Henry Lewis was born in Los Angeles, California, in 1932. His father was an automobile salesman, and his mother was a registered nurse. He was just five years old when his mother placed him at a piano for the first time, a moment that would change his life forever. For the next six decades, music would be the driving force of his life. Throughout his childhood, Lewis played in school orchestras, learning several different instruments and making it no secret that he wanted one day to become a professional musician. His father, however, like most pragmatic parents, wanted his son to be, as Lewis described it, “what he called ‘a respectable professional man,’ not a musician.” Nevertheless, Maestro Lewis would go on to become a professional musician and an internationally acclaimed conductor. He was a man of “firsts,” a trailblazer who overcame racial barriers to break into and find great success in the heavily segregated world of classical music.

Lewis has been called the “Jackie Robinson of classical music.” In 1948, he broke racial barriers when he became the first Black instrumentalist with a major American symphony orchestra. At only 16 years old, he was also one of the youngest. Twenty years later, in 1968, he became the first Black person to serve as a conductor and musical director of a major American orchestra when he was appointed to lead the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra. In 1972, he would blaze yet another trail when he became the first Black conductor to lead the Metropolitan Opera, where, over the following five years, he would conduct over 140 performances.