

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger

Violin Concerto No. 2

FLORENCE PRICE

Born April 9, 1887, Little Rock

Died June 3, 1953, Chicago

Florence Price was a remarkable composer, but today—65 years after her death—few have heard of her. Born Florence Beatrice Smith in Little Rock, she showed a remarkable talent very early: she gave her first piano recital at age 4, published her first piece at 11, and entered the New England Conservatory at 15. There she studied piano and organ and took composition lessons from George Whitefield Chadwick and Frederick Converse. Graduating at age 18, she taught at Shorter College in Arkansas, and in 1910 she became the head of the music department at Clark University in Atlanta. Returning to Little Rock, she married George Price, an attorney, and in 1927 the couple and their children moved to Chicago, where Florence studied composition with Leo Sowerby; she was at this time also writing musical jingles for radio commercials. Price's *Symphony No. 1 in E Minor*, composed in 1931-32, won the Wanamaker Competition and was performed in 1933 by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at the Chicago World's Fair—it was the first work by an African-American woman to be performed by a major American symphony orchestra. In the following years, Price's music was performed more widely in the United States and in Europe—Marian Anderson performed several of Price's songs, including "My soul's been anchored in de Lord" and "Songs to the Dark Virgin."

Price was a prolific composer. She wrote over 300 different works, including four symphonies, two violin concertos, a piano concerto, piano music, and a large number of songs and choral compositions. Most of these remain unpublished, and while some of her works have been recorded, Price's music is only now being discovered by audiences. Trained in the conservative late-nineteenth century style of Chadwick and Converse, she remained faithful to that idiom throughout her life; the many new directions of twentieth-century music did not make themselves felt in her music.

Price's *Violin Concerto No. 2* has an unusual history. She completed it in May 1952, just a year before her death, and dedicated it to the American violinist Minnie Cedargreen Jernberg (1888-1967). Price apparently never heard this music—it was not performed until eleven years after her death when Jernberg gave the premiere (with piano accompaniment) at the opening of the Florence B. Price elementary school in the Kenwood district of Chicago in 1964. And then the music vanished for nearly half a century. In 2009, a couple was refurbishing a dilapidated house in the village of St. Anne, south of Chicago, and in the process they discovered a pile of abandoned musical manuscripts. It turned out that, years before, the house had been Price's summer home. The couple turned all the manuscripts over to the University of Arkansas, which maintains a collection of Price's papers, and violinist Er-Gene Kahng of the Arkansas faculty gave the premiere of the orchestral version with the Arkansas Philharmonic in February 2018.

The *Violin Concerto No. 2* is in one continuous movement that spans about fourteen minutes. The impulse of this music is lyric rather than dramatic or virtuosic: while there are certainly brilliant passages, this concerto does not offer the violinist a separate cadenza. A firm orchestral introduction marked *Tempo moderato* leads to the entrance of the soloist on a soaring, rhapsodic theme that establishes the mood of the entire concerto. Price's one-movement structure might—very generally—be likened to sonata form: the opening introduces several different themes, the central episode extends and develops those ideas, and they are recapitulated (though not literally) in the closing section. Price's writing for violin is idiomatic, and her orchestration is clear (unusually, it features prominent parts for piano and trumpet). At the very end, the violin soars to a moment of repose before the orchestra drives the concerto to its emphatic conclusion.

Between Clouds & Streams

QINGQING WANG

Born in Changsha, Hunan Province

The following note was provided by the composer.

Having been inspired by the natural beauty and richness, *Between Clouds & Streams for orchestra* (2018), with two movements, interprets how I imagine the relationships between clouds and streams. In the first movement, clouds represent heaven, and streams refer to earth. Focusing on the charming, powerful and captivating sound in the extreme registers, it depicts a

beauty-seeking story between the two characters of clouds and streams.

The second movement is inspired by a unique painting skill, Chinese ink wash painting – the technique of *Gouliu*. (In Chinese painting, the technique of *Liurang* refers to blank-leaving and outline-blurring; The technique of *Goule* refers to sketching every detail clearly; The technique of *Gouliu* is a combination of *Liurang* and *Goule*, which juxtaposes two tastes in one space). Moreover, it explores how the soloists' group interacts with the orchestra and the strings in the auditorium. The concept of *Conduction*, a unique system using the symbolic vocabulary of ideographic signs and gestures to create real-time controlled improvisation, is applied in the second movement to strengthen the connections between the conductor and the soloists' group, the conductor and the strings in the auditorium, as well as the soloists' group and the strings in the auditorium. The work implies an intention to invite the audience to stroll in the musical garden, a garden built between clouds and streams.

