

# Polishing Hidden Gems

An Interview with John Michael Cooper  
on the State of Florence Price Scholarship

By Michael Clark, NCTM



**J**ohn Michael Cooper has edited more than 70 works by Florence Price for publication by G. Schirmer, exponentially expanding the availability of Price's music to the public. Cooper is professor of music at Southwestern University and the author of multiple books including *Historical Dictionary of Romantic Music*, *The Mendelssohns: Their Music in History* and *Margaret Bonds: The Montgomery Variations and Du Bois Credo*. I met with him on Zoom to discuss his beginnings in musicology, his experience editing Price's works and the direction of the Florence Price Movement.

**Michael Clark:** Tell me about your musical beginnings: What inspired you to study music growing up and to pursue it in college?

**John Michael Cooper:** I grew up loving music—my parents both loved music, and I've got musicians earlier in my family history. My father was a very good singer and guitar player. When I was a little kid, I became fascinated with music, just as something that's a beautiful part of life. Additionally, I grew up in Atlanta during the 1960s, when music was such a big part of the important things that were happening in U.S. society. Even though I didn't understand those things as a kid,

I could tell that this music I heard everywhere I went was playing a part in these important events that were going on around me. So I grew up not only loving music and thinking of it as entertainment but also with a conviction that music is a part of how the world works.

**MC: What drew you to musicology?**

**JMC:** I was a percussionist first—my original idea was that I would be an orchestral percussionist. I was pretty good at it, but as an undergraduate I noticed that I really enjoyed the music history classes and music theory classes that so many of my colleagues hated, and that was curious to me. Then there was a point at which the university orchestra was doing Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*, which is just for strings. That was a time for all the percussionists to get out early and go get a beer! But I, in the meantime, had checked out the score, and I sat in the middle of the string orchestra while they were rehearsing that piece, and it was a wonderful musical experience. I realized what actually turns me on is not making the sounds but being a part of what's happening in this music, even if I'm not involved with it as a percussionist. I kept going both as percussionist and as musicologist for a while, and eventually it became clear that musicology had more appeal to me than percussion.

**MC: Much of your professional life has focused on Felix Mendelssohn. How did you become interested in him?**

**JMC:** His music spoke to me—I found it thematically engaging, harmonically interesting, formally fascinating. I was also aware of the problems of Mendelssohn's identity, the fact that he had been vilified because of his Jewish ancestry, which then became even more fascinating and problematic because he never identified as Jewish. He didn't know anything about Judaism. The paradoxes and the fact that lives and music hung in balance in such a visibly politicized fashion was fascinating to me. Additionally, I realized that he had published only 72 compositions with opus numbers and had composed about 10 times that many, and I wanted to know, what were the other pieces?

**MC: You've written several books about Mendelssohn and prepared numerous editions of his works for Bärenreiter. How do the tasks of scholarly writing and music editing relate in your view?**

**JMC:** I have always been a person who finds that subdiscipline of musicology that doesn't talk about music to be something that's very sterile. It's like mathematicians who don't do numbers or writers who don't read. The music, the notes themselves, the patterns of putting notes on pages, one bar at a time, one note at a time, from beginning to end of a piece—all of that seems like it has to be integral, not ancillary, to understanding music. On one of my first trips to Berlin for my Mendelssohn research, I was fascinated by one unpublished piece. I needed to not just *look* at the manuscript, I needed to see what happened when I wrote it out. This was before music notation software was commonplace, so I would come home from my days of research in the library and edit it on staff paper. I discovered the incredible experience of actually putting the notes on the page, one note at a time, one bar at a time, from beginning to end, which is the most vivid glimpse into a composer's creative workshop that I had ever seen.

**MC: Over the past several years, you've turned your attention to Florence Price and Margaret Bonds. How did you first become interested in them?**

**JMC:** When I was a master's student at Florida State in the late 1980s, I went to an off-campus recital (at Florida A&M or a local church, I think) and heard the music of Florence Price and Margaret Bonds: Price's *Songs to the Dark Virgin* and Bonds' *Three Dream Portraits*. I had never heard the names of these composers before. I had never heard a note of music by them, and I was stunned. I was thunderstruck. I was blown away by what I encountered there. Anyone who could do what was done in those pieces was someone who had to be taken seriously. I was angry that my training had taken them out of my view, that I had been taught to think about and want to understand seemingly everything *but* these composers. So I tried to lay hands on more stuff by Florence Price and Margaret

Bonds. I could tell from the available information that both of them had been very prolific, written hundreds of pieces, and yet, I could only get to a handful of pieces by each of them, which raised the same question that I had run into with Mendelssohn. At that point, I started a private quest to track the other compositions by Florence Price and Margaret Bonds. A couple of decades later was the point where I've made it official. It was an unanswered question that was sitting there burning in my consciousness and had to be answered. I'm glad I finally got around to answering it!

