the circle of fifths. The harmonic zenith of the piece occurs on “For he must fly back to his perch and cling.” Here, Price progress C-flat augmented to D augmented while maintaining a bass line that is a tritone below the root (see Figure 8)!

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 117.

23 *mp* C<sup>aug</sup> Daug/A<sup>b</sup>  
 blood is red on the cruel bars For he must fly back to his perch and  
*mp*  
 Bass line tritone below roots

Figure 8: “Sympathy”--Tritone and Augmented Dissonances (m.m. 23-25)<sup>49</sup>

Price uses a polychord of D augmented and A-flat major on “back to his perch” The experimental harmony here looks forward to Partch and Cowell later in the century. The thorny harmony and melody reflect the wounded nature of the bird, and embody the oppressive cage. Price employs text painting with an octave leap on “and cling,” to show the bird flying back to his perch.

The B section continues with a general harmonic feeling of B diminished/D minor. The melody is interesting, because it starts reinforcing D until “fain” where it begins to reinforce a feeling of E-major which then leads to C-major on “a swing.” After that point, the melody consists more of leaps of a fifth, reflect of dramatic or heroic sentiments. It is as if in the midst of turmoil, the subject finds organization and resolve. In m. 31, the melody begins to ascend in opposition to m.m. 10-12 and arrives at the repeat of A.

“Sympathy” exhibits the full range of compositional techniques available to Florence Price. The experimental B-section is rhetorically justified by the hopeful conventions of both A sections. The return maintains much of the material of A, but has a coda which highlights the desperate hope of the bird by setting the final “I know” on a sustained G5. The piece ends in the

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 118.

home key, and a sense of symmetry is accomplished. Price exemplifies the sentiments of her teacher George Chadwick.

If, as has been repeatedly stated, the rules forbidding consecutive fifths, octaves, and augmented seconds and false relations, are broken with impunity or even ignored altogether by modern composers, the question arises, why were these rules ever promulgated? To this we may answer, if the effect justifies the means, any rule may be disregarded...They should stimulate his sense of beauty, both of sound and design, while increasing his power of expression and his realization of the significance of harmonic combinations.<sup>50</sup>

Just as Dunbar drew from European literary conventions and applied a “signifyin(g)” sensibility, Price drew from her musical training and fused it with her own cultural references. The rhetorical skill of Dunbar is magnified by the harmonic and melodic sensibilities of Price.

*Conclusion: Uncaging Black Female Composers*

Florence B. Price exemplifies the plight and impressive perseverance of black female composers. Her songs have been historically neglected by the classical canon, perhaps because of their specificity to her time and milieu. However, the songs can be appreciated for their ingenuity, sensitivity, and pianistic intrigue. Moreover, the songs can be situated in a rich lineage of black nationalistic art song. Price presented the fusion of black and European musical materials, while looking forward to the establishment of a truly “American” sound. Composers such as Margaret Bonds, Undine Smith Moore, Adolphus Hailstork, and even Copland owe much of their success and universal appeal to the groundbreaking accomplishments of Florence Price. May we continue to free black female composers from the cage of Eurocentric analysis, and find appreciation from the strength and creativity of these exemplary women.

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<sup>50</sup> Chadwick, 259-260.

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Appendix A: Piano-Vocal Score of "Sympathy" by Florence Price<sup>51</sup>*In Memory of Dr. Richard Heard*

116

*To Florence, my daughter***Sympathy**

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Florence B. Price  
*poco rit.*

**Andantino** *mp* *poco rit.*

I know what the caged bird feels, a-las! When the

**Andantino** *mp* *p* *poco rit.*

sun is bright on the up-land slopes; When the wind stirs soft through the

*mp* *p* *a tempo*

5

*mp* *p* *a tempo*

8 *cresc.* *mp* *rit.* *a tempo* *mf*

spring-ing grass And the riv-er flows like a stream of glass; When the first bird sings and the

*cresc.* *mp* *rit.* *a tempo* *mf*

<sup>51</sup> Florence B. Price, *44 Art Songs and Spirituals: Medium/High Voice*, ed. Richard Heard (Fayetteville, AR: ClarNan Editions, 2015), 119-121.

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12 117

*dim.* *rit.* *mf*

first bud opes And the faint per-fume from its chal - ice steals 1

16 *a tempo* *dim.*

know \_\_\_\_\_ what the caged bird feels. \_\_\_\_\_

*a tempo* *mf* *dim.*

21 *mf*

I know \_\_\_\_\_ why the caged bird beats his wing Till the

*mf*

118

23 *mp* 3

blood is red on the cru-el bars For he must fly back to his perch and

26 *piu mosso* *cresc.*

cling Whe he fain would be on the bough a-swing;

*piu mosso* *mp* *cresc.*

28 *f* *mp*

And the pain still throbs in the old, old old

30 119

scars And they pulse a-gain with a keen-er sting. I

*cresc. . . . . mf mp*

*cresc. . . . . mf mp*

33

know why he beats his wing, I know why the caged bird.

36 *poco rit. a tempo*

sings, ah me, When his wing is bruised and his bos-om sore, When he

*poco rit. a tempo*

*poco rit. a tempo*

120

39 *poco rit.* *a tempo*  
*mf*  
beats his bars and he would be free. It is not a car-ol of

42 *mp*  
joy or glee But a pray'r that he sends from his heart's deep core But a

45 *cresc.* ..... *f*  
plea that up-ward to Heav-en he flings. I know\_\_\_\_\_

48 *meno mosso* *a tempo* 121

— why the caged bird sings! —

*meno mosso* *a tempo* *mp*

The image shows a musical score for voice and piano. The top staff is the vocal line, starting at measure 48. It begins with the tempo marking 'meno mosso' and the lyrics '— why the caged bird sings!'. The tempo then changes to 'a tempo'. The bottom staves are for the piano accompaniment. The right hand (treble clef) starts with 'meno mosso' and features several triplet figures. The left hand (bass clef) has some chords and a triplet. The score ends at measure 121 with a dynamic marking of 'mp'.