

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION**CAMILLA WILLIAMS****(October 18, 1919 – January 29, 2012)**

Camilla Ella Williams was born in Danville, Virginia in the segregated south on October 18, 1919, youngest of the four children of Cornelius Booker, a chauffeur, and Fannie Carey Williams. Her grandfather Alexander Carey was a singer and choir leader and, by age eight, Williams was singing in Danville's Cavalry Baptist Church and school as well as playing piano and dancing.

When she was twelve years old, a Welsh voice teacher came to Danville to teach at a school for white girls. He decided to also teach a few black girls at a local private home, and there she was introduced to the classical repertoire, including works by Mozart and Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. Her desire to be a concert singer was born from this early experience. Camilla 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 was a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority and had a lifetime membership to the NAACP. She returned to Danville for the 1941-1942 school years as a third grade teacher and music instructor in the elementary schools. She was offered a scholarship from the Philadelphia Alumni Association of Virginia State College for vocal training in Philadelphia, which allowed her to study with the renowned Madame Marion Szekely-Freschl. She supported herself by working as an usherette in a Philadelphia theatre.

Camilla won the first ever Marion Anderson Award in 1943 and again in 1944. That same year, she signed with famed Columbia artist manager Arthur Judson as well as with RCA Victor and made her radio debut on the coast-to-coast RCA radio show *The Music America Loves Best*. That year, she also won top honors in the Philadelphia Orchestra Youth Concert auditions and was engaged as soloist with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy.

In 1945, at the invitation of Mrs. Howard Gilmore (for whose aunt Williams' father had served as chauffeur), Metropolitan Opera star Geraldine Farrar attended one of Williams' early

concert appearances in Stamford, Connecticut. The retired diva then 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."

On May 15, 1946, Camilla made her legendary debut with the New York City Opera in the title role of the company premiere of *Madama Butterfly*, becoming the first female African American singer to appear with a major opera company in the United States. Farrar was in the opening night audience and stated to *Newsweek*, "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 a year." Among other accolades, Williams was given the Page One Award by the New York Newspapers Guild for "bringing democracy to opera" and opening the doors to other African Americans who later found success in opera.

Later that season, she appeared at City Opera as Nedda in *Pagliacci*, and *The New York Times* proclaimed she "sang her new role with freshness of voice, charm, and personal sincerity." As City Opera's Mimi in *Boheme* in 1947, she was called "the heroine of the evening," by the *Times*, and one critic 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." In 1948, when she sang the title role of Aida in the New York City Opera's first performance of that work, the critics acclaimed, "Always she sang as a musician and an artist."

In 1951, Camilla sang the role of Bess in the historic first full-length recording of George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, for Columbia Records. She was also building a reputation as a leading concert singer, a respected interpreter of art songs, and an accomplished recording artist. In 1950, with the Little Orchestra Society, she sang the role of Ilia in the first complete New York performance of Mozart's *Idomeneo*, and in 1971, she participated in the New York premiere of Handel's *Orlando*.

Camilla launched a distinguished international career when in 1950 she embarked on a concert tour of Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Venezuela, where she returned the following year for her first South American appearance in opera. Also that year, she married Charles T. Beavers, and eminent Danville-born civil rights attorney who was on the defense team of the Malcolm X trial. He preceded her in death in 1970. In 1954, she appeared as Butterfly with London's Sadler's Wells Opera, and later the same year, with more performances of Butterfly, she became the first black artist to sing a major role with the Vienna State Opera. A Vienna critic exclaimed, "Camilla Williams is a sensation!" and another wrote, "So moving is the intensity of this singer that it is unique." In 1955, she gave the first Viennese performance of Menotti's *The Saint of Bleeker Street*.

Camilla also became a frequent cultural ambassador for the United States. 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 a 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. At the invitation of the U.S. State Department, she embarked upon an unprecedented tour of fourteen north and central African countries. She was subsequently invited to Ireland, Southeast Asia, the Far East, and Israel as a cultural ambassador for the State Department.

In 1963, she performed in Danville to raise funds to free jailed civil rights demonstrators, and notably, she was the soloist at the 1963 March on Washington, D.C., just before the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his great "I Have a Dream" speech. She also sang for Dr. King's Nobel Peace Prize Ceremony in 1964.

For her pioneering achievements and outstanding artistry, Camilla has earned countless awards, including the *Chicago Defender's* trophy for bringing democracy to opera, bestowed on her in 1951; the 75th Anniversary Certificate of Merit from her alma mater, Virginia State College, in 1957; and a presidential citation from New York University in 1959. That year she also became the first African American to receive the key to her city of birth, Danville, Virginia. IN 1960, she received the Negro Musicians Association Plaque, in addition to the WLIB Radio Award. In 1972, she was honored as a "Distinguished Virginian" by Governor Linwood Holton,

one of only thirty-five Virginians so honored. IN 1979, the City of Danville dedicated Camilla Williams Park, and she was recently honored by the Library of Virginia as one of Virginia's Outstanding Women in History.

Camilla was the subject of the article "A Day with Camilla Williams" by Elizabeth Nash in *The Opera Quarterly*; the memoir *The Autobiography of Camilla Williams, African American Concert Singer and Opera Diva* with Professor Stephanie Shonekan, published by Mellen Press Ltd. in 2010; and a 2006 PBS documentary, *The Mystery of Love*, about her life with Boris Bazala, her longtime friend and accompanist, with whom she began working in 1947. Also in 2010, Camilla received the Sagamore of the Wabash. The award, the highest honor the governor of Indiana can bestow, recognizing individuals who have brought distinction and honor to the state, was presented by Indiana State Representative, Peggy Welch.

Camilla retired from opera in 1971 and became professor of voice at Brooklyn College and Bronx College until 1973. IN 1974, she began teaching at Queens College as well as with Talent Unlimited, directed by John Motley. In 1977, she became the first African American professor of voice at Indiana University, and as guest professor at Beijing's Central Conservatory in 1983, became that school's first black professor. She retired from teaching in 1997 and remained in Bloomington until her passing. Many of her students went on to be professional international singers and professors at universities throughout the United States and in Germany.

Camilla was preceded in death by her husband Charles Beavers, sisters Mary and Helen and brother, Cornelius. She is survived by beloved nieces and nephews: Anna Montgomery of Cincinnati, Ohio; Helen Mortimer of East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania; Cornelius Williams of Laurelton, Maryland; Camilla Williams of Teaneck, New Jersey; Esther Mortimer-Packer (Dutchie) of East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania; Michael Fultz of Los Angeles, California; Nona Lee of Cincinnati, Ohio; Helena Phillips of St. Louis, Missouri; Pamela Montgomery, Fannie Dickenson, Clifford Montgomery, Clarence Montgomery, and Jeffery Montgomery of Cincinnati, Ohio; and a great, great niece and nephew, Jocelyn Packer and Charles Packer, as well as thirty great nieces and nephews.

Camilla Williams was a greatly beloved figure in the world of music and cherished by all in Bloomington. In recognition of her great gifts, and contributions to Indiana University and the larger community of which she was such a valued member, be it resolved that this statement shall become part of the proceedings of the Bloomington Faculty Council and be preserved in its minutes and archive.

Mary Ann Hart, Jacobs School of Music

Jennifer Naab, Jacobs School of Music