

Experiencing Porgy and Bess

Barry Grey
11 June 1998

George Gershwin's Porgy and Bess
Produced by the Michigan Opera Theater of Detroit
Conducted by John DeMain, directed by Tazewell Thompson
Set design by Kenneth Foy
With Gordon Hawkins (alternating with Alvy Powell) as Porgy, Marquita Lister (alternating with Marilyn Moore-Brown) as Bess, and Peabo Bryson as Sporting Life.

Current production runs from May 30 to June 20.

Some 63 years after its premiere performance, George Gershwin's masterpiece of American opera retains its beauty, pathos, vitality and, above all, its universal human appeal.

For this writer, the opening night performance of the work by the Michigan Opera Theater was a deeply emotional, even overwhelming experience. It was a wonderful production, played, sung and acted with obvious joy and commitment on the part of the musicians, the singers, the conductor and all those involved. Having attended many productions by this ambitious and dedicated company, I felt a more than usual electricity in the packed house as the audience awaited the orchestral swell and pulsating rhythm of brass and xylophone that announces the opening scene.

Some three-and-a-half hours later, having shared the joy, suffering and nobility of spirit of the residents of Catfish Row, highlighted by the love story of the crippled beggar and the beauty, Bess, the audience gave a much-deserved, grateful ovation that lasted for many minutes.

It is difficult to select particular elements of the performance for praise or criticism, largely because the overall impact of the work was so powerful. I do not pretend to be an expert on opera, but rather an enthusiast with a special and long-standing love and admiration for Gershwin.

To my mind the sets were quite effective and ingeniously designed to keep the flow of the opera moving. I suspect as well that the overall performance benefited greatly by the presence of John DeMain on the podium. He conducted the ground breaking production by the Houston Opera Company in 1976 which, for the first time ever, presented the entire work as conceived and composed by Gershwin and his collaborators, brother Ira and the Heywards, Dubose and Dorothy.

The singing and acting in general were of a high quality. I was particularly affected by the performances of Roberta Gumbel as Clara, who sings the timeless lullaby *Summertime* at the opening, and the wrenching performance of Angela Simpson as Serena, whose *My Man's Gone Now* evoked an enormous response from the audience.

A minor criticism of the production involves the decision to present the opera in two acts, rather than the original three-act structure. This alteration creates a certain lack of balance in the overall development of both the plot and the music. It also entails the elimination of the one white character, the lawyer Mr. Archdale, who is sympathetic to the inhabitants of Catfish Row.

This complaint, however, hardly detracts from the overall effect of the production. For me, in any event, the real hero of the MOT presentation was the opera itself. Here is an almost magical blending of high art and popular music: the songs and duets that will live forever— *Summertime*, *I*

Got Plenty O'Nuttin', *Bess, You Is My Woman Now*, *It Ain't Necessarily So*, *I Loves You Porgy*—and the densely orchestrated, contrapuntal and often atonal orchestral and choral passages, as well as the haunting recitatives. Perhaps, more than a blending of opposites, *Porgy and Bess* is an intimation of something new, something that will be developed and refined by future generations—an artistic achievement that is profoundly democratic and popular in its orientation and at the same time uplifting and challenging.

One may argue, as many critics and not a few composers have, that Gershwin's affinity for the popular detracts from his art, or relegates it to something of a lower order. In my opinion the opera itself refutes this view. Consider first the music. There is a remarkable integrity of theme and elaboration that runs throughout, producing a unity of diverse elements that stands as a major achievement.

The pulsating chords that immediately follow the opening notes of the overture are a germ of many of the arias and orchestral passages that follow. This motif presents the basic progression that is developed in the lullaby *Summertime*, and, in inverted form, becomes the moving duet *Bess, You Is My Woman Now*. Some musical high points are the fugue in the murder scene of Act I, Scene One; the six prayers that are sung simultaneously at the height of the hurricane in Act II, Scene Three; and the trio in the final scene, *Oh, Bess, Oh Where's My Bess*. For sheer emotion and beauty, few passages in all of opera compare to the choral lament for Clara that opens Act II, Scene Four, *Jesus is walkin' on the water, rise up and follow him home*.

