

# George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* in triumphant return to New York's Metropolitan Opera

**Fred Mazelis**  
**26 October 2019**

The great American opera *Porgy and Bess* returned to the Metropolitan Opera for the first time in nearly 30 years this fall. The new production demonstrates once again that George Gershwin's only opera deserves an honored place in opera houses everywhere. A run of six performances has just ended, but *Porgy* will return for seven more dates next January and early February.

*Porgy and Bess* tells the moving story of the love that develops between the disabled beggar Porgy and the unhappy and drug-addicted Bess. It is, however, more than the tale of its title characters. Based on *Porgy*, a play by Dorothy and Dubose Heyward, which was in turn taken from a 1925 novel by Heyward, it is the story of an African-American community, set in about 1930 in the fictionalized Catfish Row neighborhood of Charleston, South Carolina. Porgy fights to win Bess away from her violent and abusive lover Crown, as well as the temptations of the dope peddler Sportin' Life.

The opera, with a libretto by Dubose Heyward and Ira Gershwin, develops these characters and more. They include Clara and her husband Jake, and Robbins and his wife Serena. The other residents of Catfish Row occupy a central place in the story, with the Porgy and Bess Chorus, 60 operatic voices in all engaged specifically for this production, on stage for much of the time.

*Porgy and Bess*, which premiered on Broadway in 1935, did not win a secure place in the opera world until a 1976 production by the Houston Grand Opera. It won a devoted following from the beginning, but also strong criticism. Is it opera at all, demanded some classical music notables, who faulted Gershwin for his Broadway background and his use of jazz, gospel and spiritual-inflected elements? Is it, in the language that has more recently been adopted, a work of "cultural appropriation," the creation of three white men who presumed to tell a story that was not theirs to tell, of African-American life in the early part of the 20th century? Over and above these arguments, is it an effective work of musical theater?

On a recent evening, the response of a sophisticated New York audience, diverse in age and ethnic background, was unequivocal. Even though the opera is through-composed and does not include many pauses that make applause opportune, the audience created many such moments.

The role of opera as a form of musical theater is notoriously difficult to define. There is no one definition that sets opera apart from operetta, for instance, which is usually lighter in both music and theme, as in Gilbert and Sullivan and the works of Franz Lehár. From the mid-20th century onward, operetta generally gave way to the musical, as in the works of Rodgers and Hammerstein. The operatic form certainly requires far more powerful and trained voices, and almost never uses amplified singers. On this score, *Porgy and Bess* is most definitely an opera. Its use of popular forms is no more "disqualifying" than the folk and popular elements in

opera from Italy and elsewhere.

There are those who argue that numbers such as Sportin' Life's "It Ain't Necessarily So" or Porgy's "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'" do not belong in the opera house. The renditions of these classics at the Met, by the powerful voices of Eric Owens as Porgy and Frederick Ballentine (in his Met debut) as Sportin' Life, should put these complaints to rest.

It is not primarily a question of this or that number, however, but the way in which Gershwin weaves together the strands of different styles and elements—jazzy syncopation, spirituals, dance rhythms, arias, duets and ensembles—to create a unified whole, a truly coherent and stunning work of art. This composer of numerous Broadway hit shows was also the creator of *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), *Concerto in F* (1925) and *An American in Paris* (1928) for the concert hall. The power of the opera rests not only on such classics as "Summertime," but on the wonderful duets in Act I, first for Porgy and Bess (the love duet following Porgy's "Bess You is My Woman Now") and, in the following scene, the duet in which Bess first resists Crown but is then forced to stay with him.

In *Porgy and Bess*, Gershwin reached the peak of his creativity. This is all the more impressive when one considers that he was only 37 when *Porgy* premiered, with only two more years to live before being struck down by a brain tumor. Gershwin can be compared to Mozart, Bellini and Bizet, three other composers who died while still in their 30s, and it is almost painful to contemplate what else he might have achieved had he been granted a normal lifespan.

The new production is the work of director James Robinson, currently the artistic director of the Opera Theatre of St. Louis. Conductor David Robertson recently concluded more than a decade as the music director of that same city's St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. Robertson, currently the chief conductor at Australia's Sydney Symphony Orchestra, first led the Met Opera Orchestra more than 20 years ago, and has been there many times since. He drew an exciting and passionate performance from the musicians in *Porgy*.

