

## Camilla Williams 1920 - 2012

Each person has his concept of what an angel's voice sounds like, but certainly an angel's voice can be no clearer, nor have a more vibrant quality, than that of the internationally acclaimed operatic soprano Camilla Williams.

Camilla Ella Williams was born in 1920 in Danville, Virginia to Cornelius Booker and Fannie Cary Williams. She was the youngest of four children. Her father was a chauffeur, and her grandfather, Alexander Cary, was a singer and choir leader. Miss Williams' youth, in relation to music, is best recalled in notes she penned for her entry into the first edition of *Who's Who in the World*. She wrote, "My grandparents and parents were self-taught musicians; all of them sang and there was always music in our home. From this, at an early age, was born a desire to be a concert singer." She was singing in Danville's Calvary Baptist Church at the age of eight. "All my people sing," Miss Williams has said. "We were poor, but God blessed us with music."

Also blessed with a rich mind, she was Valedictorian of her 1937 graduating class at John M. Langston High School and was named outstanding graduate of the class of 1941 at Virginia State College. She returned to Danville for the 1941-1942 school term and was appointed third grade teacher and instructor in music in the elementary schools. Following that term, the Virginia State College Acapella Choir invited her to be the guest soloist in a concert in Philadelphia. After this performance, Miss Williams was offered a scholarship from the Philadelphia Alumni Association of Virginia State on the condition that she come to Philadelphia for voice training. The young soprano accepted the offer, and while studying, worked as an usherette in a Philadelphia theatre to support herself. Assistance also came from her mother's former employer, Dr. W.R. Laird, and from Mrs. L.D. Crumpler, the Danville Music Study Club, and from Virginia State College, which established the Camilla Williams Fund at the suggestion of Miss T.P. Whiting, Dean of Women.

In both 1943 and 1944, Miss Williams won the Marion Anderson Award, which is given to outstanding young musicians. Also in 1944, she signed with RCA-Victor and made her debut on Victor's *The Music America Loves Best*. In that same year she took top honors in the Philadelphia Orchestra Youth Concert auditions, and was engaged as a soloist with the Philadelphia Orchestra, conducted by Eugene Ormandy.

Following one of Miss Williams' early concert appearances in Stamford, Connecticut, in 1945, the former Metropolitan Opera soprano Geraldine Farrar wrote to her concert manager, "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." Miss Farrar's hopes were not to be denied.

On May 15, 1946, Camilla Williams made her debut with the City Center Opera Company of New York in the title role of Madame Butterfly, and became the first black Soprano to appear with an important opera company in the United States. Miss Farrar, who had created the title role of "Madame Butterfly" on the Metropolitan stage, was in the opening night audience, and told Newsweek magazine of Miss Williams' talents saying, "I would say that already she is one of the great 'Butterflies' of our day." The New York Times found her to be "an instant...success in the title role," and in her

performance found “a vividness and subtlety unmatched by any other artist who has assayed the part here in many years.” Later that season, Miss Williams sang *Nedda* in I Pagliacci, and the Times proclaimed she “sang her new role with freshness of voice, charm, and personal sincerity.” Appearing as Mimi in La Boheme in 1947, she was called “the heroine of the evening” by the Times, and the critic of PM wrote:

*Her Mimi is one of the most truly touching and believable embodiments of the role I've yet seen and heard. The lovely quality of her voice, the purity and radiance of her high notes, the sensitivity and deep emotional sincerity of her acting...all contribute to the fidelity and beauty of her portrayal.*

And in 1947 she won the Newspaper Guild Award as first lady of American opera. In the succeeding season, the young singer was brought forward in the title role of Aida and the critics acclaimed, “Always she sang as a musician and an artist.”

In 1950 the singer embarked on a concert tour of Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Venezuela. The following year she returned to Venezuela for her first South American appearances in opera. In 1950, also, Miss Williams sang the title role of Princess Ilia in a concert version of Mozart's seldom-heard opera Idomeneo. It was the first complete performance of the work in New York City. That year, too, she married Charles Beavers, an attorney from Danville.

The Chicago Defenders' trophy for bringing democracy to opera was bestowed on Camilla Williams in 1951. In 1955 she gave the first Viennese performance of Menottie's Saint of Bleeker Street, but her debut with the Vienna State Opera was in the role of “Butterfly,” and a musically discriminating Vienna critic exclaimed, “Camilla Williams is a sensation!” “So moving is the intensity of this singer,” wrote another, “that it is unique.” She became box office magic throughout Europe.

In 1957, her alma mater awarded her the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Certificate of Merit, and 1959 brought a presidential citation from New York University. That year as well, she became the first black person to receive the key to the city of her birth, Danville, Virginia. In 1960, she was the guest of President Eisenhower for a concert for the Crown Prince of Japan. In 1962, the Emperor of Ethiopia awarded her the gold medal, and she received the key to the city of Taipei, Taiwan, as well as the Art, Culture and Civic Guild Award for her contribution to music. The next year brought her the Negro Musicians' Association Plaque for contribution to music and the Harlem Opera and World Fellowship Society Award, in addition to the W.L.I.B. Radio Award for contribution to music. At the invitation of the State Department, Camilla Williams made an unprecedented tour of fourteen north and central African countries. Due to this tour's success, she was invited to Ireland, Southeast Asia, the Far East, and Israel.

With the 1970's Camilla Williams brought another first to New York City as she performed Handel's Orlando in 1971. And that year she was listed in the first edition of Who's Who in the World. In 1972, she was honored as a “distinguished Virginian” by Governor Linwood Holton, and later was named recipient of the National Association of Negro Musicians, Inc.'s highest award.

From 1970 to 1973 she was Professor of Voice at Brooklyn College. She later taught at Bronx College and taught with Talent Unlimited, directed by Dr. John Motley. Camilla Williams often returned to Danville, where a park beside the Dan River, on Memorial Drive, has been named after her.