Marian Anderson Is Dead at 96; Singer Shattered Racial Barriers

By ALLAN KOZINN

Marian Anderson, whose velvety contralto and dignified, affecting stage manner melted the hearts of music lovers around the world, and whose determination helped shatter racial barriers in the arts, died yesterday in Portland, Ore. She was 96.

She died at the home of her nephew, the conductor James DePreist. Lee Walter, a friend of the singer, gave the cause as congestive heart failure a month after a stroke.

Miss Anderson's achievements, which inspired generations of young black performers, included a concert before 75,000 listeners at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939 arranged by Eleanor Roosevelt after the Daughters of the American Revolution denied the singer the use of the concert hall in their national headquarters. And when she made her Metropolitan Opera debut in 1955, she became the first black singer to perform there.

The soprano Leontyne Price, one of the first artists to benefit from Miss Anderson's efforts, said yesterday, "Her example of professionalism, uncompromising standards, overcoming obstacles, persistence, resiliency and undaunted spirit inspired me to believe that I could achieve goals that otherwise would have been unthought of."

In 1989, when a group of musicians that included Isaac Stern, Jessye Norman and Julius Rudel put together a concert to raise money for the Marian Anderson Award, a prize given to young singers as an honor to its namesake, Donal Henahan wrote in The New York Times, "Miss Anderson's place as a high priestess of American musicians, whatever their color, is not to be denied." But Miss Anderson had to fight hard to win her place in American music history. Although she won first prize in a voice contest in New York in 1925 and made an appearance that year with the New York Philharmonic at Lewisohn Stadium, she was unable to find operatic engagements, and within a few years her career came to a standstill. It was only after she toured Europe to great acclaim in the early 1930's that the American public began to pay attention to her.

Even after her artistry was recognized in her homeland, she faced racial prejudice on a more mundane level. Well into her career, she was turned away...
at restaurants and hotels. Even America's opera houses remained closed to her until Rudolf Bing invited her to sing at the Met near the end of her career.

Because opera was denied her for most of her career, Miss Anderson's reputation rests on the considerable communicative power that she brought to the recital stage. Her manner -- closed eyes, very few gestures -- conveyed stateliness and inner serenity. And her repertory covered considerable ground, from Bach and Handel oratorio selections to Schubert, Brahms, Schumann and Rachmaninoff songs, Verdi arias and spirituals.

Her recordings of standard concert works, most notably Schubert's "Ave Maria," were prized for the radiant beauty of her interpretations. But one of her real achievements was in emphasizing that spirituals deserved a place in the active repertory, something she demonstrated with sublime readings of "My Lord, What a Morning" and "Crucifixion," which were the centerpieces of many programs. "They are my own music," she once said. "But it is not for that reason that I love to sing them. I love them because they are truly spiritual in quality; they give forth the aura of faith, simplicity, humility and hope."

During her career, Miss Anderson gave her date of birth as Feb. 17, 1902, but June Goodman, a longtime friend of hers, said that while going through some family papers recently, she found Miss Anderson's birth certificate, which gave the date as Feb. 27, 1897. Miss Anderson was born in Philadelphia, the oldest of three children. Her father died when she was a child, and her mother took in laundry to support the family. She began singing when she was 3 years old; when she was 6 she joined the choir at the Union Baptist Church and impressed the director by learning all the parts -- soprano, alto, tenor and bass -- in the hymns the choir sang.

She did not have her first formal lessons until she was 15 and began studying with Mary S. Patterson. Her church choir raised money to pay for her lessons, and the Philadelphia Choral Society, a black ensemble, gave a benefit performance to support further studies with Agnes Reifsnyder and Giuseppe Boghetti.

In 1925, Mr. Boghetti entered his pupil in a New York Philharmonic voice competition, in which she competed with 300 singers and won first prize. She made her debut with the New York Philharmonic on Aug. 27, 1925, and was immediately signed by a concert manager. But after a Town Hall recital and a handful of concerts, her engagements dwindled. By 1930, she decided to go to Europe, not only in search of performance opportunities, but in the hope of perfecting her command of languages and devoting further study to the art of lieder singing.

Her performances in Europe were great successes. During a Scandinavian tour in 1930 she met the composer Jean Sibelius, who spoke glowingly of her voice and dedicated the song "Solitude" to her. And when she ended a 1935 tour in Salzburg, Arturo Toscanini told her, "A voice like yours is heard once in a hundred years." The impresario Sol Hurok heard Miss Anderson sing in Paris that same year, and offered to present her in another Town Hall recital. She had misgivings, having received so much more enthusiastic a reception in Europe
than in the United States. But Mr. Hurok persuaded her, and he remained her manager for the rest of her career.

