

HEARING THE OTHERS

by

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## ABSTRACT

Within and outside the classical music world, female composers are often overlooked, their music underperformed. In recent years, pieces written by female composers accounted for only 1.8% of music performed by the twenty-two largest American orchestras. In the times that Haydn, Beethoven, and Mozart were composing, however, women were also learning music—Mozart had a sister who studied alongside him, for example—but none reached the same level of compositional success. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf hypothesized reasons why women were similarly overlooked in literature by imagining that Shakespeare had an equally talented sister who never reached the same level of success. But we do not have to guess what happened with Mozart's sister: she stopped performing on harpsichord once she reached a marriageable age.

Through writing three historical fiction pieces about female composers—Clara Schumann (1819–1896), Florence Price (1887–1953), and one fictional woman set in present-day—I hoped to investigate the factors that have contributed to their secondary role and, through a creative medium, provide readers with an in-depth look into what female composers have and continue to experience. The title of my project, *Hearing the Others*, comes from my desire to bring attention to the music of female composers through telling their stories, which have the capacity to be more impactful than statistics by depicting daily routines.

With the dearth of women recognized amongst the “great” composers, some automatically assume that the disparity is a result of a lack of talent or interest among women. However, through these stories, I want to present that there are specific circumstances and environments that lead to “greatness” that women were often kept from.

## PART I: CLARA SCHUMANN (1819–1896)

*Clara Schumann (née Wieck) was born in Leipzig to Friedrich Wieck, a piano teacher, and Marianne Tromlitz, a talented soprano. Clara was raised by her father, who was very demanding with her as he tried to establish his reputation as a teacher. By the time Clara was eighteen, she was a touring piano prodigy, even recognized by the Austrian government for her talent.*

*In 1840, Clara married Robert Schumann—a rising composer who would become renowned in the Romantic tradition—against her father’s will. Throughout her life, Clara assisted with Robert’s compositions while working on her own. Clara Schumann is relatively well-known for a female composer, but her recognition often stems from her relationship with the men in her life: her father, Robert, then her friend and assumed admirer Johannes Brahms.*

*This section centers on Clara Schumann’s Piano Trio in G minor, Op. 17 that she wrote from May 1846 to September 1846 while she is living in Dresden with Robert and their children. During that time, Robert was also struggling with a mental illness that often hindered his normal work. The story begins with a performance of the piece on March 8, 1860, in Vienna. Clara is performing the piano part, and wrote to her friend Joachim five days before the performance, on March 3, 1860: “My second concert is on the 8<sup>th</sup>—my Trio!!! what do you say to such courage? I am playing it in public for the first time and truly, only because of urgent persuasion from all sides.” In a letter from Joachim, he responded about the trio, “...Mendelssohn once had a big laugh because I would not believe that a woman could have composed something so sound and serious.”*

Tonight, I performed my Piano Trio in G Minor. It feels strange to say since, for the past fourteen years, I’ve avoided doing so in front of an audience to protect myself. Even though the trio has become my most acclaimed work—performed at concert halls and soirées, and reviewed in the newspapers—it is also my most vulnerable piece, inextricably linked to the years of my

life I spent in Dresden, a time filled with turmoil. And then all the critics had to say was that I'd done a great job mastering a "masculine style." One critic said that the entire work seemed to be veiled. In a way, he was right, and that's how I wanted to keep it: a delicate work, obscured and protected.

But, on this tour, after the positive reviews from the piece's other performances and Johannes Brahms and Joseph Joachim, the violinist, prodding me to play the piano part myself like I had in private, I decided to include it. It felt appropriate, maybe even cathartic.

When I sat down behind the piano, the lights blurring the audience and everything else except the keys and the music in front of me, I felt exposed, floating on a lit stage on a darkened sea. Even though there were the hundred bodies sitting in the hall's velvet chairs and two other musicians waiting for my cue—attentive, instruments in hand—I knew that they wouldn't experience the music in the same way I would, in the way that I wrote it.

The only person who had come close was Robert, my companion since I was young. He knew what I was trying to say well enough that he could correct parts and add in his sprawling hand as if I wrote it. But now he was gone.

I pushed those thoughts aside, gently placed my fingers atop the keys like I had been doing in front of an audience since I was nine. Keeping my face unexpressive, I straightened by back, looked at the violinist, inhaled, and began.

The tension in the first motif of the *Allegro moderato* enveloped me: the violin's melancholy melody, the piano's insistence. When I played the opening line, I knew that the audience was unaware of its internal reflection, the way I used it as an escape from Robert's illness, the strains

of raising children, and the resistance to my composing. Grief was the first constant in my life, then music.

The earliest memory I have is from when I was five years old. It was grey outside, which I could see from the window in the front of the parlor. During my practice time—with my father standing over my shoulder, of course—I kept looking outside. This was a new habit, one that had developed after I had been returned to the care of my father, which must have been just a few days before. Mother had brought me, sobbing, and I was confused until she unloaded my trunks into Father's house and said goodbye. I had convinced myself that by staring out the window, I could will her to walk up the stone path to our front door, maybe returning from a trip and coming to take me back with her.

I knew then that I would rather live with Mother instead of Friedrich, my father. Friedrich had always given a harsh focus to me that worsened when Mother left. I became his musical project, subject to unending lessons and practicing. But I cannot be too bitter about his treatment because it led me here, onstage, performing my own piece.

