

Marian Anderson tribute in capital sparking a Classical renaissance

by Marianna Wertz

A unique tribute to the living history of Marian Anderson (1897-1993), who passed away April 8, was held at the Ebenezer United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C. on Saturday, May 29, sponsored by the Schiller Institute. Inspired by the great artist's commitment to breaking the barrier against black Americans performing Classical music in America's most prominent concert halls, the leading men and women, black and white, who knew and worked with Anderson, came to Washington to perform the singer's favorite repertoire before an appreciative, overflow audience of more than 800 people.

Featured were two artists known internationally for their own historic roles in integrating the Classical music world in America. Baritone Robert McFerrin, now in his 70s, had heard Marian Anderson in person when he was a teenager in St. Louis. In 1953, he won the New York Metropolitan Opera's "Auditions of the Air," the first African-American to do so. As a result, McFerrin became the first black male artist at the Met, singing the lead role of Amonasro in Verdi's *Aïda*, Rigoletto, and other roles, the start of a long operatic career. McFerrin debuted at the Met just weeks after Marian Anderson had broken the ban on black artists in major roles at the Met, when she sang the role of Ulrica in Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera* on Jan. 7, 1955.

Tenor George Shirley had heard McFerrin perform when Shirley was a teenager in Detroit. He debuted at the New York Met in 1961 as Ferrando in Mozart's *Così Fan Tutte* and sang 189 performances there, in 27 roles over two decades, going on to sing at Glyndebourne in Australia, Covent Garden in England, and La Scala in Milan, as well as throughout the United States.

The entire three-hour concert was performed at the "natural" Verdi tuning of C-256 Hz, the lower Classical pitch based on the human voice, for which the Schiller Institute has led an international campaign since 1988. Modern arbitrary high pitch is a major reason that great low voices such as Marian Anderson's are no longer being produced. Several performers expressed joy after the concert at the opportunity to sing at the voice's natural pitch, and endorsed the C-256 movement.

An important part of the tribute was the accent put on local youth participation. The second half of the program was opened with a performance of Mozart's "Ave Verum" K. 618, sung by a choir of 60 children and adults from area

churches and schools, accompanied by a fine ensemble of strings from the D.C. Youth Orchestra, aged 6 to 12 years. The choir and string ensemble, conducted by Kathy Wolfe of the Schiller Institute, were especially created for the event, to commemorate Anderson's beginnings in a humble church choir and to underline that every child has the right to become a Marian Anderson.

Dozens of small children from the audience lined up after the concert with their parents for autographs of the performers. "This is a major reason we organized this concert," said Lynne Speed of the Schiller Institute. "You never know which of these little ones listening will be inspired to become our next Marian Anderson or Roland Hayes."

'In her footsteps'

The Schiller Institute's concept for the "Tribute to the Voice of the Century" was to present Anderson's life's work in its full dimensionality, what might well be called her commitment to Truth and Beauty. Dennis Speed, Northeastern coordinator of the institute and master of ceremonies for the tribute, stated in an essay on Anderson that is featured in the concert program, "In these days, when many no longer know the meaning of the term 'Classical culture,' let us extend to them this beautiful metaphor, the name, Marian Anderson. When they ask, 'Is there a connection between morality and culture?' let us say, with [Friedrich] Schiller, 'in a beautiful soul individual deeds are not properly moral, rather, the entire character is.'"

By the end of the concert, the quality of such a beautiful soul and its impact on those fortunate enough to have been touched by it, was clear to everyone in attendance.

The concert opened with an invocation by Rev. Dr. Alphonso Harrod, pastor of Ebenezer Church, who prayed for divine inspiration for the gathering. This was followed by the singing of "The Star-Spangled Banner," an Anderson favorite, accompanied by the Reed Elementary School Band, Alan Clipper, conductor. In keeping with the occasion's commitment to Truth and Beauty, the *entire* national anthem was sung, perhaps for the first time in 25 years. In these "politically correct" times, the second verse, which gives thanks to God for making and preserving us as a nation, is rarely performed.

Dennis Speed then read greetings from two leading black



Washington, D.C. Councilwoman Hilda Mason reads the "Marian Anderson Posthumous Recognition Resolution."

artists who couldn't attend in person. Soprano Shirley Verrett said, "Miss Anderson had a profound influence in my life. I went to her recitals since I was a very little girl. I first came to New York to sing because I had just won the Marian Anderson Award. . . . I never until two years ago permitted myself to sing the 'Ave Maria' in public because, having heard her, it impressed me so that I had her rendition ingrained in my mind. . . ."

Mezzosoprano Mattiwilda Dobbs wrote, "Little did I realize when as a child I heard Marian Anderson in my hometown of Atlanta, Georgia, that she was making it possible for me to follow in her footsteps, with a similar career some years later. I just knew that it was the most beautiful singing I'd ever heard, and that she was a beautiful, elegant black lady who enthralled and charmed the whole auditorium. . . . Through her I had proof that it was possible for a black person to have a career as a concert singer, and when I found that I had a singing voice and began studying voice, I set my goals for such a career."

As she recounts, Dobbs followed Anderson's career to the end of the great singer's life. Dobbs sang at the Met one year after Anderson. She sang one of the spirituals for which Anderson was famous when President Carter gave Anderson a medal of honor in a private ceremony at the White House. And finally, Dobbs was present at the Kennedy Center in Washington at the private showing of the documentary of Anderson's life, put on in 1992 in honor of Anderson's 90th birthday. "It was a rich life that touched many people, and I am happy that I was one of them," Dobbs concluded.

Passing the baton

"I saw Marian Anderson in 1961 when she sang 'The Star Spangled Banner' at the inauguration of John F. Kennedy,"

Speed recalled. When one sees her dignity and integrity, he said, the outrage done to her in 1939 when the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to allow her to sing at Constitution Hall "pales by comparison." Her art reflects that dignity and integrity, he said, and "you'll hear that in her art as she performed and championed it."

The program began with Franz Schubert's "Ave Maria," perhaps Anderson's most famous song, performed in Thomas Baker's English translation by soprano Linda Mabbs, accompanied by Danish-American pianist Bodil Frolund. Mabbs is recognized as one of America's leading exponents of vocal ornamentation and improvisation, who debuted in Washington in 1977 with the Paul Hill Chorale at the Kennedy Center in Poulenc's *Gloria*. She is now chairman of the Voice/Opera Department at the University of Maryland in College Park. Mabbs also performed two Richard Strauss lieder, "Morgen" and "Cäcilie," later in the first half of the program.

Dr. Raymond Jackson, who is known internationally both for his work as a concert pianist and for his published Juilliard School dissertation on "The Piano Music of 20th-Century Black Americans," accompanied all the artists following Mabbs on the program.

The "Ave Maria" was followed by "O mio Fernando" from Gaetano Donizetti's *La Favorita*, performed by mezzo-soprano Alexandra Zalska, who debuted in Belgrade as Princess Eboli in Giuseppe Verdi's *Don Carlo* in 1990. Zalska later sang "Stride la vampa" from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*.

The young baritone Gordon Hawkins, who studied both with Linda Mabbs and with George Shirley, was next, singing "Per me giunto" from Verdi's *Don Carlo* in a warm and sweetly round voice. Hawkins debuted locally at the Washington Opera in 1986 and at the Met in 1989 as Jake in *Porgy and Bess*. His final solo number on the program was an emotional version of "Goin' Home," the theme from Antonin Dvorak's "New World Symphony" to which words were set by W.A. Fisher, to commemorate Dvorak's devotion to teaching Classical polyphony to black American composers.

The final artist in the first half of the program was George Shirley, who began with a wonderfully rich and dignified performance of Schubert's "An Die Musik," followed by the spiritual "Little Boy, How Old Are You?" Shirley told the audience that he was adding this spiritual to the program to pay "homage to a man who has been an immense inspiration to all of us, including Marian Anderson—Roland Hayes," the great African-American tenor who was Anderson's mentor and model. Shirley sang the spiritual, whose subject is the Christ child's teaching in the temple at 12 years of age, in an arrangement by Hayes.

Then, as if to underscore the idea of passing the baton from Hayes to Hawkins, Shirley concluded the first half of the program with the duet "Solenne in quest' ora" from Verdi's *La Forza del Destino*, performed with Gordon Hawkins.



Passing the baton: (left to right) Gordon Hawkins, Dr. Raymond Jackson, and George Shirley accepting applause at the end of the concert.

A Classical Renaissance

Following the intermission, the "Marian Anderson Post-humous Recognition Ceremonial Resolution" was presented by District of Columbia City Councilwoman Hilda Mason. The resolution was drafted by the City Council and passed on May 4 by the full council. Mason asked for a show of hands of those who had been at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939 when Anderson sang before a crowd of 75,000 people. About a dozen people raised their hands as Mason recalled her own experience there. She then read the resolution, which honors Anderson's memory for "the sweet richness of her voice as it floated over the District of Columbia, and the strength of her dignity in rising above" the hatred that confronted her.

The world-famous baritone Robert McFerrin then approached the stage to the roar of a standing ovation. McFerrin recently suffered a stroke, as a result of which he lost some ability to speak, but none of his singing voice. After saying a few words of greeting in his hushed words, he began his performance with a powerful rendition of seven songs from Robert Schumann's "Dichterliebe," sung not only in beautiful *bel canto* style, but with a poetic interpretation that brought out every nuance of the Heinrich Heine poem. This was followed by "Eri tu" from Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera* and five spirituals.

Between Hawkins, Shirley, and McFerrin, the question, often debated in musical circles today, whether Negro spirituals can be performed as part of the Classical polyphonic literature, was settled. In particular, McFerrin's performance of "Give me Jesus, you can have the world," so evoked the quality of G.F. Handel's *Messiah* as to leave no doubt that these spirituals, which are always triumphant, though born

of bitter oppression, are Classical in form, and, if properly sung, are rightly part of the Classical tradition.

The two final performers, mezzosoprano Janice Jackson and soprano Regina McConnell, completed the program with some of Anderson's most famous repertoire. Jackson, a young performer with a very powerful voice, debuted in Washington in 1992 in Handel's *Messiah* at the Kennedy Center. She performed first "Re, dell' abisso, affrettati!" from Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*, the aria of fortune-teller Ulrica which Anderson sang in her 1955 Met debut. Jackson followed this with Anderson's famous spiritual, "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" which brought the audience leaping to their feet in applause.

Finally, soprano Regina McConnell, who has toured Europe and the United States in *Porgy and Bess* and is former chairman of Voice at Howard University where she continues to teach and perform, closed the program with Mozart's "Als Luise die Briefe," and Schubert's "Erlkönig." Anderson is famous for her rendition of the "Erlkönig," a difficult setting of a Goethe poem about a dying boy, which requires the performer to portray four different characters, utilizing the full power of vocal registration to achieve this. McConnell ended with great drama, creating just the right intense emotional distinctions between the narrator, the boy, the Elf King, and the father, bringing the audience to its feet.

There is no doubt, as one concert-goer told this writer, that this was the kind of event "which happens only once in 25 years." Fortunately, the Schiller Institute is committed to making such events a regular part of the "Classical Renaissance" it is hoping to spark worldwide, to save this dying civilization with the help of such beautiful souls as Marian Anderson.