

“Hold Fast to Dreams”

Florence Price’s Life in Song

December 13, 2020
7:30 PM

*Students of Tamara Acosta, Lucy Fitz Gibbon, and Gary Mouldsdale
with
pianist Ryan McCullough and guests Mary Holzhauer, Andy Crouch, and Katariina Alanko*

The 28 songs you will hear tonight represent in microcosm not just the breadth and depth of Florence Price’s oeuvre, but also of her own life’s journey. Born into a well-to-do family in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1887, Price’s early life was in many ways remarkable: her father, James, was one of the country’s first Black dentists in addition to a community leader. Her mother was a trained musician and brilliant businesswoman. They welcomed prominent guests to their home, including Frederick Douglass, and helped to found the high school from which Price would graduate, at age 14, as valedictorian. Price later excelled at New England Conservatory, majoring in organ and piano as well as studying composition with some of the nation’s most prominent composers. But despite these advantages, Price of course faced numerous, nearly insurmountable obstacles. She remarked in a 1943 letter to Serge Koussevitzky, conductor of the Boston Symphony and an important proponent of much contemporary music in America, although not hers, “Unfortunately the work of a woman composer is preconceived by many to be light, froth, lacking in depth, logic and virility. Add to that the incident of race — I have Colored blood in my veins — and you will understand some of the difficulties that confront one in such a position.”

But beyond these two universal factors, Price also lost her son in infancy, divorced an abusive husband, raised her children alone, suffered from ill health, and still became the first Black woman to have a work performed by a major American orchestra. Her songs were performed by Marian Anderson in her iconic concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Her piano works became important pedagogical tools for generations of young musicians. All the while, she supported herself by playing the organ for silent films and writing radio jingles, musical attributes of which we can hear in her brilliant use of harmony and her handful of popular songs. She forged important connections to the artists of Chicago’s African American community, even living for a time with the family of her student, pianist and composer Margaret Bonds, while she struggled to support herself. We hear in her songs the words of prominent Black poets from Paul Laurence Dunbar to Georgia Douglas Johnson and Langston Hughes alongside short works from little-known authors published in the Harlem Renaissance journal *Opportunity*. We hear echoes of Amy Beach’s parlor songs, of Tin Pan Alley’s innuendoes, of Rachmaninoff’s sweeping piano gestures. We hear her reverence for music preserved by formerly enslaved people, including Malinda Carter, the grandmother of soprano (and occasional poet) Fanny Carter Woods.

As you listen to Price’s songs tonight, and follow along with the texts in the program, I hope that you too will hear her works not just as a singular output but as part of a community, just as we have joined as a community to share, celebrate, and preserve her music for years to come.

The Heart of a Woman	Tamara Acosta Mary Holzhauer, piano	Georgia Douglas Johnson
Dawn's Awakening	Jason Ling	James Joseph Burke
An April Day	Harris Erdman	Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr.
Out of the South Blew a Wind	Caroline Lui	Fanny Carter Woods
Love-in-a-mist	Wynne Williams-Ceci	Mary Rolofson Gamble
The Crescent Moon*	Marieliette Corretjer	Louise C. Wallace
Night	Marina Sanusi	Louise C. Wallace
I Grew a Rose	Amy Crouch Andy Crouch, piano	Paul Laurence Dunbar
My Little Dreams*	Yuanning Wei	Georgia Douglas Johnson
Beside the Sea	Caroline Hinrichs	Paul Laurence Dunbar
Lethe*	Akane Wakai	Georgia Douglas Johnson
The Broken Bowl*	Alexander Myers	Wesley Curtwright

** Unpublished songs engraved for this performance by Lucy Fitz Gibbon and Stephen Spinelli from manuscripts held in the Florence Beatrice Smith Price Collection at the University of Arkansas.*