Messiah

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL

Born February 23, 1685, Halle

Died April 14, 1759, London

In the spring of 1741 the Duke of Devonshire, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, invited Handel to Dublin to put on a series of concerts in support of various local charities. Handel gathered earlier works for performance in Dublin, but that summer he began work on a new oratorio that would have its premiere there. This oratorio represented a new direction for Handel, who by no means considered himself a composer of sacred music, for it was on a text assembled from the Bible and the Prayer Book Psalter by his longtime friend Charles Jennens. *Messiah*, as this new oratorio was titled, may have represented a fresh direction for the 56-year-old Handel, but he worked with unbelievable speed. Part I was composed in one week: August 22-28, 1741; Part II was complete nine days later, on September 6; and the composition of Part III took six days. Handel had the orchestration complete in two more days, on September 14. From the time he sat down in front of a blank sheet of paper until the completion of the full orchestral score of *Messiah*, a total of twenty-four days had elapsed.

Not until he had been in Dublin for five months did Handel present his new oratorio: he led an open rehearsal of *Messiah* on April 9, 1742, and the official premiere followed four days later, on April 13. It was a stunning success, and Dubliners struggled to get tickets. Neal's

Musick Hall, where the premiere took place, had room for only 600, and so management came up with a shrewd solution. The day of the performance, *Faulkner's Dublin Journal* carried this admonition: "The Stewards of the Charitable Musical Society request the Favour of the Ladies not to come with Hoops this Day to the Musick-Hall in Fishamble-Street: the Gentlemen are desired to come without their swords." Thus slimmed-down, 700 listeners were crammed into the hall, and the performance turned the handsome profit of 400 pounds for Mercer's Hospital, the Charitable Infirmary, and the Charitable Music Society (this last was for the relief of those imprisoned for debt). A second performance of *Messiah*, on June 13, was equally successful, and Handel left Ireland in August, eager to repeat that success in London.

It must have come as the worst possible surprise to the composer when the oratorio failed at its London premiere on March 23, 1743. Perhaps he should have seen it coming. That performance was preceded by a furor in the newspapers about his decision to present an oratorio on Biblical texts in a public theater, and Handel's performance was attacked as "blasphemous." A few subsequent performances had scarcely more success, and it was not until May 1, 1750, when Handel led *Messiah* as a benefit for the opening of the Hospital Chapel of the Foundling Hospital, his favorite charity, that the oratorio finally won favor. By the time Handel died in April 1759, *Messiah* had been performed 56 times in London, and over the last two-and-a-half centuries it has remained an inescapable part of the way Christmas is celebrated.

It should be noted, though, that *Messiah* is not exclusively concerned with Christmas. Jennens structured the three parts of *Messiah* around the three central events of Christianity: Part I is about the birth of Christ, Part II is about the crucifixion, and the final part is about the resurrection and the spreading of the gospel, and so *Messiah* is essentially structured on Christianity's three holy days: Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter. Jennens has come in for a great deal of criticism over the last two centuries (he was by all accounts a vain snob), but his arrangement of texts for *Messiah* was brilliant. Basic to Jennens' choice of texts was his decision *not* to cast *Messiah* as drama—there is no narrative line here, no rising action, no climax. Jennens began with the assumption that his audience already knew the story and required no telling. He then chose texts about specific incidents in the life of Christ, and these become a sequence of moments-along-the-way in one of the most familiar of all stories, rather than an attempt to *tell* that story.

But Jennens' text, no matter how shrewdly assembled, would have been long forgotten

were it not for the magnificence of Handel's music. Handel composed *Messiah* from many different kinds of music. From opera he retained the recitative and dramatic aria, though he shrewdly avoids making the arias too brilliant. In place of florid lines that might seem operatic and out of context for this subject, he blesses the soloists with some of the most appealing, straightforward melodies ever written (though these can be brilliant enough: "Rejoice greatly" remains—over two centuries later—a *tour de force* for soprano and the combined violin sections). He is also willing to incorporate quite different kinds of music. The famous *Pastoral Symphony* is derived from the *pifferari*, the music of the Italian shepherds who would make an annual Christmas pilgrimage to Rome to play wind instruments in imitation of the shepherds who watched over the Nativity.