His character bothered me from an early age, always harsh and demanding, never kind. He was especially irritated by my early refusal to speak, shouting at me, "Are you deaf, Clara? You're smarter than this! You're my daughter—you should speak!" It's true that I didn't have a strong relationship with words in my childhood, choosing to keep my thoughts to myself instead, but Friedrich's insistence made me more defiant. I didn't like the attention, and I didn't want to give him what he wanted.

One time he was going on and on about my future while I sat at the piano in the parlor. He paced back and forth on the rug, I slouched on the bench. He lectured about how great I could be and how I could captivate any audience, then he listed his plan for me: what pieces I would

play, how much I would practice each day, what he would plan for my first public performances. Between his excited rambling, he would ask, “Does that make sense, Clara?” “Isn’t that what you want, Clara?” He became more and more agitated when I didn’t respond, only sometimes nodding in acknowledgement. Finally, recognizing that his seven-year-old daughter, twiddling her thumbs, had little interest in planning the next fifteen years of her life, he said, “Well, fine. Let me just hear your Mozart.” And I sat up on the piano bench and played through the first movement, flawlessly and emotionally—for a seven-year-old. I think Friedrich realized then that the music, not the recognition, was always going to be my focus.

Because of Friedrich’s insistence on me staying inside our dreary house to practice, music became my main companion, something that consumed my attention even outside his demands. He could control the rest of my life—my diary, my schedule, my repertoire—as much as he wanted, but he would never know the thoughts I had while I played my pieces. He could linger over my shoulder, watching every movement of my fingers, but I existed in a private world, unreachable by anyone.

As the first movement ended, the beginning theme coming back with more emphasis and conversation from the violin and cello, I was pulled back into the focus of the trio. We paused before the second movement, the Scherzo. The violinist pulled out his handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his brow, and I turned the page to the next movement, revealing the markings that I included in the composition and early rehearsals of the *Tempo di menuetto*.

Robert and I really did work well together when composing. He knew what I was trying to say through my music. There were pleasant days when we would both sit hunched over the desk writing notes in the margins of each other’s scores, laughing, rapidly chatting back and

forth. We continued that in our diary and on our daily walks, and it was like we were still young, bonding over the pieces we were learning on piano and our little compositions.

I tried to channel that lighthearted feeling in the second movement. Maybe it is just my character that makes me focus on the melancholy parts in my music, but I was able to escape that for this movement: accepting the dark parts for what they were, but maintaining levity. I played my descending quarter notes with energy, slightly swaying in my seat.

But all of my life with Robert was not like that Scherzo, especially when he started getting sick. When his career was going well, he expected me to abandon my goals to help with his arrangements or transcriptions. He spent those weeks storming around our small Dresden house, refusing to have a conversation with me or the children because he thought it would interrupt his creativity. All day, he would stay in our music room repeating the same phrases on the piano, the sound traveling through the walls and interrupting the children's naps. When Robert was in those furies, he was blind to the possibility that I might also want to practice or compose while he was occupying that room. I guess there is only space for one musical genius in a household, and it is never the one who must also take care of the children.

The Scherzo ends simply and abruptly. The musicians and I smiled at each other before continuing to the Andante's emotional indulgence. In that movement, I wanted to capture both my reverie and frustration. The piano starts, and as the other musicians sat on stage at rest with me the only one playing, I could feel the hush of the audience lured by the opening motif.

For the first two years that we were in Dresden, those melodies were my escape and companion. Since I had little time to sit at the piano undisturbed, except when Robert walked to the pub in the evenings, I was often composing the music in my head while I did other uninspiring things like change Emil's diaper.

Those years in Dresden were some of the hardest in my life. I was at first reluctant to leave Leipzig since the Gewandhaus Orchestra was thriving and Roberts always seemed to be able to find work, but illness was becoming an intrusive part of his—and my—life. The doctors thought that some years in Dresden—with its position on the Elbe and the surrounding hills—would remedy Robert's afflictions.

Dresden was a nice place for the children: Marie, Elise, and Julie, then four more during the time that we lived there. On the first floor of our house, there was a spacious parlor with large windows that let in lots of light. We also kept our piano on that floor for my teaching and practicing, and mostly Robert's composing. Upstairs, the children had their bedrooms, where I sometimes longed to spend more time. When I sat at the piano practicing or instructing another child, I could hear their feet running on the floor, having fun.

While we lived there, I barely had any time to appreciate it. Every day, I would give two or three lessons, each an hour, practice for another hour, and work for around three hours on piano arrangements for some of Robert's pieces.

Outside of music, I kept up Robert and I's diary and we would go on walks along the river and canals, the stone paths and green banks. Walks have been my favorite part of my daily routine since I was a toddler and would trail behind my mother and father around the streets of Leipzig. My thoughts had more space to circulate; the melodies that weren't working when I sat hunched over the piano in our dim parlor unknotted themselves.

The walks became more important for Robert and me when his health started to decline. He was just beginning to have moody spells, irritable sometimes and despondent the next. He would take his frustrations about his compositions out on me, often forgetting that I was, still, also a composer. He seemed to be blind to how his feelings and actions were affecting me. While

he continually talked about the “gloomy demons” that he possessed, he failed to consider that I was also living in the same house as those demons, while having to take up the parts of his responsibilities that he could no longer bear. I thought that something simple like frequent walks by the Elbe would ameliorate his problems.

With the audience enveloped in the beautiful, tranquil melody, the third movement transitions to expressing aggressive despair. From the corner of my eye, I thought I could see some of the audience’s heads lift as the cello ushered in the minor section.

