

For Thee We Sing: The Historical Implications of Marian Anderson's 1939 Easter Concert

Sonya G. Baker
Murray State University
Kentucky, USA

This lecture recital is an opportunity for me to celebrate one of my idols, the classical singer Marian Anderson. Many of you know her as the first African American to sing with the Metropolitan Opera. Some of you may connect her name to Eleanor Roosevelt and the Daughters of the American Revolution, or D.A.R. Perhaps a few of you even know some of the details of the incident in 1939 which brought these names together. However, I imagine that very few of you have ever considered Marian Anderson's 1939 Easter concert one of the rare moments in which classical singing greatly impacted American society as a whole. What other classical singers have caused millions around the world to re-evaluate American patriotism and our sense of humanity? I don't know of any. For this reason, I appear before you today to fill in some of the gaps which may be missing for you in the story of Marian Anderson and the famous concert she gave in 1939.

Along the way, I'll introduce you to a website sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania where the Marian Anderson collection is located. I hope that you will eventually visit the Marian Anderson collection and meet the incredible curators who catalogued and care for the hundreds of boxes of material there. You'll find several treasures at the website—interesting photos, audio clips and video clips. Browse on your own and enjoy!

Marian Anderson was born in Philadelphia February 17, 1897, the eldest of three daughters. She was raised in a poor, racially mixed neighbourhood and religion played an important role in her upbringing. At age six, she was enrolled in the Union Baptist Church choir and by age eight her singing had captured people's attention in both church and school. Marian Anderson began singing whatever and wherever she could. She eventually saw the need for voice lessons to further her artistry, but found that lack of money and racial attitudes were obstacles. Religion helped her overcome both. Her church collected money for her lessons and her faith allowed her to be strong when facing racial prejudice (Dizikes, 1993, pp. 492-493). For example, when Anderson tried to enroll in a local music school as a teenager, she was bypassed and then told, "We don't take coloured" (Anderson, 1956, p. 38).

Eventually, Anderson's involvement with music turned into a career, but not a particularly lucrative one. As so many other classical singers had done and would do, Anderson travelled to Europe to further her career. Unlike other American singers, however, Anderson achieved her greatest success in Scandinavia. There, people were curious about her skin colour, but she did not encounter the prejudices to which she had become accustomed at home. Marian Anderson was well received and her concerts were numerous. During the 1933-34 concert season she gave 112 concerts—an unheard of number for most classical singers of the day (Dizikes, 1993). Anderson also met several famous musicians during her time in Europe—for example, composer Roger Quilter, pianist Kosti Vehanen (who became her accompanist), and Scandinavian composers Kilpinen and Sibelius. After singing for Sibelius, who had invited her for coffee, he declared, "My roof is too low for you," and he called to his wife, "Not coffee, but champagne!" (Anderson, 1956, p. 149). Apparently, the famous impresario, Sol Hurok, had a similar reaction to Anderson's voice, and he approached her about becoming her manager after attending a concert she gave in Paris. Anderson agreed to sign with Hurok and he remained her manager throughout her career. One of the things that made Hurok invaluable to his artists in general, and Marian Anderson, in particular, was that he was willing to take risks and build for the future. It did not bother him that Anderson's tours in America lost money during their first year or two together. What was most important was that he had brought Marian Anderson home. In her autobiography, Anderson writes:

Mr. Hurok's aim was to have me accepted as an artist worthy to stand with the finest serious ones, and he sought appearances for me in all the places where the best performers were expected and taken for granted. The nation's capital was such a place. I had sung in Washington years before—in schools and churches. It was time to appear on the city's foremost platform—Constitution Hall. (Anderson, 1956, p. 184)

