

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1270

Marian Anderson

Marian Anderson was born in 1897 in down-town Philadelphia, both sides of her family having come there from Virginia seeking better conditions. Thus she grew up amongst a mix of Blacks, Irish, Italians and Jews. A bent for music was evident before she was three. At six she scrubbed steps to buy a violin at a pawn shop. She attended a mixed school and sang whenever opportunity arose, but only at the black community church was she encouraged in music. By the time she was ten, guided by an aunt, she was earning small amounts singing at church functions. In 1909, her father having died of an injury at work, the family moved into the already overcrowded home of her grand parents. In 1912, there being no funds for books and clothes, instead of going to secondary school, she became increasingly involved in church affairs, including singing. Thus in 1914, aged just seventeen, she received a favourable notice in the local press.

Marian Anderson recognised that she required good voice tuition and that the best teachers were white. However, although her school had been mixed, and although some white voice teachers had no personal objection to taking black pupils, few dared to. Eventually she was introduced to Mary S. Patterson, the best black teacher in the district, whose attitude was that students should pay only when they could. Patterson showed her how to place and project the voice, and opened her eyes to a repertoire far beyond the spirituals with which she was familiar.

For Marian Anderson Roland Hayes, then much admired, was a role model; a black artist who had overcome enormous obstacles with determination and dignity, and who sang an international repertoire. However, she found his enunciation poor and she determined that her audiences would know what she was singing about.

In 1915 a fund was raised by the black community to enable her to continue her general education and to study with Agnes Reifsnnyder, a white teacher with no time for racial prejudice. With Reifsnnyder she improved her breathing and developed the lower part of the register, and with her she studied how to prepare complete recital programmes. For the general side of her education a business school was chosen. She was ill-suited and unhappy in such studies, but it was still not clear that a career in music would follow and support for her family was a pressing call. Subsequently she moved to another school where things went better. At Easter 1916 the *Messiah* was given in Philadelphia with Roland Hayes and Marian Anderson. This led to further engagements including a performance of *Elijah* next year with Hayes and H. T. Burleigh, and, at very short notice, a concert in Georgia. There was a mixed, but segregated, audience, and Marion was spoken of as a second Schumann-Heink.

After an appearance at the Philadelphia Academy of Music a perceptive critic, L.A. Walton, praised her, but stressed the importance of continued study if she was to rise above mediocrity. In 1919 Marian Anderson was accepted as a

student of David Bispham, one of the most distinguished American artists (white) of the time, but, alas, he died before she could be taught by him.

Just as she was leaving school she began to study with Joe Bogash. As Giuseppe Boghetti he had had a brief career in Europe, but, with little success, he returned to Philadelphia and opened a studio. The church covered the fees with a gala concert. Marian's progress with Boghetti was mutually vital; it became certain that she would succeed as a singer, and on her success he prospered as a teacher.

In 1923 Marian Anderson sang for the gramophone, the first black concert artist to record for a major company. The music was entirely of arrangements of Negro spirituals by Harry T. Burleigh, a black American equivalent of the Irish Thomas Moore. She was even then extremely fastidious so that frequently many takes were needed before one was chosen for publication.

Later that year Marian Anderson and Roland Hayes became the first black artists to appear with major American orchestras. She sang 'O mio Fernando' from *Favorita* and two spirituals. The voice and the spirituals were greatly admired, but it was felt that the complexities of Donizetti's aria were not yet sufficiently mastered.

In 1924 she appeared in Harlem and in New York's Town Hall with a repertoire of music by Bemberg, Brahms, Coleridge-Taylor, Dvorak, Giordani, Handel, Pergolesi, Quilter, Rachmaninov, Saint-Saëns, Scarlatti, Schubert and Richard Strauss. Her voice and manner were admired, but lack of interpretive ability, particularly of Lieder, was almost universally stressed. Despondently, realising that the criticism could not be ignored, she did not sing again for months.

In 1925 Boghetti, with whom she was still working, entered her for a contest. She became a semi-finalist and then outright winner with 'O mio Fernando'.

From that time her status gradually grew as she weathered the problems and humiliations of trains and accommodation for a black person. But still she had not mastered German Lieder. She had to study in Europe.

London, where Roland Hayes had sung for King George V and Queen Mary, seemed a good starting point. In 1928, armed with introductions, she enrolled there for courses in French and German, and studied with Raimund von Zur Mühlen until his health failed at the end of the year. She then worked with Mark Raphael and Roger Quilter, and studied with Louis Drysdale, who was in the Garcia tradition. She was overwhelmed by Elena Gerhardt's *Die Winterreise* and hoped one day to study with her, though this never came about.

Reviews of Anderson's first European concert, in the Wigmore Hall in June, were at best lukewarm. There was concern, some of it sincere, if misguided, some of it perhaps tinged by racism, about the suitability of her voice and style for Lieder. However, a Promenade Concert in August was a definite success, leading to a broadcast and to recording sessions from which came Eboli's aria in this album.

Anderson returned to the United States. Reviews improved generally, but for her singing of Lieder. As determined as ever, and supported by a Rosenwald scholarship, she set sail in 1930 for study in Berlin. She stayed with a couple who

gladly helped her with German comprehension and accent; she felt herself at once more at ease with Lieder. She studied with Kurt Johnen, an accompanist and teacher involved in research in the psychology of music. For her Berlin début she worked intensely with Johnen and her chosen accompanist, Michael Raucheisen. The critics praised her and wanted to hear her again; the same happened in Prague. After a successful Scandinavian tour, she returned home to a country in depression. Reviews were better, but the depression reduced both audiences and fees.

Armed once more with the scholarship, she returned to Berlin. Johnen gave her some Wolf and the *Vier Ernste Gesänge* of Brahms for her next Berlin concert. She was widely praised. A second, even more successful tour of Scandinavia followed.

Back in America conditions had worsened yet further. There were fewer concerts, journeys between them were long, unpleasant and costly, and income declined as audience numbers fell. Fortunately she was invited for a third Scandinavian tour, and again she was received with huge enthusiasm. Alas, one incident cast a shadow; she was refused a work permit in Denmark on the grounds that such were conditions that the bank could not allow export of currency. She clearly felt that prejudice was at work. Press and public were outraged; one concert took place.

Denmark apart, so successful was she that her manager, Helmar Enwall, extended and further extended her tour, also encouraging her to be more fashion-conscious. Her schedule was now very heavy indeed, averaging one concert every other day; far beyond anything imaginable at home. Further, he contacted managers in Austria, France and Italy. (Germany was by now closed to her.)

Early in 1935 she toured Russia, then, after further concerts in Europe and a further Scandinavian tour, she returned to America. She had been away two and a half years; she was coming home an internationally acclaimed artist. Her accompanist was the Finn Kosti Vehanen. A white accompanist had been no problem in Europe.

Ten years earlier her efforts in a sparsely filled New York Town Hall, were coolly received. Now, in the same venue, she was for the *New York Times* 'one of the great singers of our time'. And there was no problem over the white accompanist.

The Europe she saw in 1936 was less pleasant; she left Spain on the verge of civil war, and in Austria the choice of Marian Anderson (black) by Bruno Walter (Jew) for a Musikverein concert was ill-received by the right wing.

In 1935, against advice of friends, the flamboyant Sol Hurok took on management of Anderson's American career. With around fifteen concerts, the first season can scarcely have been profitable. Five years later she was writing to him that he must inform his staff that she could not cope with such heavy schedules. For Hurok an Anderson concert was one of a series. If a venue did not want a black artist it didn't get Melchior and Ormandy; if it didn't want white artists it couldn't have Anderson. For Anderson this sometimes meant disappointing audiences which had supported her when she most needed support. Radio, however, took her into every location. The critics now competed in praising

her. Olin Downes, his staid manner suggesting reliability and objectivity, is probably best trusted. For him she was an interpreter who “fully grasped and felt deeply the import of the song”.

In April 1939 Marian Anderson was scheduled to appear in Washington. The usual venue there for major musical events was Constitution Hall, a short distance from the White House. Its owners, the Daughters of the American Revolution, refused to allow her to sing there. A major nation-wide scandal erupted. Notable among the singer’s supporters was Mrs. Roosevelt. After months of fierce and unpleasant wrangling, Marian Anderson stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and gave a free, open-air recital to an unsegregated audience of 75,000 people.

