

Marion Anderson

Anderson, Marian



Record Information

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Description:

Marian Anderson was born in 1902 and overcame racial discrimination to gain renown as one of the finest singers of all time. In 1955 she became the first African American to sing a leading role at New York's Metropolitan Opera. Despite international fame, Anderson was refused permission to perform at Washington's Constitution Hall in 1939. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt helped Walter White arrange a replacement concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that was attended by seventy-five thousand people. Anderson served as a delegate to the United Nations under President Eisenhower and returned to the Lincoln Memorial to participate in the 1963 March on Washington.

Marian **Anderson** was the first African American to sing a role at the Metropolitan Opera House and became a U.S. State Department goodwill ambassador to Asia. Her rich operatic contralto won the New York Philharmonic voice competition in 1924. Acknowledged for her modesty, humility, and unwavering religious faith, she was often called "The Lady of Philadelphia."

Anderson was born on February 27, 1897, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her mother was Annie **Anderson**, a former teacher. Her father, John **Anderson**, who died when **Marion** was eight years old, worked in the refrigerator room of the Reading Terminal Market and sold coal and ice to make ends meet. Her sisters were Ethel and Alyce. Ethel's son, James DePriest, became an eminent orchestra conductor. The family lived on Colorado Street and South Martin Street in Philadelphia.

Anderson attended William Penn High School and South Philadelphia High School, where she sang at assemblies and struggled with stenography and bookkeeping. She also attended Union Baptist Church, singing there for the first time when she was eight years old and giving concerts in neighboring churches where she was billed "the baby contralto." She participated in both junior and senior choirs at Union Baptist until becoming an adult. Opera star Roland Hayes visited Union Baptist and, quite impressed

with her soprano to bass range, invited her to sing with him in cantatas and oratorios. He made it possible for her to participate in concert tours to black colleges and churches outside Philadelphia while she was still a high school student. For these concerts, Anderson was paid \$5, if anything at all. The caring, concerned congregation once gave to her a "love offering" of \$17.02 with which she purchased a satin and hand-fashioned formal dress that she wore to her earlier recitals at churches, colleges, the YMCA, and the YWCA.

She studied violin for a very short time and played simple songs on the piano to accompany herself, but she did not have formal voice instruction until she was a high school junior. Anderson did not have early formal lessons because the Philadelphia music school with which she registered did not take "colored" and because her fatherless family did not think she required lessons since she was already singing quite well and performing in church.

Her initial vocal teacher was Mary Saunders Patterson, who also gave Anderson her first bona fide evening gown. (Several gowns worn by Anderson are in the permanent collection of the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia in Richmond, Virginia.) She then studied with Patterson and Agnes Reifsnnyder, whose fees were paid by the Philadelphia Choral Society, an African-American group Anderson sang with when she was a teen. Union Baptist Church paid the \$600 required for her vocal studies with Giuseppe Borghetti. Anderson remained under the tutelage and influence of the demanding Borghetti even after she became an accomplished opera singer. After a disastrous under-capacity Town Hall concert in which Anderson sang "Von Ewiger Liebe" rather badly in German and was written about unkindly in the press, in 1925 she sang "O mio Fernando" from Donizetti's *La Favorita* and captured first place in a vocal competition sponsored by the New York Philharmonic Symphony at Lewisohn Stadium. With this win, Anderson garnered the attention of serious music lovers. The prize was an appearance with the symphony in New York on August 26, 1925, and, although the press was only cordial, her engagement schedule expanded. She intently studied foreign languages, and her performance fee, \$5 when she began, increased to \$350 and \$500 for very special occasions. Because Marian Anderson was the first African American to win vocal competitions in the 1920s, the doors of opera, virtually closed to black performers, opened and never closed again.

In 1929, Anderson won a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship to study in Europe and by 1932 had a successful European career. Conductor Arturo Toscanini described her voice as "a voice that comes once in a hundred years." When she returned to the United States, her recitals, unlike the Town Hall fiasco of years previous, were filled to capacity and critically acclaimed. However, in the midst of her success, she encountered the practice of Jim Crow racism.

In 1939, the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) refused her right to perform in Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C., because she was a black woman. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) expressed outrage over the incident and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt renounced her DAR membership. Between the efforts of the civil rights organization and the White

House, **Anderson** arranged to perform on Easter Sunday 1939 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, where 75,000 people came out to hear her.

By 1955, she became the first African American to appear with the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York, gracing the role of Ulrica in Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*. Because of her natural humility and refinement, **Anderson** was asked by the State Department to tour Asia as a goodwill ambassador. She subsequently served as delegate to the United Nations, received decorations from governments of many nations, including Liberia and Sweden, and earned several doctorates in music and humane letters.

Marian **Anderson** died on April 8, 1993, at the age of 96.

References and Further Information

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