

## Opera for everyone

## Porgy and Bess in Berlin

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29 July 2008

*Porgy and Bess*, by George Gershwin, Deutsche Oper, Berlin, July 4 to August 1, 2008; conducted by Willie Waters; directed by Angelo Gobbato; the opera will also be performed at Den Norske Opera, Oslo, August 9 to August 29

Berlin has rarely experienced such a phenomenon: at the beginning of the summer break, when the city's opera houses traditionally close for several weeks, the Cape Town Opera is performing George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* at the Deutsche Oper—and receiving rapturous applause.

Is it because Gershwin's popular opera has not been performed for such a long time in Berlin? Or because the South African ensemble act and sing so convincingly?

Certainly, both factors play a role. At the same time, there can be no doubt that the material at the heart of *Porgy and Bess* has struck a profound chord: in the midst of poverty, exploitation and iniquity, the search for a little happiness. *Porgy and Bess* is indeed an opera for everyone, as director Angelo Gobbato maintains.

The director has transposed the opera from South Carolina during the Great Depression to the South African townships of the 1970s, where most of the singers and actors were born. The company members do not come from among the more privileged children whose musical talents were encouraged from an early age. The Cape Town cast have had their own experiences with the sort of miserable living conditions they present on stage. They are hoping that their tour to Berlin and then on to Oslo will bring in the necessary money for further productions for the ensemble.

The libretto for Gershwin's opera was adapted from the 1924 best-seller, *Porgy*, by DuBose Heyward (1885-1940), a story based on a real figure—a crippled beggar—who lived on the streets of Charleston. Porgy, forced by his crippled legs to use a board with wheels to move around, falls in love with the attractive, but drug-addicted Bess, who is kept by Crown, an abusive dock-worker.

When Crown kills a man in an argument over a gambling stake and has to flee, Porgy takes up the abandoned Bess. For a while, the two experience a harmonious relationship, but then Bess falls prey to Crown when the latter returns. Porgy strangles Crown when he comes to fetch Bess and is sent to prison. Bess once again becomes addicted to the drug “happy dust,” given to her by the dealer and rake Sportin’ Life, with whom she goes to New York. The story ends with Porgy’s return from jail and his decision to seek out Bess. His motivation is so intense that in a powerful final scene he struggles to his legs and begins to walk again.

Gershwin had long contemplated the idea of composing a grand opera, and was fascinated by the material. He was finally able to win over Heyward to write an opera treatment. The composer, who came from a Russian-Jewish family, was mainly known for his symphonic works *Rhapsody in Blue* and *An American in Paris*. But he was also familiar with classical music, and in addition to his more well-known pieces, created symphonies and piano works taking up elements of his contemporaries such as Shostakovich, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Ravel and Berg.

During the lengthy process of working on the opera, in which George's brother Ira and the novelist Heyward and his wife were also involved, Gershwin travelled to Charleston several times to become familiar with the atmosphere of this city. He also spent some time on Folly Island and James Island, where he studied and participated in the life, music and rhythms of the black population.

Since the opera was intended to be performed by a black ensemble, he offered his work not to the Metropolitan Opera in New York, but to the smaller Theatre Guild. Gershwin later explained his decision. “The reason why I had not offered this work to the usual promoters of opera in America was the hope that I had created something in American music that would please a wider public rather than a few cultivated palates.”

The work, which premiered in 1935 in New York, was only performed 128 times, a relatively short run for Broadway. The public was enthusiastic, unlike some of the critics, who attacked the “popular” character of the opera, regarding it as an inadmissible mixture of so-called serious music and popular music, a presentation of songs instead of properly composed arias, etc. George Gershwin was forced to defend his opera; pointing out that “many of the most successful operas of the past...included songs. Nearly all Verdi's operas contain what we would call a ‘hit song.’ *Carmen* consists almost entirely of a collection of hit songs.”

Gershwin was right: Verdi's operas were so popular and revolutionary that many of its arias are still sung today by ordinary people on the streets and in cafés. The same applies to Bizet's *Carmen*. Just as revolutionary for the America of his day was the performance of a popular opera with black singers and with principal figures drawn from the oppressed black population. At this time, opera was still the preserve of a white audience and an opera about life in a black slum was considered scandalous by many.

Gershwin, who died at 38, only two years after the premiere, did not live long enough to experience the triumph of his opera, which enjoyed a second run of performances starting in 1942 in New York and from 1943 in Europe. In Copenhagen, 22 sold-out performances took place under massive police guard during the Nazi occupation. When the Nazis threatened to blow up the opera house, the work was withdrawn from the programme. After this, the opera became a symbol for the Danish resistance. Every time the radio broadcast Nazi propaganda, the anti-fascists used a jamming transmitter that began its programme with the song “It ain't necessarily so.”

The first German performance of *Porgy and Bess* took place in 1952 at the Titania Palace in Berlin. Further performances followed in 1970 and 1972. However, the work then disappeared from the programme for many years, so it is high time for this revival!

In the past, the opera was often presented in a shortened version, produced in the style of a musical. Director Gobbato regards this as a misunderstanding: “It is very important for me to let the German audience know that they will see an opera on a grand scale.” Gershwin has written a

“complex, thoroughly composed opera with a great orchestral score; where the singers do the hardest work.” Later, the piece became mutated into pure entertainment. “Dialogue was inserted, the score was simplified, emphasising the jazz elements. But who wants entertainment, when one can have catharsis? Please don’t misunderstand me. I am not against well-made entertainment—but this is not what Gershwin intended. He demanded something of his audience. But something that was always worthwhile.”

It is indeed worthwhile: the opera not only lives from its stirring music, jazz rhythms, dance and great songs. It is also great drama, in which those who live in the ghetto become heroes. This provides the strong emotional impression on the audience made by the piece; it is not only blacks and other minorities who experience poverty and oppression, but increasingly larger sections of the population worldwide. Porgy’s song “I got plenty o’ nuttin’” speaks to people from the soul.

The opera contains many aspects and many roles. The main figures of Porgy, Bess, Crown and Sportin’ Life are not the only principals of the drama.

Clara, sung by Pretty Wende with a wonderful voice, performs the internationally renowned song and lullaby “Summertime,” introducing the first act. This is followed by her husband, Jake, a fisherman, who takes the child on his arm and sings the jovial song “A woman is a sometime thing.” Clara and Jake personify the desire for a regular family life despite all the misery, until the sea claims both their lives. Jake, sets out, despite a dangerous storm, to feed his family, but his boat capsizes; Clara follows after him and likewise does not return. The child becomes an orphan and must be cared for by Bess. The perspective of normalcy is shattered.

And there is Serena (Nkosazana Dimande), the wife of the fisherman Robbins, who gambles, against the wishes of his wife (“I been sweatin’ all day. Night time is man’s time. He got a right to forget his troubles. He got a right to play”) and gets killed by the thoroughly drunk Crown. The song Serena sings in mourning (“My man’s gone now”), while the other inhabitants collect money for the funeral, accompanied by a Gospel chorus singing “Gone, gone, gone,” goes right under the skin.

In many respects, the counterpoint is provided by the cocaine dealer Sportin’ Life, perhaps the most interesting figure of the piece and wonderfully played by Victor Ryan Robertson. He comes from outside, from New York, in a suit, with a sharp tie, hat and a nifty gait that now and then falls into jazz rhythms. His way out of misery is a cocktail of drugs, pleasure and luxury, and he sees the erotic, dance-crazy Bess as the ideal business partner. He provokes, sows doubts and questions the firm moral conceptions of the world. He scoffs at religious conceptions with his song “It ain’t necessarily so,” sung at the picnic on the Kittiwah Islands. One could also name a number of other figures who are outstanding singers and actors—for example, the resolute market woman Maria (Miranda Tini), who tries unsuccessfully to keep her fellow inhabitants away from drugs and alcohol.

