

*Pamela Kullans*



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# Camilla Williams

*Curatorial essay by Michelle Talibah*

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## *Etymology for diva*

“Diva” derives from Italian diva “goddess, fine lady,” from Latin diva “goddess,” feminine of divus “a god, divine one.”

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*Photo: Lotte Jacobi*

In the highly singular world of opera, few great voices emerge ultimately as divine. Lyric soprano Camilla Williams possessed such a voice, the voice of a diva.

The daughter of Fannie Carey Williams and Cornelius Booker Williams, Camilla Ella Williams was born in 1919 in Danville, Virginia. She was the youngest of four children and grew up nurtured by a loving family, the Baptist church, and the closely-knit black community in Danville. Her maternal grandfather was a basso profundo, and head of a musical family. Camilla began singing at age 5, and joined her church choir at 9 years old. Education, religious devotion, and music were the pillars of her formative years; and because of her unique gift, she was constantly in demand to perform for community events. At one such event, the minister of her church prophesized that “the name Camilla Williams would be known throughout the world.”

At age 12, Camilla began training with a Welsh voice teacher, Raymond Aubrey.

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Mr. Aubrey taught music to white students at Averett College, now Averett University, and also instructed black students in private homes. Ms. Williams credits Mr. Aubrey for introducing her to a range of classical music, including Puccini's "Madame Butterfly".

Camilla attended John M. Langston High School, graduating as class valedictorian in 1937. She left Danville to attend Virginia State College for Negroes, presently named Virginia State University, in Petersburg. Camilla was a member of the Virginia State College Choir and graduated with a B.S. degree in Music Education in 1941. After graduation, she returned to Danville and began a teaching career.



**High School Photo, 1937**  
Photo: DMFAH Collection



Photo: DMFAH Collection

In 1942, following her performance as lead vocalist with the Virginia State Choir, the Philadelphia Chapter of the Virginia State College Alumni originated a scholarship fund to further advance Camilla's musical study in Philadelphia. The opportunity demanded critical decisions. Should she leave her teaching career and the safe familiarity of life in Danville, or should she pursue her passion and step into an uncertain broader world? She chose the leap of faith and left Danville for Philadelphia. Once there, she began advanced voice training with renowned Hungarian opera star Marion Szekely-Freschl, and also studied languages and diction.

Camilla devoted her life to her talent. Her decision to 'seize the time' was a bold one for a young black girl from the South. Many accolades followed her arrival in Philadelphia. She became the first winner of the prestigious Marian Anderson Award, a vocal scholarship established by Miss Anderson, in 1943 and again the next season. In that same year, Camilla won the Philadelphia Orchestra Youth Concert Auditions, which offered an opportunity as soloist with the Philadelphia Orchestra, directed by the distinguished Eugene Ormandy.

To assess the scope of Camilla’s life, one must consider the background from which she emerged – and how that context predicted certain challenges for navigating her career. In the year of Ms. Williams’ birth, ratification of the 19th Amendment granted women the right to vote. It would be many more years before African Americans, particularly in the South, would be granted full access to voting power without the duress of segregationist ploy and practice designed to circumvent the 15th Amendment. Growing up in a small southern town in the 1920s and 30’s naturally implies the canopy of racial segregation and its ubiquitous and complicated codes of social perception and political behavior. These same codes would continue to plague her for the next sixty years of her life. As a mature woman, she realized that she had often been naïve to the prejudicial attitudes she frequently encountered. A select few had protected her from harmful attitudes and negative episodes on her journey. In conversation Camilla typically referenced Bible scripture, and she would often reconcile difficult situations from a point of view informed by unyielding spiritual faith. In a 1995 *New York Times* interview, Ms. Williams noted that...

*“The lack of recognition for my accomplishments used to bother me, but you cannot cry over those things. There is no place for bitterness in singing. It works on the cords and ruins the voice. In his own good time, God brings everything right.”*

Ms. Williams greatly admired two inspiring giants of the opera— renowned baritone Todd Duncan, the first African American to sing a featured role in a major opera company in 1945; and the celebrated contralto, Marian Anderson, whose fame grew in 1939 after the Daughters of the American Revolution refused her their stage before an integrated audience at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. because of her race. In response, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt arranged for Ms. Anderson to sing “America” on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to a crowd of 75,000 and a radio audience of millions. Camilla would frequently visit Ms. Anderson, and consulted with her for advice on many aspects of her career.



