

# Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with George Shirley

PERSON

Shirley, George

**Alternative Names:** George Shirley;

**Life Dates:** April 18, 1934-

**Place of Birth:** Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

**Residence:** Ann Arbor, Michigan

**Work:** Ann Arbor, Michigan

**Occupations:** Opera Singer;

## Biographical Note

Opera Singer George Shirley was born on April 18, 1934 in Indianapolis, Indiana, to Irving and Daisy Shirley. By age four, Shirley had begun performing, joining his mother and father as a musical trio within the Indianapolis church community. After moving to Detroit, Michigan with his parents at age six, Shirley continued to build his musical talents, playing the baritone horn in a community band, and studying voice while a student at Northern High School. His musical acumen earned Shirley a scholarship to Wayne State University, where he performed in his first musical drama, Oedipus Rex, with the Men's Glee Club in 1955. He graduated that same year, receiving his B.S. in Music Education.

Also in 1955, Shirley became the first African American high school music teacher in the city of Detroit. A year later, after being drafted into the Army, he became the first African American to sing with the U.S. Army Chorus, where, influenced by fellow choir members, Shirley decided to pursue a career in opera. In 1959, he performed in his first staged production, Die Fledermaus, with a small company in Woodstock, New York. The following year, after winning the American Opera Auditions in New York, he was invited to play the role Rodolfo in Puccini's La Boheme in Milan, Italy. In 1961, Shirley won first prize in the Metropolitan Opera Auditions, thus becoming the first African American tenor to be awarded a contract with that company, where he performed from 1961 through 1973. He played major roles in more than twenty operas, often performing with fellow African American opera pioneers Leontyne Price and Shirley Verrett. During and after his stint with the Metropolitan Opera, Shirley was a well sought tenor across the globe, appearing in productions in London, Italy, San Francisco, Washington D.C., Chicago, Boston and a host of other cities. Shirley also

won a Grammy Award for a recording of his performance in Mozart's *Così Fan Tutte*.

In 1980, Shirley joined the staff of the University of Maryland as a professor of voice. In 1985, the University honored him with a Distinguished Scholar-Teacher Award. In 1987, he returned to the Detroit area, as a professor of voice at the University of Michigan, and five years later, he was named the Joseph Edgar Maddy Distinguished University Professor of Voice. In 2007, Shirley was named the Joseph Edgar Maddy Distinguished University Emeritus Professor of Voice upon his retirement.

George Shirley was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on June 10, 2010.

## Related Entries

**Wayne State University** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**B.S. in Music Education**

**Alger Elementary School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Balch Elementary School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Moore Elementary School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Sherrard Intermediate School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Northern High School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Miller High School** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from 1955 to 1956]

**Music Teacher**

**United States Army** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from 1956 to 1959]

**Soldier; Member US Army Chorus**

**Metropolitan Opera** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from 1961 to 1972]

**Opera Singer**

**University of Maryland at College Park** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from 1980 to 1987]

**Professor**

**University of Michigan** [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1987 to 2007]

**Professor**

**University of Michigan** [MEMBEROF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Professor Emeritus of Music (Voice)**