

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Dobbs, Mattiwilda
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon,
Dates:	March 1, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:25:17).
Abstract:	Opera singer Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon (1925 - 2015) was the first African American woman to appear in a principal role at La Scala Opera House in Milan. Dobbs also desegregated the San Francisco Opera Company and performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Dobbs passed away on December 8, 2015 in Atlanta, Georgia. Janzon was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 1, 2005, in Arlington, Virginia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_056
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Opera singer Mattiwilda Dobbs was born on July 11, 1925 in Atlanta, Georgia. The fifth of six daughters, she sang her first solo at age six and began her musical studies in piano during Dobbs' childhood. A member of the last graduating class from Atlanta University Lab School, Dobbs earned her high school diploma in 1942.

Receiving her B.A. degree in music from Spelman College in 1946, Dobbs began her formal voice training under the direction of Naomi Maise and Willis Laurence James. After graduating, she studied with Lotte Leonard and Pierre Bernac and attended the Mannes College of Music and the Berkshire Music Center's Opera Workshop.

Dobbs gained notoriety after winning a 1951 international music competition in Geneva, Switzerland. In 1953, Dobbs performed at the La Scala Opera House in Milan, making her the first African American woman to appear in a principal role there. After becoming the first African American to play a major role for the San Francisco Opera in 1955, she debuted at New York's Metropolitan Opera in 1956. Refusing to appear before segregated crowds, Dobbs did not perform in her hometown of Atlanta until 1962, where she appeared in front of an integrated audience at the Municipal Auditorium. In 1973, Dobbs started teaching at the University of Texas at Austin. She also worked as a professor at Spelman College, the University of Illinois, the University of Georgia and Howard University. She ended her teaching career when she retired from Howard in 1991 and she retired from singing two years later.

In 1999, Testament Records released *Mattiwilda Dobbs: Songs and Lieder*, a CD of her early recordings.

The aunt of former Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson, Dobbs has been married twice. Her first husband, Spanish playwright and journalist, Luis Rodriguez, died a year into their marriage. She then married Swedish newspaper journalist Bengt Janzon for nearly forty years until his death in 1997.

Dobbs passed away on December 8, 2015 in Atlanta, Georgia.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon was conducted by Racine Tucker Hamilton on March 1, 2005, in Arlington, Virginia, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Opera singer Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon (1925 - 2015) was the first African American woman to appear in a principal role at La Scala Opera House in Milan. Dobbs also desegregated the San Francisco Opera Company and performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Dobbs passed away on December 8, 2015 in Atlanta, Georgia.

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:

Dobbs, Mattiwilda

Hamilton, Racine Tucker (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Dobbs, Mattiwilda--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Opera 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 Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon, March 1, 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 Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon, Section A2005_056_001_001, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon was born on July 11, 1925 in Atlanta, Georgia to Irene Thompson Dobbs and John Wesley Dobbs. Her mother was born in Columbus, Mississippi a few years after slavery and met Janzon's father in Atlanta. Her

father was born in Kennesaw, Georgia on a small farm. He was raised by his grandmother and step-grandfather while his mother, a former slave and daughter of her white owner, worked as a seamstress in Savannah, Georgia. Janzon's father had a prestigious career as a clerk in charge for the Railway Mail Service, and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt helped him obtain his pension when it was unjustly denied. Her father was secretary and later grandmaster of Prince Hill Freemasons until his death and maintained the organization through the Great Depression. Janzon's parents emphasized education and music, and her father brought her to northern cities to experience life beyond the segregated South. Janzon's five sisters include Irene Dobbs Jackson and HistoryMaker June Dobbs Butts.

Video Oral History Interview with Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon, Section A2005_056_001_002, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon grew up on Houston Street in an all-black, middle class neighborhood of Atlanta, Georgia. Her father coined the nickname Sweet Auburn Avenue for the nearby main street, and Houston Street now bears his name. Janzon enjoyed riding her bicycle and eating her mother's cooking. The neighborhood hosted African American celebrities like Duke Ellington, who once played for Janzon in her childhood home. Janzon gave her first solo performance when she sang at her parents' anniversary party at age six. She attended Oglethorpe School and Atlanta University Laboratory High School, both Atlanta University affiliated private schools with racially mixed faculty. She sang in the high school choir but did not pursue solos due to stage fright. During her freshman year at Spelman College in Atlanta in 1942, Janzon's voice teacher cured her fear of performance. She first aspired to become a fashion designer but changed her major to music at the behest of the music department. She also minored in Spanish.

Video Oral History Interview with Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon, Section A2005_056_001_003, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon studied voice for the first time as a music major at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. She sang in Spelman's glee club and the Atlanta University Chorus. Upon graduating first in her class, Janzon was encouraged to pursue a career in music by Willis Laurence James and Spelman President Florence Read. Rather than attend a conservatory, she studied with Lotte Leonard. She then obtained a scholarship to study opera at the Mannes School of Music and completed a master's degree in Spanish at Columbia University, both in New York, New York. She won a scholarship to Tanglewood Music Center in Tanglewood, Massachusetts. She studied song literature in Paris, France on an Opportunity Fellowship. Winning the Geneva International Music Competition launched her opera career. She sang all over the world, including at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, Italy and the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Janzon integrated the Atlanta Municipal Auditorium, where she first heard classical music, in 1962.

Video Oral History Interview with Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon, Section A2005_056_001_004, TRT: 0:30:02 ?

Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon and her second husband, Bengt Janzon, married in New York City because their marriage was illegal in her hometown of Atlanta, Georgia in 1957. As desegregation advanced, Janzon was able to give more performances in the United States. Janzon brought her husband to Atlanta for the first time in 1967 and sang at the city's mayoral inauguration of her nephew, Maynard Jackson, Jr., in 1974. In the early 1970s, she began her career as a music professor at University of Texas at Austin. After a stint as artist in

residence at Spelman College in Atlanta and teaching at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and University of Georgia in Athens, she taught music at Howard University in Washington, D.C. from 1977 to 1991. Janzon describes how she prepares for performances and offers advice for opera singing. She also reflects upon her life, the privileges of her childhood, contemporary black music, her concerns for the African American community, and the importance of history.

Video Oral History Interview with Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon, Section A2005_056_001_005, TRT: 0:25:55 ?

Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon reflects upon the status of historically black colleges and universities, her legacy, and how she would like to be remembered. Janzon concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.