But how would Marian Anderson get there? On January 3rd, 1939, the Howard University School of Music received permission from Hurok to sponsor an Easter concert by Anderson in Washington, D.C. Charles C. Cohen, chairman of the Howard University Concert Series, applied for the use of Constitution Hall. The hall, owned by the Daughters of the American Revolution, was thought to be the only one in Washington, D.C. large enough and acoustically satisfying enough to accommodate a professional vocal recital. Anderson had appeared in other venues in Washington, D.C., but she was fast becoming a large "draw" for audiences. Cohen was denied the use of the hall and he informed Hurok of the response. Hurok then wrote to the manager of the hall asking for a waiver of the "white artists only" policy. This policy was instituted after Roland Hayes, an African American tenor, and the Hampton Institute Choir had previously appeared in the hall and a commotion ensued because the seating was not entirely segregated, as previously expected (Keiler, 2000). It seems that On January 25th, the manager Fred Hand responded, "I beg to advise you that Constitution Hall is not available on April 9th, 1939, because of prior commitments" (Goode, n.d. a). Two days later, Hurok, believing that Anderson was being discriminated against, decided to write to Mrs. Henry Robert, Jr., the President General of the D.A.R. He wrote, "The cultivated people of America would be gravely offended by your decision to exercise the restriction above-mentioned" (Goode, n.d. a). Mrs. Robert responded by telling Hurok that Constitution Hall had been previously engaged for April 9th.

Meanwhile, Gerald Goode, the public relations man on Hurok's staff, convinced Polish concert pianist Ignaz Paderewski to request the use of Constitution Hall for April 9th (Goode, n.d. b). Paderewski was also informed that the hall was booked for April 9th, but the manager informed him that he was welcome any free day in April. Since April 8th and 10th were given as free dates, Hurok wired Cohen to secure Constitution Hall for one of these two days. The response to Cohen's second request was that Constitution Hall was "not available for a concert by Marian Anderson."

In response to the D.A.R.'s ban on Anderson after having battled with her conscience, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt resigned from the organization. Here is a copy of her letter and it reads:

My dear Mrs. Henry M. Robert, Jr:

I am afraid that I have never been a very useful member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, so I know it will make very little difference to you whether I resign or whether I continue to be a member of your organization. However, I am in complete disagreement with the attitude taken in refusing Constitution Hall to a great artist. You have set an example which seems to me unfortunate, and I feel obliged to send in to you my resignation. You had an opportunity to lead in an enlightened way and it seems to me that your organization has failed. I realize that many people will not agree with me, but feeling as I do this seems to me the only proper procedure to follow.

Very sincerely yours,

Roosevelt made her resignation public in her newspaper column, "My Day." Though she did not specifically name the D.A.R., believing that the announcement of her resignation should come from the organization itself, she wrote that she was resigning because she did not see any possibility to influence change from within and she did not agree with the actions of the organization. Roosevelt later confirmed that the organization was the D.A.R.

since, when asked by the press, the D.A.R. denied having received a letter of resignation from her. After the concert took place, Robert, explained that the D.A.R. had felt "powerless" to change its "white artists only" policy stating, "This is not a question for the Daughters of the American Revolution to solve alone" (D.A.R. President Explains, 1939, p. 25).

In the meantime, Charles Cohen, still in search of a hall for the Anderson concert, appealed to the Board of Education for the use of the auditorium in Central High School. On February 19th, Dr. F.W. Ballou, Superintendent of Schools, refused the use of the auditorium saying that the purpose was for profit, apparently a violation of rules at the time. Since Central High School was a white school and Anderson would sing before a mixed, integrated audience, another rule would be in violation. Dr. Ballou was gravely concerned about the precedence this would set in the public schools (Goode, n.d. a). The day after Ballou's announcement, the Marian Anderson Citizen's Committee (M.A.C.C.), a coalition of Washington teachers, clergymen and representatives of various organizations in support of Anderson, collected approximately three thousand signatures on a petition against the decision of the Board of Education (Goode, n.d. a). The M.A.C.C. had established an alliance with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) and its executive secretary, Walter White, which proved critical for strategy and general motivation. On March 2nd, the chairman of the M.A.C.C., Charles H. Houston, submitted the petition to the Board of Education. Houston was a prominent Washington lawyer, Harvard graduate and former dean of the Howard University Law School. *The Washington Post* reported the event on the front page, stating that Houston "declared in a crowded meeting room that the board's decision against Miss Anderson was a 'travesty on democracy,' and one that would 'haunt' it (the Board of Education) unless otherwise corrected" (Anderson Ban To Be Reconsidered, 1939, p.1). The following day, the Board of Education agreed to grant the use of the high school auditorium as long as the Board would never be asked again to "depart from the principle of a dual system (segregation of schools)" (Stokes, 1939). Cohen eventually accepted the offer as time for the concert was drawing near, but he did not accept the terms of the agreement. Of course, Cohen could not guarantee that the Board of Education would never again be asked to depart from the dual system.

