

A Singer's Chorus

As a Labor of Love, a Society of Two Keeps Marian Anderson's Voice Alive

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PHILADELPHIA

Both ladies move about rather gingerly. It's all the years behind them. It's the long struggle on behalf of their Marian.

Blanche Burton-Lyles and Phyllis Sims are fiddling with the coffee maker in Marian Anderson's kitchen. "Marian had this whole kitchen put in -- even the bars around the windows -- and it's still quite nice," Burton-Lyles says, moving from the kitchen to a room where there is a life-size portrait of the famous singer.

"What's this?" she says to Sims, picking up a stack of mail. "My goodness. It's the phone bill! Look at this. We gotta pay the phone bill, Phyllis. Folks downtown will turn the phone off!"

Sims shakes her head. It's been a hard road keeping up Anderson's home. Both women, who met the famous opera singer as children, visit the museum site daily. "Ain't nobody gonna turn the phone off," she sighs.

The great contralto used to live in this two-story house at No. 762 on South Martin Street, now known as Marian Anderson Way. She entertained in the basement during those inhospitable years of segregation when she feared what unkind words might ricochet her way in the city's downtown eateries.

The world didn't care much about blocks like this or the people who lived on them before Marian Anderson trooped down to Washington to give a concert at the Lincoln Memorial -- arguably the most famous concert in the city's history.

You might say she sang her way to freedom that day.

It was a nation-shaking event that involved White House operatives and first lady Eleanor Roosevelt. The international media covered the event, staged as a rebuke to racism after the Daughters of the American Revolution denied the opera singer use of Constitution Hall because of her color.

Standing there in her fur coat, before that bank of shimmering microphones and 75,000 souls, Marian Anderson became a symbol. And the closer the calendar got to the '60s and its overnight martyrs and villains, the bigger she became. But her interviews were always brief, sometimes elliptical. She never raised her voice -- save upon a stage.

The 30-minute performance took place 70 years ago on Easter. This Sunday there will be a tribute concert on the Mall organized by the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission and the National Park Service. Opera star Denyce Graves will sing "America the Beautiful" and "Ave Maria," two of the pieces that Anderson performed. The U.S. Marine Band, the Chicago Children's Choir and Sweet Honey in the Rock will also perform, and former secretary of state Colin Powell will speak.



Phyllis Sims, at a mural in South Philadelphia memorializing Marian Anderson's performances, is curator of a historical society honoring the groundbreaking opera singer. (Photos By Linda Davidson -- The Washington Post)

But here, on a quiet street in South Philly, you can get a feel for the life she lived and the family she came from. Anderson's home is full of memorabilia: rare photos from all around the world and dresses she brought back from Paris, old 33-rpm records and concert programs.

You might come to understand how an opera singer flew from here, through the tyranny and smoke and forgiveness of time, and became a symbol.

'We Fund Us'

Phyllis Sims's mother did public relations work for Anderson. What that mostly meant was getting word out to newspapers, radio stations and church organizations when the singer was coming home for a visit.



Sims waves an arm along the rowhouses. "At one time Marian Anderson owned seven houses on this block."

The big stone edifice across the street is Union Baptist Church. Early in the last century, one could walk by one of the side doors on a Sunday and hear Marian's young voice floating from the stage. (Just now an elderly woman is walking up to the side door. She's a volunteer at the soup kitchen.)

Burton-Lyles, who trained as a pianist, is founder of the society dedicated to preserving the home; Sims is the curator. They get a paltry amount of funding from the city. They take donations.

"My mother and her grew up together," Burton-Lyles is saying about Anderson. "So I grew up knowing Marian Anderson my whole life."

In another room there's a framed news article: "While at the Orstein School of Music, Blanche attracted the attention of Marian Anderson. On Miss Anderson's recommendation, she entered Curtis Institute where she is now studying. Keep your eye on this young musician -- she's going places."

Anderson sang before Eleanor Roosevelt, but so did Burton-Lyles: in 1948 at the Mary Dod Brown Memorial Chapel on the campus of Lincoln University in Pennsylvania.

Sims is climbing the narrow steps leading upstairs. She stops in a bedroom and goes into a closet. "This is the dress Marian brought back from Paris for Blanche's mother," she says.

Burton-Lyles is worried that Sims will get dehydrated: "Get a bottle of water, Phyllis. Phyllis!"

Sims ambles back downstairs past Burton-Lyles and into the basement.

"Everybody in South Philly had their homes fixed up like bars. They couldn't go to the bars downtown," she says. "This was Marian's entertainment center. She had a bar, sofa, everything. I remember my parents took me down South. They'd pack chicken and potato salad so we wouldn't have to stop in those segregated places."

Neither lady will give her age. "You tell someone your age and they start thinking you can't do this and can't do that," Burton-Lyles says. "Just say I graduated music school in 1954."

There aren't a lot of visitors, which both ladies lament. "If we were in Europe, people would be pouring in here all day long!" Sims says.

"We get a lot of people from down South who come," Sims allows. "We get a lot of family reunions. And we get a lot of students during Black History Month. Because of our lack of funding we're not on the tourist trail."

"We fund us," Burton-Lyles breaks in. "And we get small grants from the city and state. When I say small, I mean small. Fifteen hundred, two thousand. Largest grant we ever got was for twenty-five hundred."

She shakes her head.

Sims shakes hers, too.

