

COMMENTARY

Sylvia Olden Lee,
Pianist and Vocal Coach

‘Pay attention to
the *words*. Know
what you’re
talking about...’

Sylvia Olden Lee, pianist and vocal coach, was the first Black professional musician at the New York Metropolitan Opera, as Vocal Coach from 1954 to 1956, just before Marian Anderson’s 1955 debut. For the next decade, she played and coached more than five hundred concerts in Germany, Sweden, and across Europe. She has been Professor of Vocal Interpretation at the Curtiss Institute of Music in Philadelphia for more than twenty years. She is known as the teacher and inspiration for dozens of singers, including Kathleen Battle and Jessye Norman.

The following reminiscence is adapted from a presentation given by Miss Lee at a music symposium at Washington, D.C.’s Howard University Feb. 7 [SEE news article, page 83]. She was introduced by Dennis Speed, Northeast Coordinator of the Schiller Institute, as “one of the truly great musicians in this country.” Her presentation has been supplemented by comments made in a later interview.

My grandmother landed in the U.S. from Kildare, Ireland—Mama’s mama. Mama was so fair, with the green eyes, and the hair to her knees, and all that, that people used to always say, “Don’t you know, Sylvia, that your mother’s white? You *know* your mother’s white.” And it never occurred to me, that with Daddy walking around, looking like Harry Belafonte, that he had married a white woman. Because Mama *knew* she was African-American, and she never had an argument about it. But afterwards people continued to say, “She’s white.”

Well, my daughter Evie, who is a researcher, said, “I’ll get rid of that,” and sent to New Orleans to get the birth certificate. I told her, “in the case of many a child born in New ’Leans, white, black

and green, the parents never even bothered to go to Canal Street to register them. So, if you don’t get anything, it doesn’t mean anything.” But, they sent me something very legitimate, which was her birth certificate, and it’s got, in a Lincolnesque handwriting, very clearly put, “colored.” So that does it. And her father was from Ohio. Evie wrote there, for the Wards (the father’s side of the family), but couldn’t get anything.

And, on Daddy’s side, *his* father had run away from the plantation. My grandfather, Olden, was a slave born on the Oldham plantation, which, if you look at the Kentucky map today, is now a county. So, Oldham must have been a big-time gangster. He had a huge plantation. He had a son, who was the color

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of my son. And my grandfather was a slave.

War was declared, and my grandfather decided that he wasn’t going to put up with the plantation any longer. He ran away from the plantation, and moved by night, until he got to the north of Kentucky, where the Ohio River is a creek, swam over it, and at last he was in the North. And he went to offer himself—I don’t know whether he was thirteen, or fifteen, or so—to the Union Army. The men laughed at him—my aunt told me this, his oldest daughter—and said, “You ain’t nothin’ but a sprout. Who you come out here to fight? We’ll make you the water boy.”



EIRNS/Christopher Lewis

So, they made him the water boy. And then, they got bad off, in a year or two, and they used him as a soldier, and he fought. And Mr. Lincoln freed everybody, so my grandfather strutted back home to the plantation. But he said, "I ain't got no name, I'm just George. I'll take his—Oldham's—name, but I ain't going to spell it that dumb way, I'm going to spell it "Olden." So that's how we got that name. And he went from there to Fisk University, just founded. He took English and Religion, whatever he could pay for.

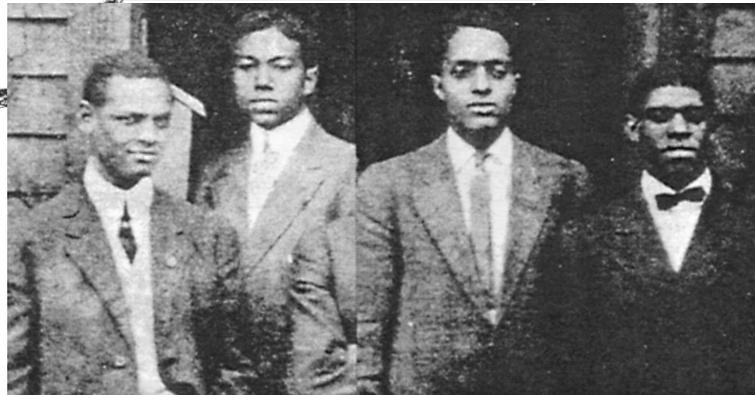
And my grandmother, my father's mother, was the daughter of the founder of the Spruce Street Baptist Church, founded in 1823 in Nashville, and still there. She had the \$5.00/semester for Fisk. But my grandfather had to work hard. They met there, and then they married. And they had four children, the youngest of whom was Daddy.

