

George Theophilus Walker (June 27, 1922 - August 23, 2018)

Lyric for Strings (composed in 1946 as a movement of a string quartet, revised for string orchestra in 1990)

Instrumentation: strings.

George T. Walker blazed many a trail during his long and prolific career as a musician. He was the first Black graduate of the famed Curtis Institute of Music, the first Black pianist to perform a recital at New York's Town Hall, the first Black soloist to play with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the first Black composer to win a Pulitzer Prize. His unique output as a composer draws from numerous influences and techniques; he composed music inspired by everything from popular songs, to jazz, to spirituals, to the serial techniques of the Second Viennese School, to late 19th/early 20th century composers such as Stravinsky and Debussy. These far-flung influences created a highly unique oeuvre that serves as an excellent representation of American "classical" music.

Originally the second movement of a string quartet composed while Walker was still at Curtis, *Lyric for Strings* first bore the title *Lament* and was dedicated to Walker's grandmother, who passed away shortly before the work's completion. It shares many characteristics with Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, which isn't entirely surprising given that Barber and Walker both studied with the same teachers at Curtis. Barber's work slightly pre-dates Walker's, and given the success of the *Adagio*, Walker was likely inspired by Barber's music (incidentally, the *Adagio* also began its life as a movement of a string quartet). It has become Walker's most performed work, and it's easy to hear why: the melody flows organically, its character defined by harmonies that oscillate between major and minor tonalities, capturing the spirit in which it was created. One moment feels like a fond memory, while the next brings a more mournful sound, all leading up to a feeling of serenity in this brief yet profound work.

Richard Georg Strauss (June 11, 1864 - September 8, 1949)

Burleske in D minor (TrV. 145, composed in 1885-1886, revised 1890 and premiered June 21, 1890 with the composer conducting and Eugen d'Albert on piano)

Instrumentation: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, strings, and piano soloist.

While Richard Strauss is best known for his epic, probing tone poems, his earlier works owe much to the influence of earlier Romantics such as Johannes Brahms. Strauss's musical output bridged between the two opposing camps of instrumental composers of the time: those dedicated to using instrumental music to depict myths, legends, and/or other art forms (programmatic music), and those who felt music could stand on its own, without the need for extramusical meaning (absolute music). Eventually, with the influence of close friend and fellow musician Alexander Ritter, Strauss took up the mantle of programmatic music, joining the likes

of Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner in their quest to reinvent instrumental music. Prior to Ritter's influence, Strauss's music sounded much more like Brahms, in large part due to Strauss's musically conservative father, the horn virtuoso Franz Strauss.

Franz Strauss was a prominent Bavarian musician, regarded as one of the finest horn players in the world. The Strauss's home life frequently included musical gatherings to play through instrumental chamber works (Franz was also an accomplished violist and clarinetist), and Franz had a very particular taste in the music he played recreationally. He eschewed the new movement in music spearheaded by Wagner and Liszt, preferring Classical music, in particular that of the First Viennese School (Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven). As principal horn for the opera orchestra in Munich, Franz performed Wagner's music frequently, but that doesn't mean he liked it!

Franz's preference for absolute music had a lengthy influence on young Richard, whose musical studies began on piano at age 4, under the tutelage of one of his father's colleagues from the Munich Court Orchestra. By age 6, Richard had completed his first composition, as his father began to teach him the music of Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. As Richard's musical output grew, so did his father's assistance in championing his son's music. Franz conducted an amateur orchestra in Munich at the time, which became something of a testing ground for Richard's early instrumental works (such as his *Serenade for 13 Winds*). Richard's skill grew immensely during this time, and so did his interest in the music of Berlioz, Wagner, and other composers that were on the cutting edge of programmatic music. However, Franz basically forbade Richard from studying these works, even though Richard had seen several of Wagner's operas that his father performed in.

After Richard Strauss left home to further his studies in Munich and then Berlin, he met the famed conductor Hans von Bülow, who would also serve as a major influence in Strauss's life. Von Bülow gave Strauss a post as his assistant at the Meiningen Court Orchestra, where Strauss would refine his conducting chops, and meet many luminaries in the musical world, including Johannes Brahms. In an apparent effort to impress von Bülow, Strauss wrote a piece for piano and orchestra dedicated to von Bülow. This *Scherzo in D minor* did not leave a great impression on von Bülow, who called it "a complicated piece of nonsense" and deemed it unplayable (von Bülow had famously small hands for a pianist). While von Bülow was away from the Meiningen orchestra, Strauss conducted the *Scherzo* in rehearsal while also playing the piano part. In a letter to von Bülow about this experience, Strauss said, "...given an outstanding pianist, and a first-rate conductor, perhaps the whole thing will not turn out to be the unalloyed nonsense I took it for after the first rehearsal. After the first run-through, I was totally discouraged..."

Obviously, Strauss shelved the work at this time, until he met the piano virtuoso Eugen d'Albert in 1889. Strauss showed the work to d'Albert, who promptly suggested some edits to the piano part that would make the piece both more playable and more palatable to the ear. Strauss rededicated the piece to d'Albert, and retitled it with the name *Burleske in D minor* ('burleske'

meaning farce or satire). The updated work premiered in 1890, alongside the premiere of Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration*.

By this time, Strauss had begun to write his tone poems, which took his musical voice in a decidedly different direction than what was contained in *Burleske*. As a result, *Burleske* serves as an interesting turning point in Strauss's compositional voice. The music in *Burleske* owes more to Brahms than to Strauss's later, more programmatic works. There are hints of themes in *Burleske* that seem to foreshadow some of the tone poems (a trace of *Till Eulenspiegel* here, a dash of *Der Rosenkavalier* there), but the music in this work is decidedly Brahms-ian. Overall, *Burleske* has much in the way of wit, as evidenced by the introduction of the primary theme in the timpani. Virtuoso piano writing, clever turns of phrases, inventive scoring, and a distinctly late-Romantic flair make *Burleske* a fascinating look into the changing aesthetics of an important figure in the early 20th century musical world.

Florence Beatrice Price (née Smith; April 9, 1887 - June 3, 1953)

Piano Concerto in D minor (composed in 1933-34, premiered in 1934 with the composer as the soloist, also known as *Piano Concerto in One Movement*)

Instrumentation: flute, oboe, two clarinets, bassoon, two horns, two trumpets, two trombones, three percussion (bass drum, snare drum, cymbals), timpani, strings, and piano soloist.

Let's perform a thought experiment: if I were to show you the early credentials of two 20th century American composers, including their musical training and early career milestones, would you be able to guess how successful they became?

Composer A: early piano and composition training, debuted on piano at age 4, first published composition at age 11, studied at New England Conservatory in Boston.

Composer B: no formal training, learned piano at home, rejected as a student by both Nadia Boulanger and Maurice Ravel, worked as a song plugger for a department store.

Which of the above would you expect to be familiar with? Most would probably guess Composer A, who's early life sounds similar to a number of other prodigies we all know and love. Yet, Composer B is the person that achieved far more fame in their lifetime (it's George Gershwin, if you're curious). If you haven't already guessed, Composer A is Florence Price, a Black woman whose music has recently been saved from oblivion by numerous scholars and musicians championing her work, including tonight's soloist, who was featured on a recording that recently won a Grammy.

Born in Little Rock, Arkansas to mixed race parents, Price learned piano from her mother, who was a music teacher. Growing up in a middle class family afforded her the opportunity to pursue musical study further, so she enrolled at the New England Conservatory in Boston. When she first signed up for classes, she passed as Mexican to avoid the inevitable discrimination she

would face as a Black woman. She graduated from NEC in 1906, and promptly made her way to Atlanta, Georgia, where she headed the music department at Clark Atlanta University. After marrying, she moved back to Little Rock with her family, until a series of racially charged crimes led them to leave the South. They settled in Chicago, where Price's musical career would blossom.

In stark contrast to the life of fear in Arkansas, Price and her family found a world of new opportunities in Chicago - not that Chicago was devoid of racial tensions itself, but there was a supportive community of fellow Black artists living there. She became heavily involved in various music trade groups around Chicago, and set up a thriving private piano teaching studio in her home. With her children older now, she was also afforded the time to compose more. She wrote instructional pieces for children, mostly for piano, and even wrote popular music under a pseudonym for radio advertisements and theater works. The educational piano pieces brought Price numerous publishing deals, which helped support her family, but these deals didn't necessarily translate to Price's more serious musical works.

