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A Critic at Large

VOICE OF THE CENTURY

Celebrating Marian Anderson.

by Alex Ross

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On Easter Sunday, 1939, the contralto Marian Anderson sang on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The Daughters of the American Revolution had refused to let her appear at Constitution Hall, Washington's largest concert venue, because of the color of her skin. In response, Eleanor Roosevelt resigned from the D.A.R., and President Roosevelt gave permission for a concert on the Mall. Seventy-five thousand people gathered to watch Anderson perform. Harold Ickes, the Secretary of the Interior, introduced her with the words "In this great auditorium under the sky, all of us are free."



In 1939, at the Lincoln Memorial, Anderson became a figure of quasi-political power.

The impact was immediate and immense; one newsreel carried the legend "Nation's Capital Gets Lesson in Tolerance." But Anderson herself made no obvious statement. She presented, as she had done countless times before, a mixture of classical selections—"O mio Fernando," from Donizetti's "La Favorita," and Schubert's "Ave Maria"—and African-American spirituals. Perhaps there was a hint of defiance in her rendition of "My Country, 'Tis of Thee"; perhaps a message of solidarity when she changed the line "Of thee I sing" to "Of thee we sing." Principally, though, her protest came in the unfurling of her voice—that gently majestic instrument, vast in range and warm in tone. In her early years, Anderson was known as "the colored contralto," but, by the late thirties, she was *the* contralto, the supreme representative of her voice category. Arturo Toscanini said that she was the kind of singer who comes along once every hundred years; Jean Sibelius welcomed her to his home saying, "My roof is too low for you." There was no rational reason for a serious venue to refuse entry to such a phenomenon. No clearer demonstration of prejudice could be found.

One person who appreciated the significance of the occasion was the ten-year-old Martin Luther King, Jr. Five years later, King entered a speaking contest on the topic "The Negro and the Constitution," and he mentioned Anderson's performance in his oration: "She sang as never before, with tears in her eyes. When the words of 'America' and 'Nobody Knows de Trouble I Seen' rang out over that great gathering, there was a hush on the sea of uplifted faces, black and white, and a new baptism of liberty, equality, and fraternity. That was a touching tribute, but Miss Anderson may not as yet spend the night in any good hotel in America." When, two decades later, King stood on the Lincoln Memorial steps to deliver his "I Have a Dream" speech, he surely had

Anderson in mind. In his improvised peroration, he recited the first verse of “My Country, ’Tis of Thee,” then imagined freedom ringing from every mountainside in the land.

Ickes, in 1939, bestowed on Anderson a word that put her in the company of Bach and Beethoven: “Genius, like justice, is blind. . . . Genius draws no color line.” With the massive stone image of Lincoln gazing out over her, with a host of powerful white men seated at her feet—senators, Cabinet members, Supreme Court Justices—and with a bank of microphones arrayed in front of her, Anderson attained something greater than fame: for an instant, she became a figure of quasi-political power. In Richard Powers’s novel “The Time of Our Singing” (2003), a magisterial fantasia on race and music, the concert becomes nothing less than the evocation of a new America—“a nation that, for a few measures, in song at least, is everything it claims to be.” Fittingly, when Barack Obama became President, “My Country, ’Tis of Thee” floated out over the Mall once more, from the mouth of Aretha Franklin to a crowd of two million.

The seventieth anniversary of the Easter Sunday concert arrives on April 9th, and various commemorations are under way. The mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves will lead a tribute concert at the Lincoln Memorial on the twelfth, and the historian Raymond Arsenault has published a book entitled “The Sound of Freedom: Marian Anderson, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Concert That Awakened America” (Bloomsbury; \$25). Last month, at Carnegie Hall and other venues, the soprano Jessye Norman curated a festival of African-American cultural achievement, entitled “Honor!,” during which Anderson was often invoked. (In 1965, Norman saw Anderson sing at Constitution Hall, which had by then dropped its exclusionary policies.) Yet Anderson’s legacy seems in some way incomplete. The Lincoln Memorial concert has lost much of its iconic status; many younger people don’t know the singer’s name. Within classical music, meanwhile, black faces remain scarce. No African-American singers were featured at the Metropolitan Opera’s recent hundred-and-twenty-fifth-anniversary gala. A color line persists, more often politely ignored than confronted directly.

Anderson was born in 1897, in a poor section of Philadelphia. Her father died when she was young; her mother worked in a tobacco factory, did laundry, and, for some years, scrubbed floors at Wanamaker’s department store. Her musical gifts were evident early, and new possibilities seemed open to her. Four years before she was born, the Czech composer Antonín Dvořák, the director of the National Conservatory, in New York, had declared that spirituals and Amerindian themes would form the basis of American music, and African-Americans were admitted to the school free of charge. Because of those encouraging signals, many black families saw classical music as a realm of opportunity. Yet, of thousands who pursued a hopeful regimen of piano lessons and vocal coaching, Anderson was one of very few who graduated into a real classical career. A core of self-confidence, rarely visible behind her reserved façade, allowed her to endure a series of potentially crushing disappointments. The sharpest setback is described in her autobiography, “My Lord, What a Morning”: when she applied to a Philadelphia music school, in 1914, a young woman at the reception desk made her wait while everyone behind her in line was served. Finally, the woman said, “We don’t take colored.”