Sometimes Robert and our friends commented that I seem to write too many of my pieces in minor keys. When I alluded that I was working on this trio in g minor, they all expressed concern that a minor key was going to be the focus of the entire work, especially in such a “sophisticated” genre like the piano trio. They didn’t say it, but I knew what they were thinking: *If Beethoven and Haydn were wary of it, why would Robert’s wife try it?*

So I tried to limit my minor sections, condense my melancholy. A major triad moving between the cello, violin, then piano ends the movement. We stopped only briefly, then the Allegretto began with an abruptly serious melody that weaves throughout the movement.

Once I finally finished the trio, some of our friends gathered to perform it and hear it for the first time. The parlor was packed: someone was sitting in every arm chair and the others were standing around the performers at the front, champagne glasses in hand. The room was warm with friendship and excitement.

After the performance, everyone—especially those who had been skeptical about the key—responded approvingly. But the compliments did not seem completely genuine; they seemed to praise the trio more enthusiastically because of their original doubt. Joseph wrote to

me months after we played the trio, after he attended a chamber music concert in Leipzig, and said, “I would rather have heard your trio. I recollect a fugato in the last movement and remember that Mendelssohn once had a big laugh because I would not believe that a woman could have composed something so sound and serious.”

The critics had many of the same comments after the trio was performed at other concerts and soirées during the next year. They applauded the work, but mainly for my accomplishment of sounding masculine with compliments for “genuinely male earnestness” and praise for my bravery for attempting a “more mature form” that requires a “certain abstract strength that is overwhelmingly given to men.” They didn’t praise me for the way I compose, but for the way I imitated male composers. They implied that being a woman is incompatible with writing complex and serious music. But, I did not want to be known for mastering the male art. I just wanted to write melodies.

I do not know why the critics were surprised that a woman could write serious music. The trio is serious in a depth that they would not understand. I continually cared for Robert, even leading our escape from Dresden when the rebels came; carried and birthed the children when I sometimes thought it would be easier to be a pianist and composer instead of a mother; and then bore the guilt from those feelings when I miscarried on one of my concert tours.

Those men did not have an issue with disbelief. They were more upset that, with the little time and resources that I had, I managed to write something as good as Robert or Mendelssohn or Brahms or Liszt.

I succeeded even though my father made additional fusses to make sure that I was dressed in pink and frills when he took me on concert tours and lectured me on the train about being sweet and friendly, “because that’s what audiences wanted to see from a young girl.”

Motherhood brought some of my most hardening situations. It would have been much easier to just be a composer or pianist than to also be a wife and mother, carrying its worries and responsibilities. Like during the uprising in Dresden when I had to lead my children to safety while seven months pregnant.

Because of Robert's illness, he couldn't fight like the rebels expected him to, so we had to flee out the back door in the night, taking our oldest, Marie, but leaving all the other children without a word. After I got them settled with friends in the next town, I left before dawn with a friend to retrieve the rest of the children from the house. They didn't want me to, but I imagined how scared the children were in their beds hearing bangs and shouts. Alleviating their fear and ensuring their safety is what strengthened me while walking through those open, unguarded fields, my pregnant belly silhouetted in the night. Groups of armed men on both sides questioned us, but I asserted that us two ladies were just coming into town to see the doctor in the morning, that I had been ill all night and unable to sleep. Each time, I became more weary as I repeated our tale.

I thought that that would be the most difficult thing I would have to go through, but there was another situation that contributed to the *Allegretto*. I sketched the motif for the movement in my notebook when Robert and I were in Norderney, soon after the miscarriage. I took a walk on the beach the next morning, the day of the concert that I would still play, and felt the sand under my feet and the sea breeze, much crisper than Dresden. For the end of July, the morning was fairly cloudy. Robert didn't come with me on the walk because I told him I wanted to be alone. I wanted to play the concert that evening to begin moving forward, but it was still hard because of my drastic change in condition. Those feelings were part of me and a part of my performance. I couldn't conceal them.

As I played the sweeping last chords to finish the Allegretto, my hands assertively crossing over each other, I felt a release. The veil over the trio no longer existed. The audience stood to applaud before we could rise to our chairs to take a bow.

**RECOVERED**

*a prose poem*

Summer weeds had just started to creep in through the floorboards. Mold wallpapered the rooms, thriving in the humidity from Illinois rains that fell inside through a tree-torn hole in the ceiling. Branches rested on a crushed couch, sagging floors. Drawers hung from their hinges, emptied by vandals of brooches and leather gloves. The piano stood broken in the corner, strings plucked out, ivory teeth shattered. But preserved in a dry room, touched by sun, were piles of papers: letters, books, musical manuscripts all signed *Florence Price*. A concerto whose voice was suffocated by dust-stale air. Never missed. Orchestras had forgotten about the woman whose name was once printed in the symphony program, who captivated Chicago with her melodies, who composed that first symphony. She predicted that her race & gender would handicap her, but still put pen to paper to sculpt compositions as lively as the juba dances she intertwined.

