

Chicago CLASSICAL REVIEW

Michelle Cann lights up Grant Park opener with Price concerto

By Wynne Delacoma

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Michelle Cann performed Florence Price's Piano Concerto in One Movement at the opening concert of the Grant Park Music Festival Wednesday night. Photo: Charles Osgood

Opening nights at the Grant Park Music Festival are usually high-spirited affairs. But the atmosphere was positively jubilant Wednesday as the Grant Park Orchestra kicked off the festival's 88th summer season.

After two years of strict pandemic-related restrictions, the Pritzker Pavilion stage was filled with musicians performing without masks or worries about social distancing. Led by an ebullient Carlos Kalmar, Grant Park's long-time artistic director and principal conductor, the players seemed to relish every moment, deftly melding full-throttle enthusiasm with serious insight.

With all due respect to Mozart and Wagner, whose music opened and closed the concert, the evening's high point was the orchestra's premiere performance of Florence Price's Piano Concerto in One Movement composed in 1934. An African-American composer and pianist whose music is being rediscovered after shamefully long decades of neglect, Price lived in Chicago for part of her life and found success here. In 1933 the Chicago Symphony gave the world premiere of her Symphony No. 1, and Riccardo Muti and the CSO gave the belated local debut of her Third Symphony last month.

Price's concerto, whose original orchestration re-surfaced only a few years ago, is the work of a master composer, and soloist Michelle Cann made the most of its extravagant energy. In the opening pages, after a few moments of plaintive musings from the winds and brass, Cann's piano erupted in an extended solo. Though the solo glittered with non-stop arpeggios and crunchy chords that thundered across the keyboard, it was not simply a flashy display of pianistic finger power. Like Rachmaninoff, Price knew how to infuse show-stopping virtuosity with thoughtful purpose. Her interplay of showy ornaments and heartfelt, singing melodies was carefully paced.

Cann has given premiere performances of this concerto with several orchestras, and she clearly knows it in her bones. In the final section, she tore through Price's rollicking, ragtime-infused melodies with the red-hot glee of a honky-tonk pianist. Throughout the concerto, Kalmar kept orchestra and soloist impressively in balance. Cann rode the orchestral waves like a proud ship on a powerful sea.

The cheering audience demanded an encore and Cann obliged with *Troubled Water*, a fantasy by Margaret Bonds—one of Price's students and later her friend—on the spiritual "Wade in the Water." Cann explored every corner of the piece's shifting moods, from its coolly sophisticated syncopations to the moments when delicate tendrils weaving around the spiritual's simple tune wandered off into unexpected harmonies.

The concert opened with a crisp, fast-paced performance of Mozart's Symphony No. 35 ("Haffner"). Nothing felt rushed, and the playing sounded relaxed and light on its feet.



Carlos Kalmar conducted the Grant Park Orchestra in music of Mozart, Price and Wagner opening night. Photo: Charles Osgood

Closing the concert with orchestral excerpts from Wagner's opera *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg*, Kalmar managed to find the sweet spot between grandeur and pomposity. This is Wagner's single, so-called "comic" opera, and Kalmar emphasized its flowing melodic lines and often-buoyant rhythms. Even the majestic "Procession of the Meistersingers" sparkled. Rather than a somber march of smug sages, it felt like a spirited parade of skilled craftsmen celebrating the work they loved.

Covid is still with us, and we are all getting used to an ever-shifting new normal. But on Wednesday night, it was deeply encouraging that the Grant Park Orchestra looked and sounded like its old, distinguished self, perhaps even better than ever.

Carlos Kalmar leads the Grant Park Orchestra and Chorus this weekend in Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 5 ("Reformation"), Judith Weir's *We Are Shadows*, and the world premiere of Mischa Zupko's *Blue Matter*. Concert time is 6:30 p.m. Friday and 7:30 p.m. Saturday at Millennium Park. gpmf.org.

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