

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with George Shirley

Overview of the Collection

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| Repository: | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com |
| Creator: | Shirley, George |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with George Shirley, |
| Dates: | June 10, 2010 and October 25, 2012 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2010 and 2012 |
| Physical Description: | 10 uncompressed MOV digital video files (5:00:11). |
| Abstract: | Music instructor and opera singer George Shirley (1934 -) is a professor of voice at the University of Michigan, and in 1961, he became the first African American tenor to earn a contract with the Metropolitan Opera. Shirley was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 10, 2010 and October 25, 2012, in Ann Arbor, Michigan and Detroit, Michigan. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2010_045 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Opera Singer George Shirley was born on April 18, 1934 in Indianapolis, Indiana, to Irving and Daisy Shirley. By age four, Shirley had begun performing, joining his mother and father as a musical trio within the Indianapolis church community. After moving to Detroit, Michigan with his parents at age six, Shirley continued to build his musical talents, playing the baritone horn in a community band, and studying voice while a student at Northern High School. His musical acumen earned Shirley a scholarship to Wayne State University, where he performed in his first musical drama, Oedipus Rex, with the Men's Glee Club in 1955. He

graduated that same year, receiving his B.S. in Music Education.

Also in 1955, Shirley became the first African American high school music teacher in the city of Detroit. A year later, after being drafted into the Army, he became the first African American to sing with the U.S. Army Chorus, where, influenced by fellow choir members, Shirley decided to pursue a career in opera. In 1959, he performed in his first staged production, *Die Fledermaus*, with a small company in Woodstock, New York. The following year, after winning the American Opera Auditions in New York, he was invited to play the role Rodolfo in Puccini's *La Bohème* in Milan, Italy. In 1961, Shirley won first prize in the Metropolitan Opera Auditions, thus becoming the first African American tenor to be awarded a contract with that company, where he performed from 1961 through 1973. He played major roles in more than twenty operas, often performing with fellow African American opera pioneers Leontyne Price and Shirley Verrett. During and after his stint with the Metropolitan Opera, Shirley was a well sought tenor across the globe, appearing in productions in London, Italy, San Francisco, Washington D.C., Chicago, Boston and a host of other cities. Shirley also won a Grammy Award for a recording of his performance in Mozart's *Così Fan Tutte*.

In 1980, Shirley joined the staff of the University of Maryland as a professor of voice. In 1985, the University honored him with a Distinguished Scholar-Teacher Award. In 1987, he returned to the Detroit area, as a professor of voice at the University of Michigan, and five years later, he was named the Joseph Edgar Maddy Distinguished University Professor of Voice. In 2007, Shirley was named the Joseph Edgar Maddy Distinguished University Emeritus Professor of Voice upon his retirement.

George Shirley was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 10, 2010.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with George Shirley was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 10, 2010 and October 25, 2012, in Ann Arbor, Michigan and Detroit, Michigan, and was recorded on 10 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Music instructor and opera singer George Shirley (1934 -) is a professor of voice at the University of Michigan, and in 1961, he became the first African American tenor to earn a contract with the Metropolitan Opera.

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:

Shirley, George

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Shirley, George --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

University of Michigan

Metropolitan Opera

Occupations:

Music Instructor

Opera Singer

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers|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 George Shirley, June 10, 2010 and October 25, 2012. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 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 George Shirley, Section
A2010_045_001_001, TRT: 0:30:36 ?

George Shirley was born on April 18, 1934 in Indianapolis, Indiana to Daisy Bell Shirley and Irving Shirley. His maternal grandmother, Candice Hubbard, was born of Dutch and Native American ancestry. Shirley has little memory of his maternal grandfather, Marshel Bell, who died in a coal mining accident. Daisy Shirley was born in 1900 in Huntington, Arkansas and migrated north to Indianapolis as an adult. Irving Shirley was born in 1900 in Summer Shade, Kentucky, a small town on the western side of the state. The Shirley family owned land in Summer Shade—Shirley's paternal grandfather farmed tobacco— and migrated north to Chicago, Illinois and Indianapolis in the 1920s. His father only completed fifth grade while his mother finished one year at Shorter College, in Little Rock, Arkansas. Shirley's parents were married in 1925. He talks about his birth by caesarian section at St. Vincent's Hospital in Indianapolis and his mother's issues around fertility.