I come prenatally from music, with my mother meeting my father at Fisk University on the day she arrived. My father was a quartet member of Fisk University, with Roland Hayes, Lem Foster, and Charles Wesley, whose name may mean something to you Howard University folks. He was a candidate for the presidency of this university, and did at least head Wilberforce College. And, Miss Leontyne Price gives him the credit for making her change, in her freshman year, from music education. Her mother wanted her to be practical. Mr. Wesley heard her sing, and said, "No, no, no! Unless you are in love with teaching only, *no one* should stop you from getting that voice across," and he helped her.

And, of the four men in the quartet,

only one of them was a music major. Daddy was religion, Charlie was history and classics, and Lem Foster was sociology. Roland Hayes was the only voice major. But, they made the entire quartet

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The Fisk Quartet, 1908 (left to right): James Olden, Lemuel Foster, Charles Wesley, Roland Hayes.

study voice, on the side, at Fisk. They had to sing Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Gounod. Every other week or so, they had to get into a horse-and-buggy, and lumber on down through the "jungles" of Tennessee for two or three hours, into the hard country, and bring back more Spirituals. So that's part of one of *my* projects.

And, the other project that you will hear about, coming up, if it ever flowers: The day that the tenor trio—Pavarotti, and Domingo, and Mr. Carreras—got through with their highly bombastic and successful [laughter]—It was. It was a bombshell. Think of the people

who had never paid any attention to opera before, who found it interesting, and who followed them. The next day, I wanted to come forth with three Black tenors, who are endowed by God with the talent. They have put in the hard hours and years of study, which many an opera singer has tried to do.

And, I only brought about this project of SYLVIA, "Save Young Lyric Voices In Advance," the acrostic, from what I gathered down through the years. I have never sung, never tried. I didn't have it in my mind to be a singer. Maybe, it's because Mama was the singer of the family, and also at Fisk University, doing the Mozart, and Rossini, and Gounod, Bach, Handel solos for the choir, which every Sunday, always, did the first oratorio, rated excellent. And, some of the other programs had opera, and Mama did operatic arias.

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on the staff of the Metropolitan Opera, also the New York Philharmonic, and he came home every holiday he got a chance, to visit his father. He heard Mama sing, and he offered her the Metropolitan. He said, "We need that voice, and you're about to graduate."

My mother never told me any of this. Some lady who was in on the offering,

who was a pal of hers, got ahold of me in Harlem, and said, “Sylvia, did your mother ever tell you? I’m coming to tell you, because I had an idea. You’ve got to know this story.”

He offered her the Metropolitan, and he said, “But you’re going to have to”—in 1913—“you’ve certainly got to forget about being ‘colored.’ You will come there, and sing.”

Mama was engaged to my father, not married to him. She was so tickled about the opportunity, but when she was told, “You’re going to have to forget about being colored,” Mrs. Meier said, “we sat there, the bunch of us, at the professor’s house, and saw her just wilt on the spot.” She said, “Oh, no. I can’t do that. I can’t give up Genie.” And, Mrs. Meier says, “Oh, go ahead. You can get that done, put your wedding off for half a year, and then let everybody know.”

My father resembled so much, in his youth, Harry Belafonte. When Harry first hit the top in the ’50’s, ’60’s, and ’70’s, my brother, who was on the staff at CBS on Madison Avenue, was stopped, time and time again, for autographs. They thought *he* was Harry. So, that gives you an idea, how “Caucasian” my father was! But, Mama said, “I can’t give him up.” And the girls said, “Go ahead, and just half a year, and you can make your success, and even in New York, you could be married to him. They’re not as bad up there as they are down here.”

And Mama said, “No, no, no.” So, Mrs. Meier said, “we can’t do anything with her. Let’s go to Genie, and tell him the chance she has.” She said to my father, “Give this girl a break. If you encourage her, she may go take her chance. She is fit for it. We need somebody to represent us.” He said, “I’ll do no such thing.” And he *did* no such thing. I don’t think he ever let her know; she certainly never let *me* know anything about the incident. It wasn’t until five years after she died, that I heard about it.

