

REVIEW ARTICLE

Democratising Archives: Digitising the Marian Anderson Collection

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It's a habit, of intention or form, for musical historical figures to be viewed through the sheen of heroism and extraordinariness, leading to a flattening of character. However, in some cases that sheen of heroism invites us to probe deeper, leading to the recovery of a life and achievements that not only proves the fidelity of that extraordinary label, but highlights aspects of that life that should be better known. Such is the case with Marian Anderson (1897–1993).

A classical vocalist, advocate of racial equity, a US Department of State goodwill ambassador and UN delegate, Anderson is a major figure in Black American history, arguably since 9 April 1939 when she performed to 75,000 people on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. This event often serves as the apex of Anderson's career; in reality, it is one of several key events that illustrate her impact on U.S. American culture and classical music, as well as her significance to Black arts and letters. Along with her contemporaries Harry T. Burleigh and Roland Hayes, Anderson helped formalise a concert spiritual set on vocal recitals, regularly performing that repertoire and art songs by Burleigh, Florence B. Price and Clarence Cameron White alongside material by Handel, Schubert and Brahms. She was one of the few Black women of her era who enjoyed global critical and commercial success for more than five decades.

Born and raised in Philadelphia, that city hosted Anderson's early challenges and triumphs: her musical studies as a member of the Union Baptist Church; scholarship support from the National Association of Negro Musicians; and her dogged search for a private voice teacher who would accept Black students. Even with all the positive and negative, Anderson always returned home, and when she passed away her papers returned as well.¹ The Marian Anderson Collection at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries (www.library.upenn.edu/detail/collection/marian-anderson-collection) contains more than 600 boxes and over 4,000 items; materials include programmes, photos, letters, diaries and journals, telegrams, and more ephemera related to Anderson's career and personal life. While not a devoted chronicler of her personal thoughts, this material nonetheless illuminates areas of 20th-century U.S.A., Black classical culture and the politicisation of artists that too often remain specialized, rather than general, knowledge. The recent digitisation of a significant portion of Anderson's collection could alter that, as more than 2,500 items are now accessible to anyone with an internet connection. The project began in 2018, when the University of Pennsylvania Libraries received a \$110,000 grant from the Council on Library and Information Resources, and was completed in 2020.²

¹This information is drawn from Allan Keiler, *Marian Anderson: A Singer's Journey* (New York: Scribner, 2000).

²'Marian Anderson Collection, Newly Digitized by the Penn Libraries, Now Accessible Online', *Penn Libraries News*, 14 July 2020 <<https://www.library.upenn.edu/blogs/libraries-news/marian-anderson-collection-newly-digitized-penn-libraries-now-accessible>> [accessed 24 July 2022].

Rather than digitise every single item (which would have required more time and much more money), archivists and librarians selected the most salient items related to Anderson's career. The project was not only an important preservation tool, but a method to democratise access to Anderson's papers. Getting to an archive is not always easy: one has to consider travel, taking time off to get to the archive as well as time to work with the materials you requested (not to mention taking more time in the event the requested materials are unavailable, or the archive needs you to reschedule altogether). There is also the fact that archives, even with their organisation, can still feel like a scavenger hunt – one where you don't always know exactly what you're looking for. The designers of the Marian Anderson Digital Collection seek to address that through a portal called 'Discovering Marian Anderson', which organises the digitised materials via medium: programmes, scrapbooks, notebooks and diaries, photographs, interviews and recordings.

In addition to an overview page, each of these categories has its own landing page, summary and two links directing the visitor to 1) a finding aid for that specific category and 2) UPenn's Colenda Digital Repository, with search parameters narrowed to the Anderson collection and the category in question.³ The organisation of the 'Discovering Marian Anderson' portal does what it was created to do: streamline search results for the most experienced or the most green researcher eager to learn more about Anderson's life and career.

'Programs' is the second largest section after 'Photographs' of the digitised materials. Visitors to this area of Anderson's collection can search via keyword or narrow their search via language, year (in some cases exact dates), personnel and location of the performance. Each programme features a listing of all pieces and composers, making studies of Anderson's repertoire easier to collect and collate. Such detailed information is not present in 'Scrapbooks' and 'Notebooks and Diaries', which is understandable due to the extensive combing for details these items would require. It also ensures the magical aspect of in-person archival research is not totally removed; sometimes the most exciting and pertinent things found on research trips are in that last scrapbook you really don't want to look through, the last few pages illuminating an aspect that had been forgotten in past decades.

In the 'Interview' section are recordings of Anderson speaking to former *New York Times* music and drama critic Howard Taubman, audio drawn on for her autobiography, *My Lord, What a Morning*, ghost-written by Taubman.⁴ As explained on the 'Interviews' page, these recordings have had little scholarly engagement and include material that did not make it into the final version of the autobiography. 'Recordings' offers another stunning look into Anderson's private life and community; this part of the collection does not only include recordings of performances, but also features recordings of radio broadcasts, some with Anderson as guest, some that she listened to for enjoyment. Unidentified men sing along with a piano; Anderson herself runs through intonation exercises during a rehearsal; and two children work through their bedtime prayers, nursery rhymes and Christmas songs. It's a heartwarming reminder of the life Anderson led off the stage, that she was a woman with friends and family and the owner of an idyllic farm where she could enjoy some much-needed peace.

Most impressive, perhaps, are the photographs. More scholars have embraced that fact that although Anderson's beauty and elegance does not detract from her skill and artistry, she was destined to be on stage and in front of the camera. This section of the collection explores the demarcation of public and private and how often they blur in the life of a global performer like Marian Anderson: the documentation of performances; glamour shots and publicity images; candid shots at work, in public, and at home. It should be noted that the photographs are housed on a different platform, and if specific keywords followed by or preceded by 'Marian Anderson' aren't used visitors can wind up in another, unrelated collection.

Aside from this search issue and the fact that visitors need to use the Philadelphia Area Archives to access the Anderson Papers finding aid, the digital Marian Anderson Collection is an astounding

³The specific finding-aids access leads to a 404-error page at the time of writing.

⁴Marian Anderson, *My Lord, What a Morning: An Autobiography* (New York: Viking Press, 1956; repr. Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

resource. It is an important repository for those who study U.S. American history, archives, Black history, classical music and the 20th century; it is easy to navigate for researchers of varying abilities and will play a major role in expanding scholarship on Anderson and in turn improve public understanding of the significance of her artistry.

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