



**Pacifica Quartet with
Karen Slack
October 14, 2023**

PROGRAM NOTES

Support for the program notes is generously provided by Roberta Viviano.

FLORENCE PRICE

(LITTLE ROCK, 1887 –CHICAGO, 1953)

String Quartet No. 1 in G major (1929)

Florence Price grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas and received her early musical training from her mother, Florence Irene Smith. Price studied composition, piano pedagogy, and organ at the New England Conservatory, earning her degree in 1906. She then returned to Little Rock and taught piano, moved to Atlanta in 1910 to head the music department at Clark College, and resettled in Little Rock in 1912 to marry a successful attorney and start a family. After witnessing an escalation of racial hostility and violence against blacks in Little Rock, the Price family moved to Chicago in 1927. Despite gaining accolades and recognition in her lifetime—including the historic distinction of being the first African American woman to have a symphony performed by a major orchestra, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, in 1933—Price still experienced discrimination in Chicago where she struggled financially and was never offered a salaried academic position.

Price's String Quartet No. 1 begins in a traditional fashion with a lengthy sonata form that immerses listeners in Price's Romantic style, as broad sweeping melodies contrast with a charming waltz. The second movement, which links the slow Andante to an Allegretto, closely parallels the structure of the first, but shifts to an American idiom. Price's penchant for crafting melodies inspired by African American spirituals is displayed in the Andante section; similar to the opening

movement, this is juxtaposed with a schmaltzy folk theme set in pizzicato.

LOUIS GRUENBERG

(BREST, RUSSIA, 1884 –BEVERLY HILLS, 1964)

Four Diversions for String Quartet, Op. 32 (1930)

Louis Gruenberg was a talented pianist and successful composer of operas and Hollywood film scores. Born in Russia, he emigrated to New York as an infant and began studying piano at the National Conservatory at age eight. As a young man he traveled to Europe to study with Ferruccio Busoni and was exposed to the music of Arnold Schoenberg. Gruenberg's mature compositional style, which is heard in this captivating collection of musical miniatures, merges jazz with European modernism.

JAMES LEE III

(B. 1975, ST. JOSEPH, MI)

A Double Standard (2022)

James Lee III, a native of Michigan, studied composition at the University of Michigan. He is currently a professor of composition and theory at Morgan State University in Baltimore. The composer writes:

A Double Standard, a work for soprano and string quartet, uses the texts from a poem, which bears the same name, by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, an African American poet who was born free in Baltimore in 1825 and died in Philadelphia in 1911. Harper was also an abolitionist, suffragist, teacher, public speaker, and writer. In 1845, she was one of the first African American women to be published in the United States. Frances Harper often expressed her passion for social revolution through her poetry. This work, *A Double Standard*, is a musical journey that displays her pain and frustration with the biases against women and the 19th-century mindset of sex, gender, and societal roles. The work begins with an extended introduction in the strings that is highly agitated. Once the introduction is completed, the soprano sings a four-note motif on the words “Do you blame me ...” and is frequently utilized when the word “blame” is uttered. One can really sense the righteous indignation in the voice of Harper as she penned these words. Throughout *A Double Standard* various emotions are evoked at contrasting dynamic levels and then comes the dramatic climax. The climax of both the poem and the music arrives when the string quartet vigorously and angrily ascends and is

followed by the highest note that the soprano sings at a fortissimo dynamic. The words she sings are:

Crime has no sex and yet today
I wear the brand of shame;
Whilst he amid the gay and proud
Still bears an honored name.

Can you blame me if I've learned to think
Your hate of vice a sham,
When you so coldly crushed me down
And then excused the man?

Harper addressed the double standards that are practiced in society when it comes to men and women, and how women are many times treated more harshly. She then calls on God to be the true judge and arbiter of justice with the words:

I'm glad God's ways are not our ways,
He does not see as man,
Within His love, I know there's room
For those whom others ban.

It is in this part of the music that there is a pause in the brash dissonance as it evokes the beauty of God's throne and His righteous judgement. These musical passages are, however, short-lived as the agitated and frustrated nature of the poem and music returns on the words:

And what is wrong in woman's life
In man's cannot be right.

The initial musical material returns and continues to demand positive change!

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

(BONN, 1770–VIENNA, 1827)

String Quartet in A minor, Op. 132 (1825)

Beethoven's last five quartets were written between 1824 and 1826. Audiences were bewildered by the new aesthetic realm Beethoven had entered in these works, which reached back to older techniques of counterpoint and recitative and experimenting radically with late-18th-century forms. As Robert Winter has observed, there is a sense that while some of the music is intended to engage the audience, much of it turns

inward while Beethoven wrestles alone with musical ideas. The late quartets were rarely performed for fifty years after the composer's death.

Op. 132 opens with the first movement's four-note main theme played slowly by the cello. A tiny eight-bar fugue is constructed from these intervals. This austere *cantus firmus* is suddenly interrupted by an impassioned *arpeggio* in the first violin, the first of many extreme contrasts in the quartet. Contradicting the first theme's dark mood, the second theme is sweetly lyrical. These disparate themes rub against each other in an unsettled atmosphere throughout the movement.

The dancelike second movement, sounding relatively simple despite its intricate contrapuntal structure, seems open and direct after the emotionally complex first movement.

The heart of the quartet is the great "*Heiliger Dankgesang*" ("Holy Song of Thanks to the Godhead from a Convalescent, in the Lydian mode"), Beethoven's expression of thanks for his recovery from serious illness in April 1825. Contrasts of feeling and musical texture are especially profound in this movement. The central slow modal chorale, ethereal and intensely spiritual in character, is interrupted by sections of elaborate dancelike music that Beethoven marks "feeling new strength."

A marchlike dance movement follows in startling contrast to the "*Heiliger Dankgesang*'s emotional intensity. After a cry of recitative in the first violin, the final movement begins. Marked *Allegro appassionato*, it is a rondo recalling many passages from earlier movements. A lyrical main theme opens the movement, recalling part of the first movement's painful opening four-note motif. Contrasting elements are pressed together instead of unfolding sequentially. After a quiet fugal section, the main theme and accompaniment merge into the highly rhythmic concluding section. Now in the 'wrong' key of A major, the frenzied music is stripped down to a series of quick chords and the quartet's closing cadence.

Program notes for the Price and Gruenberg works by Jessica Payette, Associate Professor of Music at Oakland University. Program note for the Beethoven Quartet Op. 132 by Robert Strong, © 2012