



Cheyenne
Symphony
Orchestra

Masterpiece 2 – Ceiling Full of Stars

January 27, 2024

***Adoration*—Florence Price**

Florence Price, a native of Little Rock, Arkansas, was a pioneer black American composer who distinguished herself early on. Most notably, she is remembered as the first black American woman to garner success as a composer of symphonic music. Her first symphony is perhaps her best-known work. Winner of a national prize, it was given its première in 1933 by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra—a social and cultural milestone in this country at that time.

As a young woman she journeyed north to Boston to study at the New England Conservatory, and afterwards returned to Arkansas and Georgia to teach at various small black colleges. After marriage she and her husband left a racially troubled Arkansas in 1927 for Chicago and her further study at the American Conservatory of Music. Her career blossomed, and recognition for her art led to the afore-mentioned symphony in 1931, followed by two more symphonies, concertos, and other works for orchestra. She composed in a variety of other genres: chamber works, piano music, and vocal compositions--over three hundred in all! Her songs and arrangements of spirituals were perhaps her most performed compositions, but they are not necessarily her distinguishing works. Sadly, little of her *œuvre* has been published, but with her increasing popularity today, that situation is rapidly changing. Now, her renaissance is owed in large part to the discovery not long ago of a substantial treasure trove of her compositions in a derelict house, including major works for orchestra. Included in this remarkable find was the short work for organ, *Adoration*.

Price played the organ, and earlier in her life had spent some time playing it in church, as well as in movie theatres. Her life as a composer was understandably fraught with difficulties, so it is not surprising at all that many of her works were never registered under copyright. And thus, it is with *Adoration*. So, today we enjoy many arrangements of the piece in great variety—from ‘cello choir to piano and solo viola. Tonight’s version is an arrangement for string orchestra.

Adoration, written in the early 1950s, is couched in a lush, late romantic style that defies time, place, as well as personal qualities of the composer. The twentieth century that Price lived and worked in had yielded a remarkable avalanche of newer ways of composing, playing, and hearing music—led by familiar names like Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Bartók, Shostakovich, and a host of others. But, here in this little gem by Price, that contemporary world does not exist. Rather, here is an eloquent, lyrical repose of pure traditional musical beauty. Simple in its three-part form and straightforward in texture, it evidences the innate musicality of a composer who was equally gifted in the large form challenges of the symphony and the concerto. Speaking of his compositions, near the end of his life, Gustav Mahler famously said, “My time will come.” And so it is with Price. Though she achieved laudable recognition during her life, her star faded, only to resurge more luminously a half century after her death.

Symphony No. 5 in B^b Major, D. 485—Franz Schubert

The epitaph on Schubert's tombstone reads: "The art of music has entombed here a rich treasure but even fairer hopes." We all lament the "loss" of treasure that we never possessed, none perhaps more than great art that we presume may have come to pass but not for lives cut short in youth. But not all composers can live long productive lives like those enjoyed by Verdi and Strauss, for example. Often those who die young are nevertheless privileged to accomplish much, and Schubert, like Mozart, is exemplary. He left behind him a legacy of over six hundred art songs; no other composer's contribution to the genre is as significant in scope and number. And, of course, while he did compose marvelous chamber works, symphonies, and music for piano, it is his inimitable gift for melody--the essence of his *Lieder*--that equally informs and carries his instrumental works.

His short life was generally uneventful, and his personality still is somewhat lacking in vivid details for us today, but we do know that he lived and worked within a small circle of artists in Vienna. His was contemporaneous with Beethoven, but that master's music exerted little influence upon Schubert; Haydn and Mozart were his models. He matured early, for his teenage years yielded many more profound results than did those of Beethoven, Schubert having composed over one hundred and fifty songs in his eighteenth year (almost one every three days)! The next year (1816) was almost as productive, with over one hundred songs and two symphonies—including the Symphony in B flat Major.

Schubert's fifth symphony is almost as well known as the two late, mature ones, so popular with today's audiences, the so-called "Unfinished" and the "Great" C Major. But this early work is a different take on the genre. It certainly calls to mind the symphonies of Mozart—and even alludes to portions of that composer's early G minor symphony. It is modest in length, light in orchestration (no clarinets, trumpets, or drums), and terse in development. At the time Schubert was somewhat focused upon the works of Mozart, and the orchestration and other features call to mind Mozart's Symphony No. 40.

Noteworthy of this symphony are its melodious themes and interesting harmonies—all lifelong characteristics of Schubert's works. The first movement eschews a slow introduction and gets right to the point with two attractive melodies heard almost immediately, but what is of equal interest are the arresting and unusual key areas heard later: D-flat major and E-flat minor. While the typical concertgoer may not recognize these keys by name, he will sense the richness of harmony, just as almost anyone can hear the same in a Gershwin song. So, listen for it! The slow, second movement exhibits the same melodic inventiveness and harmonic adventures—even modulating to the rare key of C-flat major. The third movement really does sound like a rough, vigorous minuet by Haydn (rather old fashioned by then), but Schubert's elegant melodic gift surfaces in the contrasting middle section. The last movement is a cheerful romp that sounds like it could have been composed some forty years earlier. So, we have a youthful work here, one that takes Haydn and Mozart as points of departure, and blends in delightful touches of Romantic melody and harmony, all so different from that of Schubert's stormy contemporary, Beethoven.

***A Ceiling Full of Stars*—Blake Tyson**

Percussion instruments are perhaps the oldest form of musical instruments, going back beyond the limits of recorded history. In Western music drums are important in medieval times, including the small copper bowls that are antecedents of today's timpani—makers. Timpani—with their close musical allies, trumpets—had an important and respected role in instrumental ensembles right through the Renaissance, Baroque, and Classical periods of musical history. And while the history of the orchestra in the 19th century focused upon the expansion of the woodwind and brass sections, it was ultimately in the 20th century that the percussion section came into its own. Its innovations were no doubt influenced immensely by the sensational effect that visiting Javanese gamelan musicians had upon Western ears at the great Parisian Exposition Universelle of 1889. Thenceforth, twentieth-century composers increasingly exploited the expanding sonic universe of what seems a limitless array of percussion instruments and their unique colors. Today, a typical catalogue of contemporary percussion instruments is astounding in its numbers and variety.

The contemporary symphony orchestra includes this formidable array of instrumental colors, and these same resources have led to a burgeoning repertoire for stand-alone percussion ensembles. These innovative ensembles are part and parcel of our contemporary musical life, and are found everywhere now in public schools, colleges and universities, and professional organizations.

Blake Tyson is well known in percussive arts circles as an active teacher, clinician, and composer. His many compositions for various groupings of percussion instruments are an important resource for percussionists everywhere. He holds degrees from Kent State University, the University of Alabama, and a doctorate in percussion performance from the Eastman School of Music. Currently, he is a member of the faculty of the University of Central Arkansas.

According to the composer, *A Ceiling Full of Stars* had its genesis in vivid childhood experiences with a small planetarium that projected galactic views on the ceiling of his home. It evidently provided hours of childhood fantasy play with its projection of a “ceiling full of stars.” The mesmerizing images of childhood carried through to this sonic retransformation. In the words of Tyson, the composition is “...a journey through space as seen through the eyes of a child.” The work was commissioned by the Texas Christian University Percussion Ensemble and was given its première by them in 2009.

It is set for eight or nine players, playing four marimbas, two vibraphones, glockenspiel, chimes, crotales, and four triangles. The four triangles are differentiated in pitch—high to low. The delicate “ping” of crotales emanates from a pitched, fully chromatic set of small, thick, round, brass or bronze discs. Crotales—sometimes called “antique cymbals”—first appeared as early as Hector Berlioz’s use, but rarely until the time of Debussy and Ravel. Now, they are a standard complement in the vast panoply of contemporary percussion resources.

A Ceiling Full of Stars begins softly with the lightest of metallic textures: triangles, vibraphones, glockenspiel, chimes, and crotales. Listen particularly for the high, ethereal crotales. Pointillist “zings” gently punctuate the floating soundscape. Gradually, rhythmic activity increases, as layers of ideas stack up, leading to a crescendo that ends with the first entry of the mellow wooden bars of the marimbas. They lead off

with a steady, almost hypnotic, ostinato that comes to inform the whole composition. The four marimbas seem to compete with each other, cascading alternatively, but all in a tight groove of ascending scales that carry it all along. In the best of allusions to some well-known post-modern musical techniques, layers of ideas careen alone, slipping and sliding back and forth over each other. It all presents a pleasant kaleidoscope of simple ideas made complex in their juxtaposition—and in essence, one of the cornerstones of the work. While the motoric tempo continues, near the middle, out of the deep, mellow register of the marimbas, a slow “chorale” tune emerges—strongly redolent of a medieval plainchant. The chorale fades away and the textures of the opening return, but varied in figurations. As the conclusion gradually winds down, the atmospheric, soft metallic instruments predominate, as at the beginning. The stellar experience wafts away.

A Ceiling Full of Stars exemplifies the creativity and artistry that inform the twenty-first century percussive arts. The “fourth estate” of the symphonic orchestra is now an eloquent, sophisticated equal resource in the remarkable richness of colors and textures of the ensemble.

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Concerto for Marimba Quartet and Orchestra—Kevin Romanski

Concerto for Marimba Quartet and Orchestra was composed expressly for the Heartland Marimba Quartet. The concerto is written as a work for a marimba ensemble as soloist rather than for four separate marimba soloists. When working with the marimba, one must be careful about maintaining balance with the orchestra, as it is not a particularly loud instrument. Similar to a violin, it should not be overwhelmed by brass instruments. However, with a quartet of marimbas, there is a certain level of dynamic power that can be achieved to match any orchestra. The concerto is structured as one continuous movement, even though it implies the presence of four separate tempo/movement sections. Listeners may notice a slight hiccup in its rhythms, as an unusual compound time signature 15/8 was chosen for the slow movement section, adding an element of unpredictability. For a bit of fun, the final movement section of the work incorporates a riff-like motive inspired by Jamaican reggae, infusing a Caribbean influence. As a whole, the concerto is not intended to sound difficult for the listener to grasp. The composer wishes for the audience to view this musical work as a friend, something they can wrap themselves in like a comfortable blanket.

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