

Lesson Plan – High School Arkansas Composers Florence Price & William Grant Still

<p>Desired Results (Enduring Understandings) Students will be able to identify Florence Price and William Grant Still as important composers, and recognize their Arkansas cultural heritage. Students will recognize two pieces, one by each composer, and discover how the composers’ creative gifts, discipline, and perseverance allowed them to overcome obstacles and realize their artistic potential.</p>	
<p>Understandings: Price and Still are hidden figures to many Arkansans. By the end of this unit, students will understand that 2 important classical composers grew up in Little Rock, and went on to make important contributions in music. They will also know that the ASO is going to perform their music on Nov. 9 & 10 at Robinson Center</p>	<p>Essential Questions: If these powerfully expressive artists came from Arkansas, and I’m from Arkansas too, what creative gifts do I have ? What does Arkansas heritage mean to me? How does the music of these composers relate to me and my American experience living in Arkansas in 2019?</p>
<p>Students will know... Price and Still responded to the world around them and the music within them. Their musical artistry flows from their Arkansas roots and their awareness of the American experience in the 20th century, and their identity as American composers and African American citizens, and is expressed in their music in timeless ways that speak to listeners in the 21st century.</p>	<p>Students will be able to... Identify themes on which the composers based their music. Describe the meaning of Still’s tribute to summer in the South, or his tribute to African-American soldiers. Describe the meaning of Price’s tribute to the mighty Mississippi River or her musical reflection on Dunbar’s poem “Sympathy” or Hughes’ poem “Song to the Dark Virgin.”</p>
<p>Evidence (Assessment) – Following listening and class discussion, invite the students to write a journal entry summarizing their impressions about a piece by Still and a piece by Price, drawing on the results of class discussion. In evaluating the students’ journal writing, the teacher should consider the following questions: Does the writing contain accurate information about the composers and the pieces? Does the journal demonstrate a synthesis of information from the video, listening, and class discussion? Is the journal entry well written?</p>	
<p>Learning Activities My video https://youtu.be/Z6lyG0z41PY is just under 20 minutes long.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It begins with a JPG from the movie Hidden Figures. Pause the video to have a class discussion about Hidden Figures and untold stories. 2. Resume the video for 18 minutes about Price & Still 3. Listen to and discuss music by Still & Price. The pieces are of varying duration, specified below. Open Spotify and go to the playlist I have provided shorturl.at/bACH9 . Select one of the pieces by William Grant Still detailed below. Listen and discuss. Then select one of the pieces by Florence Price detailed below. Listen and discuss. Encourage students to attend the ASO concerts in November and May, take advantage of student discount tickets. 4. Invite students to write a journal entry summarizing their impressions about a piece by Still and a piece by Price, drawing on the results of class discussion. 	

Hook – Use a picture prompt to introduce the lesson. JPG from the movie Hidden Figures opens my video. What was that movie about? What was the untold true story? Similarly, composers Price & Still became hidden figures after their deaths, but their music is being re-discovered and performed now, with historic concerts occurring in Little Rock in November 2019 and May 2020.

Lesson Activity – See details below. **Resource List:** My video, on YouTube <https://youtu.be/Z6lyG0z41PY>; Spotify playlist [shorturl.at/bACH9](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/shorturl.at/bACH9) and two YouTube examples of Price art songs

Closure – What do you remember most about Florence Price? About William Grant Still?

Lesson Activity, Details

1) *Summerland* by William Grant Still

Zina Schiff, violin; Cameron Grant, piano. Duration of musical example: 3 min. 55 sec

Activity: At first, don't tell the students the title of the piece. Have them listen to the first minute of the piece, and describe the music. What sort of atmosphere does the music create? What do you picture as you listen? Now tell them the title, and have them listen to the entire piece. How does a composer from Arkansas express ideas about Nature here? Describe the landscape in and around Little Rock. How does the sound of this music reflect the composer's experience growing up here? Think about your experience in Arkansas; are Still's impressions of the Natural State in his piece *Summerland* meaningful for you in modern life?

