Anderson, Marian

(b. Feb. 27, 1897, Philadelphia, Pa., U.S.--d. April 8, 1993, Portland, Ore.), American singer, one of the finest contraltos of her time.

Born of poor black parents, Anderson received her earliest musical training in the choir of the Union Baptist Church, which she joined when she was six, already having displayed a remarkable voice. Her church raised enough money for her to take private voice lessons.

In 1925 her teacher entered her in a contest for an appearance at Lewisohn Stadium in New York City with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. She was placed first among 300 competitors. She had already made several concert tours and, despite struggles against poverty and racial discrimination, was beginning to make a name for herself. Real success came after several trips to Europe between 1925 and 1935, during which time she expanded and deepened her experience as a performer. After her return to New York City in 1935 she achieved even greater success.

In 1939 the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) refused to allow Anderson to sing at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. A great public outcry followed; Eleanor Roosevelt and other prominent women resigned from the DAR, and a group of citizens arranged a concert held on April 9, 1939, at the Lincoln Memorial that drew an audience of 75,000. She was asked to sing at the White House and was the first black to sing at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, making her debut in 1955 as Ulrica in Verdi's Un ballo in maschera (A Masked Ball).

She was acclaimed for her work in behalf of black people and for her warmth of personality as well as for her vocal and interpretative powers. As a singer, her outstanding characteristics were wide range, richness and purity of tone, and mastery of a variety of styles. She wrote an autobiography, My Lord, What a Morning (1957), and retired in 1965. She received many honours and awards, including the U.S. National Arts Medal (1986).