



INTERWOVEN DIALOGUES

Five Folksongs in Counterpoint (1951) **Florence Price**
(1899-1952)

I. Adagio vigoroso
II. Andantino
III. Andantino cantabile
IV. Allegro
V. Andantino

Geoffrey Herd, *violin* Eric Wong, *viola*
Eliot Heaton, *violin* Max Geissler, *cello*

Piano Trio in D major, Op. 70 No. 1 "Ghost" **L. van Beethoven**
(1770-1827)

Allegro vivace e con brio
Largo assai ed espressivo
Presto

Michelle Cann, *piano*
Geoffrey Herd, *violin*
Max Geissler, *cello*

– intermission –

Piano Quintet No. 1 in C minor, Op. 1 **Ernö Dohnányi**
(1877-1960)

Allegro – Adagio – Tempo I
Scherzo: Allegro vivace
Adagio, quasi andante
Finale: Allegro animato

Eliot Heaton, *violin* Eric Wong, *viola*
Geoffrey Herd, *violin* Max Geissler, *cello*
Michelle Cann, *piano*

Saturday, May 29, 2021
Smith Opera House
7:30 pm

Though she was the first female African-American composer to have her work premiered by a major orchestra, the music of **Florence Price** has remained shockingly neglected since her death in 1953. Her ***Five Folksongs in Counterpoint***, for instance, languished in manuscript form for over half a century; composed in 1951, the work was rediscovered recently in the University of Arkansas Public Library. Price herself was well aware of the obstacles that she unfairly faced; in a letter to the conductor Serge Koussevitzky (conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra at the time), she writes of her “two handicaps...sex and race.” Today, Price is, at long last, gaining much-deserved attention and appreciation, and her music is experiencing something of a renaissance.

Raised in Little Rock, Arkansas, Price studied at the New England Conservatory and the American Conservatory of Music. The *Five Folksongs* reflect both Price’s African-American heritage and her musical education; the folksongs are not merely arranged, but entirely reimagined. In the first, each instrument intones the melody of “Calvary” in turn. The spiritual is surrounded by poignant countermelodies, providing a flowing, ever-evolving environment for the theme. The second quotes “Oh My Darling, Clementine.” Price’s treatment of the American ballad is, at first, deceptively simple; quickly, though, the harmonies become more complex, revealing both the melancholy and humor inherent to the lyrics. “Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes” recalls the four-part harmony of chorales, the melody floating on top of a rich accompaniment. In “Shortnin’ Bread,” the lively, syncopated rhythms of ragtime are married with dense counterpoint. The work closes with “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” The melody is first heard performed by the solo cello, as if to remind the listener of the gravity and meaning of the music, before Price turns it into a virtuosic fantasia—an ode to freedom in both music and text.

Published in 1808, the ***Piano Trio in D Major, Op. 70 No. 1, “Ghost”*** emerged at the height of **Ludwig van Beethoven’s** middle period, during a greatly prolific year. Throughout this time, Beethoven’s music gradually shifted away from the Classically influenced forms and styles of his earlier years. The “Ghost” Trio is no exception; in the central movement (Largo), for instance, Beethoven explores unexpected harmonies (meandering through various tonal areas) and sonic effects. From the hollow, uncanny unisons chanted by the violin and cello in the opening, to the quivering *tremolando* heard at the end, Beethoven utilizes the full range of dramatic possibilities. These musical features, in fact, prompted Carl Czerny (Beethoven’s best-known pupil) to comment that the movement reminded him of the ghost of Hamlet’s father, leading to the apt nickname by which the piece is known today. Czerny was, perhaps, not far off the mark in terms of inspiration; in Beethoven’s notebook, the sketches of the second movement are found alongside melodic ideas for an operatic adaption of the play that never, alas, came to fruition.

The two outer movements are less weighty, giving the work an atypical arch-like shape. The opening Allegro begins energetically with a propulsive rising theme, whose ascent yields only to a lyrical second melody heard in the cello. Both of these themes undergo significant variation in the development; even once we reach the recapitulation, though, Beethoven continues to alter and explore them in exciting ways. After the melancholy of the second movement, the final Presto offers welcome relief. The music unfolds in a sparkling display of joyous melodies, as the three performers chatter brightly with one another. As the critic E.T.A. Hoffmann writes of this movement, “Just as the storm wind drives away the clouds, with light and shadow alternating in a moment...just so does the music rush continuously onward.”

Though **Ernst von Dohnányi** composed his ***Piano Quintet No. 1 in C minor, Op. 1*** at the youthful age of eighteen years old, it is hardly juvenilia; upon hearing the work performed, Johannes Brahms was apparently impressed enough to arrange its Viennese premiere in November of 1895. It’s perhaps not surprising that Brahms was taken with the work, as its musical language is highly reminiscent of the Austro-Germanic tradition. Unlike his younger Hungarian colleagues (Bartók, for instance, or Kodály), Dohnányi was never influenced by the folk music of his homeland. His music recalls the more traditional sonic realms of Schumann and Brahms, rather than the ethnographic musical vocabulary favored by his successors.

His musical conservatism is on full display in his first piano quintet, which is inspired formally and harmonically by Romanticism. Though the first movement begins quietly, the excitement and tension is barely concealed; roiling triplets accompany a restless, driving melody. In contrast, the sonata form’s second theme is expansive and lush. Despite their differences, the motives are effectively juxtaposed in the development, before being restored to their original state in a dramatic moment of return. The second movement is a scurrying Scherzo, with its characteristic lively outer sections bookending a tender trio. The third movement (Adagio, quasi andante) starts with a heartfelt melody sung by the viola. Its opening motive—a sigh of longing—is soon echoed in the other instruments, creating a tapestry of nostalgia and yearning. The Finale opens with a delightfully off-kilter dance, the product of an asymmetrical meter. In a show of compositional skill, Dohnányi later creates a *fugato* from this limping melody, expertly setting the tune against itself. As if to remind us of the scope of the composition, he also brings the main melody of the first movement (still simmering with energy) back in C major. After this brief moment of recollection, we are launched into an extended, exuberant coda that propels us to a climactic close.

– Anya Wilkening