

At the University of Michigan

# Racist attacks mar landmark performance of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*

Barry Grey  
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On Saturday, February 17, the University of Michigan Musical Society, in conjunction with the U-M School of Music, Theatre and Dance and its Gershwin Initiative, presented a landmark concert production of *Porgy and Bess*. The four-hour-long production marked the first-ever performance of the opera as originally authored by George and Ira Gershwin and DuBose Heyward, without cuts or other revisions.

Also for the first time, the opera was mounted using a draft of an authoritative critical edition of the score, the product of a nearly six-year collaboration between the university and the Gershwin family estates. A statement posted January 29 on the U of M website explained that the Gershwin trusts, headed by the nephews of George and Ira—Marc George Gershwin and Michael Strunsky—had “granted our scholars unprecedented access to all of the Gershwins’ personal papers, compositional drafts and original manuscript scores in order to create the first-ever critical edition of their works.”

The statement went on to explain that while the definitive critical score of George Gershwin’s masterpiece was still several years from being finalized, the “performance materials being developed” would receive their official world premiere in 2019 at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

The chief editor of the critical edition of the opera score, Wayne Shirley, a former specialist in the Music Division at the Library of Congress, has been at work for two decades preparing an authoritative, fully annotated version. The product of this immense and culturally important labor was a spirited performance that held the packed hall’s rapt attention for the entire duration of the work and evoked standing ovations for the soloists, chorus, conductor and orchestra at its conclusion.

Given the generally deplorable state of culture and intellectual life in contemporary America, however, and the particularly pernicious role played by postmodernism and identity politics, which have long dominated academia, it was perhaps inevitable that this remarkable event would be tarnished by the purveyors of racial politics and racist conceptions of art.

This was all too evident in the U of M website announcement of the February 17 performance cited above, as well as in a three-day symposium held to coincide with the performance and the program distributed to those who attended the event.

The cultural know-nothings who promote these conceptions are well-represented at the U of M, long a bastion of the fixation on race and gender that has become a hallmark of upper-middle class social layers generally aligned with the Democratic Party, and a central ideological prop of American imperialism both at home and abroad.

In the attacks on the opera mounted by various professors from the Department of Afroamerican and African Studies and, shamefully, echoed by others involved in the work of the Gershwin Initiative, the figure of

Harold Cruse was invoked repeatedly. Cruse, the author of the 1967 book *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, had a particular hatred for *Porgy and Bess*. He became the first head of U of M’s Center for Afroamerican and African studies and remained in that position until the mid-1980s.

The announcement of the performance of *Porgy* on the university website combines the promotion of the university’s role in the Gershwin project with the types of ignorant slander against the opera and its authors that are stock in trade for the racial politics crowd.

It calls *Porgy and Bess* “a caricature of black artistry” and proceeds to uncritically reference Cruse’s book and its contention that the opera “must be criticized from the Negro point of view as the most perfect symbol of the Negro creative artist’s cultural denial, degradation, exclusion, exploitation and acceptance of white paternalism.” It notes, again uncritically, that Cruse called for a permanent boycott of the opera.

Cruse’s own biography substantiates the deeply reactionary content of such conceptions. In 1947, he joined the Communist Party and remained a member for several years. A 2015 book, *F.B. Eye*, by William J. Maxwell, a professor of English and African-American Studies at Washington University in St. Louis, cites a declassified FBI internal case file, obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, which notes that Cruse was recruited as an undercover CP informant and “named names” of former co-members.

The website announcement quickly establishes the opera’s original sin, calling it “one of the most celebrated American works of the 20th century,” but claiming it has “ignited controversy” due to its “appropriative nature—an opera about black Americans created by white artists.” [Emphasis added.]

The statement explains that a “scholarly symposium on issues of race in *Porgy and Bess*” in conjunction with the performance will “confront the wounds of prejudice within the work.”

It quotes Naomi André, a professor in the Department of Afroamerican and African Studies and in Women’s Studies, who notes the opera’s “terrible stereotypes that reference minstrel images.” In the same breath she says that the opera “shows an inner depth to its main characters.” How characters can be minstrel-show-like stereotypes and at the same time show an inner depth she does not explain.

