

How I Became a Conductor

by Margaret Harris as told to Suzanne Seed

57



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1 When I was a child, my mother always spent a certain part of each day with me alone. From the time I was old enough to sit up, she would put me on the piano bench next to her and play and sing for me. One day when she was busy, I crawled up on the bench and began to pick out the tune "Mary Had a Little

Lamb" by myself. Mother came running in from the kitchen. She saw me at the piano, but she couldn't believe what she heard, for I was only two and a half years old. So she asked me to play it for her again. I played it again and again, first for her and then for a friend whom she invited over.

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1989 Edition
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57

- 2 Since I really seemed to like music, my mother decided that I should have piano lessons. So I learned to read music, and by the time I was three, I had learned enough music to give a small concert, or recital. Naturally it caused a big fuss because I was so young.
- 3 I remember one funny thing that happened to me when I was five. I was giving a recital for some patients at a hospital. The hospital had only one room that was large enough for the recital. It was a ballroom with a highly polished floor, and the piano was placed in the middle of that slippery surface. When I began to play my first piece, the piano started rolling away from me. I leaned forward, but it kept moving. I tried to hook my foot round one of the legs, but it was no use. So I stood up and went on playing, following the piano around the room as it rolled. The patients certainly liked that performance, and I'll never forget it.
- 4 When I was older I went to the Juilliard School of Music in New York City. I continued to study the piano, but I also learned how to write music and how to conduct, or lead, an orchestra. I enjoy working with the musicians in the orchestra, seeing the smiles on their faces, and knowing that they want to please me. It's a nice, warm feeling to look out and see the players watching you, waiting to make music.
- 5 My first big chance to conduct an orchestra came as a complete surprise! I had been asked at the last minute to replace a pianist in a show called *Black New World*, which was opening soon in Europe. I was thrilled by the chance to travel and very happy with the work. But on the plane heading for Europe, the show's producer came to me looking very distressed. I asked him what was wrong, and he said that another person had dropped out at the last minute. This time it was the conductor.
- 6 "You saw the rehearsal yesterday, didn't you?" he asked. I admitted that I had. "You studied conducting in school, didn't you?" I told him that was true. "Good," he said, "you're our conductor. Here's the music for you to study. We open almost as soon as we arrive." So I made my first appearance before a European audience conducting an orchestra and chorus, and cuing dancers—with no rehearsal. It was just like one of those old films where the director says, "The star just broke her leg. Get someone to replace her. The show must go on!"
- 7 Being the first black woman conductor is an experience I value. Since my first appearance in the United States with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, I've been a guest conductor with a number of other orchestras and have been the musical director of a popular stage show, as well.
- 8 To young people interested in music, I'd like to pass on some advice I received as a child. I had the pleasure of meeting a lady I greatly admired, Dame Myra Hess, one of the leading pianists of her day. "Remember one thing," she said. "If you spend fifteen minutes a day on practice and totally concentrate on what you're doing, that is the same as just sitting there and working for four hours while day-dreaming about other things."
- 9 For myself, I'd tell girls and boys to have a goal, a dream. Find out what you want to do in life, and do whatever it is to the best of your ability. Be prepared to hear the word *no* a lot. As long as you've worked hard and know you're qualified, you should never take a *no* to heart. Just keep trying.
- 10 Work hard when necessary, even though there are times when you'd rather do something else. But don't let work take over your life. You can't live your work; you must live your life.

How Well Did You Read?

Write the letter of the best answer.

- 1 What first caused Margaret Harris's mother to think that her child had musical ability?
 - a Margaret playing the piano when two and a half years old
 - b Margaret's music teacher
 - c Margaret's first concert
- 2 Why did Margaret's first concert cause a fuss?
 - a She was only three years old at the time.
 - b She played unusual music.
 - c She played her own music.
- 3 What was amusing about the recital at the hospital?
 - a Margaret told some funny jokes.
 - b The piano moved while Margaret played.
 - c Margaret was dressed as an adult.
- 4 What was the first thing Margaret did to further her career after she became older?
 - a She got a job playing the piano for a television show.
 - b She began to teach music.
 - c She began to study music in school.
- 5 Why was the show *Black New World* an important event in Margaret Harris's career?
 - a It was her first chance to play the piano before a large audience.
 - b It was her first big chance to conduct an orchestra.
 - c It was her first chance to play the piano in Europe.
- 6 When the producer saw Margaret on the plane, why was he distressed?
 - a He was running short of money.
 - b He had just lost his conductor.
 - c He had just discovered that the tour was going to be cancelled.
- 7 Margaret Harris believed the most important thing involved in practice was
 - a concentration
 - b accuracy
 - c long hours

- 8 What personal quality does Margaret Harris think young people should develop?

