

Tenor George Shirley

‘You have to *translate* the composer and the poet’

George Shirley studied with Cornelius Reid in New York and debuted at the New York Metropolitan Opera in 1961, singing 189 performances there in twenty-seven roles over two decades. He debuted in 1966 at Glyndebourne, in 1967 at Covent Garden in London, and at La Scala in Milan. His many recordings include Mozart’s “Cosi Fan Tutti” and “Requiem.” Formerly Professor of Voice at the University of Maryland in College Park, he now teaches at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and performs nationally. The following interview was conducted by Dennis Speed on May 29, 1993, after Shirley performed in a concert in tribute to Marian Anderson sponsored by the Schiller Institute at the Ebenezer United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C.

Fidelio: I’d like you to give us your view of the significance of Marian Anderson and of the singers who broke into this area of Classical singing in the United States.

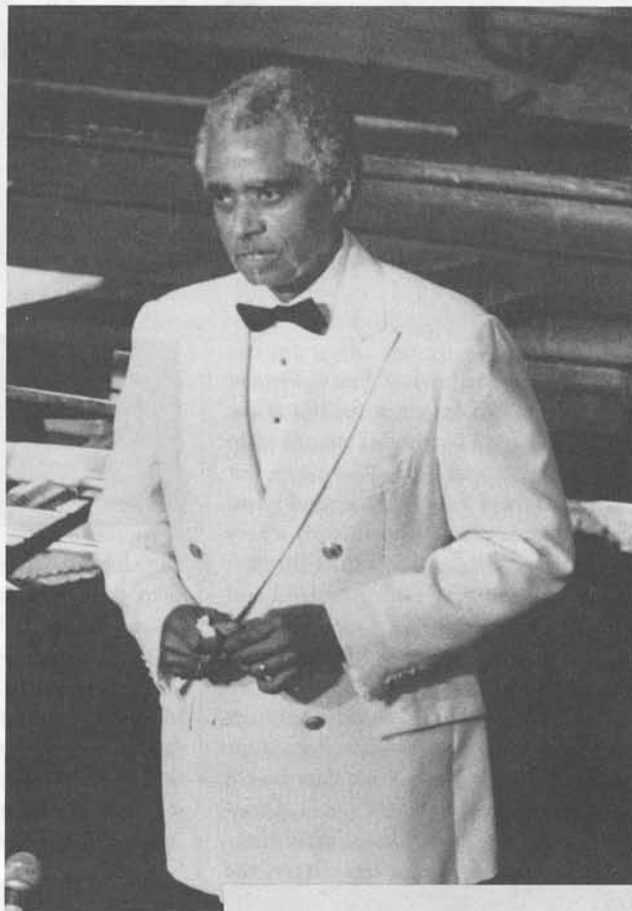
Shirley: I think it always has great impact when individuals achieve success in an area of function in which they are not expected to achieve it, for whatever reason. So the significance of people like Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, Roland Hayes, Sissieretta Jones, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, is just that they proved that they were more than capable of doing something that they were not expected to be able to do.

Marian Anderson not only showed

herself to be a superior singer, superior interpreter of the works of European composers; she not only showed herself to be possessor of one of the greatest vocal gifts of probably all time; she also went beyond that: Her significance extended to the area of the spirit. She, like Roland Hayes, was one of the most spiritual people I’ve ever had the opportunity of meeting. There was a dignity about everything she did: the way she carried herself, the way she spoke, the way she sang, the way she was, that spoke much more loudly in a sense than her artistry.

When you were in her presence, you had the feeling that you were in the presence of something that went beyond just humanity. And for all who heard her, for all of us who were privileged to have met her, this was an influence that altered the way we existed, the way we responded to situations and people.

The first time I met her, I was in college, possibly still in high school, I can’t remember, and I worked as a page for the Detroit Public Library. A women’s



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organization had invited her to Detroit and there was a tea given for her at the branch where I worked. I managed to push my truck full of books up to her side. And there was a split second when she was alone and I leaped, with a very small piece of paper, and sort of thrust it at her and she very sweetly smiled and signed it. I still have that paper.

My next meeting with her came some twenty years later, when I invited her to come so that I could interview her for a series that I was producing for WQXR-FM in New York City called “Classical Music and the Afro-American.” I spent a wonderful hour with her talking about her career, the pressures that she faced, and how she dealt with those pressures.

This woman, this great person, this great American exuded an aura that could not help but be respected. The whole area of dignity is one that we are sorely out of touch with today. We rarely see public figures reacting and acting in what can be termed, I think, a dignified manner. For African-Americans in particular, I think that genuine dignity and spirituality are fundamentals that must be reconstituted in the African-American community, in America in general, but especially in the African-American community. Because, historically, we are a people whose every move, every action is driven by something that is spiritually connected.

If we re-establish contact with who we are and use what we’ve been given through the arts, through music, through drama, through whatever, to

aim high, and to present what we present with dignity, so that what is communicated is truly worth listening to, is truly uplifting—then we continue the legacy of Marian Anderson. In order to do that, we have to know who we are, because she knew who she was. She knew she was a child of God, and she carried herself in a manner that was true to *who she was*.