"Sweet Honey in the Rock," Phyllis starts up, referring to the singing group that will be featured in Washington during the Anderson tribute, "has no connection to Marian Anderson. Now I've been knowing Blanche -- who knew Marian -- my whole life. Why is she not up on that stage?"

Burton-Lyles just nods. If she's heard this spiel before, she's not tired of hearing it.

On Sunday they'll be part of a celebratory event at a local church.

When Burton-Lyles retired from teaching, she wanted to go into real estate. "I picked that up from Marian," she says.

A real estate agent was walking the neighborhood with her in 1997 and told her that 762 S. Martin St. was for sale. A renter was living in the house. "He did not know this was her address," she says of the agent. "And I never said a word until the settlement."

After paying less than \$70,000 -- "it's still the 'hood," Sims says -- for the home of the great opera singer, she came up with the idea for the Marian Anderson historical home.

Anderson was born in 1897 and her musical gifts first drew notice when she was a little girl singing in the church choir. No local music school would accept her after high school because of her color, so she trained under the tutelage of local contraltos. She received her first recording contracts in the mid-1920s. In 1928, there was a solo show at Carnegie Hall. But racism wore on her and by 1930 she was studying and performing in Europe. Her forays across the ocean were bittersweet: Critics admired her, but her venues in the United States were limited.

It was 1939 when a clash around opera reverberated like a last battle of the Civil War. Anderson's manager, Sol Hurok, had a penchant for publicity and tried to book her at Constitution Hall. The DAR, which owned the building, forbade the appearance on account of her race. Interior Secretary Harold Ickes hatched a plan, with President Roosevelt and the first lady's approval, to have Anderson give an open-air concert at the Lincoln Memorial.

Housewives and government workers came; blacks born in the time of slavery and local college kids came; hotel workers, dishwashers and shoeshine men came. An article in the Pittsburgh Courier captured the event: "Although 75,000 persons jammed the park surrounding the Lincoln Memorial to hear Marian Anderson, there is scarcely any way to estimate the untold millions of whites and blacks who listened, and were softened, by this great singer as a symbol of the aspirations of her race. Into millions of homes, over the vast network of the National Broadcasting Company, she sang her message and racial prejudice was tethered by awe."

In 1955, Anderson became the first black person to perform at the Metropolitan Opera. She sang at John Kennedy's inauguration and during the 1963 March on Washington. She would receive medals from presidents and



Blanche Burton-Lyles, left, and Phyllis Sims preserve the memory of the contralto who sang at the Lincoln Memorial after being barred from another site by the DAR. (By Linda Davidson -- The Washington Post)

international accolades. Her private papers are housed at the University of Pennsylvania. Her former rehearsal studio in Danbury, Conn., where she lived for many years, was acquired by the local historical society in 2004.

Eileen Mackevich, executive director of the Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, lauds the work of Burton-Lyles and Sims. "I think they are important keepers of the flame, especially when they have limited resources," she says. Mackevich says there is little she can do to give them a larger role in Sunday's event. "We did invite all of the people associated with Marian Anderson's name: the NAACP, Howard University officials. They will all be recognized from the dais. What we are trying to do is re-create the original concert, which, to my mind, has never been done before."

In the mid-'60s Anderson launched a year-long farewell tour. Her very presence on a stage was something glorious and moving. It was as if she herself had become a monument.

She refused to live with anger. "You lose a lot of time hating," she once said.

In 1992, a nephew moved her to Portland, Ore. In some of the last photographs taken of her, her hair is white and her face glows. She died on April 8, 1993. More than 2,000 mourners attended a memorial service at Carnegie Hall.

'We're All Artists'

On some mornings, Burton-Lyles or Sims would come to the door here and find another soul wild about Marian Anderson handing over an item for the home.

"A person sent us an article in Russian!" Burton-Lyles says.

"Aw honey, people send us articles from all over the country," says Sims. "Lot of concert programs, too."

"Got a program from Cuba," says Burton-Lyles. "It's there on the wall. Phyllis, this coffee is so good!"

Sometimes a neighbor will come and help them tidy up. Other than that, it's a threadbare operation.

"I'm sorry if it feels a little cool in here," Burton-Lyles says. "We don't have the heat on. Too expensive."

In February the two women hosted a Marian Anderson Classical Icon Vocal Competition. First prize was \$10,000. Burton-Lyles had expected a corporate donor to come through, but it didn't happen. She dug into her own savings for the cash.

For the better part of five hours, not a single visitor has dropped by. They seem undeterred. "It's mostly by appointment anyway," Burton-Lyles says.

On Saturday evenings Burton-Lyles gets all dressed up and goes over to the Union League, a civic group founded during the Civil War. She's the entertainment; she plays show tunes. "I play all requests," she says. She'll take the tips and pour them right back into the Marian Anderson home.

"What we really want to do is have a traveling exhibit," Sims says. "I could give a historical reading about Marian and Blanche could play the piano."

Burton-Lyles's ex-husband and her son have passed away. "He was 31 when he passed," she says of her son. Sims is single. She has a daughter who lives in Chicago.

They've got each other and they've got Marian.

"We were all born in South Philly," Sims says of herself, Blanche and Marian. "We're all artists. And we're all Pisces."

Burton-Lyles turns to riffle through another stack of unopened bills. The voice of Anderson singing "Ave Maria" can be heard from the next room.