The program for the performance includes an essay by André, which in a similar fashion attempts to combine qualified praise for the opera with talk of its “collection of stereotypes.” Her chief complaint, however, “the most disheartening part of the opera,” is “the hopelessness of the characters’ fates.” The “gambling, murder and sexual assault” that are depicted are “distressing,” but “even more devastating” is the fact that “the characters we cheer for... end up dead or broken by the end.”

What is one to say? Presumably this representative of the comfortable middle class would be better disposed to the work if it showed the

crippled beggar Porgy becoming a successful entrepreneur and the beautiful Bess overcoming her cocaine addiction to become a sought-after fashion model.

Even more deplorable is the essay by Mark Clague, a professor of musicology and the editor-in-chief of the U of M's George and Ira Gershwin Critical Edition. Written by someone who should know better, it exemplifies the pollution of thought by the obsessive fixation on race, gender and sexual orientation.

Writing "as a white man leading the Gershwin initiative," Clague cites uncritically Cruse's call for black artists to boycott *Porgy and Bess* as a "symbol of that deeply ingrained American cultural paternalism."

He states that the "insidious danger of *Porgy and Bess*" is that its black characters "*can* be interpreted as caricatures, not dramatic personae," and that "*read in racist terms*, the poverty of Catfish Row becomes emblematic of black incapability..." [Emphasis added.]

This is cowardly double-talk. Is the opera racist or not? Are the characters caricatures or not? Anything can be read or interpreted in racist terms. That does not make it so.

The ideological underpinning of this exercise in evasion and conformity with the prevailing political winds is laid out starkly when Clague calls America "a society in which whites are privileged and blacks are not." Really? Colin Powell, Barack Obama, Condoleezza Rice are not privileged, but unemployed coal miners in Appalachia and poverty-wage Amazon workers who are white are?

Such are the absurd conclusions that flow from the denial of class as the basic divide in society!

The symposium accompanying the performance was dominated by similar attempts to critique (and denigrate) the opera from the standpoint of race and gender. In the course of its three days of panel discussions and performances, however, it also included panels made up of genuine historians of American music, conductors, composers, performers and professionals deeply involved in the Gershwin Critical Edition project, as well as the nephews of George and Ira, Marc George Gershwin and Michael Strunsky.

One was struck by the stark contrast between the attitude, ranging from grudging acceptance to overt hostility, of most of the academics and the universal warmth and admiration for the opera expressed by the singers and professionals who participated. The second day of the symposium featured a panel of opera singers who perform the work, including a number involved in the U of M production. Their unanimous opinion was that *Porgy and Bess* is a great opera with beautiful, complex and, from the singer's standpoint, challenging music and a deeply human and democratic ethos. None supported the notion that the work was racist, paternalistic or demeaning.

The second panel on Friday, titled "The Problem of *Porgy and Bess*," was dominated by representatives of the university's Afroamerican and African Studies Department. The most openly hostile in the group was Professor Angela Dillard, who had organized a class called "Debating *Porgy and Bess*." Attendees entering the symposium venue were confronted with large placards produced by Dillard's students raising all of the standard attacks on the work and its authors from the identity politics fraternity, with accusations of racism, misogyny and "cultural appropriation" and some rather lame attempts to refute them.

In her contribution, Dillard announced that when she was told two years ago of plans to bring a performance of *Porgy and Bess* to the campus, she told the dean of the School of Music not to do it. She explained that, failing to block the performance, she "wanted to help Mark Clague and others to do this well and provide a context in which we could all air our concerns and grievances."

This strongly suggests to this writer some kind of sordid deal between Dillard and other cultural nationalists and the university administration. The former would forgo protests against the opera in return for a free hand

to push their racist line in the official activities surrounding its staging.

Dillard said that the basic premises of her course on *Porgy* included the proposition that it was "an act of cultural appropriation and misrepresentation," but was ultimately "redeemed and reclaimed by African American artists and audiences."

This writer intervened in a subsequent question-and-answer period to oppose the racist approach to *Porgy and Bess* and art in general, stating:

I believe very strongly that *Porgy and Bess* is not racist. Like all important art, it is universal. It is not fundamentally about black people, but about the human condition. It is very much an American opera. Its greatness is precisely that it says something about the human condition, the struggles of ordinary working people, their nobility of spirit, and I think it is a very progressive and democratic opera.

This whole approach of judging art on the basis of race or gender is very wrong-headed and dangerous. Its historical pedigree can be traced back to things like Aryan art and its supposed opposite, branded by the Nazis as "degenerate art." This racist and gender-based approach has very damaging and reactionary cultural and political implications.

One can get a sense of where this type of approach leads by recalling the review of *Porgy and Bess* written by the noted composer and critic Virgil Thomson in 1935:

"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... [Gershwin's] 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... I do not like fake folklore, nor fidgety accompaniments, nor bittersweet harmony, not six-part choruses, nor gefilte fish orchestration."

It must be added, however, that despite his all-too-obvious prejudices, Thomson as a critic of the music of his day was knowledgeable and often perceptive, something that cannot be said of the racist ideologues at the U of M.

What are the implications of the concept of "cultural appropriation" so fashionable in academic circles and employed at the U of M to attack *Porgy and Bess*? All significant art borrows from, incorporates, assimilates the art and culture of other societies and nations. The Balkanization of art prescribed by the opponents of "cultural appropriation" means the death of art.

Are we to proscribe Shakespeare's *Othello* as an impermissible intrusion by a white playwright on a black subject? Are Bizet's *Carmen*, Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Zola's *Nana* examples of male supremacist "mansplaining"? Should we celebrate the zealots who condemn Benny Goodman as an exploiter of "black" jazz?

Should African-American actors be banned from performing Shakespeare and other playwrights who wrote about white subjects?

The U of M announcement of the February 17 performance of *Porgy and Bess* cites a healthy rejoinder to such racist idiocy. It quotes U of M School of Music, Theater and Dance Emeritus Professor of Voice George Shirley, a Grammy-winning operatic tenor and the first black tenor to sing at the Metropolitan Opera, who has played the role of Sportin' Life many times. Shirley states: "As in *Cavalleria Rusticana* or Alban Berg's *Lulu*, *Porgy and Bess* reflects the realities of life that exist amongst communities where poverty of circumstances dictates morality to a considerable degree, as well as the mode of survival, a fact no different for

the black community than for any other.”

Gershwin produced genuine American music precisely because he was able to creatively synthesize all sorts of national and ethnic musical and cultural influences—the classical canon, jazz, blues, Negro spirituals, Jewish music, etc. He openly spoke of his aspiration to produce music for the broad masses of people in the melting pot of early 20th century America, and especially New York. He wanted to evoke the broadly democratic and optimistic ethos of the country and its people.

He was attracted to the story of *Porgy* precisely because, in part due to his Jewish ancestry, he identified with the oppression of the occupants of Catfish Row and wanted to express, in all of its contradictory reflections, their essential nobility and humanity.

Are there elements of stereotype in the opera? How could there not be, given the period and context in which it was written? One of the damning characteristics of approaches to art based on secondary factors such as race is their ahistorical nature. Standards established today are mechanically and moralistically applied to works of the past, without serious regard for their social, historical and cultural context. Works are judged and approved or condemned on the basis of their conformity to eternal verities, subjectively determined according to political agendas.

Great operas are full of stereotypes: the exotic and sensual gypsy in *Carmen*; the tragic, bitter dwarf in *Rigoletto*; the submissive Japanese maiden in *Madame Butterfly*; etc.

Do such elements predominate in *Porgy and Bess*? The staying power of the opera and its universal, international appeal is compelling evidence that they do not. What racist tracts are beloved by people all over the world? To ask the question is to answer it.

To sum up, we propose to let Gershwin speak for himself. Here is an excerpt from a 1926 essay he published in *Theater Magazine* titled “Jazz is the Voice of the American Soul”:

Old music and new music, forgotten melodies and the craze of the moment, bits of opera, Russian folk songs, Spanish ballads, chansons, ragtime ditties combined in a mighty chorus in my inner ear. And through and over it all I heard, faint at first, loud at last, the soul of this great America of ours.

And what is the voice of the American soul? It is jazz developed out of ragtime, jazz that is the plantation song improved and transformed into finer, bigger harmonies...

I do not assert that the American soul is Negroid. But it is a combination that includes the wail, the whine, and the exultant note of the old ‘mammy’ songs of the South. It is black and white. It is all colors and all souls unified in the great melting pot of the world...

But to be true music it must repeat the thoughts and aspirations of the people and the time. My people are Americans. My time is today.



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