When Marian Sang

by Pam Muñoz Ryan
illustrations by Brian Selznick

Genre

A **biography** is the story of a real person's life, written by another person. As you read, note dates and other clues that indicate this story is about a real person.

Question of the Week

How can our determination affect our ability to succeed?

No one was surprised

that Marian loved to sing. After all, she listened to Father singing in the morning as he dressed. Mother often hummed while she worked in the kitchen. Sometimes Marian and her little sisters, Ethel May and Alyse, sang songs all afternoon.

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.

However, *her* voice was distinct—strong and velvety and able to climb more than twenty-four notes.

Everyone wanted to hear Marian sing.

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. He asked her to perform a duet with her friend Viola Johnson. As Viola sang the high part and Marian sang the low, their harmony blended like a silk braid.

Dear to the heart of the Shepherd
Dear are the sheep of His fold
Dear is the love that He gives them
Dearer than silver or gold.

Church folks started whispering and followed with out-and-out talking about Marian's remarkable gift.

Neighboring churches heard the news and invited Marian to perform. One advertisement said: "COME AND HEAR THE BABY CONTRALTO, TEN YEARS OLD." And people came.

When Marian sang, it was often with her eyes closed, as if finding the music within. Audiences heard not only words, but feelings too: spirited worship, tender affection, and nothing short of joy.

She was chosen for the celebrated People's Chorus, a hundred voices from all the black church choirs in Philadelphia. 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.

Her father was proud too, but protective. He didn't want anyone taking advantage of his child. Father's love made Marian feel important. When he died after an injury at the Reading Terminal where he sold ice, tragedy filled Marian's heart and sometimes her songs.

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 was happy for Marian's success but reminded her that no matter what she studied, she should take a little extra time and do it well.

Marian didn't need extra encouragement when it came to singing. She practiced her part of each song and often learned all the other parts too. For her, music was serious business, and more than anything, she hoped to someday go to music school. Church members promised tuition for "our Marian" if she was accepted.

Since Father's death, Marian worked at odd jobs and sang in concert programs in order to help support her family. It wasn't until 1915, when Marian was eighteen, that she finally went to a music school and patiently waited in

line for an application. But the girl behind the counter helped everyone except Marian. Was she invisible?

Finally, the girl said, "We don't take colored!" Her voice sounded like a steel door clanking shut.

Marian knew about prejudice. She had seen the trolley drive past her family as they stood at the corner. She knew that her people were always the last to be helped in a store. But she could not understand how anyone who was surrounded by the spirit and beauty of music could be so narrow-minded.

She felt sick in her stomach and in her heart. Didn't they know that her skin was different but her feelings were the same? Couldn't she be a professional singer if she was Negro?

With unwavering faith, Mother told her that there would be another way to accomplish what would have been done at that school. Marian believed her mother. She took voice lessons in her own neighborhood, continued with the choirs, and sometimes performed at Negro churches and colleges.

When Marian saw a Metropolitan Opera performance of the tragic opera *Madame Butterfly*, thoughts of a formal music education again came to mind. How wonderful it would be to sing on a grand stage, act out a dramatic role, and wear beautiful costumes. The passionate music inspired her and she was determined to study. But opera was simply the sun and the moon—a dream that seemed too far away to reach.

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.

As a young woman in her twenties, Marian was invited to many states to sing. Sometimes she traveled with her accompanist by train where they were seated in the dirty and crowded Jim Crow car reserved for Negroes. 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. Many times, she was welcomed enthusiastically by her audiences, and then could not get a hotel room because she was Negro.

No matter what humiliations she endured, Marian sang her heart with dignity. Her voice left audiences weeping or in hushed awe as they strained to hold on to the memory of every opulent note.

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.

Marian still wanted to advance her singing with master teachers. With the help of friends, she was granted an audition with the fierce yet famous Giuseppe Boghetti.

When she arrived at his studio, Mr. Boghetti announced that he didn't have time or room for new students. Too afraid even to look at him, Marian took a deep breath. Slowly, with great emotion, she sang,

"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."

Marian finally lifted her eyes.

"I will make room for you right away," Mr. Boghetti said firmly, "and I will need only two years with you. After that, you will be able to go anywhere and sing for anybody."

Again, Marian's devoted church community raised the money for her lessons.

Marian worked hard with Mr. Boghetti, and sometimes, for practice, she sang scenes from Italian operas with him. Her recitals now included German songs too, but other languages troubled her. She didn't want simply to sing beautiful words like *Dunkel, wie dunkel in Wald und in Feld!* She wanted to know that the words meant *Dark, how dark in the woods and the fields!*

Other Negro singers had gone overseas to develop their voices and learn foreign languages. Why not her? After all, Europe was different. There, she would be able to sing to mixed audiences and travel without the restrictions put on her people in America.

