

*Virginia
Opera*

PORGY and BESS

By

George Gershwin

**Libretto by DuBose Heyward
Lyrics by DuBose Heyward and Ira Gershwin**

Study Guide

2009-2010 Season

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Preface

Purpose

This study guide is intended to aid you, the teacher, in increasing your students' understanding and appreciation of PORGY AND BESS. This will not only add to knowledge about opera, but should develop awareness of other related subjects, making the performance they attend much more enjoyable.

Most Important

If you only have a limited amount of time, concentrate on the cast of characters, the plot and some of the musical and dramatic highlights of the opera. Recognition produces familiarity which in turn produces a positive experience.

Objectives

- To acquaint both the educator and the student with the musical storytelling.
- To familiarize students with the “world of opera” (it’s vocabulary, history, etc.)
- To provide an innovative, new, multi-disciplinary approach to teaching required skills and curriculum.
- To promote the understanding of how opera, as an art form, reflects and comments on our society and the world in which we live.
- To provide opera activities that assist educators in meeting the requirements of Virginia’s Standard Objectives of Learning.
- To promote realization of the importance of literature as a mirror of human experience, reflecting human motives, conflicts, and values.
- To help students be able to identify with fictional characters in human situations as a means of relating to others.

BEFORE ATTENDING THE PERFORMANCE

ALL STUDENTS SHOULD BE ABLE TO

- Recognize the character names.
- Understand how music and drama combine to tell a story.

What is Opera?

Opera is a unique type of entertainment—a play that is sung throughout. Because it combines music and theater, opera can be the most moving of all the arts, and can tell a story in a way quite unlike any other. It does so by means of words, actions, and music.

The words of an opera are called a **libretto** (the Italian word for “little book”), much like the words of a play are called a **script**. There are important differences between a libretto and a script, however. For one thing, a libretto usually contains far fewer words than a script. The reason for this is the music. It can take more time to sing a line of text than to say it; also, words are often repeated in operatic music for reasons of musical form. Therefore, there are fewer words in an opera than in a play of the same length.

While the spoken word can clearly show what people are thinking, singing is much better at showing emotions rather than thoughts. For this reason, the plot of an opera is likely to be filled with dramatic situations in which highly emotional characters perform bold actions.

The way **librettists** (the people who write the words) use words is also different. Opera librettos are commonly made up of poetry, while this is not often true of the scripts for plays. In *DON GIOVANNI* many of the musical passages can be considered a type of sung poetry, complete with meter, accents, and rhyme. If you were to say the words that the characters sing, this would become very clear.

A librettist can also do something that a playwright cannot—he or she can write an **ensemble**. An ensemble is a passage in the libretto in which more than one person sings; often, several characters sing different vocal lines simultaneously. In a play, if all the actors spoke at once, the audience could not understand the words. In an opera, the music helps the audience to sort out the thoughts and feelings of each singer. Frequently, each individual character has a distinct musical or vocal style which distinguishes him/her from the other characters. We will see this when we compare the characters in *DON GIOVANNI*.

If the libretto of an opera is a special language, the score (or musical portion of an opera) is a special use of music. It is music that is meant to be sung, of course, but it has characteristics that many songs do not. **Operatic music is dramatic music, written for the theater.** For this reason, it must also be capable of describing strong feelings that invite the audience’s involvement with the story and their identification with people on stage. In addition, a good operatic composer can use music as a tool to define character and personality traits of his characters.

One way in which a **composer** (the person who writes the music) can use music is through the voices of the singers themselves. A human voice, especially when singing, can express all sorts of feelings. Composers know this and use this knowledge to the fullest. First, they consider the personality of a character, and then choose a voice type (either high or low) that best suits this type of person. For example, younger characters are often sung by the higher voice types. There are five different voice categories (perhaps some students are familiar with these from singing in a choir):

SOPRANO: the highest female voice

MEZZO-SOPRANO: (also called ALTO) the lower female voice

TENOR: the highest male voice (like Pavarotti or Caruso)

BARITONE: the middle male voice

BASS: the lowest male voice

Each of these voice categories can be subdivided into more specialized types, such as “dramatic soprano”, “lyric soprano”, “coloratura soprano”, “basso-buffo”, depending on the specific type of music being sung. These distinctions are known as **vocal fachs**, from a German word meaning “mode”.

