

## “A Program of Song”—Leontyne Price (1959)

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Essay by David Salazar (guest post)\*



*Leontyne Price*

Throughout the 1950s, the music world stood in shock as it watched the rise of a young soprano from Laurel, Mississippi, as she ascended to become recognized as one of the greatest singers on the planet. And once she had secured that spot by the end of that decade, she never relinquished it for the rest of her storied career.

The soprano in question, of course, was Leontyne Price and, per her own admission, she never actually thought she had much of a chance to make it big on the operatic stage.

Price was ready to settle for a recital career, taking her cue from several other great black artists before her who, despite making major breakthroughs, had no choice but to remain absent from the major spotlight of most opera theaters.

Marian Anderson had made history years before as the first African American artist to sing at the Metropolitan Opera, but she managed just ten performances at the famed opera house over a ten-year span.

But Price’s voice was just too good to ignore and before long, she made history by becoming not just a major singer at the big opera houses around the world but also joining the ranks of the highest-paid singers in the world.

Price was and remains an opera legend. Her portrayals of many the art form’s greatest heroines are among the golden standard for opera lovers of the past and present.

So, it was rather shocking when in 1959, as she was establishing her foothold as a top tier artist, that the soprano made her first recording, “A Program of Song,” an album of recital pieces with piano accompaniment.

In the opera world, the first recording for any artist is usually a compilation of greatest hits, intent on helping make the artist a household name. There could be a rare piece here or there, but for the most part, a soprano or tenor’s first album was likely to feature the famed Italian or French works of their repertoire (it still remains that way).

So for Price to pick lieder was a major risk.

And yet it was a major statement for the soprano. Price wanted the world to know that she wasn’t just an opera diva with a massive voice ready to conform to what the world wanted her to do, but also a brilliant musician capable of taking on repertoire that required a greater degree of musical nuance and artistry. She was intent on changing the world, and that is exactly what she did.

In this album, the soprano takes on the music of Fauré, Poulenc, Richard Strauss, and Wolf, the expansive repertoire allowing the soprano, accompanied by her long-time collaborator David Garvey, an opportunity to shade and color her voice in ways that few are used to hearing from her.

“She paints with her voice,” stated F. Paul Driscoll in comments on the album made for Studio 360.

The album itself is a rich emotional journey, the first selection, “Claire de Lune” by Fauré, embodying everything that is to come. We hear Price’s voice rich and controlled with a strong sense of intimacy as the piece initiates. There is rhythmic precision throughout, her French coming through crisply. As the song delves into a more nostalgic feel in its second half, we feel Price’s voice soften slightly, the emotional shift subtle but potent. At the close of the song, the soprano’s “parmi les marbres” retain a rubato that ends the piece on a sense of gentle longing.

There isn’t a single track on this album that doesn’t provide this sense of rapture and emotional depth. “Notre amour,” the piece that follows right after “Claire de lune,” crescendos with ever-brightening sound, allowing a sense of soaring to greater heights. The third selection, “Au Cimetière,” takes us to a darker world before the fourth selection, “Au bord de l’eau,” opens us to the soprano’s ability to sculpt phrases like waves rising and falling. Playfulness ensues in “Mandoline,” and “Main dominée’s” moodier ambience transitions perfectly into the first Poulenc selection, the agitated “Je nommerai ton front.”

Poulenc's music builds in intensity more than the pieces by Fauré, which is perfectly suited to Price's vocal abilities and artistic temperament. The first piece's challenges are of the rhythmic variety and Price handles everything with an uttermost sense of clarity and control. But her singing builds in exhilaration, the soprano's voice growing in its aggression, climaxing in a sustained high note.

The contrasting "Tu vois le feu du soir" brings back the soprano's refined and elegant sound, the soprano's vocal breadth on full display. The piece shifts emotionally almost by the measure, moving from brighter to darker and more melancholic moods with each breath. And Price, accompanied beautifully by Garvey, makes those transitions seamlessly, her voice sweetening in its upper range before digging into its thicker quality moments later.

The latter half of the album is dedicated to German song, a far cry from the French literature of the first half. In these pieces, particularly those of Strauss, Price's sense of expansive legato is more notable. There are certainly more operatic qualities to these selections and Price engages her voice with the same powerful intensity that she would in roles like "Aida" or "Il Trovatore."

The album might be all about Price and her genius, but there is no doubt that Garvey deserves mention for how he works with her through each passage, the piano remaining rich throughout. There is an ever-present balance between the two musicians, with great attention to every single piece.

This album would go on to win a Grammy for Best Classical Performance--Vocal Soloist, the soprano's first of 13 Grammy awards from 25 different nominations. She would go on to make dozens of opera recordings thereafter, becoming one of the Met Opera's greatest legends, and Price would continue to release albums dedicated to both songs and spirituals.

This album, however, is an essential reminder of the soprano's sense of fearlessness. She didn't care that she wasn't doing things the way they are usually done. She didn't care that this was a major risk that went against the grain in terms of how people saw her. She did it because it was the best thing for her artistry. And that's why we continue to treasure her to this day.

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