Portia White's debut

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“First you dream, then you lace up your boots.”

Sounds like good advice, don’t you think? Dream big, work hard. It is a sentiment I’ve reminded myself of on many occasions and, maybe you have as well.

This quote is often attributed to Nova Scotian contralto, Portia White. Whether she said this or not, Portia White certainly embodied the message behind these words. She dreamed of becoming a professional singer and she did just that. Portia became the first black Canadian concert singer to win international acclaim after many years diligently training her voice and performing around the world. Her journey to international acclaim is inspiring and I’d like to share it with you.

But first, let me introduce myself. My name is Nicole and I recently started working in the Special Collections & Archives as a Project Archivist. As my job title suggests, I’m here to work on particular projects and one of them is to work through an assortment of papers, photographs, and other material belonging to the Breithaupt Heweston Clark collection.

While sifting through a box of photographs from this collection, I discovered an autographed, black and white headshot of Portia White dated November 14, 1944. I was intrigued. Who was she? I needed to know. So, I did a little research and this is what I learned.



Portia White was born on June 24, 1911 in Truro, Nova Scotia. Her father, William A. White, was the second African Canadian admitted to Acadia University and later the first black Canadian to receive a Doctorate of Divinity from Acadia University. Afterwards, he served as the only black chaplain in the British army during WWI. Her mother, Izie Dora White was descended from black loyalists in Nova Scotia.

Following his military service, William A. White moved the family to Halifax and became the pastor of Cornwallis Street Baptist Church. In her father's church choir, Portia began singing. Her talent quickly grew and she was already singing the soprano parts from the opera Lucia di Lammermoor by the age of eight.

As a young adult, she trained to be a teacher at Dalhousie University and eventually taught in black Nova Scotia communities such as Africville and Lucasville. She used the money from her teaching salary to pay for her music lessons. During the 1930s, Portia started taking voice lessons as a mezzo-soprano at the Halifax Conservatory of Music. In 1939, she studied under Ernesto Vinci at the Conservatory and began to sing as a contralto.

While Portia performed at a number of recitals during the 1930s, she made her formal debut at Toronto's Eaton Auditorium on November 7, 1941. The

concert was a great success and Portia started touring Canada immediately afterwards. At the high point of her career, Portia sang at New York's Town Hall on March 13, 1944 and was notably the first Canadian to ever perform there.

Later that year, Portia moved to New York and received financial support from the Nova Scotia Talent Trust established by the governments of Halifax and Nova Scotia. In 1945, Portia signed with Columbia Concerts Incorporated and toured across North, Central, and South America.

By 1948, Portia was experiencing vocal difficulties due to her hectic concert schedule and problems with her managers. She retired from public singing and moved to Toronto in 1952. At the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto she continued to train her voice and also began teaching voice lessons privately and at Branksome Hall. Some of her students included Dinah Christie, Anne Marie Moss, Lorne Greene, Don Francks and Robert Goulet. In the 1950s and 1960s, Portia sang in a few public concerts including a recital before Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip at Charlottetown's Confederation Centre of the Arts in 1964.

After a battle with cancer, Portia White died on February 13, 1968. However, her legacy continues.

In 1995, Portia White was named a "person of national historic significance" by the Government of Canada and a millennial stamp with her image was issued in 1999. In her honour, the Nova Scotia Arts Council awards the Portia White Prize to talented local artists. Additionally, the Nova Scotia Talent Trust awards the Portia White Scholarship to outstanding vocalists.

Clearly, Portia worked hard to achieve her dream of becoming a professional singer. She was dedicated and passionate and, I am so happy that I found her image in our collection. Who knows what other treasures I will find!

References

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