**MC: How did your research grow into a professional opportunity to edit Price's works for G. Schirmer?**

**JMC:** That was completely accidental. When I came back from my introductory trip to the Special Collections at the University of Arkansas, I started editing it in Finale. I did one piece, the beautiful *Song Without Words* in G Major. I was smitten! So I edited another one, and I kept going, and I really couldn't stop because every piece was so different. Meanwhile, G. Schirmer acquired the international rights to Florence Price's catalog sometime in the second half of 2018 but had no plans for the production of the music or even a clear understanding of the scope of her output (about 500 pieces!). By that time, I had edited a lot of her music, so a friend who is a Price champion herself and knows someone at Schirmer informed them of my work, and they approached me and offered to publish some of my editions.

**MC: How is the process of editing Price's music similar or different to your work with Mendelssohn?**

**JMC:** Editing music takes you into the composer's creative workshop. There's something very intimate and intuitive about manuscripts for music: Each composer has distinctive ways about putting the notes on the page—unique from everyone else. What's similar is actually the fact that Florence Price has a bunch of notational idiosyncrasies for how to do things that are practical and unique, just as Mendelssohn does, but those two composers' notational idiosyncrasies are not the same.

This is one of the things that fascinates me most: Florence Price notates music in a completely backwards process from how most other composers do. She writes the stems first, a measure or system at a time and then puts the noteheads on. How do we know this? Because there are places in manuscripts that are unfinished where the last bar is followed by a bunch of orphaned stems. The reason for it is partly because it's fast, much faster than coloring in noteheads first and then attaching stems. In order to produce about 500 pieces in 26 years, she had to have a mind that moved at the speed of light, especially with all the other things that she was doing in those years. But her approach is also wonderful because she knew that she, as a Black woman, would have precious little access to music publishing, which is to say that people would be performing her music from manuscripts. For people who are performing from manuscript, especially pianists, one of the most important things is vertical alignment of the beats. If you're starting with stems, it's very easy to keep that aligned.

**MC: Where are Price's manuscripts located?**

**JMC:** The largest single body is in the Special Collections of the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. There's also an important collection of Price manuscripts at the Marian Anderson Collection at the University of Pennsylvania. There are Price manuscripts in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., others are in the Center for Black Music Research archives at Columbia College in Chicago, and there are others in private collections. One challenge is Price often would make multiple copies or revisions of a single work. When you find something in the manuscript collection in Fayetteville, it's easy to think, "This is the source," but the Fayetteville manuscripts are sometimes early versions of later manuscripts. The later manuscripts reflect her latest thinking on those works and are usually a rejection of whatever earlier versions there might be, so the biggest problem is actually getting a handle on where all the sources are and then sorting out their chronology.

**MC: What evidence do you consider when estimating the composition date of a work by Price?**

**JMC:** She often, but not always, wrote the date on her manuscripts. However, when Price dated a manuscript, she had a maddening habit of copying the original date of composition onto later versions of the same piece, even if that second copy was made months, weeks, years later. The *Fantasia Nègre No. 4 in B Minor*, for example, is dated 1932, and the last version of it is demonstrably written in 1936 or 1937, four or five years later, but that manuscript still carries the date of 1932. You have to also look at the handwriting itself. Everybody's handwriting changes over time: It's initially very graceful and kind of light, and then as people age, their handwriting gets heavier and blockier, and in later years, it often gets a little bit trembly. There are some manuscripts that carry dates from the 1930s or early 1940s that were probably written at least 8 to 12 years later than that. Another consideration is the state of the manuscript itself: Is it clean? Or does it have a lot of corrections in it? The most effective rule of thumb in working out the relative chronological authority of the manuscripts is corrections. When a composer has written out a manuscript and decides to change a note, they simply cross it out and put in the new note. That's the least work. If they do that enough times, they will likely decide at some point to make another copy of the piece and will copy the corrected version, not the uncorrected version. The manuscript that cleanly incorporates the corrections is usually later, and therefore more authoritative.

