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MARIAN'S REVOLUTION

by Sudipta Bardhan-Quallen • 2016

5th Grade

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Marian Anderson (1897-1993) was a popular African American singer in the 20th century. In this informational text, Sudipta Bardhan Quallen discusses the obstacles Marian faced as a black singer and her great accomplishments. **As you read, take notes on how Marian responded to the obstacles she faced during her career.**

[1] By 1939, Marian Anderson had performed for presidents and kings. She had been praised for having “a voice... one hears once in a hundred years.” Despite her success, when Marian wanted to sing at Constitution Hall that year, she was banned ¹ from doing so. The owner of the hall, an organization called the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), felt that Marian couldn’t be allowed to sing there because she was African American.



"Marian Revolution" by Marian Anderson Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA is used with permission

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That wasn't the first time Marian had been turned away because she was black. When she was 18 years old, she applied to music school. The clerk [2] at the desk rudely sent her home because of her race. Marian was shocked by the clerk's words. "I could not conceive of [3] a person," Marian said, "surrounded as she was with the joy that is music without having some sense of its beauty and understanding rub off on her."

Because of segregation — the practice of keeping blacks and whites separate — the early 1900s were a difficult time for a young black woman to begin a professional singing career. But Marian was determined to sing. "It was something that just had to be done," she remembered. "I don't think I had much to say in choosing it. I think music chose me."

In 1925, Marian won a voice contest in New York, and sang with the New York Philharmonic. Still, her chances to perform in the United States were limited. To build her career, Marian traveled to Europe in 1928, where she became very successful.

A WORLD-CLASS SINGER FACES RACISM

[5] By 1939, Marian was a world-class singer. She returned to the United States to continue her career. But back at home, she faced racism in many ways. Segregation was still common on trains and in hotels and restaurants. No amount of vocal talent could spare [4] Marian from that.

Even concert halls were segregated, although usually that was limited to the audience. Because black performers often appeared on stage in segregated halls, Marian had no reason to think she would be turned away from Constitution Hall. She believed that musical skill would be the only factor that the DAR would consider.

At first, the DAR told Marian that the date she requested was not available. Then they told her that all of her alternate dates were booked. Eventually, the DAR upheld their policy that only white performers could appear in Constitution Hall.

A VOICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

When news of the DAR's policy got out, many people were outraged.

[5] First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt resigned [6] from the DAR. In a letter, she wrote: "I am in complete disagreement with the attitude taken in refusing Constitution Hall to a great artist... You had an opportunity to lead in an enlightened [7] way, and it seems to me your organization has failed."

Marian believed strongly in the civil-rights movement. She knew firsthand the pain that racism caused. She understood that the way the controversy [8] with the DAR was resolved would be a milestone [9] for civil rights.

[10] Despite public outcry, [10] the DAR would not back down and let Marian sing. With Mrs. Roosevelt's support, the Secretary of the Interior arranged a special concert for Marian, to be held at the Lincoln Memorial. Seventy-five thousand people attended. In many ways, Marian's concert was considered to be America's first civil-rights rally. That night, she took a stand against discrimination [11] and for equality. The first words she sang were: "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing."

THE OPEN-HEARTED WAY

Marian realized that equality in the United States would be achieved when every person was willing to stand up for what is right. As a public figure, she felt a responsibility to set an example. After the 1939 incident, she did her part by turning down concerts for segregated audiences.

"The minute a person whose word means a great deal dares to take the open-hearted and courageous way," she said, "many others follow."

As Marian's career progressed, America changed. She performed in many prestigious [12] locations, including Constitution Hall, where she sang after the DAR changed its policies. By 1954, segregation was

declared unconstitutional. The Civil Rights Act **13** was signed into law in 1964, the year Marian retired from performing. By then, many of the barriers she'd had to fight through were disappearing. Marian's farewell tour began in front of an admiring crowd at Constitution Hall.

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Notes

All Definitions Footnotes

1. **Ban** (*verb*) : to not allow someone to do something
2. an employee who performs general office tasks
3. to understand or imagine something
4. to keep someone from experiencing something
5. **Outrage** (*noun*) : strong reaction of anger
6. **Resign** (*verb*) : to officially give up a job or position
7. **Enlightened** (*adjective*) : having greater knowledge or understanding of something
8. **Controversy** (*noun*) : strong disagreement, typically public and heated
9. an important point in the progress of something
10. strong protest from people
11. **Discrimination** (*noun*) : the practice of unfairly treating a person or group differently from other people or groups of people
12. **Prestigious** (*adjective*) : having high status
13. a law in the United States that outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin