

Program Notes

Vicente Lusitano (?–c. 1561) is recognized by scholars as the first published Black composer. Few records of his early life exist, but the circumstance of his being born to a Black African mother and a white Portuguese father is generally assumed considering the effects of the Portuguese slave trade in the 15th and 16th centuries. In addition to his single extant volume *Liber primus epigramatum* published in Rome in the 1550s, Lusitano is mostly remembered for his work as a teacher and his treatises on music theory. Although his contributions were significant in his day, Lusitano was entangled in a contentious debate with Nicola Vicentino, another prominent theorist, centered around the chromaticism in Lusitano's "Regina Caeli." Lusitano's victory in the debate, as determined by the prominent musicians of Rome, led Vicentino to write extensively against Lusitano, likely contributing to the latter composer's absence (and near ostracization) from future historical texts and treatises. The same musical language of "Regina Caeli" can be heard in Lusitano's "Salve Regina," a petition to the Queen of Heaven for mercy and care for the poor and exiled.

Litanies à la Vierge noire also addresses the Virgin Mary in a cry for pity, however its inception centered around events more personal than liturgical in nature. **Francis Poulenc (1899–1963)** was immediately successful in his early career as a composer, and was a member of the neoclassic group of composers, "Les Six," who were devoted to leading the avant-garde movement in French music. Poulenc's intense efforts as a composer however were shadowed by a continual manic-depressive cycle, as the composer documented in his correspondence the emotional toll he experienced from the death of his closest companions, all while contending with his identity as a homosexual in a time when homosexuality was universally considered—by both church and state—to be immoral. One tragedy in particular was transfigured by Poulenc into a poignant musical statement: On the event of the death of his close friend, the composer Pierre-Octave Ferroud, Poulenc began a pilgrimage to Notre-Dame de Rocamadour. Here, he laid eyes on the statue of the black virgin and experienced a spiritual transformation, to which he responded with a total recommitment to his Catholic faith, expressed first through his *Litanies à la Vierge noire*. In Poulenc's ensuing compositions—including especially his *4 Petites prières de Saint François d'Assise*—it is evident that the composer was able to harness his strong human emotions and powerful avant-garde style, joining these elements together to express his reconnection with spirituality through music.

Born some 300 years after Vicente Lusitano (recognized as the first published Black composer), **Florence Beatrice Price (1887–1953)** was an unmatched musical pioneer during the early 19th-century—a period fraught with entrenched racism and sexism in the United States—becoming the first African-American woman to win widespread recognition as a symphonic composer. At the time, New England Conservatory was one of few institutions that

admitted African-Americans, and it was here, from age 14 to 19, that Price studied composition, organ and piano as she continued to develop the musical voice she discovered in early childhood (Professor Dominique-René de Lerma, distinguished American musicologist and eminent historian states “[Florence Price] played in her first piano recital and her first composition was published at the age of eleven, all under her mother’s guidance.”). In addition to raising a family, Price’s young adult life in Little Rock, Arkansas was punctuated by teaching at the Cotton Plant–Arkadelphia Academy and later at Clark College in Atlanta, and she also composed songs, short pieces, and music for children during this period. Continuing racial oppression in the South—including lynchings—no doubt led Price to move to Chicago in 1927, where she quickly gained popularity as a composer, winning a Wanamaker Foundation Award with her symphony in E minor in 1932. The following year the Chicago Symphony premiered her work, giving popular voice to Price’s unique style which—while sometimes formally Romantic—includes modal melodies of the African-American musical idiom folded into her innovative pastoral/impressionistic orchestral texture. In a soundscape dominated by Dvořák’s “New World Symphony” and the orchestral spiritual arrangements of her male contemporaries William Grant Still and William L. Dawson, Price’s myriad of original songs and spiritual arrangements were in time overshadowed by her few symphonies (musicologist Douglas Shadle noting that the classical canon is rooted in “conscious selection performed by individuals in positions of power.”). Even in our modern context, the texts heard today—“Sympathy” by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906) and “Fantasy in Purple” by Langston Hughes (1901–1967)—challenge us to recognize our own power—and responsibility—to raise up the music of those whose achievements are otherwise obscured by prejudice.

Known for his great contributions to the Armenian sacred music genre, **Komitas Vardapet (1869–1935)** had a lasting impact as a composer, musicologist, singer and teacher on the preservation and development of the traditional music of his country. Although familiarized with the gifts of music by his parents, the young musician was orphaned at age twelve and sent to a seminary in Armenia, where he quickly learned the oral tradition of liturgical music. He was ordained in 1894 and given the name Komitas—after a 7th-century hymn composer—as a nod to his talent for singing. Komitas Vardapet was exceptional in his understanding of theory and structure, and expanded his musical exploration to include the arrangement of folk songs for performance. He eventually traveled to Berlin to study classical composition, and returned to Armenia with an enthusiasm for deciphering ancient notation and incorporating the traditional Armenian folk and liturgical songs into new polyphonic arrangements. His *Patarag* (the Armenian Divine Liturgy which, although sometimes sung in Armenian churches, is rarely performed publicly, and has never before been presented in concert in Canada) was completed in 1912, and his creative efforts soon garnered a new international interest in Armenian music. Tragically, his work was cut short when, in 1915, the Ottoman empire systematically destroyed the Armenian people in an act of genocide. Along with other Armenian intellectuals, Komitas

was deported to a prison camp, and the loss of his people, his country, and his music caused him to experience a mental breakdown and develop severe symptoms consistent with the condition we know now as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), leaving him agonized and alone. From 1919, he spent the last years of his life in a mental hospital in Paris, where he died on October 22, 1936.

While these composers faced unique challenges and personal tragedies during their lives, their steadfast dedication to music drove them to great achievements. They have left behind works which capture strong emotion, each in a unique musical language. Was their lifelong devotion to the expression of human emotion through sacred music simply circumstantial? Or does their persistence in conveying their experiences and passions through music of spiritual intent reveal their belief in music as the passage to the divine? Can we regard the stories they tell through their music as illuminations—halos even—of their musical determination in the face of human struggle?