The first time I ever accompanied anybody. I began with Mama’s practicing her piano and her voice all the time. On my fifth birthday, I remember this clearly: She brought me by the hand to

the piano and said, “Now, today we’re starting with *you*.” And I studied from the age of five years, until I got to be about eight, when I started doing accompaniment for her and Daddy. The first thing I did in public, was an accompaniment to “Du Bist Die Ruh” of Schubert, for my father. And then he did “Hark, Hark, the Lark,” and a few other things. And then I got so I could do Mama’s arias. She was very famous for her “Traviata.” And, as I came along—I majored in piano, somehow I didn’t want to sing. I think, if you don’t have a voice like Mama’s, you don’t need to try.

I was born in Mississippi. I lived there for about fourteen months, and then Daddy got a bigger church which took him to Birmingham, the Sixteenth Street Congregational Church, around the corner from where the four little girls were blown up [the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church—ed.]. Daddy was born a Baptist and died one, but, when he finished school at Fisk, the first open place was at Brick’s North Carolina Prep School, or something, and his first church came in Mississippi, which was Congregational. And he was transferred to Birmingham. I was in Birmingham until I was four.

Daddy was always fighting the Ku Klux Klan, and going out and getting into trouble. The Ku Klux Klan got sick of him, the three years we lived in Birmingham, and one night they shot through the parsonage window. That was a warning to Daddy. He still didn’t take it. Then, he was called to Washington, to replace Rev. Garner, who was the third, or second pastor of Plymouth Congregational Church, which moved out on North Capitol. He took that church, and had it for fourteen or fifteen years or so, and that’s where I gained consciousness. I went all through school to two years of Howard University, and then I was brought to Oberlin with a scholarship.

While I was in Washington, Daddy was fighting every day. He would take

us to school, and then he would go straight to the Capitol, like Wilberforce who went to Parliament. He would go down there every day and say, “I wonder how you all can be sitting here making laws, and not ask God what he thinks of what you are now doing?” And he fought, fought, fought.

Well, I had my life in New York, and then went to Europe. But Daddy brought my husband Everett [Classical violinist and conductor Everett Lee—ed.] to Louisville, Kentucky. Daddy had gone around and settled back in Louisville, where he had lived a while. And, as we got on the boat to go to Europe, he said, “Maestro, what you

Mr. Judson turned and said to Everett, ‘I’m reading these reviews. They are out of this world. You really have something. But I might as well tell you, right now, I don’t believe in Negro symphony conductors.’ Everett told me that was the biggest shock. Then Judson said, ‘Well, perhaps if you go abroad . . .’

think”—he had excellent diction, but when he wanted to act silly, he would speak like “the Kingfish”—“what you think about when you get back here, that the first place you conduct would be *below the [Mason-Dixon] line?*”

Well, Everett said, “Reverend, I *know* you’ve lost your mind now.” But after we got to Rome, as Fulbright scholars, after a few months, the wire services—AP, or UPI—called up our apartment in mid-winter, February or March, and wanted to know if they could send someone out to interview Maestro Lee. I wanted to know “for what.” “We are told by the Louisville Gazette,” or whatever the paper was in Louisville, “that Maestro Lee is to conduct the Louisville Philharmonic when he lands back in America.” And, sure enough, Everett didn’t believe it! It was

the first time a Black would conduct a symphony in any town—and certainly a resident symphony—the first time that a Black had been invited to do it.

We landed one day, stayed with my brother. We had to fly the next day down to Louisville. Everett was on TV. “Maestro Lee, we consider ourselves doubly fortunate, that Louisville has been chosen as the city to further brotherhood by inviting you to conduct.” For twenty-five minutes, they interviewed Everett, and then we went to the rehearsal. Everett had had a lot of experience from New York, and in Europe, in Italy, Spain, and all around, with the different orchestras, and he just went in there and conducted. Then, in the

We were in New York, for ten years before this, and Everett had been on Broadway, with the “Carmen Jones.”

He had never wanted to be a conductor, but he was concert-master of the *Carmen Jones* [an “ethnic” adaptation of Bizet’s *Carmen*, popular in the 1940’s—ed.], and so the conductor wanted everything to be Classical that people did in that orchestra. You know that in *Carmen Jones*, they didn’t change one note, one rhythm, nothing but the text. And all the singers not only had to have the voice to show that they could “pass,” they had to show that they had been trained classically, every one of them. The dancers couldn’t be “hoofers.” They had to show that they had had Classical dance.

didn’t know when to steal in, with the interlude, or the intro to something, if you weren’t acquainted with it.

