

American soprano Martina Arroyo has died at the age of 90

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The much-loved American soprano Martina Arroyo has died in New York City at the age of 90. She devoted herself not only to her own work on the opera stage but to training and mentoring young people for operatic careers.

Arroyo sang at the Metropolitan Opera for more than 25 years, although the peak of her performing career came between 1965, when she triumphed in the title role of Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*, and 1978. The soprano also had a major international presence at such opera houses as London's Royal Opera, Chicago's Lyric Opera and Milan's La Scala. She traveled to perform elsewhere in the United States as well, including in San Francisco and Philadelphia. While known especially for her Verdi roles in some of his most famous operas—*A Masked Ball*, *Don Carlo*, *La Forza del Destino* and others, in addition to *Aida*—the soprano was also celebrated for her performances in the works of Mozart, Puccini and others.

The opera star was among the first black singers to break through the barriers of discrimination in her chosen field. Martina was already 19 years old when legendary contralto Marian Anderson finally made her 1955 debut at the Met. Anderson helped open the door, and by the 1960s, Arroyo was joined by such singers as Leontyne Price, Shirley Verrett, Grace Bumbry and George Shirley on the Met stage and elsewhere.

Although Arroyo sang in some small roles at the Met beginning with her debut in 1959, she began her career in earnest in Europe. It was on a family visit that she got the call to replace Birgit Nilsson as *Aida*. She was immediately offered a Met contract after that performance, going on to *Don Carlo* and several other operas that season.

Martina Arroyo was born in Harlem on February 2, 1936. Her father was Puerto Rican and her mother from

Charleston, South Carolina. Her father worked as a mechanical engineer at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and the family was able to provide some important cultural opportunities for their daughter. Martina went on to attend the selective Hunter College High School, where she came to the attention of vocal teachers who encouraged her.

Martina's early teachers and other influences recognized not only the beauty of her voice but also her acting ability, her determination and the personality needed for a career on the stage. Although her teachers strongly urged her to pursue a singing career, she was unsure of what awaited her in the classical music world. She went on to obtain degrees at Hunter College and later at New York University. She first found a job as a New York City welfare worker, followed by a number of years as a high school teacher, before musical opportunities beckoned and her commitment to opera became total.

Arroyo's career included much work on the concert stage as well, performing works by a wide range of composers, including Dvorak, Wagner, Faure, Strauss, Mahler and many others. She sang in Beethoven's 9th Symphony and in his *Missa Solemnis*.

At the end of the soprano's operatic career in the early 1990s, she transitioned to teaching. She became a professor at the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University, where she continued for well over a decade. It was in Indiana, in the course of her work with students on operatic role preparation, that she conceived the idea that would lead to the founding of the non-profit Martina Arroyo Foundation in 2003. Between 2003 and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic 17 years later, she led "Prelude to Performance," annual intensive tuition-free six-week summer workshops at Hunter College which

culminated every July with two performances each of two fully-staged operas.

A major emphasis of Arroyo's teaching was preparing young singers for the dramatic aspects of opera performance, instead of the usual pattern in opera training, which culminated in the delivery of specific arias or ensembles but not in what it meant to perform in a fully staged work.

Among the operas performed at New York City's Kaye Playhouse were such Verdi staples as *A Masked Ball*, *Falstaff*, *La Traviata* and others, as well as Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, *Don Giovanni* and *The Magic Flute*, Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore* and Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*. Martina was quoted as saying that this work of preparing young singers meant as much or more to her than her own career. She could always be found sitting in an orchestra aisle seat, warmly greeting both audience members and musical colleagues.

The staged operas of Prelude to Performance came to an end in 2020, as a result of a combination of factors, including the pandemic and Arroyo's own advancing years. A consideration that must not be lost sight of is the need to finance expensive full productions of operatic masterpieces and the absence of any public support for these cultural riches.

During her operatic career, Arroyo worked with some of the greatest operatic tenors, including Luciano Pavarotti and Plácido Domingo. She was known not only for her talent and her well-known conscientious preparation for each role but also for her engaging, warm and caring personality.

Arroyo was also the recipient of various lifetime recognition awards, including the Kennedy Center Honors in 2013.

There was little of the diva about Martina Arroyo. The legendary Plácido Domingo, now 85 years old, no doubt spoke for many in his tribute after the soprano's death, including these sentences: "We sang so much together, especially in the Verdi masterpieces, at the Metropolitan Opera, La Scala, Paris, Hamburg, San Francisco, Chicago, Teatro Colón of Buenos Aires, etc. Martina not only possessed an angelic voice but also an angel's spirit of tremendous generosity and amazing sense of humor. A room with Martina's presence was always filled with joy and caring. Martina Arroyo will always be dearly remembered by those who know her, and be deeply admired by the audience who have the

fortune of experiencing her artistry in person and in recordings."

See also:

<https://www.arts.gov/stories/podcast/martina-arroyo#audio-file>

<https://www.arts.gov/stories/short-cuts/2010-nea-opera-honor-soprano-martina-arroyo-talks-about-her-favorite-composers-112#audio-file>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4qVvLKIMFT8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfEatL0PFdI&list=PLXTjdZc9nnOM>



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