## PART II: FLORENCE PRICE (1887–1953)

*In a letter to conductor Serge Koussevitsky, Florence Price relented: “My dear Dr. Koussevitsky, To begin with I have two handicaps—those of sex and race. I am a woman; and I have some Negro blood in my veins.” Despite the opposition she faced, Price’s Symphony No. 1 in E Minor eventually became the first piece by an African American woman to be performed by a major American orchestra, the Chicago Symphony.*

*Price was born in Little Rock, Arkansas—an area still under the control of Jim Crow—and lived there for a significant portion of her life before fleeing to Chicago with her husband and daughters because of racial violence. In between, Price also attended the New England Conservatory, claiming she was a student from Puebla, Mexico to avoid racial discrimination. Like Clara Schumann, Price also faced issues with her husband, who was abusive, which led her to move in with her student Margaret Bonds.*

*Margaret Bonds was also a notable African American musician and had a close relationship with Florence Price, as depicted in this story. She was a piano soloist for the CSO concert premiering Price’s symphony and won a different category in the same competition that led Price’s composition to be performed. Bonds was also well-connected with the community of African American writers, artists, and musicians because of salons her mother would host.*

*After manuscripts for Price’s Violin Concerto No. 2 were discovered in an abandoned house in Arkansas in 2009, there has been some increased attention to her work. This section tells the story of how Price came to write her award-winning symphony that helped her compositions gain more attention.*

### SPRING 1932, CHICAGO

The spring morning had faded into midday, and birds were chirping outside the window in the corner of Margaret Bond’s compact kitchen. She had gotten up from the table to get more coffee from the aluminum pot that had been brewing and pouring all day. I stayed seated on the wooden

chair, holding my half-full mug and surveying the black-dotted manuscript sprawled across the table: the music that would be the first piece composed by a black woman to be performed by the Chicago Symphony.

Looking around at the paintings on the walls and the upright piano in the parlor of Margaret and her mother Estelle's home, I thought about how grateful I was to have that house to stay in. Even though the guest bed was cramped for me and the girls, could feel safe after my husband's cruelty.

I knew Thomas was just strung out from not being able to find work after we moved to Chicago from Little Rock, but that did not justify laying a hand on me. After the girls and I had escaped the threats hurled at us when we would walk down the streets in Little Rock, I did not want to experience the same fear in my own home. So, I filed for divorce—even though, for a woman, there was no guarantee—to make sure that he was out of our lives.

After I won and Estelle took me in, I had more peace of mind to focus on my career. The mess of music on the table in front of me was overwhelming, but that's where I thrived. It was a challenge: nothing else would cause me to give up a beautiful morning like this to sit at a table.

When I graduated from high school at fourteen as valedictorian, my teachers and family told me I could do anything. I thought about being a doctor, I thought about going into business, I thought about being a lawyer. But my mom would politely remind me that, because I was a black woman, it would be hard. Not many had done it before me.

I decided if any career path was going to be difficult for me, I wanted it to be for something that mattered to me, which led me to enroll at the New England Conservatory—claiming to be a student from Puebla, Mexico, just to be safe. That started the education that would lead me here, hunched over a symphony.

The coffee pot was empty, so Margaret turned on the gas on the stove to boil more water, humming a line from her piano piece as she went.

“When’s the deadline for sending this off to the Wanamaker Competition?” she asked, stirring around the grounds.

“Probably by Monday. You know how lazy the mail can be.”

Margaret nodded, turning back to the coffee to disguise her shock. But I could already see it on her face.

“Oh, Margaret, I don’t know how I’m going to get this done! I have to finish that composition for the advertisement by this afternoon, and I’m booked all weekend playing organ at the theatre. I also promised the girls I would take them to the park this weekend. The poor girls have been feeling so neglected with only me to look after them and not their father.”

“You know we’ll do anything to help you finish this. Me and mama can always call our friends to come over.”

“You’re right, thank you.”

Since moving to Chicago, I had sometimes had trouble focusing on each thing I was trying to accomplish. While I would work, one negative thought would pull me into a spiral of insecurity. I would think about the girls, then I would remember when their father hit me. Then I would think about what would have happened if we hadn’t left Arkansas and Thomas didn’t have to worry about finding a new job in Chicago. Would we still have moved if we knew the Depression would hit Chicago the hardest? Then I would think about the lynching and sink into the pain that accompanied being black in America—the blatant discrimination, the nasty looks, the threats—which would lead me to ask myself why I’d decided to try to be a classical

composer as a black woman. How did I expect to make it with two handicaps, my race and gender?

But for now, I couldn't figure those things out. Margaret returned to the table and we went straight back to copying the manuscript: the one I never thought I could complete.

I said, "Margaret, you're so far ahead of where I was when I was twenty years old, already entering competitions and helping me with a full symphony. You're going to do such great things."

Because I had been focused on teaching for the last decade while I was raising the girls and trying to help Thomas make ends meet, I was much more preoccupied with things outside of music when I was twenty. Because of her mother, Margaret had been surrounded by Chicago's innovative art community for her whole life. At this house, every Sunday afternoon, Estelle would host salons of artists and musicians and writers. Lounging on couches and eating sandwiches, they read their poetry and shared their sketches from notebooks. They were starting the renaissance in this city.

For last year's Wanamaker Competition, a national competition for African American composers, Margaret and I were awarded honorable mentions for small piano pieces, which were just polite demonstrations of our talents. We'd been successful with getting our music out once the playing field had been flattened for race, but our music still seemed to be overlooked because we were women. I wondered what it would take for me to win first prize.

The solution I fantasized was a complete symphony. I do not think I would have been crazy enough to attempt it if I had not broken my foot in January. While walking down the sidewalk from a meeting with a publisher, my arms full of notes and music, I slipped on a sheet of ice. I tried to catch myself by grabbing the chain-link fence, but it was no use; I was trying to

save my scores. So I fell, hard, onto the cold ground and broke my left foot, which forced me to spend the next few weeks on the couch with my leg propped up. With the extra time, I decided I would be able to write the symphony.

