

Porgy and Bess
Historical Background
by Stephen Willier

In 1930 George Gershwin received a commission from the Metropolitan Opera in New York to write a grand opera that was specifically on an American topic. He was to choose his own libretto. Gershwin wanted to set *Porgy and Bess*, based on DuBose Heyward's story, to a libretto by Heyward. Gershwin knew this topic would present problems with his commission, as it featured an all-black cast and the Met was not open to black artists. He waited for three years while he searched for another possible topic. Ultimately, however, Gershwin and Heyward announced in October 1933 that *Porgy and Bess* would be performed on Broadway with an all-black cast. It was to be produced by the Theater Guild, which had already presented Heyward's stage play based on his story. Heyward wrote the libretto text and some of the song lyrics, specifically "Summertime," "My Man's Gone Now," and "A Woman is a Sometime Thing." Later, George's brother Ira was called in to provide further song lyrics and to help polish the text. In the summer of 1934 Gershwin and Heyward went to South Carolina, to a small island near Charleston, to get a feeling for local color surrounding the Gullah community. He wrote part of the score there and in New York City.

Much unnecessary controversy has surrounded the work in terms of its genre. Is it an opera, a folk opera, a jazz opera? Or is it a Broadway musical? Much of the controversy stems from the mélange of musical sources--blues, spirituals, jubilees, praying songs, street cries, work songs, jazz, Tin Pan Alley, classical--used by Gershwin. Many who have studied the work have also detected influences of Jewish liturgical music in the score. After a number of decades and many different types of productions, *Porgy and Bess* is now recognized both as a masterpiece and a true opera. As musicologist Charles Hamm notes, it has continuous music, dialogue and recitative. The score even uses the Wagnerian device of leitmotif, in which motives are heard to establish each character with its personal musical signature. Themes then transform and combine to show conflict between characters. On the other hand, it is hardly surprising considering Gershwin was the composer, that various numbers show clear evidence of Broadway song style: "Summertime," "Oh, I Can't Sit Down," "It Ain't Necessarily So," and "I Got Plenty of Nuttin." Many who have never seen the opera know these very popular songs, which have become a ubiquitous part of American song literature.

The performance history of *Porgy and Bess* has included a starry host of performers, from Todd Duncan and Anne Brown in the original cast to Leontyne Price, William Warfield, Cab Calloway, Maya Angelou, Robert Guillaume, Sidney Poitier, Dorothy Dandridge, Diahann Carroll, Sammy Davis Jr., Pearl Bailey, Grace Bumbry, Simon Estes, and Florence Quivar. Note the presence of Classically-trained operatic singers such as Miss Price, Miss Bumbry, Mr. Warfield and others. On record, the list includes the luminaries Cleo Laine, Ray Charles, Nina Simone, and a magnificent performance by Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald. The work has had "a triumphant saga for a half century on stage, backstage, on film and around the world," wrote Hollis Alpert in his book *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess*. It has been given to great acclaim at Vienna's Volksoper and Milan's La Scala, and in Berlin and London well before it received its belated Metropolitan Opera debut in 1985, fifty years after its premiere. It was the first American theatrical presentation to be played in the Soviet Union in the early 1950s. Blacks themselves, however, did not always necessarily favor the work. The African-American social historian Harold Cruse considers it a museum piece from a harsher era: "It portrays the seamiest side of [African-American] life. . .presumably the image of black people that white audiences want to see." If so, *Porgy and Bess* is hardly the only opera to portray the seamy side of life of any number of people.

The noted poet Maya Angelou sees the work a bit differently from Cruse. She was in the cast when they played La Scala in 1955 and speaks of the cast pulling "the elegant first-night audience into the harshness of black Southern life," and of the power of "the love story," placing the work well within operatic tradition. She further relates that "Time and again, the audience came to their feet, yelling and applauding. We had performed *Porgy and Bess* as never before, and if La Scala patrons loved us, it was only fitting because we certainly performed as if we were in love with one another." Before this, all concerns about genre and race fall flat: *Porgy and Bess* is a moving, human, masterpiece.

Stephen Willier is an accomplished music historian whose writings have appeared in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, *Opera Quarterly*, *Opera News* and *Grove Dictionary of Opera*.