The present performances offer Part I of *Messiah*—the "Christmas" section—and conclude with the *Hallelujah Chorus* from Part II. *Messiah* is usually heard in the edition prepared by the English musicologist Watkins Shaw in 1959, but at these concerts it is presented in the orchestration by Mozart. A separate note for that version follows.

MOZART AND HANDEL'S MESSIAH

Mozart's arrival in Vienna in 1781 opened up many new vistas for the young composer. There he soon met one of the most remarkable patrons in the history of music, Baron Gottfried van Swieten. Swieten encouraged and sponsored Mozart, he arranged the texts for Haydn's oratorios *The Creation* and *The Seasons*, and he supported the young Beethoven, earning in the process the dedication of that composer's *First Symphony* in 1800. As a diplomat from Vienna to Berlin, Swieten had come into contact with the music of J.S. Bach and Handel, then barely known in Vienna, and he returned to spread his passion for the polyphonic music of an earlier era among enthusiasts in Vienna. Soon after his arrival in Vienna, Mozart was invited to Swieten's musical gatherings, and on April 10, 1782, he wrote back to his father in Salzburg: "I go every Sunday at noon to Baron van Swieten's—and there nothing is played but Handel and Bach. Right now I am making a collection of Bach fugues—including those of Sebastian as well as Emanuel and Friedemann Bach." Under Swieten's encouragement, Mozart pursued his interest in the polyphonic music of the Bach family—he wrote fugues for keyboard and arranged preludes and fugues by various Bachs for string trio and string quartet.

Several years later, in 1788, Swieten invited Mozart to become music director of the

Society of Associated Cavaliers, a group of nobles and music enthusiasts who joined together to underwrite the performance of major choral works. The Viennese were particularly impressed by Handel's oratorios. Haydn, who would discover these works during his visits to London, was amazed by them: to a friend Haydn confessed that they made him feel "as if I had been put back to the beginning of my studies and had known nothing up to that point." For the Society, Mozart re-orchestrated and conducted four major choral works by Handel: *Acis and Galatea*, *Alexander's Feast*, *Ode for Saint Cecelia's Day*, and *Messiah*. His re-orchestration of *Messiah* was completed in the spring of 1789, and he conducted this version on April 7 of that year at Count Johann Esterházy's palace in Vienna. In the Koechel catalog, it is listed as K.572.

Handel originally scored *Messiah* for a very small orchestra: two oboes, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. Swieten, Haydn, and others may have been astonished by the grandeur of Handel's oratorios, but many felt that Handel's orchestra was too small to project that grandeur properly. The Society of Associated Cavaliers made much larger orchestral forces available to Mozart, and he made full use of them. His version of *Messiah* (which employs some instruments Handel never heard of) calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, three trombones, two trumpets, timpani, and strings; in the process, Mozart also revised Handel's trumpet parts. This sort of orchestra strikes fear into the hearts of modern historical instrument performers, but Mozart's orchestration is surprisingly restrained. Not for him was this the opportunity to create a jumbo, technicolor Stokowski-like re-orchestration of Handel's score. To be sure, Mozart does make use of all the additional forces available to him in Vienna, but in his orchestration these forces stand at the service of Handel's music rather than calling attention to themselves. The sound of Mozart's orchestra is of course much grander than Handel's original, but this is all done with Mozart's keen ear and unfailingly good judgment.

Today, of course, historical authenticity has become almost a matter of faith, and modern performances pride themselves on historical accuracy (insofar as that can be known). Performances of *Messiah* during the nineteenth century had swelled to the point where one performance in London in 1859 involved over 3000 performers, but today we take pride in such things as original instruments, period performance practices, and appropriate numbers of performers. Yet before we feel superior to Mozart's version, we should remember that Handel himself conducted performances of *Messiah* with greatly expanded orchestras, and these sometimes included horns and bassoons, instruments that were not in his original orchestration.

Handel might have been much more receptive to Mozart's full-scale re-orchestration than we are inclined to think. Mozart's version of *Messiah* remains interesting on its own terms, for not only does it show us one great composer's thoughts on another, it also makes clear how much the conception of orchestral sonority had evolved by 1789, just thirty years after Handel's death.