Or

In memoriam, the Colored Soldiers Who Died for Democracy

Duration of musical example: 7 min. 22 sec

Activity: Give the students the title of the piece and name of the composer before they hear it. Explain that Still composed this music in 1943. Discussion questions: These are interdisciplinary, and involve thinking about history and civil rights. What year did the USA join WWII? During WWII, African-American troops joined Allied forces fighting in Europe and the South Pacific for freedom and civilization. What conditions did they face as citizens at home in the USA? (The desegregation of Central High occurred in 1957; the Civil Rights Act was passed by Congress in 1964) Then listen to the music.

2) *Mississippi River Suite: The River and the Songs of Those Dwelling Upon Its Banks* by Florence Price
Duration of musical example: the total time of the piece is 27 minutes. Composed in 1934. Listen to the first 8 minutes.

Activity: Tell the students the title of the piece, and identify the composer before they hear it. Play 2 minutes of the music. Discussion questions: Have you seen the Mississippi river? What is unique about it? What does Price's music portray about the river? Some have compared this piece to Bedrich

Smetana's piece, *The Moldau*. Smetana's piece follows a river in Europe along its route, depicting scenes the river flowed past. Price may have been inspired by this, and wanted to honor her American heritage in a similar way that Smetana had honored his Czech heritage. From the Baltimore Symphony's Listening Guide: "Similarly Price follows the Mississippi River in her suite as the water builds from a trickle to a torrent, passes through Native American lands and finally arrives in the lands of southern spirituals and New Orleans jazz. Solo instruments play quotations of "Go Down, Moses" or "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" that fade in and out of listening range as if on the banks of the shore." Now listen to the first 8 minutes of the piece, or more if time allows.

Or

Florence Price set poetry of Harlem Renaissance poets Paul Laurence Dunbar and Langston Hughes in art songs. One of her art songs is performed here by Louise Toppin, a soprano and professor on the faculty at the U of Michigan. (This example is not on Spotify, only on this YouTube link.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLnZ9mb0IZk> Duration of musical example: 2 min. 58 sec
Sympathy – poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar (published 1899)

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;
When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals —
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting —
I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings —
I know why the caged bird sings!

Activity: These are interdisciplinary activities and involve analyzing poetry as well as considering the composer's music. Focus on symbolism and metaphor in the poem. Is a caged bird free? What is the relationship between the speaker, and the caged bird? How does the music in Price's song amplify the meaning of the poem? Read the article from *The New Yorker* about Florence Price. How does the composer relate to the speaker in the poem?

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/09/arts/music/florence-price-arkansas-symphony-concerto.html>
Baranello, Micaela. "Welcoming a Black Female Composer Into the Canon. Finally."

Who is the other Arkansas artist, who titled the first volume of her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*?

Or

Another of Price's art songs is performed here by Emery Stephens, a baritone and professor on the faculty at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

<https://youtu.be/PZ4vFXNr5Do> Duration of musical example: 1 min. 54 sec (This example is on Spotify, but performed by a different singer.)

Song to the Dark Virgin – poem by Langston Hughes, published in 1926

Would
That I were a jewel,
A shattered jewel,
That all my shining brilliants
Might fall at thy feet,
Thou dark one.

Would
That I were a garment,
A shimmering, silken garment,
That all my folds
Might wrap about thy body,
Absorb thy body,
Hold and hide thy body,
Thou dark one.

Would
That I were a flame,
But one sharp, leaping flame
To annihilate thy body,
Thou dark one.

Activity: What kind of poem is this, and therefore what kind of song? (A love poem, a love song.) How does the music in Price's song amplify the meaning of Hughes' poem? How does the music add passion to the poetry? Why is it significant, in the early 20th century, that the poem exalts the beauty of a woman of color?

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