My Neighbor	Rui Zhan	Paul Laurence Dunbar
The Retort*	Brian Rappaport	Paul Laurence Dunbar
Don't You Tell Me No*	Heather Hamann	Florence B. Price
Let's Build a Little Love Nest*	Kit Ellsworth	Sal Janeway Carroll
Four Encore Songs		
Tobacco		Graham Lee Hemminger
A Flea and a Fly		Ogden Nash
"Come, Come," said Tom's Father		Thomas Moore
Song of the Open Road		Ogden Nash
	Brian Rappaport	
I Am Bound for the Kingdom	Traditional, as sung by Malinda Carter Delia Ofori	
Weary Traveler	William Prevor	Traditional
God Gives Me You	Katariina Alanko Katariina Alanko, piano	Nora Connelly
We Have Tomorrow	Sophia Handley	Langston Hughes
To My Little Son	Tamara Acosta Mary Holzhauer, piano	Julia Johnson Davis
Hold Fast to Dreams	Emily Pollack	Langston Hughes
Bewilderment	Michelle Dominguez	Langston Hughes
Winter Idyll*	Lucy Fitz Gibbon Ryan McCullough, piano	David Morton

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Texts

The Heart of a Woman

Georgia Douglas Johnson (1880-1966)

The heart of a woman goes forth with the dawn,
As a lone bird, soft winging, so restlessly on,
Afar o'er life's turrets and vales does it roam
In the wake of those echoes the heart calls home.

The heart of a woman falls back with the night,
And enters some alien cage in its plight,
And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars
While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars.

Dawn's Awakening

James Joseph Burke (1836-1928)

I stood on a hill at daybreak and watched the rising sun.
I saw the night in its passing and the day that had just begun.
I stood on a hill at morningtide and watched the break of day.
I saw the stars in the heavens, as they faded slowly away.
I saw the sun in its splendor rise over the hazy mists,
I felt the warmth of its shining rays, as the earth it fondly kissed.
I saw the sheep and the shepherd rise from a night of repose.
I saw all the beauties of nature and the dew shine like pearls on the rose.
I saw the fields and the forest, I saw the river below,
I saw the ships in the harbor, and wondered wither they'd go,
I saw in the distance a city where slumbered the wicked and just.
Close by on the hillside a graveyard where soon must mingle their dust.
I saw the church in the valley where worshipped the old and the young.
And I heard the bells in its tow'r as a heav'nly anthem they sang.
I listened again for the voices that rang in praise of our Lord,
The hilltops echoed the music with hosannas in sweetest accord.

An April Day

Joseph Seamon Cotter Jr. (1895-1919)

On such a day as this I think,
On such a day as this,
When earth and sky and nature's whole
Are clad in April's bliss;
And balmy zephyrs gently waft
Upon your cheek a kiss;
Sufficient is it just to live
On such a day as this.

Out of the South Blew a Wind

Fanny Carter Woods (1882-1948)

Out of the South blew a soft sweet wind;
And on its breath was a song
Of fields and flowers and leafy bowers,
And bees that hum all day long.

Out of the South blew a soft low wind;
On its wings was a joy of a dream,
And it hovered so near I was sure I could hear
The call of woodland and stream.

Out of the South blew a soft sweet wind;
And on its breath was a song.

Love-in-a-mist

Mary Rolofson Gamble (dates unknown)

Love-in-a-mist of doubt was lost;
The wildwood paths were all crisscross'd,
This way or that? O, where was she?
And which path led to the trysting tree?

A green elf whisper'd right in her ear:
"Are you sure your lover is quite sincere?
Lovers are seldom what they seem
And love itself is a haunting dream."

But a little blind god lived in the wood
Unseen, unheard in the path he stood.
A father, dropp'd from an angel's wing
With speed he placed in his magic sling!

Straight into the heart of the maid it flew!
Fath liv'd, doubt vanish'd, the world was new.
Heav'n's glory mark'd the path to her trust.
And never again was love in a mist.

The Crescent Moon

Louise C. Wallace (dates unknown)

I saw the crescent moon,
One silver star beside.
"The moon's my love"
I made lament,
"Would God I were her star!"

Night

Louise C. Wallace

Night comes, a Madonna clad in scented blue.
Rose red her mouth and deep her eyes,
She lights her stars, and turns to where,
Beneath her silver lamp the moon,
Upon a couch of shadow lies
A dreamy child,
The wearied Day.

I Grew a Rose

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906)

I grew a rose within a garden fair,
And, tending it with more than loving care,
I thought how, with the glory of its bloom,
I should the darkness of my life illumine;
And, watching, ever smiled to see the lusty bud
Drink freely in the summer sun to tinct its blood.

My rose began to open, and its hue
Was sweet to me as to its sun and dew;
I watched it taking on its ruddy flame
Until the day of perfect blooming came,
Then hasted I with smiles to find it blushing red—
Too late! Some thoughtless child had plucked my rose and fled!

I grew a rose once more to please mine eyes.
All things to aid it—dew, sun, wind, fair skies—
Were kindly; and to shield it from despoil,
I fenced it safely in with grateful toil.
No other hand than mine shall pluck this flower, said I,
And I was jealous of the bee that hovered nigh.

It grew for days; I stood hour after hour
To watch the slow unfolding of the flower,
And then I did not leave its side at all,
Lest some mischance my flower should befall.
At last, oh joy! the central petals burst apart.
It blossomed—but, alas! a worm was at its heart!

My Little Dreams

Georgia Douglas Johnson

I'm folding up my little dreams
 Within my heart tonight,
And praying I may soon forget
 The torture of their sight.

For Time's deft fingers scroll my brow
 With fell relentless art—
I'm folding up my little dreams
 Tonight within my heart.

Beside the Sea

Paul Laurence Dunbar

If you could sit with me beside the sea to-day,
And whisper with me sweetest dreamings o'er and o'er;
I think I should not find the clouds so dim and gray,
And not so loud the waves complaining at the shore.

If you could sit with me upon the shore to-day,
And hold my hand in yours as in the days of old,
I think I should not mind the chill baptismal spray,
Nor find my hand and heart and all the world so cold.

If you could walk with me upon the strand to-day,
And tell me that my longing love had won your own,
I think all my sad thoughts would then be put away,
And I could give back laughter for the Ocean's moan!

Lethe

Georgia Douglas Johnson

I do not ask for love,—ah! no,
Nor friendship's happiness;
These were relinquished long ago,
I search for something less.

I seek a little, tranquil bark
In which to drift at ease
Awhile, and then quite silently
To sink in quiet seas.

The Broken Bowl

Wesley Curtwright (1910-?)

The bowl is crack'd!
The fragile glass is broken;
And the milk of the soul
Is wasted away!

My Neighbor

Paul Laurence Dunbar

My neighbor lives on the hill,
And I in the valley dwell,
My neighbor must look down on me,
Must I look up?—ah, well,
My neighbor lives on the hill,
And I in the valley dwell.

My neighbor reads, and prays,
And I—I laugh, God wot,
And sing like a bird when the grass is green
In my small garden plot;
But ah, he reads and prays,
And I—I laugh, God wot.

His face is a book of woe,
And mine is a song of glee;
A slave he is to the great "They say,"
But I—I am bold and free;
No wonder he smacks of woe,
And I have the tang of glee.

My neighbor thinks me a fool,
"The same to yourself," say I;
"Why take your books and take your prayers,
Give me the open sky;"
My neighbor thinks me a fool,
"The same to yourself," say I.

The Retort

Paul Laurence Dunbar

"Thou art a fool," said my head to my heart,
"Indeed, the greatest of fools thou art,
To be led astray by the trick of a tress,
By a smiling face or a ribbon smart;"
And my heart was in sore distress.

Then Phyllis came by, and her face was fair,
The light gleamed soft on her raven hair;
And her lips were blooming a rosy red.
Then my heart spoke out with a right bold air:
"Thou art worse than a fool, O head!"

Don't You Tell Me No

Florence B. Price (1887-1953)

Always there's something you cannot get—
Maybe the girl that you have just met,
Or some sweet baby whom you have lost
Before you stopped to count the cost.
There's something I want now:
Oh mama, my mama, don't you tell me "No"
'Cause mama you see I'm yearning so.
Oh mama, sweet mama, my hands won't behave,
For your dear charms they creep and crave.
Don't scold me,
Just hold me
And fold me tight, oh tight!
Say, baby, I'll lose my mind
If you don't treat me kind.
So mama, sweet mama,
Honey to the bee
Is not as sweet as you to me.

