



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 1: Slavic Sensibilities

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE: Maurice B. Wheeler writing on Mattiwilda Dobbs

San Francisco Opera welcomes Mattiwilda Dobbs, African American trailblazing soprano, in her American operatic debut

BY MAURICE B. WHEELER

(read time ~ 9 minutes)

At the height of her career, Mattiwilda Dobbs was acclaimed by many, especially in Europe, as the most outstanding coloratura soprano of her generation. It only takes a few moments of sampling the available recordings of her far too limited discography to appreciate the appropriateness of such a sweeping and illustrious moniker. As her career progressed, reviewers were taxed to find new ways of describing her extraordinary voice and artistry. Most often the descriptions used were associated with the refraction of light: dazzling, luminous, shimmering, glowing, brilliant, vibrant, and crystalline. Her voice, supported by impeccable musicianship and radiant stage presence, positioned Dobbs for great success.

A *Guardian* review of her Konstanze in Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* captures the prevailing responses to her performances at the time. "Finally, and most emphatically first, there was Mattiwilda Dobbs, who justly brought the house down with her great aria at the end of Act I, and with her performance of the part as a whole has raised her reputation higher than ever."

In a matter of six years, Mattiwilda Dobbs advanced from graduate studies in Spanish, and private vocal study with Lotte Leonard and Pierre Bernac, to headliner in the greatest recital venues and opera houses in the world, most often as the first African American to do so. Her rise to great acclaim in Europe was meteoric. But her star was still rising in America. When Dobbs debuted at San Francisco Opera in 1955, she did so with the full awareness that the eyes of the opera world were watching. She knew this would be a historical performance for herself, and for the company.

In 1955, the nation was beginning to feel the pangs of progress brought on by the developing Civil Rights Movement, and Dobbs' engagement was an exciting and important affirmation of the spirit of the opera company and the classical music community in San Francisco. A year prior, the U.S. Supreme Court had issued its ruling against racial segregation in public education, and in January of 1955 the legendary concert artist, Marian Anderson, had shattered the color barrier at the Metropolitan Opera (with Dobbs in attendance). Yet, it was the same year that 12-year-old Emmett Till was murdered in Mississippi and Rosa Parks' refusal to relinquish her seat to a white man instigated the Montgomery Bus Boycott. For many in the opera world, and in American society at-large, the debuts of Anderson and Dobbs signaled seismic social changes to come for classical music performances.

Singing the role of the Queen of Shemakha in Rimsky-Korsakov's satirical fantasy, *Le Coq d'Or (The Golden Cockerel)*, Dobbs would be making her eagerly awaited American operatic debut. Of greater social and musical significance for the world of opera, with this debut, Dobbs would become the first African American to perform a leading role at the opera company. Being center stage at pivotal moments in operatic history was fast becoming a feature of her young career.

Only four years earlier, in 1951, she had become the first African American to win first place in the Geneva International Music Competition, and subsequently became the first African American to sing a lead role at La Scala, where she debuted as Elvira in Rossini's *L'italiana in Algeri* in 1952. Having captured the attention of the global opera community, additional debuts and roles at other European companies came in quick succession, including at the San Carlos Opera in Genoa as the Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute*; the Glyndebourne Music Festival as Zerbinetta in *Ariadne auf Naxos*; Royal Opera, Covent Garden as the Woodbird in *Siegfried*; and the Belgian National Opera in the title role of *Lakmé*.

Her first-place win in the Geneva International Music Competition catapulted her into the international spotlight. Dobbs' career was launched literally overnight. The young coloratura, who had begun her studies as a lyric soprano, was suddenly in great demand. In 1952, after her first professional operatic performance, George Lascelles, the seventh Earl of Harewood and board member of the Royal Opera House, published a review in London's *Opera* magazine. Praising her appearance in Stravinsky's *Le Rossignol* he wrote: "this was easy, accurate coloratura such as one virtually never hears nowadays...." He went on to predict that Dobbs would "rise right to the top of the profession." And, rise she did. As an African American opera singer in the early 1950s, her high-profile successes and growing fame in Europe were unprecedented.

The publicity after her successful debut at La Scala led to her auditioning for the famous American agent, Sol Hurok, who was also Marian Anderson's agent. He immediately accepted her and arranged her Town Hall debut in 1954 in a concert performance of *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Dobbs sang to sold-out performances throughout Europe, and at concerts in Russia, 30-min ovations were common. Everyone wanted to hear her, including Nikita Khrushchev's family, whose son-in-law was director of the opera company in Kiev, Ukraine.

