

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Anne Brown

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Brown, Anne, 1912-2009
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Anne Brown,
Dates:	November 16, 2006, November 17, 2006 and November 18, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:27:08).
Abstract:	Classical singer Anne Brown (1912 - 2009) was a soprano legend who played "Bess" in the original production of George Gershwin's, "Porgy and Bess." She also starred in other Broadway shows, and achieved celebrated performances as a concert artist at Carnegie Hall and with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Brown was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 16, 2006, November 17, 2006 and November 18, 2006, in Oslo, Norway. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_145
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Soprano legend Anne Wiggins Brown was the first person to play the leading role of “Bess” in the production of *Porgy and Bess* on Broadway. Brown was born on August 9, 1912, in Baltimore, Maryland. Her father, Harry Brown, was a prominent physician and a grandson of a slave. Her mother, Mary Allen Wiggins, descended from a family of singers and studied voice and piano in New York. Brown was named after her paternal grandmother, Annie E. Brown, a gifted singer and evangelist who toured the southeastern United States spreading the gospel. Her maternal grandfather, William Henry Wiggins, was known for his lyric tenor voice. Brown and her three sisters lived in a segregated community, where their mother tutored them in piano and involved the sisters in music and theatre. At twelve years old, Brown attended Frederick Douglass High School which had a superb music program. She studied music with W. Llewellyn Wilson. After graduating from Frederick Douglass High School, Brown auditioned for the Juilliard School and became the first African American to win the prestigious Margaret McGill Scholarship. Brown was sixteen years old when she began studying with Lucia Dunham at Juilliard.

Brown’s scholarship drew the attention of George Gershwin who was seeking singers for his new opera, then called simply *Porgy*. After auditioning for him, singing the spiritual *City of Heaven* without accompaniment, he awarded her the part of “Bess”. The two worked closely on the opera, rewriting the third act to have her sing *Summertime* and even changing the opera’s title to *Porgy and Bess*, reflecting the importance of her role. On October 10, 1935, *Porgy and Bess* premiered at New York’s Alvin Theater, with Brown as its first “Bess”. Brown went on to appear in the Broadway play *Mamba’s Daughters* and in the film *Rhapsody in Blue*. She reprised her role as “Bess” in various revivals of *Porgy and Bess* and between 1942 and 1948, and achieved celebrated performances as a concert artist at Carnegie Hall and with the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

In 1948, Brown settled in Oslo, Norway, where she met and married Norwegian Olympic ski jumper, Thorleif

Schjelderup. Until the early 1950s, she worked as a professional musician on productions like Menotti's *The Medium* and *The Telephone*. However, during a European tour in 1953, she was diagnosed with asthma, which ended her singing career. After this, Brown worked several years as a music teacher. Among her students were actress Liv Ullmann, jazz singer Karin Krog and folk singer Ase Kleveland. She also staged several operas in France and Norway. In 2000, Brown was awarded Norway's Council of Cultures Honorary Award.

Brown passed away on March 13, 2009, in Oslo, Norway, at the age of 96.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Anne Brown was conducted by Shawn Wilson on November 16, 2006, November 17, 2006 and November 18, 2006, in Oslo, Norway, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Classical singer Anne Brown (1912 - 2009) was a soprano legend who played "Bess" in the original production of George Gershwin's, "Porgy and Bess." She also starred in other Broadway shows, and achieved celebrated performances as a concert artist at Carnegie Hall and with the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Brown, Anne, 1912-2009

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Brown, Anne, 1912-2009--Interviews

African American women singers--Interviews

Sopranos (Singers)--Interviews

Voice teachers--Norway--Oslo--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Classical Singer

HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Anne Brown, November 16, 2006, November 17, 2006 and November 18, 2006. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The

HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Anne Brown, Section A2006_145_001_001, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Anne Brown was born on August 9, 1912 in Baltimore, Maryland to Mary Wiggins Brown and Harry Brown. Her paternal grandmother was a travelling evangelist and singer, and her maternal grandfather was Cherokee. Brown's mother was born in Wilmington, North Carolina, and studied piano and singing in New York City. Her father attended Washington, D.C.'s Howard University, and became a doctor in Baltimore. Her family was considered upper middle class, and her father owned the office building where he practiced. Brown remembers her father's personality, and her mother cooking holiday dinners. Brown's mother subscribed to a music magazine, *The Etude*, from which Brown learned many of the songs she sang with her mother in the local Methodist church. She attended P.S. 112 and Frederick Douglass High School in Baltimore, where she studied under William Llewellyn Wilson. Brown always aspired to become a musician, and was awarded the Margaret McGill scholarship to study at Juilliard School of Music in New York City.

African American women singers--Interviews.

Sopranos (Singers)--Interviews.

Voice teachers--Norway--Oslo--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Anne Brown, Section A2006_145_001_002, TRT: 0:20:12 ?