So Litow said, “You know this show now, Everett. I’m going to ask Billy to give you a rehearsal.” Now, this would already make history on Broadway, because, they never had what was called a “tightening-up” rehearsal for “colored” shows. They wouldn’t spend the money. But, he said, “I’m going to ask Billy to give you a rehearsal, and a matinee, so that you can get used to it. What would happen if something happened, and I didn’t show?”

So Litow asked Billy, and Billy said, “You don’t need any assistant.” Sure enough, one night, Litow didn’t come



EIRNS/Stuart Lewis

When I lived in Germany, one of the people I worked with was Gerhard Hüsch. He was an aristocrat, like Roland Hayes. I mean, they were aristocrats, not by title, but as men. Hall Johnson was an aristocrat also. These were men who had a certain princely bearing, were tireless, indefatigable scholars, and students. Roland came from the lowliest kind of home, and he worked as a sharecropper. But Hall was the son of a minister, went to college, and was always a scholar.

morning, when he woke up to conduct for these folks in Louisville, he said, “You know, it’s the first time that I’m feeling skittish.” This was in 1953. I said to him, “you’ll know how to handle it. And he went to the rehearsal that morning. Then I got scared, and Daddy came by the house and, I said, “Everett is having second thoughts about this.” I said, “Daddy, you go to that rehearsal, and you get, in the in-between in the rest period, you get to a phone, and tell me how it went.” And Daddy called, about two hours later, and said, “Oh, they’re really being so subservient, it’s a shame. He’s *got* them.” And, the performance was for an *integrated audience*, which is another thing. This is two years before Rosa Parks got going. And so, that concert went off very beautifully.

Everett was brought on stage, from the pit, simply to do the oboe solo. Mr. Billy Rose said, he wanted to have Classical music played in the “country club scene.” And so he brought Everett up on the stage from the pit in striped pants, and swallow tails, and he played the oboe part—but Rose wanted it, just for show. And then Everett went off, took his scene-clothes off, and came back into the pit. So Mr. Litow, who was maestro, said, to Everett, “You know, this show is so great, it’s going to run at least a year. But, you know, we can get anybody to come to conduct *Carmen*, but not *Carmen Jones*.” The speaking parts, which Bizet had originally wanted in French, Bizet had been told, had to be put to music. There are no speaking parts in *Carmen*. But, *Carmen Jones* had plenty of them, in “Black English.” And so, you

in. And I had said to Everett, “They’re not going to give you any trials. You just have to be ready any night, to go out there and conduct. But be sure, when you hear about it, ten minutes before, you get somebody to phone and let me know.” Sure enough, that’s what happened. “Ms. Lee, Everett told me to call you and tell you he’s going on.” That was two or three months after I had told him this.

This was the first time that an African-American had conducted a major Broadway show, or what was considered a major Broadway show, because there had been other “colored” shows before this.

Everett had to play all kinds of jazz shows, to live. Everett told me, “You know, we all practice our concerti while we are waiting to go on. We have an

oboist, who has to play clarinet, because that's the only way that he can live. And this saxophonist, I found out, graduated in bassoon, but there's no place for him to play. I'm going to put a few of them together, get them to get their lips back, and put them together with my Jewish friends who have symphony jobs." And that's what he did. And he made his debut in Town Hall. He got rave reviews from New York's nine daily papers. And the next year, he got rave reviews. So somebody said, "You're good enough, with these reviews, to be farmed out. You ought to be doing guest appearances. And I know Judson"—of the Judson booking agency—"who manages 89% of all the conducting jobs in this country, including visitors, guests, and residents. I'm going to get an appointment with him for you."

Everett told me about what happened. "I went there, and I was ushered into the room. Judson turned and said, 'Oh, come in, young man. I'm reading these reviews. They are out of this world. You really have something. But I might as well tell you, right now, I don't believe in Negro symphony conductors.'" And Everett said, that was the biggest shock. "No, you may play solo with our symphonies, all over this country. You can dance with them, sing with them. But a Negro, standing in front of a white symphony group? No. I'm sorry."