Marian needed to grow and Mother agreed.

A bundle of trepidation and excitement, Marian boarded the *Ile de France* in October 1927. She had never been so far from her family. She knew her sisters would take good care of Mother, but still she already felt twinges of homesickness.

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
A long ways from home. A long ways from home.

Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone
Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone
Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone
A long ways from home. A long ways from home.

Marian studied and was eventually invited to perform in concert halls in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark. The enthusiasm for her singing was so overwhelming that one newspaper in Sweden called it "Marian Fever."

Audiences applauded in London, cheered in Paris, and pounded on the stage for encores in Russia. 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 felt as if she had finally achieved some success. She even asked Mother if there was anything she wanted that would make her happy because now Marian could afford to buy it for her. Mother said that all she wanted was for God to hold Marian in the highest of His hands.

It seemed like she was already there.

Mr. Boghetti had been right. She *could* go anywhere and sing for anyone . . .

. . . until she came home to the United States.

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. They decided that the 4,000-seat Constitution Hall would be perfect. But the manager of the hall said it wasn't available *and* no other dates were offered because of their *white performers only* policy.

Marian's agent, Sol Hurok, wrote to the hall manager, pointing out that Marian Anderson was one of the greatest living singers of our time. But it did no good.

Enraged fans wrote letters to the newspaper. In protest, Eleanor Roosevelt, the First Lady of the United States, resigned from the organization that sponsored Constitution Hall.

Howard University then tried to reserve a large high school auditorium from an all-white school. Again, they were denied.

Now teachers were angry and marched in support of Marian in front of the Board of Education. Washington, D.C., was a boiling pot about to spill over.

Wasn't there someplace in her own country's capital where Marian Anderson's voice could be heard?

Committees formed and held meetings. 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. Her country was offering her a momentous invitation, but she had concerns. Would people protest? Was it dangerous? Would anyone come?

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.

She said yes.

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

. . . THIS NATION UNDER GOD SHALL HAVE A NEW BIRTH OF FREEDOM. . . .

Marian looked out on a river of 75,000 people. Her heart beat wildly. Would she be able to utter one note?

She took a deep breath and felt the power of her audience's goodwill surge toward her. Marian's sisters were there, and

Mother too. Marian stood straight and tall. Then she closed her eyes and sang,

"My country 'tis of thee
Sweet land of liberty . . .
Let freedom ring!"

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

When she began her thought-provoking encore,

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

. . . silence settled on the multitudes.

For almost sixteen years after the Lincoln Memorial performance, Marian sang for kings and queens, presidents and prime ministers, famous composers and conductors. She received medals, awards, and honorary degrees for her magnificent voice. But there was still one place Marian had not sung. When she was finally invited, a dream came true.

Marian wondered how people would react. No Negro singer had ever done such a thing. She would be the first. But she didn't need to worry. After she signed the contract, someone said, "Welcome home."

On opening night excitement charged the air. As Marian waited in the wings, the orchestra began. Her stomach fluttered. She walked onto the grand stage. Trembling, she straightened her costume and waited for the pounding music she knew to be her cue.

Tonight was her debut with the Metropolitan Opera. At long last, she had reached the sun and the moon.

The curtain parted . . .

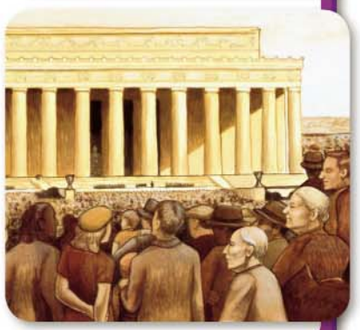
. . . and Marian sang.

In order to address the era in which this story took place, the author has, with the greatest respect, stayed true to the references to African Americans as colored or Negro. Marian Anderson referred to herself and others of her race in this manner in the entirety of her autobiography.

Objectives

- Provide evidence from the text to demonstrate understanding.
- Read independently for a sustained period of time and paraphrase the reading.

Envision It! | **Retell**



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Think Critically

1. Marian finally reached a goal she had dreamed of for many years. What is a goal you would like to accomplish? How do you plan to accomplish this goal? **Text to Self**
2. The tone of a story shows how the author feels about his or her subject. Read and show parts of *When Marian Sang* that best convey the tone of this biography. **Think Like an Author**
3. Why did so many people show up to see and hear Marian Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939? **Generalize**
4. What do you think is the most important message the author wants readers to remember about Marian Anderson? **Questioning**
5. **Look Back and Write** Look back at pages 376–378. Summarize the concert Marian gave at the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday in 1939. Explain how this event came about and why it was historically important. Use evidence from the text in your summary.

TEST PRACTICE **Extended Response**