By 1930, Price's music began to be noticed outside of educational spheres. Her solo piano work *Fantasia nègre* premiered to much acclaim at the National Association of Negro Musicians convention. Following her divorce in 1931, Price moved in with her friend and student Margaret Bonds, who connected Price to more people within the Chicago artistic community. Price and Bonds both won prizes for their compositions from the Wanamaker Foundation in 1933 - Price for her Symphony in E minor, which subsequently received a performance at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. This performance made Price the first Black woman to have a composition performed by a major orchestra.

Around this time, Price had begun sketches for a new piano concerto. Little is known about how exactly the work came about, but the first performance took place in 1934 with Price herself as the soloist. Later that same year, Margaret Bonds performed the solo part with the Woman's Symphony Orchestra of Chicago. A review of this performance said of Price's work: "...it represents the most successful effort to date to lift the native folk-song idiom of the Negro to artistic levels." While Price was certainly influenced by spirituals and folk songs from her Southern upbringing, she didn't actively transcribe and set these songs as much as her composing colleague William Levi Dawson. In regards to her approach to folk songs, she said it best in the following quote: "In some of my work, I make use of the [Negro folk] idiom undiluted. Again, at other times, it merely flavors my themes. And still at other times, thoughts come in the garb of the other side of my mixed racial background. I have tried for practical purposes to cultivate and preserve a facility of expression in both idioms."

Price's piano concerto is an excellent example of what the above quote describes. One can clearly hear a Romantic influence on the structure of the work, while the rhythmic, harmonic and melodic elements bear resemblance to African-American music. Though the work is just one movement, it has three clearly delineated sections, with an introduction that shows fragments of a larger theme, leading to a piano cadenza - a very Brahmsian technique. The first section winds its way through a modified sonata form, leading to a rather triumphant ending. The

second section is slower and more lyrical, with a call and response form between the soloist and orchestra, and much in the way of jazz-tinged harmonies. This leads to the final section - a boisterous dance based on the rhythm of the juba dance. Price deployed juba rhythms in many of her works, and one can hear why; it is high-energy, and lends itself well to a concluding section of a musical work.

Though Price had publishing deals for her educational works for piano, her serious music never was formally published. After a string of performances in the 1930s and '40s, Price's music fell out of rotation for major music institutions, despite attempts to convince music directors to program her work. In 1943, she wrote to Serge Koussevitsky, the famed Boston Symphony conductor, to inquire about potential performances. She said, "To begin with I have two handicaps, that of sex and race. I am a woman and I have negro blood in my veins. Knowing the worst, would you be good enough to hold in check the inclination to regard a woman's composition as long on emotionalism and short on virility and thought content until you have examined some of my work?" She did not receive a response (it is worth noting that the Boston Symphony didn't perform any of Price's work until the 2016/17 season). With fewer performances came fewer opportunities to secure publication of her works, and thus much of her serious music fell into obscurity, existing only in hand-written manuscripts. Many of these manuscripts remained undiscovered by the wider public, until 2009, when a couple purchased Price's old, dilapidated summer home. They discovered boxes with the manuscripts in them, which led to the first formal publication of many of Price's symphonic works, including her violin concerti and some of her symphonies. The Piano Concerto was discovered in three different forms, none of which were sufficient to reconstruct the piece on their own: a solo piano part with an orchestral reduction, two- and three-piano versions, and manuscripts of most of the orchestral parts themselves. Between these three sources, the work was reassembled into what we hear today.

Silvestre Revueltas Sánchez (December 31, 1899 - October 5, 1940)

La noche de los Mayas (originally a score for a 1939 film by the same name, symphonic suite created by Mexican conductor José Yves Limantour in 1959, which premiered on January 30, 1961 with the Guadalajara Symphony Orchestra)

Instrumentation: two flutes (both double piccolo), two oboes, three clarinets (two double E-flat clarinet, one doubles bass clarinet), two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, two trombones, tuba, thirteen percussion (conch shell, toms, snare drum, bass drum, long drum, tam-tam, xylophone, rattle, güiro, bongos, congas), timpani, piano, and strings.

