

Interview with conductor William Barkhymer: “I think the world is just thankful we had Gershwin to compose *Porgy and Bess*”

Barry Grey
25 April 2018

The following is an interview with William Barkhymer, a conductor based in Germany who frequently conducts productions of George Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess* internationally, especially in Europe. Barkhymer participated in a seminar held at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in conjunction with a landmark concert performance of the opera on February 17.

The performance was based on a draft of an authoritative critical edition of the score, which corrects many errors in the current published score and restores four bars of music and the appearance of a band on stage at the end of Act 1, which were found in Gershwin's handwritten conductor's full score used in the original 1935 production. The critical edition is the product of a nearly six-year collaboration between the university and the Gershwin family estates.

The performance and accompanying seminar were marred by racist attacks on the opera led by a section of the University of Michigan faculty. The interview was conducted on February 16. (See: “At the University of Michigan: Racist attacks mar landmark performance of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*”).

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Barry Grey: Can you tell us something about your professional activities and your connection to *Porgy and Bess*?

William Barkhymer: I'm based in Germany but I freelance. I started out in Germany on the conducting staff in Aachen after receiving my masters in conducting at Indiana University in Bloomington and a diploma from the Akademie für Musik in Vienna. During my time in Vienna I first saw a live production of *Porgy and Bess*.

I conducted the famous Houston Opera production in 1978 in Paris and Palermo and later on in Munich, Messina and again in Palermo. In the 1980s I ended up helping to put together and conduct an American production that at first was performed for nine months all over Europe. I intended to do that for only one year, but once I did it, I got the urge to do other things like it. I did *Showboat*, then we did *Carmen Jones* with Bill Hammerstein directing.

BG: You have a long connection to *Porgy and Bess* in particular. In the panel discussion today you said you thought it was the greatest American opera.

WB: Oh, definitely.

BG: And that George Gershwin was in your opinion the greatest American composer.

WB: Without a doubt.

BG: Can you elaborate on that?

WB: That's almost like trying to intellectualize why *Porgy and Bess* should be done only with a black cast. I just feel it. But I think it is clear

from the originality of his music, from the great genius of his melodies and harmonies. That was already clear even before he composed *Porgy and Bess*.

BG: What makes Gershwin unique among the great American songwriters?

WB: He goes beyond being a songwriter.

BG: Isn't that the point? This merging of popular music and concert music is what really distinguishes Gershwin and points to something, a new development for the future.

WB: It's definitely new. And it's not that we didn't have great American composers. I would go so far as to say Gershwin was one of the greatest composers period, in the world. Right up there with great European composers.

The guy was so talented, and it goes further than the talent of Leonard Bernstein. Bernstein was extremely talented too, but there was something more natural that came out of George that was really his own. People say there's [Giacomo] Puccini in Gershwin. There's no Puccini! It's his own. Everything he did was his own.

He was influenced by other composers, of course. Every composer is influenced in some way by what came before. Nevertheless, Gershwin's music is truly unique and can be immediately identified as being Gershwin.

BG: I agree with you. It is astounding that Gershwin was able to produce something like *Porgy and Bess*. He had been composing concert music for only 11 years when *Porgy* was produced.

I know that Gershwin at one point was considering doing an opera on the Dybbuk, a Yiddish story. He was a synthesizer of all sorts of musical and cultural traditions, creating out of them something new. He wrote about the American “melting pot” and his desire to express and reflect it in his music.

Gershwin was consciously seeking to develop a mass audience and write for the people. He had a very democratic sense.

WB: Definitely. But without playing down.

BG: No, he sought to elevate.

WB: Exactly.

BG: Which raises another issue, namely, what has happened to what is called classical music, or concert music, in the aftermath of Gershwin's untimely death and the Second World War that quickly followed it. To my mind much of it has become very elitist.

WB: When I grew up, the attitude toward Gershwin's concert works was more elitist than it is today. He wasn't yet appreciated the way we appreciate him today. He was played only at pops concerts. He wasn't played at classical concerts. You wouldn't hear even Concerto in F in a

classical concert.

BG: Yes, but what I'm talking about is much of the new music that is being composed. It seems to be deliberately targeting a very, very...

WB: Of course. Except, have you heard Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*? I haven't kept up with all the contemporary American operas, but I did see that one and I was quite impressed with it. It wasn't twelve tone. I think we've gotten over the twelve-tone thing anyway. It was something the audience could relate to and it was musically accessible.

BG: I think there is a certain coming back to melodic music.

WB: I hope so.

BG: Let's take the question of *Porgy and Bess*. The issue of so-called "cultural appropriation" is very much a part of this event at the University of Michigan. Although there is a clear contrast between the attitude of the singers and all those involved in the opera from an artistic standpoint—and, no doubt, 99 percent of the world public who love this opera have no concerns about the supposed "racism" of a white man writing an opera about black people...