Everett said, "I was so shocked. I had gotten my conducting lessons through the G.I. bill. I was doing everything I was supposed to do, but I had no future in my country. If Judson, who handles everything, is not going to recommend you, then you have no chance. I was just stupefied." Judson said, "I'm sorry, young man. I told the same thing to Dean Dixon." And Everett said, "That knocked it into me. And I told Judson, 'Yes, Dean Dixon had to *leave his country* to be a man and a musician.' And Judson said to me, 'Well, perhaps if you got abroad . . .'"

So, I told Everett, "You have to go abroad." He said "How?" We had two babies by that time. I said, "There's a Fulbright, or something." But he said, "I'm not going without you." So, that's how we got to Europe. Everett then got jobs with the symphonies in Europe, as guest conductor, and he again got rave reviews. So, then he went back to Judson. Judson said, "These are wonderful reviews. I still don't think I could sell you, though, in a town like Annapolis, or Kansas City, or something." Instead of *trying*, he would not do it. So Everett got to conduct, but it came from word of

But Hall was the son of a minister, went to college, and was always a scholar. He also played violin very well, and was in a quartet. And they studied, and he knew and spoke German. He took his choir to Germany, and recorded in their radio stations, before there was TV, and they were broadcast all the time. Then, they translated the African-American Spirituals into German. He wrote a lot of essays in German, some of which I have. They still sometimes broadcast him abroad. He was irreplaceable. He believed in no nonsense. He thought, if you overdid the dialect of



EIRNS/Diane Sare

mouth and from the city itself. [Eventually, Everett Lee would leave the United States permanently, only returning for occasional guest-conductor jobs.—ed.]

When I lived in Germany, for seven years, one of the people I worked with, was Gerhard Hüsch. He was an aristocrat, like Roland Hayes. I mean, they were aristocrats, not by title, but as men. Hall Johnson was an aristocrat also. These were men who had a certain princely bearing, were tireless, indefatigable scholars, and students. Hall came from Athens, Georgia. I don't know that he met Roland before Roland went to school. Roland came from the lowliest kind of home. His folks weren't educated, and he worked as a sharecropper.

With voice students and William Warfield, Ben Holt Day Young Artists Concert, Duke Ellington School for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C., October 1995.

every one of the dialect Spirituals, you were making it like a minstrel show, a "coon show." He said, you should just talk naturally, to perform it like all other folk music. And I'm busy preaching that, as of now.

Mr. Hüsch came from a background of scholars in Hanover. He was born in Hanover, where the best Deutsch is spoken. He would never get snooty about it, but he would say, "No, you can't say that that way. That's a little 'Hessische' [Hessian]. You've got to be sure that the flow is there." He was very thorough.

He was wonderful, and I was sent to work with him on German *lieder*. He knew I wasn't a singer. He had me play for the lessons. Then, when I was through with those, in two years, I lived there five more years right down the street from him. He had me come to his house and work with him. Because he still had a beautiful voice. And, after that, he came to Indiana and taught. Marvelous man, spoke marvelous English, had a sense of humor, and he was a wonderful teacher. He said to me, "There are people who will tell you that Germans do not sing *legato*. Well, I

Most of the work, I try to tell them, is like medical students: do it quietly. When you wake up in the morning, get the opera score, and look at it, and read it. Don't make a tremble in your—don't make a sound. Max Rudolph said: Beethoven and Verdi never wrote a line of poetry or prose in their lives, but on their deathbeds both of them said, 'Pay attention to the words.' Know what you're talking about, much less singing.

insist, that when you are doing something that calls for it, that you do it." You could not sing in his master class, until you had done the poem as it came to the poet. You had to stand up as though you were in a drama class, and do it. *Then* you would be allowed to sing. And he was just so wonderful that way. He would have someone sing something all the way through, in tempo, as he would walk, slowly, around the classroom. And when you would finish, you would look to him. And he would stop still, standing. He would have his eyes closed. And he would say, "I'm sleeping." He, and Hall, always said, "slow" did not mean "funereal." Hall, and he, were so wonderful.

I also spent two whole days with

Roland Hayes, who had been with my Daddy every day of his life, for five years, from 1906 to 1911. Then Hayes got famous. I went to see him in Boston, in the last six months of his life. And I sat and played his songs. He took me through them, and showed me what he would like to have, and he told me just what to do. I said to him, "I've got it in my head from hearing you at Carnegie Hall." He said, "But, I want you to be sure that there is never anything *snooty* about it."