Fidelio: I believe that Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes, and other singers that we haven’t mentioned, represented the finest expressions in the United States of what is generally referred to as Classical European culture. I just wanted to get your comments on what you think needs to be done to further break open the treasure chest, if you will, and to allow these people and to allow this kind of music to really be heard the way it should be heard.

Shirley: That’s a very tall order in this society—the ability to identify quality. We have not done very much in terms of developing understanding in the American people of what constitutes quality. So it’s sort of hard for young people to know what quality is.

It’s very hard to go into the public schools today and present something, unless the children have been well-prepared to receive it. Last year I went to a career day at a public elementary school

in Detroit, and I talked about my career. One of the questions that was asked by one of the youngsters was, “Do you sing rap?” Well, not *per se*, but I suppose one might think of recitative as being a kind of rap.

The ground, unfortunately, at that level is not being prepared, because of the fact that the arts are still seen by the public as of less than tertiary importance, when it comes to preparing the ground, preparing children. Children learn a tremendous amount of knowledge before they go to school through play, through music, through creating their own dramas, what have you. And then, when they get to school, they’re told that they have to “get serious” and forget about all of that. The parents get up-tight because the children are not able to communicate, to compute. So they see that the only way to do that is to sit them down in a dry kind of atmosphere, and pound it into them.

Fidelio: It’s called drill and grill.

Shirley: So, this whole thing of being able to identify quality gets lost, gets squeezed out. We don’t know anymore what quality is. How to attack that problem? I wish I had an answer, because I think in attacking it you have to re-weave the warp and woof of this society.

Fidelio: Do you see spirituals as you've performed them today as being essentially correspondent to the Classical lied?

Shirley: Great lieder are honest. They're forthright. And the musical construct in which they live is one that highlights, supports, and never interferes with that honesty, that directness of communication of the message of the poetry. The spiritual is honest.

One of the reasons I chose to sing the Hayes spiritual, "Little Boy, How Old Are You?," is because of the fact that it mirrors exactly the greatness of a Schubert lied. The simplicity of construction, the directness of the message, no artifice. Hayes' spirituals in particular are lean and powerful, beautiful.

The connection is natural. That's the reason why the spiritual was included in the song recital. No flamboyance, to the point, great economy of means—all of those things that we appreciate and worship in great composers are embodied in the spiritual.

It's interesting, I sang once at a high school in California for a gymnasium full of kids and I did a wide variety of things. But the things that held them the most were those very simple, quiet presentations. One of the teachers said, "How do you do that?" I don't do it. If you have something to tell people, then they'll listen. It's so much better, so much more powerful, I feel, if that listening, if that message, is surrounded by what I consider to be the basic language of humankind, and that's music.

Music is a tremendously powerful force that is, I think, not well understood to be such by many in today's society. Because if they did, then the messages that that music is utilized to give would be different. Messages given

through music stay in the consciousness. They are alternatives to thought. And that, I don't think, is as deeply appreciated as it should be.

I don't doubt that if the messages given through music were different, that society would be different, and that the consciousness of the listener would be higher. It's a hard message to get through to people. I think that some of the people who do understand it, and use it in what I consider to be negative ways, are very aware of what's going on, very, very aware of the effect, but they won't tell you that.

I'm not talking about subliminal messages. I'm talking about messages that hit you right between the eyes. I'm talking about rhythms that are warrior rhythms. I'm talking about sonorities that reflect the imbalance that exists to a frightening degree in the thinking of many of us in today's society.

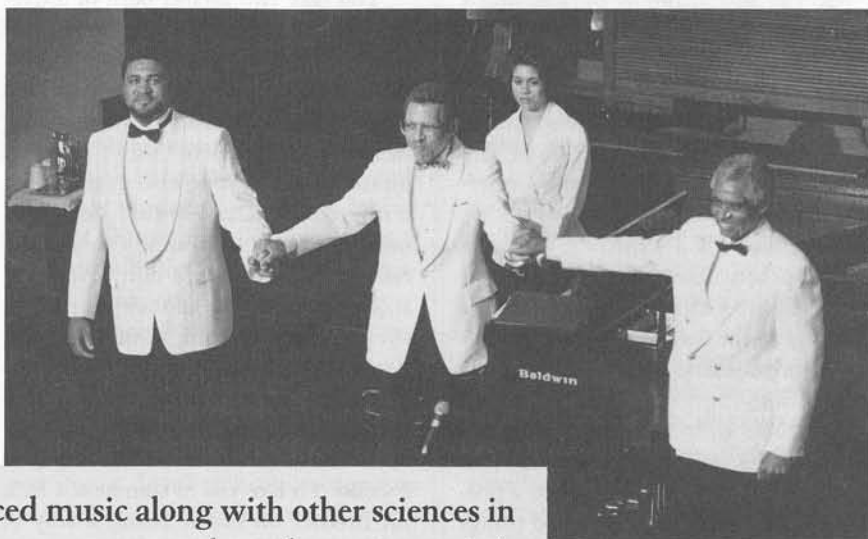
Sometimes when I'm driving down the street and my car begins to bounce a few feet off the ground as someone approaches with a booming bass, I wonder, what would happen if that were indeed something that was very quiet and soothing and calm. I know how I react to music and I don't think

I'm that different from others. In those situations where the bass is booming and the energy level is about 400 miles high, I know how I would feel if somebody bumped into my car, if somebody challenged me. Whereas, if it were something that I would identify as more soothing, I think that would effect the way I might respond in a situation like that.

What we're seeing today is a lot of response that can only be termed violent, senseless. I think a lot of it has to do with what people surround themselves with, the aura of sound and rhythm with which they surround themselves. Again, I think there are people who know the effects, who profit by it, and will attempt to continue to do so as long as they can.

Fidelio: What does it take to make a great artist?

Shirley: I was speaking with a young woman a little earlier, who is a piano major at Oberlin. We were talking about the fact that music is a tough taskmaster or mistress. We accept the fact that to be a great athlete you have to practice and it's interesting to see as we drive down the city streets, young men



EIRNS/Philip Ulanowsky

With his student Gordon Hawkins (left) and accompanist Dr. Raymond Jackson, concluding the May 29 concert.

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practicing all the time. They don't know they're practicing, but they're out there shooting hoops till the sun goes down and they're actually practicing, but they're *enjoying* it. They're having fun.

The same kind of practice goes into being a professional musician. And it's hard, but a musician enjoys it. There are times when you would like to be somewhere else, maybe shooting hoops, but you know that you have a concert coming up, so you have to shoot your hoops at the keyboard or with your voice or the horn. But it's exhilarating, hard work that prepares you, fills you,

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enables you to go out and do what you enjoy doing.

So the discipline of person that's required is something that one carries with oneself into other areas of endeavor as well. We were talking about the fact that medievalists placed music along with other sciences in the Quadrivium in the medieval university. And they were correct to do so, because music is a science. It demands of the practitioner the same kind of discipline as chemistry or physics demands—the care. These are qualities that are required in anything that a person does.

If people only understood that if a child studies music and works hard at it, that child may never become a professional musician, but the good things that accrue to that child from meeting the demands of the discipline are going to rebound in positive ways in whatever else that child does with his or her life.

Music serves the purpose of uniting people in its performance. People in an

orchestra, in a choir, have to be on the same spiritual, emotional wavelength, in order to make a performance happen. And if one can learn from this to establish those kind of contacts in other areas of being, where people need to work together, then one has acquired more than just what's required for musical performance. It's a way of thinking, it's a way of relating to other human beings.

Music feeds the spirit. Again, as I said before: To give a good musical performance, there's very little like it. It's a shame that in schools children are denied that possibility. I said before that

I believe very strongly that music is the basic language of humankind.

You take two infants born of different races, from different parts of the world. Before they acquire the imposition of language, you put them in a room and they'll communicate with each other very clearly. They'll communicate with everyone else in the room with sounds that I would define as musical sounds. I think it's very interesting to note that it's only after they acquire the language of their people that they can no longer communicate, because they stop singing from the heart, they stop making sounds from the center of their being.

Fidelio: I'd like you to comment a little bit further on music being a way of thinking, not just notes, not just an art.

Shirley: Well, it is. It's a way of expressing your thoughts. For a composer, it's her or his unique way of saying something that is important to him or her to say. It is a language. For the performer, the exercise of acquiring that language,

that's given you through the printed page, and of making it your own, is a very healthy exercise, a melding, if you will, of thoughts.

You have the composer, you have the poet, you have yourself. And, in the first two instances, you have to interpret, you have to translate the composer. You have to translate the poet. And put the result in your own language, so that you sing this lied that's been handed out two hundred years ago. You're not an empty shell reflecting what you've been given. You become the voice of the composer, the voice of the poet, and your own voice.

It's sort of like, in a certain sense, the "Erlkönig." You have to meld different personalities in your attempt to communicate the truth of this piece as you understand it. Because the piece has no life outside of your giving it life as a performer.

So it is a way of thinking. This must also be understood by parents, who wish to take music away from children.

Fidelio: I'd like to ask if you might have any comment on the recent concert by Minister Louis Farrakhan.

Shirley: I've known that he's a very fine violinist. I'm a person who would love to see something happen that will not happen because it's impractical: I'd love to see every politician in the world take up an instrument. And I'd like to see Congress make music. I'd like to see people go back to communicating with each other the way they did when they were first slapped on the behind and communicate through music and stop hiding behind words. I think that would be a lovely world to live in.

In the case of Farrakhan, I think it was right on target. I think if he would play his violin more, that he would probably make his points in a much more telling fashion than he ever could with words.

If anybody sang when he spoke, it was Martin Luther King, Jr. He sang, and he had a message. But that's the reason why his message had so powerful an impact. He sang. And if you don't believe me, listen to one of his speeches.