

Harriet Gibbs Marshall Monologue
Bicentenary of the Birth of Baha'u'llah ¹

Washington, D.C.

October 22, 2017

Oh, how marvelous it was to hear the divine spirit that stirred in our souls!

[brief pause, contemplative, with eyes closed and smiling, as if in remembrance of that moment]

Negro musicians have enriched the music of America. Our natural aptitude for rhythm, moods, skills in improvisation and the divinity of spirit have combined to produce the only true American music. I wanted all lovers of music to appreciate and respect the work of our Negro musicians.

You see, I had grown up in a segregated and divided America. My father was the first Black city judge in the United States and my mother a school teacher. I was fortunate to attend Oberlin Conservatory and became the first Black Woman to graduate with a degree in music in 1889. After studying music in Paris, I moved to Washington, DC in 1902 and was appointed as the Director of Music for the segregated public schools here.

It became my cherished dream to establish a National Negro Music Center – a Center which would aid in research, promotion, and preservation of the music of black heritage.

In time, and with the support of such prominent figures as Alain Locke, W. E. B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, and Eleanor Roosevelt, I realized my dream when I

¹ Harriet Gibbs Marshall (1868 – 1941) was a musician, writer, and educator best known for opening the Washington Conservatory of Music and School of Expression in 1903 in Washington, D.C. An African American, she was born in Canada. [Wikipedia](#)

founded the Washington Conservatory of Music with a permanent home at 902 T Street NW.

It was around this time in 1912 that I came across the Baha'i message – a message which confirmed my life's mission and renewed my spirit. I was deeply drawn to Baha'u'llah's teachings of the oneness of humanity and embraced His Cause that year. It was the year Abdul Baha visited the United States.

When I met Abdul Baha, I knew immediately that He understood me. He once said:

“The diversity in the human family should be the cause of love and harmony, as it is in music where many different notes blend together in the making of a perfect chord.”

Oh, how those words were as a healing balm to my soul! *[contemplative pause]*

However, the Baha'i community still had some ways to go. You see, Baha'is held separate gatherings for blacks and for whites, just as most churches at that time.

Abdu'l-Baha repeatedly urged us to hold meetings where blacks and whites met together. In fact, He made this a pre-condition for His visit.

How else would we demonstrate the validity of the Bahai message? How else would we eliminate the prejudices between the races? Fellowship, Fellowship, Love, Love, Unity, Unity He often said.

And so we obeyed. *[powerful tone]*

I hosted meetings at the Conservatory – at which both colored and white Bahá'is and their friends would join in fellowship. Our hearts vibrated with the melodies of oneness, forever thankful to Baha'u'llah and Abdul Baha.