



Segregating a great singer

Marian Anderson and the Daughters of the American Revolution

CAROL J. OJA

AS RACIAL PROTESTS have rocked the United States and the world, it is distressingly clear that the long arc of racism is unbroken, and each individual story of exclusion, oppression and resistance sheds light on how racism has been institutionalized. Classical music in the US during the mid-twentieth century was a cultural site of entrenched and often unspoken racism that was enforced by major performing organizations and concert facilities. The practice was far more widespread than has been acknowledged, and its pernicious effects remain with us.

A recently recovered archive of documents provides new insights into those exclusionary practices, revealing exceptional detail about how segregation worked. It relates to the now-famous performance by the great singer Marian Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC on Easter Sunday in 1939. The concert took place at that location because Anderson's original goal, which had been to perform in Constitution Hall, then DC's central concert facility, was rejected by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), who owned the hall, and the organization did so because Anderson was Black. In a segregated country - decades before *Brown vs Board of Education* of 1957 (the Supreme Court decision that outlawed the segregation of schools) or the Civil Rights Act of 1964 - a mixed-race audience of some 75,000 people assembled peacefully at the base of the Lincoln Memorial to hear Anderson perform a song recital. Dressed in a mink coat and standing at the crook of a grand piano - a vision more common in Carnegie Hall than on the steps of a national monument - Anderson opened with "My Country Tis of Thee", offered an aria from Donizetti's opera *La favorita*, moved to Schubert's "Ave Maria", and concluded with a group of spirituals. At the time, Anderson was an international star of classical music, with accolades for her extraordinary gifts resounding across Europe and the US. Four years earlier, the conductor Arturo Toscanini had anointed Anderson, famously pro-

claiming that a voice as special as hers appeared "only once in a hundred years". Meanwhile, a woman's organization dedicated to patriotism and civic improvement - an organization located in the capital of the country where Anderson was a tax-paying citizen - would not permit her on its stage. At the time, DAR's membership was totally white.

Anderson's historic concert marked the first major civil rights gathering at the Lincoln Memorial, and the site has since become closely identified with the pursuit of racial justice, most notably with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington in 1963. When DAR refused Anderson's request, made through her manager Sol Hurok, it claimed the hall was already booked. Hurok then asked for other available dates, and he was summarily refused, as DAR professed obligation to the race laws and customs of DC. That stance was true in terms of local custom, which excluded Black people from white theatres in the District. Yet there was apparently no such law on the books, illustrating the confusing mishmash of statutes and practices that underpinned segregation, varying from one locality to another. In the case of DAR, it was enforcing its own "white artists only" clause, which had been standard in its rental contracts since 1932 and is clearly visible if one views those documents today. Fred Hand, the manager of Constitution Hall, worked consistently to maintain that policy.

Sticking to its established exclusions, DAR enforced the status quo. The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), led by its president Walter White and a quickly assembled Marian Anderson Committee, joined Hurok in launching a campaign to expose the organization's racist agenda, and the Anderson incident became a notorious landmark in the battle against the segregation of public spaces. In the process, the First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt resigned from DAR in protest, newspapers covered the story from coast to coast, and Anderson's concert entered the history of institutionalized racism in the US. In retrospect, the incident appears as part of a pattern of racial segregation in concert music venues and organizations across the country. Another ignominious

Marian Anderson in front of a photograph of her free concert in 1939 at the Lincoln Memorial, 1960

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example, which eventually also involved Anderson, was the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York City, which enforced a tacit whites-only policy until 1955, when Anderson became the first performer of colour to appear in a leading role on the opera company's stage in its seventy-five-year history.

As Americans confront the mechanisms of racism today, with Black Lives Matter as a rallying cry, they do so against the background of histories such as Anderson's, and the new materials related to her battle with DAR give an inside view of how one organization managed a policy of exclusion. They add substantive depth and detail to what is already a well-known story, chronicled by Anderson's biographer Allan Keiler and the historian Raymond Arsenault, among others. Through document after document - memos, letters, postcards, bureaucratic reports - the archive makes vivid the micromanagement that was necessary to maintain the infrastructure of white supremacy. It shows how the language of hate and exclusion was delivered on fine stationery, in elegant prose. At the same time, it shows turmoil in the organization itself, to be a member of which requires documentable family ties to the period of the Revolutionary War. DAR's members were divided about the banning of Anderson, and many among them protested vehemently. DAR did not welcome its first African American member until 1977.

Before I delved into these documents, I anticipated encountering both racism and the outcry against it, which turned out to be the case. I was less prepared, however, for the virulent antisemitism that is exposed, principally directed at Anderson's manager Sol Hurok, a Jewish immigrant from Russia. Pacifists, communists and the Roosevelts are pilloried as well. A year earlier, the Dies Committee, which eventually led to the House Committee on Un-American Activities, had been formed, and many of the letter writers identified with the policies of its reactionary chair, Representative Martin Dies of Texas, and his anti-communist crusades. Thus major portions of the DAR materials reveal a history of hate.

All these documents were saved by Sarah Corbin Robert (1887-1972), who was President General of DAR during the Anderson incident. After ending her tenure in 1941, she held on to her personal and professional archive, which was then bequeathed to her son Henry Martyn Robert III. She must have realized its volatility. A few years before Henry's death in 2019, he gave the materials to DAR. Corbin Robert's story turns out to have unexpected twists, even as she remains opaque. She was a dutiful bureaucrat during the Anderson episode, implementing DAR's policy to the letter. Yet ironies abound. DAR prided itself on offering programmes to help immigrants achieve citizenship, and one of its primary projects in 1939 was to encourage an appreciation of American musical traditions - a disconnect in relation to Anderson that a DAR member from Connecticut pointed out in a letter of protest.

Educated at Syracuse University in New York (class of 1909), Sarah Corbin had a paternal ancestry that reached back to seventeenth-century England, with immigration to colonial Massachusetts. The men were farmers, and in the 1880 census her father was listed as a dry goods clerk. Sarah Corbin taught high school history for a decade before marrying Henry Martyn Robert, Jr., whose father was the author of *Robert's Rules of Order*, the standard guide to parliamentary procedure, first published in 1876. The book is "a powerful brand name and an American classic", as the *New York Times* once put it. Thus for Corbin Robert, making rules and following them was the family business, and she became an authority on parliamentary procedure. She gave lectures about it, served as a consultant to major organizations, and undertook new editions of the book. The royalties that accrued to such a widely used publication must have been considerable. Corbin Robert's own name, together with that of her son, first appeared in a "newly revised" edition of the *Rules* in 1970, although her obituary in the Wash-

ington Post dates her involvement with the book back to 1937, suggesting that she faced her own issues with the unacknowledged labour of women.

The newly available correspondence and public statements at the DAR Archive show Corbin Robert to have been a stickler for the organization's rules. Consistently, she averred that in rejecting Anderson she was simply implementing DAR policy, and she avoided expressing a personal opinion on the subject. In a public statement about the episode, Corbin Robert, as agreed by DAR's governing board, announced that the organization would change its position on the use of Constitution Hall "when the Community at large has worked out its problem". This crafty wording, common to the language of segregation, acknowledged a "problem" yet passed the buck to others for a remedy, affirming racist practices in the process.

Another striking angle on Sarah Corbin Robert - previously unrecognized - is the story of her husband's grandfather Dr Joseph Robert (1807-84). In the mid-nineteenth century, Joseph Robert worked for the abolition of slavery and was one of the founders of Morehouse College, a prestigious HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities).

Born on a slave-holding plantation in South Carolina, Joseph Robert trained as both a physician and Baptist minister. During the Civil War, the family faced the stress of divided allegiances, as happened all too often for southerners at the time, with Joseph's son Henry serving in the Union Army and his wife's oldest brother fighting for the Confederacy. After the war (in 1871), Joseph became head of the Augusta Baptist Institute in Augusta, Georgia, which educated freed slaves. Eight years later he moved the school to Atlanta, where it became the Atlanta Baptist Seminary. Following his death, that institution was renamed Morehouse College (in 1913). While living in Atlanta, as recounted by historians, Joseph was "ostracized" by many whites because of his leadership role with a Black school. He was working to deinstitutionalize racism, for which he was viewed as a traitor to the southern cause.

DAR's archive shows how Sarah Corbin Robert headed in the opposite direction from her husband's grandfather. She and the organization's leadership mounted a campaign to protect their own privileges and those of their white sisters, rather than extending a hand to others. Instead, their primary concern was damage control - essentially practising "spin" as we know it today. For them, the conflict with Marian Anderson was a public relations problem rather than a question of basic humanity.

As DAR struggled to manage the narrative, it solicited proposals from PR professionals, including John Kelly, whose advertising firm was on Madison Avenue. "The Daughters of the American Revolution does not today enjoy the public esteem which rightfully belongs to it", Kelly opened a proposal to Corbin Robert in March 1939, three weeks before Anderson's concert. "The D.A.R. has an important, a vital role to play in the nation's culture and any popular misunderstanding which tends to vitiate such effort is regrettable." Restoring DAR's reputation "requires a careful program of public relations work, a program of *interpretation*", Kelly proposed. "If there exists today animosity on the part of many editorial writers, this can only be eliminated by an educational public relations program." In a similar spirit of solidarity about damage control, F. F. Nesbit, an attorney for DAR, wrote to Corbin Robert after Anderson's concert: "I want to congratulate you on your statement to the Society in your report regarding the Marion Anderson controversy as I read it reported in the press." (Anderson's first name was often misspelt - still is.)

Letters in Corbin Robert's archive document DAR members across the country registering both support and protest. These white women presumably held high social standing, and the chorus of opposition also included women with no apparent tie to the organization. Mrs George T. Royden, a

member from New Jersey, called Anderson's exclusion "nothing short of shocking". Edna May Oliver, an actress from Los Angeles, sent an angry telegram: "Are you the Daughters of the American Revolution so blind to the ideals for which your forefathers fought and died, that you dare voice such intolerance to Marion Anderson the greatest singer of our age. If this be so you do not deserve the joy and privilege of freedom", arguing that Anderson deserved inclusion because she was exceptional. By contrast, Katherine Jane Barnes Thompson, a member from Minneapolis, voiced an appeal for comprehensive civil rights. She called DAR's decision an "un-democratic, narrow-minded, and plain, downright snobbish attitude ... It certainly shows naught of tolerance, respect for personal striving and achievement, nor equality for all".

