



MARIAN ANDERSON SINGS

by Mara Rockliff

The instant Marian Anderson stepped off the train in Washington, D.C., she found herself surrounded by reporters. Questions flew at her from every side.

The Daughters of the American Revolution have refused to let you sing at Constitution Hall because you are a Negro. How does that make you feel?

Are you insulted?

Are you angry?

What are you going to do?

For many of their questions, Anderson had no answer. But the answer to the last question was clear. She would do what she had always done, what she did best. She would sing.

Even as a little girl in Philadelphia, singing in her church choir, Marian Anderson knew her destiny lay in her rich, wide-ranging voice. But her father died when she was twelve. Her mother worked long hours cleaning houses and taking in laundry. She earned barely enough to feed and clothe her three daughters. Music lessons for young Marian seemed just a dream, but talent alone was not enough. She needed training.

A local music teacher generously offered Marian free lessons. But it was not long before the teacher said she'd taught her all she could. If Marian was really serious about her music, she should go to music school. Perhaps she could win a scholarship.

destiny: a person's fate in life

Marian Anderson rode the trolley downtown to the school. There she joined a long line of other excited applicants. Patiently, she waited for her turn. But when she reached the window, the clerk—a white girl her own age—looked right past her to the next person in line. She watched, bewildered, as the girl handed forms to everyone but her. Finally, she turned to Anderson and said, “What do you want?”

Anderson asked for an application form. The girl stared at her coldly. “We don’t take colored,” she said. Shocked and hurt, Anderson walked out.

At home, her mother urged her not to give up. If she was meant to sing, there would be a way. And there was. An Italian voice teacher who had trained many opera stars heard her sing and agreed to take her as his student. But his fees were more than she could possibly afford. Sadly, Anderson thanked him for his time and left.

However, her friends and neighbors were not about to let “our Marian” miss out on such an opportunity. They put on a benefit concert at the church and raised \$600—enough for a whole year of voice lessons.

The work was hard. Marian sang splendidly without training, but she needed to learn to control her voice like a professional. She even needed to learn to breathe differently. She practiced her exercises over and over. And she learned new songs—Italian, German, French. At first, she simply memorized the words syllable by syllable. But how could she give true feeling to a song she didn’t understand? So she had to study languages as well.

trolley: a streetcar

applicants: people who have applied for something

Those struggles were behind her now. Touring Europe, she'd become a huge sensation. Audiences crowded into concert halls to hear the elegant American contralto. With regal poise, she would stand by the piano, eyes closed, her velvety, expressive voice expanding to fill every corner of the room.

Once, after a concert, the legendary conductor Arturo Toscanini came backstage. "Yours is a voice," he told Anderson, "such as one hears once in a hundred years."

When she returned to the United States, fame and success followed. Here, too, she was invited to sing in the finest concert halls, often to sellout crowds. But across the footlights Anderson often saw only white faces. In many cities, in the South especially, people of her own race had to sit up in the balcony. And, as warmly as an audience applauded, after the show a restaurant or hotel manager might coldly turn her away.

Anderson responded to these slights with quiet dignity. She was determined not to let other people's fear and ignorance pull her away from what really mattered—her music.

The singer's popularity continued to grow. Her manager worked hard to find concert halls big enough to hold Anderson's growing audiences. When her tour schedule brought her to Washington, D.C., in 1939, the choice was obvious: the city's largest and grandest concert venue, Constitution Hall.

sensation: someone who causes great excitement

contralto: a female singer with a low voice

regal: royal; like a king or queen

poise: calm, confident self-assurance

ignorance: lack of knowledge

venue: the location where a special event or gathering occurs

Anderson's manager wrote to make arrangements. The date he wanted was already taken, he was told. He suggested other dates in April. He was told that those were taken, too. In fact, no dates were available at all.

Could this be true? Suspicious, the manager asked a well-known white pianist to try to book the hall. The answer came back: the pianist could have his pick of any date that spring.

The truth quickly came out. Constitution Hall was owned by the Daughters of the American Revolution. Only women—white women—whose ancestors had fought the British were allowed to join this group. And the DAR would not rent Constitution Hall to any African American performer, even one as widely admired as Marian Anderson.

News of this refusal outraged Anderson's many fans. Fellow musicians canceled their performances. Among them was the famous violinist, Jascha Heifetz, who said, "I am ashamed to play at Constitution Hall." Fiorello LaGuardia, the mayor of New York, sent the DAR a telegram: "No hall is too good for Marian Anderson." The First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, even resigned from the DAR in protest, making front-page headlines all over the country.

Everywhere Anderson went, reporters swarmed around her, demanding a reaction. What

saddened and embarrassed her. Dignified as always, she refused to speak out publicly against the DAR. Many of the group's members, she knew, disagreed with the national leadership. As she wrote later in her autobiography, she strongly believed that "a whole group should not be condemned because an individual or section of the group does a thing that is not right."

condemned: judged as wrong or evil

Anderson had faith that right would always win out in the end. All she wanted was to make beautiful music. She was certain she would find a place to sing.

