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Constitution Hall Concert Honors Civil Rights Movement

The celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of the historic 1963 March on Washington might well have been history repeated as farce, were it not for the beautiful “Musical Celebration” sponsored by the Schiller Institute—the “opening shot” of the weekend’s events—which filled Constitution Hall with close to 3,000 people on Friday evening, Aug. 27.

Institute vice-chairman Amelia Boynton Robinson, a seminal figure in the Civil Rights movement who opened the concert, had proposed such an event—celebrating both the anniversary of the March on Washington and the late Marian Anderson’s struggle to open Classical music to African-Americans—as a necessary corrective to the “official” commemoration, which was directed out of the National Education Association building and featured “gay rights equals Civil Rights” as a central theme.

The concert was performed throughout at the so-called Verdi pitch of middle C = 256 Hz. It featured the works of Antonin Dvořák, who worked in the United States from 1892 to 1895, and Dvořák’s mentor Johannes Brahms. Dvořák taught black American composers such as Harry Burleigh to apply to spirituals the compositional method which Brahms used to transform the folk songs of Germany into art songs.

Baritone Robert McFerrin, who with his debut at the Metropolitan Opera in 1955, broke the color barrier to the performance of Classical music along with Marian Anderson, was the featured soloist, performing works of Schubert and Verdi, and spirituals first arranged for McFerrin by the great Hall Johnson.

In addition to McFerrin, sopranos Regina McConnell and Elizabeth Lyra Ross, and mezzosoprano Hilda Harris, sang on the program, as did four young black singers—tenor Gregory Hopkins,

Above, left: Institute vice-president Amelia Boynton Robinson. Above, right: Baritone Robert McFerrin.

baritone Reginald Pindell, and sopranos Detra Battle and Melinda Young.

Accompanying the singers were pianist and vocal coach Sylvia Olden Lee, and concert pianist and scholar Dr. Raymond Jackson.

Much More Than a Concert

The three-hour program was billed as a “Musical Celebration of the Struggle to Secure the Inalienable Rights of Man,” and was much more than a concert. District of Columbia Mayor Sharon Pratt Kelly sent greetings to the Celebration, identifying the unique importance of the event: “In these times of crisis, this showcase of leading artists performing the traditional repertoire of Ms. Anderson, as well as Roland Hayes and others, will provide inspirational role models for us all and especially our young people.”

That the event was a gathering-place for the real leadership of the 1963

March on Washington was witnessed by the greetings presented, both in person and in the concert program, from those who led the 1963 effort.

The concert was opened with a surprise appearance by comedian and Civil Rights veteran Dick Gregory, who was in Washington for the Thirtieth Anniversary events. Speaking for nearly fifteen minutes, Gregory had the audience laughing at the banality of the “gay rights” commemoration theme, and at the grotesque state of race relations in America today.

Following Gregory, the Rev. James Bevel greeted the audience. Bevel was the initiator of the 1963 March on Washington, as Direct Action Coordinator for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Amelia Boynton Robinson, who just celebrated her 82nd birthday and has spent at least fifty of her eighty-two years in the Civil Rights struggle, spoke to enthusiastic applause about the necessity to continue that struggle: “The battle is still ongoing,” she said.

The commemorative concert program contained greetings as well from Wyatt Tee Walker, former Chief of Staff to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; from Hosea Williams, former Field General of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); and from D.C. Senator Florence Pendleton. Greetings from leading musicians included sopranos Leontyne Price and Shirley Verrett, baritones Sherrill Milnes and William Warfield, and Dr. Willis C. Patterson, President of the National Association of Negro Musicians.

The concert opened with the audience singing two verses of the “Star-Spangled Banner,” played by the Reed Elementary School Band, followed by “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” known as the Negro National Anthem. These opening pieces, as well as an arrangement of Beethoven’s setting of Friedrich Schiller’s “Ode to Joy,” “Va Pensiero” from Verdi’s opera *Nabucco*, and Mozart’s “Ave Verum,” were sung by a 100-person chorus, including children, under the baton of John Sigerson. The large chorus combined

the Schiller Institute chorus with the Nevilla Ottley Singers from Tacoma Park, Md., and volunteer singers from neighborhoods and churches all over the area, who are being trained weekly by Institute personnel in the *bel canto* singing method.

Remembering Marian Anderson

In 1939, Marian Anderson was denied performance use of Constitution Hall, which is owned by the Daughters of the American Revolution, because she was an African-American. In response, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt arranged for Anderson to sing an open-air concert on Easter Sunday, April 9, 1939 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The concert, attended by more than 75,000 Americans, became an historic tribute to the courage and moral strength of Miss Anderson, who passed away on April 8 of this year at the age of ninety-six.

The Schiller Institute’s concert was meant not only to commemorate her great career, by performing some of the most memorable opera arias, German *lieder*, and spirituals of her repertoire, but to encourage youth to emulate her today. As Institute chairwoman Helga Zepp-LaRouche stated in her greeting

to the event: “How sorely we need Marian Anderson’s great example today, along with the greatest possible number of artists to tread in her footsteps! Indeed, many former associates of Dr. King, who lived through those days, assure us that the state of Civil Rights today is much worse than it was in the 1960’s.”

Lower Pitch Brings Out Beauty

An important feature of the concert was that it was performed at the “Verdi” pitch of C = 256 Hz. The Schiller Institute has been fighting since 1988 to establish C = 256 (A = 432) Hz as the standard international pitch, in which fight it has been joined by thousands of leading musicians worldwide. The resonant quality and richness of sound at the lower pitch were evident throughout the concert, particularly in the operatic selections.

The event, because it succeeded on so many levels in setting a metric for what is needed in these times of crisis—to make today, as Helga Zepp-LaRouche said in her greeting, a “true Renaissance”—has, by all accounts, created a leading place for the Schiller Institute in the cultural world of Washington, D.C. today.



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The performers receive a rousing, curtain call “thank-you.”