

Marian Anderson

In 1955, Marian Anderson became the first African American singer to perform in a major role at New York's Metropolitan Opera House.

Anderson began singing publicly at the age of six when she joined the junior choir at her church. After a few years, she was singing in both the junior and senior choirs. When visitors to the church heard Marian, they often invited the choirs to sing at their churches or to perform at special events.

Marian's parents knew she had a special gift for music, but they couldn't afford to pay for music lessons. Then, when Marian was twelve years old, her father died. Without him to support the family, Marian, her mother, and her two sisters moved in with her grandmother.

Anna Anderson, Marian's mother, did her best to support her daughters. She worked hard cleaning houses and washing and sewing clothes. Marian earned money singing sometimes. At first, she gave all the money to her mother. Later, she used some of it for music lessons.

Music was Anderson's favorite subject in school. During high school, she joined the Philadelphia Choral Society, which often sang in other cities. When she was out of town, she missed classes at school, but her teachers helped her make up her work.

Although already becoming well-known, Anderson knew that if she wanted to pursue a singing career, she would have to study music and take singing lessons. A voice teacher who lived nearby knew Marian's situation and started giving her lessons, usually at no charge. With this teacher's help, Anderson learned many new songs, as well as new ways to control her voice.

After high school, Anderson wanted to continue studying music. She tried to enroll in a Philadelphia music school, but when she went there to pick up an application, she was turned away because she was black. Throughout much of Anderson's life, many American schools and businesses discriminated against blacks and other minorities, and many public facilities were segregated.

When Marian was invited to Georgia to sing, she and her mother had to ride in a section of the train that was set aside for blacks, and they were not allowed to eat in the dining car. In New York and other cities, Anderson had to stay in hotels that were far from where she had been invited to sing because they were the only hotels that



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allowed blacks. But Anderson didn't let discrimination and segregation stand in her way.

Determined to make singing her career, Anderson continued taking voice lessons privately. Her church even raised money so she could study with a famous teacher. As Anderson's singing improved, she earned more money from her concerts, and in 1925, she won a competition to sing with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.

In 1927, Anderson went to Europe to study music. She worked hard to learn foreign languages so she could sing songs written in those languages, especially the songs from European operas. She was invited to sing in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. Her concerts were always successful, and many famous European composers and musicians attended them. Her next trip to Europe lasted two years, and she sang in many other countries.

Now famous, both at home and abroad, Anderson was still not allowed to stay in some hotels or eat at many restaurants in the United States, and there were still auditoriums where she was not allowed to sing. She was once scheduled to sing at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C., but the concert was canceled. African Americans were not allowed to perform there.

Learning that one of the country's greatest singers was not permitted to perform in the nation's capital made many people angry. The government finally invited Anderson to sing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, and on Easter Sunday, 1939, more than 75,000 people, black and white, sat together and listened to the concert. Later that year, Anderson was invited by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to sing at the White House.

In 1955, when she was 58 years old, Anderson became a regular company member of the New York Metropolitan Opera, but she was nowhere near the end of her career. In 1957, the U.S. State Department sent her on a concert tour throughout Southeast Asia. A year later, she was appointed as a member of the United Nations' American delegation.

Anderson continued to perform throughout the world until Easter Sunday, 1965, when, at Carnegie Hall in New York City, she gave her final public performance. Until her death in 1993, however, Anderson continued to receive public recognition for her music and for her work with people all over the world. Her voice and her courage were admired everywhere.

Questions About *Marian Anderson*

1. When did Marian Anderson first show a talent for singing?
2. How did voice lessons improve Anderson's natural talent?
3. How was Anderson's life in Europe different from her life in the United States?
4. Why was Anderson's concert at Constitution Hall canceled?
5. What was significant about Anderson's performance on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial?
6. Why do you think that Anderson was appointed to the United Nations' American delegation?
7. When and where did Marian Anderson give her final public performance?

Vocabulary

Read the two definitions for each word below. Fill in the circle next to the meaning of the word as it was used in the story.

1. company
 - A. a group of associated performers
 - B. one or more guests or visitors
2. pursue
 - A. to chase in order to catch
 - B. to work at in order to achieve
3. minority
 - A. the smaller of two groups within one large group
 - B. a group of people that differ from the main population
4. discrimination
 - A. the act of treating people unfairly for unjust reasons
 - B. the act of seeing or distinguishing small differences
5. application
 - A. a computer program for a specific task
 - B. a written request to be chosen for or given something
6. competition
 - A. a contest or match
 - B. opposition or a rival for the same goal
7. recognition
 - A. the act of remembering someone
 - B. a tribute or praise
8. foreign
 - A. unfamiliar or strange
 - B. having to do with another country

Sequencing

A. Number the events in each part of Anderson's life chronologically.

Childhood and Adolescence

1. began to earn money for her singing
2. sang in the junior and senior church choirs
3. sang in public when she was six years old
4. joined a choral society and sang in other cities
5. began singing lessons and learned to control her voice

Early Career

1. scheduled concert canceled at Constitution Hall
2. studied privately with a famous voice teacher
3. not allowed to enroll in a Philadelphia music school
4. studied music and languages in Europe
5. won a singing competition

Later Success

1. performed for over 75,000 people at the Lincoln Memorial
2. joined the New York Metropolitan Opera
3. invited to sing at the White House
4. sent on a concert tour of Southeast Asia
5. served as a member of the United Nations' American delegation

B. List, in chronological order, the three events in Anderson's life that you feel were the most important.

Character Map

Develop a character map for Marian Anderson. Write an adjective that describes one of Anderson's qualities or characteristics on the line at the top of each box. Then write one fact from the story in each box to support that characteristic.

