

The Cathedral of St. Philip
February 27, 2022
3:15 p.m. Recital

CALVERT JOHNSON, ORGAN

Charles A. Dana Professor Emeritus of Music, Agnes Scott College

Organ Music by African and African Diaspora Composers

Sacred Idioms of the Negro <i>Jubilate</i> <i>Vesper</i> <i>Laudamus te</i>	Fela Sowande (Nigeria, 1905-1987)
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, Op. 2	Carl R. Diton (Philadelphia, 1886-1962)
Lotus Blossom	Billy Strayhorn (Dayton, OH & NYC, 1915-1967)
Pools of Living Water	Trevor Weston (NYC, b. 1967)
Suite No. 1 for Organ <i>Fantasy</i> <i>Fughetta</i> <i>Air</i> <i>Toccata</i>	Florence Beatrice Price (Little Rock, AR, & Chicago, IL, 1887-1953)

Calvert Johnson is the Charles A. Dana Professor Emeritus of Music and College Organist Emeritus at Agnes Scott College, where he served from 1986 to 2011. He recently retired as Organist at First Presbyterian Church of Marietta. He earned the doctorate and masters in organ performance at Northwestern University, and his B.A. at Kalamazoo College. He studied at Toulouse Conservatoire 1974-1975 on a Fulbright-Hays grant as a *boursier* of the French government, and where he won the Premier Prix (Médaille d'Or). Earlier, he taught at Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, OK.

Distinguished international performances include St. George's Episcopal Cathedral in Jerusalem; Church of the Redeemer Episcopal in Amman, Jordan; the Mdina Biennale, Malta; Oaxaca Cathedral, Mexico; and the Basilica of St. Denis, France. He has given recital tours in Japan, Mexico, England, Europe, and throughout the United States. Prominent performances include the Piccolo Spoleto Festival of Charleston, SC; recorded programs for Radio-France; the Eighth International Organ Festival of Morelia, Mexico; the Instituto de Órganos Históricos de Oaxaca; The College Music Society's meetings at Santa Fe, Savannah, Atlanta, and San Francisco; the Chicago chapter of the National Association of Negro Musicians; Oxford University; chapters of the American Guild of Organists; and the Kennedy Center, Washington, representing the state of Arkansas in the Bicentennial year. He has recorded *Soliloquies: New Japanese and Chinese Music for Harpsichord and Organ* (Albany Records); *Girolamo Frescobaldi: Fiori musicali* (Raven Records); and for Calcante Recordings: *Olde English, Early Spanish Organ Music*, volumes 1 and 2; *Go Tell It on the Mountain* featuring women composers; and *Chicago Renaissance Woman: Florence B. Price Organ Works*, which won the third annual award from the Society for American Music.

He presented workshops on Asian composers at the national meetings of the American Guild of Organists (Los Angeles), and the Royal Canadian College of Organists (Victoria), and recitals of black composers at Oxford, London, Chicago, New York City, Birmingham, and Atlanta, among others.

Johnson has published more than a dozen books on historic performance practices of early keyboard music from Spain, England, Italy, and the Netherlands, the earliest known Mexican organ music, edited numerous editions of compositions by women composers, and has given papers at professional conferences in the United States, Canada, France, England, and Japan.

Johnson is founder and original co-chair of Black Bear Project at Big Canoe, GA, until 2018 when he was appointed chair of the Conservation Committee. He is also past Chair of the Advisory Council of the Knowledge Series, and currently serves as the Executive Director/Concert Manager for Casual Classic Concert Series, based in Jasper. In addition, he serves on the Board of Directors of North Georgia Community Foundation, Gainesville, GA.

Program Notes

SOWANDE studied in England and became a Fellow of the Royal College of Organists, earning the Read Prize for the highest score on their 1943 examination. To earn a living, he became a dance-pianist, band-leader, and Hammond-organist. The BBC Symphony premiered some of his orchestral works. He returned to Nigeria in 1953 to be Music Director of the Nigerian Broadcasting Service and Honorary Organist at the Cathedral Church of Christ, Lagos. *Sacred Idioms of the Negro* quotes a number of traditional Nigerian melodies and Spirituals. Yoruba is a tonal language, with three tone levels (high, middle, low). Merely translating English words into Yoruba and singing Western melodies makes nonsense of the Yoruba language. So Christian converts adapted existing Yoruba melodies and composed new ones that matched the Yoruba language Christian texts in their correct enunciation. “Laudamus Te” refers to the Yoruba hymn, “Let us bow down and worship God, for God is Holy,” the melody of which is clearly heard throughout. It is accompanied by the “kon-ko-lo” rhythm familiar throughout West Africa, and heard in the left hand as a largely syncopated ostinato, regardless of the harmonies played. “Vesper” is based on an Evensong hymn for which a Methodist minister wrote both the music and the Yoruba text, which translates, “The day is all but gone; darkness draws nigh; soon every living creature will sleep; may God watch us through the dark night, and may we not find ourselves out of the hands of Sleep into the hands of Death while we sleep.” Finally, the free, uninhibited joy heard in “Laudate Te” returns in “Jubilate” as it expresses “God the Unfathomable, the Ever-Living, the Only God. Sowande eventually became an American citizen, and taught at Howard University, University of Pittsburgh, and Kent State University.