Hall also said, of the Spirituals, that many of them are not in dialect, but it is to be known that they originated in the lives of people that were in the lower social-economic bracket. Daddy knew the "Du Bist Die Ruh," but he had the Spirituals in his mind, Mama too. So, I have never gotten over the snootiness of those of us, who either won't sing them, or say "Well, Sylvia, my folks were never slaves." And I congratulate them on that every time. "How did you manage that? That's *wonderful!*"

But, I'm still fooling with singers: Todd Duncan, who was on the faculty here at Howard, insisted, "Sylvia, you've got the background. My kids here at the college, my voice majors, need training. Start right out."

So, I started, and I don't think that's bad at all, to get my training from Todd Duncan. Fantastic musician, and he's still around here, and I'm hoping I can get him to still sing. He is, in two days, he'll be 96, or something like that. The voice is still gorgeous. [Shortly after this presentation, Mr. Duncan died, on Feb. 28 of this year—ed.] And, of course, he did "Porgy," loved it. Didn't think he would, but he made his name. But he said, "Before I get tagged as Porgy and nothing else, I'm going to get my *lieder* and my German and all, and go around the country singing recital programs." And, he did that, and made marvelous, marvelous success with it, and then sang at the New York City Opera. The Met wasn't "ready" for him yet. Isn't that too bad?

That was in '55, when Max Rudolph had brought me in '54. My husband was taking private conducting studies from Gustav Mahler's nephew, Fritz Mahler, and Max Rudolph. These men came from Germany. Max Rudolph was the right hand of Rudolf Bing, he was artistic director. And, when we came to visit him, the first thing I did when I met this man, came to his house informally, I said: "I want to know, when is a Negro"—that was the word back then, and you understand it still, don't you?—"when is a Negro going to get a chance to sing at the Metropolitan?" And I told him about my mother.

"It'll happen, Sylvia, but you know, the first singer, at the Met, of color, has got to have the greatest voice, the finest talent, training, and be an absolutely incontestible, excellent musician, and the first part that he or she sings, must be visually believable."

So, I forgot about it. We went away as Fulbrights to Rome, came back, and heard Toscanini. That's another person that every Joe would listen to a bit of. Wouldn't listen to the *whole* opera on television and all, but at least they knew Toscanini. And, we came back home, and we were at the home of one of our friends in White Plains, out on the lawn. We didn't take time to sit and listen, we just—it was part of the entertainment. And I noticed it was *Ballo in Maschera*. I said, "Hm-hm." I had been accompanying Carol Brice, who was the first Black to get the Nuremberg Prize. She was a Juilliard student, and she had sung already with all of the big orchestras in this country, but she wasn't a glamour girl.

But, this part of Ulrica, I thought of it right away. So I said to him, that next summer, "Isn't it funny we notice, no matter what you've got on your roster for the coming year at the Metropolitan, you've managed to push a few of them off, to make room for what Toscanini succeeded in the last spring?" He said "Yes." I said "Well, what about this?" He said "What?" I said, "This year, it's *Ballo in Maschera*." I said, "Do you remember what you said about a Negro?" "Yes." I said, "What about Carol Brice?"

It *never* occurred to me to ask about

Miss Anderson. She could have been in La Scala, Covent Garden, Paris, if she wanted to be. And she admitted the same: she hadn't thought operatically. She and Dorothy Maynor never got on the opera stage. But, I said "Carol Brice to do Ulrica, the fortune teller, it would be—it's not the lead, but it's a good size part." And he said, "Yes. Get her to come and bring it to me. She doesn't need the whole opera here in spring for the winter. But, get her to bring it."

Carol Brice, for the first time, with her Bach programs over CBS every week, and her singing with the Harvard Glee Club, and all the philharmonics in this country and around the world, began to hedge. Her voice had been in bad shape from an Alaskan tour, and she was kind of afraid to come and sing for him not in good voice.

Next thing we know, I read in the paper that Miss Anderson was going to do it. I was so happy! I said, "It never occurred to me. Now that we've got her, what about Carol? Need not apply?" He said, "No. Have her come when she's healthy, because Mr. Hurok has said that Miss Anderson is only to make this one step, as a milestone. She is not to sing any more opera."