**MC: How have you prioritized which music to publish in what order?**

**JMC:** My priority has been variety. Florence Price's unstoppable musical imagination knew no boundaries. If you look at the pieces that were available five years ago, they mostly reflected only a small facet of that huge creative imagination. Many other facets weren't yet available for the public to know about, hear and teach. So when I was deciding which piece I would publish next, I would ask myself, what kind of piece have I not put out there yet? Basically, I look for families of pieces that are

not yet known, hoping that other people will want to know more of each of those categories. There are more to come, by the way!

**MC: How much of Price's music would you estimate remains unpublished at this time?**

**JMC:** A little under two thirds of her music is still unpublished. Think about that: In what world, other than political polls, would 28–30% be considered a representative sampling? If we are serious about wanting to know Florence Price, then we have to perform and listen to, teach and study, at least a representative sampling. Ideally, we would do what we do with every other composer who is acknowledged as being great, important, consequential—which is to say we would know everything. In the case of Bach or Mozart or Beethoven, every scrap is carefully scrutinized, reproduced in facsimile, etc. Why should Florence Price be denied that level of study? We know why she has been denied it in the past—because of her race and her sex—but I don't think many people would agree with those reasons anymore. So that's why we have to do this, to get to know her in the fullness of her imagination. If we abandon the reasoning for not knowing much of her music and much about her, we've got to change the outcome. We've got to move beyond the unrepresentative sampling of pieces that we've been "permitted" to know up to now.

**MC: What are some of the biggest remaining questions you have about Florence Price's work?**

**JMC:** One of the most intriguing things to me right now is the fact that she does have changes in style periods. There's the music of the late 1920s, and there's the music of the period from 1929 to about 1936. Then around 1937–38 her style changes and she starts doing things that she hasn't done before. Then in the late 1940s, there's a different approach that is discernible and lasts for the rest of her life. What we have learned from studying other composers is that those sorts of style period changes typically correspond to biographical and/or social events—"triggers"—that surround them. I want to know what the triggers were for Ms. Price. What happened around 1929 is clear (that's when she gets involved in Chicago musical life

## Polishing Hidden Gems

with the two Chicago chapters of the National Association of Negro Musicians [NANM] and so on). But what happened in her professional and/or personal life somewhere around 1937–38 that would have triggered this interest in modernist harmonies? In 1946–47, when she starts turning back towards former styles and achieving this mode which I tentatively think of as a kind of synthesis—what made that happen? Those are the questions that we ask about every composer whom we take seriously. That’s what’s involved in understanding their music. If we want to understand Florence Price, not just know a little about her, we need to address those questions.

**MC: In a recent presentation on Price at California State University Northridge, you said, “The best thing in the world would be for me to discover that all I’ve said is wrong because that would mean that we have moved forward.” What inspires that sentiment?**

**JMC:** It certainly was not any fondness for being wrong! This conversation about Florence Price, who she was, how she worked, why she worked, what her music meant, is just beginning. The worst thing in the world, from my perspective, would be for it to stall here, to stop and say, “Okay, this is enough. Let’s keep doing the same few pieces and repeat what people have already said.” If we want to look toward a tomorrow in the world of music that is inclusive of Price rather than exclusive of her, we *cannot* stop now. Canons shrink. If we satisfy ourselves with the relatively few pieces that are currently in circulation and the 10 or 12 sets of ideas that are repeated in an echo chamber, then our students’ students will know less, not more, than we do. We need to keep the conversation pushing forward, and inevitably, that will involve learning things that those of us in this first wave of the Price movement haven’t figured out. The point of the progress we’ve made so far in coming to know more about Florence Price and her music is that we’re making it easier for the next generation to do better.