After a composer has chosen the characters’ voice types, he then tries to interpret the libretto in musical terms. A character may sing very high notes when agitated or excited, or low notes when depressed or calm. He or she may sing many rapid notes or a few long held notes, depending upon the mood at the time.

In an opera production, the ideas of the composer and librettist are expressed by the singers as directed by a **conductor** and **stage director**. The conductor is responsible for the musical aspects of the performance, leading the orchestra and the singers and determining the musical pace. The stage director is responsible for the dramatic movement and characterizations of the singers. He works with a **design team**—a set designer, costume designer, and a lighting designer – to determine the visual interpretation of the work. Just as the composer and librettist must work in close communion in the writing of an opera, the conductor and stage director must have a close collaboration to produce a unified interpretation of an opera. Both must collaborate with the singers and the design team (and sometimes a **choreographer**, if dancing is involved). For this reason opera is perhaps the form demanding the greatest degree of collaboration.

An opera then, is a partnership of words and music with the purpose of telling a dramatic story. While the story itself may be about everyday situations or historical figures, it usually has a moral or idea that the entire audience understands. This is one of the great features of opera—it unites a variety of people with different backgrounds by giving them a common experience to relate with.

The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, and Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving a unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
<i>Soprano</i>	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
<i>Mezzo-Soprano</i>	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Cosi fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)
<i>Tenor</i>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Cosi fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<i>Baritone</i>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Marriage of Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	<i>Verdi Baritone</i> Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<i>Bass</i>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	<i>Buffo Bass</i> Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Cosi fan tutte)	<i>Basso Cantate</i> Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.



The Composer

George Gershwin was born September 26, 1898 to Russian immigrant parents on New York's East Side. His father operated various businesses, including, at one time or another, several restaurants, Turkish baths, bakeries, rooming houses and a pool parlor. While still in high school Gershwin studied piano and began composing. In his formal lessons, the young man acquired a thorough technique, and became familiar with the works of all the major composers – but his own compositions were in the style of “tin pan alley:” modern, jazz-oriented pop songs. This juxtaposition of classical and popular music persisted throughout Gershwin's career, and led him to a unique position in American cultural history.

To understand Gershwin's place in musical history, we have to know a little about the emergence of popular music in America. In the nineteenth century “popular” music essentially meant sentimental or comic songs with piano accompaniment. The difference between these songs and “classical” songs was their simplicity and regularity: almost all of them had easy, folk-like melodies and simple chordal accompaniments, and they followed a pattern of verse and refrain. The famous songs of Stephen Foster are good examples of this style. In many ways they are like the simpler songs of Schubert or arias of Donizetti.

Around the turn of the century, “popular” music experienced enormous growth, both commercially and artistically. Touring Vaudeville acts became even bigger business than before, and many extremely talented and original composers who might otherwise have gone into “classical” music wrote popular songs for the stars of these companies.

Soon, for the first time, popular music began to absorb influences which did not stem from European classical music, but rather from black American culture. The emergence of jazz and blues, and the growing popularity of fast dance music drawing on these styles, ushered in a new era in American music around the time of World War I. The new popular music came to symbolize the fun-seeking mood of the nation in the “Roaring Twenties.”

By this time popular and classical music had followed radically different courses. Many gifted composers worked in each field, but with few exceptions they did not work in both. Gershwin was one of the exceptions, and the most notable one.

Although his parents hoped he might become an accountant, and his teacher hoped he might become a concert pianist, Gershwin left school to go to work in the popular music business. When he was about twenty his songs began to have some success in various revues and stage productions. Eventually, he became one of the country's leading composers of Broadway musicals, and in 1931 one of them, “Of thee I Sing,” became the first musical ever to win a Pulitzer Prize.