I sketched themes for each of the movements during those weeks in a notebook I rested on my lap, never expecting that it could be good enough to be chosen for a Chicago Symphony premiere. Oh, but I was not fortunate enough again to break a foot . . .

“Shit, it’s noon!” I said standing up and gathering my papers together. “I have to be downtown at the studio for a meeting about this advertisement I’m composing for.”

“Go, go!” Margaret replied. “I’ll have to stop this and leave soon anyway because I have to be at the university this afternoon.”

“Yes, I don’t want this to take up your whole day. You have your own composition to worry about. I’ll see you back here this evening—we can work more on both of ours.”

## SUMMER 1932, CHICAGO

After living for four full years in Chicago, I decided that the South Side in the summer was my favorite time. The sidewalks were always swarming, especially this year with the Depression in full swing and nobody having jobs or cards. But the change in the weather still made everyone happy even if they barely had money.

Summer turned even the mundane errands—like going to the post office—into meaningful excursions. Looking at all the people moving around in brightly colored outfits, stopping to talk to the man selling apples, I got the feeling that I was a part of something and at the beginning of something. I felt the same thing when I looked around my neighborhood in the South Side. Since the area was, by origin and enforcement, separate, living there felt like

inhabiting a restricted community we'd come to accept and decorated with pansies and barber shops, trying to ignore the imaginary barbed wire that was keeping us in.

There was an unspoken recognition that we all came from the same place, having fled violence in the place where we grew up—or if we were lucky, having parents who fled violence to provide us a better life.

When I still lived in Little Rock with Thomas and the girls, and I heard of acquaintances moving up north for a chance at a better life, I sometimes scoffed, thinking of how they were taking the easy way out by abandoning their homes. Everything I knew was in Little Rock: my memories from growing up there, Thomas' office on Broadway, the girls' school, and our friends. I had started teaching young students privately—a change of pace from my job at the university before I married Thomas. I did feel a bit stuck with my career, but I thought it was just being restless in domesticity; it never felt like a justification to uproot our life.

Spring 1927 changed things. At the beginning of the year, it seemed that the fire of racism was dying down, leaving slow-burning embers. Little Rock seemed like a bit of a haven in a state dotted with Sundown Towns, but Jim Crow still dominated. The Arkansas legislature continued to pass racist laws enforcing segregation—separating marriages, prisons, washrooms, and streetcars—but the eruptions of violence were more sporadic. The lynchings that constantly threatened to keep my parents in their house at night when they were just married seemed isolated and unlikely.

Then, as it often happened, tensions rose when a black man was accused of a heinous crime. Any wrongdoing seemed to give the white people in Little Rock justification for believing that we were all evil criminals, worthy of discrimination. So everyone was on edge when Mr. John Carter allegedly assaulted two women near downtown Little Rock, and within hours of the

accusation, an angry mob formed to search for him. That afternoon, they hanged him from a telephone pole and shot him 200 times. Even when the sheriff came, the mob didn't stop. Every hand went up to vote to tie his body to a car and drag it down Ninth Street—the heart of our community—and in the evening, while their festivities were winding down, they doused the body in gasoline and lit it on fire on the street car tracks with 5,000 people watching.

The terror lingered over the next days and weeks as I and the rest of the community thought of all the “what-if”s: What if my children and I were walking through town while that happened? What if someone misinterpreted what my husband did and hunted him down? What if the mob burned our house down? Dozens of our neighbors fled the city and the state, and the Board of Censors banned black newspapers coming from Pittsburgh and Chicago—many of the refugee's destinations—to avoid inciting violence and so that we wouldn't realize how out of line Little Rock was.

Thinking of our girls, six and ten, Thomas and I started talking about moving, sitting in the dark living room with glasses of whiskey after the kids had gone to sleep. He was reluctant to leave since he had his firm, but I reminded him of what men had said to the girls and I while I was walking them to school—“You better have your husband start walking with you if you want to keep those girls around.” Our safety was more important than our comfort with our jobs, so I left with the girls as soon as I could find us a place to live, and Thomas followed a couple months later.

Arriving in Chicago, surrounded by trolleys and expansive buildings, I started to thrive. Even though the apartments were dilapidated and we were still being discriminated against—especially with South Side housing—kids were always playing in the streets and concerts happened all across the city. I made friends in musicians' societies, and almost every night, I

would go over to someone's house for a small performance. On the nights that I wasn't performing for my friends, I was taking classes at one of the universities to make up for the composition classes I didn't take at NEC. We were having a musical revolution.

Still on my way to the post office, I passed the music store. As I looked in the window, noticing the reflection of a tired woman and wishing I still had time to pass my afternoon shuffling through records and talking, I heard two voices in unison saying "Florence!" William and Michael had seen me and were coming out of the store with their instruments in hand.

"Florence! What are you up to these days? We haven't seen you around," said Willie.

"Yeah, yeah! Where have you been?" echoed Michael.

"Well, I finally finished that damn symphony and sent it off to that competition a few months ago. Then I've been staying busy with teaching and gigging. Less time for fun when music has to pay your bills!"

"So you're really keeping it up with that classical music. Do they take you seriously?" Willie asked.

"Well, it's alright. It's not always easy, but I make it work."