After **DITON** earned his bachelor’s degree at the University of Pennsylvania in 1909, Azalia Hackley encouraged further musical study by providing a scholarship to study in Munich, 1910-11. He thereupon gave a recital tour of North America, the first by a Black pianist. His teaching career includes Paine College (1912-1914), Wiley College (1914-1915), and Talladega College (1915-1918). Subsequently he became the Music Director at St. Martin’s Church, New York City, and received a further diploma from Juilliard (1930). His first recognition as a composer was a prize awarded in 1914 for his arrangements of four African-American Spirituals, and in 1930 he received the Harmon Award. Recognition also came as he accompanied major singers, including Marian Anderson and Enzio Pinza. *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* is based on an improvisation by Diton on this familiar Spiritual, when he performed at the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City.

An active member of Duke Ellington's band, **STRAYHORN** was a partner with Ellington in composing works for the band, being noted by Ellington, "Billy Strayhorn was my right arm, my left arm, all the eyes in the back of my head, my brainwaves in his head, and his in mine." Strayhorn was particularly notable for matching melodies, words, and harmony. *Lotus* is an organ arrangement of Strayhorn's *Lotus Blossom* prepared by Alec Wyton, Music Director at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York City. Ellington's widow Ruth asked Wyton to improvise on *Lotus Blossom* during communion at her husband's funeral, and the result is this composition, which had meant so much to Ellington, that he had frequently played it at the conclusion of concerts following the death of Strayhorn.

As a boy, **WESTON** was a chorister in the St. Thomas Episcopal Church choir, New York City. He studied composition at Tufts University with the leading African-American composer and professor T. J. Anderson, earning his master's and doctorate at the University of California, Berkeley, where he studied with leading-edge composers Richard Felciano, Andrew Imbrie, and Olly Wilson. Further study was at IRCAM, Paris. His teaching career includes Wabash College (1998-2000), College of Charleston (2000-2009), and Drew University (since 2009). He also served as music director and organist at St. Mark's Episcopal, Charleston (2003-09). Awards for composition include the George Ladd Prix de Paris, the Goddard Lieberman Award of the American Academy of Arts & Letters, and residencies at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and The MacDowell Colony. *Pools of Living Water* was commissioned by the Cathedral Church of St. Luke and St. Paul, Charleston, South Carolina. It is an interlude based on his choral work, *Rivers of Living Water*. A sense of calm pervades as the melody unfolds in parallel perfect fifths and fourths, or parallel triads over sustained harmonies, and briefly stated as a pedal solo.

PRICE was the first African-American woman composer to be successful in classical music. She was trained in organ and piano at the New England Conservatory and taught in her native city, Little Rock, before moving to Chicago after a brutal lynching in her upper middle-class neighborhood. Chicago enjoyed a flourishing of the arts in the 1920s-1940s, just as Harlem had its Renaissance. Price was an active participant as organist and pianist on weekly programs. Her *Symphony in E Minor* was awarded first prize in the Wanamaker composition competition (1932), and it was performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at the Chicago World's Fair (1933) to a standing ovation from the audience that included George Gershwin and Adlai Stevenson. *Suite No. 1 for Organ* is the finest of Florence Price's organ compositions. There are four movements: Fantasy, Fughetta, Air, and Toccato [sic]. The Fantasy is held together by the opening flourish which recurs frequently in the movement, modulating to the key of the dominant in the middle, and returning to the key of the tonic for the closing section. In between, a wide variety of thematic ideas is presented, sometimes lyric, other times dramatic or virtuosic. The Fughetta is a brief, technically demanding fugue exposition, followed by a development, a stretto, and further development of fragments of the subject, which resembles "Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child." The "Air" resembles a religious andante with its slow tempo and rich jazz-inspired chromatic harmonization. The melody presented at the beginning is the main source for development as the movement unfolds, and shows affinity with "Let Us Break Bread Together" and "Were You There?" The Toccato has a rondo form, and is a late Romantic perpetual-motion toccata, featuring a syncopated African juba rhythm in the pedal. Price successfully blended European forms with African-American musical elements, including pentatonic melodies, syncopations, and jazzy harmonies. She has recently become a major composer featured on concerts of leading orchestras and recitalists.

Notes by Cal Johnson