- I. Noche de los Mayas (Night of the Mayans): Molto sostenuto
- II. Noche de jaranas (Night of Revelry): Scherzo
- III. Noche de Yucatán (Night of the Yucatán): Andante espressivo
- IV. Noche de encantamiento (Night of Enchantment): Tema y variaciones

"El espíritu de México está muy dentro de mí..." (The spirit of Mexico is deep within me)

Silvestre Revueltas was proud of his heritage, and devoted much of his life to furthering the cause of contemporary Mexican music. He showed great promise from an early age as a musician, primarily as a violinist, and began serious study of the instrument in Mexico. He later went abroad to Texas to further his studies, and began his career in a theater orchestra in San Antonio. By 1929, Revueltas had also taken up conducting with an orchestra in Mobile, Alabama, leading to an invitation to move back to Mexico to become assistant conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra of Mexico under Carlos Chávez. The conducting post led directly to Revueltas developing his voice as a composer; while he worked under Chávez, he composed 4 string quartets and other chamber music, along with several works for various sized orchestral forces.

In 1933, plans for a film about Gulf Coast fishing communities entitled *Redes* emerged, and the film team sought a composer. Early on in this process, Carlos Chávez, in his role as a government employee, invited an American filmmaker to begin the project. Chávez was to receive a producing credit on the film, and he operated under the assumption that he would also compose the music. However, the commission for the film music was given to Revueltas, which appears to have led to a falling out between Chávez and Revueltas. Revueltas's score for *Redes* received wide praise; Aaron Copland, writing for the New York Times, said:

“Revueltas is the type of inspired composer in the sense that Schubert was the inspired composer. That is to say, his music is a spontaneous outpouring, a strong expression of his inner emotions. There is nothing premeditated or unspontaneous about him... His music is above all vibrant and colorful... Speaking broadly, I should say that Revueltas's music has been more quickly appreciated in Mexico than that of Chavez. This may be due to the fact that its content is less intellectual and therefore can be more easily understood. The music of Chavez is strong, stark and lacking in any exterior colorfulness; Revueltas's music, by comparison, is derived from the more usual everyday side of Mexican life. It is often highly spiced, like Mexican food itself. It is full of whims and sudden quirks of fancy and leaves one with a sense of the abundance and vitality of life.”

Following his successful foray into film scoring, most of the rest of Revueltas's career was dedicated to the film industry in Mexico. He would still compose other concert works as well, but writing for film consumed most of his time. Around 1938, he was invited to score a film about an uncontacted tribe living in the traditions of the ancient Mayan civilization. Though the film itself wasn't terribly successful, the music in *La noche de los Mayas* left a lasting impression on cinephiles and music lovers alike. Though Revueltas died early from alcoholism, the *Mayas* score ended up becoming his best known work, thanks to an orchestral suite arranged by conductor José Yves Limantour in 1959. This suite uses most of the film score cues composed by Revueltas, but many additions were made to the music to make it into a cohesive concert work. Given the translation from film score to orchestral suite, it is relevant to point out that the movement titles were provided by Limantour, as Revueltas's original music didn't really have titled sections - film music generally uses timestamps of the movie in lieu of titles.

The first and second movements of this suite are largely unchanged from Revueltas's original film score. The first, laden with drama, comes from the opening credits scene from the movie. At

that time, films normally opened with upbeat marches or fanfares, but Revueltas chose a more stately and dramatic approach. This mood gives way to more tuneful music, featuring a violin and flute melody with a clarinet and horn counter-melody. In the film, this music plays while the camera pans over some of the Mayan ruins located in the Yucatan Peninsula. This was likely the first time much of the public had seen these images on film, so it holds a special place in Mexico's cinematic history. The second movement is based loosely on the jarana, a traditional dance from the Yucatan in Mexico. Revueltas uses uneven meters to break up the flow of the dance, and while the melody churns along in the strings, the tuba interrupts with notes that aren't exactly harmonic.

Though the music in the third movement appears in the original film, the suite contains significant edits to create a cohesive musical work. A brief, much quieter restatement of the opening theme leads to music that could easily be mistaken for Mahler - slower, sensuous string sonorities with unexpected harmonic twists. A flute and percussion interlude is bookended by the Mahlerian music that then makes its way to the finale.

The fourth movement's music never made it into the film itself. Revueltas composed this music to accompany scenes of Mayan villagers in their daily lives, and the filmmakers ended up using different music than what Revueltas wrote. The suite assembles the cues by Revueltas into a theme and variations form, with a number of percussion cadenzas interspersed between the variations. Limantour added the percussion cadenzas as a nod to the music that appears in the film, but they also provide an exciting touch to already exciting music.