Many songs from the Gershwin musicals are still world famous. Some of them include “Embraceable You,” “Fascinating Rhythm,” “Stairway to Paradise,” “I Got

Rhythm,” and “The Man I Love.” All of these, and many others, have words by Gershwin’s brother Ira, who also wrote lyrics for Kurt Weill, Aaron Copland, and Jerome Kern.

Throughout his early career, Gershwin cherished the ambition of introducing elements of jazz and popular music into works intended for classical music audiences. In 1924 this wish was realized with the successful premiere of his “Rhapsody in Blue” for piano and orchestra.

In the following years, side by side with his hit musicals, Gershwin produced a piano concerto in F (1925), three preludes (1926), the tone poem “An American in Paris” (1928), a second “Rhapsody” (1932), and, most significantly, “Porgy and Bess” (1935). In the early ‘thirties, Gershwin branched out into the then brand-new field of movie musicals, and it was in Hollywood that he died at the age of 38 after a tragically unsuccessful operation for a brain tumor.

The Librettist

Dubose Heyward was born in Charleston, South Carolina in 1885. While growing up, Heyward's grandmother read stories to the children of her family. Heyward liked them so much that he made a hobby of setting his own thoughts down on paper in the form of poetry. He had no idea then that he would one day make his living as a writer.

Growing up without a father, Heyward was forced to mature early. He hated school and at the age of fourteen, left school to work at a hardware store. At the early age of sixteen, he assumed the burdens of supporting his family, eventually working as a cotton checker for a steamship line on the Charleston docks. This was where he met and worked with the African Americans who loaded and unloaded the ships. The setting of *Porgy and Bess* and some of its characters came directly from this experience.

When the steamship company went out of business, Heyward found himself unemployed. His lack of education proved a handicap and him feel like a failure. Luckily, Heyward's friend Harry O'Neil was on hand to help. O'Neill and Heyward formed an insurance company. It was risky business, but Heyward's natural charm made him a perfect salesman. The business prospered and he began to feel fulfilled.

The feeling was short lived, however, as American entered into World War I in 1917. Because of his medical problems (a bout with typhoid, polio, and pleurisy throughout the course of his life), Heyward was unable to serve. He turned to artistic pursuits and became so fascinated with words that he decided to consider a literary career. He was one of a significant group of southern writers who began, in the 20's and 30's, to translate southern history and culture into a body of notable literary works.

Heyward's first novel, *Porgy*, was considered his greatest. *Porgy* was loosely based on a real character, a black cripple known as "Goat Sammy." At first, his character was call "Pogo;" his setting included Cabbage Row and Catfish Row. He incorporated the Gullah* dialect into the novel, taking great pains to spell this language so it would sound exactly as he had heard it spoken. Heyward began writing the story in the Spring of 1924 and had completed its first draft by the Fall of that year. In November, the central character's name was changed to *Porgy*, and thus generated the title of the work. *Porgy* was published in 1925 and was an immediate success.

After *Porgy*, Heyward wrote a number of other novels, among them *Angel*, *Mamba's Daughters*, and *Star Spangled Virgin*. He and his wife Dorothy dramatized *Mamba's Daughters* for Broadway in 1939. Heyward died in 1940.

Background of the Opera

Gershwin first conceived the idea of an opera based on *Porgy* in 1926, when he read the short novel of that name by DuBose Heyward. Heyward was a native of Charleston, SC., and one of a significant group of southern writers who began, in the 20's and 30's, to translate southern history and culture into a body of notable literary works. *Porgy* was loosely based on a real character, a black cripple known as "Goat Sammy."

The composer corresponded with Heyward soon after reading the book. Heyward was enthusiastic, and the two exchanged numerous letters without actually starting to work on the musical adaptation. Meanwhile, the author and his wife Dorothy made a play version which had an extremely successful run in 1927-28. Gershwin's work on the opera was finally begun in 1934, after a "Porgy" project with Al Jolson and Jerome Kern was considered and abandoned. During the composition he spent several weeks with the Heywards on an island near Charleston, where he observed at close hand the language and customs of the blacks he was to portray musically in the opera. Both scenes in Serena's house are based on the singing he heard at actual prayer meetings of the island's inhabitants.