Meanwhile, Marian Anderson, singing on the west coast, knew nothing of the whole affair. She writes:

I was in San Francisco, I recall, when I passed a newsstand, and my eye caught a headline: MRS. ROOSEVELT TAKES STAND. Under this was another line, in bold print just a bit smaller: RESIGNS FROM D.A.R., etc. I was on my way to the concert hall for my performance and could not stop to buy a paper. I did not get one until after the concert and I honestly could not conceive that things had gone so far. (Anderson, 1956, p. 185)

Indeed, things had gone quite far. After learning the details of the incident, Anderson responded, "I am not surprised at Mrs. Roosevelt's action...because she seems to be one who really comprehends the true meaning of democracy (Mrs. Roosevelt Indicated She has Resigned from D.A.R. Over Refusal of Hall to Negro, 1939)." Interestingly, Marian Anderson, the victim of this racial prejudice, saw the event as one that had more to do with American democracy than it did with the colour of her skin. Later, Anderson usually declined comment on the issue since she trusted Hurok and the Lord to make things right. Of course, she also did not want to say anything that she may later regret. Upon reflection in later years an interviewer asked her, "Do you think Mr. Hurok had been purposely trying to shield you, or do you think it was just because you were all the way across the country?" Anderson responded, "I was a long way away but also he was a very astute man and he knew I couldn't do anything to help." The interviewer continued, "Wasn't it upsetting though?" Anderson said, "Well, when I first knew about it, it was. Music to me means so much, such beautiful things, and it seemed impossible that you could find people who would

curb you, stop you, from doing a thing which is beautiful. I wasn't trying to sway anybody into any movements or anything of that sort, you know" (Klaw, 1997).

However, people were moved. Telegrams and letters poured into the offices of Howard University, Hurok, and the D.A.R. Artists from around the world expressed their support for and solidarity with Ms. Anderson. One telegram to the D.A.R. from Leopold Stokowski, Director of the Philadelphia Orchestra, read:

I hope that in the future you and those who control the Constitution Hall of Washington will permit Marian Anderson to sing there and that recognized artists of all races will be permitted to perform there without racial distinction. I feel that it is of fundamental importance to the future of our country that we live together in a spirit of tolerance to all races which form our country because that is the only way we can achieve the greatest destiny of which this land is capable. (Stokes, 1939)

Editorials were published in papers around the country. According to a study done by G. James Fleming of *The Negro History Bulletin*, 91.3% of the editorials either expressed themselves as favourable to Anderson's use of Constitution Hall or condemned the D.A.R. for its actions (Fleming, 1950). I should tell you that this includes editorials from papers in the South. Still, there was no location for Anderson's Easter Concert.

Having failed with the D.A.R. and the Board of Education, Charles Cohen, Walter White and Hurok tried another tactic. They appealed to the Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, for permission to hold a public concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Ickes granted permission immediately and began making plans. The concert was ultimately sponsored by well-known Americans in government and the arts—Chief Justice Hughes, Associate Justice Black, Secretary of Treasury Morgenthau, Attorney General La Follette, Fiorello La Guardia, Canon Anson Phelps Scott, Katherine Hepburn, Tallulah Bankhead, Leopold Stokowski and of course, Eleanor Roosevelt, to name a few. It was known that this would be a big event, but I am not sure that 75,000 people were anticipated.

Secretary Ickes introduced Marian Anderson:

In this great auditorium under the sky all of us are free. When God gave us this wonderful outdoors and the sun, the moon and the stars, He made no distinction of race or creed or color. And 130 years ago He sent to us one of His truly great in order that he might restore freedom to those from whom we had disregardfully taken it. In carrying out this task, Abraham Lincoln laid down his life, and so it is as appropriate as it is fortunate that today we stand reverently and humbly at the base of this memorial to the great emancipator while glorious tribute is rendered to his memory by a daughter of the race from which he struck the chains of slavery.

Facing down the Mall beyond the Washington Monument, which we have erected as a symbol of the towering stature and fame of him who founded this Republic, there is rising a memorial to that other great democrat in our short history, Thomas Jefferson, who proclaimed that principle of equality of opportunity which Abraham Lincoln believed in so implicitly and took so seriously. In our own time, too many pay mere lip service to these twin planets in our democratic heaven. There are those, even in this great Capital of our democratic Republic, who are either too timid or too indifferent to lift up the light that Jefferson and Lincoln carried aloft.

Genius, like justice, is blind. For genius has touched with the tip of her wing this woman who, if it had not been for the great mind of Jefferson, if it had not been for the great heart of Lincoln, would not be able to stand among us today a free individual in a free land. Genius draws no color line. She has endowed Marian Anderson with such a voice as lifts any individual above his fellows, as is a matter of exultant pride to any race. And so it is fitting that Marian Anderson should raise

her voice in tribute to the noble Lincoln, whom mankind will ever honor.

We are grateful to Miss Marian Anderson for coming here to sing to us today.
(Marian Anderson Sings to 75,000 at the Lincoln Memorial, 1939)

Anderson recalls:

All I knew then as I stepped forward was the overwhelming impact of that vast multitude. There seemed to be people as far as the eye could see. The crowd stretched in a great semicircle from the Lincoln Memorial around the reflecting pool on to the shaft of the Washington Monument. I had a feeling that a great wave of good will poured out from these people, almost engulfing me. And when I stood up to sing our National Anthem 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, 1956, p. 191)

The same America which had not allowed Marian Anderson admittance to music school, which had forced her to travel to Europe for a singing career, which then would not permit her to sing in the best concert hall in the nation's capital had now wholeheartedly embraced this African American artist. She returned their warmth the only way she knew how, with her voice. She once remarked:

Certainly I have my feelings about conditions that affect my people. But it is not right for me to try to mimic somebody who writes, or who speaks. That is their forte. I think first of music and of being there where music is, and of music being where I am. What I had was singing and if my career has been of some consequence, then that's my contribution. (Klaw, 1997, p. 57)

On April 9th, 1939, Marian Anderson contributed several of her favourite selections. The first selection was "America," or "My Country Tis of Thee," which I have sung for you—the patriotic reference needs no explanation by now. You may have noticed Marian Anderson's use of the word "we" instead of "I." Interestingly, Anderson seldom used "I" and usually spoke of "we" or "one." It is said she did so in recognition of the fact that one seldom does anything alone. We always carry people with us, "baggage" in contemporary terms, but something much more complimentary to Marian Anderson. In singing, there is an accompanist. In life, there is one's family, church, community, however you may define it, and God. "I" seemed inappropriate for Anderson.

After "America," Anderson continued her program with "O Mio Fernando" from Donizetti's *La Favorita*. The aria is one which Anderson sang throughout her career and I'd like to play a bit of it for you now so that you may hear Marian Anderson's own voice in its glory.

This aria shows Anderson's artistry well, but she was better known for Schubert's "Ave Maria," her third selection on the program. Anderson thought "Ave Maria" was a tiresome tune when she was given the song by her teacher in high school, but she did not then understand the text. Once she learned the language, she had such a deep connection with the poetry of this song, that her rendition of it moved audiences around the world. Even if she did not sing the song in her concert, audiences often called for it during her encores.

