

NBC Radio Coverage of Marian Anderson's Recital at the Lincoln Memorial (April 9, 1939)

Added to the National Registry: 2008

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Marian Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial

During her career, African-American contralto Marian Anderson gave hundreds of concerts. Yet no concert of hers—or any other artist, perhaps—carried with it more emotional and historical weight than the free concert she gave at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, in April of 1939. She sang seven songs--“America”; “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen”; “Ave Maria”; “Gospel Train”; “My Soul Is Anchored in the Lord”; “O mio Fernando”; and “Trampin”---yet what she sang was far less important than where she sang it, and the fact that she got to sing at all.

By 1939, Marian Anderson (1897-1993), born in Philadelphia, the eldest of three children of a devout Christian family, was already being celebrated as the greatest opera singer of her time. After first hearing her in concert, no less of an authority than Arturo Toscanini stated of Anderson’s three-octave range, “What I have heard today one is privileged to hear only once in a hundred years.”

Though she had played Carnegie Hall in 1928, Anderson’s fame was even more pronounced in Europe where, during the early 1930s, she was the toast of the continent, performing to sold out audiences in every major opera hall. She triumphantly returned to America in 1935, holding a recital at New York’s Town Hall in December of that year. The “New York Times” said in its review of that evening, “[Anderson’s voice] is a contralto of stunning range and volume, managed with suppleness and grace... It was music-making that probed too deep for words... Europe has claimed this tall, handsome girl. It is time for her own country to honor her.” In 1936, Anderson sang at the White House at the invitation of the President and Mrs. Roosevelt. The day after the performance, the First Lady also sang the young diva’s praises in her syndicated newspaper column, “My Day.” Mrs. Roosevelt wrote, “...I have rarely heard a more beautiful and moving voice or a more finished artist.”

Beginning in 1936, Anderson also began a series of concerts, staged annually by Howard University, a historically black college, based in Washington, DC. Each year, demand for tickets to her performance increased exponentially. Accordingly, Howard had to continually seek larger and larger venues for her to appear. In 1936 and ‘37, her first years, Anderson was at Armstrong High School; in 1938, she was at the Rialto Theater. But, by 1939, an even larger auditorium was needed. The University approached the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), the owners of Constitutional Hall, then the largest theater in the city, even though University officials knew that the theater had a long-standing policy of barring African-American

performers from its stage. Howard had hoped that, based upon Ms. Anderson's fame and notoriety, a one-time waiver would be granted. But the Hall's booking manager, Fred E. Hand, declined.

Outraged by the refusal, Anderson's American concert manager Sol Hurok took the story of the denial to the national press. Despite the prevalence of widespread racism and segregation laws still very much in effect in the US, the DAR flap caused a major public outcry. The day after the announcement was made, Mrs. Roosevelt, in protest, resigned her membership in DAR. Opera star Kirsten Flagstad, Interior Secretary Harold Ickes and the NAACP's Walter White also all complained or issued statements of protest. Yet, still, the Hall refused to reconsider.

To add insult to injury, days after the DAR debacle, Howard approached the Washington, DC, Board of Education for use of the auditorium at DC's Central High School. Central High, a predominately white school, also refused Ms. Anderson.

Based upon these events, various citizens groups marshaled and formed the Marian Anderson Citizens' Committee. Mrs. Roosevelt, Secretary Ickes and White also began to explore options to bring Ms. Anderson's artistry to a racially diverse Washington, DC, audience. They formed the idea of a free concert to be held on the steps of the Capitol's Lincoln Memorial, a venue under the auspices of the Department of the Interior.

The concert was scheduled for Easter Sunday, April 9, 1939.

That morning, Anderson traveled by train from Philadelphia to Washington, DC, accompanied by her mother and her sister. From Union Station, they made their way to a private home where they would be staying; no DC hotel at that time would take "colored" guests.

At the Lincoln Memorial, an estimate 75,000 people, of all races, had gathered on the mall to see Anderson perform. Also in attendance, Harold Ickes, Supreme Court justice Hugo Black, and Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau.

Secretary Ickes introduced Anderson. As she took to the impromptu stage, the imposing statue of Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, was plainly visible behind her. Anderson stood before a phalanx of microphones; her program would be broadcast, in its entirety, nationwide by NBC Radio.

Though a staggering number of people were able to see that concert in person, thanks to radio, millions more were able to listen to it live. Anderson began her performance with "America," its time-honored lyrics altered slightly for that day, from "Of thee I sing" to "To thee we sing." She continued with the aria "O mio Fernando," then Schubert's "Ave Maria," then the spirituals "Gospel Train," "Trampin'," and "My Soul Is Anchored in the Lord." Her encore was apt: "Nobody Knows the Troubles I've Seen." (Some sources list the encore's title as "Nobody Knows De Trouble I See" or "Nobody Knows the Trouble I See.")

The Marian Anderson-Lincoln Memorial broadcast was a mixture of musical interludes and news story. Certainly the newsreel agencies of the day (Hearst Metrotone/MGM, Fox Movietone, and Warner Pathe) covered it as a news story; none filmed the full concert. Hence, the only full record we have of Ms. Anderson's full performance is its radio/audio component.

By all accounts, Marian Anderson did not want to be an activist. "It was not in her nature," according to her biographer, Raymond Arsenault. For her, it was all about sharing the gift of her music. Still, the fact that Anderson appeared at all, and considering the songs she chose to perform that day, she knew of the importance of her appearance and of the unique role and opportunity that history had placed before her.

Since that chilly day in April of 1939, Anderson's performance has been widely celebrated, as both an artistic triumph and pivotal point in the civil rights movement. It has since been called "the concert that awakened America." The day after the airing, a Norfolk newspaper carried the headline, "Marian Anderson Thrills America." Not long after its airing, membership in the NAACP doubled in size. The concert also laid the groundwork--gave the template for--for future peaceful protests by civil rights groups and other political movements.

Many years later, still being heralded for her artistry and her role in America's racial equality, Anderson said, "I hadn't set out to change the world in any way. Whatever I am, it is a culmination of the goodwill of people who, regardless of anything else, saw me as I am, and not as somebody else."

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