Marian Anderson was so marvelous. I don't know that any of you are old enough to have been at that debut in 1955. But, it started a *deluge* of Blacks being allowed to come to the Met, and doing well. If they had not acquitted themselves well, if critiques had been bad, then the bigots on the board would have said, "Well, you bring these Negroes in here, and they don't know anything you're trying to do, we're not having them."

No. There were *one hundred*. There were *one hundred*. And only about forty when James Levine came, and he brought—I went, because I was on the staff at the Met. Max Rudolph had me training singers. And, I was the first Black to do this. And so, I proceeded to work very diligently with them, and some of them I didn't even know. They flooded in, forty of them, before Mr. Levine got there. And, I went to the archives, and found out that he had brought forty. And I said, "You know

that's going to give you a bad name with this place. You know, they won't allow it." He said, "What do you mean? No. Well, I don't care. They can't touch me. They can't touch me. I have"—this was in the '70's, late '70's. He said, "until the '90's, I have a contract."

You notice you're not hearing quite so many now? Why do we have only Jessye last year with *The Makropulos*, and Denise Graves with *Carmen*, and the others do Ping, Pang, or Pong, just walking on, or pulling some kind of a carriage, or something? Why do we not have the African-American talent here, that is up and ready and proving itself all the time, in Europe?

We lived for seven years in Munich, Germany, and I was all over that country. Germans won't use anybody on their sixty opera slates. They have a rule: Don't use any non-German, if there is a German to do the part. And I can understand that they'd think that way.

But there are *black* Blacks, all over Germany, at the big opera houses. I'm so proud of my Gwen Bradley, who came to Curtiss, and she has been to Paris, and everywhere, and she has been the *Hochcoloratura* soprano, *the leading soprano* of Berlinstaats [the Federal opera house—ed].

Anyway, I gathered, through the years, from '35 to about '90, oh, I got this thing together. I named it in an acrostic, after my mother: "Save Young Lyric Voices In Advance"—SYLVIA. I meant for the singer to *think* of himself, and not just go praised all through high school in singing *Madame Butterfly* there, to come to school and expect to do *Tosca* and those things. Mr. Muti, who just stepped down from the Philadelphia Orchestra, is head of La Scala. He got me, and said, "Please, Signora Lee, *don't let any of your pupils*"—he thought I was a technician, I know nothing of technique—but he said, "*Don't let any of them sing Puccini before they're thirty.*"

I said, "What about 'O Mio Bambino Caro'?" He said, "Maybe. But that's all. If they do justice to that age of people, the Puccini's and all, Puccini and

Giordano, and all like that, they will endanger their throats physically. So, be careful that they *save*, learn as much as they can between sixteen and twenty-two and twenty-four, and sing things that are not a penalty to them, and a danger. Get them to get their voice teachers to tell them exactly how many hours a day they sing their exercises and their repertoire."

This, just simply, is the sum total of what I gathered, from the Jessye Normans and Marian Andersons and, oh, Shirley Verrett, that wonderful somebody. Oh, God! And Kathy Battle. They have one thing in common: there are no two voices with the same print, thumbprint. The ability, the beauty and all, that's a matter of opinion. But they *all*, if they reach this level, *they have saved their throats*, or broken it early, and shut up for a year, such as Lawrence Tibbett is supposed to have done, and Lucrezia Boria. They have had to go through that kind of "maybe it'll come back." But if they're not ruined, they are able to work.

But, most of the work, I try to tell them, it is like medical students: do it quietly. When you wake up in the morning, get the opera score, and look at it, and *read* it. Don't make a tremble in your—*don't make a sound*. This is what I tell them to do, from what I have gathered. And, this works, that you *learn*. And I've got Einstein's picture that says "Just Say Know," *K-n-o-w*.

Don't get up, and just because your voice sounds like Miss Price's to somebody, your boyfriend or your church, that you get up and throw it together. We are coming, every day, closer to the truth, which means what Max Rudolph said: Beethoven and Verdi never wrote a line of poetry or prose in their lives, but on their deathbeds both of them said, "Pay attention to the *words*." Know what you're *talking* about, much less singing.

So, that is what I would like. Now I'm trying to get these three tenors going. And, when I get that going—we should, before that, march to the Met, to get them to give us a reason—they might have a reason—that they don't use these marvelous talents.