The opera was first produced by the Theatre Guild in 1935, with direction by Rouben Mamoulian and conducted by Alexander Smallens. Porgy was sung by Todd Duncan, a teacher at Howard University, and Bess by Anne Brown. Its initial run was not strikingly successful (124 performances), but subsequent tours and revivals made it clear that *Porgy and Bess* had won a place in the repertory as important and unique as its composer's place in American musical history.

The Principal Characters

Porgy, a crippled beggar. Bass-baritone

Bess, a young woman with a reputation for drinking and promiscuity. Soprano

Crown, a dockworker; he is strong, violent, and a heavy drinker. Bess lives with him at first. Baritone

Sporting Life, a dealer of liquor and drugs. Tenor

Jake, a fisherman. Baritone

Clara, his wife. Soprano

Robbins, another fisherman. Tenor

Serena, his wife. Soprano

Other residents of 'Catfish Row': fishermen, children, vendors, visiting white men, etc.

Place: Charleston, South Carolina

Time: The early 1930's

The Story of Porgy and Bess

Act One:

The first scene is set in “Catfish Row,” a black slum in Charleston. It is a typical Saturday night: someone is at a piano playing blues, while a few people dance; Clara is singing a lullaby to her baby (“Summertime”); and the men are playing a crap game (although some of the women disapprove).

Porgy comes in on his little makeshift cart, drawn by a goat, and joins the game. Someone sees Crown coming, and Porgy asks whether Bess is with him. The men tease Porgy for being “soft” on Bess, but he says he’s not soft on any woman: when God makes a man crippled, he means for him to be lonely.

Crown and Bess enter. He is drunk and belligerent, and immediately buys more whiskey from Sporting Life. Bess drinks too, which disgusts the other women (one calls her a “liquor guzzlin’ slut”). Crown then joins the game, but when Robbins wins a throw Crown attacks him savagely with a cotton hook, and kills him. He is too drunk to run away until Bess tells him the police will be coming. At that word everyone goes off to hide. Crown tells Bess he will be coming back when the fuss dies down—and that he expects her to wait for him.

Bess is distraught. She begs Sporting Life for some “happy dust” (cocaine). No one will take her in to hide from the police, because she is known to be Crown’s woman. She tries to flee, but hears a police whistle and turns back—to see one door open to her: it is Porgy’s room, and she goes inside.

Scene two is in the room of Serena, the dead man’s wife. Robbins’ body is laid out on the bed, with a saucer on his chest. The mourners put in money to pay for his burial, as they sing a spiritual.

Suddenly a detective and two policemen interrupt the singing. The detective brusquely advises Serena that the body will be picked up and given to medical students if she doesn’t have it buried within a day. Then he randomly accuses an old man of the murder, and drags him off to be locked up as a material witness when he admits he saw Crown kill Robbins. Serena, meanwhile is overcome with grief (“My Man’s Gone Now”).

The undertaker comes and agrees to bury Robbins rather than let his body be dissected, even though there is too little (\$15.00) in the plate.

Act Two:

Scene one takes place on Catfish Row, a month later. Jake and the other fishermen are singing and mending their nets. Bess is now living with Porgy, who

happily sings, “I Got Plenty O’Nuttin”. Frazier, a swindler “lawyer”, shows up to sell Bess a “divorce” from Crown. It turns out that she was never married, but instead of making things simpler this apparently requires “expert” legal help that will cost Porgy another fifty cents: it isn’t easy to get a woman divorced when she’s not married!

A white man then enters and asks for Porgy. Fearing that Porgy is in some sort of trouble, everyone pretends not to know him. But when it becomes clear that the man means no harm, they produce their friend. The white man has come to explain that he posted bond for Peter (the old man who was dragged off by the detective), because “his folks used to belong to my family.”