"You know if you ever get tired of all that and want to come play or write lines for us, we'd be happy to have you," said Michael.

"Yes, I know, Michael. You've made that clear."

"I'm just saying! Anyway, we gotta get going," Michael said as they grabbed their horns. "Hopefully we'll see you around again soon, and not just like this!"

"Let's plan on that," I assured.

They tipped their hats and headed down the sidewalk while I was deep in thought. Both sides wanted something different from me: white classical musicians wanted the satisfaction of

hearing gospel and jazz tunes adapted to their style, my community wanted me to use my prominence to reject stuffy classical music. They didn't understand why I wanted to stick with a type of music whose creators and appreciators did not welcome me.

As I arrived at the post office and the hanging bell dinged on the metal arm, I considered why I was doing this. It's true that I had to work twice as hard as any white composer. That was clear since I was in conservatory. But there was something that spoke to me in classical music like no other genre could: the way that different lines of melody could interact while melting together different timbres, the vastness of an orchestra as my instrument. Even though I knew that the institution I looked up to would probably reject me, I strived to fit in the same position as someone like Haydn or Beethoven.

When I got to the counter at the post office, I pulled my letter to Langston Hughes out of my purse and handed it to the attendant who stamped it and tossed it in the pile.

“Oh, Ms. Price, something crossed my table today that I think you might be interested in. It's a large envelope from Philly.”

Thinking about the symphony must have encouraged the letter to show up. Trying to hide the tremble in my voice, I responded, “Why thank you. I think I've been waiting for this.”

He went to the back, and returned with a white envelope striped with stamps. It was addressed to Mrs. Thomas Price from the Wanamaker Competition. I cradled it in my arms and waited until I was outside, sitting on a bench, to open it. I sat my bags down around me and slid my finger under the seal. Inside, on top of a copy of my manuscript, was a letter that read:

*Congratulations. For your notable accomplishments with your Symphony in E Minor, we would like to award you First Prize in the 50<sup>th</sup> annual Wanamaker Competition. This*

*honor comes with five hundred dollars of prize money to use to continue your creative pursuits.*

A smile spread across my face, not just with pride that my piece had been successful, but with relief since \$500 would really help me and the girls. Maybe we could even work at renting our own house and getting out of Margaret's. I wondered if her letter had come in the mail, so I gathered my bags and started running towards her house.

### SUMMER 1933, CHICAGO

In the summer of 1933, all of Chicago felt like it was in a celebration. Getting downtown to the Auditorium Theatre for rehearsal, I travelled with a whole crowd along Michigan Avenue and, on my way, passed lines of street vendors selling flowers and balloons on the side of Grant Park. It was the summer of the World's Fair, named "A Century of Progress International Exhibition" to celebrate Chicago's centennial. Even though I'd only lived there for six years out of the one hundred being celebrated, I could not help but be pulled into the excitement, especially because my music was included in the celebration.

It was the day of the first rehearsal for my Symphony in E Minor played by the Chicago Symphony. After winning the Wanamaker, who could have guessed the attention I would receive? The symphony—which I wrote with some references to African music and some beautiful melodic passages, to my ear at least—now seems conservative next to the rest of my work, but it excited those trying to expand the capacity of American symphonic music, including the music director of the Chicago Symphony, Frederick Stock.

Mr. Stock and I had been in contact in the weeks before as he worked through learning the piece, but today was the first day that I would hear an orchestra play my music. When I

entered the Auditorium Theatre, Mr. Stock greeted me in the lobby, wearing his typical straw hat and twirled mustache. He was a kind man; when we talked about my music, I never felt like he doubted my abilities or held me to a lower standard. He knew the symphony and loved the music, so that translated to its creator.

After an embrace, he said, “For you, Florence, today is the big day. The performance will be exciting because of the crowds, but this is what you’re going to remember. Are you ready to see your creation come alive?”

“I have been since I finished it, Mr. Stock.”

I followed him into the hall where the orchestra was already on the stage. He ran up to the podium, and I settled into a seat in a middle row. I thought about what Mr. Stock had said about this being my day and ran my eyes over all the ornate floral designs lining the stage and ceiling. I thought about how the people who designed the auditorium had not made it for people like me.

As the orchestra warmed up and tuned, one of the attendants that bustled around came by with a stack of programs. In green print, it listed my name next to the symphony alongside Berlioz and Coleridge-Taylor.

As I looked at the preliminary draft of the program, I noticed something: there was a clear divide between what was being performed on Wednesday night and Thursday night. The program for the night before proclaimed “American Music,” highlighting Gershwin, and the black composers were saved for the next night instead of being recognized as equally American. But then I heard the beginning of the first movement, and saw the joy of the musicians playing it. Maybe my music could start to change things.

### PART III: ELIZA (PRESENT DAY)

*Eliza is a fictional composer set in present-day New York City whose experiences were inspired by the lives and stories of living female composers such as Sarah Kirkland Snider, Hannah Lash, and Du Yun. Eliza is a graduate student studying music composition and worrying about her acceptance to summer music programs, which are important learning opportunities for college musicians. Many point to a lack of support and opportunity as a cause of fewer women striving to become composers, and education plays a vital role in this.*

*Today, what is classified as classical music is also changing, and what being a composer means is changing alongside it. So, Eliza is also struggling with being taken seriously while not writing traditional classical music. Through this section, I hope to exhibit the increased opportunities for women while still drawing attention to the inequalities that still exist, such as fewer mentorship opportunities, gendered language, and career expectations.*

*He said I should think about what I would want to do if composing doesn't work out. Through a fog of anger that had been forming in the last fifteen minutes of my lesson with Dr. Ingram, I bounded down the stairs and onto the sidewalk.*

I clicked open my iPhone to Spotify and pressed play. Florence Price's Symphony in E minor resumed, the floating sounds partially ameliorating my frustration. I turned onto 3rd, my scarf wrapped up to my chin and my hands in my coat pockets. The walk home would give me some time to think, so I decided not to take the right turn that would lead me to the subway.

