

# Marian Anderson's Big Decision

**Lesson Type:** Humanities

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**This lesson plan is geared towards a fifth grade level, but may be adapted for use by any age group. It meets the following National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (Middle Grades):**

**Theme: Culture**

- Explain how information and experiences may be interpreted by people from diverse cultural perspectives and frames of reference
- Articulate the implications of cultural diversity, as well as cohesion, within and across groups

**Theme: Time, Continuity and Change**

- Develop critical sensitivities such as empathy and skepticism regarding attitudes, values, and behaviors of people in different historical contexts

**Theme: Individual Development and Identity**

- Relate personal changes to social, cultural, and historical contexts
- Describe the ways family, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and institutional affiliations contribute to personal identity
- Identify and describe ways regional, ethnic, and national cultures influence individuals' daily lives
- Identify and describe the influence of perception, attitudes, values, and beliefs on personal identity
- Identify and interpret examples of stereotyping, conformity, and altruism

**Theme: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions**

- Demonstrate an understanding of concepts such as role, status, and social class in describing the interactions of individuals and social groups
- Identify and analyze examples of tensions between expressions of individuality and group or institutional efforts to promote social conformity

**Theme: Power, Authority, and Governance**

- Explain and apply concepts such as power, role, status, justice, and influence to the examination of persistent issues and social problems

Standards taken from: *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*. National Council for the Social Studies, April 1994. ISBN 0-87986-065-0

**Goals:**

1. Students will gain an understanding of the difficulty Marian Anderson faced in 1935 when choosing between her two accompanists: Billy King and Kosti Vehanen.
2. Students will make a personal connection to the dilemmas in Marian Anderson's life, and through this get a deeper understanding of the era in which she lived.

**Objectives:**

1. Discuss the consequences that may follow an important decision.
2. Discuss Marian Anderson's early career that led to her difficult decision.
3. Imagine yourself in Marian Anderson's shoes.

**Resources Needed:** Reading Extract below.

**Approx. Time Required:** one hour

**Skills Learned:**

- Students will be able to understand the difficulty of making important decisions.
- Students will learn how to empathize – to understand the feelings of another person.

**Lesson:**

*Warm-up or "hook":*

**Problem:**

Two of your very good friends have invited you to separate parties that are taking place at exactly the same time. (You cannot possibly attend both and they are too far apart to spend one half the time at each). Though you are closer with one of these friends, you know that your other friend is having a much better party. You must decide which party to attend.

**Questions:**

1. What are the different factors that you would consider in making your decision? Make a list of these with the class.
2. Which one would you consider to be the deciding factor?
3. What impact would your decision have on your relationship with the friend whose party you chose not to attend?

Have students write a few lines about why one particular factor would sway them and discuss with the class.

**Activity:**

Hand out or read the extract below with the class. Discuss the following questions:

- What major decision did Marian Anderson have to make?
- Why do you think this was a very big decision for a singer?
- What are the factors that she would have had to consider in making this decision? Make a list with the class on the blackboard or flip chart, making sure to consider the following:
  - Billy King had been with Marian since the beginning and had shared "hard times" with her.
  - Billy King was an African-American and the job of becoming Marian's accompanist would be a very big break for him. (Keep in mind that Billy had helped make her career possible).
  - Kosti was white and this would create many problems with American audiences at that time.
  - Kosti had a higher level of training and was a much better musician than Billy. He and Marian had been playing together for a long time, and had built a strong musical relationship. (Keep in mind that Marian always said that the most important thing to her was music).

**Homework (optional):**

Write a short essay (one or two paragraphs) discussing which man you believe Marian should pick to be her accompanist and explain your reasons. Make sure you explain which is the "deciding factor" in your decision.

### Closure / Reflection:

If you are building your career, which would you value more, friendship or ability in your in your field?

### Assessment and Follow-up:

Have several students share their homework assignment with the class. Tell the students that Marian decided that music was the most important thing to her, and so she chose Kosti, since he was the better musician. She made this decision even though she knew it might be an unpopular move with black and white audiences, and might hurt Billy's feelings. Wrap up by asking students if they agree with her decision. How do the students believe this decision impacted her future career?

### Reading Extract:

One of the most famous African-American singers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a woman named **Marian Anderson**. Marian was born in Philadelphia in 1897, the first of three girls born to a hardworking, but fairly poor, family. As a child, she sang in church choirs. Everyone commented on her beautiful singing voice, and many churches asked her to come and sing for them. Marian knew that if she wanted to become a professional singer, she would need professional voice training. However, it was very difficult for her to find a teacher because she had very little money, and there was a lot of racial discrimination against black people at the time. One music school refused to even give Marian an application.

Eventually, Marian did get professional training. She was ready to begin her singing career. Marian was introduced to a man named **Billy King**, a very talented African-American musician who had accompanied other black singers. Billy became Marian's accompanist. He helped her in many other ways as well; he got her singing engagements around the South, and helped her advertise their concerts. The two became close friends. Without Billy's help, Marian's career might not have ever taken off.

Marian began to realize that in order to further improve herself and advance her career, she would have to go to Europe to study. In 1927, Marian went to Europe to study and perform. She was a great success! In 1930, she met a man from the country of Finland named **Kosti Vehanen**. He was a very well-trained pianist and talented musician who had accompanied many famous singers. Kosti knew many languages and was highly educated. He was a great musician, and he and Marian enjoyed making music together very much. He became Marian's accompanist for the remainder of her time in Europe. Together they played concerts in many countries, including England, Russia, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, France, Germany, and more.

In 1935, Marian was ready to return to the United States. She now had to make a very difficult decision. Who would be her accompanist: Billy King, the African-American who helped to get her on the road to success and who was her good friend, or Kosti Vehanen, the white European who was more educated and the better trained musician than Billy?