



November 2017 Her Story ENewsletter Opera Singers

A recent performance of the opera *Madame Butterfly* triggered the thought to profile opera singers in this month's eNewsletter. This art form originated in Italy in the 1500s; even today it delights audiences and enriches us culturally. We are pleased to profile sopranos Leontyne Price and Beverly Sills.

Raised in Mississippi, Leontyne Price rose to international acclaim in the 1950s and 1960s. She was one of the first African Americans who became a leading artist at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. Her musical career began with a toy piano when she was three years old. It progressed through the church choir and on to college, where she trained for a career in music education. Assisted by the family who employed her aunt as a maid (and who had noticed the caliber of her singing voice) and by Paul Robeson, a famous bass singer, she enrolled at the Julliard School in New York City. Her opera career began in 1951. In 1953, she became the first African-American singer to perform with the Met, by singing at a fundraiser.



Leontyne Price

Throughout the 1950s, Price toured internationally and sang around the country. Her performance at La Scala in 1960 was the first time that an African American had sung a lead role in that great opera house of Italy. Her Metropolitan Opera debut occurred in 1961. Subsequent performances that year at the Met resulted in her being named Musician of the Year and appearing on the cover of *Musical America*. The Grammy-award winner was honored with the Lifetime Achievement Award in 1989 after garnering 19 Grammys. Her additional honors include the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the Kennedy Center Honors and the Spingarn Medal from the NAACP. In 2008, she was one of the inaugural recipients of the Opera Honors from the National Endowment for the Arts.



Beverly Sills

Singing on the radio when she was three years old (and known as "Bubbles"), Beverly Sills became the face of opera in the U.S. and popularized it for the masses. Her operatic stage debut came in 1947 and she debuted with the New York City Opera in 1955. Over the course of her career, Sills partnered often with conductor Sarah Caldwell and was featured on the cover of Time magazine in 1971.

Sills not only had a stellar singing career, after her retirement from singing, she served as director of the New York City Opera and Chairwoman of Lincoln Center and, later, the Metropolitan Opera. She was also active in the March of Dimes and other philanthropic and arts endeavors. The winner of Grammy and Emmy Awards as well as the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the National Medal of Arts and the Kennedy Center Honors, Sills has been inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

Leontyne Price and Beverly Sills are among the more than 850 women profiled in our book *Her Story: A Timeline of the Women Who Changed America*. Women's accomplishments continue to inspire and encourage us. Help us to tell women's stories!

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