

The Lady of Philadelphia

Marian Anderson



Imagine this: You are a young black woman with a magnificent voice, but you have no money for singing lessons, and even if you could take singing lessons, where would you sing? As a young black woman, many restaurants refuse to serve you and some hotels refuse to give you a room. So where would you sing? Certainly not in any American concert hall.

Your name is Marian Anderson, and with the help of your church and some remarkable people in your life, you do manage to take music lessons. You begin your career singing in Europe, but by the time your career is winding down, you are singing all over the world

★

"I have a great belief in the future of my people and my country."

—Marian Anderson
(1897–1993)



They Stood Alone!

and you are considered one of the greatest classical singers of all time.

Marian was born in South Philadelphia on February 27, 1897, the first of three daughters.

Her mother had been a teacher and her father sold coal and ice. Her father was also an usher in the church the family attended, and Marian joined the junior choir when she was six.

Mr. Robinson, the choir director, encouraged Marian's musical talent, and when she was eight she talked her father into buying an old piano. There was no money for music lessons, so Marian taught herself enough to play music to sing to.

Following her father's death when she was ten, the family moved in with her paternal grandparents. Her mother supported the family by taking in laundry and working as a cleaning woman, the only kind of work available to black women.

Marian's mother was just the first of several women role models who influenced her immensely. Her mother's faith instilled a core of stability which lasted her entire life.

Music and church were always an important part of Marian's life. By age thirteen she was the youngest member of the senior choir at her church where she thrilled audiences with the three-octave range of her voice.

As she continued to sing, she found another role model who influenced her life. Mary Saunders Patterson was a black music teacher whom Marian met when she was a junior in high school. Ms. Patterson gave her free music lessons and once loaned her a dress to wear to a concert.

Marian learned how to project her voice to the far corner of a room, to enunciate the words to a song clearly, and to strengthen her voice through special exercises.

A third influence was a white woman, Dr. Lucy Wilson, principal of South Philadelphia High School for Girls. Dr.

Wilson rescued Marian from the business courses she was taking to become a secretary, so that she could have more musical training as part of her high school curriculum. Dr. Wilson also arranged for many opportunities for Marian to sing in public.

After graduation from high school, Marian tried to register at a music school in Philadelphia, but the receptionist there told her, "We don't take colored." That music school no longer exists in Philadelphia, but the rejection hurt her deeply.³⁷

Dr. Wilson again came to her rescue and arranged for her to audition for Guisepppe Boghetti, a much-sought-after music teacher. When he heard Marian sing "Deep River," he was moved to tears.

With the help of her church and Dr. Wilson arranging benefit concerts for her to raise money, she was able to take private lessons with Boghetti who taught her how to control her breathing and to sing opera.

In 1925 she won an important singing contest in New York City with over three hundred contestants, which resulted in her singing with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra at Lewisohn Stadium.

As a result of that performance, a top concert manager offered to represent her, and she was finally able to support her mother. Marian always said that the greatest moment in her life was the day she told her mother that she could quit her cleaning job in a downtown department store.

Like many other artists both black and white, she had to build a reputation in Europe before American audiences would even consider giving her a chance at the top. And even then she could not escape the racism so deeply embedded in American life. For almost a decade until 1935, her primary musical audiences were European.

In Europe there was no discrimination because of race, and

They Stood Alone!

she was accepted immediately. The Europeans loved her, and she sang before kings and queens.

She returned to the United States in the fall of 1930 and was awarded a fellowship to study in Germany. While studying in Germany, her first concert was so successful that she received invitations to sing in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

Although she returned to America for family visits, she always returned to Europe. In America, she was not being booked into the large concert halls, whereas in Europe she was accepted with no problem and performed all over Scandinavia as well as in London, Paris, and Vienna.

While in Europe, she met Sol Hurok, a famous American concert manager, who asked if he could represent her in America, so she returned home once again.

While touring America, she encountered a good deal of discrimination. Some restaurants refused to serve her, and some hotels refused to give her a room.

The most famous case of discrimination in Marian's career occurred in 1939 when the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to let her sing in Constitution Hall in Washington, DC, because she was black. The members of the D.A.R. were descendants of the men who had fought against the British in the American Revolution, but they would not grant a black woman the freedom to perform in their hall.

Many people, including Eleanor Roosevelt, were outraged at this discrimination. Mrs. Roosevelt resigned her membership in the organization and invited Marian to sing instead at an open-air concert Easter Sunday, 1939, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC.³⁸

Seventy-five thousand people came to see and hear her. They wanted her to know that they didn't approve of the cruel treatment she had received, and millions of people listened to

her on the radio. She gave such a great performance that this concert became one of the most famous concerts ever given in the United States.

Her triumphant concert and all the unpleasantness leading up to it were an important episode in the history of race relations in the United States.

Marian began to insist that blacks in her segregated audiences be offered seats equally as good as the seats for the whites. And she demanded that blacks be able to buy tickets on a first-come, first-served basis and not have to wait until whites had been given first choice of the tickets. Eventually, she refused to sing in any concert hall that was segregated.

In 1954 Rudolf Bing, the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, invited her to sing at the Metropolitan. January 7, 1955, was a historic occasion. Marian was the first black singer to sing with the Metropolitan Opera and at the end of her performance, the audience thundered her name.

In 1963 she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian honor, and ten years later she was elected to the National Women's Hall of Fame.

She continued to sing in concerts and operas all over the world until 1965 when she announced her retirement. When she finished her last concert at Carnegie Hall, the audience applauded with such enthusiasm that she sang an extra hour.

After that, she performed only occasionally until her death from congestive heart failure on April 8, 1993, at age ninety-six. More than two thousand admirers attended a memorial service for her at Carnegie Hall in New York City.

Marian Anderson, "The Lady of Philadelphia" and world-leading concert contralto, traveled hundreds of thousands of miles around the world and gave more than a thousand performances during her career.

They Stood Alone!

Perhaps her greatest legacy to the American people, however, was demonstrating by her own example that talent, dignity, and courage were more important than skin color, and that by leading by example one could be an instrument for social change.

Segregation was just ending as Marian Anderson retired, and she had helped to blaze a trail for equal rights in America and open doors for a whole generation of African Americans. She prepared the way for all the young black singers of classical music who came after her.