I had imagined that, by my final year, I wouldn't leave the school of music frustrated and embarrassed every day, relying on the crowded Manhattan sidewalks to swallow my confusion, but the university kept finding new ways to surprise me. When I was accepted to its grad composition program after studying history and music in college—I wasn't even a composer,

really—I thought for a while that my path was clear. I had been accepted to the university. I had made it.

Now, three years later, I felt far from successful. I spent most of my nights staying late in the windowless practice rooms, working things out on the piano, my laptop propped on its lid. I was trying to finish the last piece for my recital for a small string ensemble and electric guitar, which I would also be conducting. And Dr. Ingram just tore it apart for being too “emotionally indulgent.” At least he prefaced his comments with “I hope you don’t cry easily.”

Even though his comment was inappropriate, right then, it fit. I was supposed to hear from my top summer fellowship—one that would allow my pieces to be performed—two weeks ago. Since then, I had been a wreck: panic-sending other applications while composing for my recital. My hair was unwashed, the shadows under my eyes were darkening, and I’m sure I looked like a flurry of stress with my jackets and messenger bag trailing behind me.

I stopped briefly on the sidewalk—letting the crowds rush around me—to fix my fallen headphone back into my ear.

Florence Price. Just months ago, home renovators had found some of her lost manuscripts in a corner of a dilapidated old house, bringing attention back to a composer who had spent most of her life fighting the limitations of her gender and race. When I first heard of her, I was a high schooler realizing that there were very few women who had become successful composers, but Florence had become the first African-American woman to have her work performed by a major American orchestra.

The articles about the Florence Price discovery came in a flood of headlines that increasingly made my mouth grimace and my muscles tense. Each news notification and *New York Times* op-ed had been a manifestation of what I knew was true, but didn’t want tangible

proof of. #MeToo allegations crept into classical music, making people think, “Hey, there aren’t that many women in these roles, anyway.” Facebook friends in the industry shared articles like, “Female composers largely ignored by concert line-ups,” “Female composers are making great strides. The classical music world isn’t helping them,” and “There’s a good reason why there are no great female composers.” Each subsequent scroll through the black-and-white print reminded me of Florence Price: she survived all that, and worse.

When I decided I wanted to be a composer—five years old and sitting on the carpet in our music room while my dad played records of Beethoven symphonies—I could not imagine anything that could prohibit me. I wanted to express myself through sound. I wanted to create something out of silence.

Once I reached elementary school and started studying music, learning about where the notes my fingers struck on the piano fell on the staff and about the great composers’ lives, the picture started to be less straightforward. All the laminated pictures of composers lining the top borders of my classroom walls were stoic, bearded, white men. And I thought, *were there any women? Where would I fit?*

I woke up from my thoughts standing on the front steps leading to my apartment door, my key turning the lock. The afternoon light was streaming from the one large window, making the cramped combination living room-kitchen-dining room seem much less dismal for a January day. The house plants clustered in the windowsill were drinking it up.

My roommate stood in the kitchen over the rusty stovetop, whistling along to the music booming from the speaker while cooking quinoa. “What’s *up?*” Rodrigo cheerfully asked as I dropped my bag off my shoulder and slouched on a stool over the counter. I sighed and began,

“Well, you know that fellowship I applied for at Cypress? I still haven’t heard back, and I told that to Dr. Ingram in my lesson.”

He cut me off. “You had a lesson with Dr. Ingram? Why?”

“Yeah, well, we all have to because of instrumentation, blah blah blah. Anyway, he used that as an opportunity to tell me that it’s very rare for them to pick ‘a composer like me’—I guess referring to my music. You know how he feels about what I write: too emotional, too direct, too indulgent, too experimental.”

“Yeah, yeah. Asshole.”

“I always thought that his main problem with my pieces was that they don’t stick to traditional forms and I use a lot of pop harmonies. But I was talking with another guy in the composition department, Andrew, the other day, and he said that Dr. Ingram told him in his lesson that he thinks he has a good shot at being chosen for Cypress. Then, he took him out for coffee and asked him to housesit next weekend, saying in exchange, he would spend some time looking over his other pieces and help him apply to more programs. So that’s confusing, since Andrew and I are writing the same kind of experimental music.

“Then, in my lesson, Dr. Ingram continued to say, ‘You should think about what you want to do if composing doesn’t work out. You’ll probably want a family, right?’ Until then, I just thought his harsh comments came from him not liking my music, but then, I began to connect Andrew’s experience with mine. Also, I guess he could tell that he was being harsh on me, so he said, ‘I hope you don’t cry easily.’ He would never say that to a male student.”

“Um, yeah, definitely not.”

“I hate complaining about things like this because I know that I’m very lucky. Maybe I’m making a problem out of nothing, but it seems like a pattern. It made me think that I would have

been given so many more opportunities at school if I weren't a woman. Maybe I'm here just to check a box instead of to actually be prepared for a career."