At the centre, though, are Porgy (Xolela Sixaba) and Bess (Tsakane Valentine Maswanganyi), who embody the desire to break out of the miserable conditions in the ghetto—Bess, finally with her flight to New York, dancing, with Sportin’ Life, after taking a dose of “happy dust.” Porgy’s response is to struggle painfully to his legs, following his return from prison, in order to go to New York and look for Bess.

Angelo Gobbato: “Of all the figures, Porgy goes through the most development, from the humiliated outsider, consumed by self-pity, to the optimist, who wants to change things. But whether we like to admit it or not, Porgy is also a murderer. He is not the harmless, pathetic cripple, as people like to see him.” Thus the opera ends with an appeal to the oppressed of the world not to suffer the same fate.

Gershwin’s music brilliantly underscores this message. While the size of the orchestra reflects the symphonic tradition, numerous new elements are also included in the opera: popular ballads, jazz rhythms, gospel songs. In contrast to nineteenth century opera, in which grand arias are

closely linked with the decisions and actions of the main figures, the songs in Gershwin’s opera, as in *The Threepenny Opera* of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, have the task of describing and interpreting a situation, and also of expressing an inner emotional state.

The plot is driven along by the song-driven text. Attention is not mainly focused on the development of the individual hero, but on the interaction between the individual and collective fate. The marvellous chorus from Cape Town also plays a powerful role in this opera. Even Porgy’s decision to go to New York is not purely an individual resolution, expressed in the course of a tremendously moving aria. He reaches his decision in the middle of the local population, who have turned out to welcome him after his return from prison and they support his decision in solidarity. His final aria, “Oh Lawd, I’m on my way,” is accompanied by the entire chorus.

Why is Gershwin’s music so moving? The arias and text express widely felt sentiments rather than simply individual anguish. This helps explain why so many songs from this opera are anchored in popular consciousness.

Gershwin’s opera is connected to a changed understanding of music at the beginning of the last century, when a number of composers embarked on new musical directions. The break with rigid rules, the mixture of styles and the inclusion of elements of popular music mark the works of such different composers as Mahler, Bartók, Ravel, Stravinsky and Shostakovich.

Arnold Schönberg, who from 1909 began to develop twelve-tone music, rejected the use of popular idioms, but admired Gershwin and regarded him as one of “those rare musicians, for whom music is not a product of greater or lesser skill,” but “the air, which he breathed, the food that nourished him, the drink, which refreshed him.”

*Porgy and Bess* is therefore just as little a purely American opera, dealing with the life of the black population in the US and their musical mode of expression, as Shostakovich’s music is purely a Russian affair. These changed musical directions were closely linked to the social changes at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth: the convulsions of the First World War and the Russian Revolution, the rise of the workers’ movement and the increasing resistance by blacks and other minorities. As was the case in theatre, the music of this time also reflects the intervention of the masses into social events.

The renaissance of *Porgy and Bess* in Berlin comes at the right time. The intensification of the social crisis and the contradictions between rich and poor, the discrimination faced by immigrants and refugees in every country and the growing attacks on democratic rights make it thoroughly contemporary. No doubt, many of the visitors to the Deutsche Oper, while certainly not amongst the poorest, are affected by today’s social decline.

The claim by cynics that there is no longer any interest in art that deals with social topics, and that the public is only looking for short-term distractions and more easily digested fare has been roundly disproved by the overwhelming applause at the end of each performance.

One hopes that the great success enjoyed by *Porgy and Bess* at Berlin’s Deutsche Oper indicates a certain reorientation in artistic circles, away from the phase of navel-gazing—not in the sense of political declamations, and not by ignoring individual fates, but in a form full of life and driven by profound human emotions. This would certainly be a very welcome development.



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