

Soprano Jessye Norman dies at the age of 74

Fred Mazelis
5 October 2019

Renowned American dramatic soprano Jessye Norman died on September 30 at the age of 74. The cause of death was septic shock, a complication from a spinal cord injury she suffered four years ago.

Jessye Norman had an extraordinary stage presence, often described by the adjective “regal.” This was partly the result of her imposing height and size, but it was also inseparable from her unusual and powerful voice, heard on opera and recital stages around the world. She specialized in the music of Richard Wagner and the late Romantic repertoire of Mahler and Richard Strauss, but ranged widely in her programs and performances, back in time to Mozart and Beethoven and forward to Stravinsky, Bartok, Janacek and contemporary composers as well.

She was born in Augusta, Georgia in September 1945, at the very beginning of the post-World War II era. She came from a musical family and was encouraged by her parents, including her mother, who was an amateur pianist. This was the Jim Crow South, and Norman would have heard recollections of such events as the historic performance of Marian Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939, after the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) had refused permission for her to sing at Constitution Hall.

The future star of the Metropolitan Opera went to Howard University and continued her musical training in Baltimore and at the University of Michigan. At the age of 23, she won the 1968 Munich International Memorial Competition and began a singing career at Berlin’s Deutsche Oper, where she debuted as Elizabeth in Wagner’s *Tannhauser*, with one critic even comparing her voice to that of the illustrious Lotte Lehmann (1888-1976).

Jim Crow and other racial barriers were coming down by the end of the 1960s, but they were not fully dismantled. Like some other African-American performers, Norman sought experience in Europe at the

beginning of her career. She sang opposite Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau in Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro* in 1971, and in 1972 sang her first performances of *Aida*, at La Scala in Milan, and Berlioz’s *Les Troyens*, at London’s Royal Opera House.

Norman did not make her first performance at the Metropolitan Opera until 1983, once again in *Les Troyens*, and she drew immediate raves. The 1970s and 1980s were the prime years of her career. On the heels of her success at the Met, Norman became especially prominent in the 1980s. She accompanied the Berlin Philharmonic on a US tour and became increasingly famous through recordings and television appearances. She sang 80 performances at the Met in the decade or so after her debut, but was also appearing all over the world.

She received numerous honors over the years, including five Grammy awards for her recordings, and in 1997 she was one of the five performing artists given the annual Kennedy Center Honors.

In her prime, Norman’s voice was instantly recognizable for its power as well as her powerful diction, whether singing English, German or French. *New Yorker* music critic Alex Ross refers to its “shimmering magnificence.” Another critic called it a “grand mansion of sound.” Norman’s voice during her mature years was powerful and enveloping, but not overpowering or lacking in interpretive subtlety.

There was something else unusual about this soprano, and that was her flexibility in essaying roles that were typically sung by the lower-voice mezzo-sopranos. Norman famously said, when asked about her willingness to try parts that were not typical for voices of her range and weight, that “pigeonholes are for pigeons.”

Her most famous roles were in Wagner (*Tannhauser*, *Lohengrin*, *Tristan and Isolde*, *Die Walkure*, *Parsifal*) and Strauss (*Salome*, *Ariadne auf Naxos*), but she also

sang in *The Marriage of Figaro*, Beethoven's *Fidelio*, and early 20th century works by Stravinsky (*Oedipus Rex*), Bartok (*Bluebeard's Castle*), and Schoenberg (*Erwartung* and *Gurrelieder*).

Symphonic and recital highlights of her career included Brahms's sublime Alto Rhapsody (which she remembered hearing for the first time when she was 10), Mahler's Second and Third Symphonies and his song cycle *Kindertotenlieder* (Songs on the Death of Children), and, perhaps most famously, Richard Strauss's *Four Last Songs*, completed when the composer was 84, in 1948. With the exception of one other song, these are Strauss's last completed works, and have been justly interpreted as his farewell to life. He died one year later.

The *Four Last Songs* are comprised of "Frühling" (Spring), "September," "Beim Schlafengehen" (When Falling Asleep), and "Im Abendrot." (At Sunset). The first three songs are set to texts by 20th century German poet and novelist Hermann Hesse, and the last is to a text by 19th century German romantic poet Joseph von Eichendorff.

The *Four Last Songs* were recorded by Jessye Norman and the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, led by Kurt Masur, the future music director of the New York Philharmonic. The recording dates from 1982, before the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the East German Stalinist regime. The tempos are unusually slow, especially for the last song, "Im Abendrot," and some critics have found fault. Most agree that Jessye Norman's powerful, majestic and unforced singing provides an extraordinarily moving interpretation of Strauss's music as well as the poetry.

Norman began experiencing vocal problems in the 1990s. There was some criticism of her vocal mannerisms at the time, an effort on her part perhaps to compensate for these issues. She gradually cut back her operatic performances, but remained active in recitals as well as in performances somewhat further afield. These included a Carnegie Hall program with Duke Ellington's sacred music on the program, set to jazz combo, piano and string quartet. She also worked over the next decade with several modern dance choreographers, including Bill T. Jones. She continued to perform spirituals, as she had during her entire career. Norman remained involved in musical activity even after being confined to a wheelchair in 2015.

Although Norman's operatic career was shorter than that of others, her legacy, both in performances and through her recordings, ensures that her name will not be forgotten.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact