

BORN TO BE A MUSICIAN

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.

BREAKING BARRIERS

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.

The New Haven Register

SUNDAY, JANUARY 26, 1969

Negro Conductor Breaks Barriers

By GORDON EMERSON
Register Music Writer

NEWARK, N.J.—Henry Lewis is part of the American Dream.

He is now the conductor of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, and also manages to meet the heavy demands of a performing schedule that includes guest conducting throughout the world. Some of his visions and insights into the boundless orchestral repertoire have already been captured for posterity on the

London label. And this is only the beginning.

Why part of the American Dream? After all, there are several conductors who guest conduct, record for major labels, and have an orchestra that they call home. Why then is Henry Lewis different?

The fact of the matter is that he really isn't. His musical training is solid; he has played most of the standard orchestral instruments and was assistant principal bassist of the Los Angeles Philharmonic for half of the ten years that he performed with that group.

But as the first Negro admitted to a major American orchestra, and the first black American to make a go of it as a full-time conductor, he is clearly singular. Maestro Lewis joined the ranks of such pioneers as Jackie Robinson and Leontyne Price rather unobtrusively some 20 years ago by being accepted into an area of American life that was previously “out of bounds.” Out of bounds, not only because of discrimination, but because, as Maestro Lewis explains it, “most of us weren't ready for the challenge of serious music. It takes years and years of training, background, and experience, and these opportunities were simply not available to most Black Americans when I was growing up.”

Things are changing, however, and Henry Lewis's success in the rarified atmosphere of the Toscaninis, von Karajans and Bernsteins is long overdue proof that they are. And because of creative and talented individuals like Henry Lewis who wouldn't take “no” for an answer, everyone's life is the richer for it.

Front-page clipping from
the New Haven Register,
January 26, 1969