Brown was determined at an early age to be a singer, and wanted her sisters to play music as well. She won a contest to attend Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore, Maryland, but her admittance was rejected when they discovered she was African American. Decades later in 1998, Brown returned to the Peabody Conservatory of Music, where she was awarded the George Peabody Medal for outstanding contributions to music in America. Her daughter, Paula Schjelderup, remembers Brown's speech on that day and the audience's response. After her rejection, Brown attended Baltimore's Frederick Douglass High School, where she studied under William Llewellyn Wilson with Avon Long and Ruby Elzy. She won the Margaret McGill scholarship to study at Juilliard School of Music in New York City under Lucia Dunham and Lotte Lehmann. Brown recalls the international character of the school; her parents' thoughts on her work; and her sisters' careers. Brown also performs the song 'The Man I Love' with her daughter.

Video Oral History Interview with Anne Brown, Section A2006_145_002_003, TRT: 0:29:15 ?

Anne Brown read that George Gershwin was writing 'Porgy and Bess' while she was a student at Juilliard School of Music. She asked to audition for Gershwin and his brother, Ira Gershwin, and was cast as Bess. Brown visited Gershwin's office weekly to sing for him while the opera was being written. She remembers when the title changed to 'Porgy and Bess,' and when the song 'Summertime' was given to her. Brown's father was unhappy with her role and connection to John Bubbles, whom some felt negatively portrayed African Americans. Other cast members included Todd Duncan, Ruby Elzy and Abbie Mitchell. In 1936, 'Porgy and Bess' was performed at the segregated National Theatre in Washington, D.C. Brown refused to perform until the audience was

desegregated. As a result, the production became the National Theatre's first integrated show. Brown's other Broadway productions were 'Pins and Needles' and 'Mamba's Daughters.' She married Jack Pettit, with whom she had a daughter, Paula Schjelderup, in 1939.

Video Oral History Interview with Anne Brown, Section A2006_145_002_004, TRT: 0:29:59 ?

Anne Brown toured internationally, while her daughter, Paula Schjelderup, attended the Hessian Hills School in Croton-on-Hudson, New York. The two moved to Norway, where Brown began her career as a classical singer. She reprised the role of Bess in 'Porgy and Bess' several times throughout Europe, including at the Royal Danish Theatre in Copenhagen, Denmark. She performed in accompaniment with well-known Norwegian composers and conductors. While many of the recordings of these performances are lost, there are extant recordings of her concerts with Olav Kielland and Malcolm Sargent. Brown plays recordings of her performance of 'Nightingale,' 'Warum sind den die Rosen so blass' and 'Pleurez, Pleurez mes yeux.' While performing in Norway, Brown met Thorleif Schjelderup, an Olympic skier, and the two were married. At this time, her daughter was in boarding school in Plans-sur-Bex, Switzerland. Brown ended her singing career after she was diagnosed with asthma, and instead taught voice lessons in Norway.

Video Oral History Interview with Anne Brown, Section A2006_145_002_005, TRT: 0:29:54 ?

Anne Brown performed in several small operas written by Gian Carlo Menotti, including 'The Medium' and 'The Consul.' Although, living in Norway, Brown was removed from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, she was aware of it, and wrote articles to Time magazine regarding civil rights. She describes an experience of racial discrimination, in which she was initially refused service on a train in the United States because of her race. Brown was friends with notable African American opera singers such as Todd Duncan, Leontyne Price and Felicia Weathers. Due to her asthma, Brown ended her career as a singer in her forties, and began teaching in Norway. Her students included Norwegian actresses Liv Ullmann and Mona Hofland. In the 1960s, Brown directed Norwegian productions of 'Porgy and Bess' and 'Madame Butterfly.' Her autobiography, 'Sang Fra Frossen Gren,' was published in 1979, and she was elected as an honorary citizen of Baltimore, Maryland in 1999. Brown narrates her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Anne Brown, Section A2006_145_003_006, TRT: 0:31:07 ?

Anne Brown narrates her photographs. She also plays 'I Got Rhythm' and 'Love Walked In' on the piano with her daughter, Paula Schjelderup.

Video Oral History Interview with Anne Brown, Section A2006_145_004_007, TRT: 0:30:09 ?

Anne Brown's daughter, Paula Schjelderup, remembers moving to Europe; her mother practicing with Robert Levin; and listening to her sing 'An die Musik.' Brown's daughter grew up in Norway away from racial discrimination and the Civil Rights Movement. It was not until she was older that she understood Brown's sacrifices and contributions to the African American community. Brown's sister, Mayme Brown-Wheatley, acted as a second mother to Schjelderup. Schjelderup rarely saw her father, because of her parents' poor relationship. Instead, Schjelderup considered Brown's husband, Thorleif Schjelderup, to be her father figure. Brown met Thorleif Schjelderup at a performance in Norway. The two married just after he won the bronze medal in ski jumping at the 1948 Winter Olympics. The family lived in Italy for two years, and Brown had her second child. Due to breathing problems, Brown ended her singing career and began teaching. Her students included well known Norwegian actresses Liv Ullmann and Liv Dommersnes.

Video Oral History Interview with Anne Brown, Section A2006_145_004_008, TRT: 0:07:22 ?

Anne Brown enjoyed throwing dinner parties in the United States and in Oslo, Norway. She was a good cook, and taught her skills to her daughter, Paula Schjelderup. Schjelderup remembers learning her mother's recipe for macaroni and cheese, and how to prepare various kinds of produce and meat while the family lived in Italy. Schjelderup also explains what it was like to grow up as the child of a celebrity. Although she was in awe of her mother, she aspired to a career other than singing, and became a designer.