Let's Build a Little Love Nest

Sal Janeway Carroll (dates unknown)

Since I met you, Dear, I've been thinking too
Of a cozy little love nest made for two.
In all my dreams, Dear, down around the bend
I have found the rainbow's glorious end.
Let's build a little love nest around the bend,
Just a little love nest up in a tree!
How happy we could be, Dear, Making dreams come true
In a little love nest for two.
We'd call our little love nest the Rainbow's End
And only we two could find it round the bend.
Let's build a little love nest at the rainbow's end
'Cause there ain't no room for worry or for gloom in our love nest.

Four Encore Songs

I. Tobacco

Graham Lee Hemminger (1895-1949)

Tobacco is a dirty weed,
I like it.
It satisfies no normal need,
I like it.
It makes you thin, it makes you lean,
It takes the hair right off your bean.
It's the worst darn stuff I've ever seen.
I like it.

III. "Come, come," said Tom's Father

Thomas Moore (1779-1852)

"Come, come," said Tom's father, "at your time of life,
There's no longer excuse for thus playing the rake--
It is time you should think, boy, of taking a wife"--
"Why, so it is, father--whose wife shall I take?"

II. A Flea and a Fly

Ogden Nash (1902-1971)

A flea and a fly in a flue
Were imprisoned, so what could they do?
Said the fly, "let us flee!"
"Let us fly!" said the flea.
So they flew through a flaw in the flue.

IV. Song of the Open Road

Ogden Nash

I think that I shall never see
A billboard lovely as a tree
Indeed, unless the billboards fall
I'll never see a tree at all.

I Am Bound for the Kingdom

Traditional, as sung Malinda Carter

I am bound for the Kingdom.
Glory in my soul!
If you get there before I do,
Glory in my soul,
Look out for me, I'm a comin' too
Glory in my soul.

Weary Traveler

Traditional

Let us cheer the weary traveler
Along the heavenly way.
I'll take my gospel trumpet
And I'll begin to blow
And if my Saviour helps me,
I'll blow wherever I go.
And brothers, if you meet with crosses
And trials on the way,
Just keep your trust in Jesus,
And don't forget to pray.

God Gives Me You

Nora Connelly (dates unknown)

Because you hold my hand and say "I do"
Before love's altar, I pledge my soul to you.
All through my life, this promise will hold true,
Because within this hour God gives me you.

Thy spirit soars on wings of visions fair;
From out the space of life you called to me there
With gifts of love I came endowed anew,
Because within this hour God gives me you.

Love's conquering peace becalms my restless soul
And angels sing as our hearts they enroll.
Throughout life's day my vows I will hold true,
Because within this hour God gave me you.

We Have Tomorrow

Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

We have tomorrow
Bright before us
Like a flame.

Yesterday
A night-gone thing,
A sun-down name.

And dawn-today
Broad arch above the road we came.

To My Little Son

Julia Johnson Davis (1889-1961)

In your face I sometimes see
Shadowings of the man to be,
And eager, dream of what my son
Will be in twenty years and one.

But when you are to manhood grown,
And all your manhood ways are known
Then shall I, wistful, try to trace
The child you once were in your face?

Hold Fast to Dreams

Langston Hughes

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

Bewilderment

Langston Hughes

I ask you this:
Which way to go?
I ask you this:
Which sin to bear?
Which crown to put
Upon my hair?
I do not know,
Lord God,
I do not know.

Winter Idyll

David Morton (1886-1957)

The dry-lipped grass curls back
And bares the pitted stones,
And the tree, in its new lack,
Bares now its angular bones.
Man looks and looks away
From earth to a bleak sky
Where, high above the day,
Where high above the sky
The last geese going by
Pass the horizon's rim;
And a man remembering where
A door will welcome him
Turns in the darkening air,
And takes him there.