

2-17-99

Great Moment

On the way to the post office the other day, I heard on my car radio a voice I'd not heard in years. Nevertheless, the first five or six notes were enough for me to identify the voice and remember with a thrill the only time I heard her sing in person.

Marian Anderson was singing in concert at Dallas' Fair Park Auditorium on a Sunday afternoon in October, 1940, and I was there. Paul was ushering for the event; his reward for ushering was the privilege of taking a date, and I was the lucky girl. The seats we found after he had finished his duties were in the second row on the right side of the hall, nearly on the stage. We almost felt that she was singing to us alone, there was such an electric presence in the music hall. We were familiar with Miss Anderson's voice, had in fact considered her one of our favorite singers, and we were excited to be present at her concert even though we were also saddened by the prevailing customs surrounding her appearances in concert. Her glorious voice was not nearly as important as her color in those days, and we had read about the difficulties of providing her with befitting food, housing, and entertainment when she was traveling in the south. We forgot our feelings of the injustices she had to contend with, however, in her presence as she sang in her magnificent way.



She wore a long princess-style, Quaker-gray dress, with plain sleeves and a severe white collar at her high neckline. The simplicity of her dress was mirrored in her movements on the stage: the graceful, slow movements of her entrance, comfortably erect posture near the piano which accompanied her, gracious but dignified bows to recognize the enthusiastic applause that greeted everything she sang.

I recognize that I do not have a musician's ability in musical criticism, but to me, then and now, her contralto voice must have been as nearly perfect as a human voice can be. The honey-smooth, velvety tones surrounded me and, I'm sure, every member of the audience. Frequently, there was an electric pause at the end of her song, a pause indicating the absorption with which the audience was involved in her music, followed by applause which she acknowledged simply and naturally. After an afternoon program consisting of art songs and arias from opera, she ended with several Negro spirituals. Sung with a depth of feeling and an understated, glorious intensity, her spirituals evoked emotional applause from the obviously very moved audience. The magnificence of her performance transcended the traditional mistreatment of her and her race. Years later, I could only regret, when she finally sang with the Metropolitan Opera, that the prime of her voice on that day in 1940 was long past, but I was happy that she had at last been recognized in the arenas in which she belonged.

Music has been an important, delightful part of my life. I have been privileged to witness several magnificent musical moments in my years of listening. Marian Anderson's performance on that Sunday afternoon long ago is one of the greatest highlights of music in my life. The magic she produced with her interpretations have not dissipated since that day, as I have frequently been able to revisit some of those great moments by way of recordings and radio. In the car as I listened to part of that compact disc of Marian Anderson's singing proved to be such an occasion.