Everyone is pleased, but suddenly Porgy sees an evil omen: a buzzard is flying overhead, and if it lights on a house it will bring bad luck. In the “Buzzard Song” the inhabitants of Catfish Row pray for the creature to pass them by.

After the song, everyone goes off to get ready for a big picnic on nearby Kittiwah Island. Sporting Life tries to sell Bess more cocaine, but she rejects it and Porgy warns him to keep away from her. Porgy and Bess then sing their great duet “Bess, You Is My Woman Now.”

The crowd comes back, dressed up in their fanciest clothes for the picnic. They urge Bess to hurry and get ready, but she wants to stay with Porgy. He doesn’t want her to have to miss the picnic just because he’s crippled, and so at his suggestion she decides to go along.

The next scene is on the island. The picnic is drawing to a close: everyone is full, many are drunk. Sporting Life entertains the crowd with an irreverent song about some unlikely Bible stories (“It Ain’t Necessarily So”).

The boat whistle is heard, but as all start to leave Crown appears – he has been hiding out in the thicket on Kittiwah – and pulls Bess aside. She begs him to let her go, telling him about Porgy. Crown laughs, and forces Bess to kiss him. She struggles, but her resistance weakens. Crown pushes her down into the thicket as the curtain falls.

Scene three is back on Catfish Row a week later. Bess has returned from the island feverish and delirious, and has not recognized anyone since. Serena prays for her, and a little later, as some vendors come hawking their wares, Porgy hears Bess call his name.

He tells her that he knows she has been with Crown again, and she begs him to protect her when Crown comes back for her: she cannot trust herself to resist him. Porgy promises, and tells her not to worry.

Suddenly the waterfront’s most dreaded sound is heard; the hurricane bell. Everyone is struck with terror as the storm gathers. Clara falls down fainting – her husband Jake is out at sea in the storm.

The fourth scene takes place in Serena's room, while the storm rages outside. Inside, prayers and a spiritual are sung. There is a knock at the door, and Crown himself bursts into the room. He orders Bess to come with him. She refuses, and Porgy tries to move between her and Crown, who knocks him down to the floor. Crown mocks the frightened, praying women with a song about red-headed girls. Suddenly, Clara screams. She has seen her husband's boat upside down in the water. Thrusting her baby into Bess's arms, she runs hysterically out into the storm. "Ain't there no man here?" asks Bess, "won't somebody go to Clara?" Crown mocks Porgy for his lameness: "Yeah, where is a man? Porgy, what you sittin' dere for?" He goes out to rescue Clara, but warns Bess he will be back for her.

Act Three:

Scene one, again on Catfish Row, begins with a chorus of mourning for Clara, Jake, and Crown, all presumed to have been killed in the storm. Sporting Life chuckles at the mourners, and suggests to Maria that Bess's "two mens" might be a source of trouble. He leaves, and Crown is seen sneaking on to the empty stage. He crawls stealthily towards Porgy's door—but as he passes under the window a hand reaches out and plunges a knife in Crown's back. Porgy pulls out the knife, grasps Crown by the neck, and strangles him. When he is dead, Porgy throws his body as far as he can from the window.

The next morning (scene two) a white coroner and detective come to investigate the murder. They question Serena (because the dead man had killed her husband), but she pretends to have been sick in bed for three days. It is decided that Porgy will have to go to the morgue to identify Crown's body, and he becomes hysterical because of his belief in the old superstition that a victim's wound will bleed when his killer looks at him. As soon as Porgy is dragged away, Sporting Life tells Bess the court will lock him up – "not for long – maybe one year, maybe two," and gives her some dope. She resists him contemptuously, but then suddenly yields and takes it. Sporting Life urges her to go with him to New York ("There's A Boat That's Leavin' Soon For New Yawk"), and when she refuses a second sniff of dope he leaves it on her doorstep, confident that she will come back for it and that he has won.

The final scene takes place one week later. Porgy, who refused to identify Crown, has been in jail for contempt of court. With money he won in crap games he has bought presents for several friends – and for Bess. Everyone is awkward and embarrassed, because Bess has gone to New York with Sporting Life. When they finally manage to tell Porgy this, he calls for his goat and asks where New York is. Against the urging of all his friends, he prepares to set off "way up north pas' de custom house," and sings a spiritual, "O Lawd, I'm On My Way," as the curtain falls.

The Music of Porgy and Bess

For George Gershwin, *Porgy and Bess* was his masterwork. A popular songwriter and composer of Broadway revues and musicals, he nourished a long held desire to write an opera. To that end he devoted years to preparation and technical study. The opera is infused with songs of every conceivable variety. Gershwin's boundless imagination created unforgettable songs for *Porgy and Bess* whose melodies can easily stand alone outside the dramatic setting of the opera. Well known as a jazz composer, he drew his inspiration from music that developed from the African-American experience. He termed a "folk opera" reflecting the opera's connection with the musical heritage of this ethnic group. To understand the folk stream of African-American music one must examine spirituals, work songs, social songs, hymns, blues, and gospel. Gershwin drew upon these forms; writing original pieces for *Porgy and Bess*.

The opera begins with a driving, energetic introduction which sets a mood of vitality. The strings and xylophone play a bright, fast-paced figure with offbeat accents. In contrast, the horns introduce a dramatic yet simple rhythmic melody that is harsh and hard-edged like the life in Catfish Row. This melody grows louder and harsher as it is repeated, foreshadowing the events to come. The music quiets to introduce the lullaby, "Summertime," that Clara sings to her baby. This song has a beautiful melody with a languid rhythm that reflects the slower pace of life during the hot season. Attention shifts to the men playing with dice, conversing through recitative. Strains of the "Summertime" theme are heard again interwoven with the men's comments.

A contrasting "lullaby" follows as the baby's father, Jake, gives the infant advice about women, "A Woman is a Sometime Thing." Porgy's entrance is also accompanied by a recurring theme associated with him.

The community of Catfish Row is a main focus of the opera and its residents are on stage most of the time. Gershwin establishes the identity of the community through communal songs, such as spirituals. He did not make use of existing spirituals, but wrote original pieces. The first spiritual, "Gone, gone, gone," opens the second scene of the first act after the death of Robbins at the hand of Crown. Various characters act as leader and the group responds with the refrain during a wake for Robbins. The arrival of the police interrupts the singing. The police are treated respectfully but with distrust. Gershwin gives the police straight dialogue to ask questions and bully the residents while the people of Catfish Row respond with accompanied recitative. The police are clearly outsiders. The wake continues with Robbins' wife Serena singing a dramatic solo lament, "My Man's Gone Now," that takes her voice to its upper range as the song ends with a cadenza-like finish. The wake concludes with another spiritual lead by Bess, "Leavin' For the Promise' Lan'," that sets a more lively, optimistic tone as the scene is brought to an end.

The next scene begins with another song from the folk genre, a work song, "It'll Take a Long Pull to Get There," sung by Jake and the fisherman. The work song filled a

particular need in the community, just as the spiritual did. This work song follows a refrain/chorus format. Porgy appears, singing a banjo and minstrel song that reflects his happiness with Bess. Strings are plucked, imitating the banjo, while the clarinet adds a blues sound in the song, "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'." Porgy's bright and cheerful outlook expresses his satisfaction with the good and simple life. A chorus of neighbors joins in as he sings another verse. The love Porgy and Bess feel for one another is emphatically stated in their beautiful duet, "Bess, You is my Woman Now." Gershwin uses the melody of this duet as a recurring theme.

The highlight of the festive Kittiwah Island picnic is the song, "It Ain't Necessarily So," sung by Sportin' Life with a chorus of revelers. In this reinterpretation of Bible stories, Sportin' Life entertains the group and engages them in an imitation of "scat" singing, a form of vocal jazz improvisation, in the chorus, "Wa-doo (Wa-doo), Zim bam boodle-oo (Zim bam boodle-oo), Hoodel ah da wad a-Scatty wah." When the picnic is over, Bess sees Crown, who has been hiding out on Kittaway Island. He urges her to stay with him. This is the moment of truth for Bess. Gershwin handles it with recitative that rises over a chordal background before Bess sings the opera's most conflicted song, "What You Want Wid Bess?" Bess and Crown join in a somewhat discordant duet that is more like a parallel singing before Bess succumbs completely.

When Bess returns to Porgy, she begs him to protect her from Crown in the song, "I Loves You Porgy." This is the point where Porgy decides he must kill Crown to prevent him from taking Bess away. The hurricane scene follows, with its storm sounds in the orchestra and a vocal return to the spiritual. Crown arrives seeking refuge from the storm. He stops the spiritual singing and substitutes the song, "A Red-Headed Woman." As Crown leaves, the individual prayers are resumed, all sung simultaneously creating dissonance.

After the hurricane the community mourns for Clara and Jake, who were lost in the storm, with a plaintive spiritual, "Clara, Clara." Bess is singing the "Summertime" lullaby to Clara's baby as Crown returns to take her away. To a furious orchestral accompaniment Porgy ambushes Crown and kills him as they struggle. As he triumphantly tells Bess that he is her man now, the Porgy theme trumpets forth in the orchestra. The authorities arrive and once again they have only spoken dialogue with no underlying orchestral music. As they take Porgy away to identify Crown's body, Sportin' Life begins to undermine Bess' confidence with the song, "There's a Boat That's Leavin' Soon for New York." He leaves her with a package of "happy dust" to complete her seduction and capitulation.

To the orchestral sound of Porgy's theme, Porgy is welcomed back to Catfish Row. As he looks for Bess, the music of "Bess, You is My Woman Now" is heard in the orchestra. When he realizes that she is gone he sings the anguished, "Oh, Bess, Oh, Where's my Bess." Porgy feels a resurgence of hope when he is told that she's not dead, but gone to New York with Sportin' Life. He resolves to go to New York to find her and sings, "Oh Lawd, I'm on my Way," as starts on his journey. The orchestra concludes with the Porgy theme and the melody from "Bess, You is my Woman, Now."

Presenting the Music

Recorded Excerpts

After each recorded excerpt, solicit general reactions. How does the music of *Porgy* compare with other operatic music to which the students have been exposed? How is the singing itself similar, and how different?

Additional questions for specific excerpts follow:

Musical Excerpt #1 Summertime (Act I, Scene One)

If you did not know the words, would you guess this song was a lullaby? How? (Slow, regular alternation of chords in accompaniment; soft vocal dynamic; soothing instrumentation –not brassy or percussive; gentle, leisurely melody –no wide leaps)

Musical Excerpt #2 Crap Game and Murder (Act I, Scene One)

(Begin at Crown’s line “Oh, no, you don’t; play until “Jesus, he’s killed him!”) How would you describe the music? Does it seem to be more concerned with melodies or with words? What is the orchestra doing? (Point out examples in which it mirrors the emotions of the character who is singing).

Musical Excerpt #3 “Gone, Gone” Chorus and Collection of Burial Money (Act I, Scene 2)

(Play from beginning of scene through the detective’s entrance). What kind of folk music provides the basis for this scene? (spiritual)

Musical Excerpt #4 “I Got Plenty O’Nuttin” (Act II, Scene One)

If you did not understand the words, how would you know the singer was happy? (Brisk, major-key melody; crisp accompaniment; bright tone of singer’s voice).

Musical Excerpt #5 “It Ain’t Necessatily So” (Act II, Scene Two)

Does anyone recognize the kind of poem on which the rhymes are based? (Limerick)

Musical Excerpt #6 “What You Want Wid Bess?” (Act II, Scene Two)

(Play through end of scene). How does the music express Bess’s unhappiness and anxiety? Crown’s violence?

Vocabulary

Supertitles	Coloratura (coh-la-rah-TOO-rah)
Opera	Opera Buffa (BOO-fah)
Libretto	Patter
Script	Dramma Giocosa (joe-COH-zah)
Ensemble	Overture
Score	Forte (FORE-tay)
Composer	Piano (pee-YAH-no)
Soprano	Allegro (ah-LAY-groh)
Mezzo-soprano	Finale (fee-NAH-lay)
Tenor	Tragedy
Baritone	Comedy
Bass	Opera Seria (SAIR-ee-ah)
Conductor	Recitativo (reh-chee-tah-TEE-voh)
Director	Secco (SHE-coh)
Design team	Accompagnato (ah-comb-pahn-YAH-toh)
Choreographer	Stromentato (stroh-men-TAH-toh)

Topics for Discussion

Both “opera” and “musical comedy” refer to theatrical works with singers and orchestra. In America there is a strong distinction between the two, but many opera houses in Germany (for instance) include American musicals (such as “West Side Story”) in their repertory.

1. What are the differences and similarities between opera and musical comedy? Look up dictionary definitions of the two terms. Do these seem to describe adequately the operas and/or musicals with which the students may be familiar? (For example, *Webster’s New World Dictionary* defines musical comedy as “...consisting of musical numbers, dances, and humorous or satirical skits, centered upon some slight plot.” But many musicals have very serious and coherent plots. Ask students to name some of these musicals.) Some similarities and differences which might be discussed are:
 - Dialogue. Most (but not all) operas are sung all the way through, while musicals generally have a great deal of purely spoken dialogue.
 - Musical style. Most opera composers write for what is thought of as the “classical” music audience, while musicals have a “popular” style which appeals to some listeners who may not appreciate “classical” music.
 - Presentation. Operas are usually given by companies which put on a few performances each of several different works, while musicals are played continuously by a single company and “run” as long as the box office turns a profit.
2. Gershwin considered *Porgy and Bess* an opera, but until very recently it was usually presented as a musical, and rarely done by opera companies. Why do you think this is so? What are some reasons for considering it a musical? An opera?
3. Discuss the culture of Catfish Row. The characters are modeled after the Gullahs, a community of blacks who live on the sea islands off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. African in origin, their ancestors were brought to this country as slaves. How do the characters maintain their own unique culture in a modernized world?
4. Research the history of the Gullahs with your students, and examine the accuracy of Gershwin and Heyward’s portrayal of the community.
5. Discuss the African influences on their means of religious expression: gospel-like singing, incantation, and dialect. How is this different from what your students may experience?
6. Explain the concept of foreshadowing. Cite examples of this concept.
7. *PORGY & BESS* was written when segregation was still the law in this country. One of the reasons Gershwin did not want to have it given at the Metropolitan

Opera was that African Americans were not allowed to perform there. Now that the opera world is integrated, should PORGY & BESS still be performed by an all-black cast? Why or why not?

8. Some critics think that PORGY & BESS, written by a white composer and white authors, paints an unrealistic picture of southern black culture. Have your students discuss this.
9. Could a story similar to that of *Porgy* occur in other nations or among other minority groups? What features of the opera could be transferred to similar situations elsewhere (example: harassment and arbitrary treatment by the police)? What features are peculiar to southern black culture (examples: specifically African American spirituals; some of the social customs depicted in Act I, scene 1)? What can Porgy expect if he reaches New York? What kinds of experiences might he have there? Do you think *Porgy* could be successfully translated into a foreign language? What would be some of the drawbacks of a translation?

Discography

- EMI Classics: Rattle, conducting; Damon Evans, Cynthia Harmon; London Philharmonic and Glyndebourne Festival Chorus.
- RCA Victor: De Main, conducting; Albert, Alex-Cole, Baines, Barry, Bash, Bazemore, Brice; Houston Grand Opera Orchestra and Chorus.
- SONY Classical; Engle, conducting; Winters, Williams, Mathews, Coleman, Long; J. Rosamond Johnson Chorus. *Original 1951 Studio Recording

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