**MC: In the same presentation, you described the last few years as the beginning of the “Florence Price Movement.” Where do you see this movement going?**

**JMC:** It could go either of two places. It could stagnate. The scholarly discourse could become

an echo chamber and the performance discourse a matter of repeating the same pieces over and over so that successive performances end up being tropes on previous ones, which would be unfortunate. Or it could turn into something that replicates what has happened over the last 10 years. In 2013, the amount of Florence Price’s music that was available and performed, the number of times that she came up in scholarly or popular discourse was just the dimmest anticipation of where we are now. Ideally, what would happen is that the current level of Price-related activity—performances of her recently recovered works, scholarly discussions, etc.—is not a peak of any sort. Rather, this should be just the first chapter, if you will, in a book whose best chapter is, say, chapter 30. That’s why I call it a movement. Because the number of people who are involved in it is growing and the enthusiasm, the passion is growing. I might add that it’s important not to exceptionalize her unduly. She was exceptional, yes, but in many other ways she was representative, and I think she considered herself that way. She knew that Black women composers, and women composers generally, were a huge body of people who wrote good music. If we pretend that she was not a part of this vibrant culture at which the musical world has not previously looked seriously, then we’re tokenizing Florence Price and all of those other people. This is where the work that Dr. Samantha Ege is doing, exploring Florence Price and the Chicago facet of the national phenomenon that Price and her contemporaries called the “New Negro movement,” it is so important. That work helps to teach us about this network of creative voices that supported each other and fueled further creativity, and that have been marginalized from the view of white society because of the race of those artists.

I have to emphasize here that if we want the Price movement to go forward rather than stagnate, the most important thing is for musicians of every stripe to quit assuming that mischievous genies in malevolent music publishing companies are responsible for the problems and questions in the music of Price that are currently available. That is not the case. I am the first to criticize mercenary publishing tactics and bad editions, but I have to emphasize here that *no publishers’ editions are ever*

any better than their editors' work. That means that the root cause of the current spate of unsatisfactory Price editions (by which I mean especially the editions produced in-house at G. Schirmer—not my own editions, which are good) is that many folks assume that knowing how to use Finale or Sibelius is the same thing as knowing how to responsibly edit the manuscript(s) for a musical composition.

It's a false assumption. And the fact that most of the voices who have been interviewed for some recent articles critical of the current state of Price editions have never mentioned this, and that those same voices have zero experience publishing printed editions means that those voices are little better than armchair quarterbacks, that they literally do not know what they're talking about. They seem not to know that there has never, ever been a perfect edition, that the reason we have (for example) a *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* or a new complete edition of the works of Mozart and Beethoven and Mendelssohn and Robert Schumann and other canonical composers is not that the publishers of historical editions of those composers' music were incompetent mercenaries, but that we have learned more about those composers' compositional processes and new manuscripts and other sources have since come to light that made it necessary to release new, up-to-date and more correct editions of that same music. They also seem utterly unaware that the multiple dimensions of musical notation pose vastly more complex challenges for music editors, and in turn for publishers, than the neat little uniform rows of alphanumeric characters involved in creating, correcting, proofing and publishing verbal texts. For these reasons, those voices are little better than those who blame teachers rather than students for students' poor performance when they have not studied or practiced, than music critics who have no musical background and literature critics who don't read. To accept such ill-informed and simplistic prognoses is to ignore the root problem we face yet expect it to be solved. That's a recipe for failure.

So let me say it here: The *only* way forward for people who want to improve the state of editions of Price's music is for them to learn, systematically, how to understand

musical manuscripts in general; for them to work directly with Florence Price's musical manuscripts in their several main locations (Chicago, Fayetteville, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C. and elsewhere as well as those in private collections); and for them then to produce responsible source-critical editions. Publishers will then have good editions to work with—and they need to make these *affordable* and *promote them energetically*. And teachers and performers need to learn the music they do not already know. Failing any of those three things, 10 years from now the Price movement will be in a worse place than it is now, not a better one.

### **MC: How can interested musicians get involved in Florence Price scholarship?**

**JMC:** The first thing is to look for music by Florence Price that you don't already know and take it seriously. Don't go back to a piece that you do know. Once you take an unfamiliar piece seriously, you will have grown as a musician, you will have gotten a glimpse into something of that creative personality that was previously hidden from view. And in so doing, you will have made your own small step toward continuing this movement, the growth of knowledge, understanding and appreciation of this extraordinary composer who is, in my opinion, not only a national treasure but a treasure for the entire world of music. It has to be not about solidifying what we already know through repetition but about *pushing forward*, about *increasing breadth and depth*. If our world and our students' worlds do that, then we'll be closer to achieving some measure of justice for Florence Price.

**AMT**

---

**Michael Clark**, NCTM, is assistant professor of piano at Baylor University. He studies historical approaches to fingering and founded the online database *PianoTricks.net*. His album *Waltzes and Character Pieces of Florence Price* is streaming everywhere.