Video Oral History Interview with George Shirley, Section
A2010_045_001_002, TRT: 0:29:32 ?

George Shirley was the first African American child born at St. Vincent's Hospital in Indianapolis, Indiana in 1934. He describes his parents' personalities; both parents, Daisy Bell Shirley and Irving Shirley, were musically inclined. Shirley placed second in his first singing competition at five years old hosted by the William H. Block Company department store; he performed 'There's a Gold Mine in the Sky.' Shirley spent his early childhood in Indianapolis. Parents of actor James Baskett, "Uncle Remus", lived next door. In the 1940s, Shirley's family moved to Detroit, Michigan where his parents worked for Ernest Breech, chairman of the Ford Motor Company. His father contracted blood poisoning and was sent to Eloise Sanitarium expecting little chance of survival. He recovered and began working for the Mammoth Life and Accident Insurance Company, which sold insurance primarily to African Americans. In 1957, Shirley's father helped found Detroit's People's Community Church with Rev. Carlyle Fielding Stewart.

Video Oral History Interview with George Shirley, Section A2010_045_001_003, TRT: 0:31:19 ?

George Shirley grew up in Detroit, Michigan's North End in the 1940s and 1950s. He attended Ebenezer A.M.E. Church and began his education at Moore Elementary School. Shirley then attended Sherrard Intermediate School and Northern High School. At Northern, Shirley benefited from a strong music curriculum. He explains how the Detroit Public Schools trained a generation of Motown greats such as HistoryMakers Martha Reeves and Smokey Robinson. Shirley sang tenor for performances of Handel's 'Messiah' and Verdi's 'Requiem' in high school. In addition to his classical music training, he co-edited the school newspaper. Shirley enrolled at Wayne State University in Detroit in 1956. Professors encouraged him to hone his vocal talents by casting him in performances such as Igor Stravinsky's 'Oedipus Rex.' He graduated with his B.S. degree in music education in 1955 and began teaching at Miller High School where he became the first African American vocal music teacher in the Detroit Public Schools.

Video Oral History Interview with George Shirley, Section

A2010_045_001_004, TRT: 0:28:39 ?

George Shirley auditioned for the United States Army Chorus after being drafted in 1956. Formed by General John “Black Jack” Pershing, the chorus did not include any African American singers prior to Shirley. His sight singing skills impressed conductor Samuel Loboda, who invited Shirley to join the Chorus. Shirley encountered segregation and racial discrimination performing with the Chorus throughout the late 1950s in Washington D.C. Shirley attended his first opera, a performance of Verdi’s ‘Rigoletto,’ while on a Western tour with the U.S. Army Chorus. He intended to return to a teaching career in Detroit, Michigan after being discharged from the Army. However, a chorus member encouraged him to meet opera singer Themy Georgi and he decided to pursue an opera career. In 1959, Shirley signed a summer contract with the Turnau Opera Company in Woodstock, New York and attended regional auditions for the Metropolitan Opera. At Turnau, he performed in pieces by Strauss, Mozart, Bizet, Ravel, and Puccini.

Video Oral History Interview with George Shirley, Section
A2010_045_002_005, TRT: 5:29:04 2012/10/25

George Shirley won a contract to perform with the Metropolitan Opera, “the Met,” in New York City in 1961. His first performance, as Ferrando in Mozart’s ‘Così fan tutte’ happened after the lead tenor, Charles Anthony, fell ill, with Shirley performing as his understudy. During his eleven year career with the Met, Shirley studied with Cornelius Reid and sang with Leontyne Price. Shirley describes the history of African American opera singers and companies in the United States. Mary Cardwell Dawson formed the National Negro Opera Company in 1941 to showcase the talent of Lillian Evanti. Jules Bledsoe and Paul Robeson both had successful careers in the 1930s. Shirley identifies Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson and Joe Louis as his childhood idols. He met Anderson and Hayes in Detroit and attended a cocktail party with Robeson in New York City but was too afraid to introduce himself. Shirley describes the shifting musical tastes of black youth during the black power period.