Miss Anderson's return to Town Hall on Dec. 30, 1935, was the success that Hurok told her it would be. "Let it be said from the outset," Howard Taubman wrote in The Times, "Marian Anderson has returned to her native land one of the great singers of our time."

In the late 1930's, she gave about 70 recitals a year in the United States. But her fame did not entirely eradicate the prejudice she confronted as a young black singer touring the United States. It was a particularly unfortunate display of that prejudice, however, that helped make Miss Anderson a household name. In 1939, Hurok tried to book her at Constitution Hall in the national headquarters of the D.A.R., and was told that all dates were taken.

When Hurok took his singer's case to the public, Eleanor Roosevelt, the First Lady, resigned from the D.A.R., and other prominent women followed suit. Harold L. Ickes, the Secretary of the Interior, offered Miss Anderson the Lincoln Memorial for a concert on Easter Sunday 1939. Some 75,000 people attended the concert, and millions more listened to the radio broadcast. Photographs and films of Miss Anderson singing in front of Lincoln's statue, before the enormous crowd, quickly became a poignant symbol for the nascent civil rights movement.

During the dispute, Miss Anderson maintained the quiet dignity for which she was famous. Refusing to comment or to express any rancor when reporters pressed her for a response, she later wrote in "My Lord, What a Morning," her memoir, "I particularly did not want to say anything about the D.A.R. As I have made clear, I did not feel that I was designed for hand-to-hand combat."

Four years later, the D.A.R. invited Miss Anderson to take part in a China Relief concert at Constitution Hall. "When I finally walked onto the stage of Constitution Hall," she said later, "I felt no different than I had in other halls. There was no sense of triumph. I felt that it was a beautiful concert hall and I was very happy to sing there."

Miss Anderson continued to tour as a recitalist, but made no headway in the opera world until Mr. Bing invited her to sing Ulrica in Verdi's "Ballo in Maschera." She made her debut on Jan. 7, 1955.

"The curtain rose on the second scene," Miss Anderson said later about the evening, "and I was there on stage, mixing the witch's brew. I trembled, and when the audience applauded and applauded before I could sing a note, I felt myself tightening into a knot."

It did not matter that at 57 she was past her vocal prime. As Howard Taubman noted in his review in The Times, "men as well as women were dabbing at their eyes" during the tumultuous ovation. In 1957, the State Department sponsored a 10-week tour of India and the Far East in which Miss Anderson sang 24 concerts in 14 countries. A CBS News crew accompanied her, and the film was


She sang at President Dwight D. Eisenhower's inauguration in 1957, and at President John F. Kennedy's in 1961, and later that year for American troops in Berlin. She toured Australia for the first time in 1962, and in October 1964 began her farewell tour, at Constitution Hall, and gave her last recital at Carnegie Hall on April 18, 1965. She made occasional stage appearances in the 1970's, as the reader in Aaron Copland's "Lincoln Portrait."

Late in her life Miss Anderson was frequently honored. She was given a Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1963, and in 1978 was in the first group of artists to receive Kennedy Center Honors. In 1980, the United States Treasury Department coined a half-ounce gold commemorative medal with her likeness, and in 1984 she was the first recipient of the Eleanor Roosevelt Human Rights Award of the City of New York. In 1986, President Ronald Reagan awarded her the National Arts Medal.

Miss Anderson married Orpheus H. Fisher, an architect, in 1943; he died in 1986. They had no children. The singer spent her retirement at her farm, which she named Marianna, in Danbury, Conn., and although in her last years she had to use a wheelchair, she was occasionally seen at concerts in New York City. In July 1992 she moved to Portland to live with her nephew, Mr. DePreist, who is her only survivor.

In the late 1950's, when Miss Anderson began to wind down her singing career, she pursued several other interests. President Eisenhower appointed her an alternative representative in the United States delegation to the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations. She gave benefit concerts for the Congress of Racial Equality, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the America-Israel Cultural Foundation. And she sang again at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

She also made a point of helping young singers, particularly through the Marian Anderson Awards, which she started when the city of Philadelphia awarded her the $10,000 Bok Prize in 1943. Eventually the prize fund ran out of money, but since its re-establishment in 1990 it dispenses $25,000 annually. She was also associated with Young Audiences, an organization that presents school concerts with professional musicians.

In addition to direct involvement and encouragement, she was also, of course, a role model for the black musicians who followed her.

"At age 10 I heard, for the first time, the singing of Marian Anderson on a recording," the soprano Jessye Norman once said. "I listened, thinking, 'This can't be just a voice, so rich and beautiful.' It was a revelation. And I wept."