

A Note from the Librettist

On April 9, 1939, African American teenagers Georgia and Jack Johnson raced from the Kenilworth neighborhood of Washington, DC, onto the Benning Road Streetcar to Lafayette Square and ran down to the Mall to hear Marian Anderson sing at the Lincoln Memorial. Georgia, nicknamed Jo, is my mother, and I grew up in the Mayfair Mansions and Takoma neighborhoods hearing the exhilarating story of how she and my Uncle Jack raced toward Marian Anderson as a race toward freedom. Jo and Jack were two expressions of the public anguish surrounding this amazing contralto, Marian Anderson, who was not allowed to sing at Constitution Hall because of her race.

In shaping the libretto I have tried to capture the depth of Anderson's engagement with African American and European musical traditions, the welcoming of her by the residents of Washington, the tenderness of her earliest recognition of her great gift, the yearning of African Americans for equality, the particular burdens of being black and male in the United States of the 1930s, the unknown complexity of the racial controversy surrounding Anderson's use of Constitution Hall, the inspiration of her worldwide concert tours – and that amazing run of my elders from the lily pond of Kenilworth to the reflecting pool at the Mall to hear Marian sing.

My collaboration with Maestro Bruce Adolphe has been music in action, from the victorious laughter of call and response to the stirring and inspiring point counterpoint of baroque elaboration. I am indebted to the Washington Performing Arts Society and the Washington National Opera not only for asking me to write the libretto, but also for introducing me to the maelstrom of creativity who is Bruce Adolphe. I give my thanks also to scholar Allan Keiler (*Marian Anderson: A Singer's Journey*) and to the librarians at the University of Pennsylvania Rare Book room, Nancy Shawcross and John Pollard.

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