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REVIEW

Florence Price's Piano Teaching Music

Lillie Gardner

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Abstract

Florence Price is finally gaining recognition on the concert stage, but it is equally important that her works are included in beginning piano teaching repertoire. This review of Volumes I and II ("Beginning Pieces") of Florence Price's piano teaching music promotes the musical benefits of these pieces for piano students of all ages, includes an overview of their musical and technical content, and considers the versatile pedagogical opportunities offered by these pieces for teachers.

Keywords:

Piano; pedagogy; music for teaching, piano

Florence Price is finally gaining recognition as one of America's great composers of the twentieth century. In recent years, her orchestral music has been performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra and Minnesota Orchestra among others, and many of her piano and chamber works are being recorded for the first time since piles of her manuscripts turned up in an abandoned house in 2009 (including on Dr. Samantha Ege's newest album *Fantasie Nègre: The Piano Music of Florence Price* and Lara Downes' *Florence Price Piano Discoveries*). While Price's concert works are long-overdue admissions to the canon, her multi-faceted career deserves to be honored off-stage as well as on-stage. In addition to being a talented musician and composer, Price was a brilliant pedagogue. Piano teaching was a significant part of her life as well as her creative output.

Price's pedagogical works are attractive and important additions to any beginning piano student's repertoire. Dr. Lia Jensen-Abbott edited two volumes of this teaching music, published in 2015 and 2016 by ClarNan Editions. Likely composed in the 1920s or earlier, these musical miniatures demonstrate Price's inventive approach as a piano instructor in addition to serving as bite-sized examples of her unique compositional style. While each work emphasizes a specific element of piano technique, the collection contains beautiful melodies and rich expressive potential throughout. Both volumes are labeled "Beginning Pieces," although Volume II is more advanced than Volume I.

Volume I begins with two character pieces— "On Higher Ground" and "The Froggie and the Rabbit"—before two sets entitled "Little Pieces on White Keys" and "Little Pieces on Black Keys." The opening pieces are the most advanced in the



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volume. Both in the key of F Major, “On Higher Ground” requires a hand position with overlapping thumbs and “The Froggie and the Rabbit” is a fun eight-bar piece in 6/8 time.

Mostly in C-position and 4/4 time, the nine “Little Pieces on White Keys” consist of simple rhythms and could serve as a primer to works like Carl Czerny’s Op. 599. The first few are simple eight- or twelve-measure pieces, and the set grows more advanced as it progresses. No. 5 introduces triads in the left hand, No. 6 serves as an introduction to canon (reminiscent of Béla Bartók’s Volume I Mikrokosmos pieces), and No. 7 is an example of mirror music. Nos. 8 and 9 are longer and in G-position.

The “Little Pieces on Black Keys” highlight the importance of keyboard topography in early piano learning, as playing on black-key groups is conducive to developing a good hand position in general. Unlike many other beginner black-key piano pieces, Price’s black-key works are all composed on the grand staff with the appropriate key signatures of flats or sharps. This invites students to get comfortable with the sight and concept of key signatures, even if a full understanding of them may not yet be possible or necessary. Because of the advanced key signatures, these pieces may be taught by rote and the score used as a reference, depending on the student’s learning style and level.

Even these simple black-key pieces are imbued with Price’s unique musical style, which blends southern African-American musical traditions with Western European classical traditions. “This Way and That Way,” which is the sixth of the “Little Pieces on Black Keys,” hints at syncopation with its long notes on weak beats. Others such as No. 4 utilize a call-and-response structure. Throughout the set, pentatonicism reigns supreme—just as it does in many of Price’s concert works.

Volume II is more exploratory of key signatures and hand positions than Volume I. Many of the Volume II works are character pieces that evoke nature with titles like “Autumn Echoes,” “Clover Blossoms” and “March of the Beetles.” Price specifies that the purpose of “Autumn Echoes” and others is to develop the student’s imagination. In addition to more nuanced expressive content, Volume II includes greater technical challenges. “Criss Cross” involves the hands crossing over one another and “Roly Poly” introduces harmonic intervals. A welcome complement to Dmitri Kabalevsky’s small character pieces, these miniatures also offer opportunities for beginning students to portray the American landscape, serving as an excellent interpretive primer for intermediate works like Amy Beach’s Six to Twelve or Edward MacDowell’s Woodland Sketches.

Most striking about Price’s teaching pieces are their versatility. As Dr. Jensen-Abbott notes, these pieces can be used as supplemental repertoire, as exercises in various technical and expressive challenges, or as examples for sight-reading. They can be used for children and adult students alike, and they are as musically gratifying as they are technically doable for a beginning student. Nearly every piece in the collection lacks markings for dynamics, articulations and tempo, which allows teachers to tailor the music to their students’ needs and encourages students to develop their own expressiveness. As Dr. Jensen-Abbott writes in the preface to Volume II, “this music is a veritable playground for students to imaginatively explore their own interpretations.”

From this foundational playground, students can graduate to Price’s more complex intermediate works, where they can explore the beautiful sonorities of “The Old Boatman,” the rhythmic drive and syncopations of “Ticklin’ Toes” or the more virtuosic technical requirements of “The Goblin and the Mosquito.” Because Price’s style is a smooth amalgam of influences, her small-scale works are the perfect launching pad to pursue both European classical repertoire and other African-American character pieces such as those by Hale Smith or Valerie Capers.

Not only are Price’s pedagogical works a welcome addition to a level of teaching repertoire that often exclusively represents nineteenth-century European men, but her teaching pieces are exciting and rewarding in and of themselves. Replete with interesting melodies, playful rhythms and dramatic characters, each of Price’s beginning pieces is a warm invitation for students to explore the piano keys, hone technique and develop as musicians—all through joining her in the simple pleasure of making something beautiful.

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