

Marian Anderson: She Opened the Door

ONE OF THE GREAT vocal talents of all time will be heard in public for the last time on Easter Sunday afternoon when Marian Anderson makes her farewell appearance in New York's historic Carnegie Hall. Music critic Alan Rich of the New York Herald Tribune recently had this to say about the final bow of the much beloved Lady from Philadelphia:

It will be a sentimental occasion, and I don't suppose there will be many tickets floating around at the last moment. We have a lot to thank her for. Even aside from her musical qualities, Marian Anderson is a whole series of symbols for our age and for ages to come. The fact that her musical qualities are so rich and noble merely adds a touch of the miraculous.

There were few respected Negro performers in the world of serious music before Miss Anderson's time. One of them was the beloved Roland Hayes, who astounded American and European audiences with his Handel and Schubert as long ago as 1920. Astounded them, that is, not only with the fact that a Negro could sing such music, but even more in the fact that he sang so beautifully whatever his race. Hayes' victory in Europe was as much a vindication of the American artist in general as the Negro artist in particular.

Be that as it may, the fact remains that the Hayes career paved the way for Miss Anderson's, and that Miss Anderson's career opened the doors for all others of her race. On Miss Anderson's side was not merely her origin, but also her exceptional beauty. Has there ever been a more regal, noble, expressive sight on the concert stage than the figure of this simply dressed woman standing straight and still, probing the inmost soul of the music she sang? Has any singer been more gracious to her audiences, more genuinely appreciative of their acclaim, more moved herself by the way she moved others?

You wanted to love this woman, and she made it easy for you. Every time she would turn her back to the audience in the concert hall, to sing one or two songs just for the additional crowd in the seats on the stage, you felt: "Here is some one remarkable, considerate, generous." Marian Anderson's life in music has been a life of service, to her art and to the people for whom her art was meaningful.

But it wasn't merely this quality, or her built-in news value, that established her place in music. That wasn't why Toscanini called her "the voice that comes once in a hundred years," or why she was invited to give recitals at Salzburg in 1936 when that city's festival was still Parnassus, or why Jan Sibelius came out of retirement to teach her his songs. When memory fails we have the recordings she made in her prime to testify to her musical abilities, and they are overwhelming.

Listen sometime to the records of Schubert lieder she made in the '30s. Hear her sing *Der Tod und das Maedchen*, with the chill monotone of Death's



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words and the awesome plummet to the low D at the end. Hear her recreate with consummate artistry the simple folkish joy of *Die Forelle* and how the voice darkens when the poor trout is finally tricked and caught. This is the singing of a finished, sophis-

ticated artist, endowed with a truly magnificent voice and with the deep understanding of how to use it in the service of the most elevated music.

Naturally, this was an acquired sophistication, as it is for every non-German singer who takes on the German song repertory. The remarkable thing about Miss Anderson is that she acquired this sophistication so completely, while never losing the special simple gifts natural to her background and upbringing. When she sang a Negro spiritual it was, of course, a concert performance far removed in spirit from its humble origins. But she managed a poignancy in this music that was truly transcendent. Some Negro recitalists today sing their inevitable group of spirituals in a somewhat self-conscious manner; they owe it to their audience but they wish they didn't. Never so in an Anderson performance; the music seized her from within, as had the Handel and Schubert earlier on the program.

Her special success in this kind of music, and in the light semi-classic American and English ballads she liked to sing, came about partly from her remarkable reaction to words. Negro singers almost without exception, as many writers have pointed out, have a special gift for making the English language beautiful and natural. Few Caucasians can come within miles of this, with the possible exception of the Welsh and the English from the north of their country. It may be a matter of dialect, or it may be something physical.

Whatever it is, Miss Anderson's particular art benefits greatly from it. Whether it is in a phrase like "de trouble I've seen" or an aria from *Messiah*, the Anderson English is a remarkable and wonderful sound. It can stand as a lesson and a warning to almost every American singer who mouths and mumbles his native tongue today in the opera house and the concert hall, and there are many.

It was inevitable that sooner or later the Metropolitan Opera had to recognize the existence of Negro talent, and when the door was finally opened in 1955 it was only fitting that Marian Anderson be the first to enter. The Met might have chosen any number of other Negro singers; by that time there were many who had come through the door (See MARIAN, page 17)

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