The music, moreover, conveys a panorama of human emotions and experience—love, fear, oppression, violence, hope and the will to survive—that endow the story of Porgy, Bess and the people of Catfish Row with enormous dignity and humanity. To my mind, a particularly powerful expression is Porgy's response to the ominous sight of a buzzard in Act I, Scene Three:

*Buzzard keep on flyin' over, take along your shadow,
Ain't nobody dead this mornin',
livin's just begun.
Two is strong where one is feeble;
man and woman livin', workin',
sharin' grief and sharin' laughter,
and love like August sun ...
There's two folks livin' in this shelter
eatin', sleepin', singin', prayin'.
Ain't no such thing as loneliness.
And Porgy's young again.*

Gershwin is sometimes portrayed as little more than a Tin Pan Alley tune smith who had the temerity (perhaps the Yiddish word *chutzpah* is more appropriate) to intrude into the realm of "serious" music. In reality he sought, from the beginning of his career, to assimilate the principles of musical composition, harmony, counterpoint and orchestration, studied the work and made the acquaintance of such contemporaries as Ravel, Schoenberg, Stravinsky and Berg and quite consciously set about incorporating elements of their music into his own compositions. He attended performances of such operatic masterpieces as Berg's *Wozzeck*

and Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mzensk*.

His friend, the brilliant pianist Oscar Levant, once listed Gershwin's favorite recordings: Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*, Shostakovich's Symphony no. 1, Milhaud's violin concerto, Berg's *Lyric Suite*, Schoenberg's complete string quartets, Honnegger's *Les Aventures du Roi Pausole*, and Duke Ellington's recordings of his own *Creole Love Song*, *Swanee Rhapsody*, and *Daybreak Express*. Levant also noted what Gershwin studied in score: Stravinsky's *Les noces*, Prokofiev's Piano Concerto no. 3, Debussy's piano preludes, and various orchestral works by Ravel.

Moreover, the musical cross-fertilization was by no means one-way. From the time of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), the American upstart exerted a significant influence on his European contemporaries. No one who has listened to Ravel's very popular Piano Concerto in G can doubt the French master's debt to Gershwin's Concerto in F.

And yet, for all that, Gershwin never turned his back on his roots in the popular song and the Broadway musical, nor did he spurn his early love affair with the rhythm and blues harmonies of jazz. Indeed, he was quite determined to create out of the intermarriage of these popular forms with the classical tradition a genuinely popular and definitively American genre. And, to an amazing extent, he achieved his goal, carving out for his music a unique and lasting significance.

Such was the passion that drove his work on *Porgy*. Explaining why he turned to the Theater Guild and Broadway for the staging of his opera, Gershwin said, "The reason I did not submit this work to the usual sponsors of opera in America was that I hoped to have developed something in American music that would appeal to the many rather than to the cultured few."

There is no question that Gershwin felt a deep bond with the characters of the *Porgy* story. He read Dubose Heyward's novel *Porgy* in 1926 and immediately wrote to the author suggesting that they collaborate on a folk opera based on the book. But it was not until 1934 that the collaboration actually began. That summer he, Ira Gershwin and Heyward settled at Folly Beach, located on a barrier island 10 miles from Charleston, South Carolina, the harbor city that is setting for the *Porgy* story. They spent many hours at revival meetings of the Gullah blacks who lived on adjacent James Island.

In a 1935 article in *Stage* magazine Heyward described Gershwin's interaction with the people who became the prototypes for the characters of his opera. "To George it was more like a homecoming than an exploration," he wrote. "The quality in him which had produced the *Rhapsody in Blue* in the most sophisticated city in America, found its counterpart in the impulse behind the music and bodily rhythms of the simple Negro peasant of the South.

"The Gullah Negro prides himself on what he calls 'shouting.' This is a complicated rhythmic pattern beaten out by feet and hands as an accompaniment to the spirituals, and is indubitably an African survival. I shall never forget the night when at a Negro meeting on a remote sea-island, George started 'shouting' with them. And eventually, to their huge delight stole the show from their champion 'shouter.' I think that he is probably the only white man in America who could have done it."

This natural empathy with ordinary people that finds its expression in Gershwin's music, while it brought great popularity, fame and wealth, was no doubt a factor in the critical disparagement from an influential segment of the American musical establishment that dogged his career. It is undeniable that some of the criticisms of technical shortcomings in Gershwin's orchestral works are justified, although one cannot help thinking that those who dismissed such works as *Rhapsody in Blue* simply on that account were, at best, guilty of missing the woods for the trees and, at worst, infected by a degree of snobbery, and even personal envy.

In Gershwin's lifetime, *Porgy and Bess* was very much a target of such derogation. One could write a small book on the history of the opera, but

this is not the place for such a venture. Suffice it to make a few points.

The opera had its trial run in Boston in September of 1935 and was enthusiastically received by both the audience and the critics. Nevertheless the Theater Guild and the director, Rouben Mamoulian, insisted that major cuts be made in advance of the New York premiere. That performance, on October 10, 1935, received generally negative reviews, many of which dismissed it as little more than a glorified Broadway show.