1940 also brought problems for Anderson. Her long-term accompanist had to leave with extreme suddenness to avoid a scandal, probably of a homosexual nature, there were strains with her long-term prospective husband over when to marry and where to live, and overwork was giving rise to comments on the state of her voice.

Anderson, probably disliking the business aspects of her career, made herself negotiate firmly for better fees and fewer concerts per year. Hurok was able to offer several leading accompanists; Anderson chose Franz Rupp, partially because he had substituted on occasion, so she knew his quality. As she became used to working with Rupp, the critics noted definite improvements in her performances. The domestic problems were also gradually resolved.

Hurok saw value in records and broadcasts of his artists. Thus, during the recording ban from 1942 to 1944 Anderson reached vast audiences by radio. And, like many other artists in wartime, she performed frequently in hospitals and for the troops.

As the years passed Anderson felt the need for a coach to help care for her voice. She was fortunate to be guided by Edyth Walker, a contralto with all the experience of a major operatic career to draw on. Then, in 1948 she had to undergo an operation. After two months she was allowed to try her voice; all was well, she was ready for the next season. In 1949, as the American season ended, Anderson and Rupp left for a heavy tour of Europe. Whilst she was more popular than ever, those who remembered her previous visits heard greater musicianship, but a lesser voice. Returning to Germany was for both of them deeply moving; Anderson had not sung there since 1930, Rupp had left, denounced by an artist with whom he had worked for years. The European tour was immediately followed by heavy tours all over both American continents.

In these years the race issue was intensifying. Blacks who had fought for freedom in Europe felt entitled to a decent share in the new prosperity at home. Anderson’s insistence on vertical segregation (halls divided into left and right, thus offering the same qualities of seats to whites and blacks) was now a middle-class compromise. In 1952 she joined those who insisted on unsegregated audiences. In 1953 she sang to an unsegregated audience in Constitution Hall.

Anderson had the strongest ties to her family. Older members were now gone, others were old and ailing. For her to leave now for a tour of Japan was

proof of the depth of her professional commitment. From Japan she flew to Korea to entertain American troops, then back for more lengthy tours.

In 1955 Anderson, approaching sixty, made her début at the Metropolitan Opera as Ulrica in *Un Ballo in Maschera*, the first black singer to appear there. The cast included Zinka Milanov and Richard Tucker; Dmitri Mitropoulos conducted. Olin Downes was very impressed. Four days later she sang the role when the company visited Philadelphia. Anderson balanced daydreaming and reality, Azucena perhaps? Reality won; six performances as Ulrica were her operatic career, but Rudolf Bing never wavered in his policy of engaging artists for ability not colour.

In the 1950s the world changed. Stalin was dead. Gilels and Oistrakh visited the West. Jan Peerce and Isaac Stern visited Russia. A black artist had sung at the Metropolitan Opera. Little Rock was coming to the boil. The State Department wanted a cultural exchange with Asia. Marian Anderson, aged 60, would give 26 concerts in 12 countries in 2 months; between concerts she would give interviews, visit churches and schools, meet local dignitaries etc. But she was not a trained diplomat; careful though she was, one or two remarks were repeated adversely out of context. It must have been the most exhausting tour of her career.

In 1958 the Eisenhower administration, anxious to show its broad-mindedness, persuaded Anderson to be Secretary of State in charge of African Affairs in a United Nations delegation. After much hesitation she agreed. Her quiet dignity, obvious integrity, and friendship with other delegates averted a storm when it was clear that she could not agree with a prepared statement from her government.

Anderson was working as hard as ever, she even toured Australia, but critics were now remarking on a voice in decline and she was restricting her repertoire. Then, for a year or two she appeared less often. In 1965 she sang her last concert.

For a dozen years Anderson was on various committees and was a narrator, but she was ageing. Her 75th birthday, actually her 80th, was celebrated in Carnegie Hall.

Marian Anderson died, aged 96, in 1993.

In the course of her career Anderson received many scholarships, awards and honours, including the Philadelphia Award, instituted by Edward W. Bok for persons who brought great credit to the town. With it she founded the Marian Anderson Scholarship Fund to help young singers without means. It was to be run by people who knew her and her ideals.

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