"You can't go to those places, Eliza! Yeah, it's shitty, but you're in the school, and you obviously have the talent to be here. You know how Dr. Ingram is. He's been here forever, and if he had his way, he probably would keep the department as the same good ol' boys club. He probably doesn't go to the symphony when they program women composers."

I kept picking bits of trail mix from the jar on the counter, trying to perfectly match the proportion of dried cranberries to almonds to cashews. Rodrigo was right that it was just one professor's comments, but what if someone with the same thoughts was responsible for choosing whether or not I would be picked for Cypress?

"Hey, I can tell you keep thinking about this," Rodrigo said, "and you know your thinking never gets you anywhere."

"You're right. I just need to keep working on my recital and other program applications and be assertive with asking professors to help me with my stuff. I really have some great mentors at the university, like Dr. Lee, and plenty of women have gone through the same thing before me."

"Yeah, a lot of people at school feel the same way. Apparently a girl in the voice department, Amber, has been having trouble with her professor because he didn't want her to sing music by women composers for her recital because they're not part of the standard repertoire. Speaking of which, she's having a party tonight to celebrate her recital. You should come! You haven't gotten out in a while, and I think it would be good for you."

I thought about my existing plans: staying in my room in sweatpants and cranking out the last movement of my composition, then maybe baking banana bread. But I knew that that might

end with me editing one phrase then panicking about my future, so I decided to be social for the night.

“Yeah, I’ll go,” I said. “Just send me the address.”

Sometimes I hated being at musicians’ parties. People ask what you do and what you have done like they’re trying to compare resumes instead of getting to know you. When I say I am a composer, the subsequent question is usually, “Oh, who all has performed your work? Would I have heard it somewhere?” Now especially, the conversations revolved around auditions and summer programs—which was the last thing I wanted to discuss.

I arrived after Rodrigo because I had spent some extra minutes in my apartment studying a score, still in my sweatpants, and then staring in my bathroom mirror to decide whether or not it was worth it to put on makeup. When I walked into the already crowded apartment, everyone’s heads turned to me to see if the opening door brought anyone exciting, then they quickly returned to their conversations. The music boomed so that I couldn’t hear anything. I could spot Rodrigo on the other side of the apartment talking to people from the opera department.

Surprisingly, the guests were not all from the music school. There were people from the drama department that I recognized from the fall performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, some people I recognized from Juilliard performances, and I saw my friend Henry’s roommate who was dating Amber.

“Hey, Eliza!” he said as I walked in, my eyes clearly searching for a group to enter. “Do you want a drink? I’ll make you one!”

I was a little surprised he was so friendly to me. Usually, when I’ve been at Henry’s apartment, he’s made a quick retreat to his room instead of staying to talk. Maybe he doesn’t

understand our relationship and doesn't want to intrude.

"What do ya want?" he asked. "I've been making a lot of margaritas."

"Ummm could I just have a vodka-cranberry?"

"You've got it! So remind me what you do? What's your story?"

"Well, I'm getting my master's in composition, and I also play the harp and conduct a youth ensemble for a non-profit."

"Eliza, that's awesome! So what do you want to do after school?"

"Ideally, I'd just like to compose, then conduct my own work when I need to."

"Woah. I don't want this to sound bad, but I never think of women doing those things for their careers. Like, I don't think I could name one female composer. Not that they're not out there. Just that as someone who's not in the classical music scene, I don't hear of them."

"Yeah, unfortunately, I think a lot of people I like that. But we're out there, I promise. Here, if you're interested I can give you a brief intro to female composers, and you can check them out."

I grabbed a cocktail napkin and a pen from my bag.

As I jotted names down, I explained, "So, I first heard of Clara Schumann—wife of Robert Schumann, who you might have heard of. Then, skipping some decades and moving to our continent, there's Amy Beach and Florence Price, who was the first African-American composer to have her work performed by a major American orchestra. And there are some great ones that are still living and who I look up to, like Jennifer Higdon and Sarah Kirkland Snider."

"I'll definitely check them out—thanks so much. If it means anything to you, from what I've seen and heard, you definitely have a shot at being one of them."

I smiled and nodded, trying not to reveal that I was still very much preoccupied with my

acceptance to Cypress.

“So do you want to go back and hang out with the weirdos who aren’t spending their Saturday night talking about music?”

I nodded and grabbed my drink.

The next morning, I woke up to a glint of sunlight coming through my blinds and my cat pawing over the foot of my bed. I sat up and felt the weight of my head wanting to fall back to the pillow. For me, that meant it was a fun night because I don’t stay out until 2 a.m. unless I’m having a good time. Despite my hangover, I still needed to write. The number of days until my composition was due would get smaller whether or not my body wanted to sleep until noon.

After pulling on pajama pants from the floor and pouring some not-very-good coffee that was left over in the French press, I sat down at my desk to begin writing. When I opened up my laptop, I had an email notification with the subject line *Congratulations!* I double clicked as fast as I could and read the first sentence: *You have been accepted as Cypress Music Festival’s Composer-in-Residence!*

I immediately stood up from my chair and jumped up and down in a circle. For the moment, with the excitement swirling in my head, my apprehension about the future was covered.

Next in my inbox was a note from Dr. Lee saying, *Eliza—Cypress just contacted me about your acceptance, and I am so proud of you!!! I know for a fact that you are the first non-traditional composer they’ve chosen, and word has it that this year, there’s about an even gender split in the class. This is great news!*

I smiled to myself, and opened the third movement of my composition.

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