Throughout these letters, DAR appears less monolithic in its racism and with more dissent behind the scenes. The responses from Corbin Robert, however, were consistent. Carbons of her replies show that often her assistant averred that Corbin Robert was travelling and could not answer immediately, and when the President General did write, she kept her comments bland, as in one letter from May 1939: "The National Board of Management com-

posed of members from all parts of the country has at all times no other wish than to make a decision for the best interests of the Society in accordance with the highest standards of its objects ... There were compelling reasons for doing so."

Robert's official civility was by no means neutral, since it effectively upheld segregation, and many members agreed with doing so, especially those in the South. Mrs. J. G. Acton sent a telegram: "Shreveport [Louisiana] Chapter number 237 udc [sic] are with you 100 percent in the Marion Anderson controversy". Mrs Florence D. Stephenson of Winona, Mississippi amplified the Anderson episode with crude hate speech: "I have been struck with the fact that in all the wild and frenzied protests no one has touched the heart of the question. If the coloured woman had been permitted the use of the hall, of course the race would have expected all barriers removed to their entrance to hear her ... Had this permission been granted the place would probably have been swamped with negroes - the thought of which is intolerable. Moreover they would have demanded our Hall for any other concert they chose to give there, or possibly other meetings".

DAR's stance is also reflected in venom directed at Sol Hurok as a Jew. Mrs. William Nelson (Mary A.) of New York City wrote to Corbin Robert in February 1939, also singling out the conductor Walter Damrosch and the violinist Jascha Heifetz, who had made public statements in support of Anderson: "I regret extremely that Dr. Damrosch, Heifetz and others, have tried to interfere with you, but consider the source ... They are all Jews ... Hurok is also a Jew. Pushing his way and trying to force his way every where ... I also told Dr. Damrosch if Marion Anderson were such a great artist she would not wish to force herself where she is not wanted". Even more chilling is an antisemitic broadside printed by "Christian Defenders of American Heritage". It must have been mailed to Corbin Robert, although the sender is not identified. "Our story is concerned with Miss Anderson's manager, SOLOMON HUROK, who seems to have a particularly large share in this attempt to 'smear' one of the oldest patriotic societies in this country", the scurrilous flier states. "Solomon Hurok, a Russian Jew, was dumped on Ellis Island ... He was a 'bald, moon-faced little COMMISSAR OF ART,' ie a communist.

What do we do with these painful histories of hate? For decades, DAR continued to be criticized as it refused to accept full responsibility for its treatment of Anderson. It did change its stance eventually and Anderson performed at Constitution Hall later in her career. The organization now acknowledges its role and works to redress its history. Its website includes a "DAR Marian Anderson Statement", which hails her 1939 concert as "a pivotal point in the struggle for racial equality". Stating that it "wishes that history could be rewritten", DAR affirms it "has learned from the past". At the same time, the use of the passive voice is unsettling: "The National Society Daughters of the American Revolution deeply regrets that Marian Anderson was not given the opportunity to perform her 1939 Easter concert in Constitution Hall".

Opening up Sarah Corbin Robert's archive to scholars constitutes a major step towards transparency, even reconciliation. The materials, including the offensive documents, are available for viewing by scholars, and a webpage publishes selected Marian Anderson materials about the organization's role in barring her performance in Constitution Hall. It is one model for other institutions with a similarly troubled past.

For the US to move past the current racial crisis and achieve substantive change, its racist history needs to be told fully and repeatedly, with all the offensive details intact. DAR's new cache of materials gives an insider's view on one famous case of racial exclusion, revealing the clear-eyed intent and pernicious attention to detail that maintained segregation for a very long time. ■

from The Orchards

(After Rilke)

XXVIII A Goddess

Dog days on the terrace.
The goddess was here, she was here -
but she left no trace.
Not one single strand of hair.

Nature promises to catch her out.
Everywhere invisible forces conspire
to read each soft contour
in a terrible new light.

XLI

Strange, this nostalgia for places we never loved,
or not enough, in the passing hour;
the wish to honour them even now
with a forgotten gesture, a final gift,

and some day return -
this time alone -
to touch that tree, to linger by that fountain,
to caress this bench made of stone...

That lonely chapel you always meant
to visit, or so you said - go to it:
ease open the lych-gate, and sit
silent with the silent.

Pious or subtle,
to make contact is the important thing.
To be strong as the earth is strong.
To lament because we understand so little.

LVIII

We can rest here tonight. I have something to say -
but once again I catch myself; once
again you wait upon my silence ...

Let the others play
at calling one another 'lover' or 'friend'.
Here, under these wonderful trees, we renew our bond.

PAUL BATCHELOR