

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Georg Koen

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Koen, Georg, 1934-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Georg Koen,
Dates:	January 31, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:06:02).
Abstract:	Lieder singer Georg Koen (1934 -) was the first American artist since World War II invited to perform in Bulgaria, and he received critical acclaim for his final performance in Norway. After he retired, he formed a banking analysis company called Corporate Computer Services. Koen was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 31, 2005, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_032
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Internationally acclaimed lieder singer Georg Koen was born on April 4, 1934 in Memphis, Tennessee. His interest in singing and performing began in the sixth grade. His mother died when he was twelve and Koen went to live with his maternal aunt. He began performing with The Teen Town Singers, a group of young people who sang on WDIA radio in Memphis. While performing with this group, a representative from Rust College High School in Holly Springs, Mississippi offered him a full scholarship. Koen traveled throughout the Midwest performing and earned his diploma in 1951.

From 1952 until 1954, Koen studied music at the University of North Dakota. Drafted into the United States Army, he performed in the televised U.S. Army chorus production of *Get Set Go*. Koen also performed with the U.S. Army concert band in Germany. In 1958, he made his European debut as a lieder singer and toured throughout Germany. In 1960, Koen was invited by Princess Margaretha of Denmark to perform at her annual society charity ball.

Koen's singing abilities earned him audiences in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Yugoslavia. In 1962, he became the first American artist since World War II invited to perform in Bulgaria. From 1962 until 1971, Koen continued his European success, performing in Barcelona, Madrid, Berlin and Turkey. Although he was a well-known concert, television and radio performer, he was unable to achieve the same notoriety in the United States because of his race. In 1976, Koen received critical acclaim for a lieder recital in Norway. This was his final performance.

After he retired, he formed a banking analysis company called Corporate Computer Services which provides banking consulting services for high-profile clients including CBS, Club Med, Newsweek Magazine and Sterling Optical.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Georg Koen was conducted by Racine Tucker Hamilton on January 31, 2005, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Lieder singer Georg Koen (1934 -) was the first American artist since World War II invited to perform in Bulgaria, and he received critical acclaim for his final performance in Norway. After he retired, he formed a banking analysis company called Corporate Computer Services.

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:

Koen, Georg, 1934-

Hamilton, Racine Tucker (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Koen, Georg, 1934---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Lieder 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 Georg Koen, January 31, 2005. 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 Georg Koen, Section A2005_032_001_001, TRT: 0:29:44 ?

Georg Koen was born on April 4, 1934 in Memphis Tennessee. His mother, Ida Hollins, was born in Memphis, Tennessee, but raised in Byhalia, Mississippi. His father, Maurice Koen, was also born in Memphis. Koen's parents divorced when he was a baby. Koen's father was very loving toward him. As a child, he spent his days in his paternal family's shoe repair shop, the largest in Memphis. After his father moved to Chicago, Illinois in the 1940s, Koen spent summers

there with him. Koen was raised by his mother in Memphis until she sent him to live with his aunt in Cleveland, Ohio. There, he attended Gladstone Elementary School, which he found less supportive than his schools in the South. When he was twelve years old, Koen's mother died from ovarian cancer, and he went to live with a maternal aunt in Memphis. Listening to The Metropolitan Opera and Marian Anderson on the radio ignited Koen's interest in classical music. He acted in school plays and enjoyed singing in the choir at Central Baptist Church in Memphis.

Video Oral History Interview with Georg Koen, Section A2005_032_001_002, TRT: 0:31:02 ?

Georg Koen's mother died when he was twelve, which grieved him deeply. A radio appearance as part of the Teen-Town Singers led to him receiving a music scholarship to Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi. After graduating in 1951, he attended University of North Dakota in Grand Forks. Realizing he needed more advanced training, he went to New York City to study music and dramatic arts. After being drafted into the U.S. Army in 1956, Koen performed on the television show 'Get Set, Go' and auditioned for the U.S. Army Chorus; he was denied entry due to racial discrimination despite passing the audition. He was stationed in Munich, Germany as part of an army concert band. While there, he sang lieder in recitals. After his discharge, he continued studying music in Germany, then embarked on a four-month tour in Yugoslavia. He gave a command performance for Princess Margaret of Denmark in 1960. Koen found himself typecast occasionally in Europe, but overall, he encountered less discrimination than in the U.S.

Video Oral History Interview with Georg Koen, Section A2005_032_001_003, TRT: 0:29:39 ?

Georg Koen was featured on a Norwegian television program in 1961, traveled to Bulgaria in 1962 and gave an outstanding performance in Barcelona, Spain. In 1965, he did a recording for RIAS in Germany and appeared on a Turkish television program in 1971. Koen's performances were critically acclaimed in Europe, but the productions did not sell well. However, remaining in Europe afforded him more opportunities. Upon his return to the U.S. in 1976, he found it difficult to obtain the work his experience and reputation merited due to continuing racial discrimination. The Ashley-Famous Agency declined to represent him after signing Richard Pryor because they would only accept one African American client at a time. Koen traveled to Norway annually throughout the 1970s to give performances, including a well-received lieder recital that, unfortunately, failed to sell out the house. Koen explains the distinction between lieder and opera singing and how he handled language barriers while living in Europe.

Video Oral History Interview with Georg Koen, Section A2005_032_001_004, TRT: 0:31:21 ?

Georg Koen started a banking analysis company, Corporate Computer Systems, whose clients included Seventeen Magazine, CBS and Soap Opera Digest, after his retirement from singing. Although his friend, the actress Mary Santpere, tried to convince him to return to Spain and resume performing, he was content with his new business and the stability it afforded him. He describes how cultural tastes in music changed throughout the 1960s and 1970s and reflects upon the current state of classical music and opera, noting the lack of African American male singers. He shares advice for African Americans aspiring to a career in classical music performance, his thoughts on the importance of preserving history and why he believes Hans Jurgen Massaquoi's life is exemplary. He reflects upon his life, legacy and his family's impressions of his career. He describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community and how he would like to be remembered. Koen also narrates his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Georg Koen, Section A2005_032_001_005, TRT: 0:04:16 ?
Georg Koen narrates his photographs.