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On Porgy & Bess

George Gershwin famously described his new opera as a cross between **Carmen** and **Die Meistersinger**. In that one description one can only wince at how that comment must have been received by the classical music pundits. George Gershwin's honesty was perceived as arrogance. How could this son of Russian-Jewish immigrants, this Tin Pan Alley upstart, be writing an opera? The man who claimed to have brought jazz into the concert hall with his **Rhapsody in Blue** and then followed it with an orchestral tone poem, **An American in Paris**, had clearly gone too far -- and it was to be an opera he thought might be likened to two masterpieces, one of which was by Wagner, no less.

Well, the pundits had their revenge on **Porgy and Bess**. The New York Times sent their drama critic *and* their classical music critic to the opening night in 1935. The drama critic liked the music and (yes, you guessed it) and the music critic liked the drama. The opera was neither a commercial nor an artistic success. When it closed after 124 performances, it was more or less considered a failure.

George and his brother and lyricist, Ira, moved from New York to Hollywood in order to repair their fortunes. The Broadway community felt he had betrayed them. The classical music snobs dismissed him out of hand, and the Hollywood savants thought George had lost the common touch. He had, after all, written an opera.

During the next year and a half, George wrote songs and scores for the movies. And they were hits. "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off," "A Foggy Day in London Town," "They Can't Take That Away from Me," "They All Laughed," "Nice Work if you can Get It," and "Our Love is Here to Stay."

There were Hollywood parties, dates with Kitty Carlisle, tennis games and composition lessons with Arnold Schoenberg. And then there was the loneliness and the longing to return to New York. And there were those headaches and his perception of a strange smell of burning rubber. No one knew what that meant until it was too late.

George Gershwin was rushed to Cedars of Lebanon Hospital. The cystic tumor was growing so fast in his brain that an emergency operation was performed before America's leading brain surgeon could arrive from Johns Hopkins. At 10:35 AM, July 11, 1937, with his brother at his side, George Gershwin died. He was 38 years old.

Songs, duets and ensembles from **Porgy and Bess** were performed at the Hollywood Bowl at a memorial concert, broadcast live to the United States. Lily Pons, who sang a fairly unintelligible "Summer Time", joined members of the original cast, conducted by Alexander Steinert, the original rehearsal pianist, vocal coach and a man "who conducted 84 performances of the original," as the announcer told the radio audience.

But what was to become of the failed opera, some of whose "songs" were becoming hits? The answer to that question is one of the most complicated sagas in the history of Music Theater.

In 1941, the visionary and indomitable producer, Cheryl Crawford, produced a two-act musical based on the opera. The spoken lines from the original play **Porgy** replaced the sung text, and most of the hits songs and duets were presented as if **Porgy and Bess** were indeed a Broadway show. And it was a hit.

From that point on, the controversy raged: Is **Porgy and Bess** an opera or a musical? Is it classical? Is it pop? Is it jazz?

Whatever it was, everyone knew the hit songs. The State Department sponsored a long-running tour to Europe. Jazz stars recorded it. Otto Preminger, of all people, directed a movie version of it, filmed in 70mm and it starred the greatest black actors of the time: Dorothy Dandridge, Sidney Poitier, Brock Peters, Sammy Davis, Jr. and Pearl Bailey.

And then Ira spoke up for the integrity of his brother's one and only opera. A full score was assembled and published and a gigantic opera, as long as **Die Meistersinger**, emerged in the late 1970s on the stage of the Houston Grand Opera and in a number of recordings. The world was dazzled and almost numbed with the magnitude of the work. And yes, it was kind of like **Carmen**, too, with its passionate underbelly and its tunefulness. And, like **Carmen**, it was definitely not a musical. (Ironic, of course, that Oscar Hammerstein II went on to turn **Carmen** into the musical, **Carmen Jones**, in 1943, and casting the show with African-Americans.) What was so extraordinary was the concept: everyone who lives in Catfish Row sings everything except when this African-American community is interrupted by white men. These outsiders can only speak. They have no soul. *They* are the aliens. Once they leave the stage, the singing continues. This idea – making sung words the exclusive language of the citizens of Catfish Row - in and of itself made the Broadway musical version, with its spoken text, a fundamentally flawed compromise.

As it turned out, however, those complete performances of the opera, while impressive, were challenging to audiences and were extraordinarily expensive. In reality, few opera companies performed all the music to **Porgy and Bess** and made somewhat random cuts. That's when the last part of the puzzle was found.

The musicologist, Charles Hamm, wrote an article in the Journal of the American Musicological Society stating that the so-called complete score was actually a working score from which Gershwin himself had made extensive cuts and alterations during rehearsals in 1935. Those adjustments could be found in the conductor's score, the vocal scores of the original cast, the prompter's book, and the original orchestral parts. These changes were never copied into a master score.

The complete score was never intended for performance, but had been used by Gershwin for rehearsal purposes. All one needed to do was compare these sources, and one could reconstruct the version approved and supervised by George Gershwin. That version, restored in 2006, was recorded by Decca, with the Nashville Symphony and this writer as its conductor and editor.

Is that what you will hear in Washington? Well, yes and no. The amazing thing about **Porgy and Bess** is that its heart and soul triumph in every version I have ever heard. Like Cheryl Crawford's version, Francesca Zambella's **Porgy** is presented in two acts, not three. That is the biggest departure from Gershwin's concept. The inner cuts and transitions are, in fact, mostly what George and Ira produced in 1935. Since this production pre-dates the restoration, there is a bit more here and a bit less there, though many musical changes have been made for this series of performances based on the newly restored performing version.

Without question, however, this will be the closest to that version anyone has heard on the stage since 1935. (Those who want to hear the 1935 performing edition, might want to search out the Decca two-disk recording with the Nashville Symphony.)

As important as the actual musical notes are, it is the performance indications in the conductor's score and the orchestral parts that are an equal partner in what you will hear. We can know how every tempo change was achieved -- when the conductor was beating in four or two, when he slowed down or made a slight break, or *luffpans*. Will it sound different? Yes, sometimes. For those who are familiar with the score, the very opening will seem slower. It is clear from Gershwin's metronome markings and from the articulations in the orchestral parts that he intended the opening to be moderately fast (marked "*Risoluto e Ben Marcato*" in the composer's hand), exposing its inner syncopation and then accelerating. "Summertime" is faster than we are accustomed. It is not a sad song, after all, and "A Woman is a Sometime Thing" is slower. In fact, these two "lullabies" by the mother and the father of their nameless child, are at the *same metronome marking*. In other words, Gershwin wanted to link the daddy and the mommy to each other by the speed of their music, even if

their words and styles are quite (humorously) different. We are blessed to have a few recordings of Gershwin conducting readings with the orchestra and the original cast of his new score and these recordings support what is in the archival orchestral parts.

Restoring **Porgy and Bess**, with the help of Charles Hamm and Wayne Shirley, was one of the great joys and honors in my life. I so look forward to returning to the Kennedy Center Opera House, where I was Music Director of the Washington Opera as well as Consultant for Music Theater under Roger Stevens, and bringing to it some small illumination to a masterpiece that now stands in the company of **Die Meistersinger** and **Carmen** in the repertory of opera houses. The influence of this music can be felt in Benjamin Britten's **Peter Grimes**, Kurt Weill's **Street Scene** and Leonard Bernstein's **West Side Story** and **Mass**. Gershwin proved that American vernacular music-- our national heritage of black song and dance forms -- was malleable enough to become an opera, and powerful enough to retain its essence as songs and dances at the same time. Perhaps that explains why so many versions of this material manage to retain the composer's genius as well as the magnificence of our essential American utterance -- one that emerged from the tragic history of slavery in our country and the music that flowered from it. If there is any better example of the power of art to transform history into a living continuity of hope and aspiration, I do not know of it.

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