**Camilla with Marian Anderson**  
Photo: DMFAH Collection

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As Camilla's career progressed, important individuals recognized Camilla's extraordinary talent and were pleased to assist. She welcomed and appreciated the generosity of those who provided endorsements, key introductions, and financial assistance. One crucial advocate was renowned American opera soprano Geraldine Farrar, who in 1907 portrayed Cio-Cio-San in the Metropolitan Opera's first production of "Madame Butterfly". After hearing Camilla at a concert in Stamford, Connecticut in 1945, Farrar wrote to her concert manager:



Geraldine Farrar as Cio-Cio-San in  
"Madame Butterfly"

Photo: A.D DuPont, Library of Congress

*"I was quite unprepared for this young woman's obvious high gifts... I should like to voice my unsolicited appreciation and the hope that under careful management and encouragement, the rich promise she shows will mature to even higher artistic endeavors. A discriminating audience endorsed my own enthusiasm."*

It was Farrar who arranged for Camilla to audition with the New York City Opera for "Madame Butterfly", and she would sometimes offer advice to Camilla regarding other opera roles.



Camilla Williams as Cio-Cio-San in  
"Madame Butterfly"

Photo: DMFAH Collection

Within a year of this endorsement, Camilla Williams was to become the first black woman to appear in a major American opera house, performing the title tragic role of Cio-Cio San in "Madame Butterfly," which opened at the New York City Opera on May 15, 1946. She would also become the first black artist to receive a contract from the Opera. A succession of important roles followed, including the lead role of Aida for the New York City Opera production in 1948.

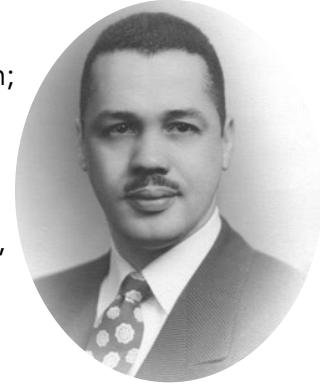
Williams was also in demand as a recording artist and recorded for RCA, MGM, and Columbia Records. She recorded George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess" with baritone Lawrence Winters for Columbia Records in 1951, but



she refused to portray Bess in staged productions because she felt the stereotypical casting for the opera did not represent black people and culture in a positive light.

In 1950 Camilla Williams married New York civil rights attorney Charles Theodore Beavers. The two were close friends growing up in Danville.

By all accounts, the marriage was a happy and rewarding union; and Williams credits the relationship as a refuge from the demanding and often turbulent life of concerts and performance. They mutually supported each other in their respective careers, and Camilla often performed for civil rights causes. Beavers became ill, leading to his death in 1970, leaving Camilla with a tremendous void of solace and companionship.



**Charles T. Beavers**  
Photo: DMFAH Collection

Ms. Williams was the first black singer in a major role at the Vienna State Opera. Her April 1954 performance as Cio-Cio San was a triumph, and she received great acclaim as the leading soprano with the company through the 1950s.

In 1958, she represented the U.S. State Department as a cultural ambassador, touring 14 countries in Africa. In September 1959, Williams made a command performance at the White House during the first state visit of the Crown Prince and Princess of Japan. Two years later, she made a second State Department tour of Japan, South Korea, Indochina, the Philippines, New Zealand, and Australia.

During 1962 and 1963, Williams received a range of honors from prominent music organizations. One highlight of 1963 occurred in an interesting twist of fate when Camilla sang the "Star-Spangled Banner" before the historic "I Have a Dream" speech delivered by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28th of that year. Marian Anderson, having been scheduled to sing the anthem, happened to be delayed in traffic.

Retiring from opera in 1971, Williams began her teaching career in New York. She taught voice at Brooklyn College, Bronx College, and Queens College. In 1974, she taught voice at the Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History, where she is honored in the museum's History Hall of Fame.

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In 1977, Camilla Williams became the first black woman appointed as faculty at Indiana University Jacobs School of Music in Bloomington, Indiana, retiring in 1997 with distinguished honors. She became a member of the National Society of Arts and Letters in 1981. The following year, Williams was an honored guest to the New York Philharmonic 10,000th Concert Celebration and was also honored by the Philadelphia Pro Arte Society. In 1983, she became the first black professor of voice to teach at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, China.



Camilla Williams at a press luncheon at the New York Philharmonic, October 2, 1998

Photo: Beale Wolff

Camilla's friend and colleague Todd Duncan fondly called her "Diva." Not just a term of endearment, the title was earned. Williams was a stellar role model and paved the way for many opera singers who followed her. In her own words following her celebrated opening performance of "Madame Butterfly" in 1946:

*"Who would have guessed that a little black girl from Danville, Virginia would make such a wonderful debut. Only God knows what he has in store for each of us."*



Photo: DMFAH Collection

Camilla Williams passed away on January 29, 2012, in Bloomington, Indiana; and, true to early prophesy, the world knew her name.



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