

“He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands”– Marian Anderson (1956)

Added to the National Registry, 2003

Essay by Randy Jones (guest post)*



Marian Anderson, 1945

Like other folk spirituals, the exact origin of “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands” is unknown. Whether created extemporaneously by one slave or by a community of slaves, this spiritual’s earliest known written reference is *Spirituals Triumphant Old and New*, compiled by Edward Boatner (1898–1981) in 1927. Various versions of the spiritual have been set and performed by choral groups and solo performers in the classical music realm and the folk and popular music worlds.

By the time contralto Marian Anderson (1897–1993) added the spiritual to her repertoire, the American vocalist had become an internationally renowned concert artist. Her notoriety had only grown when she presented a program of opera arias, art songs, and Negro spirituals on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday, 1939. The concert, which drew 75,000 attendees and a radio audience from around the world, was a protest of the policy, instituted by the Daughters of the American Revolution, that prohibited access by black artists such as Anderson to the concert facilities at Constitution Hall.

Composers from Jean Sibelius to Florence Price wrote songs for Anderson to perform. She learned of composer Hamilton Forrest (1901–1963) through contralto and Broadway actor

Marion Kerby (1877–1956), who had developed a professional interest in African American culture, especially the collection and performance of Negro spirituals. Forrest was a Chicago native who had begun performing with Kerby in the early 1930's and composing spirituals for the duo's concertizing.

Anderson was immediately drawn to Forrest's setting of "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," dedicated to Anderson by the composer and published by Mills Music in 1951. In her autobiography, *My Lord, What a Morning*, Anderson stated that Forrest "provided a piano part that fits the words like a glove." Author Steve Sullivan noted that the "song is the essence of simplicity, explaining why generations of Sunday school children have learned it; Marian and her pianist give it dignity and elegance, underlining the poignancy of childlike faith."

She and pianist Franz Rupp recorded "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" and ten other spirituals on May 14, 1952. The group of spirituals was released that year under the RCA Victor Red Seal label as *Marian Anderson Sings Eleven Great Spirituals* (LRM 7006).

Anderson reached another major milestone in her career on January 7, 1955, when she became the first African American to sing a role on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera. The following year, RCA Victor released the long-playing disc, *Spirituals* (LM 2032). The album was a reissue of the 1952 release along with ten spirituals Anderson had recorded in 1947 that had been released by RCA Victor Red Seal as *Marian Anderson Sings Spirituals* (MO 1238) in 1948.

In 1952, Anderson's voice had matured, but she was still able to maintain the tonal control that would become problematic in her later performances. She instilled in her performance of "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," all of the dark, velvety richness that had earned for Anderson the reputation as the "voice one hears once in a hundred years." The spiritual became an audience favorite, and Anderson programmed it regularly on her recitals. She also selected the spiritual when she once again performed at the Lincoln Memorial, this time for the 1963 March on Washington when civil rights activist the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his famed "I Have a Dream" speech.

When Anderson gave her farewell tour in the mid-1960's, she ended each recital with "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." Author Allan Kozinn wrote "A Tribute to Marian Anderson, For the Most Part in Her Voice," recounting the June 1993 memorial service given to commemorate the recently deceased contralto:

The printed program carried the title "Remembering the Art of Marian Anderson," and indeed the focus was on her singing, not on her struggles and triumphs. . . . It was in the group of spirituals that Miss Anderson's expressive range was best illuminated. Included were her haunting accounts of "Crucifixion," "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" and "Were You There?," as well as representations of the brighter, more ebullient side of her artistry, captured in her recordings of "Let Us Break Bread Together" and "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands."

RCA Victor Red Seal remastered and re-released Anderson's *Spirituals* (09026-63306-2) on compact disc in 1999. The CD contained six additional tracks recorded by Anderson with pianist

Rupp between 1941 and 1946 and three tracks Anderson recorded with pianist Kosti Vehanen (1887–1957) in 1936.

The lyrics for “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands” vary from version to version, as is typical for folk spirituals. Anderson described the text Forrest used in his setting:

This spiritual reminds us not to lose sight of the fact that we have our times of extremity and that there is a Being who can help us at such a time. It takes in everybody. It speaks first of the wind and the rain. No one can stop the rain, no matter how rich or poor, brilliant or stupid he may be. "He's got the wind and the rain in His hands, He's got the whole world in His hands." It goes on, "He's got the lying man, He's got the gambling man, He's got the crap-shooting man in His hands." That takes in most of the transgressors. Then it comes to "little bits-a-baby." Who will protect them when mother and father can't? Then "He's got you and me, brother, in His hands. He's got you and me, sister, in His hands. He's got everybody here in His hands. He's got the whole world in His hands." It is all there in that spiritual. I chose it not alone because I thought the audience would like it, but because it had a cry, an appeal, a meaning to me. It is more, much more, than a number on a concert program.

Anderson’s performance of “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands” was selected to the Library of Congress National Registry in 2003 and inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2008.

Randy Jones is the author of “So You Want to Sing Spirituals: A Performer’s Guide” (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), compiler of the online resource “The Spirituals Database,” and author of the web site, “Afrocentric Voices in Classical Music.”

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.