

Marian Anderson: A Voice for Freedom

How a singer's remarkable voice helped transcend a nation's ugly racial divide.

By Bryan Brown

On the morning of April 9, 1939, for the first time ever, workers carried a grand piano up the marble steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Others set up microphones and a sound system. By 5 o'clock on that Easter Sunday, about 75,000 people had crowded onto the Mall. Many were from the city's black community. As one attendee later said, everyone knew how important the day was.

At last, African American contralto Marian Anderson stepped up to the microphone. "I had a feeling that a great wave of goodwill poured out from these people, almost engulfing [overwhelming] me," she later wrote.* "And when I stood up to sing ["America"], I felt for a moment as though I were choking. For a desperate second I thought that the words, well as I know them, would not come."

Anderson had been denied the right to sing in Washington's Constitution Hall because she was black. Many people had been enraged at the injustice. In response, a few influential people, including First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, had organized the concert on the Mall. Now, Anderson was standing at the place where, 24 years later, Martin Luther King, Jr., would give his "I Have a Dream" speech. On that afternoon in 1939, Anderson struck her blow for freedom simply by singing.

"Free as a Bird"

Marian Anderson was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on February 27, 1897. The oldest of three girls, she was a happy child, especially when singing in the choir at the Union Baptist Church. From the beginning, adults noticed her naturally beautiful, powerful voice.

When Marian was 12, her father died. Marian had to go to work to help support her family. She delivered laundry that her mother took in and scrubbed the white marble steps of Philadelphia row houses.

There was never money for music lessons. But people sensed that Marian had a destiny. On many occasions, the congregation at Union Baptist raised money for her. "We want to do something for our Marian," the Reverend Wesley Parks said. The first collection brought in \$17.02. Marian used the money to buy fabric, which her mother made into Marian's first evening gown.

"I sang naturally, free as a bird, with a voice of considerable size and wide range," Anderson later wrote in her autobiography. "There was no difficulty in filling the church auditorium." Soon, she was in demand at black colleges and churches.

"A Cold, Horrifying Hand"

But there were barriers to overcome. One day, Anderson tried to apply to a Philadelphia music school. When she reached the front of the line, the white woman who was taking applications ignored her for a long time. Finally, the woman said, "We don't take colored." ("Colored" is a term once widely used for black Americans that is now considered offensive.)

"I don't think I said a word," Anderson later wrote. "It was as if a cold, horrifying hand had been laid on me. I turned and walked out. It was my first contact with the blunt, brutal words, and this school of music was the last place I expected to hear them."

As Anderson grew more famous and traveled farther from home, discrimination remained a problem. In the

South in the early 1900s, Jim Crow laws required the separation of races in many public places.

Nonetheless, in time, she established a reputation in the great concert halls of Europe. There she perfected a program of European art songs and spirituals. In 1935, the famous conductor Arturo Toscanini heard Anderson sing in Salzburg, Austria. "A voice like yours is heard once in a hundred years," he said.

At this point, Anderson was ready to be discovered by her own country. She appeared repeatedly on the radio, heard by millions of Americans. In 1936, Eleanor Roosevelt invited Anderson to sing at the White House for President Franklin D. Roosevelt and herself. The next day, Mrs. Roosevelt wrote in her newspaper column, "My Day," "I have rarely heard a more beautiful and moving voice."

In 1939, promoters tried to rent Constitution Hall for a Marian Anderson concert. Constitution Hall was owned by a group called the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). The all-white DAR was an exclusive organization of women descended from patriots of the American Revolution. The DAR refused to rent its hall to nonwhites.

A storm of protest followed the decision. Eleanor Roosevelt was so angry that she resigned from the DAR. Soon, she helped organize the concert on the Mall.

A Great Day of Pride

Easter Sunday started out cold and overcast. But by late afternoon, the sun had broken through the clouds. Shortly after 5 o'clock, Harold Ickes, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior, introduced Anderson to the crowd. "Genius draws no color line," he said.

Somehow, Anderson remembered, she got her voice to work. "I am so overwhelmed, I just can't talk," she told the audience at the end of the concert. "I can't tell you what you have done for me today. I thank you from the bottom of my heart again and again."

The concert proved to be a turning point for Anderson. She went on to achieve great fame. In 1955, she overcame discrimination at New York City's Metropolitan Opera, becoming the first African American singer to perform there as a regular member.

Black Americans looked upon the Easter 1939 concert with tremendous pride. Decades later, many took part in the civil rights demonstrations of the 1960's. For them, that great day Marian Anderson sang on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial had been the start of it all.

*Excerpts are from Marian Anderson's autobiography, *My Lord, What a Morning*, originally published in 1956 by The Viking Press. Current edition published in 2002 by the University of Illinois Press.

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Pronunciation Guide

Harold Ickes (ICK-eez)

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