

PRELUDE



*I*t was a beautiful autumn when I found myself in Europe for the very first time, in bustling, stylish Munich. While completing a master's degree in vocal performance at the University of Michigan, I had been among the students selected from around the country by a special committee of the United States Information Agency to participate in international music competitions. I was thrilled to be taking part in the prestigious Bayerischer Rundfunk Internationaler Musikwettbewerb, the Bavarian Radio International Music Competition. Julius, a great friend and fine pianist whom I knew from my undergraduate days at Howard University, had traveled with me as my accompanist. There was electricity in the air: the whole city seemed to be involved in the events at the Bavarian Radio. All of the performances during the competition were to be held before a live audience.

The country Julius and I had left behind for these few weeks was on fire. The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. the previous spring had sparked riots all over the States. Classes at

Berkeley had not taken place in months. Los Angeles, Detroit, and Newark were ablaze with the passion for peace and justice. Protesters marched, organized sit-ins, and took over administration buildings on college campuses. Attacks on Dr. King's legacy were as vicious as the trained-to-kill dogs, fire hoses, and smoke bombs directed at American citizens exercising their civil rights. Those sworn to protect and serve stood quietly on the sidelines or, worse still, joined the chorus of hate emanating from those sidelines.

The war in Vietnam had surely and steadily lost support, and no half-truths or presidential speeches beginning with the words "My fellow Americans" could douse the flames of revolution visible just across the street from the White House, in Lafayette Square. The country roared in opposition to the status quo. Europe was no less a hot spot, particularly in Paris, where student protests against university tuition payments and other concerns made for significant unrest. The world was most certainly in a state of evolution and revolution.

I had participated in mass meetings and protest marches, carrying signs exhorting NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE, and lending my voice to the song concluding almost every gathering, Pete Seeger's "We Shall Overcome." I understood that many organizations, with varying approaches to the fight for justice, were needed. No single civil rights group could channel every frustration, or rally everyone to stand tall in the face of those who would just as soon see us crawl away in defeat. Every voice needed to find its own place, its own platform from which the cry for freedom and equality could be heard.

Even though I was engaged increasingly in politics and social issues back home, I was enthralled by gorgeous Munich, and had few worries about my participation in this important competition. I felt that I was there to offer what I had been trained to do, first at Howard, then the Peabody Conservatory, and now at Michigan, with these very words from my mother in my ears from my earliest memories: stand up straight and sing!

Shortly after our arrival, Julius and I received the time slot for our appearance in the first round of the competition. All was well. Our performance time in hand, we went into a rehearsal room to make our final preparations, mindful of the wonderful honor that had been bestowed on us. Yes, we were here to represent ourselves, but more importantly, we were representing the United States of America in an international forum. We took this to heart.

Julius and I moved through the first round of competition with appreciation for all the work we had put into rehearsing and studying for this moment. We felt compelled to do even more, and work even harder in the next round. This was a serious event and an important time in our young lives, and we were grateful that we felt prepared.

Round Two.

A different kind of electricity surfaced in the second round of competition. Almost as soon as the names of those who had made it to the second round were announced, I was called into a room far away from the performance hall, without my friend Julius. There, the adjudicators of the competition suggested that having my own accompanist in Round One had given me an unfair advantage over

the other singers. The fact that some of the other singers were participating with their pianist spouses or their coaches was not part of the discussion.

This was unusual behavior for a jury—and most assuredly against its own rules. Normally, there is absolutely no interaction between an adjudicator and a competitor. I was told that I would need to give up my accompanist and sing with one of the piano accompanists provided by the organizers. I did not know quite what was afoot, but I knew enough to request that the new pianist, Brian Lampert from London, should rehearse with me every single song and aria on my list, before I went forward in Round Two.

In the first round, competitors may make their own choices from the list of music approved at the time of their acceptance into the competition, as long as this does not exceed the performance time limit. In the second round, the jury chooses from that same list what the competitor will perform. In still another unusual move, the adjudicators summoned me a second time to discuss my second-round performance. This time I was advised that the jury wished me to sing something that was not on my previously submitted list of repertoire. To my knowledge, no other contestant was being offered such creative treatment.

Now, I had reviewed the requirements carefully for this competition and knew them by heart. I was therefore very comfortable in stating my case: “I am sure that you are not permitted, according to the rules governing the competition, to ask me to sing anything that is not on my list,” I said. “And why would you want me to sing something I have not prepared, in any case?”

“Well,” one judge said, “you have performed the second aria of

Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser* during the first round. We would like to hear you sing the first aria.” I stated that I of course knew the first aria as well, but that my vocal professor and I felt that the first aria did not lend itself as a performance piece with piano nearly as well as with an orchestra. That was why this aria was not on my list.

To say that these adjudicators—an impressive slate of singers, accompanists, and music critics from around the world—were surprised by my response to their “request” would be something of an understatement, but I was not concerned. The audience had been advised already that I would be among those performing in the second round. I surmised that no one on the jury wanted the responsibility of having to explain that a change in the regulations of the competition, created especially for me, might well prevent my further participation in the event.

After a few more fruitless attempts to change my mind about singing the wonderful aria “Dich, teure Halle” (“You, dear treasured hall”), with piano, and with no small amount of intimidation, the jury members relented. I would sing what I had come prepared to sing.

The second round of the competition was completed, and more of the original eighty singers were eliminated. I was so happy to make it through to the final round. Not even the questionable behavior of the jury members had caused me to lose focus or concentration.

Round Three.

The third round of the competition was with orchestra, in Hercules Hall, the best of the concert venues in Munich at the time. The support I had from brand-new friends in my very first

European city, singing in the third and decisive round, was cause for even more giddy excitement.

With the thrill of being in Munich, I had not expected my participation in this competition to be met with the kind of challenges presented by the members of the jury. Julius and I had been more concerned with how our artistic readiness would compare to others from the different countries represented in Munich. I found a determination and a guiding spirit within myself in defending what I saw as my rights in this competition, the same clear guidance that drove my personal political growth and understanding.

I would sing what I had come prepared to sing. Whether in spite of or because of the judges, I was not the same young woman who had left the States just a few weeks earlier.