

# OPERA NEWS

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## Woman of Iron

**Soprano Dorothy Maynor made her dream of an arts school in Harlem a reality.**

*By Fred Cohn*



Maynor at the keyboard

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**SOPRANO DOROTHY MAYNOR** was every bit the reserved Southern lady, but she was also a person of iron determination. She forged a brilliant concert

Maynor clearly had a recitalist's *gift of communication*.

career during an era that offered few opportunities to Black singers. When the curtain closed on that part of her life, she went on to an even greater accomplishment—the launching of the Harlem School of the Arts, a hallowed institution that to this day reflects her extraordinary vision.

Maynor was born in 1910 in Norfolk, Virginia, the daughter of a Methodist minister. As a teenager, she attended Hampton Institute, a nearby historically Black institution, and found a mentor in its choir conductor, R. Nathaniel Dett, the Black Canadian composer and conductor. Dett recognized her talent from the first, and when the Hampton Institute Choir played Carnegie Hall in 1926, he gave Maynor a solo. She was just fifteen.

Intending to become a teacher and choir director, Maynor studied choir at Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey, where she befriended the town's most famous resident, Albert Einstein. She got a teaching job after graduation at Phenix Training School on the Hampton Institute campus, but a group of supporters persuaded her to move to New York to study singing and pursue a career. In 1939, her vocal coach, Alan Haughton, arranged an audition for her at Carnegie Hall that resulted in a contract with Columbia Artists Management.

Soon thereafter, she auditioned at the Berkshire Festival for Serge Koussevitzky, who deemed her “a musical revelation.” The celebrated conductor’s ecstatic reaction paved the way for her New York recital debut, at Town Hall on November 19, 1939. In his review, critic Olin Downes offered praise of an extravagance seldom seen in the pages of *The New York Times*. “Miss Maynor’s voice is phenomenal for its range, character and varied expressive resources,” he wrote. “She should be able to reach any height as one of the leading concert singers of her generation.”

A recording from that period—a 1940 recital at the Library of Congress, with her frequent collaborator Arpad Sandor at the piano—gives a sense of what the fuss was about. The shimmering beauty of her voice, with its fine-spun vibrato, is immediately striking. So is its consistency from top to bottom, and at all dynamic levels; the *pianissimo* ending of Strauss’s “Wiegenlied” is particularly ravishing. Maynor clearly had a recitalist’s gift of communication. She conveys



[Maynor singing on \*The Treasury Hour Millions for Defense\* in 1941](#)  
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Maynor singing on *The Treasury Hour Millions for Defense* in 1941  
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the affective essence of each song directly and powerfully. For all her discretion as a performer, her concert personality is unmistakable: she lets you know just who is singing.

**Everett Collection Inc/Alamy**  
[http://www.operanews.org/uploadedImages/Opera\\_News\\_Magazine/2023/2/Features/WomanofIronMaynorportraitlg223.jpg](http://www.operanews.org/uploadedImages/Opera_News_Magazine/2023/2/Features/WomanofIronMaynorportraitlg223.jpg)  
Everett Collection Inc/Alamy

Maynor was a recitalist by default. Over the course of her career, she learned twenty-three opera roles, but she never got to sing any of them. When she embarked on her professional path, the stages of the nation's opera houses were off-limits to Black singers. But her accomplishment was nonetheless formidable, and she broke much new ground. In 1951, she appeared with the National Symphony Orchestra at Washington's Constitution Hall, run by the Daughters of the American Revolution, and broke the ban on Black performers that in 1939 had famously prevented Marian Anderson's appearance in the space. The following year, Maynor sang at Dwight Eisenhower's inauguration, making her the first Black singer to perform at such an event.

Maynor's dedication to the education of Black musicians stemmed from her visits during the 1930s to Harlem's legendary Savoy Ballroom, where she had observed white bandleaders notating the music of Black jazz bands as they played, with the probable aim of appropriating the music. The sight made her determined to foster Black musical literacy. She had moved to Harlem in 1943 when her husband, the Reverend Shelby Rooks, was appointed the pastor of St. James Presbyterian Church. In 1963, her career winding down, she persuaded Rooks to let her use the church's recreation center for a music-education program into which she channeled her energies. It was dubbed the Harlem School of the Arts in 1964, eventually incorporating theater and dance as well as music. Maynor's exalted artistic reputation was no doubt a factor in the number of high-profile advisors and supporters she enlisted, a group that included such boldface names as George Balanchine, Samuel Barber, Leonard Bernstein and Agnes De Mille. The school opened a new state-of-the-art facility in 1979, its construction in large part a product of Maynor's grit and perseverance. One donor reported coming downstairs at his home and finding Maynor camped out on his couch. "I just went right back upstairs and got my checkbook," he said, "because I knew she wasn't going anywhere until I'd done what she wanted me to do."

When a cancer scare in 1979 sent Maynor into the hospital, she summoned mezzo-soprano Betty Allen to her bedside. "Well, young lady, I guess you will have to take over the school," she told the astonished Allen. Maynor never returned to HSA, and Allen took over as its president and CEO.

Maynor died in 1985, but HSA thrives to this day, an implicit tribute to her foresight and dedication. Yolanda Wyns, chair of music at HSA since 2015, never met the school's founder, but she keeps a photo of Maynor hanging proudly above her desk. "I feel her presence in this space," Wyns says. "Her legacy lives on, and the mission lives on." ■