

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County

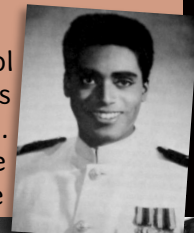
George Shirley (April 18, 1934 -)



“First Black Lead Performer with the New York Metropolitan Opera”

George Shirley was born on April 18, 1934, in Indianapolis, Indiana. At the age of four, George was singing in church with his parents, and by age five, he had won First Place in a local talent competition. George's father took an auto industry job in Detroit and moved the family to Michigan.

George played the baritone horn in a community band and studied voice in high school which earned him a music scholarship to Wayne State University. He graduated in 1955 with a bachelor's degree in Music Education and became the first black high school music teacher in Detroit High Schools. George married Gladys Ishop in 1956, and later that year, he was drafted into the U.S. Army. While in the Army, George became the first black man to sing with the U.S. Army chorus. It was during this time that he was encouraged by his fellow choir members to pursue a career in opera.



After he returned from the service, George made his opera debut with a small troupe at Woodstock in New York, as Eisenstein in their production of Die Fledermaus. The following year, after winning in the American Opera Auditions of New York, he was invited to play the role Rodolfo in Puccini's La Boheme in Milan, Italy. In 1961 he received an offer from the Metropolitan Opera after winning first prize in the Metropolitan Opera Auditions where he performed Nessun Dorma. There, George Shirley became the first black male to receive a contract from the Met and the second black male to perform there (Note: The first was Robert McFerrin (father of Bobby McFerrin). George performed 28 major roles in 26 operas during his 11 seasons with the Met, appearing more often than any other tenor.

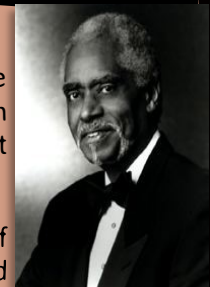
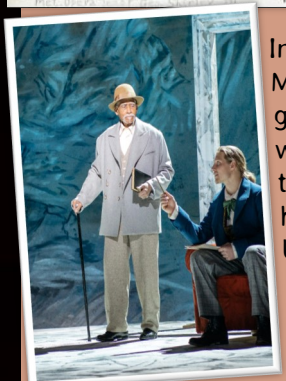


In 1968 George received a Grammy Award for singing the role of Ferrando in Mozart's opera Cosi fan tutte, a recording that also featured opera greats Leontyne Price, Sherrill Milnes, and Tatiana Troyanos. In 1980 George was asked to teach voice at the University of Maryland. In 1985 he received their Distinguished Scholar Teacher Program award. Upon moving back to his hometown of Detroit in 1987, he became a professor of voice at the University of Michigan, a position he held until his retirement in 2007.



Soprano Leontyne Price, conductor Karl Bohm, and George Shirley

In all, George's music career has lasted more than 50 years. He has sung the lead role in over 80 operas at major opera houses, all over the world. And, although he is known as a trailblazer, gives credit to *his* trailblazing role models - Roland Hayes, the first superstar black tenor, as well as opera singer Marian Anderson, and concert singer Paul Robeson.



In 2008, the George Shirley Voice Scholarship was established at the University of Michigan. In December 2014, George released a recording of Negro Spirituals entitled "George Shirley at 80: My Time Has Come!". In 2015, President Barack Obama presented George with the National Medal of Arts Award, which is given to individuals or organizations who have contributed significantly to the cultural life of the United States. George was presented with the William Warfield Legacy Award in 2019 for his dedication to the advancement of African American classical vocalists.



George Shirley currently resides in Michigan and serves as Joseph Edgar Maddy Distinguished Emeritus Professor of Music (Voice) School at the University of Michigan.

