

Marian Anderson, 1897-1993: 75,000 People Heard Her Sing at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

The Daughters of the American Revolution would not let Anderson perform in their concert hall because she was black. *Transcript of radio broadcast:*
24 January 2009

VOICE ONE:

I'm Shirley Griffith.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Steve Ember with People in America in VOA Special English. Today, we complete the story of singer Marian Anderson.

(MUSIC: "der schmied, op. 19/4")

VOICE ONE:



Marian Anderson

Marian Anderson was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the early nineteen hundreds. She began singing in church. Soon, her rich deep voice became widely known in the area.

Marian Anderson loved opera. At that time, however, black singers were not permitted in white opera companies in the United States. So she performed as a concert artist instead. Her first concert in New York City was not successful. She felt defeated and did not sing again in public for many months. Then her mother became sick. Anderson knew she would have to work to keep her family together. Singing was her work.

VOICE TWO:

In the nineteen twenties Marian Anderson won two singing competitions. She sang in New York with the Philharmonic Orchestra. This concert was a huge success. She signed an agreement to perform in other cities. Most of the time, only black people attended her concerts. When she was in the southern part of the United States, she was not permitted to stay in hotels for white people. She did not let racial hatred affect her music. Yet she knew she would never be completely successful until she could sing for all people.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

In nineteen thirty, Marian Anderson received money to study music in London. In those days, Europe seemed to be the only place where a black artist could gain recognition. So Marian traveled to Europe. Many years later, she described her experience there: "I was made to feel welcome, even at a hotel. People accepted me as a person. They judged me for my qualities as a human being and an artist . . . nothing else."

VOICE TWO:

In the nineteen thirties, Anderson studied and performed in London and Berlin, Germany. She gave few concerts at first. Then she was invited to give a series of concerts in Sweden. The musician Kosti Vehanen played the piano at Marian's concerts. He said her voice was so powerful that it seemed to come from under the earth. He described it as a voice that overflowed with a deep, tragic feeling.

Marian Anderson had her first great success in Sweden. The Swedish people loved her voice. They especially liked the spirituals she sang. Few of them had heard this kind of American music before.

(MUSIC: "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands")

VOICE ONE:

Marian Anderson traveled through the countries of Scandinavia. People praised her singing everywhere she went. In Helsinki, Finland she sang for the famous Finnish composer Jean Sibelius. He told her: "The roof of my house is too low for your voice."

Anderson sang in Scandinavia for three concert seasons. She sang for the kings of Denmark and Sweden. Finally, she decided to return to the United States. She said she wanted to test herself in her own country.

VOICE TWO:

News of her success in Scandinavia did not mean much to concert hall owners in the United States. They knew black concert singers were not popular. Anderson was back where she began -- singing at churches and small gatherings. She decided to go back to Europe. Again, she was greeted warmly.

The famous Italian orchestra conductor Arturo Toscanini heard her sing in Austria. After the concert he said: "She has a voice that one hears only once in a hundred years." Toscanini's comment spread throughout the world of music. Finally, Marian Anderson was famous. She returned to the United States and sang all around the country. In nineteen thirty-five she appeared for the second time at Town Hall in New York. This time she was a great success.

(MUSIC: "Don Carlos")

VOICE ONE:

Marian Anderson gave concerts in northern and southern cities. She firmly believed that her music was the best weapon against racial hatred.

At one concert in the southern state of Mississippi, Anderson saw that her singing could bring people together. It had been a long concert. Yet the crowd kept calling for more. Marian asked the audience to join her in singing one last song. The people stood. Black people and white people sang together, side by side. The local newspaper described what happened: "Sometimes the human spirit rises above itself, above racial prejudice. "

VOICE TWO:

Another incident became famous around the world. Marian Anderson was to sing in Washington, D.C. at Constitution Hall. This concert hall was owned by an organization called the Daughters of the American Revolution, or D.A.R. The D.A.R. would not permit Anderson to perform in the concert hall because she was black.



Marian Anderson singing at the Lincoln Memorial

Many people protested, including Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of the American president. With Missus Roosevelt's help, Anderson was able to sing for an even bigger crowd in Washington. She gave a free concert in the open air, near the Lincoln memorial. Seventy-five thousand people attended that concert on Easter Sunday, April ninth, nineteen thirty-nine. Years later, Anderson described how she felt on that day:

VOICE ONE:

"There seemed to be people as far as the eye could see. I felt that a great wave of goodwill poured out from those people. When I saw them, my heart jumped wildly. I could not talk. I wondered if I would be able to sing. "

VOICE TWO:

Marian Anderson did sing. And seventy-five thousand voices -- black and white -- joined with hers. They sang the national song of the United States. Then they listened as she sang another song about America.

(MUSIC: "My Country 'Tis of Thee")

VOICE ONE:

In nineteen fifty-five, Marian Anderson was asked to sing with the New York Metropolitan Opera company. It was the first time a black singer performed regularly with an American opera group. Marian Anderson's presence made it possible for other black singers to become opera singers in the United States.

VOICE TWO:

Marian Anderson received many honors and awards during her life. In nineteen fifty-eight she was appointed a delegate to the United Nations, expanding her job as goodwill ambassador of the United States. She received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in nineteen sixty-three.

Anderson retired from singing two years later. She lived quietly with her husband, Orpheus Fisher, in the state of Connecticut. After he died, she lived with her sister's son, orchestra conductor James DePriest. Marian Anderson died in nineteen ninety-three at the age of ninety-six.

Experts say she is remembered not only for the quality of her voice, but also because of the way she carried out her right to be heard.

(MUSIC: "Ave Maria")

VOICE ONE:

This program was written by Shelley Gollust. It was produced by Lawan Davis. I'm Shirley Griffith.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Steve Ember. Join us again next week for People in America in VOA Special English.