Then came a surprising invitation—from the United States government. How would Anderson like to sing on Easter Sunday at the Lincoln Memorial? It would be an outdoor concert, free, open to all—and with no segregation.

Anderson struggled over her reply. She was a singer, not an activist. She did not enjoy being the center of attention for reasons other than her music. To sing at the Lincoln Memorial would be a bold political statement. At best, she'd feel uncomfortable. At worst, she might find herself at the center of an ugly riot.

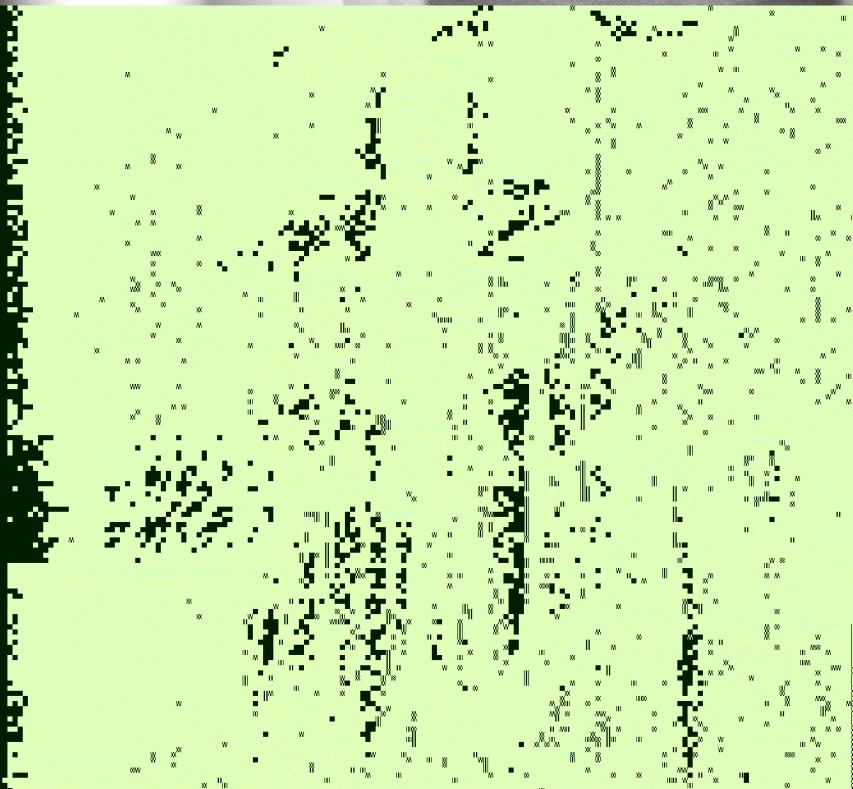
"I studied my conscience," she wrote. "I could see that my significance as an individual was small in this affair. I had become, whether I liked it or not, a symbol, representing my people. I had to appear."

Easter Sunday arrived. Hours before the concert started, people began gathering at the Lincoln Memorial. By the time Anderson's car pulled up, the crowd had grown to 75,000. Millions more waited at home by their radios.

Police led Anderson through the throng to a platform in front of the monument. "My heart leaped wildly, and I could not talk," she wrote. "I even wondered whether I would be able to sing."

She barely noticed the many Washington notables who joined her on the platform. Members of President Roosevelt's cabinet, Supreme Court justices, senators, and congressmen were all on hand to hear the celebrated singer.

segregation: the separation of people based on their race
throng: a large crowd



Asadovoyan looked out at the sea of faces, black and white, young, old, and children. "There seemed to be people who set on the eye would see," she wrote. "You would breathe in a great exhale from the Caspian Mountains, around the valley, you in the heart of the wilderness. Moreover, there a feeling that a great wave of good will passed out from those people, almost engulfing me."

Standing tall and determined, Asadovoyan looked like a queen. Inside, though, she was terrified.

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The first notes of "The Star-Spangled Banner" boomed over the loudspeakers. For a desperate moment, Anderson felt as if she were choking. Would the words she knew so well refuse to come?

She found her voice. Thousands of voices joined Anderson's

ence in the national anthem. She went on to
followed by an operatic aria, Schubert's "Ave
traditional African American spirituals. Her
powerful, rich, and thrilling.

When she finished, a great roar went up. The crowd surged
and could not stop cheering and applauding.

Anderson remembered that day at the Lincoln Memorial,
where she had been moved more deeply than Marian
Anderson. Her courage and faith had been rewarded. America
had embraced one of its greatest singers.

"I can't believe what you have done for me today. I thank you from
my heart again and again."

The melody sung by a single voice with orchestra
growing force, as a wave

as she led her audience
sing "America," for
Maria," and three times
voice soared, power

When she finished
forward. They could

Of all who gathered
no one could have
Anderson. Her courage
had reached out to

"I am overwhelmed
tell you what you
the bottom of my

aria: in an opera, a
surged: moved with