Finally, Anderson included three of her favourite spirituals, "Gospel Train" arranged by H.T. Burleigh, "Trampin'" arranged by Edward Boatner, and "My Soul's Been Anchored in the Lord," arranged by Florence Price. One thing to remember about the spirituals is that Marian Anderson not only knew them through her faith and her background, but she knew the arrangers of these spirituals. The fact that the Marian Anderson Collection contains a wide array of spirituals in both original manuscript and published form is a testament to Anderson's commitment to these songs and their arrangers.

Anderson said that she sang spirituals because:

No program is complete, to me, without a group of spirituals. They are my own music; but it is not for that reason that I love to sing them. Music has no racial boundaries... I love the spirituals because they are truly spiritual in quality; they give forth an aura of faith, simplicity, humility, and hope. Others must find this to be the case, too; for the spiritual is immensely well liked by Europeans who know nothing of the land or the people who produced the songs. They find in the spirituals the same quality of soul that I do; and, to express faith through humility, and hope through simplicity, is, perhaps, the finest thing that any work of art can achieve. I like to think of the artist as one who approaches his work in this spirit. (Anderson, 1939)

I hope that I, too, can approach my work in that spirit and leave you with a bit of that "quality of soul" which Marian Anderson so poignantly shared with her audience of 75,000 on Easter Day in 1939. I wish that I had some way to sum up the event and what it means to me, personally, as a classical singer, as a musician, as an African American and most of all as an American. I believe that I, as Marian Anderson suggests, should leave the words to the writers and the orators. It is best for one to share in one's most expressive medium.

Appendix

Slides projected throughout the presentation:

- Slide #1: <http://www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/rbm/anderson>
 Slide #2: <http://www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/rbm/anderson/philimage.html>
 Slide #3: http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/american_originals/eleonor.html
 Slide #4: <http://www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/rbm/anderson/linimage2.html>
 Slide #5: <http://www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/rbm/anderson/linimage.html>
 Slide #6: <http://www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/rbm/anderson/linimage.html>
 Slide #7: <http://www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/rbm/anderson/sprimage6.html>
 Slide #8: <http://www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/rbm/anderson/linimage4.html>

References

- American Originals. Retrieved: June 24, 2003 from National Archives and Records Administration: http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/american_originals/eleonor.html
- Anderson, M. Marian Anderson by Herself. (1939, Nov.). *Etude*, reprinted in a publicity brochure from the office of S. Hurok. (1946-47).
- Anderson, M. (1956). *My Lord, what a morning*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Anderson Ban to Be Reconsidered. (1939, March 2). *The Washington Post*, p. 1.
- D.A.R. President Explains. (1939, April 19). *New York Times*, p. 25.
- Dizikes, J. (1993). *Opera in America: A cultural history*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Fleming, G. J. (1950). Southern Newspaper Editorial Opinion on the Marian Anderson — D.A.R. Affair. *Negro History Bulletin*, 14, 68-72.
- Goode, G. (n.d. a). The D.A.R. versus Marian Anderson. Memo to S. Hurok.
- Goode, G. (n.d. b). Easter Sunday, 1939: A Memoir written 25 yrs later.
- Keiler, A. Marian Anderson: A Singer's Journey. (200). New York: Scribner.
- Klaw, B. (1997, February). A Voice One Hears Once in a Hundred Years: An Interview with Marian Anderson. *American Heritage* 28:2, 56-57.
- Marian Anderson Sings to 75,000 at the Lincoln Memorial. (1939). *The Journal of Negro Education*, 8, 260.
- Marian Anderson: A Life in Song. Retrieved June 24, 2003 from University of Pennsylvania, Penn Library Exhibitions: <http://www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/rbm/anderson>.
- Mrs. Roosevelt Indicated She Has Resigned from D.A.R. Over Refusal of Hall to Negro. (1939, February 28). *New York Times*, p. 5.
- Stokes, A. P. (1939). *Art and the Color Line*. Washington, DC: n.p.