Video Oral History Interview with George Shirley, Section
A2010_045_002_006, TRT: 6:29:07 2012/10/25

George Shirley talks about those black opera singers recognized in 1960s popular culture, including Marian Anderson, and the difficulties involved in composing an opera. Shirley originally intended to become a high school music teacher in Detroit, Michigan, but after meeting tenor Themy Georgi in the late 1950s, he began to consider a career as a professional opera singer. He describes seeing Verdi's 'Rigoletto,' on tour with the United States Army Chorus in 1957. In 1961, four years after seeing his first opera, Shirley joined the Metropolitan Opera Company, "the Met," in New York City. He talks about the desire of many musicians to identify as multi-dimensional artists and about ragtime pianist Scott Joplin's 1911 opera 'Treemonisha.' Shirley talks about the interconnections between jazz and classical music and Broadway musical and operatic compositions. Although he does not consider himself a jazz performer, he does enjoy singing popular jazz songs.

Video Oral History Interview with George Shirley, Section
A2010_045_002_007, TRT: 7:30:21 2012/10/25

George Shirley talks about singing with acclaimed opera singers Shirley Verrett and Leontyne Price at the Metropolitan Opera in the 1960s. He recorded Stravinsky's 'Oedipus Rex' with Verrett for Columbia Records. During his eleven year career with the Metropolitan Opera, Shirley often performed roles for the first time after little rehearsal. The limited number of professional tenors in the United States forced the Met to rely heavily upon the talent in their own company. Shirley performed twenty-seven roles at the Met including Tamino in Mozart's 'The Magic Flute' and Macduff in Verdi's 'Macbeth.' Shirley describes roles he's enjoyed most, including "Pelléas" in Debussy's 'Pelléas et Mélisande.' A reviewer for Time magazine once accused Shirley of attempting to conceal his race with makeup in his performance in 'The Stag King'. He defends himself and talks about critic's incorporation of race in reviews of African American performers.

Video Oral History Interview with George Shirley, Section

A2010_045_002_008, TRT: 8:29:29 2012/10/25

George Shirley describes his first visit to Atlanta, Georgia in 1962 with the Metropolitan Opera, “the Met,” as part of their end season tour. He was refused service at Davis Brothers Cafeteria and at Herndon’s barbershop—a black-owned and black-staffed barber service that did not serve black customers. The Metropolitan Opera staged ‘Romeo and Juliet’ during their 1971 season, and Schuyler Chapin, the new general manager, asked Shirley to sing Romeo. For this performance, he received unfavorable reviews. Shirley’s career at the Met ended with a performance of ‘Don Giovanni.’ Shirley performed in Europe after leaving the Met. He describes highlights from his career, including a performance of ‘Simon Boccanegra’ that was recorded illegally. In 1980, Shirley accepted a professorship with the University of Maryland in College Park, Maryland. He then received an offer from the School of Music, Theatre and Dance at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1987.

Video Oral History Interview with George Shirley, Section
A2010_045_002_009, TRT: 9:31:49 2012/10/25

George Shirley briefly taught at the University of Maryland in College Park, Maryland before joining the faculty of the School of Music, Theatre and Dance at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan. At the University of Michigan, he taught future opera stars Anita Johnson, Michael Fabiano, David Daniels, and Scott Piper. Shirley continued performing while at the University of Michigan, traveling to Austria in 1998 to play “Sportin’ Life” in ‘Porgy and Bess.’ He declined an offer from the Metropolitan Opera Company in 1965 to play Porgy because he did not want to be typecast. Shirley talks about the significance of “Porgy” as well as continued international interest in ‘Porgy and Bess’ as evidence that twenty-first century opera composers should draw from American history. He describes his teaching style; proper voice maintenance; and having to manage acid reflux disease.

Video Oral History Interview with George Shirley, Section
A2010_045_002_010, TRT: 10:30:15 2012/10/25

George Shirley addresses the misapprehension that weight corresponds with a singer's talents. Shirley gained weight at the beginning of his career with the Metropolitan Opera, "the Met," in the 1960s, and altered his diet to live a healthier lifestyle. Shirley describes the significance of diet and vocal study for opera singers. He worries that technology will lessen the importance of vocal training for the next generation. Shirley reflects upon his legacy and describes how he would like to be remembered. He concludes by talking about his family and singing, in Italian, the aria from Puccini's 'The Girl of the West.'