The vocal leads were Owens and Angel Blue, each of whom made his or her debut at the Met more than ten years ago. Owens, well known to audiences in New York in challenging roles in Wagner, Richard Strauss, Mozart and Dvorak, among others, projected power, tenderness and vulnerability as the crippled beggar. Angel Blue was equally impressive as a singing actress, showing Bess in the depths of despair as well as the warmth of her love for Porgy.

Every major cast member rose powerfully to the occasion, including Denyce Graves as Maria, the matron of Catfish Row, Ryan Speedo Green as Jake and Janai Brugger as Clara, and Alfred Walker as Crown and Ballentine as Sportin' Life. Latonia Moore stood out, even in this excellent company, as Serena, the devout wife of Robbins, who mourns her husband after he is killed in a fight with the reckless Crown ("My

Man's Gone Now"). For this listener—if forced to choose from such a wealth of musical pleasure—Serena's aria and the duets between Porgy and Bess were the musical high points of the evening.

There were, however, numerous high points. The choral numbers, usually combined with dance, included powerful renditions of "It Takes a Long Pull to Get There," "Looking for the Promised Land" and "O I Can't Sit Down." Act II contains lighter moments, with delightful short arias from the Strawberry Woman and the Crab Man. Later in this act, after Clara is feared lost in the storm that has taken the life of her husband, Bess, while cradling Clara and Jake's baby, offers a moving reprise of "Summertime," the famous aria with which Clara has opened the opera.

When Porgy, released from prison, returns joyfully to Catfish Row, he is informed—in the course of a haunting and dissonant trio in which he is joined by Serena and Maria—that Bess has left with Sportin' Life for New York. This sets the stage for the opera's final scene, as Porgy tosses his crutches aside and announces that he will go north to find Bess ("O, Lawd, I'm On My Way").

Set designer Michael Yeargan and costume designer Catherine Zuber made important contributions to the production, but special mention should be made of the choreography of Camille A. Brown. The choristers often joined in the dancing with a smaller group of dancers drawn from Ms. Brown's own Camille A. Brown and Dancers company. It was another big element in the evening's events, at times so powerful that it ran the risk of distracting from the music and drama.

As noted above, *Porgy and Bess* has had a long road toward acceptance. The original production was brought to Broadway precisely because Gershwin sought, as he explained, a bigger and broader audience than could be found in the opera house. The leads in 1935 were Todd Duncan and Anne Brown, both of whom lived into their mid-90s and were devoted defenders of the opera. Though they had operatic voices, neither were given as many opportunities as later generations of black singers.

Before the 1976 Houston production, *Porgy and Bess* had achieved fame in Europe, at the Royal Opera House in London, in a 1952 production that included the young Leontyne Price, who became one of the most famous sopranos of the 20th century. Also in the cast were William Warfield as Porgy and the legendary jazz singer Cab Calloway as Sportin' Life. *Porgy* did not come to the Met until 1985, in a production starring Grace Bumbry and Simon Estes, with the orchestra under the direction of James Levine. In the meantime, it had been filmed in 1959 and staged on Broadway in revivals on a number of occasions, including in 1983. The opera has appeared around the world, including a version in which it was transposed to South Africa, where its theme found powerful expression.

The long delay at the Met was owing to several causes. Ironically, those wealthy patrons who found the subject matter as well as the music somewhat "beneath" the opera stage wound up in agreement with advocates of black cultural nationalism, who also looked down on the residents of Catfish Row and who advanced a tribalist conception of art, one that insisted that composers, novelists, playwrights and others could treat matters only of their own ethnic group.

In addition, some others made the claim that *Porgy* was to be avoided because the image of Catfish Row supposedly clashed with that of the militant and mass struggle for racial equality against Jim Crow in this period of the 1950s and '60s. The fundamental issue, however, was whether the story of *Porgy and Bess* was humane, truthful and sympathetic, as it definitely was, and whether the music succeeded in conveying the lives and struggles of the characters. The idea of imposing a political test on such a work was at best hopelessly misguided, and some black musicians, like Duke Ellington and Bumbry, later changed their minds about the opera.

