When Marian Sang: The True Recital of Marian Anderson, The Voice of a Century

Read the book aloud to children first, so that they can enjoy the illustrations and become familiar with the story. Because of the complexity of the historical situation presented in the story, you may also want to spend time discussing the broader political situation with students. In the book, you will find lengthy author and illustrator notes to help you with this task as well as a discography and chronology.

When you are ready, hand out a set of photocopied scripts to eight students. (Note that each of the narrators, as well as Marian, has significant reading parts. In addition, you will want to decide in advance whether the many songs that the Marian reader encounters will be spoken or sung. If sung, it would be helpful for that reader to listen to recordings of Marian Anderson singing these songs.) Ask all other students to form the audience. If you have plenty of time set aside, allow students to practice their parts individually or as a group until they are reading fluently. If time is limited, have performers face the audience and simply read their parts on the first run-through. Once all readers are comfortable with their parts, have a second reading.

Roles

Marian
Alexander Robinson
Mother
Giuseppe Boghetti

Narrator One
Narrator Two
Narrator Three
Narrator Four

After Reading


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Adapted with permission from When Marian Sang by Pam Muñoz Ryan, illustrated by Brian Selznick © 2002 by Pam Muñoz Ryan.
**Narrator One:** No one was surprised that Marian loved to sing.

**Narrator Two:** After all, she listened to Father singing in the morning as he dressed.

**Narrator Three:** Mother often hummed while she worked in the kitchen.

**Narrator Four:** Sometimes Marian and her little sisters, Ethel May and Alyse, sang songs all afternoon.

**Marian and Narrators One and Two:**

*Let us break bread together*

    on our knees

*Let us break bread together*

    on our knees

*When I fall on my knees*

*With my face to the rising sun*

*O Lord, have mercy on me.*

**Narrator Three:** However, Marian’s voice was distinct—strong and velvety and able to climb more than twenty-four notes.

**Narrator Four:** Everyone wanted to hear Marian sing.

**Narrator One:** Alexander Robinson, the choir director at the Union Baptist Church in South Philadelphia, wanted to hear Marian sing even though she was not quite eight years old and sometimes sang too loud.

**Alexander Robinson:** Marian, will you perform a duet with Viola Johnson?

**Marian:** Yes, if you want me to.

**Narrator Two:** As Viola sang the high part and Marian sang the low, their harmony blended like a silk braid.

**Marian and Narrator Three:**

*Dear to the heart of the Shepard*

*Dear are the sheep of His fold*

*Dear is the love that He gives them*

*Dearer than silver or gold.*

**Narrator Four:** Church folks started whispering and followed with out-and-out talking about Marian’s remarkable gift.

**Narrator One:** Neighboring churches heard the news and invited Marian to perform.

**Narrator Two:** One advertisement said “COME AND HEAR THE BABY CONTRALTO, TEN YEARS OLD.”

**All Narrators:** And people came.

**Marian:** When I sang, I often closed my eyes, finding the music within.

**Narrator Three:** Audiences heard not only words, but feelings too: spirited worship, tender affection, and nothing short of joy.

**Marian:** I was chosen for the celebrated People’s Chorus, a hundred voices from all the black church choirs in Philadelphia.

**Alexander Robinson:** She was one of the youngest members and had to stand on a chair so those in the back could see the pride of South Philadelphia.

**Narrator Four:** Her father was proud too, but protective. He didn’t want anyone taking advantage of his child.

**Marian:** Father’s love made me feel important.

**Narrator One:** When he died after an injury at the Reading Terminal where he sold ice, tragedy filled Marian’s heart and sometimes her songs.

**Marian:**

*Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?*

*Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?*

*Oh … oh … sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble*

*Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?*

**Mother:** I’m happy for your success, child, but no matter what you study, you must take a little extra time and do it well.

**Narrator Two:** Marian didn’t need extra encouragement when it came to singing.

**Narrator Three:** She practiced her part of each song and often learned all the other parts too.
Marian: But I could not understand how anyone who was surrounded by the spirit and beauty of music could be so narrow-minded.

Narrator Two: She felt sick in her stomach and in her heart.

Marian: Didn’t they know that my skin was different but my feelings were the same? Couldn’t I be a professional singer if I was Negro?

Narrator Three: But Mother had unwavering faith.

Mother: There will be another way to accomplish what would have been done at that school.

Narrator Four: Marian believed her mother.

Marian: I took voice lessons in my own neighborhood, continued with the choirs, and sometimes performed at Negro churches and colleges.

Narrator One: When Marian saw a Metropolitan Opera performance of the tragic opera Madame Butterfly, thoughts of a formal music education again came to mind.

Marian: How wonderful it would be to sing on a grand stage, act out a dramatic role, and wear beautiful costumes.

Narrator Two: The passionate music inspired her, and she was determined to study.

Narrator Three: But opera was simply the sun and the moon—a dream that seemed too far away to reach.

Marian:

He’s got the wind and the rain
in His hands

He’s got the sun and the moon
right in His hands

He’s got the wind and the rain
in His hands

He’s got the whole world in His hands.

Narrator Four: As a young woman in her twenties, Marian was invited to many states to sing.

Narrator One: Sometimes she traveled with her accompanist by train where they were seated in the dirty and crowded Jim Crow car reserved for Negroes.
Narrator Two: When she arrived at her destination, she often sang the same program twice, to separate audiences—one white and one black—or to segregated groups, whites in the best seats and blacks in the balcony.

Marian: Many times, I was welcomed enthusiastically by my audiences, and then could not get a hotel room because I was Negro.

Narrator Three: No matter what humiliations she endured, Marian worked from her heart with dignity.

Narrator Four: Her voice left audiences weeping or in hushed awe as they strained to hold on to the memory of every opulent note.

Marian:

When Israel was in Egypt’s Land
   Let my people go
Oppressed so hard they could not stand
   Let my people go
Go down Moses
   Way down in Egypt’s Land
Tell ol’ Pharaoh
   To let my people go
Narrator One: Marian still wanted to advance her singing with master teachers.

Narrator Two: With the help of friends, she was granted an audition with the fierce yet famous Giuseppe Boghetti.

Narrator Three: When she arrived at his studio, Mr. Boghetti shunned her.

Giuseppe Boghetti: I don’t have time or room for new students.

Marian: I was too afraid even to look at him, so I took a deep breath.

Narrator Four: Slowly, with great emotion, she sang.

Marian:

Deep river, my home is over Jordan
   Deep river, Lord, I want to cross over
   into campground
Don’t you want to go to that gospel feast
   That promised land where all is peace?
O, deep river, Lord, I want to cross over
   into campground.
Narrator One: Marian finally lifted her eyes.
Narrator Two: The enthusiasm for her singing was so overwhelming that one newspaper in Sweden called it “Marian Fever.”

Narrator Three: Audiences applauded in London, cheered in Paris, and pounded on the stage for encores in Russia.

Narrator Four: In Austria, the world-famous conductor, Arturo Toscanini, announced that what he had heard, one was privileged to hear only once in a hundred years.

Marian: I felt as if I had finally achieved some success.

Narrator One: Now she could afford to buy anything her mother desired.

Marian: Is there anything you want that would make you happy, Mother?

Mother: All I want is for God to hold you in the highest of His hands.

Marian: It seemed like I was already there. Mr. Boghetti had been right. I could go anywhere and sing for anyone.

Narrator Two: And then Marian came home to the United States.

Narrator Three: In 1939, Howard University in Washington, D.C., booked a concert with Marian Anderson and began looking for an auditorium big enough to hold the audience she attracted.

Narrator Four: They decided that the 4,000-seat Constitution Hall would be perfect.

Narrator One: But the manager of the hall said it wasn’t available and no other dates were offered because of their white performers only policy.

Narrator Two: Marian’s agent, Sol Hurok, wrote to the hall manager, pointing out that Marian Anderson was one of the greatest living singers of the time.

Marian: But it did no good.

Narrator Three: Enraged fans wrote letters to the newspaper.

Narrator Four: In protest, Eleanor Roosevelt, the first lady of the United States, resigned from the organization that sponsored Constitution Hall.

Narrator One: Howard University then tried to reserve a large high school auditorium from an all-white school.

Narrator Two: Again, they were denied.

Narrator Three: Now teachers were angry and marched in support of Marian in front of the Board of Education.

Narrator Four: Washington, D.C., was a boiling pot about to spill over.

All Narrators: Wasn’t there someplace in her own country’s capital where Marian Anderson’s voice could be heard?

Narrator One: Committees formed and held meetings.

Narrator Two: Finally, with President Roosevelt’s approval, the Department of the Interior of the United States government invited Marian to sing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday.

Narrator Three: Her country was offering her a momentous invitation, but she had concerns.

Marian: Would people protest? Was it dangerous? Would anyone come?

Narrator Four: Examining her heart, Marian realized that although she was a singer first and foremost, she also had become a symbol to her people and she wanted to make it easier for those who would follow her.

Marian: So I said yes.

Narrator One: Standing in the shadow of the statue of Lincoln, waiting to be called out, she read the engraved words.

Marian: THIS NATION UNDER GOD SHALL HAVE A NEW BIRTH OF FREEDOM …

Narrator Two: Marian looked out on a river of 75,000 people. Her heart beat wildly.

Marian: Would I be able to utter one note?

Narrator Four: Marian stood straight and tall. Then she closed her eyes and sang.

Marian: My country ‘tis of thee
Sweet land of liberty …
Let freedom ring!

Narrator One: A roaring cheer followed every song.
Narrator Two: At the end of the program, the people pleaded for more.

Narrator Three: When she began her thought-provoking encore, silence settled on the multitudes.

Marian:
Oh, nobody knows the trouble I see
Nobody knows my sorrow ....

Narrator Four: For almost sixteen years after the Lincoln Memorial performance, Marian sang for kings and queens, presidents and prime ministers, famous composers and conductors.

Narrator One: She received medals, awards, and honorary degrees for her magnificent voice.

Narrator Two: But there was still one place Marian had not sung.

Narrator Three: When she was finally invited, a dream came true.

Marian: I wondered how people would react. No Negro singer had ever done such a thing. I would be the first.

Narrator Four: But she didn’t need to worry. After she signed the contract, someone said, “Welcome home.”

Narrator One: On opening night excitement charged the air.

Narrator Two: As Marian waited in the wings, the orchestra began.

Marian: My stomach fluttered as I walked onto the grand stage.

Narrator Three: Trembling, she straightened her costume and waited for the pounding music she knew to be her cue.

Narrator Four: Tonight was her debut with the Metropolitan Opera.

Marian: At long last, I had reached the sun and the moon.

All Narrators: The curtains parted … … and Marian sang.

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