- a Modesty
- b Determination
- c Charm

Learn about Words

Vocabulary

- A You can often tell the meaning of a word by reading the words around it.

Look at each number in parentheses. Find the paragraph in the story with the same number. Then find the word that fits the given meaning. Write the word.

- 1 asked to come (1)
- 2 much bother or attention (2)
- 3 rubbed smooth and slick; shined (3)
- 4 group of musicians playing together (4)
- 5 upset (5)
- 6 practice session; tryout (6)
- 7 group of people gathered to hear (6)

- B A word may have more than one meaning. Its meaning depends on the way it is used. The word *string* is an example.

We tied the box with *string*.

Our team had a *string* of victories.

Look at each number in parentheses. Find the paragraph in the story with the same number. See how the word in **heavy type** below is used in the paragraph. Decide whether it has meaning a or b. Write a or b.

- 8 **floor** (3)

- a part of a room to walk on
- b knock down; shock

- 9 **slippery** (3)

- a easy to slide on
- b tricky; not to be trusted

- 10 **conduct** (5)

- a carry through or across
- b direct or lead

Word Study

C Summer held the land in her warm embrace.

Sometimes a writer personifies a thing, a quality, or an idea. That is, the writer makes it sound like a person. In the example above, the warm summer weather is made to sound like a warm, loving person. Write the word that is personified in each sentence below.

- 11 The car wheezed and sputtered as it warmed up.
- 12 The thunder was announced by a flash of lightning.
- 13 Time marches steadily on.
- 14 Harold listened to the lonely song of the train's whistle.
- 15 The apple tree wore a dress of white blossoms.
- 16 The flowers opened when kissed by the morning sun.
- 17 We heard the happy chatter of machines as we entered the factory.
- 18 The newcomers felt threatened by a hostile city.

D Writers sometimes use words in special ways known as figures of speech. Similes and metaphors are figures of speech that make comparisons. A simile always uses the word *as* or *like* in saying that one thing is like another:

My brother is **as** fierce **as** a tiger.

My brother is **like** a tiger.

A metaphor states a likeness without the use of *as* or *like*:

My brother is a tiger.

But all three sentences mean the same thing. They all mean "My brother is very fierce." Read the figures of speech below. If the comparison is a simile, write *S*. If it is a metaphor, write *M*.

- 19 Life is a highway.
- 20 The thief is as sly as a fox.
- 21 The baby's eyes were like full moons.
- 22 Hank is a snail.

- 23 The lawn was velvet.
- 24 His hair is like snow.
- 25 Her aunt is a peach.
- 26 The cat's fur is as smooth as silk.

E A dictionary's pronunciation key uses symbols to show you how the sounds in a word are spoken. Not all pronunciation keys are alike, but you are likely to find these symbols used in many dictionaries:

a = at	e = end	o = odd
ā = age	ē = me	ō = open
ä = father	ə = marker	ô = order

There are many other symbols as well. This is just a small part of a pronunciation key. Complete each statement below by writing a word from the key above.

- 27 The *a* in *magnetic* (mag net'ik) is like the *a* in ____.
- 28 The *o* in *harrow* (har'ō) is like the *o* in ____.
- 29 The *e* in *legal* (lē'gəl) is like the *e* in ____.
- 30 The *o* in *perform* (pər fōrm') is like the *o* in ____.
- 31 The *a* in *feldspar* (feld'spär') is like the *a* in ____.
- 32 The *e* in *caret* (kar'et) is like the *e* in ____.
- 33 The *a* in *embrace* (em brās') is like the *a* in ____.