The more recent charges of "cultural appropriation" are utterly backward and reactionary. One might just as well denounce Antonin

Dvorak for writing the String Quartet that he subtitled "American," based on his impressions of "Negro themes," or Brahms and other masters who used "gypsy" themes in so much of their music. Or, for that matter, why have Price and other great African-American singers received ovations for their renditions of the songs of Schubert, Schumann, Mahler and Brahms, and the operas of Wagner, Verdi, Puccini and scores of others?

All great art reflects a combination of influences, the interpenetration of different styles and forms. It was not only Gershwin who incorporated jazz into his classical compositions, but also such figures as Maurice Ravel, Darius Milhaud, Kurt Weill and many others.

In this regard, a comment in the review of *Porgy* by *New York Times* chief music critic Anthony Tommasini is revealing. Tommasini closes his otherwise laudatory review by saying, "That *Porgy and Bess* is a portrait of a black community by white artists may limit the work. The response should not be to discount *Porgy*, but to champion overlooked operatic portraits of black communities by black artists and foster the creation of new ones."

Tommasini tries to evade the issue by praising the opera but adding that Gershwin's and Heyward's skin color "may" limit *Porgy and Bess*. The meaning is clear. This is his way of toeing the editorial line set down by the *Times* in its "1619 Project," with its falsification of American history in order to stoke racial divisions today. *Porgy and Bess* is in its own way a refutation of this reactionary outlook, and makes the advocates of identity politics uneasy.

The Gershwins insisted that *Porgy and Bess* have an all-black cast, but that is another question, unrelated to identity politics. Color-blind casting must be the goal, and there may well come a time when it is applied to *Porgy*, as it certainly is today to the 19th century operas of Verdi and others. At present, however, it is generally understood that fidelity to the story and the theme of *Porgy and Bess* requires an all-black cast.

This raises another possible reason for the past difficulties of this opera: the problem of assembling a large and powerful cast of African-American singers. Of course this is not a reflection on the abilities and potential of black artists, but rather of the inadequate training and opportunities which they have been afforded. This situation has drastically changed, an indirect product of the mass civil rights struggles that dismantled racial barriers of various descriptions. While undoubtedly there are many of all backgrounds who are denied opportunities for economic reasons, the racial obstacles have come down.

This finds thrilling expression in the current production. There was a time when African-American singers were wary of roles in *Porgy and Bess* lest they be typecast and deemed worthy *only* of those roles. Every single member of the current cast, however, has already made a name for herself or himself in the operas of Mozart, Verdi, Puccini, Wagner, Dvorak, Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky and many others.

*Porgy and Bess* takes its place—it is indeed first among equals—along other well-known American operas of the 20th century, including *Treemonisha*, by the master of ragtime, Scott Joplin; Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*; Douglas Moore's *The Ballad of Baby Doe*; and Aaron Copland's *The Tender Land*. After he came to the US Kurt Weill composed many musicals and one operetta, *Street Scene*, which has been occasionally performed in the opera house, and deservedly so. Among contemporary composers John Adams has found success with *Doctor Atomic*, on J. Robert Oppenheimer and the birth of the atom bomb; and *The Death of Klinghoffer*, on the tragic death of a Jewish passenger on the cruise ship Achille Lauro, raising the issues in the long conflict between Jews and Palestinians in the Middle East.

*Porgy and Bess* must not wait another 30 years before being presented in New York and in opera houses around the country as well as the world. Of course big resources are needed for an opera of this size and scope, but they must be fought for. While many classic operas remain popular despite being dated, this label does not apply to *Porgy and Bess*. It still

resonates today, in the suffering of migrants, refugees, the homeless and others. George Gershwin and Dubose Heyward were influenced by the great struggles of the early decades of the 20th century. New voices will come forward, shaped by the struggles emerging today, and they will find the words and music to speak to the issues confronting humanity.

*The author also recommends:*

*Porgy and Bess* in Berlin

[29 July 2008]

New Met production of *Porgy and Bess* prompts racialist criticisms of America's greatest opera

[26 September 2019]

The legacy of the Gershwin's and *Porgy and Bess*

[23 April 2018]

Experiencing *Porgy and Bess*

[11 June 1998]



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**wsws.org/contact**