Of particular note is the savage notice by Virgil Thomson, a composer and critic and pillar of the American musical establishment. His review was not only malicious, but overtly racist and anti-Semitic.

"One can see, through *Porgy*," Thomson wrote in *Modern Music*, "that Gershwin has not and never did have any power of sustained musical development.... The material is straight from the melting pot. At best it is a piquant but highly unsavory stirring-up together of Israel, Africa and the Gaelic Isles.... His lack of understanding of all the major problems of form, of continuity, and of serious or direct musical expression is not surprising in view of the impurity of his musical sources and his frank acceptance of the same.... It is clear, by now, that Gershwin hasn't learned the business of being a serious composer, which one has always gathered to be the business he wanted to learn.... I do not like fake folklore, nor fidgety accompaniments, nor bittersweet harmony, nor six-part choruses, nor gefilte fish orchestration."

A number of influential black composers and critics, including Duke Ellington, attacked the opera as well. Ellington concluded an article in *New Theater* magazine by declaring, "No Negro could possibly be fooled by *Porgy and Bess*." On the other hand there was a minority of black intellectuals and musicians, including the Harlem Renaissance figure James Weldon Johnson and his brother L. Rosamond Johnson, a composer, and lead singers Tod Duncan and Ann Brown (the original *Porgy* and *Bess*), who steadfastly championed the work.

The opera had a disappointing run of only 124 performances on Broadway. Its lack of commercial or critical success doubtless took its toll on Gershwin, who, for all his success, had an acute need for reinforcement by his peers. Less than two years after the Broadway premiere, Gershwin was dead of a brain tumor at the age of 38.

But despite the disappointing initial reception, Gershwin remained convinced that with *Porgy* he had created a genuine work of art. The subsequent decades have vindicated his belief, but not without difficulty. Even after the composer's untimely death the opera had to struggle to establish its place in the ranks of great twentieth century works. For several decades the work was more widely performed and better appreciated in Europe than in the US. It was not until the Houston Opera production in 1976 that the opera was staged in its original form, complete with the wonderful orchestral passages, choruses and recitatives that make it an artistic whole. And it took 50 years from the 1935 premiere for the work to find its way to the stage of the New York Met.

How does one account for the achievement embodied in *Porgy and Bess*? The relationship between social and historical context and individual artistic genius is always complex. Certainly the period was propitious for such a fusion of serious art and popular culture. It was a time of enormous crisis and social upheaval, and many currents of innovation and dissent were at work in the field of art. Hitler had come to power and the fascist menace, with its ominous import for Jews in particular, was on the rise. America and most of the world were mired in a depression that had discredited the capitalist status quo in the eyes of countless millions. In the US, the working class movement was beginning to emerge in explosive fashion after years of defeat and quiescence. And socialism was seen by growing numbers as a viable and desirable alternative to the miseries of a society based on profit.

Gershwin himself was, at least as far as his public persona goes, not an actively political man. However, his leanings are indicated by some of his

works. Prior to *Porgy and Bess* he collaborated in a series of shows of a broadly satirical and politically dissident character: *Strike Up the Band*, *Of Thee I Sing*, and *Let 'Em Eat Cake*. That he was concerned with the big political issues of the day is indicated by a letter he wrote to a friend during the summer of 1934 when he was on Folly Island gathering ideas and material for his opera. “We sit out at night gazing at the stars, smoking our pipes. The three of us, Harry [Botkin], Paul [Mueller] and myself discuss our two favorite subjects, Hitler’s Germany & God’s women.”

As always with a great artist, however, the social and political find a unique, deeply personal and transcendent refraction through the force of the creative imagination. This, I suppose, is what earlier centuries called the spark of the divine. Gershwin, I believe, had this spark.

He is a remarkable anomaly. A second generation immigrant Jew, who grew up on Manhattan’s Lower East Side and never graduated high school, collaborated with Heyward, the descendant of an aristocratic southern family (who nevertheless grew up under impoverished conditions and contracted debilitating polio) to create a piece about poor black working people in Charleston—which has become the definitive American opera.

I find in this bio-history something of the miraculous, and, moreover, a profound testament to the unlimited potential of the human race. And here we come to the final point: this opera which so powerfully speaks to the American experience is, at the same time and precisely because it is true to that experience, a universal work. In the final analysis, it is not about Americans, or blacks. It is about some fundamental aspects of the human condition and the human spirit. That is why it is a work everyone should experience.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact