

FLORENCE PRICE  
MARGARET BONDS  
ROBERT NATHANIEL DETT



AMERICAN SPIRITUAL  
MICHAEL LEE, PIANO

## AMERICAN SPIRITUAL

American Spiritual highlights the musical narratives of three Black American composers in the early 20th century. For me, it was a passion project and scholarship effort to represent music that had been obscured by history, and that has very rarely been recorded or programmed in concert. I chose major piano works by these three composers (Price, Bonds and Dett) because their music was stylistically intriguing — it managed to blend elements of Western Art Music with the American Spiritual to create something that was truly unique. Moreover, this fusion of two musical worlds (with very different musical histories) points to an overarching metaphor of our interconnectedness, and an affirmation of our shared humanity.

## PIANO SONATA IN E MINOR Florence Price (1887-1953)

Native Arkansas composer Florence Price (1887-1953) was well known and celebrated in her day, which is remarkable given her own description to conductor Serge Koussevitzky of her two “handicaps”: race and sex. Her career is, nonetheless, an indictment of the treatment received by artists of colour and women; her achievements—which include, for instance, the recognition of having the first extended symphonic work performed by a major American orchestra—were never anything less than hard-won.

After Price’s death, most of her music fell into relative obscurity; some ten years ago, the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* listed merely a handful of extant works, with a trove of others assumed lost. But the chance discovery in 2009 of a dilapidated summer house where Price worked (and in which she stored hundreds of pages of her work) resulted in the recovery of volumes and volumes of her music. Today, we are witnessing something of a “Florence Price Renaissance.”

The majority of Price’s works for keyboard are small-scale: either standalone pieces or grouped into suites. The conspicuous exception is her Piano Sonata in E minor (1932), a relatively early work which demonstrates, nevertheless, all the hallmarks of her unique and inimitable compositional voice. Unbelievably, this great American work was only recorded in 1993 by Althea Waites (after she had been introduced to it by Price advocate, Rae Linda Brown), and has only very recently begun to receive the dissemination it deserves.

The first movement (Price adheres to tradition in the work's structure in three movements) is firmly rooted in tonal harmony, which is revealing of Price's influences; some might detect Rachmaninoff or even a bit of Debussy. It is also replete with neo-Romantic flourishes. The second movement comprises some of the most memorable and exquisite moments in all Price's music for the piano; a heartfelt Spiritual tune is buttressed by richly satisfying pianistic writing. The final movement is bright, playful, and fleet-footed, closing out the work in brilliant fashion.

## SPIRITUAL SUITE: III. TROUBLE WATER Margaret Bonds (1913-1972)

Margaret Bonds was born in Chicago and grew up in a devotional musical environment. Her mother was the organist of a local church, and the Bonds household served as a kind of artistic forum where musicians of all provenances and styles were welcome, and music-making was constant. Bonds was trained at Northwestern University and later, after moving to New York, at The Juilliard School. As a high-school student in Chicago, she studied piano and composition with Florence Price. Bonds's ambitions as a pianist can be observed in her undergraduate and graduate solo recitals, as well as in the performances she gave post-1934 (after she had graduated), in which sprawling, virtuoso 19th-century works feature prominently.

This remarkable composer synthesized many influences into a beautiful and haunting expressive ecosystem best illustrated in her emblematic piece "Troubled Water," which like Price's Sonata is progressively gaining more attention on the 21st-century concert stage. Along with the latter Sonata, it appears to have been recorded only once, in 1993, by Althea Waites.

Bonds originally wrote "Troubled Water" as the third movement of her *Spiritual Suite*; the tune which serves as the foundation for this piece is "Wade in the Water," a particularly rich Spiritual in terms of its historical landscape, and in which water symbolically reverberates in Bonds's masterfully flowing writing. A piece filled with fearless harmonic adventurousness, it synthesizes the improvisatory impulse and a tightly woven structure. After a moderately propulsive opening and exposition of the Spiritual's tune, Bonds introduces an E major episode enfolding some of the piece's most beautiful lyricism. This is superseded by a resolute ostinato, which reappears in the closing page, driving the music to a thrilling conclusion.

## 8 Bible Vignettes

### Robert Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943)

Canadian-American composer Robert Nathaniel Dett was an enormously important figure of 20th-century African-American music. He took direct inspiration from Dvořák's integration of Czech folk tunes and idioms in the Western Classical tradition. Dett's modus operandi is best summed up in the following oft-quoted, eloquent call to action:

“We have this wonderful store of folk music—the melodies of an enslaved people ... But this store will be of no value unless we utilize it, unless we treat it in such manner that it can be presented in choral form, in lyric and operatic works, in concertos and suites and salon music—unless our musical architects take the rough timber of Negro themes and fashion from it music which will prove that we, too, have national feelings and characteristics, as have the European peoples whose forms we have zealously followed for so long.”

In some ways, *Eight Bible Vignettes* is the summation of a life's work. It is the last piano work that Dett completed, and the pieces in this cycle were written in the final years of his life. They also comprise musical immortalizations of tales and narratives deeply woven into the fabric of African-American life. The pieces' titles alone resonate far beyond their biblical origins, and into the centuries-long American enslavement of people from Africa—for instance in “Desert Interlude,” there is a depiction of Abraham's slave Hagar and their child. The alternatively austere and gently “learned” character of the opening movement contrasts with the piece's lonely lilt. A newfound, blossoming lyricism characterizes the third piece, “As His Own Soul,” where Dett quotes a passage from 1 Samuel, in which the intimate and ultimately tragic tale of David and Jonathan is set: “And it came to pass ... that the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him

as his own soul.” The serpentine, contrapuntal skeins of “Barcarolle of Tears” convey powerfully the suffering of the enslaved Jews in Egypt; there are moments that also recall Debussy and, in places, an almost Expressionistic impulse. “I Am the True Vine” is a three-part fugue, clearly a reference to the Trinity, echoing the passage “no one comes to the Father except through me.” The sixth piece, titled “Martha Complained,” reveals Dett's compositional flexibility and skill as well as his ecumenical thinking—the textual passage is the second to provide a special focus on a female character, seen in many later guises as a symbol of domesticity. A melismatic, slightly bluesy right hand unfolds above a lackadaisical left-hand ostinato interrupted by a forceful, memorably powerful outburst. The seventh movement, “Other Sheep,” takes as its starting point the text “And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring.” Here, Dett follows in Bach's footsteps, notably the second volume of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* in a compositional *tour de force* reserved for this penultimate space. It takes as its theme an African chant, unfolding as a set of variations then capped by a condensed final section. The final piece is a setting of the ubiquitous Psalm 23—a peaceful benediction of hope.

## MICHAEL LEE, PIANO

Michael Lee enjoys an active and wide-ranging musical career as both a solo and collaborative pianist. He has performed throughout North America and Europe, has given premieres of new works, studied at eminent music festivals and has worked as a répétiteur and music director for several opera productions.

He has taught at the University of Toronto, Memorial University of Newfoundland, and Dalhousie University; has worked as an adjudicator for music festivals, and has been involved in many outreach projects with the primary goal of improving educational accessibility in rural and underserved areas. Furthermore, he focused his doctoral dissertation research in a niche of educational psychology to explore strategies to maximize student potential.

Michael was born and raised in beautiful St. John's, Newfoundland & Labrador. He holds a Doctor of Musical Arts in Piano Performance and a Master of Music in Piano Performance and Pedagogy, both from the University of Toronto, where he studied with the eminent Romanian pianist, Marietta Orlov. He completed his Bachelor of Music in Piano Performance at Memorial University of Newfoundland, where he also received the University Medal of Excellence for graduating with the highest academic standing. He has received full scholarships for his studies at each institution.



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# CREDITS

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We acknowledge that Leaf Music's work spans many Territories and Treaty areas and that our office is located in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People

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# AMERICAN SPIRITUAL

## MICHAEL LEE, PIANO

### **FLORENCE PRICE**

Piano Sonata in E Minor

- 1 I. Andante - Allegro
- 2 II. Andante
- 3 III. Scherzo

### **MARGARET BONDS**

Spiritual Suite

- 4 III. Troubled Water

### **NATHANIEL DETT**

8 Bible Vignettes

- 5 No. 1, Father Abraham
- 6 No. 2, Desert Interlude
- 7 No. 3, As His Own Soul
- 8 No. 4, Barcarolle of Tears
- 9 No. 5, I Am the True Vine
- 10 No. 6, Martha Complained
- 11 No. 7, Other Sheep
- 12 No. 8, Madrigal Divine