WB: I haven't heard this discussion even mentioned since James Baldwin wrote about it. I really thought we were beyond it, maybe because I live so much in Europe.

BG: This issue has been raised repeatedly and increasingly hysterically, targeting *Porgy and Bess* as part of racialist and gender politics. In *Gershwin Remembered* on PBS in 1987, Anne Brown, the original Bess, was interviewed and spoke very strongly in defense of the opera and Gershwin. She absolutely rejected the attacks on the opera as either patronizing, racist or exploitative. Besides the fact that in their interpersonal relationship there wasn't a trace of racism in Gershwin, she said he was an artist, he had a vision and every right to translate that into an opera. In her view, and I think in the view of a lot of people, it was very true to life.

WB: That's what virtually all of the singers that I've worked with or met doing *Porgy and Bess* feel. Especially the ones that come from the South. Of course, there are stereotypes. There are stereotypes in all art works, in all operas.

BG: I was thinking of Carmen—the gypsy. Where do you draw the line? You would probably have to ban Shakespeare because of the *Merchant of Venice* or Hamlet's misogyny toward Ophelia.

WB: Gershwin's stereotypes aren't as bad as people make them out to be, especially in Germany. They always refer to Bess as a prostitute. The way I understand it, she wasn't a prostitute (though maybe Sportin' Life intends to make her into one in New York). She was a loose woman, a hussy, however it is worded. And Crown wasn't entirely a bad person. He goes out to save Clara. He was brutish and so forth, but he wasn't the devil incarnate.

BG: This racialist approach involves a completely ahistorical conception of art. It sets up certain contemporary standards and then imposes them on the work.

WB: You could say there are bad things about Mozart's *Zauberflöte*, bad things about *Meistersinger*. Richard Wagner was an anti-Semite. Does that mean you shouldn't perform his operas? Daniel Barenboim performed Wagner in Tel Aviv for the first time (though not without some protest, understandably).

I have a feeling that some of the organizers of this event really don't believe this stuff, but felt they had to include it.

BG: Angela Dillard, the black studies professor who spoke, began by saying that when this event was initially discussed, she said, "Don't do it." I imagine there were probably negotiations between her faction, which is very powerful on campus, and others. She might have said, OK, we'll let you put it on, but you have to allow us to dominate the surrounding event.

But contrary to the absurd attacks on the work as a form of minstrelsy, the opera does, I think, succeed in providing a powerful portrait of a

community.

WB: Exactly. That's what I try to emphasize in Germany. It's about a community, the people, how they interact with each other, how they hold together in good times and bad times. That's what *Porgy and Bess* is about for me. I mean, there are so many things. That there are racial problems is just part of it.

BG: You did say in your contribution in the panel discussion that in Germany the critics are obsessed with race in connection with *Porgy and Bess*.

WB: They feel that the main theme of *Porgy and Bess* is racial problems and that we don't show that enough in our production. I haven't seen in Germany complaints about a white composer writing an opera about blacks, but it wouldn't surprise me that someone would be stupid enough to say that.

I had an interview on German radio in 2016 before we opened in Dresden at the famous Semperoper. At that time they were having these big anti-immigrant, ultra-right Pegida demonstrations every Monday in front of the opera house. The interviewer asked how we were working the Pegida theme into the staging of *Porgy and Bess*. I was dumbfounded.

BG: What is the significance of the critical edition of the opera?

WB: The significance is that we've been working with conductors' scores and orchestra parts that are just full of mistakes. Wayne Shirley [the editor of the critical edition] explained to me that what we are using aren't even copies of the original. They were recopied in the early 1950s or something, maybe when they did the State Department tour. They were copied from the originals, but in someone else's hands. There are literally thousands of printed mistakes. Every time I do the opera I find some more.

There are four bars he's put back in at the beginning of the second scene. There's a stage band in the scene where everyone is going off to Kittiwah that he's put back.

BG: Do you have anything musically about the opera that you find particularly important, striking?

WB: I would mainly have only positive things to say about it. I'm sure Gershwin would have loved to have heard it played by a large orchestra as is done in most opera houses in North America and Europe, because that's the way he orchestrated it. He made the right decision probably that they do it on Broadway instead of in an opera house for logistical reasons at the time, but he would have loved to have heard it in an opera house.

When we go to Italy we use their house orchestras and we have about 72 musicians, and most other places about 60, instead of the 43 he had on Broadway. It's so glorious to hear it that way. Every once in a while there might be some places where the orchestration may be a tiny bit weak, and had Gershwin lived longer he might have changed a few minor things in the orchestration, as did several other composers. And it was a big thing not that far back when Schumann's symphonies were re-orchestrated by others, and they would double all the winds in Beethoven, and all that sort of stuff, and that was not so long ago.

For me, the most moving parts, the only times when I've gotten tears in my eyes while conducting, are the "Clara, Clara" chorus and the "I'm On My Way" finale.

I think the world is just thankful that we had Gershwin to compose *Porgy and Bess*.



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