While on a concert tour in early 1955, Dobbs received a cable from San Francisco Opera inviting her to make her company debut in the upcoming fall season. Dobbs reminisced years later that she had been moved to tears by the symbolism accompanying the invitation because this debut would be in the country she still considered home.

San Francisco Opera founder and music director, Gaetano Merola had announced his intention to racially integrate the company's roster of singers before his untimely death in the 1953. His successor, Kurt Herbert Adler, lived up to that commitment. In March of 1955, Adler revealed in a press conference that he had been considering a role for Dobbs' debut for the previous two years.

The role of the Queen of Shemakha in the company's revival in English of Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Golden Cockerel* seemed a perfect vehicle to showcase the rising star's vocal and artistic capabilities. Dobbs would be making her San Francisco Opera debut in a role previously performed in the company by international opera icon, Lily Pons. Dobbs was given a reigning Queen's welcome on the stage of the company.

As had become their practice from early in her career, her parents and members of her family often attended Dobbs' performances, including international performances. Her father, John Wesley Dobbs, an early Georgia civic leader and Civil Rights activist, had been particularly instrumental in her career choice and was one of her greatest supporters and advocates. Her father and sister, June Dobbs Butts, were present to witness her debut in San Francisco, and joined her backstage with Kurt Herbert Adler and Erich Leinsdorf.

Dobbs debuted on October 11, 1955 and sang three performances on the War Memorial stage, and two tour performances in Los Angeles. At a Gala Performance at Los Angeles' Shrine Auditorium on October 27, she performed another of her specialties, Gilda, in Act III of Verdi's *Rigoletto*.

Mattiwilda Dobbs appeared on the American opera scene at the most opportune of times, with the total package of talent, experience and Europe's stamp of approval. She was the third African American to sing at the Met, after Anderson and baritone Robert McFerrin, but her career there was precedent-setting. In 1956, she was the first African American to sing a romantic role at the Met, and also the first to be offered a long-term contract at the company. Dobbs appeared at the Met from 1956–1964 in 29 performances. Her roles there included Gilda in *Rigoletto*, Oscar in *Un Ballo in Maschera*, Zerlina in *Don Giovanni*, and Lucia in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, a role for which she received nine curtain calls after the famous mad scene.

Dobbs eventually moved to Stockholm, Sweden after marrying Bengt Janzon, a Swedish public relations executive and journalist, in 1957. That same year she made her Royal Swedish Opera debut and joined the Hamburg State Opera in 1961. *Opera News* reported in November 1958 that Dobbs had broken all outdoor concert attendance records in Stockholm when an audience of over 40,000 people gathered to hear her in concert. Although she continued to sing at the Met for 8 seasons, her career remained anchored in Europe.

In 1978 Dobbs sang at the White House ceremony where President Jimmy Carter bestowed the Congressional Gold Medal on Marian Anderson. A former early winner of the Marian Anderson Scholarship Award, she paid tribute at the ceremony by singing one of Anderson's favorite encore pieces, Margaret Bond's "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." Long after her stage career ended, Dobbs remained a venerated artist and in 1989 the board of directors of the Metropolitan Opera elected her to a board position.

Her extraordinary singing and artistry set a new standard and changed the perception of what African American opera singers could accomplish. Her repertoire contained the most virtuosic coloratura soprano roles, including Zerbinetta, Olympia, Lakm , Konstanze and Lucia. Dobbs' voice was perfectly suited for the recording technology of the era, unfortunately, she was not given the opportunity to create an extensive discography. Nonetheless, existing recordings accurately capture the splendor of her singing and beauty of her voice. Contemporary fans especially relish her recordings of *Abduction from the Seraglio* (which she recorded with her friend and colleague, Nicolai Gedda), *The Pearl Fishers* and *Tales of Hoffmann*.

Nurturing the growth and development of young singers has been an important part of San Francisco Opera's history and tradition. The inclusion of African American singers in that early history was transformational for many singers, and for the operatic landscape in America, especially in the latter half of the 20th century. Mattiwilda Dobbs' successful engagement paved the way for future generations of African American singers to follow in lead roles with the company, including Leontyne Price, Martina Arroyo, Reri Grist, Grace Bumbry, Shirley Verrett, Leona Mitchell, George Shirley, Simon Estes, Lawrence Winters, and many of today's finest singers. The impact of Dobbs' trailblazing career and the standard set by her astounding vocal abilities leave a legacy that cannot be overestimated.