

Michelle Cann at Severance: smiles, laughter, and learning something new (May 19)

by Stephanie Manning



What's the best part about attending a dinner party? Maybe it's the friendly conversation, the relaxed atmosphere, or a lovely musical performance. Michelle Cann's recital had all three.

On May 19, the pianist welcomed the audience into her (temporary) home at Severance Music Center, entertaining with both elegant musicianship and cheerful dialogue. The warm lighting, low ceiling,

and plush seats of Reinberger Chamber Hall helped make it feel as if the packed crowd was listening from inside Cann's living room.

Presented in Cleveland as part of the 2025 Mandel Opera and Humanities Festival, "The Women of Chicago's Black Renaissance" is a program as much about education as it is about performance. Cann loves providing commentary during her concerts, an approach that works particularly well when the stories behind the music are as important as the pieces themselves.

After the upbeat, ragtime-like opener, Nora Holt's *Negro Dance*, Cann moved to the microphone to begin her remarks. There's a lot to learn about the five Black women composers featured on the program, many of whom remain underrepresented in the classical music world. Thankfully, Monday's audience provided an active sounding board.

"Wow"s and murmurs could be heard in the room as Cann described the historical inequities in music publishing, which prevented many of these women's works from seeing the light of day. And gasps of dismay arose when Cann revealed how Nora Holt's house was devastatingly robbed — meaning that of the composer's more than 200 works, only two survive to the present day.

The pianist then brought a naturalistic touch to Betty Jackson King's *Four Seasonal Sketches*, from the lushness of the opening "Spring Intermezzo" to the buildup of a June thunderstorm in "Summer Interlude." The movements "Autumn Dance" and "Winter Holiday" emphasized Cann's ferocity, especially as the winter-themed finale jumped between the keyboard's high and low extremes. "It's a very Cleveland winter," Cann joked, speaking from the experience of her student years at the Cleveland Institute of Music.

Starting with Florence Price's *Fantasia nègre No. 1*, the influence of Spirituals came into play. This particular work is based around "Sinner, Please Don't Let this Harvest Pass," which Cann sang warmly before sitting back down at her instrument. Within the eight-and-a-half-minute piece, she kept the Spiritual's tender melody easily identifiable.

Price's piece starts contemplative before the variations get fiercer and faster — and the same could be said for Irene Britton Smith's *Variations on a Theme by MacDowell*. This was the most "classical" sounding work of the evening, and while the finale came off a bit heavy-handed, sweeter moments emerged in the slower sections.

Cann prepared the audience for Margaret Bonds' *Spiritual Suite* with more singing — this time to the Spiritual "Wade in the Water" — and the audience enthusiastically joined in. Once the first movement began, heads started to bob as the pianist smoothly settled into a jazzy groove. And by the end of the third, "Troubled Water," the listeners eagerly followed her concluding flourish with cheers.

As a parting gift, Cann chose Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2*, arranged by Hazel Scott (another trailblazing Black pianist). Cann embraced the humor within the changes in mood and melody, earning plenty of laughs. At one point, she theatrically leaned back, laced her fingers together, and cracked her knuckles, as if to say: "No sweat."

Photo by Roger Mastroianni

Published on ClevelandClassical.com June 5, 2025.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)