



Painting by Brenda Zlamany, November 1996.

## Marian Anderson By Jessye Norman Grace Under Fire

**M**arian Anderson was a woman of such quality, compassion and modesty that her humanitarian efforts alone would warrant our adulation. But she was also blessed with a matchless voice — a voice with so much warmth, richness and mobility that Arturo Toscanini was moved to call it a voice “heard once in a hundred years.”

I became acquainted with this glorious sound at about age 10, through a recording of Brahms’s Alto Rhapsody, and was so overwhelmed I wept, not really understanding why. When I was 16, in the early 1960’s, I traveled by train from Augusta, Ga., to Philadelphia to participate in the Marian Anderson Voice Competition. I was so young and thrilled at being there that I was unaware that perhaps I should have been anxious as well. I did not win a prize, but the gentleness and warmth of that experience remain with me to this day.

It was in Constitution Hall in Washington that I first heard Miss Anderson in person, in 1965. Her

voice filled the vast space easily, whether singing Schubert at full strength or “Deep River” with a profound hush. She was queenly in her every gesture. In 1939, the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to permit her to perform in this hall on racial grounds. Eleanor Roosevelt broke ranks with her fellow D.A.R. members and helped arrange a concert at the Lincoln Memorial, a historic event that has been called America’s first civil rights rally.

Miss Anderson and I both attended a Metropolitan Opera performance of “Les Troyens” in 1973, when I was privileged to meet her for the first time. She recalled having sung in Augusta some 20 years before, and I was happy to tell her that the city still thought of her visit not only as a watershed but also as a blessing. On the occasions when we were able to sit and talk, I found her interest in me flattering, but I preferred listening to her speak about herself. How could she show the world such poise when she was faced with touring a segregated United States? How could she not take exception to her exclusion from the Met until late in her career? How could she be so deeply spiritual without being at all sanctimonious?

She wore the glorious crown of her voice with the grace of an empress and changed the lives of many through the subtle force of her spirit and demeanor. If the planet Earth could sing, I think it would sound something like Marian Anderson.

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*Jessye Norman is an opera and concert singer.*