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Gwynne Kuhner Brown

Problems of Race and Genre
in the Critical Reception of *Porgy and Bess*

Gwynne Kuhner Brown

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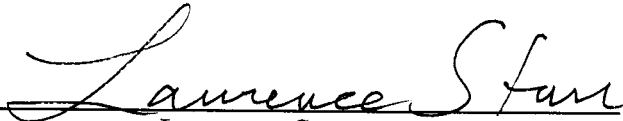
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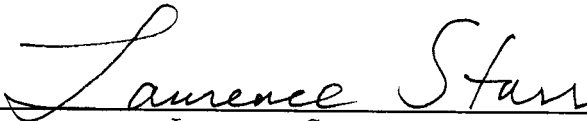
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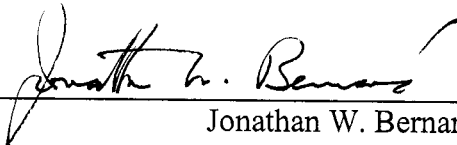


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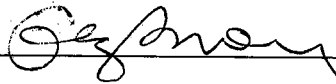


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Abstract

Problems of Race and Genre in the Critical Reception of *Porgy and Bess*

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George Gershwin's desire to create a uniquely American opera led him to compose *Porgy and Bess*, a stylistically heterogeneous work whose controversial racial and musical aspects are both intrinsic and interrelated. His purpose was not to create a work that would accurately depict African American culture, but to draw on African American culture and performers because they could encompass what he saw as being most distinctive about the national character: its variety. This dissertation explores the critical reception of *Porgy and Bess*, taking note of the tendency of reviewers to fault its composer for stylistic inconsistency and racial and cultural inauthenticity, as though these resulted from incompetence and ignorance rather than from conscious decisions by Gershwin.

The first chapter of the dissertation is concerned with the artistic and nationalistic goals that Gershwin articulated in his writings, and how he set about achieving them with *Porgy and Bess*. The second chapter provides an overview of the American production history of the work, and examines the interrelationships among the composer's reputation, the ways in which the score has been modified over the years, and the critical reception of various productions. The third chapter explores Gershwin's attitude and approach to African American culture, and takes a close look

at ambivalent black critical responses to *Porgy and Bess*. The fourth and final chapter argues that the opera was created as an interracial collaboration, and investigates the indispensable role that African American performers have played and continue to play in shaping the work and how it is understood.

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DEDICATION

For Jim—

it took a long pull to get here.

And for my mother,

Dr. Arlene Kuhner.

Chapter 1: Introduction

I don't think there has been such an inspired melodist on this earth since Tchaikovsky, if you want to know what I really feel. . . . But if you want to speak of a *composer*, that's another matter.

Leonard Bernstein¹

Many musicians do not consider George Gershwin a serious composer. But they should understand that, serious or not, he is a composer—that is, a man who lives in music and expresses everything, serious or not, sound or superficial, by means of music, because it is his native language.

Arnold Schoenberg²

George Gershwin was one of the greatest songwriters America has ever produced. From “I Got Rhythm” to “They Can’t Take That Away From Me,” his songs—often with lyrics by his older brother, Ira—are a permanent part of our national musical heritage. Few would question his high place among the luminaries of American songwriting’s golden age.

His position as a great American composer, on the other hand, is less firmly established. Few critics have doubted Gershwin’s level of inspiration or talent, but many have been dubious that he was *more* than simply inspired and talented, that he was also intelligent and thoughtful. Underlying a good deal of Gershwin reception is the assumption that he was more or less an *unthinking* conduit for a God-given melodic gift. No one came closer to stating this outright than Virgil Thomson in 1941:

Gershwin’s lack of any intellectual orientation, even the most elementary, toward musical style and his positive ignorance about everything that makes

¹Leonard Bernstein, “Why Don’t You Run Upstairs and Write a Nice Gershwin Tune?” in *The Joy of Music* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978); reprinted in *The George Gershwin Reader*, ed. Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 297.

²Arnold Schoenberg, “George Gershwin,” in *George Gershwin*, ed. Merle Armitage (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1938), 97; reprinted in *Gershwin Reader*, 273.

opera opera seem only to have thrown the more into relief his ability to write beautiful and expressive melody and his childlike sincerity. . . . He didn't know much about musical aesthetics and he couldn't orchestrate for shucks; but his strength was as the strength of ten because his musical heart was really pure.³

The critical debate over whether Gershwin's "serious" compositions had more than catchy tunes and sincerity going for them began in 1924 with his first successful concert piece, *Rhapsody in Blue*, and continued throughout his lifetime and beyond.⁴ Even today some critics continue casually to malign his competence, though they may grant him high marks for talent and inspiration.⁵ Some of this skepticism may be attributed to Gershwin's working-class background, lack of formal education, and proclivities for sports and socializing—none of which resembles the stereotypical image, at least in America, of "real" composers as somber, well-bred highbrows.⁶

Less superficially, Gershwin's approach to composition itself is a root cause for the mixed reception his works have received. He was fundamentally an inclusive composer, both in terms of the broad range of styles upon which he drew, and in terms of the audience to which he wanted his works to appeal. In moving from

³Virgil Thomson, "Porgy in Maplewood," *New York Herald Tribune*, 19 March 1941; reprinted in Thomson, *The Musical Scene* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 167-69.

⁴For example: "The 'Rhapsody in Blue' and 'An American in Paris,' junk music though those scores may be, have a certain brashness and *joie de vivre*." Harold Schonberg, "A Minority Report on 'Porgy,'" *New York Times*, 17 October 1976.

⁵A wave of impending major publications on Gershwin's life and music by noted musicologists suggests that his reputation is in the process of being rehabilitated. Howard Pollack's *George Gershwin: His Life and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) will be released just as this dissertation reaches completion; Larry Starr and Richard Crawford are also at work on books scheduled to be published in the near future.

⁶David Schiff addresses this American phenomenon: "Music was surprisingly democratic in Europe—a career open to talent and not limited by class. Many European composers, such as Haydn, Dvorák, Mahler, and Schoenberg himself, came from humble origins, whereas in America the myth persisted that artists had to be young men of means and leisure." "Misunderstanding Gershwin," *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1998, 101.

Broadway to the concert hall, he did not jettison the syncopated rhythms, jazzy harmonies, or appealing tunefulness that had made him a popular success in the former venue, nor did he assume a self-consciously abstract, dissonant, or formalistic style in order to impress critics in the latter one.⁷ Many critics in Gershwin's time and since have attributed his disinclination to differentiate more clearly between the two worlds to a lack of training, taste, or intellectual heft. Lawrence Starr eloquently summarizes this tendency:

One's first impression might well be that Gershwin's music is a somewhat haphazard combination of amiable elements that do not quite coalesce to form a convincing whole. This can happen because of the common and often unconscious prejudice in favor of traditional, essentially European, conceptions of stylistic unity, and against that interest in heterogeneity which was one of Gershwin's characteristics as an artist and which links him strongly to major lines of development in specifically American music, arts, and aesthetic thought.⁸

The reception of Gershwin's art music has been rocky in part because critics have frequently failed to consider the possibility that the composer intentionally embraced stylistic heterogeneity as part of a deliberately inclusive, American style.

Nowhere has this weakness been more evident than in the reception of *Porgy and Bess*, Gershwin's most ambitious and controversial work, with a libretto by DuBose Heyward and additional lyrics by Ira Gershwin. Its score has been criticized as stylistically incoherent and inconsistently effective, and its treatment of African

⁷For more on this point, see Richard Crawford, "Gershwin's Reputation: A Note on *Porgy and Bess*," *Musical Quarterly* 65/2 (April 1979): 257-64; Lawrence Starr, "Gershwin's 'Bess, You Is My Woman Now': The Sophistication and Subtlety of a Great Tune," *Musical Quarterly* 72/4 (1986): 429-48. It should be noted that Gershwin moved *between* Broadway and the concert hall throughout most of his career, not permanently from one to the other.

⁸Starr, "Gershwin's 'Bess,'" 430.

American culture has been called stereotypical, exploitative, and inauthentic. The myriad ways in which it has confounded critics' expectations are all traceable to Gershwin's conscious intention of forging a uniquely American opera. Yet, because he has so widely been viewed as an intuitive creator rather than an intentional one, critics have too seldom realized that the opera's failure to live up to their expectations reflected the inaptness of those expectations, not the composer's inability to fulfill them.

Critics' failure to take Gershwin's intentions into account has profoundly shaped the controversies sparked by *Porgy and Bess* since 1935. It has also prevented them from seeing the connection between the work's racial content and its unconventional approach to the operatic genre. Those deeply concerned with race have seldom been equally intent on how the work should be generically categorized, and vice versa. The most common explicit intersection between the two occurs when a critic argues that the merits of the score do, or do not, outweigh the offensiveness of the work's racial content—an argument that does not typically make a meaningful connection between the musical and racial aspects of the work, but only prioritizes one over the other.⁹

The separateness of the racial and generic themes in *Porgy and Bess* reception is reflected in Richard Crawford's perceptive article, "It Ain't Necessarily Soul: Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* as a Symbol."¹⁰ Of the four symbols he identifies running

⁹In one example of many, Martin Gottfried writes in the *New York Post*, "There's no use pretending that 'Porgy and Bess' isn't racially offensive," but concludes that what really matters is that the opera's music is "overwhelming." "A Promise Kept," *New York Post*, 9 October 1976.

¹⁰Richard Crawford, "It Ain't Necessarily Soul: Gershwin's 'Porgy and Bess' as a Symbol,"

through *Porgy* criticism, the first (“*Porgy and Bess* as American Opera”) involves genre but not race, and the other three (“*Porgy and Bess* as American Folklore,” “Racial Stereotype,” and “Cultural Exploitation”) are concerned with race but not genre.¹¹

It has not been widely perceived how closely the racial and generic aspects of *Porgy and Bess*—in particular, the ways in which the work confounds a variety of possible expectations about how an opera, or a piece of theatrical art about African Americans, should behave—are connected. Gershwin’s goal of creating a uniquely American opera led him to create a work whose controversial racial and generic aspects are intrinsic and interrelated, as will be discussed shortly. In turn, issues of race and genre are not as separate in the critical reception as they appear on the surface. Reviewers might not explicitly discuss race in a review, but the presence of black spirituals and jazz harmonies in the score still contributes to their conclusions about the work’s genre. Another reviewer may not care about the conventions of opera and whether *Porgy and Bess* follows them, but his or her feelings about the work’s portrayal of African Americans are partially contingent on whether a production is understood as being a prestigious opera or simply an entertaining musical. Tellingly, the years in which the work was most racially controversial are

Yearbook for Inter-American Musical Research 8 (1972): 17-38.

¹¹The “American Folklore” theme, as discussed by Crawford, hints at a connection between race and genre: the parts of *Porgy and Bess* that he quotes Hall Johnson criticizing as ethnically inauthentic, such as “the heavy, involved treatment of . . . thematic material,” are often those that one would expect to find in an opera (p. 28). Crawford does not discuss the inherent tension between folkloric and operatic elements in a “folk opera”—an omission that reflects the absence of this theme from the reception he is summarizing.

also the years in which it was regularly trimmed of its recitatives. Race and genre are not separate concerns in the history of *Porgy and Bess*; in both its genesis and its reception they are tightly linked. This is a fundamental argument of this dissertation.

The remainder of this chapter is concerned with the artistic and nationalistic goals that Gershwin articulated in his writing, and how he set about achieving them with *Porgy and Bess*. It will also discuss previous accounts of the opera's reception, and how this dissertation supplements and deviates from them. The second chapter provides an overview of the American production history of *Porgy and Bess*, and explores the interrelationships among the composer's reputation, the ways in which his score has been modified over the years, and the critical reception of various productions.¹² The third chapter explores Gershwin's attitude and approach to African American culture, and takes a close look at the ambivalent black critical response to *Porgy and Bess*. The fourth and final chapter argues that the opera was created as an interracial collaboration, and investigates the indispensable role that African American performers have played and continue to play in shaping the work and how it is understood.

A host of factors have contributed to critics' evaluations of *Porgy and Bess*, from their prejudices about Gershwin's fitness as a composer to their bitterness over the persistence of racism in much American entertainment. What the composer was

¹²Although I deal primarily with major American productions, I do include the Trevor Nunn-directed production that appeared at the Glyndebourne Festival in 1986, because it was widely covered by the American press, and because it was filmed for television in 1992, appeared on PBS in 1993, and is widely available on video.

actually trying to accomplish has played a surprisingly minor role in how his opera has been judged. An exploration of his intentions, particularly as expressed in his published writings, strongly suggests that a good deal of *Porgy and Bess* criticism has been based on Gershwin's failure to achieve goals that were in fact antithetical to his stated priorities.

Beginning with the *Rhapsody in Blue*, the purpose of Gershwin's serious compositions was, he wrote in 1929, "to express myself, then, to express America. Somewhat vaguely I felt that it would be one and the same thing."¹³ His conception of the America that he wished to express was an unselfconsciously egocentric one, based on his own particular experience of the country. Ever since his early teens, he wrote in a 1926 essay, he had gradually become "acquainted with that which later I was to interpret—the soul of the American people." He went on,

Having been born in New York and grown up among New Yorkers, I have heard the voice of that soul. It spoke to me on the streets, in school, at the theater. . . .

Wherever I went I heard a concourse of sounds. Many of them were not audible to my companions, for I was hearing them in memory. Strains from the latest concert, the cracked tones of a hurdy-gurdy, the wail of a street singer, the obbligato of a broken violin, past or present music—I was hearing within me.

Old music and new music, forgotten melodies and the craze of the moment, bits of opera, Russian folk songs, Spanish ballads, chansons, ragtime ditties combined in a mighty chorus in my inner ear. And through and over it all I heard, faint at first, loud at last, the soul of this great America of ours.¹⁴

Emerging vividly from this description is that Gershwin believed New York

¹³George Gershwin, "Fifty Years of American Music," *American Hebrew and Jewish Messenger*, 22 November 1929; reprinted in *Gershwin Reader*, 117.

¹⁴George Gershwin, "Jazz Is the Voice of the American Soul," *Theatre Magazine*, March 1927; reprinted in *Gershwin in His Time*, 47-48; *Gershwin Reader*, 92-93.

to be a sufficient basis for understanding “the American soul” because of its heterogeneity. This, above all, was how he defined America. This mixed character, represented above as a musical panoply, had emotional and racial aspects as well. This becomes apparent in his reminiscence in 1930 about the creation of his first concert work:

The idea for the *Rhapsody in Blue*, for example, came to me quite suddenly. The vivid panorama of American life swept through my mind—its feverishness, its vulgarity, its welter of love, marriage, and divorce, and its basic solidity in the character of the people. All of the emotional reactions excited by contemplating the American scene, with all its mixture of races, . . . were stuffed into the first outline of the *Rhapsody*.¹⁵

For his music to reflect this somewhat chaotic national character, it would itself have to be a feverish, even vulgar mixture of styles and moods. The word “vulgar” turns up in several of Gershwin’s published essays, and in one of them he takes pains to defuse its negative connotations:

If I were an Asian or a European. . . listening with fresh ear to the American chorus of sounds, I should say that American life is nervous, hurried, syncopated, ever *accelerando*, and slightly vulgar. I should use the word *vulgar* without intent of offense. There is a vulgarity that is newness. It is essential. The Charleston is vulgar. But it has strength, an earthiness, that is an essential part of symphonic sound.¹⁶

Gershwin was not hampered by a fear of being called tasteless. His compositions embraced vulgarity, in the sense that they were deliberately ingratiating, au courant, and accessible to the general public. His writings singing the praises of stylistic

¹⁵George Gershwin, “Making Music,” *New York World Sunday Magazine*, 4 May 1930; reprinted in *Gershwin in His Time: A Biographical Scrapbook, 1919-1937*, ed. Gregory R. Suriano (New York: Gramercy Books, 1998), 76; also reprinted in *Gershwin Reader*, 134. The ellipses in my quotation are found in both of the reprint versions.

¹⁶Gershwin, “Jazz Is the Voice of the American Soul,” in *Gershwin in His Time*, 48-49; *Gershwin Reader*, 93.

inclusiveness, energy, and vulgarity strongly suggest that the presence of these things in his compositions was not a coincidental result of his songwriting background, but a deliberate, artistic and nationalistic choice.

Gershwin believed that the role of the American composer was to combine the disparate aspects of the national life into something distinctive, individual, and new.

He wrote in 1930:

Imitation never gets anyone anywhere. Originality is the only thing that counts. But the originator uses material and ideas that occur around him and pass through him. And out of his experience comes this original creation or work of art, unquestionably influenced by his surroundings.¹⁷

Thus, everything that the composer experiences becomes grist for the creative mill. By drawing his American experiences together into compositions with his unique personal imprint, Gershwin crafted some of the most recognizably American art music ever written, from the *Rhapsody to An American in Paris* to *Porgy and Bess*—music that succeeds, as he intended, in expressing himself just as strongly as it does America. The fact that it tends not to be stylistically homogenous, formally fastidious, or resolutely highbrow results from his deliberate rejection of these as adverse to his goals.

Porgy and Bess has been criticized more than any other of Gershwin's "serious" compositions for being an erratic concatenation of styles and moods. This is partly because it is by far his longest work, which makes its heterogeneity and sprawling structure more noticeable. It is also due to the prestige of the label "opera,"

¹⁷George Gershwin, "The Composer in the Machine Age," in Oliver Saylor, *Revolt in the Arts* (New York: Brentano's, 1930); reprinted in *Gershwin in His Time*, 83; *Gershwin Reader*, 120.

second only to “symphony” in its power to summon forth from critics comparisons to European masterpieces, which they habitually invoke as models of universally applicable standards for the genre. When he set foot inside the operatic arena, Gershwin encountered the most intense critical scrutiny of his career, which led him shortly after *Porgy and Bess*’s New York premiere to write “Rhapsody in Catfish Row” to explain his decisions in regard to the opera.

The essay, published in the *New York Times* on 20 October 1935, revisits the theme of American inclusiveness from Gershwin’s earlier writings, but there is a striking difference. Whereas previously he alluded to race primarily in passing and as an abstraction—the “mixture of races” being part of “the American scene,” for example¹⁸—by 1935 race has become central to his conception of his opera and its Americanness. “Because *Porgy and Bess* deals with Negro life in America,” he writes, “it brings to the operatic form elements that have never before appeared in opera,” elements that enable the work to “run the gamut of American expression” as no previous opera has done.¹⁹

It is noteworthy that Gershwin’s stated goal is not to run the gamut of *Negro* expression, and this is in keeping with his labeling of the opera as an “American Folk Opera” rather than a “Negro Folk Opera” (as numerous critics referred to it, into the 1960s). Rather counterintuitively, he chose a story of an insulated African American community in order to create an opera that would be inclusive, wide-ranging, and

¹⁸George Gershwin, “Making Music,” *New York World Sunday Magazine*, 4 May 1930; reprinted in *Gershwin in His Time*, 76; *Gershwin Reader*, 134.

¹⁹George Gershwin, “Rhapsody in Catfish Row,” *New York Times*, 20 October 1935; reprinted in *Gershwin in His Time*, 112; *Gershwin Reader*, 217-18.

broadly representative of the national character. He explains: “When I chose *Porgy and Bess*, a tale of Charleston Negroes, for a subject, I made sure that it would enable me to write light as well as serious music and that it would enable me to include humor as well as tragedy—in fact, all of the elements of entertainment for the eye as well as the ear, because the Negroes, as a race, have all these qualities inherent in them.”²⁰ His purpose was not to create a work that accurately reflected African American culture, but to draw on African American culture because it could reflect what he saw as most important about the national character: its variety.

This was a fundamental shift from the specifically ethnic and racial focus of *Porgy* as a novel and a play, and it is critical to a central argument of the dissertation, that Gershwin deliberately drew on African American styles, culture, and performers in order to create a new kind of American opera. Because the opera, with this broad nationalistic intent, is so different in this regard from DuBose Heyward’s original conception of the story as a window into an intriguingly dark and foreign world, this dissertation deals with *Porgy and Bess* almost exclusively as George Gershwin’s creation. This is made easier and more logical by the fact that most reviewers of the work were considerably more interested in Gershwin than in Heyward—even when they were not able or inclined to say very much about the music.

Although *Porgy and Bess* was conceived as an “*American Folk Opera*,” not a “*Black Folk Opera*,” the score’s oft-criticized lack of cultural authenticity is not a sign of Gershwin’s superficial understanding of black culture, but a side effect of the

²⁰Ibid.

nationalistic and expressive purpose to which he put it in his opera. He had a lifelong interest in and affinity with African American music, and by 1935 he had experienced a great range of that music, from jazz at Harlem rent parties to church music in Charleston, attending performances ranging from Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake's musical comedy, *Shuffle Along*, to William Grant Still's *Levee Land*. He knew that African American culture was rich and varied; that was exactly why he drew on it in *Porgy and Bess*, and the extent to which the opera's music seems to well up naturally out of Catfish Row is testament to the composer's remarkable grasp of black musical idioms. But even black culture's wide margins were not wide enough, and the moments in the score of music that are not convincingly "authentic" as black music should serve as reminders that the character that Gershwin sought to express was not racial but national.

Authenticity aside, whether he was entitled to help himself to African American culture is another matter. This is not a question that Gershwin addressed in "Rhapsody in Catfish Row," for it was not one that critics—black or white—were asking yet. It would not take them long, however. Virgil Thomson, among the many barbs he aimed at Gershwin in his essay for *Modern Music* in November 1935, included the observation that "folklore subjects recounted by an outsider are only valid as long as the folk in question is unable to speak for itself, which is certainly not true of the American Negro in 1935."²¹ The idea that Gershwin was attempting inappropriately to speak for African Americans in *Porgy and Bess* appears again in

²¹Virgil Thomson, "George Gershwin," *Modern Music* (November 1935); reprinted in *Virgil Thomson: A Reader*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Routledge, 2002), 151.

Charles Schwartz's 1973 biography of Gershwin, and there as in Thomson's essay it seems motivated more by an impulse to disparage the composer than by a sincere desire to see black cultural ownership respected. In any case, there is no evidence that Gershwin intended to "set himself up as musical spokesman for the blacks represented in *Porgy and Bess*," as Schwartz puts it.²² I am not aware of any African American critic having made this accusation; several have seen Gershwin as a thief or an incompetent imitator of black culture, but the idea that he might have been trying to speak for black people does not seem to have occurred to them.

The question of whether *Porgy and Bess* constitutes cultural exploitation sometimes appears in the context of broader discussions of how Jewish popular songwriters and entertainers drew upon African American culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.²³ There has been, to my mind, a disturbing tendency in some scholarship to paint these Jewish artists as shrewd opportunists who turned a profit and advanced in American society by expropriating black culture and mediating it for white audiences. Jeffrey Melnick's recent book, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song*, is an especially vigorous exposition of this theme. While Gershwin may have benefited from the common perception of Jewish artists as having unique access to and affinity for African American culture,

²²Charles Schwartz, *Gershwin: His Life and Music* (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1973), 271.

²³Readings of *Porgy and Bess* as exploitation can be found in Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Rudi Blesh, *Shining Trumpets: A History of Jazz*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1958); and Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Morrow, 1967). Pro-*Porgy* accounts include Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Jack Gottlieb, *Funny, It Doesn't Sound Jewish* (Albany: State University of New York in association with the Library of Congress, 2004).

this does not mean that his success was achieved through deliberate racial manipulation and exploitation, as Melnick insinuates when he writes that “his career relied on an ability to sell Jewishness as a flexible modality—and one particularly suited for absorbing African American music.”²⁴ Chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation deal with the specifics of Gershwin’s respectful and mutually beneficial interactions and collaborations with African Americans prior to and during his creation of *Porgy and Bess*, which I hope will convince readers that Gershwin’s relationship to black culture was not crassly exploitative.²⁵

One of the most important points to consider is that Gershwin’s use of African American musical idioms in *Porgy and Bess* is surprisingly *unmediated*. Given his admiration for *Wozzeck*, and his undoubted desire to silence the critics who had questioned his high-art credentials ever since the *Rhapsody in Blue*, it is notable that Gershwin did not coat his stylistic borrowings with a veneer of modernism, weave them into a seamless Wagnerian fabric, or in some other way ostentatiously demonstrate that he had advanced beyond the plebeian world of discrete, hummable tunes with seemingly simple phrase structures.²⁶ The score is sophisticated and

²⁴Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*, 75.

²⁵Although it is outside of the scope of this dissertation to defend Irving Berlin, Al Jolson, and the other targets of Melnick’s book, I strongly resist his implication that they, like Gershwin, were calculating parasites of black culture. Melnick’s valuable exploration of the complicated racial dynamics in play in the early 20th-century popular music industry is tainted by a tendency to ascribe malevolent cunning to individual Jews who managed to thrive in a society that disadvantaged them somewhat less than it did African Americans.

²⁶Larry Starr and Susan Neimoyer have convincingly demonstrated that Gershwin’s melodies, as early as the *Rhapsody in Blue*, are frequently neither symmetrical nor predictable; the fact that so many of them seem as much “found” as composed, so natural and effortless do they sound, has led many to overlook their formal ingenuity. See Starr, “Musings on ‘Nice Gershwin Tunes,’ Form, and Harmony in the Concert Music of Gershwin,” in *The Gershwin Style: New Looks at the Music of George Gershwin*, ed. Wayne Schneider (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 95-110; Susan Ethel Neimoyer, “*Rhapsody in Blue*: A Culmination of George Gershwin’s Early Musical Education” (Ph.D.

complex, to be sure, but it does not condescend to black vernacular music by continually calling the listener's attention to how it has been transformed into opera.

In "Rhapsody in Catfish Row" Gershwin writes, "When I first began work on the music I decided against the use of original folk material because I wanted the music to be all of one piece. Therefore I wrote my own spirituals and folksongs. But they are still folk music."²⁷ This passage has often been quoted as evidence that Gershwin had a very casual attitude about the definition of folk music, but it has other implications. Among them is that the decision to write "[his] own spirituals and folksongs" was motivated not by a sense that the originals were insufficiently operatic, uninteresting to his intended audience, or in some other way inadequate; he simply wanted the opera to be all his own rather than a patchwork of original and preexisting material. (This is in keeping with his desire not only "to express America," but "to express myself."²⁸)

From some critics' perspectives, the reasons that Gershwin drew upon African American culture and the specific ways in which he did so are largely irrelevant; the important issue is that he drew on a culture that was not his to use, and reaped benefits to which he was not entitled. Harold Cruse provides the clearest and most famous example of this argument, calling *Porgy and Bess* "the most perfect symbol of the Negro creative artist's cultural denial, degradation, exclusion, exploitation and acceptance of white paternalism."²⁹ Such a point of view cannot be refuted if the

diss., University of Washington, 2003).

²⁷Gershwin, "Rhapsody in Catfish Row"; *Gershwin in His Time*, 112; *Gershwin Reader*, 217.

²⁸Gershwin, "Fifty Years of American Music"; *Gershwin Reader*, 117.

²⁹Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 103.

fundamental otherness of Gershwin from African American culture is taken for granted, and it is not my place as a white person to argue that it should not be. I do wish to suggest, however, that Gershwin did not consider himself to be an outsider because he was not black, nor did the African Americans with whom he interacted (whether in New York or on Folly Island) make him feel excluded or marginalized, nor does his use of black musical idioms in his opera indicate that he perceived them to be exotic or distinct from his own musical language. These facts, like Gershwin's intentions, are irrelevant if *Porgy and Bess* is being read as a "perfect symbol" of a racist society, but extremely important if it is being considered as a work of art, and this is how most criticism of the work purports to consider it.

This dissertation attempts to demonstrate the importance of Gershwin's attitudes, intentions, and actions to how *Porgy and Bess* should be understood, and to trace the ways in which these have been overlooked in much critical reception of the work. It also seeks to remedy two crucial omissions from previous accounts of the opera's reception.

First, despite the widely perceived presence of two major areas of controversy, the racial and the musical/generic, there has been little effort to consider how the two might be related. Although the two debates are seldom explicitly connected by reviewers, they are nonetheless intertwined in the work's reception: they have influenced one another in terms of how the opera has been edited, performed, and understood (a subject to which Chapter 2 will return); and they are

literally embodied by cast members who are both African Americans and operatic performers, and whose artistic, professional, and personal decisions profoundly shape how *Porgy and Bess* is received (a topic addressed in Chapter 4).

Second, while everybody knows that *Porgy and Bess* has been the subject of racial controversy, the writings on the subject by African American critics have been summarized selectively and simplistically in most accounts. An examination of dozens of reviews in the black press since 1935 shows that *Porgy and Bess* has evoked wide-ranging and shifting reactions from black critics and their communities; this remarkable variety of responses cannot be satisfactorily covered in a single sentence or page, but accounts of the opera's reception often attempt to do so.³⁰ Chapter 3 will attempt to illuminate the complexity of the African American response.

Efforts to summarize the reception history of *Porgy and Bess* have come in three basic varieties. First, there are the thumbnail sketches of the work's critical fortunes that appear in many performance reviews, beginning with the first major revival in 1941. These tend to claim that the opera was a flop in 1935 because of its generic ambiguity, and beginning in the 1950s they sometimes allude to controversy over its racial content. Such mini-narratives, at least in the context of positive reviews, often paint *Porgy and Bess* as a masterpiece that was originally rejected but is now at last receiving the acclaim it deserves, whether thanks to judicious trimming,

³⁰By "the black press" I mean periodicals that focus on events of concern to, and are explicitly intended to be read by, African Americans. These include newsweeklies such as *The New York Amsterdam News* and *The Afro-American*, and monthly publications such as *Opportunity* and *Ebony*.

loving restoration, excellent performances, or the dawning of a more enlightened age.

For example:

The sad history of *Porgy* is well known: Gershwin's first hope to work the material into something of operatic stature, his later decision to hand it over to Broadway, its failure on Broadway due to its status as an uneasy hybrid, later capitulations that suppressed the "operatic" elements in favor of something more overtly showlike. With all the changes wrought upon *Porgy*, by Gershwin during his lifetime and by others after his death, the essence of the show might never have been realized.

Now, thanks to the Houston Grand Opera Company. . . that essence has been revealed.³¹

It is rather admirable that so many critics have made the effort to put their reviews of *Porgy and Bess* into a historical context. If their summaries lack detail or nuance, or occasionally include misconceptions about how much Gershwin personally allowed to be trimmed from his score or how badly the Theatre Guild production fared with critics, this is not surprising.

Presumably they have gotten much of their information from biographies of Gershwin, the second variety of *Porgy and Bess* reception summary. These tend to emphasize the critical response garnered by the first production, since this was the only one mounted during the composer's lifetime. They also typically accentuate the negative: bad reviews from New York critics, a short run, financial losses.³² It may be that such gloomy accounts accurately reflect Gershwin's own disappointment that his masterpiece was not received with the boundless enthusiasm he himself felt for it, but the Theatre Guild production was actually remarkably successful when viewed in

³¹"A Hit, by George!" *New York Magazine*, 11 October 1976.

³²William G. Hyland's account stands out for the amount of attention he pays to positive reviews. See *George Gershwin: A New Biography* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003), 170-5.

perspective.

First, the reviews were largely positive. Out of a selection of 70 mainstream reviews from 1935-36, fully 49 can be characterized as generally positive, while only eight qualify as truly downbeat.³³ The reviews by Olin Downes and Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times*, often cited as being negative, can more accurately be described as mixed: Atkinson, the theater critic, finds the work enjoyable and moving despite his distaste for the trappings of opera, and music critic Downes finds it inconsistent in style and quality, but describes significant portions of the work as “felicitous,” “effective,” and “excellent.”³⁴ Second, a 124-performance run, while short compared to that of a Gershwin musical hit like *Of Thee I Sing* (441 performances), is remarkably long for an opera, especially a new one. (Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein’s *Four Saints in Three Acts*, by contrast, ran for 48 performances in 1934.) Third, the monetary losses incurred by the production were not due to weak attendance stemming from poor reviews, but to several factors in combination: the expensiveness of the production, what some potential audience members viewed as overpriced tickets, and the wobbly financial situation of the Theatre Guild itself.³⁵ Virtually every Gershwin biography makes this first production

³³This sample consists of reviews from newspapers in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Washington, found in the Gershwin scrapbooks in the Gershwin Collection at the Library of Congress.

³⁴Brooks Atkinson, “‘Porgy and Bess,’ Native Opera, Opens at the Alvin; Dramatic Values of Community Legend Gloriously Transposed in New Form with Fine Regard for Its Verities,” *New York Times*, 11 October 1935; Olin Downes, “‘Porgy and Bess,’ Native Opera, Opens at the Alvin; Exotic Richness of Negro Music and Color of Charleston, S.C., Admirably Conveyed in Score of Catfish Row Tragedy,” *New York Times*, 11 October 1935. Both reprinted in *Gershwin Reader*, 213-17.

³⁵*Variety* reported in 1942 that the Theatre Guild production had been “the only show with colored artists that ever had a \$4.40 top, and it was figured that the scale was too high. Grosses totaled \$24,000 weekly for a time, but when the count dropped under \$20,000 there was an operating loss” Ibee,

seem like a crippling failure on every level, and this was simply not the case.

Whereas most Gershwin biographies end their accounts of *Porgy and Bess* reception in 1936, when the Theatre Guild production closed, the recent books by William G. Hyland and Rodney Greenberg take their accounts up to recent years, when prestigious performances at the Metropolitan Opera and the Glyndebourne Festival in the mid-1980s dramatically validated Gershwin's operatic ambitions. Their chronicles of the work's fortunes in the intervening decades convey, correctly, that it earned popular success as a musical, with its recitatives cut and its scoring dramatically reduced, but that its reputation was damaged by racial controversy. Both authors conclude their discussions poignantly by noting that Gershwin created a tremendous masterwork but did not live to see it vindicated as such. Both also imply that in the face of the opera's now-established artistic and human magnificence, the racial controversy should go away (though neither actually claims that it has yet done so).³⁶

The third, and smallest, category of *Porgy and Bess* reception historiography consists of more substantive approaches to the topic. The most obvious of these is Hollis Alpert's *The Life and Times of "Porgy and Bess": The Story of an American Classic*.³⁷ More than two thirds of the book consists of details about various productions and their reception. It is an entertaining and informative read, and

"Porgy and Bess (Revival)," *Variety*, 28 January 1942. See also Marie Ellen Noonan, "Porgy and Bess and the American Racial Imaginary, 1925-1985" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2002), 132-33.

³⁶Hyland, *George Gershwin*, 170-79; Rodney Greenberg, *George Gershwin* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 193-93.

³⁷Hollis Alpert, *The Life and Times of "Porgy and Bess": The Story of an American Classic* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).

provides an extremely useful overview of the opera's production history. Its failings as scholarship are straightforward. First, Alpert does not provide citations for his sources, making them difficult or impossible to verify. Second, his biases are apparent: above all he is an unabashed fan of Gershwin and his opera, and throughout the book he takes the side of *Porgy and Bess* against its attackers. For example, in his discussion of the controversy over the international touring production of 1952-56, every quoted criticism of the tour (or "diatribe") is quickly followed by a rebuttal.³⁸ Alpert is also somewhat obsequious in his treatment of those who, like Ella Gerber and Sherwin M. Goldman, gave him interviews and materials. I share Alpert's enthusiasm for the opera, but strive to listen more carefully to the various strands of criticism, in order better to understand both the reception and the work itself.

There are two recent dissertations that deal extensively with the critical reception, those of John Andrew Johnson and Marie Ellen Noonan.³⁹ Johnson's three-volume dissertation displays a vast amount of research and contains a good deal of very useful material on virtually every topic related to *Porgy and Bess*, from Gershwin's career prior to the opera to a 1991 *Porgy and Bess* concept album by a grunge band called When People Were Shorter And Lived Near The Water.⁴⁰ Johnson discusses the opera's reception at some length, but a significant omission is an in-depth consideration of the black reception of the work; this lapse becomes clear

³⁸ Alpert, 181-83.

³⁹ John Andrew Johnson, "Gershwin's 'American Folk Opera': The Genesis, Style and Reputation of *Porgy and Bess* (1935)," Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1996; Marie Ellen Noonan, "*Porgy and Bess* and the American Racial Imaginary, 1925-1985," Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2002.

⁴⁰ Johnson, 677-79.

when Johnson writes that Era Bell Thompson's 1959 *Ebony* article, "Why Negroes Don't Like 'Porgy and Bess,'" marked the first time that strong black criticism of the opera had appeared in print.⁴¹

Noonan's dissertation, which discusses the reception of *Porgy* as a novel and a play before looking at the response to several productions of the opera, is generally excellent and perceptive, but she considers *Porgy and Bess* as a historian, not a musicologist. Scholars like Charles Hamm and Larry Starr are not listed in her bibliography, and her concern is chiefly with racial rather than musical issues. She also ends her dissertation rather abruptly with the Houston Grand Opera production, claiming that the return to the opera hall ended the racial controversy over the work—a claim that I will demonstrate to be inaccurate.

The 1972 article by Richard Crawford, "It Ain't Necessarily Soul: Gershwin's 'Porgy and Bess' as a Symbol," is a seminal and important piece of scholarship, one that takes the opera seriously and considers the various strains of racial and generic controversy in a clear and useful way.⁴² It predates the return of *Porgy and Bess* to the opera house; not only does this limit the article's scope, but it means that the author was denied the opportunity to observe that this event had a significant impact on the work's racial reception—something that might have led him to develop his thoughts further about the interrelationship between racial and generic issues.

David Horn's 1996 article, "Who Loves You, Porgy? The Debates

⁴¹Ibid., 568. Era Bell Thompson, "Why Negroes Don't Like 'Porgy and Bess,'" *Ebony*, October 1959, 50-54.

⁴²Richard Crawford, "It Ain't Necessarily Soul: Gershwin's 'Porgy and Bess' as a Symbol," *Yearbook for Inter-American Musical Research* 8 (1972): 17-38.

Surrounding Gershwin's Musical," builds on Crawford's approach admirably, also tracing the racial and musical threads of the opera's reception and their disinclination to connect with one another, but suggesting a site where they could connect: the use of African American musical styles.⁴³ Rather than exploring the presence of such a connection in the reception, Horn suggests that the struggles over the opera might be productively defused if audiences agree to suspend their disbelief and accept that the characters onstage are generating their own music. Ultimately, Horn's brief but very accurate account of the work's reception is meant to reveal a problem that he hopes to solve via a particular (and very intriguing) approach to the musical stage, rather than by any particular insight about the opera itself.

Enchanted Evenings, Geoffrey Block's recent book on Broadway musicals, contains a chapter about *Porgy and Bess* that provides concise and accurate coverage of the opera's reception. It is notable for the absence of the misattributions and misconceptions (particularly about black reception) that bedevil so many other accounts. Block's brief account emphasizes the negative reactions of African American critics to *Porgy and Bess*; in my dissertation I have room to include and discuss positive black reactions as well.⁴⁴

Despite its status as arguably America's best-known and -loved opera, there is an astonishing amount of scholarly work left to be done on *Porgy and Bess*, as well as

⁴³David Horn, "Who Loves You, Porgy? The Debates Surrounding Gershwin's Musical," in *Approaches to the American Musical*, ed. Robert Lawson-Peebles (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996), 109-26.

⁴⁴Geoffrey Block, *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from "Show Boat" to Sondheim* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 64-75.

a mountain of misinformation to be debunked. This may be traced in part to the fact that Gershwin's art music has long been taken for granted as likable, shallow, and straightforward. This situation has slowly begun to change in the last twenty years or so. In particular, Larry Starr and David Schiff have written persuasively and inspiringly about the importance of understanding Gershwin's music on its own terms.⁴⁵ The fact that *Porgy and Bess* does not necessarily conform to lazily applied conventional wisdom about what "good" or "serious" music should be does not mean that it is not good or serious. In this dissertation, I attempt to pay Gershwin, his opera, and those who have responded to it, the respect of close reading and thoughtful consideration.

⁴⁵See Lawrence Starr, "Gershwin's 'Bess, You Is My Woman Now': The Sophistication and Subtlety of a Great Tune," *Musical Quarterly* 72/4 (1986): 429-48; Starr, "Musings on 'Nice Gershwin Tunes,' Form, and Harmony in the Concert Music of Gershwin," in *The Gershwin Style: New Looks at the Music of George Gershwin*, ed. Wayne Schneider (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 95-110; David Schiff, *Gershwin: "Rhapsody in Blue,"* Cambridge Music Handbooks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Schiff, "Misunderstanding Gershwin," *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1998, 100-5.

Chapter 2: From Opera to Musical and Back Again

Gershwin's lack of any intellectual orientation, even the most elementary, toward musical style and his positive ignorance about everything that makes opera seem only to have thrown the more into relief his ability to write beautiful and expressive melody and his childlike sincerity.

Virgil Thomson¹

Gershwin did not get down on his knees before the notion of "opera" but stood on his own two feet and, if he felt like it, tapped them.

Walter Kerr²

As fiery as the racial rhetoric has been at times, the controversy that has most persistently dogged the work since 1935 is the generic one: is *Porgy and Bess* an opera, a musical, or something in between? Every production has had to take a stand on how the work should be performed, and the critical response to each approach has amounted to a referendum on the score itself. Between 1941 and 1975, the opera was routinely revamped into a musical, and the popularity of this approach seemed to prove that Gershwin's original, operatic conception had been misguided. Since the return of the work to operatic format in 1976, critics have turned to examining whether it emerges as a coherent musical composition or an inconsistent one deserving of judicious truncating.

The perception of Gershwin's responsibility for *Porgy and Bess* has also fluctuated. In the period when the opera's recitatives were usually replaced with spoken dialogue and its three acts condensed into two, the composer seemed to be little more than the creator of incidental songs and ensemble numbers. This was

¹Virgil Thomson, "Porgy in Maplewood," *New York Herald Tribune*, 19 October 1941; reprinted in Virgil Thomson, *The Musical Scene* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), 168.

²Walter Kerr, "Gershwin, True to Himself," *New York Times*, 10 October 1976.

actually a mixed blessing: on one hand, Gershwin was demoted from serious opera composer to talented songwriter, and reviewers' respect for his abilities declined accordingly; on the other hand, during a period in which the libretto's racial content was increasingly controversial, the seeming separateness of Gershwin's songs from the spoken, plot-advancing portions of the work meant that he was not held as accountable for the work's racial content as DuBose Heyward was, and the songs remained available for countless musicians of all races to cover.

When *Porgy and Bess* reemerged as an opera in 1976, Gershwin's contribution and compositional prowess were reconsidered. The opera's high quality overall, its coherence as a composition, and its dramatic effectiveness astonished many critics. In the years since, the work's reputation has been tightly yoked to the success of each production, with compelling stagings inspiring reviewers to admire Gershwin's score, and weaker renditions giving rise to doubts about his judgment and ability. This inconsistency suggests that the score, with its idiosyncrasies and inclusiveness, is still not understood in more than a superficial way: if it works onstage, it must be good, and if it doesn't, it isn't.

Indeed, one of the most striking things about the reception of the opera's music is how shallow it has largely been. After grappling seriously in 1935-36 with whether Gershwin had managed to create a successful American opera, critics were largely content for four decades to accept the work as a collection of wonderful tunes strung together by spoken dialogue. Gershwin's conception of *Porgy and Bess* as a single, complete, musically continuous composition was readily laid aside for an

easier one to enjoy and understand. And in the period since 1976, the composer's conception has been vindicated not so much because it is now generally better understood, but because the work has proven itself to be just as enjoyable as an opera, when ably performed, as it was as a musical. This shallowness is itself an important aspect of the work's reception, as it reveals something about the persistent ambiguity of Gershwin's status in the American cultural hierarchy. It also helps to explain why the composer's nationalistic and personal approach to his opera have so seldom been fully understood or even discussed.

This chapter first offers a brief account of the opera's production history, from the Theatre Guild production that George Gershwin himself had a major role in shaping, to productions in recent years, including some high-profile ones with African American directors. It then closely examines the reception of five particular productions: the Theatre Guild (1935-36), the Cheryl Crawford revival (1941-45), the Robert Breen tour (1952-56), the Houston Grand Opera (1976-78), and the first Metropolitan Opera production (1985). These five productions had particularly high profiles, so critics of one were often aware of the reception that the previous mounting had received—in some cases, they had contributed to the earlier production's reception themselves.

In each case, I focus on how the score was perceived by critics, and the extent to which they respected or demeaned Gershwin as a composer, paying particular attention to the expectations that they brought with them to the theater. Overall, what emerges most clearly is that Gershwin's status as a "serious composer" has remained

stubbornly variable (as it were), despite the occasional appearance of operatic productions whose success seemed once and for all to lay the questions about his competence to rest. This ongoing unwillingness, on the part of music and theater critics in the popular press, to admit Gershwin into the ranks of composerdom's undisputed masters has much to do with their unwillingness to consider, or inability to comprehend, his nationalistic and personal goals for *Porgy and Bess*.

Although it was as high profile as any staged production, I leave the 1959 Goldwyn film out of my in-depth discussions in this chapter. Critics' expectations are quite different for a film than for a staged opera or musical, and those who review films are not typically the same people who review staged works. Moreover, my emphasis in this chapter is on different approaches to and criticisms of the score through the years. The fact that the film version of *Porgy and Bess* was scored by André Previn, however ably, makes it less "Gershwin" than even the most liberally edited and refashioned stage production of the work, and the film's critical reception reflects this by paying little serious attention to Gershwin's "contribution."

***Porgy and Bess* from Prehistory to the Present**

The genesis of *Porgy and Bess* has been dealt with in detail elsewhere; a fairly brief summary will suffice here.³ The story begins in March 1924, when poet DuBose

³All Gershwin biographies spend some time on the prehistory of *Porgy and Bess*. The most detailed treatments are in Hollis Alpert, *The Life and Times of "Porgy and Bess": The Story of an American Classic* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 11-113; and John Andrew Johnson, "Gershwin's 'American Folk Opera': The Genesis, Style and Reputation of *Porgy and Bess* (1935)" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1996), 267-358. The latter includes a wealth of information from primary sources.

Heyward noticed a brief news item in the *Charleston News and Courier*. By the end of the following year, the crippled black man at the center of the news story had been transformed into the protagonist of Heyward's first novel, entitled *Porgy*. It was generally well received by black and white reviewers alike. Wrote the African American poet Countee Cullen, "As far as any white man can understand a Negro's feelings, Mr. Heyward scores; and inasmuch as there are depths in a black man's mind totally inaccessible to the most adroit white plumbing, Mr. Heyward should regard his as a satisfactory performance."⁴

It was via the novel that George Gershwin first made the acquaintance of *Porgy*, *Bess*, *Sporting Life*, and the rest of Catfish Row's inhabitants. He contacted Heyward by letter in 1926 and expressed his interest in someday turning the book into an opera. The novelist was enthusiastic, but several factors delayed the beginning of their collaboration. Both men were busy, Gershwin with a number of performing and composing commitments, Heyward with the adaptation of *Porgy* into a play—an undertaking that his wife, playwright Dorothy Kuhns Heyward, had begun secretly on her own. In addition, Gershwin admitted frankly that he was not yet technically prepared to write an opera.⁵

Porgy was again successful as a play, staged in New York by the Theatre Guild in 1927. Among its reviewers was Eva Jessye, an African American choral director who would go on to participate in many productions of the future opera,

⁴Countee Cullen, "Book Shelf," *Opportunity*, December 1925, 379.

⁵DuBose Heyward, "Porgy and Bess Return on Wings of Song," *Stage*, October 1935; reprinted in *Gershwin and His Time*, ed. Gregory R. Suriano (New York: Gramercy Books, 1998), 103.

including the first. She wrote, “To briefly sum up the production, it reveals the immeasurable capacity for feelings of the Negro—spontaneous, human, and of the vital quality not found in those of more shallow natures.”⁶ J. Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times*, although he preferred the eloquent and succinct novel to the “ruder, deeper, franker, coarser” play, praised the “strength and substance in ‘Porgy,’” and called it “an illuminating chronicle of American folklore.”⁷

In 1933, DuBose Heyward and George Gershwin began collaborating on their opera in earnest. Ira Gershwin, George’s older brother and longtime songwriting partner, also contributed, writing the lyrics for songs such as “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” counseling Heyward on the art of lyric writing, and providing (as usual) a sounding board for his brother.⁸ The collaboration between Heyward and the Gershwin brothers was conducted largely long-distance; Heyward was constrained from leaving Charleston by family health and financial concerns, and George Gershwin was busy with a radio show and other professional obligations. Nonetheless, the composer did manage to spend the better part of two months in the summer of 1934 living in a cabin on Folly Island, near Charleston. There he composed, relaxed, and spent time (often with Heyward as a guide) listening to and interacting with the region’s African Americans called “Gullahs.”⁹ Heyward later described Gershwin’s experiences as “more like a homecoming than an exploration.

⁶Eva Jessye, “‘Porgy’ a Stellar Production,” *Afro-American* (national edition), 22 October 1927.

⁷J. Brooks Atkinson, “Negro Mystery: ‘Porgy’ Begins the Theatre Guild Season with an American Folk-Tale,” *New York Times*, 16 October 1927.

⁸John Andrew Johnson’s dissertation provides a chart of who wrote which lyrics, on pp. 831-33.

⁹For more on Gullah culture, see William S. Pollitzer, *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999).

The quality in him which had produced the *Rhapsody in Blue* in the most sophisticated city in America found its counterpart in the impulse behind the music and bodily rhythms of the simple Negro peasant of the South.”¹⁰

The casting of the opera began in New York in late 1934, and was undertaken primarily by Gershwin himself.¹¹ Todd Duncan, a concert artist and voice teacher at Howard University, became the first Porgy. John Bubbles, a vaudevillian, was Gershwin’s inspired choice for Sporting Life. And Anne Wiggins Brown, a young voice student at Juilliard, auditioned for and won the role of Bess. She later described herself as the composer’s “guinea pig,” going to his apartment and singing parts from the various roles as soon as they had been composed, and offering Gershwin advice about how to write for different vocal ranges.¹²

As the play had been, *Porgy and Bess* was produced by the Theatre Guild and directed by Rouben Mamoulian; Alexander Smallens was the music director and conductor. The work had its world premiere at Boston’s Colonial Theatre on September 30, 1935. Gershwin himself participated actively in making significant cuts to the Theatre Guild production of *Porgy and Bess*, both before the Boston tryout, and again before the New York opening on October 10. Charles Hamm, whose 1987 article discusses these cuts in detail, categorizes them into three groups: those made “to tighten dialogue or action,” those intended to reduce repetition, and those

¹⁰DuBose Heyward, “Porgy and Bess Return on Wings of Song,” 105.

¹¹Gershwin’s central role in auditioning potential performers sets *Porgy and Bess* dramatically apart from most of Gershwin’s previous stage works on two fronts: first, the opera was not intended to be a “star vehicle,” and second, he was clearly first in command of the Theatre Guild production.

¹²Anne Brown, “Anne Brown: From an Interview by Robert Wyatt (1995),” in *The George Gershwin Reader*, ed. Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press,

that significantly shorten the opera's running time.¹³ He argues that most of the cuts, which were cooperatively hashed out by Gershwin, director Mamoulian, and conductor Smallens, were made for sound musical and dramatic reasons, not merely in the interests of making the work shorter. In any event, it is important to note that none of the cuts made before the New York run, nor indeed during Gershwin's lifetime, made *Porgy and Bess* less of an opera. The recitative, though somewhat edited, was not changed to spoken dialogue.

The first production of *Porgy and Bess* played in New York for 124 performances and toured the East coast briefly. As the first chapter discussed, while the run was short compared to those enjoyed by Gershwin's hit musicals, it was extremely long for an opera. The production lost money chiefly as a result of production-related expenses, including the cost of employing a large orchestra at the Broadway union wage scale—not because of a preponderance of negative reviews.

The first major, successful revival of *Porgy and Bess* was produced by Cheryl Crawford, whose had begun her theatrical career as a stage manager for the Theatre Guild's production of the Heywards' play, *Porgy*.¹⁴ Although a great fan of Gershwin's songs, she felt the recitatives were "unnecessary" and "out of keeping with the black milieu."¹⁵ She approached Alexander Smallens to be music director

2004), 229-30.

¹³Charles Hamm, "The Theatre Guild Production of *Porgy and Bess*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 40/3 (Autumn 1987): 516-19. The cuts are also catalogued in John Andrew Johnson, "Gershwin's 'American Folk Opera,'" 764-9.

¹⁴I am passing over the ill-fated revival tour produced by Merle Armitage in 1938, which involved many of those who had been involved in the first production. The tour was ended early by catastrophic winter flooding in California. For an account of that production, see Merle Armitage, *Accent on America* (New York: E. Weythe, 1944), 163-66.

¹⁵Cheryl Crawford, *One Naked Individual* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1977), 114.

once again, and it turned out that he, too, thought the work would be more effective without sung recitative. He made some other changes as well, notably reducing the size of the orchestra.¹⁶

The Eva Jessye Choir, Todd Duncan, Anne Brown, and several other performers from the first production appeared in the Crawford revival; Robert Ross directed. Following two brief, wildly popular runs at New Jersey's Maplewood Theatre in the summer and fall of 1941, *Porgy and Bess* had a three-week stint at Boston's Shubert Theatre in late December, and then moved to Broadway's Majestic Theatre where it ran for 286 performances, more than any previous Broadway revival. It went on to tour North America until 1945. Whereas the Theatre Guild's mounting of the opera had run aground financially with its high production costs and dwindling box office sales (due in part to the unusually high ticket prices), the staging produced by Cheryl Crawford appeared in larger venues, kept ticket prices down, and cut corners by shortening the work and reducing the size of the orchestra. (This led Ira and his wife Lenore Gershwin later to disparage it as the "bargain basement" production.¹⁷)

Theater director Robert Breen teamed up with wealthy arts supporter Blevins Davis to produce the next major mounting of *Porgy and Bess*, beginning in 1952. Breen was forthrightly not a fan of opera in general, and had not been impressed by

¹⁶Howard Taubman, "The Faithful Maestro," *The New York Times*, 26 April 1953; Alpert, *The Life and Times of "Porgy and Bess,"* 136-37.

¹⁷Alpert, 149. An article in *Variety* noted that the Theatre Guild production "was the only show with colored artists that ever had a \$4.40 top [ticket price], and it was figured that the scale was too high," while the Crawford production's ticket prices stopped at \$2.75 (Ibee, "Porgy and Bess (Revival)," *Variety*, 28 January 1942).

the Theatre Guild production of Gershwin's opera in 1936.¹⁸ He approached the work not as opera but as "good theater," with the goal of "wringing from it every legitimate value and illusion of the theater."¹⁹ This production, like Crawford's, employed Smallens as conductor, and he continued tinkering with the orchestration, expanding it somewhat from his previous version in anticipation of having larger pit orchestras in foreign countries. Like Breen, he felt that Gershwin's melodies were immortal, but that his recitatives and orchestration were severely flawed. Together, Breen and Smallens shaped a fast-paced production that cut or sped through the recitative, but had plenty of stage action amidst the popular songs. They rearranged the work's three acts into two, and were able to eliminate waits between scenes thanks to a clever set design by Wolfgang Roth.²⁰

Amidst all the alterations, Breen and Smallens also restored some material that had been cut, not only by the Crawford production but during the Theatre Guild run. Among other things, the Breen production included Porgy's "Buzzard Song," which had been cut before the first production had opened in New York. (It was moved to the last scene, however.)²¹

The Breen production toured four continents and for four years, launched the

¹⁸Although Breen said he saw "the original production once in Chicago in 1935," that production did not come to Chicago until mid-February 1936. See Clifford M. Sage, "Curtain Going Up," *Dallas Times Herald*, 8 June 1952.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰Alpert, *The Life and Times of "Porgy and Bess,"* 164-66.

²¹According to Charles Hamm, "Among other changes, Porgy's 'Buzzard Song' in act 2, scene 1 was shifted to the final scene and the opening orchestral music and choruses of act 3, scene 3 were moved to the beginning of the previous scene." "The Theatre Guild Production of *Porgy and Bess*," 497 n. 11.

opera career of Leontyne Price, and featured as Porgy (at least for a while) William Warfield, newly famous for playing Joe in the 1951 MGM film of *Show Boat*, and legendary bandleader Cab Calloway as Sporting Life. The production's global tour, which even extended into the Soviet Bloc, was endorsed and partially funded by the U.S. State Department. The glamorous cast, and the fact that they had been chosen to represent their country, was meant to provide a Cold War-era rebuke to Communist claims that African Americans were still virtual slaves.²² The propaganda value of the tour turned out to be somewhat mixed—*Porgy and Bess* and its cast were generally well received, but the messages that audiences and critics took away from it often strayed from the ones the State Department had in mind. I will return to this topic later in the chapter.

In the late 1950s, *Porgy and Bess* finally followed its composer to Hollywood. Producer Samuel Goldwyn chose the work to be the crowning achievement of his long career, little realizing the wretchedness of his timing: the American civil rights movement was in full swing, and Gershwin's opera was viewed by many as backward, even racist, in its depiction of black life.

²²I addressed the mixed success of this endeavor in my paper, "A Dubious Triumph: *Porgy and Bess* as Propaganda, 1952-1956," presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society, Seattle, 2004. Other accounts of the tour include David Monod, "Disguise, Containment and the *Porgy and Bess* Revival of 1952-1956," *Journal of American Studies* 35/2 (2001): 275-312; John Harper Taylor, "Ambassadors of the Arts: An Analysis of the Eisenhower Administration's Incorporation of *Porgy and Bess* into its Cold War Foreign Policy" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1994); Truman Capote, *The Muses Are Heard* (New York: Random House, 1956); and Alpert, *The Life and Times of "Porgy and Bess."* For the performer's-eye view, see William Warfield's rather tart comments in William Warfield with A. Miller, *My Music & My Life* (Champaign, IL: Sagamore Publishing, 1991), 127-47; Maya Angelou, who was a chorus member and became a featured dancer in the picnic scene, offers some wonderful tour anecdotes in *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (New York: Random House, 1976).

The omens were not good. An unsolved arson at the studio in the summer of 1958 destroyed the sets and costumes. Rouben Mamoulian was abruptly fired as director over differences with Goldwyn, to be replaced by Otto Preminger, who had directed Dorothy Dandridge's Academy Award-winning performance in *Carmen Jones*.²³ Preminger was an unpopular choice with some in the cast, notably Leigh Whipper, president of the Negro Actors Guild, who quit, expressing concern that the new director was not respectful of African Americans.²⁴ Nonetheless the film reached completion and was released in June 1959, to mixed reviews.

André Previn was responsible for conducting and adapting Gershwin's music for the film. Spoken dialogue was used more than recitative, but Previn's score was virtually continuous throughout, lending what many critics felt was an operatic, *durchkomponiert* quality to the film. The majority of Previn's changes made the work more pretentious rather than less, plumping up the orchestra (105 pieces) and orchestration to properly lush, cinematic proportions. The "Buzzard Song" and "Jasbo Brown" opening were incorporated into the film, but much of the choral music was pared down.²⁵ Dandridge, Sidney Poitier, and even Diahann Carroll (as Clara) were dubbed on the soundtrack—the latter by Loulie Jean Norman, who was white. Although the dubbing was widely criticized, Previn's score received broad acclaim,

²³*Carmen Jones*, is Oscar Hammerstein's updating of Bizet's *Carmen* to Chicago's South Side. For a cutting and insightful review, see James Baldwin, "Carmen Jones: The Light is Dark Enough," in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 46-54.

²⁴Whipper's allegations received minor attention in the black press and virtually none in the mainstream press; see Lawrence F. LaMar, "Leigh Whipper Quits 'Porgy'; Press Confab Labelled [*sic*] 'Dud,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, 16 August 1958.

²⁵John Andrew Johnson, "Gershwin's American Folk Opera," 651-54.

even garnering an Academy Award.

Around the time of the film's production and release, there was a not coincidental surge in jazz and popular recordings of songs from *Porgy and Bess*, among them a Miles Davis/Gil Evans collaboration and an album featuring Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald.²⁶ The piece was ubiquitous, and yet every rendering of one of its numbers seemed to confirm that Gershwin's work was only a starting point, a rich source of material waiting to be transformed, rather than an opera that was valid and entire on its own terms.

In the decade and a half following the Goldwyn film, *Porgy and Bess* became an increasingly disreputable masterpiece. The delightfulness of its songs was beyond dispute, and kept the work onstage (in cut versions meant to highlight those songs), but the story that held them together and the characters that sang them were often held to be unwelcome relics of a racially ignorant past. Given that the songs could be, and frequently were, extracted and performed separately, it seemed likely that they would survive, while the musical theater piece whence they had sprung would gradually disappear from the national stage.

Porgy and Bess was performed four times by New York's City Center Light Opera Company between 1961 and 1965, to mixed reviews. The company faced increasing difficulty recruiting enough African American performers, with the result that some suspiciously pale singers began to infiltrate the choruses. Although these

²⁶For more on the recordings of this period, see Arthur Knight, "'It Ain't Necessarily So That It Ain't Necessarily So': African American Recordings of *Porgy and Bess* as Film and Cultural Criticism," in *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music*, ed. Pamela Robertson Wojcik and Arthur Knight (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), 319–46.

productions received uneven reviews and little attention outside of New York, the fact that the company continued to stage the work despite the obstacles is testament to the enduring popularity of Gershwin's songs, even during the period when the opera's subject matter was at its most unpopular.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, Robert Breen's former assistant director Ella Gerber directed several performances of the work—mostly as a musical, shortened and with recitatives excised. Gerber seems to have made a career out of mounting *Porgy and Bess* with professionals in the leads and talented local amateurs in the smaller roles.²⁷ Eva Jessye trained the chorus for most of these productions. The two continued gradually to adjust the work over the years, with Jessye suggesting new approaches to the score, and Gerber attending to theatrical details.²⁸ Their productions were basically regional affairs, appreciatively received by local critics for the beloved songs and sometimes compelling performances. It is likely that the opera would have sunk into near-obscurity in the 1960s had it not been for Gerber and Jessye's commitment to it.

The tide was turned around the time of the American bicentennial. The conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra, Lorin Maazel, put together a concert performance and recording of the opera *as an opera*, following the orchestral score in the Library of Congress, with the music that had been excised over the years

²⁷Gerber not only crisscrossed the United States, putting together productions in cities as far flung as Miami and Baltimore, but even directed a production in New Zealand. See Keith W. Thomson and Frank Durham, "The Impact of *Porgy and Bess* in New Zealand," *Mississippi Quarterly* 20/4 (Fall 1967): 207-16.

²⁸Their collaboration is described by Edwin Howard in "'Porgy and Bess' for Breakfast, With Its Leading Lights," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 24 May 1972.

restored—even the parts that Gershwin himself had agreed to cut before the New York run. The three-record set, featuring Willard White as Porgy and Leona Mitchell as Bess, was issued on the London label in time for the American bicentennial celebration—a wily time to resurrect the nation’s long-truncated operatic masterpiece. It received glowing critical notices, which tended to emphasize that this was a grand opera, after all.

Despite the recording’s success, most opera companies still hesitated to mount *Porgy and Bess* as an opera—it was expensive, touchy, and risky. Ira and Leonore Gershwin themselves were content to have it performed as a musical, and seem to have feared that an uncut staged production would do more harm than good to the work and its composer’s reputation.²⁹ Sherwin M. Goldman, a longtime admirer of *Porgy and Bess* who wanted to produce it as a full opera, eventually got their permission. He teamed up with David Gockley, whose Houston Grand Opera had mounted Scott Joplin’s *Treemonisha* in 1975, and in July 1976 Gershwin’s opera appeared onstage in its fullest and most operatic form since the 1930s.³⁰ Theater director Jack O’Brien was brought on to direct a cast that included Clamma Dale, an overnight sensation as Bess, Donnie Ray Albert as Porgy, and Larry Marshall as

²⁹Hollis Alpert writes of Sherwin Goldman’s efforts to get the Gershwins’ permission: “‘Why tamper with it?’ Ira asked him. ‘It’s a great success as it is.’ Leonore suggested a small, experimental production in some out-of-the-way place. ‘What’s the harm of trying, so long as no one sees it?’” *The Life and Times of “Porgy and Bess,”* 296.

³⁰The two-act structure Robert Breen had created was retained, and some cuts were made to keep the running time under three hours. According to O’Brien, “First we included every single note Gershwin wrote, and then we began to look for viable cuts, a reprise here, something very small there—nothing anybody would notice. We fought for every note, and wound up with two minutes to spare.” *Ibid.*, 299-300.

Sporting Life.³¹ John DeMain served as music director and conductor. After opening in Houston, the production went on to a 128-performance run at Broadway's Uris Theater, toured the United States and Europe, and released a successful recording.

The Houston Grand Opera's triumph paved the way for the Metropolitan Opera Company finally to produce *Porgy and Bess* in 1985, fifty years after the work's premiere. The Met, the country's most prestigious opera company, was the work's long-delayed final stop on the way to validation as a great American opera.³² As an aspiring composer of opera, Gershwin had aimed at the Met himself, as he had acknowledged before even beginning work on *Porgy and Bess*.³³ There had been talk of producing the work there in 1935, but Heyward and Gershwin preferred the Theatre Guild, and there were logistical disadvantages to a Met production: the company was all-white, and the expensive show would not have the possibility of a long run as it would on Broadway.³⁴ The Breen production, too, had negotiated

³¹The major roles were played by several performers in alternation. Alpert's account of the Houston production includes a good deal of interesting firsthand testimony from Goldman. *Ibid.*, 295-303.

³²The Breen production appeared in 1955 at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, an analogous benchmark in Europe and a first for an American opera. The Goldman production also played there, in 1977.

³³Said Gershwin: "Of course, it's natural for me to aim at the Metropolitan." Quoted in F. P. Dunne, "Gershwin Shelves Jazz to Do Opera," unidentified newspaper clipping from after Spring 1929, in the second of Gershwin's scrapbooks in the Library of Congress Gershwin Collection; quoted in John Andrew Johnson, "Gershwin's 'American Folk Opera,'" 77.

³⁴Gershwin's interactions with the Met over *Porgy and Bess* are the subject of some dispute. Hollis Alpert writes that Otto Kahn offered Gershwin \$5,000 to do *Porgy and Bess* at the Met, but the composer wanted the longer run that a Theatre Guild production would make possible (*The Life and Times of "Porgy and Bess,"* 76). Critic Harold Schonberg wrote in 1976 that Gershwin chose Broadway over the Met for monetary gain, but Gershwin biographer Edward Jablonski, in a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, skeptically demanded to know the basis for Schonberg's claim. (Harold Schonberg, "Porgy and Bess: A Minority Report," *New York Times*, 27 September 1976; Edward Jablonski, "Music Mailbag: 'Porgy and Bess' Reconsidered," *New York Times*, 7 November 1976.) While Gershwin's contract with the Met for an abandoned operatic project, *The Dybbuk*, is extant, I know of no hard evidence that the Met ever entered into or offered Gershwin a formal agreement with regard to *Porgy and Bess*.

appearances at the Met in 1952, but scheduling problems ultimately proved insurmountable.³⁵ And in the bicentennial year there had been discussion of a Met production of the Gershwin opera, but at that time the company's finances were too shaky to take on such a costly project.³⁶

At last, in 1985, the stars aligned. *Porgy and Bess* was given a Met production with all the bells and whistles: Simon Estes and Grace Bumbry played the leads, James Levine conducted, and Nathaniel Merrill directed. The Gershwin score was performed in its entirety, based on the manuscript score at the Library of Congress. Todd Duncan and Anne Brown came to the premiere. It seemed that the great American opera had at last received its coronation—but, as will be discussed below, the reception did not live up to the hype.

A year and a half later, an equally prestigious and operatic production at the Glyndebourne Festival received the enthusiastic critical response that the Met had not. Trevor Nunn's staging, starring Willard White and Cynthia Haymon, was a stunning critical success. Simon Rattle conducted the nearly complete score respectfully but without paralyzing reverence, and the performances and staging decisions struck critics as moving and vivid. Gershwin's operatic ambitions seemed once again to be vindicated. A revival of the 1986 Glyndebourne production was filmed in 1992 and broadcast in the U.S. on PBS in 1993. Since then it has been widely available on video and DVD.

In 1995 Hope Clarke became the first African-American to direct an

³⁵Alpert, *The Life and Times of "Porgy and Bess,"* 157-61.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 295.

American production of *Porgy and Bess*, for the Houston Grand Opera. Her approach was to emphasize the African elements of Catfish Row's culture, and to combine a dignified approach to the characters with vigorous theatrical pacing. Alvy Powell and Terry Cook played Porgy in alternating performances, and Roberta Laws and Marquita Lister shared duties as Bess. The production opened in January 1995 and began to tour in March. Soon after, Houston general manager David Gockley felt that the production was not "achieving an emotional payoff," and brought in Tazewell Thompson, another black director, to make some changes.³⁷ Clarke was not pleased, and the incident caused some negative publicity, but the tour continued into 1996, spanning the West Coast, Texas, Florida, Minnesota, and Ohio, as well as Japan.

Thompson has directed *Porgy and Bess* again since, notably a New York City Opera production that ran in the spring of 2000 and again in March 2002, at which time it was broadcast on the PBS program, "Live from Lincoln Center" (on 20 March 2002). Alvy Powell and Marquita Lister were featured both years.

In 1998, the centennial of George Gershwin's birth, there were no major productions of his magnum opus.³⁸ In February, a program entitled "*Porgy and Bess*: An American Voice" aired on the PBS series, "Great Performances." Directed by Nigel Noble and produced by James A. Standifer of the University of Michigan, it included historical information and performance footage, as well as substantial

³⁷Lewis Segal, "It's Summertime, and the Staging Ain't Easy," *Los Angeles Times*, 1 June 1995.

³⁸Late in 1998, there was a high profile concert performance in December conducted by Bobby McFerrin at Avery Fisher Hall. The title roles were sung by Kevin Deas and Marvis Martin, and the New York Philharmonic played the score. See Cori Ellison, "'Porgy' and the Racial Politics of Music," *New York Times*, 13 December 1998; Paul Griffiths, "The Folks on Catfish Row in Concert," *New York Times*, 19 December 1998.

excerpts from interviews with various performers, directors, and others who had been involved in or affected by the opera. The program took quite an evenhanded approach to the racial issues raised by *Porgy and Bess*; those who were troubled by the work got a fair hearing, as did those who loved it unreservedly.

In October and November 2005, the Washington National Opera produced its first *Porgy and Bess*, with Francesca Zambello directing a cast headed by Gordon Hawkins and Kevin Short alternating as Porgy, and Indira Mahajan and Morenike Fadayomi as Bess.³⁹ Serena was played by Angela Simpson, who also played the role in the Clarke and Thompson productions. Simpson graciously granted me an interview, which I discuss in Chapter 4.

At the time of this writing, Trevor Nunn is once again directing *Porgy and Bess*, this time not in its uncut, operatic form as at Glyndebourne, but as a musical. Nunn has drawn on the original novel, play, and libretto to create a new version of the spoken dialogue. He has sought and received not only permission but advice from members of the Gershwin family along the way. Composer Gareth Valentine is said to have adapted the score as needed, while preserving the well-loved melodies. Having directed a highly acclaimed and fully operatic production in the past, Nunn says, “I hope I won’t be perceived as someone who’s doing an insensitive thing in attempting a different version, so that a wider public gets to appreciate this extraordinary music.”⁴⁰

³⁹This was the first production that I was able to attend—quite an experience, after four years of research and writing about *Porgy and Bess*.

⁴⁰Campbell Robertson, “Plenty o’ Trimmin’ Turns ‘Porgy and Bess’ Into a Musical,” *New York Times*, 30 June 2006.

The Theatre Guild Production (1935-36)

An oft-repeated claim about *Porgy and Bess* is that the Theatre Guild production was a critical disaster, while Cheryl Crawford's wildly popular revival six years later caused critics to change their minds about the work. This is simply untrue. The first production did receive mixed reviews, but the majority were positive, and—equally important—even the negative reviews tended to give serious consideration to the composer, his opera, and the stylistic questions that the work posed. On the other hand, while the Crawford production was indeed highly acclaimed, the critics' admiration for this revival was contingent on their approval of Gershwin's operatic score having been turned into a more traditional musical theater work. In other words, what many critics changed their minds about in 1941 was not the high quality of *Porgy and Bess*, but the sound judgment of its composer.

The persistence of the erroneous claim that the Theatre Guild production was a critical failure may be due in part to the fact that it creates a very compelling narrative: *Porgy and Bess* becomes a tragic tale of a masterwork that initially flopped, and whose worth went unappreciated until after its composer's early (and perhaps flop-hastened) death. Every successful production, from the Crawford revival to the present, has prompted some reviewers to provide a thumbnail sketch of the opera's trajectory from its supposedly disastrous first run to its current glory. For example, *Newsweek's* Alan Rich wrote in 1987,

Gershwin's music is there to remind the fickle that what they miss on the first hearing they should always listen for twice. Witness the ultimate triumph of "Porgy and Bess." Gershwin composed the work as a full-length opera. It ended up on Broadway, not the Met, in 1935 and at first it flopped. . . . Later

cut-down versions did earn a devoted following. But it was Jack O'Brien's exuberant 1976 Houston production that restored a masterpiece.⁴¹

Many such accounts include quotations from early critics like Olin Downes—"The style is at one moment of opera and another of operetta or sheer Broadway entertainment"—and especially from Virgil Thomson, whose 1935 article was full of memorable lines, such as "At best it is a piquant but highly unsavory stirring-up-together of Israel, Africa, and the Gaelic Isles."⁴²

Such narratives fail to acknowledge that even criticisms as lofty as Downes's or as colorful as Thomson's appeared in reviews that found a great deal to praise in *Porgy and Bess*. Downes, the music critic for the *New York Times*, withheld judgment on Gershwin's ultimate "destiny as an opera composer," presumably waiting for a second Gershwin opera to confirm the promise of the first and improve on its stylistic inconsistency. Nonetheless, he admired Gershwin's lyrical gift, "instinctive appreciation of the melodic glides and nuances of Negro song," "rich and exotic harmony," excellent use of voices, theatrical experience, numerous fine songs, and "flashes of real contrapuntal ingenuity."⁴³ Downes's review is mixed, but it says nothing to dissuade and much to intrigue potential ticket buyers, from the ranks of both typical operagoers and fans of Gershwin's popular songs.

Virgil Thomson's article, biting as its criticisms are, is also surprisingly lavish

⁴¹Alan Rich, "Nice Work If You Can Get It," *Newsweek*, 16 March 1987, 70.

⁴²Olin Downes, "'Porgy and Bess,' Native Opera, Opens at the Alvin; Gershwin Work Based on DuBose Heyward's Play," *New York Times*, 11 October 1935; Virgil Thomson, "George Gershwin," *Modern Music* (November 1935), reprinted in *A Virgil Thomson Reader*, ed. Virgil Thomson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 23-27; and in *Virgil Thomson: A Reader*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Routledge, 2002), 149-52. Subsequent references to Thomson's essay refer to pages in the Thomson-edited *Reader*.

⁴³Downes, "Porgy and Bess."

in its praise. One senses that he was astonished and somewhat appalled that a composer as naïve and unintellectual as he believed Gershwin to be could create an opera of such tremendous significance: “Gershwin does not even know what an opera is; and yet *Porgy and Bess* is an opera, and it has power and vigor. Hence it is a more important event in America’s artistic life than anything American the Met has ever done.” He attacks everything from the recitative to the scoring to the libretto, but admits that the work has “a constant stream of lyrical invention and a wealth of harmonic ingenuity,” and that he was “fascinated at every moment” of its long running time.⁴⁴

While Thomson and Downes were more positive than the usual quotations suggest, and the critical response to *Porgy and Bess* in 1935 was more positive generally than the conventional wisdom would have it, those who describe the first production’s reception as hostile or uncomprehending are not entirely wrong. A work as complex, ambitious, and surprising as *Porgy and Bess* could hardly be expected not to draw criticism on its first appearance. The key error lies in failing to put this early reception in context, which I will attempt to do in the following pages.

It is important to realize that the 1935 debut of *Porgy and Bess* was an extraordinary event on three levels: (1) Gershwin was a famous and somewhat controversial figure; (2) he was making a momentous shift from musicals to opera; and (3) the story of Porgy was already well known and had recently been staged as a successful play. These three factors played major roles in how the opera’s score was

⁴⁴Thomson, “George Gershwin,” 151-52.

first received, but none would be equally significant for future productions. This has led many to forget, even as early as 1941, that criticisms of the work had been shaped to a large extent by the unique circumstances and expectations of 1935.

Right around the time of the Theatre Guild production's opening, Isaac Goldberg began an article about Gershwin by noting that he "manages, without half trying, to create news." He continued:

Ever since Ring Lardner and George S. Kaufman, in their play of Tin Pan Alley entitled "June Moon," used his unseen figure to point an amusing moment, theater folk have been alive to the drawing power of George's name. Kaufman and Hart brought him on to the stage in "Merrily We Roll Along." Was Gershwin offended? Not in the least. "Why," he said to me, while the play was at its height—and, no doubt, he said it to everybody else who mentioned the obvious takeoff, "I'm the only healthy person in the show. The rest of them are a crowd of dissipated, nervous wrecks."⁴⁵

Gershwin would not have been so famous had it not been for his good looks, active social life, and associations with other famous people. Nonetheless, the root of his fame was his compositions, which fell into two categories, "popular" and "serious." His first hit was "Swanee," which Al Jolson made a sensation in 1920, and Gershwin continued throughout his life to turn out a steady stream of popular songs for musicals, revues, and films. His concert music career was dramatically launched in 1924 with *Rhapsody in Blue*, written on commission for the Paul Whiteman Orchestra.

Despite the popularity of Gershwin's art music, and the artfulness of his popular songs, the two streams of his career were largely viewed as separate, by

⁴⁵Isaac Goldberg, "Gershwin at a New Period in His Career," *Boston Evening Transcript*, shortly after 26 September 1935. This undated article was acquired from the microfilmed Ira Gershwin Scrapbooks in the Library of Congress (Reel 8)

critics and by the composer himself. He wrote in a 1935 essay that he viewed his “serious” music as a permanent legacy, while the songs were more ephemeral: “When I wrote the *Rhapsody in Blue* I took ‘blues’ and put them in a larger and more serious form. That was twelve years ago and the *Rhapsody in Blue* is still very much alive, whereas if I had taken the same themes and put them in songs they would have been gone years ago.”⁴⁶

Many music critics were skeptical about Gershwin’s seriousness as a “real” composer, and viewed his concert works as orchestrated stringings-together of melodies that he might otherwise have employed in his popular songs.⁴⁷ Indeed, the quotation just cited reinforces this view, although his sketchbooks held in the Library of Congress clearly differentiate between “tunes” (meant for songs) and “themes” (for larger works).⁴⁸ *Porgy and Bess*, since it actually contained numerous songs clearly destined to be hits, was particularly susceptible to being seen as merely a pretentiously dressed-up Gershwin musical.

For some music critics, such as Lawrence Gilman, the inclusion of songs of such easy appeal in an opera was a failure of taste tantamount to a moral lapse:

Perhaps it is needlessly Draconian to begrudge Mr. Gershwin the song-hits which he has scattered through his score and which will doubtless enhance his fame and popularity. Yet they mar it. They are its cardinal weakness. They are a blemish on its musical integrity. Listening to such sure-fire rubbish as the duet between Porgy and Bess, “You is my woman now,” or the afflicting F

⁴⁶George Gershwin, “Rhapsody in Catfish Row,” *New York Times*, 20 October 1935; reprinted in *George Gershwin in His Time: A Biographical Scrapbook, 1919-1937*, ed. Gregory R. Suriano (New York: Gramercy Books, 1998), 112-13.

⁴⁷Such views have persisted into the present day; for an effective rebuttal see Larry Starr, “Musings on ‘Nice Gershwin Tunes,’ Form, and Harmony in the Concert Music of Gershwin,” in *The Gershwin Style*, ed. Wayne Schneider (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 95-110.

⁴⁸Susan Ethel Neimoyer, “*Rhapsody in Blue*: A Culmination of George Gershwin’s Early Musical Education” (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 2003), 137-43.

major Andantino, “I loves you, Porgy”—which is perhaps worthy of the late Signor Tosti, but not of Mr. Gershwin—you wonder how the composer of the opera could stoop to such easy and such needless conquests.⁴⁹

Gershwin was doubtless responding to such criticisms when he wrote (in an essay published nine days after Gilman’s review), “It is true that I have written songs for *Porgy and Bess*. I am not ashamed of writing songs at any time so long as they are good songs.” He went on to point out, rightly, that many acclaimed European operas by the likes of Verdi and Bizet contained “song hits.”⁵⁰ He did not bring up the obvious difference, that Verdi and Puccini had not made a fortune by writing “Swanee” and “I’ll Build a Stairway to Paradise” before turning to opera, a circumstance that had (however unfairly) shaped the reception of Gershwin’s first operatic effort. One Philadelphia critic’s comment, that “the [opera’s] tunes admirably carried out the feeling expressed in the text, especially those in which no deep sentiment was manifest,” reflects the not uncommon predisposition to view Gershwin as a shallow tunesmith.⁵¹

Some music critics’ doubts about the seriousness of *Porgy and Bess* were exacerbated by their assumption that an opera ought to display more stylistic unity than Gershwin’s did. Both Olin Downes and Virgil Thomson, quoted previously, complained about the work’s eclecticism. A European composer such as Richard Strauss might be forgiven for the way *Der Rosenkavalier* flitted stylistically from

⁴⁹Lawrence Gilman, “George Gershwin’s New Opera, ‘Porgy and Bess,’ Produced by the Theater Guild,” *New York Herald-Tribune*, 11 October 1935.

⁵⁰Gershwin, “Rhapsody in Catfish Row,” in *George Gershwin in His Time*, 113.

⁵¹Samuel L. Laciari, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Opens at the Forrest,” *Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger*, 28 January 1936.

century to century, but a popular American composer veering from Broadway to Charleston to Milan and back was seen as tasteless, or else incompetent. Said the *Washington Post* reviewer:

From the viewpoint of construction, the opera lacks coherence between the various episodes. Its looseness of form is that found in the musical comedy, where situation governs the musical climax and the links between situations are periods of musical slump. Also the admixture of romantic and realistic elements assists in the dislocation. The duet between Porgy and Bess in the first scene of the second act, itself an appealing bit of melodic beauty, is quite out of key with the prevailing style of “blues.”⁵²

As discussed in the first chapter, Gershwin believed that a truly American opera should “run the gamut of American expression,” and he had chosen the story of Porgy and Bess because “it would enable me to write light as well as serious music and that it would enable me to include humor as well as tragedy.”⁵³ His nationalistic agenda specifically precluded his hewing to any one “prevailing style.” Nonetheless, some critics saw *Porgy and Bess* as evidence that Gershwin had been unable to write his opera entirely in a serious vein, or had not been sophisticated enough about opera to understand that he should do so.

The critic B. H. Haggin was particularly explicit about the divide between Gershwin’s natural abilities, which had served him well in the creation of songs for musical comedies, and his acquired compositional skills, which were superficial and suspect:

According to newspaper reports, Gershwin prepared himself for his [opera] with further study of modern harmony and counterpoint. And the result was again a work with material that represented his own talent and feeling and

⁵²Ray C. B. Brown, “New Gershwin Folk Opera Given First Local Hearing at National,” *Washington Post*, 17 March 1936.

⁵³Gershwin, “Rhapsody in Catfish Row,” in *George Gershwin in His Time*, 112.

material that represented his increased skill in the use of alien idioms and techniques. His own talent and feeling were expressed in various songs, both lyrical and light, in his best, ripest, richest musical show style; and in the religious music. His study of modern harmony and counterpoint manifested itself in oversophisticated treatment of some of the religious music, which was deprived in this way of its essential simplicity of feeling, and in the continuous music for dialogue, action, scenes, situations, much of which was pretentious (where the modern harmony was applied to jazz material), derivative or ineffectual. Of all of this material the best was the lyrical and the humorous, and of these only the humorous was appropriate to its dramatic material.⁵⁴

One may take issue with the grounds on which Haggin chastises the opera, such as the “essential simplicity of feeling” of African American sacred music, the inherent pretentiousness of blending modern harmony and jazz, and the unsuitability of lyrical music for the love story of Bess and Porgy. Fundamentally, however, it is difficult to rebut the subjective charge of tastelessness. For Haggin and others, Gershwin was a talented and successful creator of popular songs, but no amount of study and seriousness of ambition would ever make up for his having built his career on commercial rather than aesthetic values.

Gershwin’s ongoing fame and success as a composer of popular hit songs colored the reception of *Porgy and Bess*, but most critics were willing to give the opera the benefit of the doubt, and praise substantially outweighed criticism. Some saw the work as a dramatic new stage of development for the composer. As *Boston Herald* critic Elinor Hughes put it,

He has been hailed as a wonder child, even as a genius, and, on the other hand, as a supremely clever composer of popular music, music that for all its skill was full of wit rather than of feeling. . . .

⁵⁴B. H. Haggin, “Porgy as Opera,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1935. This source was acquired from the microfilmed Ira Gershwin Scrapbooks in the Library of Congress (Reel 8); the article, unlike most of the clippings in the scrapbooks, was not clearly labeled as to source or date.

. . . No one, however, is likely to question that he has taken a great stride forward in writing an American opera that will entertain as well as please, that can and will be accepted by theatre goers as well as by music lovers.⁵⁵

There were many others who seemed to think it a logical step for Gershwin to produce an opera. Cecelia Ager described his career's trajectory for *Variety*:

Plugging songs, and then, in the few years that intervened, moving in a straight ascending line from song plugger to pop tune writer to musical comedy composer; through "Rhapsodie [*sic*] in Blue" to composer of ballets and concertos—until there opened Thursday night at the Alvin Theatre the first Gershwin opera, opened with suitable fanfare, elegant hullabaloo, and both music and dramatic critics racing neck and neck for the distinction of writing its warmest welcome."⁵⁶

Whether opera was seen as a bold new direction or an inevitable progression for Gershwin, there was broad agreement that America had been waiting for its first truly indigenous operatic masterpiece for some time, and some critics believed it had arrived at last with *Porgy and Bess*. There had been previous candidates for the honor, notably Louis Gruenberg's *The Emperor Jones*, but they came in for disparagement when compared to Gershwin's opera and its exuberant Americanness.⁵⁷

In a February 1936 review that rebutted many of the criticisms that had appeared since the Theatre Guild production's premiere, Chicago critic Robert Pollak wrote:

⁵⁵Elinor Hughes, "A Play Becomes an Opera and the Beholder Wonders," *Boston Herald*, 6 October 1935.

⁵⁶Cecelia Ager, "George Gershwin Thinks You Can Write Opera and Make It Tuneful," *Variety*, 16 October 1935.

⁵⁷Said one reviewer, "Ever since the high and haughty Metropera [*sic*] came along with their version of 'Emperor Jones,' the musical saysoers said that a truly representative American opera had arrived on the scene. But they said that with their tongue where the cheek rouge should have been." Philip Klein, "*Porgy and Bess*—At the Forrest," *Philadelphia Daily News*, 28 January 1936.

The musicologists who have been scanning the horizon for the appearance of the great American opera will find it at the Erlanger where “Porgy and Bess” is playing. For, to be perfectly fair to this Gershwin achievement, it must be judged specifically as a grand opera, in spite of the Guild auspices, the curious choice of theater, the colored cast and the small orchestra. . . .

I have heard the music described sneeringly as “Broadway.” So what? The metropolitan idiom that Gershwin uses with such amazing vitality is honestly American. It is as eloquent and true as the near-folk melodies that Stephen Foster bequeathed us. And it speaks with superb originality of a country as eager for interpretation as the Russia of Moussorgsky or the old Bohemia of Smetana.

The American operas produced at the Metropolitan in the past include works by Converse, Cadman, Hugo, Breil, Parker, Damrosch, DeKoven and Deems Taylor. With the exception of Taylor there was not enough genius in the lot of these gentlemen to hurt a fly. . . .

By contrast the Gershwin score looms mightily.⁵⁸

There are numerous such reviews of *Porgy and Bess* that praise its vigor, inspiration, and distinctively American qualities. For reviewers who approached the opera with the preconception that that Gershwin was an overly ambitious songwriter, the tuneful, sprawling work provided evidence to support this view. But to many of the critics open to the possibility that Gershwin might actually produce a great American opera, *Porgy and Bess* seemed to be just that.

Not every critic sent to review the Theatre Guild production was looking for the great American opera. Because *Porgy and Bess* was by Gershwin, and because it was being presented by the Theater Guild rather than the Metropolitan Opera, newspapers often sent both their music and their theater critics to cover it. The latter group consisted largely of people who had never reviewed an opera before, and many of them did not actually like the genre. For these critics, the features that generically

⁵⁸Robert Pollak, “Found—The Great American Opera!” *Chicago Sunday Times*, 23 February 1936.

differentiated *Porgy and Bess* from Gershwin's musicals were unwelcome. Thus we read comments like Brooks Atkinson's: "'Sister, you goin' to the picnic?' 'No, I guess not.' Now, why in heaven's name must two characters in an opera clear their throats before they can exchange that sort of information?'"⁵⁹

Music critics had some qualms about Gershwin's approach to recitative, but the theater critics often rejected the convention of recitative altogether. Said the *New Yorker*'s Robert Benchley, "I liked the original 'Porgy' much better, because the people didn't sing when they should have been talking. Is that awful to say?"⁶⁰ John Anderson of the *New York Evening Journal* felt the same way:

Much of it is desperately laggard and repetitious, overworked, tedious and irrelevant. Possibly if Mr. Gershwin had merely written music for a play, and not turned the play into an opera, "Porgy" would have stood up on its own feet and found further splendor in its song. But it must have not only the advantages of music; it must have the operatic formula to deaden it, and "Porgy" as a libretto does not survive.⁶¹

Like Benchley, Anderson was self-conscious about his distaste for opera: "Possibly I wouldn't know a good folk opera if one walked right up and bored me to death."

Several of the theater critics sent to review *Porgy and Bess* were sheepish about their ignorance of opera, announcing that they would stick to dramatic issues and defer to their music critic colleagues on musical matters. Anderson and Benchley chose bravado over humility, displaying frank disdain for this antique and foolish art.⁶²

⁵⁹Brooks Atkinson, "'Porgy and Bess,' Native Opera, Opens at the Alvin," *New York Times*, 11 October 1935.

⁶⁰Robert Benchley, "The Theatre: Two Big Ones," *New Yorker*, 19 October 1935, 32.

⁶¹John Anderson, "Catfish Row with Music by Gershwin Shown in Folk Opera," *New York Evening Journal*, 11 October 1935.

⁶²More than a few of these white theater critics, despite their protestations of ignorance when it came to opera, were fearless when it came to making sweeping pronouncements about African Americans. For example, Kaspar Monahan repeatedly declared himself "a layman in things musical"

Perhaps unsurprisingly, critics who generally liked opera often lauded Gershwin (as well as director Rouben Mamoulian) for enlivening the genre—as one put it, for making “an effort to transfuse vital, black blood into the somewhat hardened arteries of conventional opera”—while drama critics like Anderson and Benchley criticized him for weighing down a play.⁶³ In either case, critics’ attitudes about the operatic genre played a major role in how they responded to *Porgy and Bess*. It is important that this be taken into account before making generalizations about the first production’s reception, for in several cases what seems on the surface to be a criticism of Gershwin’s opera is in fact a reflection of a theater critic’s feelings about *all* opera. Subsequent productions were affected much less by such issues: for the next four decades the work was largely performed and marketed as a musical, and when it reemerged as an opera in the mid-1970s, reviewers of the work were not inclined to identify themselves as opponents of the genre.

In addition to Gershwin’s reputation and theater critics’ resistance to the operatic genre, a third factor played a uniquely important role in the reception of the Theatre Guild production: *Porgy and Bess* had been recently preceded by *Porgy*, a spoken play interlarded with African American spirituals. The play, which had been a hit for the Theatre Guild in 1927, had as a chief selling point that it offered New York audiences a realistic glimpse of an exotic black community. According to Percy Hammond of the *New York Herald Tribune*,

but waxed eloquent about “the mercurial, buoyant spirit of the Negro.” See “‘Porgy and Bess’ Opens at Nixon,” *Pittsburgh Press*, 11 February 1936.

⁶³Elliot Norton, “Premiere of ‘Porgy and Bess’: Opera at the Colonial Able and Brilliant Experiment,” *Boston Post*, 1 October 1935.

The [play] persuaded you that you were peep-holing on an unusual scene that was actually happening. Its characters behaved themselves as human beings who, however strange, were more on Earth than on a platform. . . . The Heywards, its authors, were so anxious to have it done truthfully or not at all that they demanded from Broadway a cast that contained no white actor with burnt cork on his face.⁶⁴

Many critics approached *Porgy and Bess* from the same angle, assuming that the work strove for the same racially specific authenticity (or the appearance thereof) as the play. Gershwin's well-publicized visits to South Carolina contributed to the perception that he, like DuBose Heyward, was part artist, part ethnographer. Even though he told the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle's* Irving Kolodin that his visits were more for inspiration than for collecting material to reproduce or imitate, it was widely believed that Gershwin's trips south resulted from his desire to capture Gullah music accurately in his opera.⁶⁵ Percy Hammond claimed that Gershwin had "spent two years in Charleston close in contact with its Negro inhabitants in order to become permeated with the atmosphere of Catfish Row. He lived with the characters he proposed to sing about, so that he could catch and convey to audiences in the North the secrets of their existence."⁶⁶ Even a writer for the black weekly *Pittsburgh Courier* claimed that "Gershwin wanted [the characters] to sing their own music that he had tried to put down," making him sound like a transcriber of folk material.⁶⁷

While Gershwin was interested in writing *effective* music for his African

⁶⁴Percy Hammond, "The Theaters: Catfish Row Set to Mr. Gershwin's Music," *New York Herald Tribune*, 20 October 1935.

⁶⁵"Perhaps, it was suggested, the distinction is one of absorption rather than reproduction? Yes, said Gershwin, absorption, not reproduction." Irving Kolodin, "Gershwin Writes an Opera and Harlem Cheers," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 27 January 1935.

⁶⁶Hammond, "The Theaters." Gershwin actually spent only a few weeks in South Carolina.

⁶⁷Louise Tyson, "Shadows on the Gay White Way," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 29 February 1936.

American characters to sing, racial and ethnic authenticity were low on his list of priorities. If he had been greatly concerned about them, he probably would have left the Heywards' play alone and written some other opera. The fact that he chose to write his own "folk music" for an opera based on *Porgy* should have given critics a clue that he considered his own music better suited to his purpose than actual black folk music, which might have led them to consider what his purpose actually was—that is, the creation of an American (not "Negro") folk opera.

Instead, some critics complained that Gershwin had written overly complicated and sophisticated music for his characters, particularly in comparison to the play. Wrote the *Boston Herald's* Elinor Hughes, "Gershwin's opera was at its best when it held most closely to the spirit and letter of its original. 'Porgy' was a story of simple people, given to expressing their emotions in the most direct fashion: their songs and their dances reflecting their changing moods without any obscuring shadow of sophistication or reticence."⁶⁸ A Philadelphia reviewer noted that the "work is labeled a 'folk opera,' and one might reasonably expect that once [Gershwin] took a work so already surcharged with folk expression he would produce an analogous emotion in his opera version. That, I'm afraid, he doesn't." Whereas in the play the characters "could fling themselves into what impressed as an 'ad lib' sense of exultation or depression, they must now follow a conductor."⁶⁹

⁶⁸Hughes, "A Play Becomes an Opera." By the end of her review, Hughes concludes that "'Porgy' was a special story about a certain group of people; 'Porgy and Bess' has taken that story out of Catfish Row and made it universal." This is an unusual insight in 1935, but she seems unconvinced that the transformation is desirable (or intentional).

⁶⁹Henry T. Murdock, "'Porgy and Bess' Opens at the Forrest," *Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger*, 28 January 1936.

Naturally, complaints such as these were partly the result of critics' belief that black characters should express themselves more simply. Even the African American composer and choral director Hall Johnson was in this group:

One basic quality exists in genuine Negro music which even the fairly musical layman must have recognized long ago. That is the quality of utter simplicity,—in theme and in style. . . . following the law that simple people reacting to elementary situations will express themselves simply and directly. Mr. Gershwin must be aware of this law. Still, in the heavy, involved treatment of his thematic material, he suggests sophisticated intricacies of attitude which could not possibly be native to the minds of the people who make up his story.⁷⁰

The natural conclusion of this line of thought—though not the one that Johnson came to—is that a story about poor black people was not appropriate for the operatic genre.⁷¹ Several reviewers agreed with the *Boston Globe's* Warren Storey Smith that “the sophisticated atmosphere and idiom of opera scarcely suits the protagonists of ‘Porgy.’”⁷² Willing as critics might be to hear complex music from a *Carmen* or a *Wozzeck*, their suspension of disbelief did not always extend to *Porgy and Bess* singing a harmonically inventive romantic duet, or crapshooters' dialogue set to a fugue.

These reviewers often pointed to particular parts of *Porgy and Bess* that they did find believable and affecting, such as the choral spirituals and the more memorably tuneful numbers such as “There’s a Boat Dat’s Leavin’ Soon for New York” and “Oh, I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin’.” These latter songs were, of course, the very

⁷⁰Hall Johnson, “*Porgy and Bess*—A Folk Opera,” *Opportunity*, January 1936, 25-26.

⁷¹Johnson’s essay makes a larger point, that *Porgy and Bess* leaves lots of room for black opera composers to improve on. For more on his criticism, see Chapter 3.

⁷²Warren Storey Smith, “Premiere of ‘Porgy and Bess’: Opera at the Colonial Able and Brilliant Experiment,” *Boston Post*, 1 October 1935.

selections that guardians of operatic standards such as Lawrence Gilman assailed as “a blemish on its musical integrity.”⁷³

By combining both complex and accessible styles in his opera, Gershwin attracted criticism from both sides, from those who sought an ethnically realistic presentation (or thought they did) as well as those who wanted a typical opera. Gershwin had not set out to satisfy either of these camps. His actual purpose was clear to anyone who read his published essays, or who listened with an open mind to *Porgy and Bess*, and there were indeed some critics who managed to understand it. For example, in his positive review for the black weekly *New York Age*, Lucien H. White wrote that Gershwin “has answered the question as to whether or not the American Negro’s racial development can be used as a basis for a distinctive American opera. And in doing this, he has given an opportunity for demonstration of the Negroes’ ability in interpreting and portraying the operatic forms. For in this work there are examples of all kinds of musical expression.”⁷⁴ White appreciated the opera both as an opportunity for black performers to sing a variety of musical styles, and as a work whose identity was no less broadly national for being racially specific in its casting and characters.

The reception of the Theatre Guild production of *Porgy and Bess* was extremely varied: for every critic who disparaged the score as overly sophisticated, there was another who was astonished by Gershwin’s natural feel for black music; there were those who saw it as a stylistically inconsistent hodgepodge, while others

⁷³Lawrence Gilman, “George Gershwin’s New Opera.”

⁷⁴Lucien H. White, “Porgy and Bess,” *New York Age*, 26 October 1935.

believed the score's variety to be perfectly suited to the story's wide-ranging emotions. In highlighting the problems that the first production encountered as a result of Gershwin's reputation, the work's genre, and the recent appearance of the play on Broadway, I do not mean to bolster to the widely held impression that the Theatre Guild production's reception was generally negative. On the contrary, the opera was on the whole received remarkably well for such an innovative and ambitious work. My purpose has been to show that the criticism it did face stemmed in large part from the unique circumstances of 1935-36, which should be taken into account when considering the opera's earliest reception.

The Cheryl Crawford Production (1941-45)

If it had been revived as an opera in the 1940s, the position of *Porgy and Bess* as an American operatic masterpiece might well have been solidified then, instead of decades later. By the 1940s, critics had had time to forget the play, to tailor their expectations to the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the opera, and to appreciate the composer's seriousness. Gershwin's death in 1937 softened the attitudes of some who had considered him merely an ambitious songwriter, and in 1945 he was the subject of a Warner Brothers film entitled *Rhapsody in Blue*, which eulogized him as a composer who "gave a voice to the America he knew and loved so well."⁷⁵ Although *Porgy and Bess* had not been a financial success during Gershwin's lifetime, it had

⁷⁵Charlotte Greenspan, "Rhapsody in Blue: A Study in Hollywood Hagiography," in *The Gershwin Style: New Looks at the Music of George Gershwin*, ed. Wayne Schneider (New York: Oxford University Press, 199), 152.

elicited admiration from many critics and respect from nearly all, and the nationalistic postwar years might have proven very kind to the opera.

Instead, producer Cheryl Crawford teamed up with music director Alexander Smallens to create a lighter, livelier, less operatic revival in 1941. In her memoirs, Crawford wrote:

When I had seen the 1932 [*sic*] production I had been critical of only one element, the recitatives, which, I felt, were out of keeping with the black milieu. As the Maplewood rehearsals began, Smallens and I sat in the theatre with a score between us and carefully cut recitatives we thought were out of place or unnecessary. That may seem sacrilegious to some, but I never got a thrill out of a recitative like “Oh God! Don’t let them take Bess to the hospital!” The show became more of a piece and flowed swiftly and tunefully.⁷⁶

The response to the newly trimmed *Porgy and Bess* by critics and audiences was almost uniformly positive. Since several of the songs had remained in constant circulation since 1935, becoming “an authentic part of our musical heritage,” as Brooks Atkinson put it, people were glad to have the opportunity to hear them performed onstage again.⁷⁷ The production’s program listed the songs individually, and removing the recitatives sped up the intervals between them, a welcome development for many. The *Boston Daily Globe* reported that the audience anticipated and responded enthusiastically to the songs throughout the performance.⁷⁸

Reviews of the Crawford production commonly mentioned that *Porgy and Bess* was now an established American masterwork, and referred to the songs in

⁷⁶Cheryl Crawford, *One Naked Individual* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1977), 114-15.

⁷⁷Brooks Atkinson, “The Play,” *New York Times*, 23 January 1942.

⁷⁸“The Boston Stage in Review,” *Boston Daily Globe*, 30 December 1941.

glowing terms. The conventional wisdom about the 1941 revival is that the warm critical response it received “was all that Gershwin or Heyward might have wished for,” as Hollis Alpert puts it in his book.⁷⁹ However, praise for the new version was nearly always accompanied by criticism of the work in its original form—surely not what Gershwin or Heyward would have wished for. I wish to demonstrate in the following pages that the well known commercial and critical success of the Crawford revival was paired, somewhat contradictorily, with a substantial decrease in esteem for the composer and his score. This downside to the revival’s success has been overlooked.

One of the paradoxes of this production’s reception is that it is marked by reviews that simultaneously laud and denigrate the score, as when New York critic Robert Coleman writes that “musical director Alexander Smallens has eliminated the recitatives which some of us thought detrimental to George Gershwin’s brilliant score.”⁸⁰ It is as if the recitatives had somehow landed on the otherwise excellent score like flies, and Gershwin had never had a chance to shoo them away.⁸¹ Coleman was not the only critic to characterize them this way: the reviewer for the *Boston Traveler* claimed that the revival “has eliminated the recitatives and [made] other changes which Gershwin always wanted to make, resulting in a more fluid

⁷⁹Hollis Alpert, *The Life and Times of “Porgy and Bess,”* 138.

⁸⁰Robert Coleman, “Mr. Coleman’s Verdict: New ‘Porgy and Bess’ Better Than First,” *New York Daily Mirror*, 23 January 1942.

⁸¹DuBose Heyward had written to Gershwin on 12 November 1933 that “I feel more and more that all dialog should be spoken. . . . this will give the opera speed and tempo.” Obviously Gershwin did not agree. Heyward’s letter is in the Library of Congress Gershwin Collection (Box 65, Folder 22); it is also reprinted in *Gershwin Reader*, 204.

performance.”⁸²

Although the removal of the recitatives was a widely welcomed move, it seems clear that the replacement of recitative with spoken dialogue did the work some harm in terms of its emotional effectiveness and musical coherence. In 1935-36, few complained that the work’s musical and dramatic climaxes were less than compelling, but in 1942 they were described by one critic as “commonplace musically and unorganized architecturally,” while another called “the plot crises of the play. . . a trifle empty emotionally, or merely noisy.”⁸³ John Mason Brown claimed that “what Mr. Gershwin’s score lacks to equal the tension of the book’s emotional climaxes, it more than makes up for in color, in gaiety, in the sheer loveliness of its melodies.”⁸⁴ I have seen only one review that linked the production’s weakness in this regard to the cuts that had been made by Smallens and Crawford, noting that the “integration of action and drama is not as fluid as in the original production.”⁸⁵ The other critics laid the fault at the feet of the composer, who “could make the pulse of his listener tingle but. . . could not make the heart throb,” or “stood a little in awe of the operatic form in which for the first time he was working.”⁸⁶

There emerges among reviewers in the 1940s a newfound ability to say in one breath that *Porgy and Bess* is a masterpiece and in the next that Gershwin was an

⁸²Helen Eager, “Gershwin’s ‘Porgy and Bess’ Returns to Shubert,” *Boston Traveler*, 30 December 1941.

⁸³Robert Lawrence, “‘Porgy and Bess’ as Opera,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 23 January 1942; Wolcott Gibbs, “The Theatre: Negroes, Actors, Critics, Tots,” *The New Yorker*, 31 January 1942.

⁸⁴John Mason Brown, “The Theater,” *New York World Telegram*, 23 January 1942.

⁸⁵Rosamond Gilder, “Places and People: Broadway in Review,” *Theatre Arts*, April 1942, 219-20.

⁸⁶Robert Lawrence, “‘Porgy and Bess’ as Opera”; Brooks Atkinson, “The Play.”

incompetent composer. Louis Kronenberger of the weekly *P.M.* wrote that “Gershwin had not yet mastered sustained operatic writing,” and yet concludes that “*Porgy and Bess* is a magnificent musical play and remains the best promise we have ever had for serious native opera.”⁸⁷ Reviewers of the Crawford revival called the work “brilliant” and “magnificent,” but the revision of *Porgy and Bess* from its original format to a more scaled-back approach led them to a common conclusion: Gershwin was a great songwriter, but he didn’t know how to put a large-scale composition together.

Gershwin’s background in musical comedy came back to haunt him in the early 1940s, as he was transformed back from a skilled and thoughtful composer to a facile tunesmith. The reviewer for the *Boston Herald* called Gershwin “intuitive rather than skilled,” as though his innate talent alone had somehow generated a whole opera.⁸⁸ The *New York Herald Tribune*’s Robert Lawrence said that Gershwin “thought in terms of eight-bar song periods,” and that his score “lacks an articulated musical approach.” Lawrence went on to describe the entire work as a “happy accident, the bubbling over of an outstanding, semi-cultivated talent” rather than the “product of an organized heart and mind.”⁸⁹

All of this is very much in contrast to the respect shown Gershwin in 1935 and 1936. Some critics had seen him as overly ambitious, true, but none referred to his “semi-cultivated talent” or condescendingly called his magnum opus a “happy accident.” Those who had criticized *Porgy and Bess* in its first incarnation had done

⁸⁷Louis Kronenberger, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Is Still the Top American Opera,” *P.M.*, 1 February 1942.

⁸⁸Alexander Williams, “In the Theater,” *Boston Herald*, 30 December 1941.

⁸⁹Robert Lawrence, “More About ‘Porgy,’” *New York Herald Tribune*, 1 February 1942.

so primarily in the spirit of constructive criticism, for everyone (including the composer) expected it to be only the first of several Gershwin operas. It was seen as a respectable attempt at a forbidding genre, even among those (relatively few) critics who saw it as a failed attempt.

Virgil Thomson's 1935 article in *Modern Music* is often quoted as an example of the supposedly negative critical reaction elicited by the first production, but the article's occasionally snide tone was actually quite exceptional for the time. Thomson wrote, "I used to think that perhaps [Gershwin] was cultivating a certain amateurishness because he had been promised that if he was a good little boy and didn't upset any apple carts he might maybe when he grew up be president of American music, just like Daniel Gregory Mason or somebody."⁹⁰ His rather vivid description of *Porgy and Bess* as Gershwin's "real live baby, all warm and dripping and friendly" anticipated a common attitude of the 1940s: that the opera was born naturally and spontaneously from an innate talent, rather than being the artistic result of a conscious and intentional process.⁹¹

Thomson reviewed the Crawford revival in 1941, and those summarizing *Porgy and Bess*'s reception commonly describe his second review as less negative than the first. According to Hollis Alpert, "he revised his original estimate of the opera," and William Hyland's biography claims that "one of the most prominent and

⁹⁰Virgil Thomson, "George Gershwin," reprinted in *Virgil Thomson: A Reader*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, 150. Ethan Mordden writes evocatively of Thomson's criticism of Gershwin, "One hears as if watching a dirty little mummy open his poison ring." *Sing for Your Supper: The Broadway Musical in the 1930s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 103.

⁹¹Virgil Thomson, "George Gershwin," 27.

strident of the original critics, the composer Virgil Thomson, decided that he liked the new version.”⁹² This gives the misleading impression that Thomson changed his mind about Gershwin’s achievement, when in fact he still found the work severely flawed, and this time his criticism was largely unmitigated by his initial, startled enthusiasm for the work. He wrote of the revised score:

Mr. Smallens has taken occasion to diminish the thickness of the instrumentation and to make some further musical cuts. Gershwin would not have minded, I am sure. He was, if anything, too complaisant about permitting changes in his scores. And his orchestration, at best, was never very skillful or very personal, this particular score, which he probably made without assistance, being heavily overcharged with useless doublings.⁹³

Later in the article he refers to “badly timed passages,” “Gershwin’s incredibly amateurish way of writing recitative,” and “faults of taste, faults of technique, and grave miscalculations about theatrical effect.”⁹⁴

The praise for the work’s effectiveness and inspiration that bookends the review does not counterbalance the overwhelming negativity of the central two thirds.

In fact, Thomson’s “praise” for Gershwin is even more vicious than his criticism:

When one considers one by one the new works that the world’s greatest opera houses have produced with ballyhoos and hallelujahs in the past forty years and the almost unvarying pattern of their failure, one is inclined to be more than proud of our little Georgie. He didn’t know much about musical aesthetics and he couldn’t orchestrate for shucks; but his strength was as the strength of ten because his musical heart was really pure.⁹⁵

It is inaccurate to characterize this review as more positive than Thomson’s first. He

⁹²Alpert, *The Life and Times of “Porgy and Bess,”* 137; William G. Hyland, *George Gershwin: A New Biography* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 176.

⁹³Virgil Thomson, “Porgy in Maplewood,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 19 October 1941; reprinted in Virgil Thomson, *The Musical Scene* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), 167.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 168.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*

claims to approve of the changes that have been made to the score, but they seem to have tipped the scale from grudging admiration to disdain. Paradoxically, the more satisfactory production has decreased Thomson's respect for the work and its composer.

In this, Thomson's 1941 review *was* broadly representative of the criticism of the time. While there were fewer negative reviews of the Crawford production than of the Theatre Guild's, reviewers of the production were nonetheless far more likely to cast aspersions on the quality of the opera and the competence of its composer. Additionally, those who had reviewed the first production just a few years earlier frequently misremembered their original appraisals. For example, in 1935 New York critic Robert Garland had nothing but praise for *Porgy and Bess*, calling it "superb, a modern masterpiece masterfully projected."⁹⁶ In 1944, however, he wrote, "As one who found the original production by The Theatre Guild—that was some eight years ago—on the pompous side, this lighter, and certainly livelier, reproduction seems even more as-it-should-be than I had remembered."⁹⁷ He had not made any reference in 1935 to pomposity; on the contrary, he celebrated the work for having "guts, gusto and the courage of its convictions. Mr. Gershwin isn't afraid of a tune when he writes or remembers it!"⁹⁸

Another example comes from the *Boston Herald's* Alexander W. Williams. In his review of the Theatre Guild production, he had described Gershwin's

⁹⁶Robert Garland, "'Porgy and Bess' Scores," *New York World-Telegram*, 11 October 1935.

⁹⁷Robert Garland, "'Porgy and Bess' Back with Wm. Franklin," *New York Journal-American*, 8 February 1944.

⁹⁸Garland, "'Porgy and Bess' Scores."

achievement: “He has written a score which is impulsive, like the action in the play, colorful like the characters and with moments of lyric beauty. Mr. Gershwin seldom fails in the course of a long work.” Williams listed only two weak moments, the funeral for Robbins and the requiem for the fishermen, each of which he felt would have been more affecting if they had been set to simpler music, like the spirituals of the play.⁹⁹ In response to the revival Williams wrote, “Much that was tedious and clumsy has been eliminated. . . . The play in the first place was exciting theater, and sometimes the music tripped the action up and sent it sprawling.” In this later review he criticized sections of the score that he had not previously found fault with, such as the interaction between Bess and Crown on Kittiwah and Porgy’s murder of Crown. Since these scenes had not troubled him in the Theatre Guild production, it might have occurred to Williams to blame the new production, but he, like others, attributed the weaknesses to Gershwin, whom he now regarded as “an intuitive rather than a skilled composer.”¹⁰⁰ (In 1935 he had seen the opera as evidence that Gershwin had significantly matured and had “put superficial musical trickery behind him.”¹⁰¹)

By cutting *Porgy and Bess* down to a musical, Cheryl Crawford and Alexander Smallens created a hugely successful revival, but at a high cost in lost prestige for the opera and its composer. The reception of the Theatre Guild production had been complex because the work had been, defying expectations and raising questions about opera, American art, the role of African Americans in national

⁹⁹Alexander W. Williams, “Porgy and Bess,” *Boston Herald*, 6 October 1935.

¹⁰⁰Alexander Williams, “The Theater,” *Boston Herald*, 30 December 1941.

¹⁰¹Williams, “Porgy and Bess.”

culture, and whether a composer had to decide once and for all between popularity and seriousness. The Crawford production resolved all of these questions by turning *Porgy and Bess* into something easily understood: a great piece of entertainment spiked with catchy songs. Critics were comfortable seeing the work in this way, and recalled the original production not so much as challenging but as *uncomfortable*—which they ascribed to faults in the work, now happily excised.

The commercial success of the revival, and the retroactive criticism of the opera as first conceived, led to *Porgy and Bess* generally being widely considered and performed as a musical until the mid-1970s. This period was also marked by increasing hostility toward the work among African Americans who viewed it as demeaning and offensive. Certainly the middle of the 20th century was a time of tumultuous cultural change with regard to race in America, and the black reception of Gershwin's opera reflected that. However, the impact that the Crawford/Smallens changes had on that reception should not be underestimated. In 1935-36, when *Porgy and Bess* had the prestige of opera, the black press was generally well disposed to the work, particularly because of the opportunity and respect that it provided its African American performers. Composer Hall Johnson, and critic P. L. Prattis of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, found the opera's score unconvincing as black music, but they did not complain about its dramatic content.¹⁰² Only the *Afro-American's* Ralph

¹⁰²Hall Johnson, "Porgy and Bess"; P. L. Prattis, "'Porgy and Bess' Is a Show Window Woman: Has Form and Beauty But Is Only a Dummy," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 15 February 1936. Prattis's subtitle captures the gist of his criticism well: "Gershwin Has Composed an Iridescent Score, But Victor Herbert Could See Himself Under George's Sequin-like Musical Periods—Has Only a Dash of Negro Flavor."

Matthews criticized the opera for trotting out the usual stereotypes about the sexual immorality of black women, and his criticism was answered promptly by an African American orchestra conductor who urged him to consider that immoral female characters of all races were a staple of *opera*.¹⁰³ The genre of *Porgy and Bess* was essential to answering Matthews's charge.

In the 1940s, the attitudes of black reviewers began to change. They were not as polarized by the work as they would become in the 1950s, but the lavishness of their praise for the performers was no longer matched by similar enthusiasm for the work. Wrote Dan Burley for the *New York Amsterdam Star-News* in 1942, "While there will be many colored theatregoers who will see 'Porgy and Bess' and come away with the usual complaint, 'why don't they show us as we are?' the fact is evident that the Gershwin-Heyward conception of Negro life will have to do until some Negro takes the time to write one that will be acceptable."¹⁰⁴ Burley spends the rest of the review describing the cast members' achievements, and the implication is clear: *Porgy and Bess* is still worthwhile as a vehicle for talented African American singers and actors, but without an ambitious form to match the ambitions of its performers, it is not worth much discussion.

¹⁰³Ralph Matthews, "Every Broadway Play to Date Has Shown Our Women as Prostitutes," *Afro-American*, 26 October 1935; W. Llewellyn Wilson, "Most Feminine Characters Were Pretty Bad Lot, Baltimore Director Points Out," *Afro-American*, 9 November 1935.

¹⁰⁴Dan Burley, "'Porgy and Bess' Scores Hit With Most of Original Cast," *New York Amsterdam Star-News*, 31 January 1942.

The Breen-Davis Touring Production (1952-56)

With the Theatre Guild production, no question had been more pressing for critics than genre: had Gershwin created, at last, the great American opera, and had he been wise to try? The Crawford revival, by turning *Porgy and Bess* from an opera into a musical, had also elicited much discussion about genre, most of it centered on the popular belief that the work was better in this less “pretentious” format.

The production directed by Robert Breen marked a turning point away from this focus on genre in the reception of *Porgy and Bess*. This was due to a number of factors. First, the United States had become a global superpower in the wake of World War II, and the cultural insecurity that marked the 1930s-era discussion of whether Gershwin’s opera measured up to European standards was far less prevalent in the 1950s. Second, the Crawford production had established that the songs of *Porgy and Bess* were its *raison d’être*, thus taking the emphasis off of the work as a whole. Who cared whether the dialogue was sung or spoken, as long as one didn’t have to wait more than a few minutes between hit songs?

Although genre was no longer a major point of contention for the Breen production, that does not mean that the genre of *Porgy and Bess* had been settled. Breen and music director Alexander Smallens attempted to give the score the fast pacing of a musical, but they also restored some material that had been cut, not only in the Crawford revival but during the Theatre Guild run, such as the “Buzzard Song.” Smallens also increased the size of the orchestra from the pared-back one used

for the Crawford revival, and some recitatives were restored.¹⁰⁵

These restorations led many critics to assume that the Breen production marked a return to the full, original Gershwin score, and although most of them had applauded the cuts made for the revival in the 1940s, they applauded again what they believed to be a return to the authentic Gershwinian version. Nevertheless, critics did not return to the composer's own designation, instead using a wide array of labels to categorize *Porgy and Bess*, from "Negro opera" to "America's greatest musical" to the vague "Gershwin folk classic."¹⁰⁶ The disagreement implicit in this range of designations seldom provoked any real discussion of the work's genre, as it had in 1935-36; in the 1950s it was sufficient to acknowledge that the work's category was somewhat obscure. Wrote John Rosenfield in the *Dallas Morning News*, it was "called folk opera, operetta or musical comedy according to how you look at it. Defying classification, 'Porgy and Bess' ranks as a theatrical creation comparable with 'Show Boat' and somewhat higher as musical composition."¹⁰⁷

While critics no longer scrutinized *Porgy and Bess* to see if it was the

¹⁰⁵It is not possible to tell from the reception exactly how much recitative was restored. The critics offer widely differing accounts; for instance, the *New York Post's* Richard Watts, Jr., says that the production "go[es] back to the original Gershwin operatic form, instead of breaking it up into the combination of straight dialogue and songs that the otherwise admirable revival of 1942 made of it" ("The Return of 'Porgy and Bess,'" 10 March 1953), while Irving Kolodin writes that "virtually all of the unsuitable recitative has been eliminated" ("Music to My Ears," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 28 March 1953, 27). According to Dr. Alan Woods, Director of the Jerome Lawrence & Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute at Ohio State University, the majority of the text was sung, with only a few lines (such as Porgy's "How far New York" in Act 3) spoken, for emphasis. (Personal correspondence, 28 November 2006.)

¹⁰⁶George Daniels, "Should 'Porgy and Bess' Be Taken Abroad Is Question American Negroes Cannot Agree On," *Chicago Defender*, 17 April 1954; "New 'Porgy and Bess' Has Fabulous Career," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 24 November 1953; Herman Kogan, "'Porgy' Even Greater from Seats in Rear," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 15 July 1952.

¹⁰⁷John Rosenfield, "Passing Show: How Big D Got 'Porgy' As Opener," *Dallas Morning News*, 8 June 1952.

masterpiece that would finally put the United States on the operatic map—this was a less pressing issue after the war had put the nation on the political map in a much bigger way—a new nationalistic goal was fitted to the work. The Breen production was sent abroad, under the auspices and financial sponsorship of the U.S. State Department, as an instrument of pro-American propaganda. Between 1952 and 1956, it not only toured North America, it appeared in countries spanning Western Europe, the Eastern Bloc, the Middle East, North Africa, and South and Central America.

The propagandistic purpose of exporting *Porgy and Bess* was twofold. First, the appalling treatment of African Americans in many parts of the U.S. was a major public relations problem during the Cold War, when the government was trying to position America as a beacon of justice and freedom, in contrast to the Communist bloc. The State Department hoped that Breen's cast members, who were elegant, highly educated, and publicly entrusted with an important role as representatives of their country abroad, would provide striking evidence that African Americans were not all downtrodden and thwarted in their ambitions. This was the most controversial aspect of the production, and will be addressed in the next chapter.

The second purpose of the tour was to build goodwill for the United States by exporting a charismatic group of performers in an effective, entertaining, and distinctively American show. These are the terms in which *Porgy and Bess* was discussed by critics in this period: the important thing was not that the work be artistically excellent, but that it be likeable. And although the excellence of Gershwin's creation was, like its genre, a matter of opinion, its Americanness and the

appeal of its songs were virtually beyond dispute.

Gershwin received a good deal more praise and respect from reviewers in 1952-56 than he had during the Crawford revival, but the terms of approbation made it clear that it was not for his achievement as an opera composer that his reputation was being rehabilitated. Rather, it was for his innate, almost instinctual ability to write melodies that won friends and influenced people.¹⁰⁸ The image of Gershwin as a flawed, genial, unwitting genius, which had been a major theme of *Porgy and Bess* criticism in the 1940s, was all the more appealing in the 1950s because it counterbalanced the flagrantly propagandistic use to which the work was being put.

As a result, much of the praise hinged on the score's honesty and emotional appeal. Harold Clurman of *The Nation* wrote that "the quality of its emotion is one which communicates itself easily and directly, and one accepts it without critical cavil.... It is as if a skilful popular composer were trying to reach some area of feeling beyond the clatter and glister of 'Broadway's' surface, an area purer, richer, more tender than what others were satisfied with."¹⁰⁹ Here, Gershwin's ambition in writing *Porgy and Bess* was not a matter of aspiring to a higher-browed genre, but of seeking a deeper, more human way of communicating. Clurman's review, except for referring to Broadway and calling the libretto "a Negro folk tale," does not address genre at all,

¹⁰⁸This is a major theme in Leonard Bernstein's 1955 essay, "Why Don't You Run Upstairs and Write a Nice Gershwin Tune?" In the essay, which is a fictional dialogue between Bernstein and his "Professional Manager," the latter says of Gershwin, "He wrote tunes, dozens of them, simple tunes that the world could sing and remember and want to sing again. He wrote for people, not for critics." Leonard Bernstein, *The Joy of Music* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978); reprinted in *Gershwin Reader*, 295.

¹⁰⁹Harold Clurman, "Theater," *The Nation*, 28 March 1953, 272.

only emotion.

Other critics expressed the work's emotional impact in more visceral terms. One writer described the world tour: "*Porgy and Bess* was singing and prancing its big, warm, wild heart out"—making the piece seem more like some sort of delightful trained animal than somebody's opera, and certainly far from a calculated political tool.¹¹⁰ Another, Robert C. Ruark, wrote of his "great fund of sentiment for 'Porgy and Bess'" and the fact that "it affects me so I feel I got [*sic*] to do something reckless. Once, after hearing 'Summertime' for the first time, I quit a dues-paying, God-fearing government job in Washington and romped off to Germany in the merchant marine. Next time I heard it I whizzed off to war." Ruark veered from this particularly idiosyncratic reaction to an approving assertion that the work "poses no sociological question, carries no veiled message, packs no propaganda. . . . It is merely a sad love story surrounded by some of the finest Gershwin tunes."¹¹¹

Douglas Watt's review for the *New York Sunday News* captures a number of salient aspects of the Breen production's domestic reception. Watt wrote that "the American masterpiece has found its true mission as a minister of good-will." He went on:

The force of 'Porgy and Bess' is ever amazing. It is not a perfect work; it is even, in some ways, an inept one. Gian-Carlo Menotti writes more fluent operas, and Rodgers and Hammerstein write their light musical plays with greater assurance. But none of these things matter. The bursting vitality and enormous conviction of 'Porgy and Bess' sweep aside all other considerations. A unique creation, it makes its own rules.¹¹²

¹¹⁰Ira Wolfert, "'Porgy and Bess': Ambassadors at Large," *The Nation*, 19 May 1956, 429.

¹¹¹Robert C. Ruark, "Bess, I Loves Yuh," *New York World-Telegram and Sun*, 25 March 1953.

¹¹²Douglas Watt, "'Ambassadors of the Arts,'" *Sunday News*, 17 July 1955.

Several points are worth emphasizing. First, Watt's comparison of Gershwin's composition to those of both Menotti and Rodgers reflects the now widespread indifference to the precise generic classification of *Porgy and Bess*. Second, it is clear from Watt's review that the compositional mastery shown by the fluent Menotti or the assured Rodgers is less valuable than Gershwin's "bursting vitality and enormous conviction"—in other words, his raw, honest appeal. The claim that, though an inept composer, Gershwin was able to create an American masterpiece reflects a view of him as a gifted but purely instinctive songwriter, a view that arose during the Crawford production and became politically advantageous during the Breen tour.

Although Watt asserted that *Porgy and Bess* "makes its own rules," he did not go on to explore what those new rules were. This may partly have been the result of the work's indeterminate genre, so that the "rules" of neither opera nor musical theater applied to it. But the real implication of Watt's lack of further discussion seems to be that the vitality and conviction of *Porgy and Bess* were enough to make it a masterpiece—and a worthy export—despite its serious technical flaws. In short, "makes its own rules" was a euphemism. Thus, the innovations that had been inspired by Gershwin's pluralistic sense of the American character were once again ignored, this time in favor of the politically expedient view that the opera was simply a unique and affecting expression of America's "big, warm, wild heart."

Even Alexander Smallens encouraged this understanding of the work and its international diplomatic mission. In April 1953 he was quoted as saying of the recently completed first European tour:

I wish Americans, all Americans, could have watched the wonder and stir this opera caused in Europe. The most serious critics discussed the work in the most serious way. They were not worried that Georgie was a Tin Pan Alley boy. They were not worried about the undoubted weakness and imperfections here and there. They realized that this was a unique and personal work of art. And the public at large, without bothering to analyze, knew it too.¹¹³

Again, the uniqueness and personal appeal of *Porgy and Bess* trumped what even its “Faithful Maestro” casually referred to as “weakness and imperfections.”¹¹⁴

In many reviews of the Breen production, the music received little concentrated attention. Besides general admiration for the delightful and beloved songs, and the occasional passing reference to the work’s technical flaws, critics tended rather to focus on the work’s emotional impact, its dramatic intensity (or even frenzy, often attributed to Breen’s direction), and the excellence of the performers. Consequently, while Gershwin received widespread praise for his masterpiece in 1952-56, it was not because he or his opera were better understood.

It is striking, then, that an article appearing in the February 1953 issue of *Etude* expressed an explicit comprehension of exactly how Gershwin’s Americanness manifested itself in his music. In his reminiscences of his friendship with the composer, Mario Braggiotti stepped in where Douglas Watt had left off, explaining the new “rules” that Gershwin’s music—not just *Porgy and Bess*—had established.¹¹⁵

¹¹³Howard Taubman, “The Faithful Maestro,” *New York Times*, 26 April 1953.

¹¹⁴It is striking that Virgil Thomson also referred to Gershwin as “Georgie” and as a “boy.” I sometimes suspect that “Faithful Maestro” Smallens did as much harm to Gershwin’s score and reputation, by enthusiastically cutting the score and portraying these cuts as needed improvements, as Thomson did with his acidic criticism—yet it is Thomson, never Smallens, who plays the role of villain in histories of *Porgy and Bess*.

¹¹⁵Mario Braggiotti (1909-96) was an Italian-born pianist and composer, best known as a member of a piano duo with Jacques Fray. They were famous for combining popular and classical music on the same program. University Libraries, “Mario Braggiotti,” University Libraries at the University of

He wrote, “as an aspiring composer myself, I see in Gershwin’s works a clear road of a much-needed new school of music, a sort of 20th century romanticism—a fresh and fertile path leading boldly ahead from the dead ends of impressionism, neo-classicism, polytonal and atonal antics and pedantics, experimental dodecanesimum [*sic*], etc.”¹¹⁶

Braggiotti did not subscribe to the now-commonplace assumption that Gershwin was a less than fully conscious or proficient composer. He discussed how Gershwin created music at once emotionally compelling and distinctively American:

[Gershwin is] a “sophisticated primitive.” ... The latter word, *primitive*, should be defined first. It is the stylistic setting of a mood which is a pure outgrowth of the street chant and the dance hall rhythm, straight and fresh from the people—primitive in the musical blend of the races, creeds and customs of a new world: in one word, America. It is the riding, biting lilt of the jazz idiom, that genuine effortless savvy to rip a syncopated lick and travel in “groovy” fashion from head to feet and back again.¹¹⁷

This definition of “primitive” renders Gershwin the *opposite* of what the term typically connotes: naïve, simple, and unsophisticated. The complex populism that he ascribes to Gershwin’s “primitive” side is very much in line with the latter’s own descriptions of his music’s American “vulgarity.”¹¹⁸

Braggiotti continued:

The first word of my phrase, *sophisticated*, is the polish and the “asides” of rhythm, such as rubatos and their balancing rallentandos, the ad lib licenses in melodic embellishments..., and the subtle gliding through classicism, romanticism, and impressionism in the overall interpretation. In a nutshell, an

Maryland, <http://www.lib.umd.edu/PAL/IPAM/IPAMbraggiotti.html>, accessed 29 October 2006.

¹¹⁶Mario Braggiotti, “Gershwin is Here to Stay,” *Etude* 71 (February 1953): 14.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 63.

¹¹⁸See, for example, George Gershwin, “Jazz Is the Voice of the American Soul,” *Theatre Magazine* (March 1927); reprinted in *Gershwin in His Time: A Biographical Scrapbook, 1919-1937*, ed. Gregory R. Suriano (New York: Gramercy Books, 1998), 47-49.

academic know-how in the field of feel-how.¹¹⁹

This passage shows an awareness that the Americanness, and importance, of Gershwin's music was in its mixing of highbrow and low, of a variety of styles and moods, and in the composer's own ability to combine them into music that had both intellectual and sensuous appeal.

Braggiotti's profound understanding of the thoughtful, intentional heterogeneity of Gershwin's American music unfortunately did not spread beyond the covers of *Etude*. A few commentators made the connection between mixedness and Americanness, but this tended to be a matter not of musical understanding, but of the racial and political significance of the work's diverse collaborators. An editorial for the *St. Louis American*, an African American newspaper, expressed the opinion that "the make-up of *Porgy and Bess* is an excellent example of what our American heritage can mean. Here its very diversity is its central genius," going on to explain that DuBose Heyward was from South Carolina, his wife's "maiden name was a Germanic Dorothy Hartzell Kuhns [*sic*]," George Gershwin was Jewish, and the cast consisted "mainly of American Negroes in their own polychrome facials and features." The writer concluded, "Here then is a cross-section combination that CAN and SHALL make our nation the great leader in Democracy that it was destined to be!"¹²⁰ The work's nationalistic importance had little or nothing to do with its musical language; aside from saying that the love duets of *Porgy and Bess* were equal to those

¹¹⁹Braggiotti, 63.

¹²⁰"A Footnote Salute to the Collaborators of *Porgy and Bess* of Catfish Row," *St. Louis American*, 25 February 1954.

of *Tristan und Isolde*, the editorialist had nothing to say about the score.

This *St. Louis American* editorial, while being one of only a handful of enthusiastic black responses to the export of *Porgy and Bess* for political purposes, was representative in its relative neglect of the work's music.¹²¹ Even more than the white critics, African American reviewers and commentators focused on the politics of the production (as will be discussed in Chapter 3). The question of whether Gershwin had created credible black music, which had been of interest to critics regardless of race in the 1930s, was largely replaced in the 1950s by the more incendiary issue of whether the libretto was defamatory to African Americans, an issue that few white critics felt the need to address during the years of the Breen production.

William Warfield, one of the production's stars, was asked in 1952 whether *Porgy and Bess* was an accurate representation of black life. He responded that it was, to about the same extent that *Carmen* was representative of life in Spain.¹²² *Carmen* had frequently been cited in the mid-1930s as a precedent for various controversial musical and dramatic aspects of *Porgy and Bess*—even Gershwin had done so, in his “Rhapsody in Catfish Row” essay—but the comparison was less compelling now that

¹²¹ Another African American who was in favor of the tour was George Daniels, who felt that the work had “some of the best music of the world as sung by some of the most talented and thrilling performers in the world,” and that the residents of other countries had sense enough to know that *Porgy and Bess* did not represent all of black life in America. “Amusing Art, People the World Over Should See, Says Another,” *Chicago Defender*, 17 April 1954. I include this because it is easy to lose sight of the fact that the black response to the tour was not monolithic. Nonetheless, Daniels was presented by the *Defender* as something of a “minority report” (so to speak); Dean Gordon Hancock's opposing article, “‘Dangerous Propaganda’ Says This Critic of Planned Tour,” received more prominent placement on the page. Both opinions were printed under the heading, “Should ‘Porgy and Bess’ Be Taken Abroad Is Question American Negroes Cannot Agree On.”

¹²² “Ambassador Porgy,” *Newsweek*, 22 September 1952.

the work's operatic status was neither firmly established nor considered terribly important. For most white critics, the justification was hardly necessary; it was enough that *Porgy and Bess* "pulse[d] with inspiration and sincerity."¹²³ For some black ones, however, even though they liked the songs as well as anybody else, the work was a distorted vision of an unpleasant past, and they knew that its export had more to do with the real segregated South than with Bizet's imaginary Spain.

Return to the Opera House (1975-1985)

Between the Breen production and the mid-1970s, *Porgy and Bess* fell into disrepute: it contained some beloved classic songs, but these could be enjoyed individually in renditions by everyone from Ray Charles to Mel Tormé. The racial content of the piece was increasingly viewed as irreparably dated, and it had been performed as a musical for so long that the sense of it as a serious artwork, envisioned by its composer as a meaningful whole, had long since faded from the public consciousness.

The 1975 concert performance and recording of the complete opera, conducted by Lorin Maazel, marked a dramatic turning point for the work. According to one journalist, "Mr. Maazel and some of the cast agreed that the recording would probably not have been made six or eight years ago when militant black protest was at its highest."¹²⁴ The mellowing of racial tensions in the 1970s and the approach of

¹²³John Rosenfield, "A New 'Porgy,'" *Saturday Review of Literature*, 28 June 1952, 44.

¹²⁴Paul Delaney, "Maazel and Cleveland Orchestra Record the First Complete 'Porgy and Bess' in Stereo," *New York Times*, 24 August 1975.

the national bicentennial both helped to make the work's resurrection possible, but there was another factor that paved the way: because the production was first a concert performance and then a sound recording, the Maazel version put the emphasis squarely on the music. The restoration of the opera to its original format, the recording's seriousness of tone and intent, and the excellence of the performance all encouraged reviewers to respond to the work as an opera and to put on the back burner their concerns about the libretto and its racial elements. Critics were safe, as it were, to reconsider the musical merits of *Porgy and Bess*, because its score was undiluted by troubling visual elements. Irving Kolodin wrote in the *Saturday Review* that the recording offered listeners, for the first time, the opportunity "to measure precisely Gershwin's success in achieving what he set out to do," and concluded that *Porgy and Bess* "makes a congruent whole."¹²⁵

A year later, the critical reaction to the Houston Grand Opera production showed that a remarkable shift in attitude toward the work and its composer was taking place. First of all, the return of *Porgy and Bess* to the ranks of opera had a direct impact on how critics judged its racial content. At this late date, white critics could no longer ignore the presence of stereotypes in the libretto, but some of them noted that many great operas were beloved despite being littered with racial and ethnic caricatures, and that the Gershwin-Heyward work, being an opera, should be

¹²⁵Irving Kolodin, "Porgy: Complete and Incomplete," *Saturday Review*, 12 June 1976. In his review, Kolodin compared the Maazel recording to the somewhat less complete Columbia-Odyssey recording conducted by Lehman Engel and released in 1951. He preferred the earlier recording, due to its more compelling performances and stronger sense of place, even though it presented the work more as "a sequence of glorious songs and ensembles connected by a tissue of drama" than as a unified opera.

treated with the same leniency. As Speight Jenkins put it, “If there be any to criticize the subject matter or the dialect as derogatory to the black, so then should the Italian Anti-defamation League attack. . . ‘Cavalleria’ as a caricature of Italian temper or the German-American object to the pomposity of Wagner’s masters.”¹²⁶

Some reviewers went further, arguing that Gershwin’s complete score, particularly when performed so admirably, actually transformed the problematic libretto. This was a change from the perspective of some critics in the 1950s and 1960s, that the problems of the libretto were made up for by the good songs, with the implication that the songs did not actually affect the meaning of the libretto or vice versa.¹²⁷ In 1976, critics saw the music not just as a candy coating that made the distasteful libretto palatable, but as actually changing its meaning. Jack Kroll wrote in *Newsweek* that “what is patronizingly picturesque in DuBose Heyward’s libretto becomes urgent and warm in Gershwin’s music.” He admitted that “what Gershwin called his ‘folk opera’ does carry all of the romantic attitudes of whites toward Negroes during the Jazz Age, but Gershwin transcends these by the fraternal force that reaches out in the very texture of his music.”¹²⁸ It took a fully operatic staging to lead Kroll and other critics to this conclusion; hit songs alone did not convey a sense of “fraternity” between the composer and his African American characters and cultural sources.

¹²⁶Speight Jenkins, “‘Porgy’ Is Alive and Well in Philly,” *New York Post*, 14 July 1976.

¹²⁷ See, for example, Raoul Abdul, “Music the Virtue of ‘Porgy and Bess,’” *New York Age*, 4 July 1959: “If the legend of Catfish Row with its crippled Porgy and its wanton Bess is to survive, it will do so for one reason—the magnificent score by George Gershwin. It is no secret that Dorothy and DuBose Heyward’s play, on which the folk opera is based, has had its day.”

¹²⁸Jack Kroll, “The Compleat ‘Porgy,’” *Newsweek*, 11 October 1976.

Another long-dormant issue, that of the music's racial authenticity, also resurfaced in the reviews of the Houston production. Although as an opera it was "allowed" to be less than authentic, more than a few reviewers heard the restored score and were struck by its credibility as "black music." Even some in the black press accepted it, such as the reviewer for the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, who described the opera's genesis approvingly:

Gershwin, fascinated by the play 'Porgy,' recognized it as a perfect vehicle for opera using blues and jazz idioms. After spending considerable time in Charleston, South Carolina, studying the "Gullah" dialect and gathering impressions of the Catfish Row natives, he composed the score for what he called a "folk opera" in which unforgettable songs... were tightly integrated with the drama.¹²⁹

Clamma Dale, whose portrayal of Bess won her instant (albeit short-lived) celebrity, noted in one of her many interviews, "I respect Gershwin because he spent a lot of time doing research. He had tremendous empathy for the style of black music. In some ways I think the music is more African than it is jazz. Gershwin had an affinity for ragtime—he loved the syncopation, which happens in the opera all the time."¹³⁰

The restoration of the work's recitatives, and other oft-trimmed moments such as the six-part prayers, undoubtedly played a role in the perception that the music of *Porgy and Bess* was more ethnically accurate than had previously been realized. Productions of the work as a musical had been dominated by the songs, which range from the convincingly folksy melody of "Summertime" to the frankly Broadway-style "There's a Boat Dat's Leavin' Soon for New York" and the ambitiously chromatic

¹²⁹"Porgy and Bess Opens L.A. Engagement," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 19 May 1977.

¹³⁰Howard Kissel, "Broadway Black Theater: Goodnatured Politics," *Women's Wear Daily*, 30 August 1976.

“Bess, You Is My Woman Now,” giving the impression that Gershwin’s stylistic inclusiveness was arbitrary and opportunistic. By performing the work as it had been composed, the Houston production revealed that Gershwin had created effective, sensitive, and virtually continuous music for all the work’s situations and characters. Marveled one reviewer, “The almost seamless flow of the work, the unity despite all the diverse stylistic elements, the heightened expression gained only from sung dialogue—these were the things we had to be shown.”¹³¹

The reevaluation of the opera’s recitatives, so long derided as inept, is one of the most striking aspects of the Houston production’s reception. Wrote the reviewer for *New York Magazine*,

What genius there is in this score! Those sung recitatives, which I had come to regard merely as Gershwin sadly overreaching his limits, now become passages of enormous skill and subtlety, full of little musical motivations that become part of the total artistic sweep of the piece. What a wonder, how this Jewish composer from Brooklyn so totally soaked up the black man’s music (not only the blues idiom, but a vast panoply of dance and folk language) that he could operate within this music as if it were his own!¹³²

The recitatives had not received this kind of effusive praise when the City Center productions had reinstated some of them in the early 1960s; critics had generally felt that they hampered the work’s pace and were musically neither interesting nor successful. Their more positive reception may have been partly the result of the Houston production’s generally more serious approach, in which context the recitatives surely seemed more at home. Another likely reason that the recitatives

¹³¹Ellen Pfeifer, “Operatic Character of ‘Porgy’ Restored,” unknown Boston newspaper, before April 1977; in Gershwin Scrapbook No. 27, in the Gershwin Collection of the Library of Congress.

¹³²“A Hit, By George!” *New York*, 11 October 1976.

emerged as skillfully composed and effective is that the Houston Grand Opera production marked the first occasion, at least in the United States, where a serious, operatic approach to *Porgy and Bess* was undertaken by performers with extensive operatic experience. The Theatre Guild production was the only comparably ambitious and complete staging of the work, and its performers, almost all newcomers to the operatic stage, can hardly have been comfortable singers of recitative, let alone of innovative recitative in Gullah dialect.

Other long-disparaged elements of Gershwin's score were also positively reevaluated as a result of the Houston Grand Opera production. The orchestration, for instance, was praised in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*: "It is a sophisticated, colorful score that gains from the appearance of banjo and piano in contrast to the comparative richness of the orchestra."¹³³ Even more noteworthy, however, is the newfound approval of the score's stylistic heterogeneity. No longer seen as evidence of Gershwin's "lack of understanding of all the major problems of form, of continuity, and of straightforward musical expression," as Virgil Thomson had once put it, now it was seen as a "wondrous mix of jazz, blues, gospel, Broadway and European romanticism... a treasure that has been hoarded too long."¹³⁴ Speight Jenkins, writing for the *New York Post*, praised conductor John DeMain for "balanc[ing] the piece on the high wire between opera (and impressionistic literature at that) and folk music

¹³³Daniel Webster, "A New Stature for Porgy and Bess—and Gershwin, Too," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 14 July 1976.

¹³⁴Virgil Thomson, "George Gershwin," 24; William Bender, "The Return of *Porgy*," *Time*, 19 July 1976, 64.

(basic black American, cut with blues and jazz).¹³⁵ The score's mixture of styles was now understood as a challenge, rather than a weakness.

Reviewer Jack Kroll connected this aspect of the score to its Americanness. He wrote, "Gershwin isn't a simple composer—Arnold Schoenberg heard something new in his work—and there is still an unresolved tension between Broadway and Bayreuth in 'Porgy.' But that's the American tension in Fitzgerald and Hemingway, too—it's poetry written on greenbacks, the million-dollar slugfest between idealism and materialism."¹³⁶ Kroll did not pursue this line of thought any further, and did not consider Gershwin's own statements about the contradictions and collisions of American society and art, which might have led him to conclude that the opera's collision of art and commerce was deliberate, not merely a side effect of its American provenance. Nonetheless, the fact that a reviewer in 1976 was ready to ascribe the "unresolved tension" of *Porgy and Bess* to something besides its composer's lack of experience—indeed, to see that tension as a profoundly American quality—shows that the work's stylistic innovations were finally beginning to be appreciated and understood.

An important sign of this growing understanding and respect for Gershwin's achievement was the disappearance of reviews that called *Porgy and Bess* a masterpiece while sneering at its composer. Most critics now gave Gershwin full credit for having created a magnificent, complete score which, seen at last in its entirety, emerged victorious. Harold C. Schonberg, the only mainstream critic I have

¹³⁵Speight Jenkins, "'Porgy' Is Alive and Well in Philly."

¹³⁶Jack Kroll, "The Compleat 'Porgy,'" *Newsweek*, 11 October 1976.

come across who unabashedly derided Gershwin in 1976, also bashed the opera, and its inclusion of “some pretty tunes, few and far apart” did nothing to ameliorate his view. Schonberg gave Gershwin as much credit for what he saw as the work’s resounding failure as the other reviewers gave him for its success.

Schonberg’s pan of *Porgy and Bess* is reminiscent of, and even makes reference to, Virgil Thomson’s 1935 essay in *Modern Music*. Both seem to be trying to prevent the reader from taking Gershwin too seriously as a composer. But whereas Thomson modeled an indulgent, affectionate attitude toward Gershwin’s “obviously well-meant efforts at mastery of the larger forms,” Schonberg showed nothing but contempt:

Of course the man did have a clever, brittle, superficial talent. He wrote some nostalgic tunes throughout his career, and in that Tin Pan Alley milieu he may have been supreme. The trouble with Gershwin is that he was ambitious and had big ideas that his talent could not begin to encompass. When he tried for something big, the results could be as puerile as his paintings. Gershwin spent a lot of time before his easel, turning out derivative, tight, pretentious oils—an equivalent in paints of what “Porgy and Bess” is in music.¹³⁷

The nastiness of this attack may have been motivated, at least in part, by the fact that Gershwin and his opera were being praised so effusively by everyone else. Schonberg noted early in the review that *Porgy and Bess* in its latest revival “has been universally received as the greatest thing since ‘Le Nozze di Figaro.’” He had railed against *Porgy* in 1965, writing that it “seems to have taken roots as an American classic, and everybody accepts it as a kind of masterpiece. . . . All I can say is that it is

¹³⁷Thomson, “George Gershwin,” 23; Harold C. Schonberg, “A Minority Report on ‘Porgy,’” *New York Times*, 17 October 1976.

a wonder that anybody can take it seriously.”¹³⁸ At that time, it had been receiving mixed reviews; in 1976, when it actually was being taken seriously and lauded as opera, Schonberg’s review took on an almost desperate quality. He decried the work’s recitatives, its pacing, its construction, its racial content, and its purported lack of technical innovation. He even lashed out at other Gershwinian compositions: “‘Porgy and Bess’ is largely, at basis, commercial, slick and sentimental. At least the ‘Rhapsody in Blue’ and ‘American in Paris,’ junk music though those scores may be, have a certain brashness and *joie de vivre*.”¹³⁹

Schonberg was clearly fighting a losing battle, as the numerous rebuttals that swiftly appeared in the pages of the *New York Times* and elsewhere attest.¹⁴⁰ Nonetheless, the fact that he was comfortable expressing such opinions so frankly and publicly does suggest that Gershwin’s status as a serious and meritorious composer was not entirely beyond question.¹⁴¹

The resurrection of the fully operatic *Porgy and Bess* led many critics to include in their reviews a brief description of the work’s production history. This typically followed a pattern, well exemplified by Kroll:

Since the first production, which brought critical confusion and financial failure, subsequent successful American revivals have treated “Porgy” as a musical, with severe cuts and spoken dialogue between the songs. In the

¹³⁸Ibid.

¹³⁹Ibid.

¹⁴⁰Deena Rosenberg, Edward Jablonski, and Stanley I. Schachter, “Musical Mailbag,” *New York Times*, 7 November 1976. See also Benny Green, “Gershwin and the New York Times,” unknown source, 11 November 1976, in Scrapbook No. 26 of the Gershwin Collection of the Library of Congress.

¹⁴¹Strikingly, Schonberg was an important advocate of two other American composers, Louis Moreau Gottschalk and Charles Ives, whom he praised for their music’s nationalism and innovation. See, for example, “Let’s Get to Gottschalk,” *New York Times*, 25 February 1968; “The Pulse of America Beats in the Music of Ives,” *New York Times*, 6 October 1974.

virtually uncut production by the Houston Grand Opera, now on Broadway, producer Sherwin Goldman has made it possible for us to see “Porgy and Bess” whole.

What emerges is a work of genius.¹⁴²

These summaries almost always exaggerate the negativity of the Theatre Guild production’s reception, emphasizing reviewers’ “confusion” and incomprehension in 1935. This provides an effective contrast to the sympathetic understanding being shown the work by critics in 1976. *Porgy and Bess*, like *Carmen*, is mythologized as having been rejected during its composer’s tragically short lifetime but finally rising to its rightful place in the operatic canon. This narrative, appealing though it is, is inaccurate at both ends: as noted earlier, the opera did not flop in 1935; and its triumphant return to the ranks of opera in 1976 did not mark an end to controversy over its artistic merit, nor its composer’s ability.

The Met production should have provided the perfect, tidy ending to the narrative that had been created in 1976 about the initial failure of *Porgy and Bess*, its 40 years in the wilderness, and its long-overdue coronation as America’s great opera thanks to the Houston Grand Opera production. The opera may have been crowned in 1976, but the throne of the Metropolitan stage still awaited. No opera—certainly no American opera—could be considered fully canonic until it had received a production by the Met.

While reviewers of the Houston production had based their narrative on the trials and tribulations of the much-edited score, the Met production inspired a

¹⁴²Jack Kroll, “The Compleat ‘Porgy,’” *Newsweek*, 11 October 1976.

different historiographical focus, on the fact that Gershwin's opera had had its New York premiere on Broadway, and was only now appearing in the nation's most prestigious opera house. A variety of explanations were advanced for the work having played at the Alvin in 1935, under the auspices of the Theatre Guild, rather than at the Met. Some blamed the benighted times: "The fact that the original production played in the Alvin had less to do with Gershwin's intentions than with the two formidable hurdles he faced: making a snobbish intelligentsia accept his fusion of popular and classical music and making the then-segregated opera world accept a serious work about black Americans."¹⁴³ Others pointed to Gershwin: "While he was writing 'Porgy' in 1934, the Met offered to produce it, but the composer opted for a Broadway run, which he assumed would be more lucrative than a few performances during an opera season already depleted by the Depression. How wrong he was."¹⁴⁴ Some suggested it may have been the Met that backed down from producing an expensive opera about African Americans, when its company was all-white and its finances were shaky.¹⁴⁵

There is likely some truth to all of these explanations. Whatever the reason they cited for the delay, writers in 1985 generally assumed that *Porgy and Bess* was now receiving the kind of "caviar production" that it had long deserved. Wrote Raoul Abdul for the *New York Amsterdam News*, "It has taken... 'Porgy and Bess' 50 years

¹⁴³Samuel G. Freedman, "After 50 Years, 'Porgy' Comes to the Met as a Certified Classic," *New York Times*, 3 February 1985.

¹⁴⁴Bill Zakariasen, "The Real 'Porgy and Bess,'" *New York Daily News*, 6 February 1985.

¹⁴⁵See Freedman, "After 50 Years." He cites Anthony Bliss, "the general manager of the Met and the son of the opera's chairman in the 1930's," as the source for this explanation.

to finally reach the stage of the Metropolitan Opera. On last Wednesday evening, the historic moment arrived when this American opera—like *Bess* in one scene—changed from *Woman* to *Lady*.¹⁴⁶ The prestige of the Met production, after the opera's lowly beginnings and decades in the musico-theatrical gutter, was a central theme in the 1985 reception.

The main question, then, was whether *Porgy and Bess* would emerge triumphant on the Met stage, or fall victim to overinflated expectations. In the many newspaper articles leading up to opening night, anticipation ran high; director Nathaniel Merrill, conductor James Levine, choreographer Arthur Mitchell, and lead performers Simon Estes and Grace Bumbry were all quoted extolling the work's operatic virtues and describing the culturally sensitive and musicologically authentic approach being taken in the production.¹⁴⁷

The reviews, however, did not turn out to be particularly good. Given that the Houston Grand Opera production had won ecstatic critical acclaim for its “complete” operatic production just a few years earlier, the blame for the Met's unsatisfactory performance should have fallen resoundingly on the specific production, not on *Porgy and Bess* itself. Surprisingly, this was not always the case. Because the production utilized the score in its entirety, and because this was the Met, many critics took for

¹⁴⁶Raoul Abdul, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Catfish Row Gets Caviar Production,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 16 February 1985.

¹⁴⁷See Joseph C. Koenen, “A Grand Entrance for ‘Porgy and Bess,’” *Newsday*, 3 February 1985; Valerie Brooks, “Profile of the Week: Arthur Mitchell,” *New York News*, 3 February 1985; Samuel G. Freedman, “After 50 Years, ‘Porgy’ Comes to the Met as a Certified Classic,” *New York Times*, 3 February 1985; Nan Robertson, “Populating Catfish Row on the Met Opera Stage,” *New York Times*, 5 February 1985; Bill Zakariassen, “The *Real* ‘Porgy and Bess.’”

granted that this was the definitive mounting of the opera as Gershwin had written it. Therefore, its weakness was commonly laid at the composer's feet.

For example, Martin Bernheimer of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote that "by playing the opera uncut, the company may respect Gershwin's initial ideas. But it also exposes lots of busy music, lots of padding, lots of repetition, lots of cumbersome filler between the great songs."¹⁴⁸ Peter Goodman of the *Long Island Newsday* also emphasized that the work had every advantage in this production, yet fell short:

Despite the lavish production, the glamor of the cast (Grace Bumbry and Simon Estes in the title roles, James Levine in the pit), the enthusiasm of the chorus and Arthur Mitchell's exuberant choreography for members of the Dance Theater of Harlem, what one saw was the work of an authentic American genius who had not mastered the essence of opera, that European art form.

Goodman acknowledged some unevenness in the performances, but he claimed that "the greater difficulty was the evidence that Gershwin, although he often ingeniously blended singing with recitative, succumbed to the urge to write pretty music that was not emotionally expressive."¹⁴⁹

Similarly, *New York Times* reviewer John Rockwell admired the "sureness and refinement" of Levine's conducting, but claimed that Gershwin, despite having "worked hard here to stitch together his tunes into a Germanic/Wagnerian leitmotivic package," had failed due to inexperience: "Too often, one can perceive the mechanics clunking away just beneath the surface; instead of an organic flow, as with Wagner at

¹⁴⁸Martin Bernheimer, "50th Anniversary Icon Met's 'Porgy' Goes Respectable," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 February 1985.

¹⁴⁹Peter Goodman, "'Porgy' Hits and Misses at Met," *Long Island (New York) Newsday*, 8 February 1985.

his best, one sees chunks of music juxtaposed, often very awkwardly.”¹⁵⁰ Rockwell did not consider that if the Met had taken a more understanding, perhaps less “refined” approach to the score, it might have produced a better result.

The fact that both Rockwell and Goodman made reference to European opera in their criticisms reveals that, even after several decades of the work being deemed an iconic piece of Americana, its differences from European opera were still not being considered as evidence of its intentional Americanness. Another reviewer suggested that Gershwin suffered from “an unfortunate American obsession—the need for certification on European terms before treating anything we do with real respect.”¹⁵¹ Again, that Gershwin tried to succeed at writing an opera “on European terms” was taken for granted.

None of these critics questioned that *Porgy and Bess* was, as Gershwin had written it, an opera. In fact, many reviewers of the Met production made reference to the genre debate being a thing of the past: “Let us try to dispose of the tiresome old argument about whether ‘Porgy’ is an opera, a debate that dates from the premiere 50 years ago and makes sense only if the word opera is defined so rigidly that it loses all meaning historically.”¹⁵² The new argument was over whether the Met, by performing every note of Gershwin’s score in the grand opera style he supposedly desired, had actually done him a “disservice.” Wrote Donal Henahan of the *New York Times*,

¹⁵⁰John Rockwell, “Opera: ‘Porgy and Bess’ in Reprise at the Met,” *New York Times*, 30 October 1985.

¹⁵¹Jack Viertel, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Gains Pedigree at the Met,” *L.A. Herald-Examiner*, 24 March 1985.

¹⁵²Donal Henahan, “A Good Deed, But a Disservice to Gershwin,” *New York Times*, 10 March 1985.

I am not at all reluctant to call 'Porgy' an opera; I merely suggest that it is not a terribly good one.

The Metropolitan production, predictably grander than the work should be asked to sustain, brings the work's weakest features into sharp focus and forces the ear to concentrate on them. Its strengths, the memorable songs and choruses, do not need a plush setting such as the Metropolitan provides, but they do not seem seriously diminished by being sung by first-rate voices....

... (T)his expensive 'Porgy,' in a version that restores virtually every scrap of music or text that Gershwin and his librettists ever wrote, continues to seem like a series of tuneful interludes rather than an integrated work.

Henahan wrote that "composers often have to be saved from themselves," and that "despite what its fondest propagandists have to say, the evidence shows that [*Porgy and Bess*] still works best when presented as what it is: an example of the American musical at its best."¹⁵³ It is striking that he did not consider the Houston Grand Opera's acclaimed production as a compelling piece of evidence for the opposing view of the work.

Andrew Porter, writing for the *New Yorker*, is perhaps the most blatant example of a reviewer misplacing blame for the Met production's weaknesses. He had seen "a buoyant, stylish, and totally enjoyable performance by the Indiana University Opera Theatre" five years earlier, and had felt on that occasion that "the genre scenes built into a coherent whole" and that "the more of the score that is done the better." Yet the new production raised for Porter not questions about the Met's approach, but "old questions about the work which I thought had been laid to rest. . . about the merit of both the score and the subject."¹⁵⁴

The tendency in 1985 to dismiss Gershwin's operatic intentions as overblown

¹⁵³Ibid.

¹⁵⁴Andrew Porter, "Musical Events: A Long Pull to Get There," *New Yorker*, 25 February 1985.

was not dissimilar to the attitude of many of the Crawford production's reviewers in the 1940s, and it was born of the same fundamental skepticism about the composer's competence. Like the Crawford revival, the Met production came only a few years after an operatic staging that had received respectful, score-oriented reviews. In both cases, the previous production's reception was routinely overlooked or misremembered in assessments of the current one. The reception of the Met production, like that of the Crawford revival, revealed the pendulum swinging away from the idea of Gershwin as an innovative, skillful composer. The key difference was that whereas the Crawford version seemed to show that *Porgy and Bess* benefited from being simplified, the Met's production was taken as proof that it suffered from being performed as written. The opera's uninspired reception in 1985 knocked its composer's reputation down a peg, and seemed to vindicate its 50-year absence from the Metropolitan Opera's repertoire.

Although most critics gave Gershwin at least a few licks for the production's failings, several also faulted the Met for its ill-considered approach. For some, the mistake lay in following the composer's intentions—that is, in performing the score uncut and operatically. Others felt that the Met had misunderstood the work in some fundamental way, either by taking it too seriously or not taking it seriously enough. In the former camp was Barton Wimble of the *New York News*, who wrote that the production was “a wax-museum ‘Porgy,’ almost as long as ‘Gotterdammerung’ [*sic*] and with half the laughs.” He complained that Levine conducted “the score as if it were ‘Wozzeck’—the whole musical fabric has the clogged sound and stiff-gaited

rhythmic paralysis of an outdated jazz opera like ‘Jonny Spielt Auf.’”¹⁵⁵

On the other hand, Edward Rothstein argued that the production seemed to take its own existence more seriously than the work being performed:

There is a constant gnawing consciousness that one of the main points of the staging and the singing is that we in the majestic Metropolitan Opera House are experiencing it at all: the fact of this performance of *Porgy* seemed, quite self-consciously, the main interest to be had. . . . A sense of dramatic casualness but determined theatricality seemed a hallmark of the production, which was so poorly enunciated... that several people attempted to follow the libretto in the dark.¹⁵⁶

For Rothstein, the Met’s “overblown” treatment of the work’s folk and Broadway-style aspects revealed a lack of attention to the composer’s intentions. He wrote:

Gershwin’s *Porgy* remains someplace in the middle, between the folk cultures that influenced him and the pop cultures that were his heirs, fraught all the while with the ambitions of the European high-art tradition. Any opera-house performance has to pay those ambitions heed, even when they fail; and that means taking the other elements seriously. The folk and racial elements of the work, far from being accidental to its theme, are essential to it—more essential, indeed, than the details of its awkward plot.¹⁵⁷

Rothstein clearly felt that *Porgy and Bess* was a far from perfect work, but his attention to its essential heterogeneity shows that he, like a few other critics, was pondering the implications of the work’s stylistic idiosyncrasies. For Rothstein, the score’s complexity was a result of the complex role Gershwin and other Jewish songwriters and performers played in early-20th century American society, mediating between low art and high. His essay paints *Porgy and Bess*, as well as the controversies over race and genre it sparked, as symptomatic of broader societal

¹⁵⁵Barton Wimble, “This Bess, She Ain’t My Woman,” *New York News* (New Jersey edition), 8 March 1985.

¹⁵⁶Edward Rothstein, “George Gershwin’s Heav’nly Lan’,” *New Republic*, 18 March 1985, 29.

¹⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 30.

tensions. Gershwin's motivations as a composer come across in Rothstein's analysis as more a matter of personal identity than of conscious art: "Gershwin was out to prove that he was not Sportin' Life, selling out character and soul for 'happy dust' and happy tunes, that he was, in fact, a Porgy, full of pain and sensibility."¹⁵⁸ But at least Rothstein did not write off the opera's Broadway and folk elements as mere slips of compositional technique.

Jack Viertel of the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* had a more broadly national interpretation of *Porgy and Bess*'s stylistic inclusiveness, and his use of the term "multidisciplinary" to describe the work suggests that he thought the quality was intentional.¹⁵⁹ He noted that the elements used were, "with the exception of the Grand opera influence, all native, and all familiar." Faced with a disappointing Met production, he daydreamed about a better one: "Would it be impossible to have a conductor who was as at home with show tunes and Duke Ellington and Art Tatum and American folk field recordings as with 'serious opera'? It may seem so, yet all of those musics are, in some deep recesses, in the heads of most Americans who have gone beyond rock."¹⁶⁰ While the wide-ranging nature of *Porgy and Bess* rendered it beyond the abilities of the hidebound Met to perform, Viertel did not think its musical language to be outside of the ability of most Americans to understand.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., 28.

¹⁵⁹The word encompassed more than musical style, including also elements of drama, comedy and dance. "There is certainly a better production down the road. It waits not simply for better principals, or a better conductor or director, but a better national theater that can fully accommodate all of Gershwin's sources. . . . What's needed is a production that can accommodate the operatic voices needed for the lead, and still be fearless enough to give the role of Sportin' Life to a Gregory Hines." Jack Viertel, "'Porgy and Bess' Gains Pedigree."

¹⁶⁰Ibid.

Although the Met production was a symbolic victory for *Porgy and Bess*, it marked a setback for the score's reputation. Critics assumed, perhaps partly because of the Houston Grand Opera's success with its staging of the complete opera, that *Porgy and Bess* should respond well to the Met's conventional operatic approach. When it did not, most concluded that Gershwin—who had, after all, always desired a Met production—must have erred in his composition. Perhaps the old conventional wisdom was right: the opera was best performed as the Great American Musical. Happily, there were a few reviewers who, like Viertel and Rothstein, looked beyond the usual boundaries of opera and considered the possibility that Gershwin might have been doing or expressing something beyond the ken of even the nation's most prestigious opera company.

Conclusion

In the years since the Met debut of *Porgy and Bess*, the score has continued its roller coaster ride, esteemed when a production is judged to be effective and criticized when it is not. The Houston Grand Opera and Met productions, as well as the Maazel-directed recording of 1975, featured the work in its entirety as published in piano/vocal score before the Boston tryout in 1935, but this did not conclusively resolve the question of how the opera is best performed. Charles Hamm's 1987 article calls "a myth" the idea that the published score is the most authentic representation of Gershwin's own intentions, given that the composer was actively involved in the cuts made to the Theatre Guild production before and after the Boston tryout. Nonetheless,

as Hamm points out, none of these cuts made *Porgy and Bess* any less of an opera.¹⁶¹

Hamm argues, in making the case that the published piano-vocal score need not hold every measure sacred as an integral part of a grand scheme on the composer's part, that Gershwin was not the sort of composer whose works depended on every note for coherence. He writes, "To my knowledge no one has demonstrated that tightly-controlled, large-scale tonal and motivic design was part of Gershwin's modus operandi, in either his pieces for the musical stage or his extended instrumental compositions, and I can find no evidence of such techniques in *Porgy and Bess*."¹⁶²

Given Susan Neimoyer's illuminating recent work on the structure of *Rhapsody in Blue*, it seems to me perhaps only a matter of time before someone finds the key to the structure of this sprawling opera.¹⁶³ This is not to say that every inch of the score is essential, and Hamm correctly notes that Gershwin himself was willing to see a lot of it cut (however reluctantly). But it is only right to search seriously for the ways in which the work holds together, not only dramatically but musically, so that all the cuts and changes that are made in the future will be in keeping with and respectful of the composer's goals.

¹⁶¹Charles Hamm, "The Theatre Guild Production of *Porgy and Bess*," 495-98, 521.

¹⁶²Hamm, 523.

¹⁶³Susan Ethel Neimoyer, "*Rhapsody in Blue: A Culmination of George Gershwin's Early Musical Education*" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 2003).

Chapter 3: The Racial Debate Over *Porgy and Bess*

Throughout its history, “Porgy and Bess” has never gained the support of Black audiences to any large degree. When it first came on the scene in 1935, Blacks who had any interest in the arts were struggling to join the mainstream of American life. They did not care to remember Catfish Row.

Raoul Abdul¹

In our present age of increased black consciousness and vocalism over black issues, the opera has even become downright embarrassing to many whites as well as to blacks. They question not only the Uncle Tomisms in the opera but the underlying conceit of the work—that Gershwin could set himself up as musical spokesman for the blacks represented in *Porgy and Bess*.

Charles Schwartz²

Among the barnacles of conventional wisdom that have attached themselves to *Porgy and Bess*, one of the most damaging is that because Gershwin was racially insensitive, his opera has always offended African Americans. This widely held belief has not only harmed the reputation of the work and its composer, but also hampered this complicated opera’s ability to foster productive critical discourse about the issues that it raises, an ability that is one of art’s greatest potential benefits. Because so many critics have come to take the work’s offensiveness for granted, they seldom consider the possibility that the music has a direct impact on how the racial content should be judged.³ All that remains for them to discuss is exactly *how* offensive it is, and whether the music’s appeal is sufficient compensation.

The most obvious problem with the myth of the instantaneous black hostility

¹Raoul Abdul, “Porgy and Bess Taking a Great Step,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 2 October 1976.

²Charles Schwartz, *Gershwin: His Life and Music* (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1973), 271.

³*Porgy and Bess* is not the only opera (or musical) to have its libretto judged without due consideration being given to its score. For more on this topic, see Geoffrey Block, “Review Essay: ‘Reading Musicals’: Andrea Most’s *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*,” *Journal of Musicology* 21/4 (2005), 579-600; Paul Robinson, “Reading Libretti and Misreading Opera,” in *Opera, Sex, and Other Vital Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 30-51.

toward *Porgy and Bess* is that it is just that: a myth. The African American reaction to the opera has in fact been extremely varied, with some critics rejoicing in the work, others abhorring it, and many falling somewhere in between. It is not the case, as some have suggested, that the few supporters of the work within the black community have primarily been those who have actually performed in it and who, it is insinuated, have had something to gain by approving of the work (or at least pretending to).⁴ On the contrary, many black critics have found things to praise about the work's musical content, dramatic effectiveness, and depiction of Catfish Row.

Ironically, for the first quarter century of the opera's existence, white critics paid scant attention to its mixed black reception, as demonstrated by Joe Schoenfeld's blithe claim in 1957 that the work "has never encountered any criticism from any recognized Negro source."⁵ In the wake of the unmistakable racial controversy over the 1959 film, white critics began to take notice of the fact that the opera's depiction of a poor, vice-ridden black neighborhood was not universally admired by members of the race in question. During the years immediately following the film, African American rhetoric about *Porgy and Bess* by figures such as James Hicks and Harold Cruse was frequently quite heated, and white writers about *Porgy and Bess*, no longer indifferent but not overly curious either, replaced their earlier ignorance with easy generalizations about the general dislike of African Americans for the opera. Black

⁴For example, according to John Andrew Johnson's dissertation, "Black supporters largely consist of performers whose careers have benefited from association with such a mainstream enterprise." "Gershwin's 'American Folk Opera': The Genesis, Style and Reputation of *Porgy and Bess* (1935)" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1996), 535.

⁵Joe Schoenfeld, "Time and Place," *Variety*, 19 November 1957.

critics such as Raoul Abdul, quoted at the beginning of the chapter, also sometimes gave in to the temptation to simplify the work's reception history.

In the years since the film, it has become almost *de rigueur* for those reviewing productions of *Porgy and Bess* to make reference to its controversial racial content. Sometimes it has been a major point of their reviews, as it is of Martin Gottfried's in the *New York Post*: "There's no use pretending that 'Porgy and Bess' isn't racially offensive. If you want to buy the work, you have to somehow accept its condescending, exotic treatment of rural black Southern people."⁶ At other times, reviewers merely acknowledge the fact before moving on to deal with particulars of the performance, as when John Rockwell of the *New York Times* writes, "As to whether 'Porgy' is unintentionally condescending and insulting in its vision of Catfish Row, perhaps only a black can respond adequately to that issue. . . . To me, 'Porgy' seems so deeply affectionate that any lingering naïveté can be easily overlooked."⁷

Gershwin's racial insensitivity, whether born of naïveté, condescension, arrogance, or some other shortcoming, has been widely taken for granted. (DuBose Heyward may have created the characters and the story, but Gershwin was the one who chose *Porgy* for his opera, and it is because of his music that the story has lasted.) The tendency of many critics to assume that Gershwin's approach to his opera's African American elements stemmed from personal ignorance, or from the

⁶Martin Gottfried, "A Promise Kept," *New York Post*, 9 October 1976.

⁷John Rockwell, "Opera: 'Porgy and Bess' in Reprise at the Met," *New York Times*, 30 October 1985.

benightedness of his time, rather than from considered and deliberate creative decisions, is very much analogous to their assumptions about why his opera is so varied in style and tone.

The fact that Gershwin was a talented and often fast-working composer should not blind us to the evidence, found in his words as well as in his scores, that he was also intelligent, thoughtful, and original. Although there is not as much documentation of Gershwin's racial views as there is of his musical ones, there is more than enough evidence to suggest that he was unusually curious about and sensitive to African American culture, and that unlike many whites of his era, he "was neither afraid of Negroes nor intimidated by the subjects of style and feeling that they presented in their ethnic version of American life," as the African American critic Stanley Crouch describes him.⁸

This chapter endeavors to "recomplexify" the oversimplified view of *Porgy and Bess* as an inherently faulty work by a racially insensitive composer. First, it will demonstrate that Gershwin was no more ordinary in his racial attitudes than in his musical ones, and that in neither arena was he particularly hindered by conventional boundaries. Second, it will challenge the idea that the African American reception of the opera has been monolithically and consistently negative, by illuminating the wide range of concerns and reactions articulated by the four black critics whose words are most often cited as evidence for such a view. I believe that these complexities, if more widely acknowledged, could do much to reinvigorate the discourse about the

⁸Stanley Crouch, "An Inspired Borrower of a Black Tradition," *New York Times*, 30 August 1998.

racial content of *Porgy and Bess*.

George Gershwin and Race

It has been well documented that George Gershwin spent a good deal of time in Harlem, listening to African American musicians in clubs and at rent parties.⁹

Countless well-off whites frequented the Cotton Club and other Harlem establishments in the 1920s and early 1930s, reveling in the exoticism and titillation being peddled as black culture, but Gershwin's visits to black musical venues were clearly more than mere cultural tourism.¹⁰ Verna Arvey, in a 1948 article, relayed the recollections of the composer's close friend, Kay Swift:

[Swift] remembers going with [Gershwin] at 3, 4 and 5 A.M., after their respective shows were over, to little places in Harlem where there were recordings by Negro artists that couldn't be gotten downtown. There the composer would listen intently, making mental notes and absorbing the style. Besides that, Gershwin was certain to be present at any concert or show in which a Negro was doing something new in music. If getting there was difficult, he would make the effort somehow and arrive in time to hear it. He admired Ethel Waters' singing very much and was grateful for the extemporaneous "act" put on by Ethel Waters and Bill Robinson just for him before he left for Hollywood for the first time, in 1930. He attended the performance of William Grant Still's *Levee Land* at New York's Aeolian Hall, with Eugene Goossens conducting and the incomparable Florence Mills as soloist.¹¹

This account conveys the scope of Gershwin's interest, encompassing not only

⁹See, for example, Carl Van Vechten's introduction to Edward Jablonski and Lawrence D. Stewart, *The Gershwin Years* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1958), 24; Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 54-55.

¹⁰For more on cultural tourism in Harlem, see David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981).

¹¹Verna Arvey, "George Gershwin Through the Eyes of a Friend," *Opera and Concert* 13 (April 1948); in Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson, ed., *The George Gershwin Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 23.

“vernacular” black music in various forms but concert music by William Grant Still. Clearly his conception of black music was not monolithic, nor was his interest.¹² The fact that he was willing to inconvenience himself in order to hear this music is a testament to it being more than mere exotic fun for him. And the interactive nature of his explorations is also hinted at, in the fact that his admiration for Ethel Waters was reciprocated by a private performance by her and Bill Robinson. Gershwin was neither an aloof observer nor a superficial consumer of black entertainment.

When the time came to compose *Porgy and Bess*, Gershwin took the advice of DuBose Heyward and spent several weeks on the South Carolina coast in June and July of 1934, listening to and interacting with members of the Gullah community there. This is further evidence of his understanding that black culture was not monolithic, for it shows that he was not content to proceed with his music for Catfish Row based on what he had heard in New York. It should not, however, be assumed that he thought he was doing ethnomusicological “field research” during his stay. His purpose was ultimately to enrich his *own* musical language, through what Irving Kolodin called (with Gershwin’s agreement) “absorption rather than reproduction.”¹³ Nowhere in any of the composer’s writings did he indicate a desire to preserve authentic Gullah musical tradition, or even broadly to represent black culture.¹⁴ His

¹²Carl Van Vechten once complained that the college-educated Tuskegee Singers were “forty thousand leagues away” from “the authentic Negro manner” when they sang spirituals. It is hard to imagine Gershwin ever making a similarly sweeping and prescriptive pronouncement. Quoted in Steven Watson, *Prepare for Saints: Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thomson, and the Mainstreaming of American Modernism* (New York: Random House, 1998), 205.

¹³Irving Kolodin, “Gershwin Writes an Opera and Harlem Cheers,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 27 January 1935.

¹⁴Despite this fact, choral director Eva Jessye gave Gershwin credit for preserving elements of African American folk culture that might otherwise have been forgotten: “He found and expressed

goal was to create music that was characteristically American and distinctively his own.

In addition, Gershwin did not maintain the objective distance of a researcher; his approach to the music he heard in South Carolina was frequently participatory.

DuBose Heyward famously recounted one such encounter:

The Gullah Negro prides himself on what he calls “shouting.” This is a complicated rhythmic pattern beaten out by feet and hands as an accompaniment to the spirituals, and is indubitably an African survival. I shall never forget the night when, at a Negro meeting on a remote sea-island, George started “shouting” with them. And eventually to their huge delight stole the show from their champion “shouter.” I think he is probably the only white man in America who could have done it.¹⁵

It may be questioned whether Heyward’s interpretation of Gershwin’s participation and the onlookers’ reaction to it is accurate, but one may assume that he truthfully depicts the composer’s willingness to jump into an activity that most whites (including Heyward) would have been too self-conscious or intimidated to attempt. Nor was this an isolated occasion; according to Kay Swift, the members of the black Macedonia Church in Charleston told her that Gershwin had often joined in their singing during his stay in the area, and had also spoken to them many times.¹⁶

His participation in black music-making, and the fact that it may on some occasions have been accepted by them, indicates something crucial about Gershwin’s

things in the Negro idiom that even the Negroes don’t know about today. Gershwin wrote one song for the opera in the old ‘pat’ rhythm—it’s usually left out in modern performances—that some Negro directors haven’t known the value of” (Doris Reno, “Eva’s Proud of Her ‘Porgy’ Choruses,” *Miami Herald*, 17 April 1965). I am not certain which song Jessye is referring to here.

¹⁵DuBose Heyward, “Porgy and Bess Return on Wings of Song,” *Stage* (October 1935), in *Gershwin in His Time*, ed. Gregory R. Suriano (New York: Gramercy Books, 1998), 105.

¹⁶Arvey, “George Gershwin Through the Eyes of a Friend,” 24.

attitude toward African American culture: he did not feel himself to be an outsider looking in. This is not to say that he considered himself to be an expert in black music. His orientation was not intellectual but creative: he was instantly captivated by the music he experienced in the South, and incorporated it easily and unselfconsciously into own musical voice. This is reflected in Heyward's statement that the experience Gershwin had there in 1934 "was more like a homecoming than an exploration."¹⁷ There seems to have been no separation in Gershwin's mind between what African Americans had and what he himself could possess.

It is for this reason that he had the nerve to compose an opera based on *Porgy*, to utilize in his composition as wide a variety of musical styles as seemed dramatically appropriate, and to declare that he had written his "own spirituals and folksongs," little concerning himself about whether or not his score would be seen as consistently approximating genuine black folk music.¹⁸ These controversial aspects of *Porgy and Bess*—its peculiarity as opera, its stylistic heterogeneity, and its questionable racial authenticity—are the direct result of Gershwin's disinclination to be conflicted or self-conscious about race, whether his own or other people's. Such a relaxed attitude toward what is probably the most contentious issue in American society is so rare that many critics have failed to consider it as a possible explanation for the audacity of the composer's artistic decisions.

Because Gershwin was not terribly concerned with "blackness" in and of

¹⁷Heyward, "Porgy and Bess Return," 105.

¹⁸George Gershwin, "Rhapsody in Catfish Row," *New York Times*, 20 October 1935, in *Gershwin in His Time*, ed. Suriano, 112; *Gershwin Reader*, 217.

itself, he was free to devote his attention to the problem of creating an opera that would be truly American. As discussed in Chapter 1, African American culture was a means to this end. Gershwin wrote in his “Rhapsody in Catfish Row” article for the *New York Times*,

When I chose *Porgy and Bess*, a tale of Charleston Negroes, for a subject, I made sure that it would enable me to write light as well as serious music and that it would enable me to include humor as well as tragedy—in fact, all of the elements of entertainment for the eye as well as the ear, because the Negroes, as a race, have all these qualities inherent in them. . . .

Humor is an important part of American life, and an American opera without humor could not possibly run the gamut of American expression.¹⁹

Gershwin’s now-jarring generalizations about “the Negroes, as a race” may be attributed in part to the fact that his article was primarily a defense of the opera’s inclusion of an unusually wide range of musical styles and dramatic moods, which was its most controversial aspect in 1935. By claiming that “because *Porgy and Bess* deals with Negro life in America, it brings to the operatic form elements that have never before appeared in opera,” Gershwin sought to justify his approach to opera by reference to the supposedly inherent characteristics of African Americans, the use of whose culture he was not generally begrudged.²⁰ He emphasized those aspects that his mostly white readers would have been comfortable associating with black people, what he called “the drama, the humor, the superstition, the religious fervor, the

¹⁹*Gershwin in His Time*, 112; *Gershwin Reader*, 218.

²⁰*Gershwin in His Time*, 112; *Gershwin Reader*, 217. There were some, notably Hall Johnson and Virgil Thomson, who felt that Gershwin erred in his presentation of black music and culture, but this was a very rare theme in the reception of the Theatre Guild production.

dancing, and the irrepressible high spirits of the race.”²¹ His willingness to avail himself of stereotypes to make his point may be disappointing, but it does not change the fact that he wrote a complex, ambitious work that makes extraordinary demands on the black performers he insisted upon casting. He would not have done so had he not respected their musical and professional capabilities.

His essentialist claims about African Americans set up his explanation for why he had chosen to base his opera on a tale about them, and here his nationalistic motive becomes clear: “No story could have been more ideal for the serious form I needed than *Porgy and Bess*. First of all, it is American, and I believe that American music should be based on American material. I felt when I read *Porgy* in novel form that it had 100 percent dramatic intensity in addition to humor. It was then that I wrote to DuBose Heyward suggesting that we make an opera of it.”²² It was the ability of African Americans to encompass both the highbrow and lowbrow elements of American art, and the full range of the American character, that attracted Gershwin to *Porgy* as a subject for his opera—that, and his comfort level with African American people and culture.

Gershwin’s unselfconsciousness about racial boundaries enabled him to turn *Porgy*, which as both a novel and a play self-consciously strove to be an authentic and realistic depiction of Gullah life, into an opera whose meaning he saw as personal, inclusive, and broadly national, rather than specifically racial or ethnic. This marked a dramatic shift. Gullah culture was something that Heyward observed from a distance,

²¹*Gershwin in His Time*, 112; *Gershwin Reader*, 218.

²²*Gershwin in His Time*, 113; *Gershwin Reader*, 219.

rather than participated in. He said wistfully that “the primitive Negro [was] the inheritor of a source of delight that I would have given much to possess.”²³ He had many more years of exposure to Gullah people than Gershwin received in his brief visits to South Carolina, but the air of wonder with which Heyward described the composer’s interactions during those visits suggests that Gershwin’s experiences were far more participatory than his had ever been.

Gershwin’s level of comfort with black culture, music, and performers, and his goal of creating an American (*not* “Negro”) folk opera, combined to help make *Porgy and Bess* a work with significantly different racial implications from those of DuBose and Dorothy Heyward’s play.²⁴ First, the play had been studded with genuine African American spirituals, which had contributed to the audience’s sense that what they were seeing onstage was culturally authentic. Gershwin’s choice not to incorporate pre-existing African American spirituals made the opera more obviously a work *about* African Americans, *not of* them.²⁵ He established at the outset of his “Rhapsody in Catfish Row” article that folk authenticity was not his priority: “When I first began work on the music I decided against the use of original folk material because I wanted the music to be all of one piece. Therefore I wrote my own

²³DuBose Heyward, “Introduction on the American Negro in Art,” *Porgy: A Play in Four Acts*, Dorothy Heyward and DuBose Heyward (London: E. Benn, 1929), x.

²⁴The novel *Porgy* is like the play in terms of its representation of Catfish Row as an exotic milieu presented for the gaze of outsiders. I focus on the play in this discussion because, as a staged work with music and live performers, the comparison with the opera is more clear-cut. Additionally, the opera largely follows the narrative structure of the play, which was quite different from that of the novel.

²⁵Hall Johnson made this distinction clear: “If the operatic technique is sound, no matter what the musical idiom, the result can be a good opera about Negroes. A good Negro opera, however, must be not only good opera but must be written in an authentic Negro musical language and sung and acted in a characteristic Negro style.” “*Porgy and Bess—A Folk Opera*,” *Opportunity* 14/1 (January 1936), 25.

spirituals and folksongs.”²⁶ Such a cavalier attitude toward the difference between his own “folksongs” and genuine Gullah music is reflective of Gershwin’s indifference toward racial boundaries. It also resonates with his statement of 1929, that his compositional goal was “to express myself, then, to express America.”²⁷ His desire to have the score be entirely his own was in line with this desire for self expression—a motive that the play’s creators never expressed.²⁸

A second profound difference between opera and play comes from the Gershwin score’s differentiation of the African American characters. There are certainly distinct characters in the play, and they were portrayed by skillful performers in 1927. Judging by the play’s reviews, however, the inhabitants of Catfish Row, including Porgy, came across more as a mass than as individuals; several white critics referred to them as a “swarm” or a “horde.”²⁹ By contrast, the people who make up Catfish Row in the opera are individualized musically. Although there is a great deal of choral music in the opera, reflecting how close-knit the community is (and how inspired Gershwin was by massed black voices), there are

²⁶Gershwin, “Rhapsody in Catfish Row,” *Gershwin in His Time*, 112; *Gershwin Reader*, 217.

²⁷“Fifty Years of American Music.” In *Gershwin Reader*, 117.

²⁸The street vendors’ cries in Act 2, scene 3 were reportedly taken more or less “verbatim” from ones Gershwin heard in Charleston, but this seems to have been the only instance of direct reproduction of folk material into the score. (DuBose Heyward wrote that the six-part prayer that opens and closes Act 2, scene 4 was *inspired* by a particular occasion on which he and Gershwin overheard the singing of “a group of Negro Holy Rollers,” but does not claim that the opera’s music is a reproduction of their singing. DuBose Heyward, “Porgy and Bess Return,” 105-6.

²⁹For example, Alexander Woolcott made reference to “the fluctuant multitude which swarms through the stately mouldering gateway and melts up stairways and through myriad doors in the old warren.” The subsuming of the individual into the mass was doubtless partly the result of directorial decisions by Rouben Mamoulian, who favored carefully choreographed mass movements; Woolcott praised him as a “brilliant general” who crafted art from a “wild, untrained, tatterdemalion horde of players.” (Since Mamoulian also directed the opera, however, the change from play to opera cannot be attributed to a change of director.) Alexander Woolcott, “The Stage,” *New York World*, reprinted as “Famous Drama Critic Says ‘Porgy’ Is Best Negro Play in Years,” *New York Age*, 15 October 1927.

nineteen solo singing roles, and eight of them receive not only vivid but *complex* characterizations, with music that conveys a range of emotions and attitudes.³⁰

Consider Serena, whose music ranges from the emotional maelstrom of “My Man’s Gone Now,” to the strident scolding that chases “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” to the chanted prayer for Bess’s recovery in Act 2, scene 3. Her music consistently conveys her power through accompanimental ostinati and bass pedal points (E, G, and B-flat, respectively), but it carefully differentiates the power of her moral and spiritual authority in the community from the power of her almost overwhelming personal grief. Note the difference between the quasi-improvisatory freedom of her prayer (often taken as an occasion for actual improvisation by the role’s performer) and the restraint of the melody in “My Man’s Gone Now,” which is measured out in creeping two-measure units as though Serena is trying to rein in her sorrow, only to burst out in a wordless wail at the aria’s end. The power and range of her musical expression give Serena a human complexity that she lacks in the play.

Ethan Mordden has eloquently made a similar observation about the variety of Porgy’s musical expression:

“I Got Plenty O’ Nuttin’”. . . sounds “easy”—better, fundamental—not because Gershwin forgot himself and deserted the Philharmonic for Tin Pan Alley but because he wants to exploit the folklike amiability of the tune to develop his protagonist. Porgy’s first-act solo, “They Pass By Singin’,” is completely different, more “classical” yet also drawing on a folkish sound at its climax. This reveals a complex personality in somewhat unstable music, a philosopher of sorrow: “When Gawd make cripple, He mean him to be lonely.” So “Nuttin’s” simplicity is character advancement: Porgy has been clarified by love.³¹

³⁰The eight: Porgy, Bess, Serena, Sporting Life, Crown, Maria, Clara, and Jake. Peter could arguably be included as a ninth, although he has less to sing than the others.

³¹Ethan Mordden, *Sing for Your Supper: The Broadway Musical in the 1930s* (New York: Palgrave

Even the most one-dimensional of the main characters, the relatively villainous Crown and Sporting Life, are given appealing and distinctive music to sing, which helps to emphasize the qualities—Crown’s bravery and sexual allure, Sporting Life’s sly charisma—that make them genuine members of the Catfish Row community, not just unwanted interlopers, despite the dangers they pose. By helping the audience to appreciate why Bess might be swayed by these men, the opera’s music transforms her from a weak and unsteady character into a complex woman in the grip of a genuinely wrenching moral dilemma (conveyed in turn, exquisitely, by her own music).

The care with which Gershwin differentiated his characters musically shows that he understood each of them as individual human beings, not stereotypes, and composed accordingly. This is unusual for a work created by whites about African Americans, particularly in the era in which *Porgy and Bess* was written. It makes sense, given Gershwin’s desire to create a uniquely American opera, that he should lavish such attention on the individuality of his characters—individualism being a hallmark of the national character. There is no evidence that he intended the subtlety and range of the characters’ expression be understood as a statement of interracial solidarity. However, if one wished to read a bit of activism into the composer’s choices, one might conjecture that by depriving the white characters of music to sing, Gershwin demonstrated an unwillingness to allow racial segregation into the

democratic musical language of his opera.³²

Another aspect of his lavish attention to character that bears emphasis is that it puts the superficiality of much *Porgy and Bess* criticism into perspective. While in the abstract the opera can be seen as perpetuating a host of negative black stereotypes—“Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks” in Donald Bogle’s formulation, along with a few others—the music itself, when taken seriously, shows how far its composer was from such lazy and thoughtless conceptions of his characters.³³ An appreciation for the advance that the opera represents from the play in this regard, as well as for the vast strides that Gershwin himself had made just thirteen years after his ill-fated, blackface one-act of 1922, *Blue Monday*, should help to mitigate the stereotyping charges against *Porgy and Bess*.³⁴

The opera certainly retains many racially insensitive elements from the play, including the free use of the “N-word” (long since excised in performance), the minstrelsy buffoonery of the black Lawyer Frazier, and the condescension of his white counterpart, Mr. Archdale. Neither does the ingenious subtlety of the score change the fact that the characters are not upwardly mobile, politically conscious, or otherwise models of African American empowerment. *Porgy and Bess* displays Gershwin’s lack of racial selfconsciousness in both positive and negative ways, and it is representative not only of American versatility and individualism, but of America’s

³²Larry Starr suggested this interpretation in conversation.

³³Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Viking Press, 1973).

³⁴For more on this early work, see John Andrew Johnson, “Gershwin’s *Blue Monday* (1922) and the Promise of Success,” in *The Gershwin Style: New Looks at the Music of George Gershwin*, ed. Wayne Schneider (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 111-41.

racial inequality and dividedness. While it is certainly possible to see the opera as a symptom or symbol of these problems, such a perspective does justice neither to the subtleties of the work nor the intentions of its composer, and should be understood as something other than art criticism.

“Recomplexifying” the African American Reception

In the summaries of black reception found in reviews of the opera and biographies of its composer, soundbites from four particularly eloquent African Americans have been repeatedly quoted as evidence for the supposedly monolithic and instantaneous rejection of *Porgy and Bess* by black critics: Duke Ellington, Hall Johnson, James Hicks, and Harold Cruse.³⁵ The consistency with which the same statements are quoted again and again—and, in the case of Ellington, are misattributed again and again—suggests that those doing the quoting are engaged in a game of “Telephone,” rather than being conversant with the statements in their original contexts. In the following pages, their words on the opera will be examined in detail and in context, both in order to demonstrate that these purported standard bearers of African American opposition were more ambivalent than is commonly realized, and to pay long overdue attention to the thoughtfulness and significance of their actual positions.

³⁵Edward Morrow, “Duke Ellington on Gershwin’s ‘Porgy,’” *New Theatre*, December 1935, 5–6, reprinted in Mark Tucker, ed., *The Duke Ellington Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 114–18; Hall Johnson, “*Porgy and Bess*—A Folk Opera,” *Opportunity* 14/1 (January 1936), 2 4-28; James L. Hicks, “We Don’t Need ‘Porgy and Bess,’” *Afro-American*, *AFRO Magazine*, 28 March 1953; Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1967).

Duke Ellington is the most often cited black critic of the work. Since the mid-1970s, his 1935 interview by Edward Morrow for *New Theatre* magazine has been quoted in the thumbnail histories of *Porgy and Bess* that reviewers often provide before going on to review a particular production.³⁶ Several Gershwin biographies, including those by Joan Peyser, Rodney Greenberg, and William G. Hyland, also quote Ellington, as does Hollis Alpert's book on *Porgy and Bess*.³⁷

The line from the interview that is nearly always quoted, "The times are here to debunk such tripe as Gershwin's lamp-black Negroisms," actually originates with Edward Morrow, not Ellington as is generally claimed. All of the above-listed authors except Hyland mistakenly attribute the statement to Ellington. Likewise, Morrow was the source of the statement, "no Negro could possibly be fooled by *Porgy and Bess*," another line often attributed to Ellington himself. These misattributed comments come from two framing paragraphs at the beginning of the interview and three at the end, in which Morrow attacks Gershwin's opera as a demeaning and exploitative appropriation of black culture and an abuse of black talent. Ellington, while critical of the work, is more restrained in his comments.³⁸

³⁶Examples include Raoul Abdul, "Porgy and Bess Taking a Giant Step"; Jack Kroll, "The Compleat 'Porgy,'" *Newsweek*, 11 October 1976; Bernard Holland, "Gershwin Bows at Radio City," *New York Times*, 3 April 1983; Kenneth Herman, "'Porgy' Gets a Cultural Makeover," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 March 1995.

³⁷Joan Peyser, *The Memory of All That: The Life of George Gershwin* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 251; Rodney Greenberg, *George Gershwin* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 196; William G. Hyland, *George Gershwin: A New Biography* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003), 173; Hollis Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 121-22.

³⁸Edward Morrow, "Duke Ellington on Gershwin's 'Porgy,'" *New Theatre*, December 1935, 5-6; reprinted in Mark Tucker, ed. *The Duke Ellington Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 114-18. It is worth mentioning that Ellington later claimed to have been misquoted in the published interview, although Tucker opines that although the "frank tone is surprising, the manner of delivery would seem to be Ellington's own" (115).

An oft-quoted remark that Ellington *did* make during the interview is that “Gershwin surely didn’t discriminate: he borrowed from everyone from Liszt to Dickie Wells’ kazoo band.”³⁹ The charge of stylistic promiscuity in *Porgy and Bess* was a common one in 1935, and the complaint typically had more to do with genre than with race: operas were expected to exhibit more consistency of tone and style than Gershwin’s did. What sets Ellington’s criticism apart and makes it so quoteworthy is that his own authenticity as a “black music” expert and originality as a jazz composer are widely acknowledged, so it is particularly powerful when he claims that the opera, with its “borrowings,” is neither racially authentic nor artistically original. Ellington’s choice of Liszt and a novelty kazoo band as two of Gershwin’s sources, in addition to being a playful pairing, highlights the whiteness and dubious artistic merit that he ascribes to *Porgy and Bess*.⁴⁰

Ellington says that the opera did “not use the Negro musical idiom.... It was not the music of Catfish Row or any other kind of Negroes.” (The fact that Gershwin had firsthand experience with the music of the kind of community that the opera depicts, whereas Ellington almost certainly did not, does not seem to have diminished the latter man’s sense of authority on this point.) Later in the interview, he singles out the Strawberry Woman as a missed opportunity for Gershwin to “get the rhythm, the speech, and the ‘swing’ of the street-vendor,” charging that instead he “went

³⁹Tucker, 115.

⁴⁰I suspect that Ellington invoked Liszt as a pejorative comparison, but I am not certain of it, and as a Liszt fan I do not endorse such a use of his name. At the very least it seems significant that Ellington does not criticize Gershwin for borrowing from, say, Beethoven or Wagner—or from an opera composer, for that matter.

dramatic! Gershwin had the girl stop cold, take her stance, and sing an *aria* in the Italian, would-be Negro manner.”⁴¹ This is a somewhat curious moment for Ellington to single out, since the street vendors’ cries of Act 2, scene 3 are among the most ethnically authentic moments of the opera, having been inspired by actual South Carolina street cries. It is possible that Ellington was reacting more to how the moment was staged than to the music itself.

A more fundamental issue is that there seems in Ellington’s view to be a natural antagonism between African American music and opera as a genre—that the European-derived conventions of the latter are incompatible with authentic black expression. Again, this was not an uncommon theme in the early reception (nor in later reception, for that matter); Gershwin’s choice of black musical styles and black characters for his opera was the root of much critical speculation about whether the work was truly operatic, and the composer’s “Rhapsody in Catfish Row” essay can be seen partly as a response to this debate.

What is distinctive in Ellington’s approach is that whereas white critics sometimes seemed to be defending the institution of opera from the intrusion of inappropriate African American musical styles, he does quite the opposite, arguing that Gershwin’s operatic treatment of black idioms robbed them of their expressiveness and authenticity. As an analogy he offers the difference between black jazz lingo and what he refers to as “decent English,” arguing that “fifteen-dollar words” cannot capture meaning of a directive he might give to his orchestra, such as,

⁴¹Tucker, 115-16.

“Now you cats swing the verse, then go to town on the gutbucket chorus.”⁴² Ellington insinuates that it is a rare white musician who can fully understand black musical culture, let alone contribute to it.

It is fair for Ellington to criticize Gershwin’s use of African American music in his opera, but he goes much further, ultimately dismissing the operatic genre as a whole. When Morrow asks whether he might write an opera or symphony himself, Ellington responds: “I have to make a living and so I have to have an audience. I do not believe people honestly like, much less understand, things like *Porgy and Bess*. The critics and some of the people who are supposed to know have told them they should like the stuff. So they say it’s wonderful.”⁴³ This portion of the interview has not been quoted by critics and biographers providing thumbnail sketches of *Porgy and Bess* reception, while “lamp-black Negroisms” and “Dickie Wells’ kazoo band” appear repeatedly. This may be because Ellington’s quoters have been using him as a famous exemplar of an African American who criticized *Porgy and Bess* on racial grounds, and his rejection of opera generally as elitist and incomprehensible is not related to this theme.

I would argue, however, that Ellington’s wholesale rejection of opera as a genre calls into question whether his negative attitude toward *Porgy and Bess* was predominantly a matter of race. When he goes on to criticize the Act 1 gambling scene, his bias is clear: “There was a crap game such as no one has ever seen or

⁴²Ibid., 115.

⁴³Ibid., 116. As Tucker notes, Ellington did do some work on an opera of his own, *Boola*, in the 1930s (p. 116, n.3).

heard. It might have been opera, but it wasn't a crap game. The music went one way and the action another. If a singer had lost his place, he never would have found it in that score."⁴⁴ Ellington's unwillingness to accept a stylized, operatic depiction of a crap game, along with his disparagement of the complex score's demands on performers, strongly suggests that his dislike of the work is based not only on racial grounds, but on generic and aesthetic ones as well.⁴⁵

Another key aspect of Ellington's critique, little acknowledged by those who have quoted him, is that some of his complaint was provoked not by Gershwin, but by how *Porgy and Bess* was being understood by white audiences. Immediately after his comment, quoted above, about the complexity and stylization of the crap game, he continues: "Still, the audience gasped: 'Don't the people get right into their parts?' and 'Aren't they emotional!'"⁴⁶ Ellington's problem with *Porgy and Bess* was multifaceted, encompassing a rejection of the score's racial authenticity and of the social and artistic utility of opera, as well as disgust that such a work should still be understood by white people as confirming their essentialist notion of African Americans as naturally emotional and unrestrained. The tendency among critics and historians to reduce Ellington's critique to a simple instance of a black musician deriding "Gershwin's lamp-black Negroisms" emerges as not only inaccurate but injurious: both to Ellington, whose *actual* comments on music, opera, and reception

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵In addition to finding the crap game too complicated musically to be a good crap game, Ellington's comment about singers losing their place leads me to speculate that the scarcity of opportunities for the performers to improvise—and thus their continual reliance on the written score—may be part of the opera's racial inauthenticity for Ellington.

⁴⁶Ibid.

should not be neglected in favor of a racially provocative and misattributed quotation, and to Gershwin, who is given a black eye by the implication that Ellington (Morrow) speaks for many African Americans in understanding *Porgy and Bess* as a perpetuation of minstrel-show stereotypes.

Hall Johnson, the other most-cited black critic of *Porgy and Bess* from the time of the Theatre Guild production, suffers an almost equally reductive fate in accounts of the work's reception. His essay on the work, published in the African American journal *Opportunity* in January 1936, is a particularly thoughtful, eloquent, and in-depth treatment of it, both as an opera and as a depiction of black culture.⁴⁷ Harold Cruse termed it "probably the best professional criticism on record" in 1967, and it remains a standout today.⁴⁸

While some scholars, notably Richard Crawford and Geoffrey Block, have looked carefully at Johnson's essay, most often Gershwin biographers and opera reviewers have seized on the same few pithy comments, again in a quest to demonstrate that African Americans have opposed *Porgy and Bess* from the beginning for its demeaning or inauthentic racial content.⁴⁹ The most popular Johnson quotation: "Mr. Gershwin's much-publicized visits to Charleston for local color do not amount even to a matriculation in the preparatory-school that he needed for his

⁴⁷Hall Johnson, "Porgy and Bess—A Folk Opera," *Opportunity* 14/1 (January 1936), 24-28.

⁴⁸Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1967), 104.

⁴⁹Richard Crawford, "It Ain't Necessarily Soul: Gershwin's 'Porgy and Bess' as a Symbol," *Yearbook for Inter-American Musical Research* 8 (1972): 24-25, 27-30; Geoffrey Block, *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from "Show Boat" to Sondheim* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 72-73.

work.” The second most popular: “It is only as good as it seems to be because of the intelligent pliability of the large Negro cast. . . . If these singing actors had been as inexperienced as the composer, *Porgy and Bess* might have turned out to be as stiff and artificial in performance as it is on paper.”⁵⁰

These quotations both convey the sense that Hall Johnson was fundamentally hostile toward Gershwin. The first emphasizes Gershwin’s separateness from African American culture, by highlighting the publicity surrounding Gershwin’s time in South Carolina and disdainfully referring to what he sought there as “local color.” The second contrasts the composer (“inexperienced”) and his work (“stiff and artificial. . . on paper”) with the performers and their “intelligent pliability,” suggesting a division between Gershwin and his cast that is belied by the active and collaborative relationship that led to the work’s creation and first production, which will be discussed in Chapter 4. By taking these quotations out of context, writers have made Johnson out to be a straightforward opponent of *Porgy and Bess* and its composer on racial grounds.

This is not the case. Johnson states that he has “always admired Gershwin’s music,” that he has seen the opera four times, and that he finds it “an interesting and varied entertainment” that “contains some very good Gershwin.”⁵¹ More importantly,

⁵⁰Johnson, “*Porgy and Bess*,” 25, 24. The first of these quotes appears, for example, in Raoul Abdul, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Catfish Row Gets Caviar Production,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 16 February 1985, and in Hyland, *George Gershwin*, 173; the second is cited in Peyser, *The Memory of All That*, 252, and in Alpert, *The Life and Times of “Porgy and Bess,”* 121. Probably because he is less of a household name, Johnson is more commonly quoted in biographies and other books than in newspaper reviews, unlike Ellington.

⁵¹Johnson, 24.

he acknowledges the composer's right to draw from a race not his own:

[Gershwin] is an individual artist, as free to write about Negroes in his own way as any other composer to write about anything else. The only thing a really creative artist can be expected to give us is an expression of *his own* reaction to a given stimulus. We are not compelled to agree with it or even to like it. It is not to be considered as just another photograph of *our* old estimates snap-shotted by a new photographer.⁵²

This is not to claim that Johnson's critique is generally a positive one, but rather that it is mixed, not wholly negative. The many writers who have cited Johnson in their discussions of *Porgy and Bess* reception have not sufficiently acknowledged the ambivalence he expresses in his essay. It is not, for instance, accurately characterized by Joan Peyser as she concludes her discussion of Johnson's essay: "In this instance, when a black writer finds the work admirable in any way, it is despite, not because of Gershwin."⁵³ Johnson finds the opera to be a hit or miss affair, but he gives the composer full credit for hits and misses alike.

It is true that much of Johnson's essay betrays a degree of exasperation with *Porgy and Bess*, but it is far from a knee-jerk reaction to a white composer's imperfect opera about African Americans. The frustration Johnson expresses seems to stem from two main sources. The first is that he is vexed by what he perceives as the opera's sporadic lapses into cheap effects and cultural inauthenticity, precisely because he finds so much of the work very good—not just effective in performance, but sensitively and compellingly composed. His disappointment with Gershwin's inconsistency is especially clear in the following passage:

At [certain] times he has succeeded in catching a real racial strain. For

⁵²Ibid., 26.

⁵³Peyser, *The Memory of All That*, 252.

example, the opening measures of the love-duet between *Porgy and Bess* [*sic*] have a delightful Negroid flavor which is already familiar to the composer and his admirers. And later in the opera, when *Bess* is trying to resist the ferocious blandishments of *Crown* on the island, she sings a few pages of such vibrant beauty, so replete with the tragedy of the minor spirituals, that most of what follows is made to sound a little more false by reason of the absolute rightness of this episode.⁵⁴

Johnson's criticisms are not those of a viewer predisposed to reject Gershwin's opera (although he admits at the beginning of the essay that he had originally approached the work with trepidation), but those of one whose willing absorption in a powerful and often convincing work was periodically, aggravatingly disturbed by moments "lacking every true racial quality," such as "Oh, I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'" and "It Ain't Necessarily So."⁵⁵ His criticisms of these should not be taken as representative of his opinion of the whole opera.

The second source of Johnson's frustration is that *Porgy and Bess* has been broadly accepted as a convincing "Negro opera" despite its flaws. He writes,

It affords quite adequate fare for the average uncritical audience without too much interest either in opera or in Negroes. This audience . . . admired the Broadway Negro style because it does not know the real and its intelligence is not yet insulted when Negro folk-material is mis-stated in foreign terms.⁵⁶

Again, it must be emphasized that Johnson took pains to assert that Gershwin was well within his rights to create *Porgy and Bess*; it was not cultural appropriation that raised his ire, but the widespread acceptance of half-successful borrowing—by Gershwin and others—as the real thing.

Many of Johnson's criticisms of the opera are best understood in this context.

⁵⁴Johnson, 26. Italics in the original.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Ibid., 27.

When he quibbles with the authenticity of “*Serena’s* beautiful lament in three-four rhythm which should, by all means, have been in four-four,” or of “Oh, I Got Plenty O’ Nuttin’” being “punctuated (or punctured), by a series of sudden off-tone shouts in the manner of the cheaper *Escamillos* about to enter the bull ring,—a style no Negro singer ever uses,” Johnson is complaining partly because no one else has done so.

The most emphatically negative portion of the essay deals with the direction of *Porgy and Bess* by Rouben Mamoulian (who is not mentioned by name). Johnson trounces what had, ever since his direction of *Porgy* play of 1927, been Mamoulian’s most-imitated staging idea: “By now we are fully and painfully aware that in all Negro group-scenes on Broadway there must be much swaying of bodies and brandishing of arms with SHADOW EFFECTS,—though this has not always been so stiffly stylized as in the present Russian Pictorial Edition.”⁵⁷

Johnson makes abundantly clear his cumulative frustration with numerous stage portrayals of black characters:

Will the time ever come when a colored performer on a Broadway stage can be subtle, quiet or even silent,—just for a moment, and still be interesting? Must the light revues always be hot, fast and *loud*, and the serious (?) pieces always profane, hysterical and *louder*? Always loudness! *Always any* thing makes for monotony and Negroes can *truthfully* be everything *but* monotonous.⁵⁸

He argues that “every person, of whatever race, who loves and welcomes new expressions of beauty in the theatrical arts” has a responsibility to support African American folklore on the stage in its true form, and to reject “the old spurious stage-

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid., 26.

imitations” created by “clever theatre men who knew everything about everybody but Negroes.”⁵⁹ Ultimately, Johnson’s goal is not to tear down *Porgy and Bess*, but to build up a public and critical demand for similarly effective works that draw more accurately on black folk culture.

For a composer whose output, including *Run, Little Chillun!* of 1933, was in more or less direct competition with *Porgy and Bess*, Hall Johnson reveals surprisingly little territoriality about the cultural capital of his race. At the end of the essay, he does argue that non-black artists are at a permanent disadvantage in their efforts, but this argument seems to be aimed more at inspiring his fellow African Americans (who would, of course, have constituted the main readership of an essay in *Opportunity*) than at discouraging Gershwin and his ilk from further attempts:

Only we who sowed the seed can know the full and potent secret of the flower. The fact that others try to master it and fail (while we are making up our minds what to do with it), should not fill us with resentment, but with pride and fresh determination. With the greatest patience and the best of intentions, all they can ever grasp is—a handful of leaves.⁶⁰

Johnson’s concern with the authentic expression of African American folk culture, which emerges eloquently in this passage and throughout the last page of his essay, reveals an essential division between his priorities and Gershwin’s. Although the essay is full of powerful insight and indispensable information about the work’s relationship to “real” black culture, it is predicated on the assumption that Gershwin had endeavored to create an authentic representation of that specific culture. Johnson even makes explicit his rejection of Gershwin’s more broadly *national* purpose for

⁵⁹Ibid., 28.

⁶⁰Ibid.

the work: “What we are to consider then is not a Negro opera by Gershwin, but Gershwin’s idea of what a Negro opera should be. The fact that it is advertised under the broader sub-title, *American Folk Opera*, does not disguise the specific direction of his attempt.”⁶¹

For Gershwin, black culture was a means to a nationalistic end: an exciting, expressive, and versatile repository upon which to draw in his efforts to create an opera that was distinctively American in its diversity. Johnson was disinclined to accept this use of black culture, or even to acknowledge it as a possible strategy on Gershwin’s part. In fact, he rejected it on two different grounds. First, he disputed the assimilability of African American materials, arguing that “the essential temper of [the Negro’s] *true* folk-culture is so unique that it must be weakened if it is to be assimilated.” Second, leaving racial issues aside altogether, he found *Porgy and Bess* to be too varied an opera, a hodgepodge of styles unsatisfactorily connected by awkward and unintelligible recitative.⁶² Johnson’s argument was in both regards a conservative one, in that he urged that black culture and opera alike be approached with respect, and without dilution by extraneous matter. Like so many other critics, he does not seem to have considered the possibility that Gershwin’s approach was intentionally heterodox, racially and musically. (Admittedly, such a consideration might not have changed Johnson’s judgment of the result.)

It must be borne in mind that Johnson’s essay is not a straightforward theater review: *Porgy and Bess* was an occasion for him to raise the call for more accurate

⁶¹Ibid., 26.

⁶²Ibid., 28, 24.

depictions of black culture and more skepticism toward inaccurate ones. This broader context has been ignored and distorted by those who have quoted the essay to show that Johnson opposed the opera, when in fact he generally *liked* the opera, but disliked what it betokened in terms of American theater dealing with African Americans, and its reception.

Were it not for this more sweeping purpose, some of Johnson's complaints could be seen as uncomfortably prescriptive about what black characters can and can't credibly do onstage. In terms of musical style, Johnson writes,

One basic quality exists in genuine Negro music which even the fairly musical layman must have recognized long ago. That is the quality of utter simplicity,—in theme and in style. . . . [I]n the heavy, involved treatment of his thematic material, [Gershwin] suggests sophisticated intricacies of attitude which could not possibly be native to the minds of the people who make up his story.⁶³

Likewise, he complains about all the singing during the hurricane scene, claiming, “One does not have to know the simpler Negroes very long to learn how absolutely quiet they can be indoors during a storm. Some even crawl between mattresses.”⁶⁴ In context, such criticisms make sense: since there were few portrayals of African Americans onstage and most of those were full of cultural fabrications, Johnson was using *Porgy and Bess* as an exemplar of what needed to be improved upon by black (and, just maybe, sensitive non-black) artists. Without this context, Johnson seems to be ungraciously slapping away Gershwin's gift to black performers of a work that *didn't* limit them to (stereo)typical notions of what African Americans sounded or

⁶³Ibid., 26.

⁶⁴Ibid., 27.

acted like. It wasn't folklore, but it *was* an unprecedented step beyond the confines of blackness as it was usually constructed—a step taken not out of ignorance on Gershwin's part, but out of creativity and ambition.

Hall Johnson and Duke Ellington have been too often quoted misleadingly and uncritically, as though their opinions were basically negative and mainly motivated by race, and with the implicit assumption that a black critic's remarks on *Porgy and Bess* are definitive. I hope to have demonstrated that neither man's response to the opera has been accurately conveyed by those who have taken a few sentences out of context. Looking at these two important critiques more carefully allows them to be fully understood and profitably discussed, thus advancing our understanding of the work and its complex reception. Another gain is that it becomes more difficult to be complacent about the opera's supposedly demeaning racial content when the falsity of the "African Americans have always hated it" cliché is revealed. If Johnson and Ellington thought *Porgy and Bess* important and ambiguous enough to discuss at length, then there must be substance worth discussing.

To a greater extent than was to be the case in the next 30 years, the African American reception of *Porgy and Bess* in 1935-36, though mixed, tended toward the positive side. Some black critics, like the *New York Age's* Lucien H. White, applauded Gershwin for "answer[ing] the question as to whether or not the American Negro's racial development can be used as a basis for a distinctive American opera. And in doing this, he has given an opportunity for demonstration of the Negroes'

ability in interpreting and portraying the operatic forms.”⁶⁵ Others, like Hall Johnson and Duke Ellington, were more ambivalent about the work’s racial authenticity. There is scant evidence of black critics in the 1930s having had a reflexively negative opinion of the work based on its plot or characters. I have come across only one instance of a black critic in this period criticizing the presence of demeaning racial stereotypes in *Porgy and Bess*: Ralph Matthews listed it as one of five offending works in an *Afro-American* article, “Every Broadway Play to Date Has Shown Our Women as Prostitutes.”⁶⁶ This lone example did not go unchallenged; two weeks later W. Llewellyn Wilson, the African American director of the Baltimore Municipal Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, published an article in the same newspaper, responding that there was a long tradition of wayward female characters in opera, and that Bess’s promiscuity should not be taken by “supersensitive” African Americans as an affront to black women.⁶⁷

Black critics have penned positive reviews of every production of *Porgy and Bess* in the United States, but the generally benevolent attitude toward the work that marked the 1935-36 reception was much less pervasive in the following decades, replaced by guardedness in the 1940s and escalating hostility in the 1950s. This was doubtless due to a wide range of factors, from broad social changes wrought by World War II to the fact that *Porgy and Bess* lost cultural prestige by having its more

⁶⁵Lucien H. White, “*Porgy and Bess*,” *New York Age*, 26 October 1935.

⁶⁶Ralph Matthews, “Every Broadway Play to Date Has Shown Our Women as Prostitutes,” *Afro-American* (National Edition), 26 October 1935.

⁶⁷W. Llewellyn Wilson, “Most Feminine Characters Were Pretty Bad Lot, Baltimore Director Points Out,” *Afro-American* (National Edition), 9 November 1935.

operatic elements excised in 1941. A factor that should not be neglected, and that I have not seen discussed elsewhere, is that African Americans had become increasingly aware of the fact that white audiences and critics were interpreting *Porgy and Bess* not as an imaginative opera that displayed the dramatic range and artistic excellence of its cast, but as a realistic tableau of a stereotyped “Negro existence on the half shell,” as one white critic put it.⁶⁸

Only a few months into the first production’s run, both Duke Ellington and Hall Johnson were worried about Gershwin’s opera being interpreted by white viewers as an accurate portrait of black life. There is much evidence that this worry was well founded. For example, Percy Hammond, reviewing *Porgy and Bess* for the *Herald Tribune* in October 1935, wrote that Gershwin had “spent two years in Charleston close in contact with its Negro inhabitants in order to become permeated with the atmosphere of Catfish Row.” The critic described “Negro life” as “dissonant [in] its barbaric cadences and colors,” and praised Gershwin for creating a score “at once civilized and savage, mingling jazz, spirituals, and the conventional arias.”⁶⁹ Hammond was not the only white writer to exaggerate the length of Gershwin’s stay in South Carolina, nor to display complete credulity in the work’s ability to musically encompass a generalized version of “Negro life.” These tendencies surely contributed to the disgruntlement expressed in Hall Johnson’s essay.

Some white critics went further, seeing not only the music but the characters

⁶⁸Cecelia Ager, “George Gershwin Thinks You Can Write Opera and Make It Tuneful,” *Variety*, 16 October 1935.

⁶⁹Percy Hammond, “The Theaters: Catfish Row Set to Mr. Gershwin’s Music,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 20 October 1935.

and plot as representative of all African Americans. The *Washington Post*'s Nelson B. Bell noted the opera's "fidelity to the inherent instincts of the race with which it deals."⁷⁰ In Philadelphia, Philip Klein praised the "spectacular trueness" of a host of stereotypes: "the languid and lazy roustabouts; the tongue-lashing women folk; the dope-selling smart guy; the longword-slinging lawyer; the song-singing mammy; the sing-song crab seller; the strawberry lady; the police-fearing inhabitants of this strange settlement; the principals in this weird but understandable dice game of life."⁷¹ It is true that all of these elements are present in the opera, but by distilling the individual characters into a list of clichés, Klein seems to embrace the opera specifically for its confirmation of the validity of racial stereotypes.

While many white reviewers misguidedly understood *Porgy and Bess* as a realistic depiction of African American people and culture, others were predisposed to take it, despite its genre and heavy plot, as light entertainment because of the race with which it dealt. Carol Frink wrote in the *Chicago Herald* of "kinky heads above rolling eyes pop[ping] out of the windows to contribute bursts of song or casual remarks to busy scene below."⁷² The *New York Mirror*'s Walter Winchell described Crown whimsically, with a bit of mock dialect thrown in for good measure, as "a strapping fellow—'all man' who causes so much trouble in Catfish Row, abusing Po'gy, stealin' Po'gy's gal, and killing people like he does."⁷³ There was much in the

⁷⁰Nelson B. Bell, "New Gershwin Folk Opera Given First Local Hearing at National," *Washington Post*, 17 March 1936.

⁷¹Philip Klein, "Porgy and Bess—At Forrest," *Philadelphia Daily News*, 28 January 1936.

⁷²Carol Frink, "'Porgy and Bess' Now Is Told in Song," *Chicago Herald*, 18 February 1936.

⁷³Walter Winchell, "Gershwin's Folk Opera Smash Hit," *New York Mirror*, 11 October 1935.

white reception of the opera to discomfit an African American reader.

It is not surprising that African Americans paid attention to what white critics had to say, since minority groups are typically aware of the majority's activities and attitudes. The reception of *Porgy and Bess* was of particular interest to black readers, so much so that some African American periodicals reprinted entire white-authored articles from other publications. The *Afro-American* provided its readers with a substantial excerpt from *Stage* magazine, under the headline, "Mamoulian Never Saw Colored People Before He Directed 'Porgy' for Guild." One wonders how a typical reader of the *Afro-American* felt about writer Ruth Sedgwick's description of Ella Madison, who played Annie in the stage play of *Porgy*:

Ella finally had to admit that she couldn't read, so they taught her her lines word by word. By the next day, however, she had invariably forgotten them and made up some of her own she liked better. For her the play became a living reality.

She never could be taught not to break through dialogue, when she was excited, with ringing comments of her own, a good many of which crept into the final script. The only thing which worried Ella was money. She had been earning seven dollars a week and doubted if the Guild could do as well for her. When Mamoulian got her a sixty-dollar a week salary, no Messiah was ever greeted with a more volcanic frenzy of worship. In the end she saved up five hundred dollars and bought her way into an old ladies' home, which she always mentioned proudly as "dat home for delinquent women."⁷⁴

Some African American readers may have enjoyed these anecdotes, but it seems likely that some of them were sharply aware of the race of the author and her original readership, and suspicious of what kind of amusement they might have derived from

⁷⁴Ruth Sedgwick, article in *Stage Magazine* (October 1935); quoted in "Mamoulian Never Saw Colored People Before He Directed 'Porgy' for Guild," *Afro-American* (National Ed.), 19 October 1935. The Sedgwick article was written in 1927 about the straight theatrical version of *Porgy*, which had also been directed by Rouben Mamoulian.

these stories.

Sometimes it was not only curiosity but necessity that led the black press to reprint articles by white critics. The black weeklies' critics were not invited to the premiere of *Porgy and Bess* in 1935, so some reprinted reviews from mainstream daily newspapers before publishing their own critics' write-ups the following week. The African American *New York Age*, for instance, provided its readers with Danton Walker's review from the *New York Daily News*, after a preface explaining the reason for doing so. Walker's review, a very positive one, was probably relatively inoffensive to a black audience; he did claim that "emotional expression in song [is] part of the very blood-stream of the colored race," but such essentialist praise was unlikely to raise many hackles in 1935. It is interesting, however, that despite highly praising the artistry and ability of the cast, he neglected to mention a single performer by name.⁷⁵

In the 1930s and 1940s, the black press thus kept an eye on the white reception of *Porgy and Bess*. By 1952, when the Breen production was gearing up for its first European tour, the black press was no longer content quietly to observe the mainstream press's coverage of it. L.F. Palmer, writing for the *Chicago Defender*, noted that "a popular national magazine is ballyhooing the all-Negro revision of 'Porgy and Bess' which was chosen by our State department as a vehicle to combat

⁷⁵Danton Walker, "'Porgy and Bess' First True American Opera," *New York Daily News*, 11 October 1935; reprinted in William E. Clark, "In the Name of Art," *New York Age*, 19 October 1935. Clark, in his introduction to Walker's review, made up for the lack by noting that "Anne Brown, Todd Duncan, Abbie Mitchell and other principals of the cast all came in for high praise" in the reviews of the daily press.

Communist propaganda overseas.” Palmer quotes the article as saying that the work will show audiences abroad that African Americans have a “dignified” place in American culture. He goes on to provide some of the captions that the national magazine is running beneath photographs of the production, including: “Bess (Leontyne Price) distracts dice players when she gets money to buy whiskey for lover Crown.” Comments Palmer, “Real dignified, huh?”⁷⁶

James L. Hicks observed the reaction of white audience members around him in 1953, and remarked,

It is not difficult to understand why some white people stand up and yell “bravo” and clap their hands until they are blue when they see colored actors acting the fool and making fools of other members of their race.

It’s the traditional role which some white people have set aside for colored people since the first days of Uncle Tom.

It’s the role of the ignorant, happy-foot, lust-loving, crap shooting clown—and “Porgy” has them all.⁷⁷

Hicks, like Ellington and Hall Johnson, is frequently quoted in accounts of the black reception of *Porgy and Bess*.⁷⁸ Unlike those two, he was as fervently and consistently hostile toward the work as the most-quoted line of his article suggests: “The current revival. . . is the most insulting, the most libelous, the most degrading act that could possibly be perpetrated against colored Americans of modern times.”⁷⁹

While there is no disputing the fact that Hicks abhors *Porgy and Bess*, his

⁷⁶L. F. Palmer, Jr., “‘Porgy and Bess’ Is Good Theater; As Propaganda Vehicle, It’s A Flop,” *Chicago Defender*, 6 September 1952.

⁷⁷James L. Hicks, “We Don’t Need ‘Porgy and Bess,’” *Afro-American, AFRO Magazine*, 28 March 1953.

⁷⁸For example, see Samuel G. Freedman, “After 50 Years, ‘Porgy’ Comes to the Met as a Certified Classic,” *New York Times*, 3 February 1985; Edward Rothstein, “George Gershwin’s Heav’nly Lan’,” *New Republic*, 18 March 1985, 29; Alpert, *The Life and Times of ‘Porgy and Bess,’* 181; Greenberg, *George Gershwin*, 196.

⁷⁹Hicks, “We Don’t Need ‘Porgy and Bess.’”

animosity is aroused as much by the timing of the production, and the response it is eliciting from audiences, as by the work itself. He finds it insulting that, at a time when African Americans are struggling for equality, the U.S. government has given its blessing to the export of a work that “presents a complete picture of the minority dregs of the colored race in its lowest ebb of life without once making the point that this is not typical colored Americana.” The choice of *Porgy and Bess* seems, in Hicks’s view, to reflect a desire on the part of the State Department to publicly deny that African Americans have progressed beyond Catfish Row.⁸⁰

The topic to which Hicks devotes the majority of his article, however, is that of the acquiescent African American response to the Breen production. He notes that Jewish and Catholic advocacy groups take strong measures when a play or film portrays one of their members in a negative light, but many African Americans seem to be content with *Porgy and Bess*:

Forward thinking colored people show righteous indignation today at white people who seek to identify them with Saturday night brawls with knives over two bit crap games.

Yet when a white man hires a few of them to present them exactly in this manner on a Broadway stage they sit beside the white people and rock the rafters with their cheers.

This inconsistency is galling to Hicks. “When,” he asks, “will the colored people of America rise up in unified protest against the way they are pictured on the American stage, radio screen [*sic*] and television?”⁸¹

Hicks’s call for African Americans to be more aware of racial stereotyping,

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Ibid.

and for them to reject it consistently and vocally, marks a shift in attitude toward *Porgy and Bess*. Nowhere in his article is there any discussion of the work's genre, its artistic merits or demerits, or even of its music.⁸² He mentions neither George Gershwin nor DuBose Heyward. The specifics of the work's artistic depiction of African American culture—a topic so important to Duke Ellington and Hall Johnson almost 20 years earlier—are no longer relevant in this context. *Porgy and Bess* is, for Hicks, nothing but an exasperating symptom of American racism, and of the failure of African Americans to combat it effectively. He does not see the work as a unique, provocative collision of operatic tradition and black folk materials, but merely as another demeaning descendant of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Thus, it is misleading to quote Hicks, as many biographers and reviewers have done, as belonging to the same purported cadre of black *Porgy*-haters as Ellington and Johnson. His concerns were different from theirs, reflecting the different circumstances in which he was writing: *Porgy and Bess* was no longer a new work; since the early 1940s it had been edited and performed as a musical, and thus lost the prestige value of opera; and—most important—it was being exported under the aegis of the United States government.

One example of Hicks's position being misrepresented can be found in Rodney Greenberg's biography, *George Gershwin*. He quotes Duke Ellington and

⁸²In 1935, also in the pages of the *Afro-American*, black orchestra conductor W. Llewellyn Wilson had urged readers to view the work in the context of operatic tradition—a tradition that did not “attempt to glorify [or] vilify any racial group” but rather sought to express broadly human emotions. In 1953, Hicks did not differentiate among the traditions of different entertainment genres: every stereotypical portrayal of African Americans deserved to be condemned by those being depicted (Wilson, “Most Feminine Characters Were Pretty Bad Lot”).

James Hicks as exemplars of “widespread black opposition” to the work, and discusses the latter critic this way:

A black journalist, James Hicks, was vitriolic when the opera was revived on Broadway in 1953. He found it ‘the most insulting, the most libellous, the most degrading act that could possibly be perpetrated against coloured Americans of modern times’—words that starkly echo criticism of *Blue Monday*. Of all people, Gershwin—the roller-skating Jewish boy from the tenements of Brooklyn—was no stranger to racial stereotyping or to discrimination. He and Ira had struggled with the racist problems inherent in their subject, in addition to the purely musical and dramatic ones of creating a viable piece for the Broadway stage in an operatic format.⁸³

Greenberg mentions the Breen production’s world tour in his next paragraph, but makes no connection between the tour and Hicks’s “vitriolic” response to *Porgy and Bess*. His invocation of *Blue Monday*’s negative reception seems designed to imply that both of Gershwin’s stage works with black characters were victimized by reflexive black opposition, and he attempts to defend the composer by making reference to his lower-class Jewish background and resulting sensitivity to racial inequality. Hicks would not have been the least bit swayed by Greenberg’s argument: the problem with *Porgy and Bess* lay in how it was being used and received in 1953, and Gershwin’s intentions in the 1930s, however benevolent, were as irrelevant to Hicks as the music he had composed.

Harold Cruse’s book *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, which contains the most recent of the oft-quoted black critiques of *Porgy and Bess*, appeared in 1967, fourteen years after Hicks’s article. Like Hicks, Cruse was far more concerned about the racial issues surrounding the work than about the work itself. But whereas *Porgy*

⁸³Greenberg, *George Gershwin*, 196.

and Bess was a central element of Hicks's complaint, it is only a bit player in Cruse's 568-page book, which is a scathing indictment of racism in America's cultural life, and of the ineffectual, elitist, assimilationist response to it by African American artists and intellectuals since the 1920s.

The portions of Cruse's book that are so often quoted certainly sound like they come from a thoroughgoing indictment of the opera. Cruse calls *Porgy and Bess* "the most contradictory cultural symbol ever created in the Western world" and "a symbol of that deeply-ingrained American cultural paternalism practiced on Negroes ever since the first Southern white man blacked his face." He also urges that the work "be forever banned by all Negro performers in the United States," and that it be performed, if at all, "by white performers made up in blackface, because it is distorted imitation all the way through." These statements have been widely cited in books and journalistic articles.⁸⁴

It is readily apparent that Cruse thinks poorly of *Porgy and Bess*, and writers do not misrepresent his hostility by quoting these lines. It is worth noting, however, that his criticism takes place in the context of an extremely wide-ranging argument about American culture; his interest in Gershwin's opera as a specific work of art is minimal. His evaluation of the work's content, which follows directly on the above quotation calling for a boycott of the work by black performers, represents a significant drop in rhetorical firepower: "Musically, it is a rather pedestrian blend of

⁸⁴Cruse, 106, 103. For instances of quotation, see Jack Kroll, "The Compleat 'Porgy,'" *Newsweek*, 11 October 1976; Claudia Roth Pierpont, "Jazzbo: Why We Still Listen to Gershwin," *The New Yorker*, 10 January 2005, 80; Alpert, *The Life and Times of "Porgy and Bess,"* 291.

imitation-Puccini and imitation-South Carolina-Negro folk music that Gershwin culled. In theme, it presents the ‘simple black people’ just the way white liberal paternalists love to see them.”⁸⁵ It is not the content but the context in which the work was created, and continues to be perpetuated, that raises his ire and gives rise to fierce phrases like those often quoted. He follows the just-cited criticisms with the real substance of his attack on *Porgy and Bess*: “Culturally, it is a product of American developments that were intended to shunt Negroes off into a tight box of subcultural, artistic dependence, stunted growth, caricature, aesthetic self-mimicry imposed by others, and creative insolvency.”⁸⁶

For Cruse, it is a waste of time to criticize *Porgy and Bess* for the racial stereotypes it contains, rather than for what it fundamentally *is*. He notes that “*Porgy and Bess* has successfully weathered all such criticisms on its content and has been enshrined in America’s rather empty cultural hall of fame as the great American musical classic.” He argues that in order profitably to critique the work,

One must see it in terms of something more than mere content. It must be criticized from the Negro point of view as the most perfect symbol of the Negro creative artist’s cultural denial, degradation, exclusion, exploitation, and acceptance of white paternalism. *Porgy and Bess* exemplifies this peculiarly American cultural pathology, most vividly, most historically, and most completely.⁸⁷

Cruse is explicit: the importance of the opera as a symbol far outweighs that of its “mere content.” This perspective is worlds away from that of the earlier black critics with whom he is so frequently grouped in accounts of *Porgy* reception.

⁸⁵Cruse, 103-4.

⁸⁶Ibid., 104.

⁸⁷Ibid., 103.

Indeed, Cruse himself is well aware of the distinction between his views and those of earlier *Porgy and Bess* critics. Since a major theme of his book is that African American intellectuals have failed to display effective leadership to combat the effects of white racism, the focus of his discussion of Gershwin's opera is on the black response to it, which he finds inept and unproductive. Specifically, he addresses the comments of *A Raisin in the Sun* playwright Lorraine Hansberry, who engaged in a televised debate about *Porgy and Bess* with film director Otto Preminger in 1959.⁸⁸ Hansberry attacked the work as perpetuating the stereotype of the exotic and primitive African American: "We, over a period of time, have apparently decided that within American life we have one great repository where we're going to focus and imagine sensuality and exaggerated sexuality, all very removed and earthy things—and this great image is the American Negro."⁸⁹ Cruse summarizes Hansberry's criticism, commenting, "This was, of course, not the first time *Porgy and Bess* had been criticized by Negroes. Ever since its premiere in 1935, it has been under attack from certain Negro quarters because it reveals southern Negroes in an unfavorable light. Hence Miss Hansberry's criticisms were nothing very new or original."⁹⁰

As Cruse puts Hansberry's remarks into class context, he reveals a somewhat startling orientation toward the "mere content" of *Porgy and Bess*: "Most Negro criticism of *Porgy* has been of middle-class origin, although the Negro middle class has never been at all sympathetic to the realities of southern Negro folk

⁸⁸For an account of the debate, see Jack Pitman, "Lorraine Hansberry Deplores 'Porgy,'" *Variety*, 27 May 1959.

⁸⁹Ibid. This is slightly misquoted ("sensuality and exaggerated sensuality") in Cruse, 101.

⁹⁰Cruse, 101.

characteristics in any way, shape or form. Hence, a generically class-oriented non-identification was inherent in Miss Hansberry's views."⁹¹ In other words, Cruse is breaking with black critics who have criticized the opera because they find its characterizations unflattering and undesirable. He notes that "hundreds of working-class Negroes (whom Miss Hansberry claimed she wrote about in *Raisin*), lined up at the box offices to see this colorful film 'stereotype' of their people."⁹² What offends Cruse about the work is not what it portrays, but who creates the portrayal, and who profits.

He sums up his argument about *Porgy and Bess*, how it has been criticized, and how it should be criticized, in two paragraphs worth quoting in full.

This whole episode [the Hansberry-Preminger debate] revealed some glaring facts to substantiate my claim that the Negro creative intellectual does not even approach possession of a positive literary and cultural critique—either of his own art, or that other art created for him by whites. In the first place, Lorraine Hansberry revealed that she knew little about the history of this folk-opera, or how or why it was written. She was only concerned with the fact that it was a stereotype. This already precluded the possibility of Miss Hansberry or anyone rendering the kind of critique *Porgy and Bess* deserves from the Negro point of view. Hence, the whole debate was worthless and a waste of time except from the point of view of making some more noisy, but superficial, integrationist propaganda.

The real cultural issues surrounding *Porgy and Bess*, as it relates to the American Negro presence, have never been confronted by the Negro intelligentsia—inside or outside the theater. The two most obvious points a Negro critic should make are: 1.) that a folk-opera of this genre *should have been written* by Negroes themselves and has not; 2.) that such a folk-opera, even if it *had been written* by Negroes, would never have been supported, glorified and acclaimed, as *Porgy* has, by the white cultural elite of America.⁹³

⁹¹In a footnote, Cruse here cites another example of such "non-identification": Era Bell Thompson, "Why Negroes Don't Like *Porgy and Bess*," *Ebony*, October 1959, 50-54.

⁹²Cruse, 102-3.

⁹³*Ibid.*, 102.

Note that the emphasis in this passage is not on Gershwin or his work, but on African Americans as artists, receivers of art, and potentially powerful shapers of American culture. This is the one aspect of his approach to *Porgy and Bess* that Cruse shares with Hall Johnson and James Hicks: none of them spend the majority of their energy on the question of what has been “done to” black people by this work by whites. Rather, they are interested in fostering the ongoing activities of African Americans—from creative work to ticket-buying to political activism.

Because these black critics are so often quoted by historians and reviewers in a negative context, as opponents of *Porgy and Bess*, the positive and productive elements of their arguments—as well as the Afro-centrism of their perspectives—have been ignored. This makes them seem reactive rather than proactive, and represents their varied concerns as a single, static, and apparently ineffectual desire to pull down a work of art. The illusion that there is a clear-cut, antagonistic relationship between African Americans and Gershwin’s opera has been perpetuated by this misrepresentation.

This false dichotomy tends to cast one side in the role of passive victim and the other as the active victimizer. In perhaps the most common synopsis of black reception, *Porgy and Bess* is a stimulus—an “act. . . perpetrated against colored Americans,” as James Hicks put it—to which African Americans have responded by complaining.⁹⁴ It is true that there have been black critics who have played the reactive role; notably, Lorraine Hansberry exemplified it as she explained to Otto

⁹⁴James L. Hicks, “We Don’t Need ‘Porgy and Bess,’” *Afro-American, AFRO Magazine*, 28 March 1953.

Preminger, "It isn't a matter of being hostile to you, but on the other hand it's also a matter of never ceasing to try to get you to understand that your mistakes can be painful, even those which come from excellent intentions. We've had great wounds from great intentions."⁹⁵ However, the comments made by Hicks, Cruse, Ellington, and Johnson exemplify neither passivity nor a desire to convince whites of their victimization by *Porgy and Bess*. They have more interesting fish to fry.

For the racial meanings of *Porgy and Bess* to be more fully understood and productively discussed, both Gershwin's role in consciously creating a complex work, and the complexity and thoughtfulness of African American critics' reception of it, need to be acknowledged. In an essay about Gershwin written for the *New York Times* in 1998, black critic Stanley Crouch provides a remarkable model of the kind of perspective that has so often been lacking in *Porgy and Bess* reception: he is frankly aware of the tangled racial issues that surround Gershwin's career and the black response to it, but remains clear-eyed about the greatness and importance of the music.⁹⁶

Crouch notes that Gershwin "realized, as did most of the songwriters of his time, that Negroes had put something together that could supply fresh melodic, harmonic and rhythmic directions through the literal and implied elements of blues, idiomatic syncopation and swing." But Crouch understands that the composer did not just imitate what he heard, but synthesized and developed it into something that was

⁹⁵Jack Pitman, "Lorraine Hansberry Deplores 'Porgy,'" *Variety*, 27 May 1959.

⁹⁶Stanley Crouch, "An Inspired Borrower of a Black Tradition," *New York Times*, 30 August 1998.

not warmed-over black music, but distinctly *American* and uniquely his own: “His sound, part Negro and part everything else that was going on when he came to power, is one of the most important distillations of lyric and rhythmic American feeling to arrive in the first half of the 20th century.”

While acknowledging that “Jewish journeymen, in and out of blackface, were able to make use of Negro culture while benefiting from a support system capable of neutralizing the religious status of a minority in favor of its acceptably white skin,” Crouch rejects the idea that Gershwin’s career was a matter of wrapping stolen black goods in a white package: “George Gershwin was nobody’s journeyman.” He displays a splendid disregard for racial decorum, not unlike Gershwin’s own, when he observes “an extraordinary irony: with the exception of Duke Ellington, Gershwin went on to become a finer songwriter than any of the Negroes who were his contemporaries or who influenced him.”

At the same time, Crouch is cognizant that Gershwin is not the only active party in his relationship with African American musicians and their music—that the story does not end with *his* “inspired borrowing”:

There is another irony when the subject of “stealing” comes around to Gershwin. That irony is found in the work of all the jazz musicians who have used his songs as jumping off points for classic improvisations, either on his themes or on the chord sequences he devised. The uncopyrightable chords of “I Got Rhythm,” by the way, have been used by so many jazz musicians that we have no idea how much larger the Gershwin fortune would be if his estate could lay claim to every use of that harmonic material. So one could argue that black musicians have done much more profitable, literal stealing from Gershwin than he did from them.

Ultimately, Crouch deems it to be a mutually beneficial process that Gershwin

initiated, despite being complicated by “the squabbles our nation’s racial mess continues to guarantee.”⁹⁷ By looking past the label of “exploiter” to see the greatness of Gershwin’s gift, and by rejecting the label of “victim” as applicable to black musicians who have continued to benefit from that gift, Crouch demonstrates a fearlessness and wisdom that have too often been lacking in discussions of *Porgy and Bess*.

⁹⁷Ibid.

Chapter 4: Performers and Performance

After all, being white you can go only so far into the black. Sometimes [Gershwin] just heard the surface. He hit the surface, the part that was bubbling up. But what came from way down in the ground, of course, he couldn't get. But he indicated it. And so I made it my business to surface many things that he indicated.

Eva Jessye¹

No one is more important to the various meanings of *Porgy and Bess* than the African Americans who have performed it for more than seventy years. They literally embody the work's racial, stylistic, and generic concatenations, and no production has succeeded without their artistry, willing commitment, and imaginative engagement. Despite being most centrally and personally involved in the ongoing, onstage life of the work, performers' views have sometimes been left on the sidelines while critics battle over the opera's racial content and generic classification.

Some racially sensitive critics have characterized *Porgy and Bess* as something that George and Ira Gershwin, DuBose Heyward, and successions of white producers, directors, and ticket buyers have *done to* African Americans. James Hicks's vivid verbiage is often quoted as a typical indictment of the work itself as "the most insulting, the most libelous, the most degrading act that could possibly be *perpetrated against* colored Americans of modern times," and "a disgraceful *felony against* a race of people which is struggling to hold its best high" (emphasis mine).² Black editorialist J.A. Rogers includes *Porgy and Bess* among the "enterprises" by

¹Peter Seidman, "Eva Jessye," *The Black Perspective in Music* 18/1-2 (1990): 262.

²James L. Hicks, "We Don't Need 'Porgy and Bess,'" *Afro-American AFRO Magazine*, 28 March 1953. As noted in Chapter 3, Hicks was referring here to the touring Breen production, not to the opera itself—although he was certainly not a fan of that, either.

which whites have profited from African Americans.³ While the frustration evident in such statements results from genuine and persistent racial inequities, it cannot fairly be claimed that the history of *Porgy and Bess*, specifically, is a simple matter of white exploitation and black victimization. Insufficient attention has been paid to the ways in which African Americans, particularly as performers, have actively participated in and directly shaped *Porgy and Bess*.

Black critics, audience members, civil rights leaders, and theatrical directors have contributed significantly, but it is the generations of performers who have had the most impact on *Porgy and Bess* and its reception. They worked directly with Gershwin as he composed, and have brought their opinions to bear on every production. They have accepted roles eagerly, ambivalently, reluctantly, or not at all. They have spoken their minds in books and to the press, repeated the company line, or kept silent. They have brought their skill, passion, and understanding to their performances. They have brought Catfish Row to life. *Porgy and Bess* has lasted in the United States because African American artists have engaged with it. It has not been done to them; they have done it.

This is not to claim that performers have had unlimited power, or that the history of the opera is unmarked by injustice and exploitation. There are several cases of artists being strong-armed into participating in *Porgy and Bess*. In too many cases, black singers' operatic careers have begun and ended with the work. This chapter will address these problems. There are also factors limiting performers' power that are not

³J.A. Rogers, "History Shows," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 23 April 1960.

specific to this opera, such as the fact that careers in opera are difficult for singers of any race to come by, so there are strong incentives for performers, especially non-famous ones, to be pliable and acquiescent to the demands of producers and directors.

I also do not mean to suggest that, because the performers of *Porgy and Bess* have exercised an underappreciated degree of control over the work, all African Americans have been empowered by it. At some points in its history, the opera has been considered detrimental by most commentators in the black community, despite the (sometimes dubious) professional advantages gained by its cast. Generally speaking, however, critics and historians—particularly white ones—have overstated the extent to which the perspectives and goals of *Porgy* performers have been distinct from those of other African Americans. In his Gershwin biography, William G. Hyland writes that “black criticism [of *Porgy and Bess*] seems to have been divided between the outsiders—the critics, writers, and sociologists—and the performers.”⁴ John Andrew Johnson puts it more forcefully in his dissertation: “Black supporters largely consist of performers whose careers have benefited from association with such a mainstream enterprise.”⁵ Such dichotomization mischaracterizes both the black reception of the opera (which has been far from monolithically negative, as Chapter 3 detailed) and the principles of African American performers, who do not typically sell their “soul” to gain entrance to the operatic stage. The complexity of performers’ attitudes toward *Porgy and Bess*, and of their identities as black opera singers, is an

⁴William G. Hyland, *George Gershwin: A New Biography* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 173.

⁵John Andrew Johnson, “Gershwin’s ‘American Folk Opera’: The Genesis, Style and Reputation of *Porgy and Bess* (1935)” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1996), 535.

important theme of this chapter.

Porgy and Bess was created via collaboration, not only between George Gershwin and DuBose Heyward but between Gershwin and the cast of the first production, and it continues to rise and fall based on the goodwill and understanding (or lack thereof) that performers experience in their relationships with directors, producers, audiences, the black community, and the work itself. The critical reception of *Porgy and Bess* has too often overlooked the impact and significance of African American participation in the opera's creation, history, and ongoing existence. This chapter attempts both to highlight this inadequacy and to correct it.

Gershwin the Collaborator

The story of George Gershwin's artistic life is the story of a collaborator. At age fifteen, he got his professional start as a song plugger for Jerome H. Remick and Co., a job that required him to respond quickly to the desires of his employer, song writers, and singers. When he began to write songs for Broadway revues and then for his own shows, he constantly collaborated with producers and directors, lyricists, and performers. The commercial songwriting business was not geared for a person who wished to do his own thing without interference; it required cooperation, flexibility, and openness to input. Gershwin had these qualities, in addition to tremendous musical talent.

While collaboration goes with the territory in the songwriting world, individualism and independence have tended to be more highly regarded in the realm

of art music. That was certainly the case in early 20th-century America, where iconoclastic European artists and musicians like Pablo Picasso and Igor Stravinsky were admired for their personal and artistic individualism. Among his other suspect qualities, Gershwin's background as a collaborator contributed to the tendency of some critics not to take him seriously as a composer. The fact that his first great success in the concert hall, *Rhapsody in Blue*, was orchestrated by the Paul Whiteman Orchestra's staff arranger, Ferde Grofé, led some critics to assume that Gershwin's subsequent compositions were also orchestrated by someone else, and that he lacked the ability to do it himself. This was, of course, far from the case; he orchestrated every concert work thereafter, from the *Concerto in F* to *Porgy and Bess*.⁶

Another aspect of Gershwin's collaborative nature that has sometimes been read in a negative light, as evidence of a weakness of technique or even character, is his private study of composition with a variety of teachers, including Edward Kilenyi, Sr. and Joseph Schillinger.⁷ He also famously (and in some cases, perhaps apocryphally) requested lessons from figures such as Nadia Boulanger, Maurice Ravel, Igor Stravinsky, and Arnold Schoenberg—all of whom turned him down.⁸ The fact that he continued to pursue formal composition study throughout his life, despite

⁶Wayne Shirley, "George Gershwin: Yes, the Sounds as Well as the Tunes Are His," *Schwann Opus* (Fall 1998), 6a-11a; reprinted in *The George Gershwin Reader*, ed. Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press), 301-7.

⁷For more information on Gershwin's studies in composition, see Edward Kilenyi, Sr., *Gershwiniana: Recollections and Reminiscences of Times Spent with My Student George Gershwin* (copyright by the author, 1963); Susan Ethel Neimoyer, "Rhapsody in Blue: A Culmination of George Gershwin's Early Musical Education" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 2003); Vernon Duke, "Gershwin, Schillinger, and Dukelsky: Some Reminiscences," *Musical Quarterly* 33/1 (January 1947), 102-15.

⁸See David Schiff, "Misunderstanding Gershwin," *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1998, 100.

his early and remarkable success as a professional composer, should be seen as evidence of his ongoing curiosity and open-mindedness, not as an admission of incompetence.⁹

When he approached *Porgy and Bess*, his most ambitious project, Gershwin brought to the task not only his prodigious talent, skill, and experience as a composer for the stage, but his willingness and ability to collaborate. From his letter to DuBose Heyward in 1926 to his participation in cutting the score after the Boston tryout in 1935, Gershwin created his magnum opus in cooperation with others. He knew his own strengths and limitations, and his famous cockiness did not prevent him from recognizing and drawing on other people's strengths as needed. As choral director Eva Jessye put it, "A man can think about himself or as well of himself all he likes as long as he doesn't think everyone else adds up to a big nothing."¹⁰

Gershwin collaborated not only with DuBose Heyward and Ira Gershwin, director Rouben Mamoulian, choral director Eva Jessye, and other leaders behind the scenes, but also with members of the cast. He had a long history of tailoring his Broadway songs to suit the styles and talents of celebrities like Fred Astaire and Ethel Merman, and he remained responsive to the individuals who performed his opera, despite the relative obscurity of most of them.

It is clear that Gershwin, in casting *Porgy and Bess*, sought out performers who had a good deal of presence and self-assuredness—who would, in short, be

⁹For an example of Gershwin's studies being portrayed in the latter way, see Duke, "Gershwin, Schillinger, and Dukelsky."

¹⁰Charles Staff, "Jessye Choir Has Long 'Porgy' Experience," *Indianapolis News*, 29 December 1966.

active participants in the first production. Todd Duncan's description of his initial private audition reveals that he was bold, confident, and even somewhat prickly in his first interaction with the composer. He recalls:

[Gershwin] stopped me after twelve measures of "Lungi dal caro bene"—twelve measures! And he said, "Will you go around there? Do you know this by memory?" "Of course I know it by memory, I sing everything by memory," I replied rather indignantly. He said, "Look straight in my eyes. Don't look anywhere else, look straight in my eyes." I sang the same twelve measures and he stopped once again! So I'm thinking, "What is wrong with this man? Why won't he just let me sing this aria?" And he said, "Will you be my Porgy?" Now guess what I had the nerve to say? . . . I said, "Mr. Gershwin, I have to hear your music first." Oh, he loved it! He just loved it!¹¹

Although the character of Porgy has sometimes been seen as a way for whites to get a black man on his knees (literally as well as figuratively), the fact that Todd Duncan's assertiveness and pride so appealed to Gershwin reveals that he did not conceive of Porgy as a deferential "Uncle Tom." Duncan's willingness to look directly into Gershwin's eyes while singing is particularly noteworthy: this would have required tremendous confidence and concentration from anyone, given Gershwin's fame, but particularly from an African American raised in a segregated society.

Anne Brown's audition story is similarly revealing:

I sang a French aria by Massenet, several German lieder, Russian songs in English, even a Gershwin melody. And George Gershwin was full of praise. And then he asked me to sing a Negro spiritual. Well, unless one is nearly as old as I am and has lived in the United States before the Second World War and understood the insidious damage racial prejudice can [inflict] on both the victim and the racist, it may be difficult to understand my reaction at that moment. I said, "Well, weren't you satisfied with what I sang?" And he said, "Yes, of course, it was lovely—beautiful." "But why do people always ask Negro singers to sing spirituals as if that is the only thing that they should be

¹¹Todd Duncan, "Todd Duncan: From an Interview by Robert Wyatt (1990)," in *Gershwin Reader*, 221-22.

singing and not German lieder or French arias.” I was very much on the defensive. George Gershwin simply looked long at me and he said, “Ah huh, I understand.” And I realized that he *did* understand and then I wanted more than anything else to sing a spiritual for him.¹²

There can be no doubt that it took an honest effort for Gershwin to win over his desired lead performers. In both cases, there were tensions that had to be defused: Brown and Duncan were sensitive about not being taken seriously as black opera singers, and Duncan was skeptical about Gershwin as an opera composer. Gershwin succeeded by taking them seriously as people, respecting them as artists, and captivating them with the score of his opera.

As he had done for the performers in his Broadway shows, and indeed as opera composers had done for centuries, Gershwin shaped his music to fit individual performers as soon as they were cast. Duncan recalls, “I loved singing the role of Porgy and after Gershwin had heard me sing, he tailored the part for my voice. Some of the music had already been written but once he knew my sound, everything just seemed to fit so well.”¹³

The composer also welcomed cast members’ contributions, and permitted them to take liberties with their parts. According to Anne Brown, Gershwin “never objected to changes in his music. When Ruby Elzy, for example, embroidered [Serena’s] prayer with all sorts of ornamentation, he smiled and said, ‘That’s wonderful, keep it in.’”¹⁴ And Helen Dowdy recalls how Gershwin “flipped” over her

¹²Anne Brown, “Anne Brown: From an Interview by Robert Wyatt (1995),” in *Gershwin Reader*, 229.

¹³“Todd Duncan: From an Interview with Robert Wyatt (1990),” 224.

¹⁴“Anne Brown: From an Interview with Robert Wyatt (1995),” 231.

way with the strawberry vendor's cry in Act II, scene 3.¹⁵

Although Gershwin welcomed the insights and creativity that the cast members brought to their roles, he did not expect them to have an inherent understanding of the Gullah characters and milieu simply because they were African Americans. Anne Brown recalls that "at the rehearsals George occasionally complained that many of the people in the cast had unfortunately been born in the north. Everyone laughed at this since many of us had not even *visited* the south. Some of us were college students and didn't know the dialect of the southern Negro."¹⁶ Because Gershwin had more firsthand experience with Gullah dialect than did most in his cast, he took it upon himself to coach them on it from time to time. This has been seen by some as evidence of arrogance and insensitivity: not only did he have the nerve to appropriate black culture, but he even thought he, a white man, could teach black people how to sound black! Jeffrey Melnick characterizes Gershwin's activity this way:

By the time of the 1935 rehearsals for *Porgy and Bess*, as many witnesses have recounted, the idea of a Jewish man teaching an African American how to sing authentically "Negro" was no longer a joke: George Gershwin spent time tutoring his mostly northern cast in how to capture the proper southern Black dialect he wanted to match to his music.¹⁷

While it is true that many whites conflated authentic Negritude with Southern black culture (often understood through the lens of blackface minstrelsy), I know of no

¹⁵P.G., "The Unsinkable 'Porgy and Bess': Years Fail to Destroy Its Appeal," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 24 July 1965.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 230.

¹⁷Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 49-50.

evidence that Gershwin would have thought he was teaching his cast “how to sing authentically ‘Negro.’”¹⁸ He was simply aware that his cast members did not share the opera characters’ particular background. In my view, his willingness to teach his cast reflects, in addition to an amazing degree of confidence and unselfconsciousness, a rare sensitivity to the diversity of black culture. Unlike many who would review the opera in the decades to come, Gershwin was fully aware that his performers were engaged in artifice, not a recreation of their own lives.

The composer’s respect for the individuality of his cast members can best be seen in his very different working relationships with Anne Brown and with John W. Bubbles, who played Sporting Life. Their professional backgrounds were extremely dissimilar, Brown being a Juilliard-trained but inexperienced young classical singer, Bubbles a talented but musically illiterate star of the vaudeville stage. While completing the score, Gershwin drew regularly on Brown’s knowledge of different voice types, as well as on her ability to sightread freshly-composed portions. She describes her role in the opera’s creation:

I think that no one—other than his family and those strictly connected with the opera—had a closer association and contact with George Gershwin while he was writing *Porgy and Bess* than I did. Maybe Kay Swift did but that was from another point of view. He used me as a guinea pig and he tried everything and he would ask me, “Is this too high for a baritone?” “No, no, not if he doesn’t stay up there too long,” I would say. “How’s this, should I change this note?” “No, no. As a matter of fact, I’d like to do it higher,” would be my answer. I even made a few changes in “I Loves You Porgy,” notes which fit my voice better and he would say, “That’s good, let’s use that.”¹⁹

¹⁸The perception in the 1920s and ‘30s that Southern, rural black culture was black culture at its “purest” and most authentic is a recurring theme in Marie Ellen Noonan, “*Porgy and Bess* and the American Racial Imaginary,” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2002).

¹⁹“Anne Brown: From an Interview with Robert Wyatt,” 232.

It is clear from Brown's reminiscences that Gershwin benefited from her expertise, and also enjoyed her friendship.

He does not seem to have been personally as close to Bubbles, but they worked together intensely in a different way. Bubbles remembers how he learned his part:

Everybody [in the cast] but [my vaudeville partner Ford] Buck and me had finished the conservatory of music. They all had a musical education. But Buck don't read and I don't read. By ear. That's how we did it.

I learned all of the numbers in Gershwin's apartment. He taught me the songs himself. We just sat side by side on the piano bench, and he played and I sang. . . .

I think some of the others in the cast were worried some about how I'd do because I hadn't the fine training they had. But Gershwin was satisfied. He knew I could do it.²⁰

The image of Bubbles and Gershwin sharing a piano bench, and the performer's sense that the composer had faith in his abilities, paints a compelling picture of their relationship. Bubbles may not have felt welcomed by his fellow cast members, but he did by Gershwin.

The composer's productive and positive relationships with these performers and the others in the cast may be traced to two important factors. First, Gershwin was cognizant of the unusual path he had taken to becoming an opera composer. This enabled him to approach both Anne Brown, who knew more about some aspects of opera than he did, and John Bubbles, whose expertise in "lowbrow" theater mirrored

²⁰Robert Kimball, program notes for Glyndebourne production (1986). Todd Duncan also describes Gershwin teaching Bubbles his part through dance; according to Duncan, "when you talked about a major or a minor third or a perfect fourth or go up the scale, well [Bubbles] didn't know what you were talking about, even if you'd sing it. But if he got the rhythm, and would pat it out and let him dance it, he got it. He would never miss." "Todd Duncan: From an Interview with Robert Wyatt," 223.

his own, with understanding and respect for their different gifts. Second, he was not self-conscious about the racial difference between himself and his cast, so that once he had demonstrated to them that he was not prejudiced, this difference ceased to be a barrier to their productive collaboration.

There is, therefore, a rather poignant irony in the fact that *Porgy and Bess* has been such a racially and generically contentious work for the past seven decades, given that it was created and brought to the stage for the first time by a composer who modeled a genuinely integrative and egalitarian approach to different races as well as styles. Unfortunately, very few Americans share Gershwin's balance of self-awareness and unselfconsciousness, especially when it comes to matters of race. As a result, nearly every production has been shaped from the beginning by the tension created by having a black cast and a largely white directorial staff.²¹

Despite the positive presence of Gershwin, even the Theatre Guild production was marked by problematic attitudes. In particular, Alexander Smallens was recalled without affection by cast members. Bubbles tells the most famous story:

The night of the dress rehearsal all of the executives connected with the show are in the audience. When it came my turn to come on to do "It Ain't Necessarily So," I waited for my cue. The orchestra conductor had a light on the end of the baton and you could see it real good. He gave the downbeat for the song, which is my cue, and I came in right *after* the beat. He didn't like that. He threw the baton down, and he started yelling, "Throw him out! Take

²¹I know of seven African Americans who have directed *Porgy and Bess*. The first to direct it was Irving Barnes, who played Porgy in the Breen touring production of the 1950s. He directed a production in Sarajevo in the early 1970s. See Dan Morgan, "A Serbian 'Porgy and Bess,'" *Washington Post*, 13 December 1971. Anne Wiggins Brown has directed the work several times, according to Barry Singer, "On Hearing Her Sing, Gershwin Made 'Porgy' 'Porgy and Bess,'" *New York Times*, 29 March 1998. Felicia Weathers directed the work for Opera Ebony in Rio de Janeiro. Elizabeth Graham has played Bess and directed a Living Arts production that has toured since the late 1990s. Henry Miller directed a production at the Indianapolis Opera in 2000. The other two, Hope Clarke and Tazewell Thompson, will be discussed shortly.

him out! Throw him out!” Remember, this is the dress rehearsal, and all the important people are there, and the conductor is yelling to have me thrown out of the show for coming in *after* the downbeat.

George Gershwin was sitting in the back, and he came running down the aisle. He says to the conductor, “What’s the matter?” And the conductor says, “Throw him out!” Gershwin just said, “We can’t take him out. He’s the black Toscanini!”

I picked that time to step over the footlights, and I said to him, “Mr. Smallens, if I had the money for the way you conduct, I’d be a millionaire.”²²

While the story is often repeated for its delightful quips by Gershwin and Bubbles, it is also noteworthy for what it reveals about Smallens: that he was, even by the time of the dress rehearsal, unfamiliar with the conventions of the vaudeville stage, where the performers would routinely take liberties and improvise; and also that he was not particularly respectful of Bubbles, even calling for him to be ejected in the middle of the dress rehearsal, before an audience.

Anne Brown, too, expresses respect but not fondness for Smallens:

During the actual stage rehearsals, we were coached by Alexander Smallens. He was a fine conductor but, well, he wasn’t a patient man, really. I always thought he played the score too fast, for the most part, and we made jokes about it because he lived in Connecticut and he had to make a train each night. “Oh, he doesn’t want to be late tonight!” And he would go through the score like a house afire! Gershwin would sometimes play for rehearsals and then the tempi were right.²³

Smallens went on to conduct for the Crawford and Breen productions of the 1940s and ’50s, eagerly helping to trim the opera to fit the format of a musical. It is plain that it was not only the train schedule that made him impatient, but the operatic proportions of the work itself.

²²Kimball, Glyndebourne program notes. A slightly different version of the story appears in Hollis Alpert, *The Life and Times of “Porgy and Bess”*: *The Story of an American Classic* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 104-5.

²³“Anne Brown: From an Interview by Robert Wyatt,” 231.

Brown also recalls that the directorial staff frequently socialized with each other, but never invited her, Duncan, or the other cast members to join them. There was at least one occasion where the white staff and the black performers mingled outside of the theater; the *New York Amsterdam News* gave an account of Mamoulian, Smallens, and even DuBose and Dorothy Heyward attending a lavish reception in the apartment of Georgette Harvey, who played Maria.²⁴ This was clearly an unusual and public event. It was only Gershwin, however, who regularly spent time informally with members of the cast, welcoming them into his apartment, dining with them in restaurants, and attending their parties.²⁵

The affection that the performers felt for Gershwin is evident in their reminiscences about him. After he died in 1937, they also demonstrated it by their eagerness to participate in the ultimately flood-truncated west coast revival mounted by his friend, producer Merle Armitage. Armitage writes that “Todd Duncan’s respect and affection for George made my later invitation to sing *Porgy* a foregone conclusion, and Todd Duncan was the first to arrive for rehearsals in Los Angeles.” Duncan wasn’t alone in his willingness, says Armitage: “most of the former company [was] so enthused about an opportunity to play Gershwin’s music drama again that many members of the cast actually turned down other offers, or took leave from engagements, in order to be with us.” Everyone involved in the production strove to do Gershwin proud.²⁶

²⁴“‘Porgy’ Stars Are Guests at Brilliant Reception,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 19 October 1935.

²⁵“Anne Brown: From an Interview by Robert Wyatt,” 235-36.

²⁶Merle Armitage, *George Gershwin: Man and Legend* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1958), 130-31, 133.

Making Performers (Un)comfortable: Five Case Studies

Relationships between production-side staff and casts have had a major impact on the quality of subsequent *Porgy and Bess* productions. Because the opera was created by whites, and has widely been seen as containing some racially stereotypical elements, a white director cannot proceed as though it were a politically neutral artwork, and cannot pretend that his or her own racial identity is inconsequential to the performers. The most successful directors have openly acknowledged the limitations imposed by their own whiteness, and have demonstrated respect for the cast members' skill, training, and ideas about the work. There is a suggestive correlation between how adept producers and, especially, directors are at cultivating goodwill with their casts, and how positively productions' performances are received by critics.

A handful of examples will demonstrate this point. Surely the most disastrously poor relations between production-side staff and cast can be seen in the Samuel Goldwyn film of 1959. A number of factors contributed to the film's poor publicity, mediocre finished product, and ultimate withdrawal from public view, not least among them the fact that the height of the civil rights struggle was a very poor time to make a glossy film about Catfish Row.²⁷ Goldwyn struggled to cast the film,

²⁷Hollis Alpert explains the film's disappearance: "Instead of an outright sale, Goldwyn had bought a fifteen-year lease of the rights. After that time lapse, the film could not be shown without permission of the authors or their estates and, even if permission were given, would have required an additional payment." John Andrew Johnson reports that "the film was withdrawn from circulation of any kind in 1987." To view it today requires a trip to the Library of Congress, or a willingness to purchase a grainy (and illegal) bootleg videotape on E-Bay. Alpert, *The Life and Times of "Porgy and Bess,"* 280; Johnson, "Gershwin's 'American Folk Opera,'" 630.

even resorting to coercion in order to get Sidney Poitier to play Porgy.²⁸ Neither Poitier nor Dorothy Dandridge, who played Bess, did much talking to the press before the film's release, leaving it to Sammy Davis, Jr. (*Sporting Life*) and Pearl Bailey (Maria) to reassure the public that the film was coming together smoothly and would not be defamatory to African Americans. William Warfield, who turned down the invitation to provide Poitier's singing voice on the soundtrack (for little recognition and "insultingly unacceptable" pay), describes the film as being "conceived in bitterness and hostility—between the original stage producer, Robert Breen, and Samuel Goldwyn; and then between Goldwyn and his director, Otto Preminger; and then between the tyrannical director and his browbeaten cast."²⁹

Ultimately, the finished film seems to labor painfully to reassure its audience that it is not racist—a hopeless task. Its tentative and sterilized approach to *Porgy and Bess* shows that Goldwyn, Preminger, and the cast never reached any sort of mutual understanding or common goals; many of the performers seem tense or dispirited.³⁰ Open discourse might have defused the defensiveness and mistrust palpable in the film and its surrounding publicity, but neither Goldwyn nor Preminger were accustomed to doing much listening. Given the level of suspicion and ill will on both sides, a frank conversation between the blacks and whites involved in the production

²⁸Joan Barthel, "He Doesn't Want to Be Sexless Sidney," *New York Times*, 6 August 1967.

²⁹William Warfield with Alton Miller, *My Music & My Life* (Champaign, IL: Sagamore, 1991), 125-26.

³⁰Only Pearl Bailey is a truly warm and relaxed presence, and even negative reviews of the film single her out for praise. Several newspaper articles of the period mention that she was an aggressive striker of dialect and stereotypical words and phrases from the script during rehearsal; her authority to do so, which was surely granted due to her stardom, may well have contributed to her relative onscreen ease.

might have revealed to all of them just how unwise the project was in the first place.

A decade and a half later, another production was created in a very different atmosphere, and with much better results. Producer Sherwin M. Goldman's courageous decision to give *Porgy and Bess* a fully operatic staging at the Houston Grand Opera resulted in a tremendously successful production. The sharp contrast between the 1959 film's uncomfortable performances and mediocre reception and the enthusiasm with which the Houston production was performed and received may be traced in no small part to the latter's director, Jack O'Brien, whose honest and open communication with the performers gave them a sense of safety that had clearly been lacking on the Preminger film set. From the beginning, O'Brien was frank about his own anxiety and hopefulness:

I walked into that rehearsal hall and for a moment I felt very white indeed. There's always a moment of chill at the first rehearsal, even if you've cast the show yourself. I was nervous—I'd never done anything with an all-black cast before—even though I believed that "Porgy" was not a put-down of blacks, written by whites, but a moving story about people who happen to be black. I was determined to tell the truth about the show as I felt it, in terms of how it dealt with love, jealousy, death and adversity. What a revelation! The company went with me all the way.³¹

What resulted was a production that firmly re-established *Porgy and Bess* as a full-fledged opera. By taking the work seriously not only as an opera, but as a story with universal resonance, O'Brien and producer Sherwin M. Goldman earned the trust and commitment of the performers. They were open to input from the performers, particularly Clamma Dale, who played Bess to ringing acclaim. Although Goldman

³¹Robert Berkvist, "The Man Who Brought New Life to 'Porgy,'" *New York Times*, 24 October 1976.

says that he and Dale “argued endlessly” from the beginning of their professional relationship, it is clear that her feminist take on Bess’s back story and motivations played an important role both in the production and in how it was received by the press.³² She gave numerous interviews in which she spelled out her thoughts about the character and the opera, acting very much as a mouthpiece for the production.³³ This reflects both her personal commitment to the production and the degree to which the cast in general was empowered by it.³⁴

Two more productions drive home the importance of relationships and communication between performers and directors and producers with particular force: the Metropolitan Opera’s 1985 mounting and the one at the Glyndebourne Festival less than a year later. Both productions were prestigious, expensive, and featured experienced and capable casts and directors. The Met received much less effusive reviews, however, and it is clear that its cast had a less harmonious relationship with the production team. Even the casting was contentious. Simon Estes, who was particularly known for his work in Wagner operas, had played Porgy already in Zurich, and found it satisfying and challenging. He had no qualms on his own account

³²Alpert, *The Life and Times of “Porgy and Bess,”* 305.

³³For examples see Howard Kissel, “Broadway Black Theater: Goodnatured Politics,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, 30 August 1976; Anna Quindlen, “Clamma Dale: The Mouth that Roars,” *New York Post*, 25 September 1976; Mel Gussow, “Clamma Dale Sings Way to Top,” *New York Times*, 29 September 1976.

³⁴Clamma Dale was clearly the most powerful cast member: the production seems to have focused on Bess, and due to her strong personality and charisma she received by far the most media exposure. All the same, the other cast members did not consider themselves less integral to the production. Said Robert Mosley, who played Porgy in some performances, “The secret of this production is that everybody depends on everybody else. We had our problems with Bess in New York, but we got things back together onstage by working things out offstage. This isn’t a case, as so many operas or musicals, of just one person in his own little bag doing his own thing.” Thomas Willis, “The Black Experience Takes Rich Root in a Hit ‘Porgy and Bess,’” *Chicago Tribune*, 10 April 1977.

about playing the role at the Met, but he was concerned about whether the African American artists who were hired on for *Porgy and Bess* would be cast by the Met in subsequent productions. In James Standifer's 1999 documentary, Estes describes having a conversation with an unnamed Met administrator who got increasingly angry with him when he pressed her for more than weak assurances that the male cast members, in particular, would receive roles in future operas.³⁵

Damon Evans, who played Sporting Life in the Glyndebourne production, turned down the Met when they offered him the role there, for exactly that reason:

I did say no to the Met's production of *Porgy and Bess*. Yes, I did, and you know something? It's the one decision in my life that I have never regretted. . . . I saw too many brilliantly talented black singers go into the Met doing *Porgy and Bess* and shown the exit sign as soon as it was over, and I knew that would never happen to me. If I never set foot on their stage, that was never going to happen to me.³⁶

Grace Bumbry, a star of the Met company, was not enthusiastic about playing Bess, and ultimately chose to take part because she didn't want the production to go on without her:

It took me about four months to decide. I said to myself, as the Metropolitan Opera didn't ask me could they do "Porgy and Bess" and they are going to do it with or without me and since I'm often complaining about productions not being done well, I decided it would behoove me to accept so I could put my input into this wonderful piece of music.³⁷

Although Bumbry claimed that by studying the score she had been won over by its greatness, and had "gone from reluctance to acceptance to gung-ho," she was

³⁵James A. Standifer, prod., *Porgy and Bess: An American Voice* (Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 1999).

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Joseph C. Koennen, "A Grand Entrance for 'Porgy and Bess,'" *Newsday*, 3 February 1985.

distinctly less of a presence in the extensive publicity leading up to opening night than Simon Estes, who was much less conflicted about playing Porgy.³⁸ A lengthy *New York Times* article from February 5, for instance, offers extensive quotations from quite a number of cast members, but surprisingly few words from Bumbry.³⁹

The Met production received mixed reviews, and the most consistently criticized element was Grace Bumbry's performance. Several reviewers said that she was too old for the role, but I strongly suspect that the real problem was that while she may have come to respect the score, she never lost her distaste for the story, and so was unwilling to immerse herself in her role.⁴⁰ Instead of playing Bess, she played Grace Bumbry playing Bess, with what more than one reviewer perceived as self-conscious irony. According to Barton Wimble, she approached her characterization with "indifference," and "her opera-star vocal tricks transform Gershwin's simple, heartfelt melodies into grotesque imitations of Bumbry's mannered Strauss and Verdi princesses."⁴¹ Robert Croan praised her singing, but said that "her histrionics were nothing short of disastrous. . . . Vamping around like a parody mixture of Tosca and Dalila, she seemed to have walked into the wrong opera, and her final exit, wiggling her hips as she leaves for New York. . . was pure high camp."⁴²

³⁸Nan Robertson, "Populating Catfish Row on the Met Opera Stage," *New York Times*, 5 February 1985.

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰Additional evidence of Bumbry's ongoing ambivalence can be found in a televised interview in February 1985; she claims rather tepidly that the story of *Porgy and Bess* is acceptable insofar as it is a relic of the past, and that the Met will do a fine job as they always do (*Channel 4 Today in New York*, 8 February 1985, Teleclips, Luce Press Clippings, Television News Transcripts).

⁴¹Barton Wimble, "Counterpunch: This Bess, She Ain't My Woman," *New York News*, New Jersey ed., 8 March 1985.

⁴²Robert Croan, "'Porgy and Bess' Finally Makes It to Met," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 14 February 1985.

If the entire production had been characterized by this kind of deliberately distancing performance, one might imagine that it resulted from an innovative, ironic directorial concept. Since no one else in the cast took a similar approach, this seems unlikely. Instead, Bumbry's metaphorically "off-key" performance suggests a breakdown in communication between her, director Nathaniel Merrill, and music director James Levine. The directors may or may not have been aware of Bumbry's lingering discomfort with the libretto and the character of Bess, but clearly they failed to address its impact on her performance.

A comment that Merrill made in the run-up to the production's run reveals something of his attitudes, and suggests why this communication breakdown may have occurred: "The opera has passed into a piece of Americana, where we can look at it objectively, and not feel that we have to apologize for it. I don't think any of the cast feel that they need to be apologized to for the opera anymore."⁴³ Two points bear underlining. First, the phrase "passed into a piece of Americana" suggests that *Porgy and Bess* has become safe, even quaint, with the passage of time—an idea that apparently did not assuage Bumbry's concerns, and that neither bespeaks nor seems likely to engender much enthusiasm about the work's artistic quality. Second, Merrill subtly gives away a critical distinction in his mind between himself and the performers—and, unavoidably, between whites and blacks—because the "we" in his statement is actively engaged in "look[ing] at it objectively" and "not feel[ing] that we have to apologize," while the cast is passively (and purportedly) no longer

⁴³Joseph C. Koennen, "A Grand Entrance for 'Porgy and Bess,'" *Newsday*, 3 February 1985.

desirous of “be[ing] apologized to.” Moreover, Merrill implies that the racial innocuousness of this period piece is demonstrated by the fact that blacks no longer expect whites to apologize for it, a rather simplistic view of the work’s racial content and its potential significance for African Americans.

If these comments by Merrill accurately reflect his perspective on the work and the cast, this may help to explain why he did not effectively communicate with Bumbry, and why she gave such a guarded and unsympathetic performance. Directors who have conveyed genuine artistic enthusiasm, and who have reassured their casts that they are both aware of and actively working against the undesirable racial messages that some see in *Porgy and Bess*, have been the most successful in fostering positive relationships with casts from the 1950s on. While there is no evidence that the Met directorship was aware of the necessity of such actions, Trevor Nunn and Simon Rattle clearly approached the Glyndebourne production of the opera in 1986 with exactly the right attitude to create an atmosphere of openness and cooperation. Director Nunn relates that he immediately acknowledged to the cast the awkwardness of being a white director (albeit British, not American) of *Porgy and Bess*: “The first thing that I said [in rehearsal] was, ‘I feel like an impostor. You all know much more about this work than I do. I’m going to need your help and guidance constantly.’”⁴⁴ This was not an apology, but an invitation to dialogue, and one that clearly bore fruit.

Music director Simon Rattle shared this approach. Nunn describes an incident that shows Rattle’s willingness to learn from and empower the chorus—typically the

⁴⁴Standifer, *Porgy and Bess: An American Voice*.

least powerful members of an opera cast:

There was something about the train spiritual [in Act I, scene 2] that a number of people felt, “We’re toppling over, we’re rushing, it isn’t feeling right.” I talked to Simon about the fact that it would be good if people were able to say what they wanted, and at a certain point Simon came up out of the pit and everybody was there, and he said, “Um, talk to me, first of all, about the problem,” which lots of people did. And he said, “Okay, what can we do? Okay, look—I’ll just give you a downbeat. . . then show me. . . .”

This was such an unusual event. I mean, here was an internationally famous conductor saying, “Show me.” And he did, and the chorus were completely sensational. It was like, “This we have to prove.” Now, uncondacted, I mean absolutely nothing dictating what was holding them together, they sang that vast unit of the work, but so movingly and absolutely immaculately, and together, like they were one singer.⁴⁵

As a result of the directors’ openness, the performers were moved to invest themselves fully in the production and Nunn’s concept for it. As Willard White, who played Porgy, put it, “There was tremendous excitement there at the point of rehearsal. Everyone on stage felt a certain commitment about what they were doing, because Trevor Nunn had managed to weave into the whole piece, the whole presentation, a clarity as to who you are.”⁴⁶ The *New York Times* reported that the first rehearsal ended with the cast in tears, not only (the reporter hypothesized) from being caught up in the music and the story, but because “they must have known they were part of a rare experience: a production that redeems an artistic vision, rescuing it from doubts, bringing it to life.”⁴⁷ The collaborative attitude that the directors brought to the rehearsal process surely played an important role in the performers’ enthusiasm.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Anthony Lewis, “The Music of Life,” *New York Times*, 19 August 1986.

Many reviews of the Glyndebourne production emphasize the uninhibited quality of the performances—a quality that earlier generations of white critics had readily perceived as a typical characteristic of black people, but which was no longer expected from anyone participating in such a controversial work. Nicholas Kenyon, the reviewer for the *Observer*, wrote that it was now being “performed with fantastic commitment and accomplishment by a cast who demonstrate not the slightest qualms about its problems and a conductor with not the slightest doubt about its musical stature.”⁴⁸ This commitment and lack of qualms was reflected in the compelling emotional frankness of the performances, particularly those of the leads. *Opera* magazine’s Max Loppert said that White and Cynthia Haymon “had me in tears throughout ‘Bess, you is my woman now’: such direct displays of naked tenderness, of painful self-exposure to new, deep emotion, are rare on any stage.”⁴⁹ Clearly, this was the work of performers who held nothing back, who did not feel the need to self-consciously differentiate themselves from their characters. Such a sense of artistic and personal safety is only possible when the cast and directorial staff communicate openly about the potential racial tensions inherent in a production of *Porgy and Bess*.

In 1995, when an American production was finally directed by an African American, the need for the director to bridge the racial divide between herself and the cast was eliminated, but the importance of her own attitude toward the opera was, if anything, accentuated. Hope Clarke approached the new Houston Grand Opera

⁴⁸Nicholas Kenyon, “Summertime Blues,” *The London Observer*, 13 July 1986.

⁴⁹Max Loppert, “*Porgy and Bess*, August 6,” *Opera*, Autumn 1987, 25.

production as a “joint effort” with the cast: “We all put our recipes into the pot.”⁵⁰ Unfortunately, the collaborative spirit that she brought to her relationship with the cast seems to have been counterbalanced by a degree of antagonism on her part toward *Porgy and Bess* and its performance and reception history. This is not surprising; given the well-publicized fact that she was the first African American to direct an American production, Clarke was expected to bring a distinctive, new perspective to the work—to shake it up.

Many of her comments to the press emphasize how her production was different from previous ones. She highlights the pride and industriousness of Catfish Row’s inhabitants, noting that “in my production, everybody works. . . . Just because you are poor doesn’t mean you have to be slovenly or ignorant.”⁵¹ Even Porgy carved little African figurines out of wood to give to his “donors.”⁵² The cultural specificity of the Gullah community was important to Clarke, and she drew on a cast member who had Gullah relatives, Keith Crawford, to assist the other performers with the dialect.

Press accounts portray Clarke’s approach to the new Houston production not only as correcting decades of misguided decisions by other directors, but as improving the opera itself. According to Rebecca Morris of *American Theatre* magazine, Clarke “feels the show’s language needs attention. ‘I think that’s one of the

⁵⁰Melinda Bargreen, “Her Version/Vision: First African-American to Stage ‘Porgy and Bess’ Gives It a Different Spin,” *Seattle Times*, 12 March 1995.

⁵¹Rosalyn M. Story, “Hope Clarke, the First African-American to Direct Gershwin’s Masterpiece, Casts the Work in a New Light for Houston Grand Opera,” *Opera News*, 21 January 1995, 14.

⁵²Since the opera does not call for Porgy to beg onstage, presumably this would have been implied.

things black people don't like,' she says, referring to the stylized dialect. 'It sounds a little like the speech of totally uneducated, stupid black people. It's supposed to be Gullah. It's not. We will be absolutely Gullah if we can achieve it.'"⁵³ There is a touch of animosity toward the work in Clarke's words, and reporters often highlighted this attitude, even though many of her directorial decisions seem to have built on, rather than contradicted, elements of the opera. For example, she used African drums onstage during the picnic scene, a move very much in the spirit of Gershwin's score, but a newspaper account suggests that Clarke was bringing a fresh new perspective that would have been alien to the composer:

Clarke has also made prominent use of drumming, a significant aspect of African culture. For example, at the big dance on Kittiwah Island, she has added an onstage drum and percussion ensemble.

Clarke justified her African emphasis on the better understanding we now have of the Gullah community that inhabited the Sea Islands off the coast of the Carolinas and Charleston. . . . Although Gershwin spent time with Heyward in Charleston while he was composing the opera, it is unlikely that two whites could have gained access to the inner circles of the Gullah community.⁵⁴

Articles about the production make scant mention of what might have attracted Clarke to *Porgy and Bess* in the first place; she is quoted on more than one occasion calling the work, or at least the music, "great" or "brilliant," but she is not quoted elaborating further, which makes the praise appear perfunctory.⁵⁵ Morris writes that "Clarke candidly admits she hopes *Porgy and Bess* will lead to directing

⁵³Rebecca Morris, "Hope Clarke," *American Theatre*, December 1994, 53-54.

⁵⁴Kenneth Herman, "'Porgy' Gets a Cultural Makeover," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 March 1995.

⁵⁵R.M. Campbell, "Seattle Shares in a New 'Porgy and Bess,'" *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 10 March 1995; Morris, "Hope Clarke."

on Broadway and at the Met.”⁵⁶ One gets the impression that Clarke was not terribly committed to the opera for its own sake. It is admittedly difficult to separate what Clarke may or may not have thought or said about *Porgy and Bess* from the way she and the production were written about in the press. It may be that her opposition to certain elements of the opera made for a better story than did her admiration for it.

Judging by reviews of the production, cast members responded to Clarke’s direction with heartfelt and excellent performances. She clearly had a harmonious relationship with the performers; as she said in one interview, “I told the cast, ‘We’re going to laugh all the way to the opening,’ and we did.”⁵⁷ While this paints a picture of a pleasant rehearsal process, it is curiously incongruous with the serious tone and content of much of the opera. She told the interviewer, “We’ve emphasized the elements of musical theater, and it seems more like a play than an opera.”⁵⁸ The statement is telling both for her use of the first-person plural—unlike Nathaniel Merrill, quoted above, Clarke is referring to herself and the cast—and for her assumption that a non-operatic approach to *Porgy and Bess* is desirable.⁵⁹ Her affinity for the cast appears to be stronger than for the opera.

Clarke broke new ground in seeking to elevate the respectability of the opera’s portrayal of African Americans while simultaneously downplaying the importance of

⁵⁶Morris, “Hope Clarke,” 53.

⁵⁷Melinda Bargreen, “Her Version/Vision: First African-American to Stage ‘Porgy and Bess’ Gives It a Different Spin,” *Seattle Times*, 12 March 1995.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹According to Martin Bernheimer of the *Los Angeles Times*, 9 June 1995, “the score. . . is presented virtually uncut,” so the musical theater aspect of the production was apparently more a matter of emphasis and tone than of actual editing of the score.

its classification as opera. In the history of *Porgy and Bess* up to this time, the racial and generic components had been inextricably linked, as this dissertation has shown: productions that presented the work as a musical coincided with increased racial controversy over the libretto, and the work was redeemed politically in the mid-1970s by productions that emphasized its seriousness and artistic merit as an opera. Clarke's approach implicitly offered a critique of *Porgy and Bess* on both generic and racial grounds, and sought to make it at once more entertaining (i.e., more theatrical, less "operatic") and more culturally authentic. The result was a production that was compellingly and wholeheartedly performed, and which likely would have pleased the composer better than a more reverent production like the Met's, ten years earlier.⁶⁰ Despite the antagonistic flavor of some of her comments, the collaborative spirit of Clarke's work with her cast was true to Gershwin's own approach in 1935.

Careers on Catfish Row: The Problems of Reception

It is critically important for a director of *Porgy and Bess* to cultivate open, respectful, and collaborative relationships with and among his or her cast members, because involvement in the work requires a great leap of faith from them: in order for a production to succeed, they must give what amounts to an idealistic performance, in a world that they well know is far from ideal. The director must foster that idealism by having a persuasive artistic vision, and by allowing the cast to be partners in

⁶⁰Despite generally positive reviews, the production apparently did not please David Gockley, Houston Grand Opera's general manager, who brought in director Tazewell Thompson to do some mid-tour "tweaking." See Lewis Segal, "It's Summertime, and the Staging Ain't Easy," *Los Angeles Times*, 1 June 1995.

realizing that vision. The stage, in rehearsal and performance, must be a space where the performers feel safe enough to manifest the idealism that is required for a convincing performance.

This dissertation has underlined the harsh reality in which *Porgy and Bess* exists: its composer has been taken lightly, its music tinkered with and undervalued, its plot criticized for its stereotypes. The performers cannot help but be aware of these facts, and yet must bring their characters to life as believable human beings, even though they are also symbols encrusted by years of controversy. Such a performance requires a tremendous belief in the artistic quality of the work itself, despite its mixed critical reception, and a willingness to make a personal connection to the character being portrayed, despite the inclination a talented, ambitious African American artist might reasonably feel to keep his or her distance from Catfish Row.

Whatever a performer thinks of *Porgy and Bess*'s music and libretto, there is a serious reason to think twice about appearing in the work: as an advancer of operatic careers, it has had a checkered history. On one hand, it brought skilled and gifted black singers onto the opera stage who might otherwise never have appeared there. On the other, the skills and gifts performers have displayed in *Porgy and Bess* have not always garnered them roles in other operas.⁶¹ This is partly because of the work's stylistic uniqueness and generic ambiguity; the popular quality (and sheer popularity!)

⁶¹According to Gregg Baker, "I did [Crown] for fourteen years. I wasn't given an opportunity to sing anything else. Certainly it was not from lack of desire to sing other repertoire, or being able to sing other repertoire—there just wasn't an opportunity. Fortunately, after years and years of working at it, people began to realize I could sing other things." Paul Thomason, "The Problem with *Porgy and Bess*," *Opera News*, August 1998, 19. Angela Simpson has faced a similar problem, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

of many of *Porgy*'s songs has obscured the fact that its vocal demands are as fierce as those of more traditional operas.

It is also, of course, partly a matter of race. One of the most vexing problems faced by performers of *Porgy and Bess*, surely, is that white audiences have sometimes believed the excellence of the performances to be due primarily to a racial affinity for the opera's African American characters and musical idioms. In the first twenty or so years of the work's existence, white critics were often frank about exactly why they thought the performances were so good: they believed that they were characterized by "the peculiar spontaneity and realism that only Negroes can give to a saga of their own people."⁶² In some cases, the fact that the cast members were performing, not simply being themselves, seems to have been overlooked—a testament to the performances, but also to the attitudes and expectations of white viewers.

The idea that the "spontaneity and realism" of the acting was racially inherent, rather than the result of conscious decisions by highly trained performers, often lies behind white critics' occasional complaints that a performer is *not* quite convincing in his or her role. For example, Gail Borden wrote in 1936 that "Anne Brown, as 'Bess,' . . . gives a good account of her character, albeit with a little too much study and music-school learning for this department."⁶³ It may well be that Brown's

⁶²Don Craig, "'Porgy and Bess' Is Thrilling Theater Event in Local Debut," *Washington Daily News*, March 1936. (This article is in the Gershwin scrapbooks in the Library of Congress; no specific date is indicated.)

⁶³Gail Borden, "'Porgy' Opera of Gershwin Rich, Appealing," *Chicago Daily Times*, 18 February 1936.

performance was a bit prim, but Borden insinuates that the problem lies not in her difficulty convincing the viewer that she is uneducated like Bess, but in the very fact that she is so highly educated.⁶⁴

In 1952, John Rosenfield made it particularly explicit that he did not find many of the performers “black enough,” culturally, to seem at home on Catfish Row.

Alone of the cast [Leontyne Price] had the second nature of the Southern Negro as of Charleston, S. C., circa 1910. Otherwise it was a curiously de-Africanized “Porgy and Bess” that Breen delivered. A reason, perhaps, is what has happened to the Negro population between 1935 and 1952. The strutting and shouting, the dialect English, the primitive reactions now have to be acquired. Warfield, for example, determinedly sang “I’ve Got Plenty o’ Nuttin’” as “I’ve Got Plenty of Nothing.” All Breen saved by importing his Negro cast was burnt cork.⁶⁵

That Anne Brown and Todd Duncan had been natural strutters and shouters in 1935 is just one of the jaw-dropping assumptions that Rosenfield reveals in this passage.

Another is that Warfield’s diction would have been different if he had shared “the second nature of the Southern Negro” with Price. (Yet another is that a white cast performing *Porgy and Bess* under a layer of burnt cork would be morally equivalent to a highly-educated black cast performing the work!) Rosenfield’s concern for what he perceives as racial authenticity blinds him to the fact that individual artistic decisions—Breen’s, as well as Price’s and Warfield’s—shaped the performances.

In the post-civil rights era, white critics gained a measure of sophistication about race, or at least self-consciousness about it, which greatly reduced the

⁶⁴Brown herself admitted, “I think that the very first days of rehearsals and then perhaps even in the performances I must have been a very schoolgirlish Bess. But of course it developed as time went on” (Robert Wyatt, “Anne Brown: From an Interview with Anne Brown (1995),” 230).

⁶⁵John Rosenfield, “A New ‘Porgy’ in Dallas,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, 28 June 1952, 44.

frequency with which they made such egregious statements about *Porgy and Bess* and its performers. In a 1976 review of the London recording directed by Lorin Maazel, Irving Kolodin exemplifies this improvement as he complains of “the post-conservatory conformity in the sound of key members of the cast,” and notes that most of the principals have “little relationship in fact to the blacks of Catfish Row and insufficient command of theatrical art to simulate it” (emphasis mine).⁶⁶ Kolodin is aware, as previous generations of white critics had sometimes failed to be, that the performers had to rely on artifice, not merely “be themselves,” in order to give convincing performances as Porgy, Bess, and the rest. Nonetheless, he shares with earlier critics a desire to be convinced of an authentic, cultural connection between each performer and his or her character.

The professional problem that this can pose is suggested by one critic’s comment about the Glyndebourne production: “Harolyn Blackwell as Clara, Cynthia Clarey (Serena) and Marietta Simpson (Maria) all identify so closely with the characters that it is often hard to remember that we are watching professional singers assuming parts for the occasion or to conceive that they could ever have played, respectively, Gilda, Carmen and Prince Orlovsky.”⁶⁷ What this commentator found “hard to remember,” many white viewers, especially in the early years, never realized to begin with.

It is instructive to compare these attitudes with those of music and theater critics in the black press. From the beginning, African American critics have been

⁶⁶Irving Kolodin, “Porgy: Complete and Incomplete,” *Saturday Review*, 12 June 1976, 46.

⁶⁷Hugo Cole, “The Shock of the New,” *Country Life*, 17 July 1986.

highly aware of *Porgy and Bess*'s performers *qua* performers. In some cases, it was precisely the *difference* between performer and character that they sought to highlight—both because this showed the artistry of the performances, and because it pointed to the fact that the opera's version of African American life was not broadly representative. In 1935, black critics paid a good deal of attention to Anne Brown, emphasizing how much skill was involved in her portrayal of Bess. Writes William E. Clark for the *New York Age*, "It is her dramatic talent alone which enables her to give such a convincing portrayal of 'Bess,' who just couldn't resist 'Crown's hot hands' . . . There is nothing whatever in Miss Brown's own social background or experience which would be of aid to her in interpreting this role." Clark goes on to underline the quality of Brown's classical training, and how her work in *Porgy and Bess* fits into that context:

Besides a rarely lovely voice. . . she is a thorough musician, playing the piano very well, and her French and German diction are above reproach. And more remarkable still is the fact that she can speak and sing in the dialect of the Negroes of "Catfish Row" as though she had lived among these people all her life.⁶⁸

For Clark, Brown's ability to give a compelling performance as Bess has more to do with her classical training in diction than with her being black.

Not every critic enjoyed the evidence of this classical training, but they all found it significant. Ralph Matthews of the *Afro-American* actually complains about the "conservatory twang" of the performances, and the work itself.⁶⁹ But despite

⁶⁸William E. Clark, "In the Name of Art," *New York Age*, 19 October 1935.

⁶⁹Ralph Matthews, "Broadway Gives a Royal Welcome to Gershwin's 'Porgy and Bess,'" *Afro-American* (national edition), 19 October 1935. This is a criticism that very few white reviewers of the period echo, taken in as they are by the "characteristic fervor of a Negro cast" ("Porgy and Bess,"

finding *Porgy and Bess* a bit too highbrow for his tastes, he praises Brown and Todd Duncan for their duets, “which call upon all the technical training of both artists to get the best out of the intricate score of Gershwin.” He is also glad to see Ruby Elzy and Abbie Mitchell get “an opportunity to display rare dramatic ability as well as use their excellently trained voices.”⁷⁰ In the same publication two months later, a writer noted,

In this high-water mark season on Broadway, the first college girl has arrived in opera—Ruby Elzy of Ohio State University.

It is clear that the colored actor, by superior technique, has sold himself on Broadway on the basis of straight personality. This fact has destroyed the burnt cork era.⁷¹

Much of the black press’s coverage of the Theatre Guild production conveys a strong sense of optimism about the degree to which *Porgy and Bess* would expand professional opportunities for African American performers, both in opera and on Broadway. Floyd J. Calvin, writing for the *New York Age*, saw the opera as part of a broader trend toward more varied, less formulaic vehicles for black artists. It is rather surprising, given how often *Porgy and Bess* has been denounced as full of stereotypes, to read Calvin’s jubilant words: “At last the old ‘Black-face’ stereotype has been broken. White people now pay to see Negroes be themselves, and rate them on the faithful interpretation of character rather than on the faithful portrayal of pre-conceived prejudiced notions.”⁷²

Of course, *Porgy and Bess* did not mark the end of “faithful portrayal[s] of

Philadelphia Evening Bulletin, 28 January 1936).

⁷⁰Matthews, “Broadway Gives a Royal Welcome.”

⁷¹“Porgy and Bess,” *Afro-American* (national edition), 14 December 1935.

⁷²Floyd J. Calvin, “Five Broadway Spots Set New High Record for Race Performers,” *New York Age*, 7 December 1935.

pre-conceived prejudiced notions” about African Americans, nor the onset of a flood of satisfying roles for black performers. This latter fact is made plain by the availability of most of the original cast members to participate in the Armitage and Crawford revivals of 1938 and 1941-45, respectively.⁷³ Neither Anne Brown nor Todd Duncan went on to have flourishing operatic careers in the United States. Duncan was already considering returning to the classroom in March 1936, when the *New York Amsterdam News* quoted him: “Should I be offered a dignified role, one not that of a comedian and permissible of interpretation by a intelligent Negro, and if I could be assured of working all the time instead of just 10 or 12 weeks and being idle the other 40-odd, then I would remain on the stage.”⁷⁴ He did ultimately have major roles in important musicals such as *Cabin in the Sky* and *Lost in the Stars*, and in 1945 became the first African American to perform with the New York City Opera, but for the most part his career consisted of recital appearances and teaching, and *Porgy* remained his signature role.⁷⁵ Anne Brown, frustrated by the lack of opportunities for an African American opera singer in the U.S., moved to Norway in 1948, where she met with some success until asthma stopped her from singing in 1953.⁷⁶

Although the optimism of the 1935-36 black press coverage of *Porgy and*

⁷³ For a discussion of the trends in black performance opportunities on Broadway post-*Porgy*, see Allen Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From “Coontown” to “Dream Girls”* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 176 ff.

⁷⁴ “Stage May Not Retain Duncan,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 7 March 1936. [HS #85]

⁷⁵ Todd Duncan, “Todd Duncan: From an Interview by Robert Wyatt (1990),” in *Gershwin Reader*, 228.

⁷⁶ Barry Singer, “On Hearing Her Sing, Gershwin Made ‘Porgy’ ‘Porgy and Bess,’” *New York Times*, 29 March 1998.

Bess was quickly shown to be ill-founded, many African American critics remained convinced that appearing in the work was beneficial to performers: even if it didn't guarantee them roles in other operas or musicals, it still enabled them to display their talents and training—and to make a living through their art, as long as a production lasted.

These advantages were taken very seriously indeed, as is revealed by the tension in the pages of the black press over the Breen production's international tour in the 1950s. On the one hand, the opera's libretto was widely seen as detrimental to the African American reputation abroad; on the other, the international exposure and acclaim that the cast received was a source of great pride. For Frank E. Bolden, the way to resolve the conflict of interests was to downplay the importance of the libretto:

In talking with the talented William Warfield, who plays the role of Porgy; Miss Leontyne Price, who portrays Bess; Leverne [*sic*] Hutcherson, the alternate Porgy, and Irving Barnes, understudy to Porgy, it was clearly pointed out that the libretto is not the most important thing in a dramatic production, but that the actor is.

In Europe, Mr. Warfield pointed out, patrons of the theatre are more interested in the talent which an artist displays than the libretto. An artist is singled out for his good or bad performance of a role and is not "typed" because of the role he portrays.⁷⁷

Bolden goes on to press his case further, accusing tour critics of being ignorant about opera, showing both his awareness of the mixed blessing that the tour represents for the African American community, and his conviction that the pros outweigh the cons.⁷⁸

⁷⁷Frank E. Bolden, "'Porgy and Bess' Cast Eyes Europe," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 26 July 1952.

⁷⁸Bolden asserts that "every patron of the theatre is not qualified to be recognized as a critic of the theatre," and compares politically-motivated criticism of *Porgy and Bess* to "frying a pork chop over a Stradivarius."

Virtually every black critic of the tour took pains to shield the cast members from their criticism. “We’ve got nothing against William Warfield and Leontyne Price. They are shining stars. We’ve said so over and over again,” writes one, in an article whose headline announces, “As Propaganda Vehicle, It’s a Flop.”⁷⁹ Another critic praises the “fine, trained singers,” noting their numerous college degrees, and singles out Leontyne Price as having “one of the finest voices to come along in years,” before remarking, “Surely, our great State Department could have utilized the talents of these great artists in [a] far more appropriate production for foreign consumption.”⁸⁰ Despite the general sense that the tour was sending abroad an unfortunate message about African Americans, most black critics did not begrudge the performers the opportunity to shine on the international stage; on the contrary, they took pleasure in their success, and the black press avidly covered the warm responses that the production elicited from international audiences.⁸¹

Even the high profile and global scope of the Breen production did not translate into operatic stardom for any of its cast but Leontyne Price. William Warfield, who already had a budding concert and film career when he took the role of

⁷⁹L. F. Palmer, Jr., “‘Porgy and Bess’ Is Good Theater; As Propaganda Vehicle, It’s a Flop,” *Chicago Defender*, 6 September 1952.

⁸⁰Al Sweeney, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Superbly Produced,” *Washington Afro-American*, 9 August 1952. Interestingly, when Sweeney’s article was reprinted in the national edition of the *Afro-American* on 16 August 1952, the four paragraphs criticizing the tour were excised.

⁸¹See, for example, “Yugoslavs Demand 13 ‘Porgy’ Curtain Calls,” *Jet*, 30 December 1954. Despite the undeniably favorable reviews and strong ticket sales that the Breen production encountered throughout its international tours, those who worried that *Porgy and Bess* would perpetuate racial stereotypes abroad are very much vindicated by even a cursory perusal of the translated reviews in the Robert Breen Collection of the Jerome Lawrence and Robert Lee Theatre Research Institute at Ohio State University. This aspect of the foreign reception was not generally reported in the United States. For more on this topic, see Marie Ellen Noonan, “*Porgy and Bess* and the American Racial Imaginary,” 219-29.

Porgy in 1952, certainly gained publicity from his participation in the tour, but ultimately his American career centered more on concert performances, roles in musicals, and teaching than on operatic roles. (He did play Porgy several more times at the Vienna State Opera.) The failure of the Breen production to launch any major operatic careers save Price's was partly due to a strategy on the part of producers Breen and Blevins Davis. According to Warfield's autobiography,

In their long-range plans to develop a small industry around *Porgy and Bess* so that it might finally be profitable. . . they were not only paying everyone low wages; they were also insuring that the publicity was focused on the musical itself, and not the performers. Now that the show had taken off, the advertising listed Heyward and Gershwin as creators and Davis and Breen as producers, but no other personal credits.⁸²

Additionally, the lead roles were played by different performers each night, to prevent exhaustion, but this too had an impact on how much recognition each individual received. They were stars on the pages of the black news weeklies, but nowhere else.

By the late 1950s, when Goldwyn began work on his film version, there was no longer a consensus in the African American community that *Porgy and Bess* was good for performers. In *Shining Trumpets*, Rudi Blesh noted that “in 1957 the entire gifted company that had presented *Porgy and Bess* with such spectacular success abroad—particularly in Moscow—was at liberty at home or else engaged in menial labor.”⁸³ Some critics, who had previously exempted performers from the scorn they directed at *Porgy*, began to take them to task.

James L. Hicks offers a clear example of the change. A vigorous opponent of

⁸²William Warfield with Alton Miller, *My Music & My Life* (Champaign, IL: Sagamore, 1991), 144.

⁸³Rudi Blesh, *Shining Trumpets*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1958), 357.

Porgy and Bess, in 1953 he wrote that the Breen production featured a superlative cast, but “because these voices stem from the bosom of black breasts they are not being heard from the stage of the Metropolitan opera where they belong. Instead they are intermingled with the rattle of dice which roll across the stage throughout ‘Porgy.’” He did not explicitly blame the performers for participating, although they might well be implicated in his closing question, “When will the colored people of America rise up in unified protest against the way they are pictured on the American stage, radio screen and television?”⁸⁴

In 1958, by contrast, Hicks pulled no punches:

I still think ‘Porgy’ stinks—even though, it does give some jobs to Negro show folks. . . .

I take the position that if a man’s talent in show business can’t earn him anything else but a role in a play which degrades his race, it might well be that man doesn’t have too much talent.

Perhaps he’d do better in some other field—maybe like shoveling coal.⁸⁵

Part of the shift in tone may be linked to the rising sense of empowerment among African Americans over the course of the 1950s. Accompanying this shift is a new attitude toward black performers: members of the black press no longer hold them up as “shining stars” to be admired for their glamour and forgiven for the compromises they must make for their careers; they are now held responsible for their actions, expected to take principled stands, to refuse degrading roles and insist upon dignified ones.

⁸⁴James L. Hicks, “We Don’t Need ‘Porgy and Bess,’” *Afro-American AFRO Magazine*, 28 March 1953.

⁸⁵James L. Hicks, “Theatricals,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 6 September 1958.

There had been fairly broad agreement in the black press that the international tour of the Breen production had been counterproductive, but when it came to the big-budget film version produced by Samuel Goldwyn in the late 1950s, the consensus broke down. For every hostile James Hicks, there was a Harry Levette, who wrote glowingly for the American Negro Press syndicate that *Porgy and Bess* was being filmed “at long last,” and that “at no better time than now could this be done because at no time more than now is music, the universal language of humanity, more needed.”⁸⁶

Sidney Poitier, in particular, found himself in the midst of the controversy over the film, long before it reached theaters. His career had been built on dignified, authoritative roles, and he was in no hurry to accept the part of Porgy. At first he turned it down because Goldwyn would not give him script approval rights. When he decided to participate anyway, Poitier made a public statement:

My enthusiasm was tempered, very honestly, by a fear that if improperly handled, “Porgy and Bess” could conceivably be, to my mind, injurious to Negroes. . . .

I have never to my conscious knowledge, done anything that I thought would be injurious to anyone—particularly to my own people. . . .

I was unwittingly unfair to Mr. Goldwyn in assuming that he might mistreat the property and bring about the very fears that I then held. Well, I didn’t have to go very far in examining Mr. Goldwyn’s record to learn that in the past he has always exercised good taste, integrity and dignity in all his work.⁸⁷

This is the first time, to my knowledge, that a performer in *Porgy and Bess* publicly acknowledged having reservations about appearing in it. In truth, Poitier’s qualms

⁸⁶Harry Levette, “Samuel Goldwyn to Film ‘Porgy and Bess,’” *The Kansas City Call* (Mo.), 1 November 1957.

⁸⁷“Poitier Explains Why He’ll Do Porgy Role,” *Los Angeles Mirror News*, 4 January 1958.

had not been put to rest; in 1967 he admitted that he had only taken the role because “there was a threat of my career stopping dead still. . . . I didn’t enjoy doing it, and I have not yet completely forgiven myself.”⁸⁸ The role he agreed to play, however, clearly included that of Poitier-as-convert: his explanation of how Goldwyn had won him over was part of a transparent attempt to reassure the black public and sympathetic non-blacks about both the film and Poitier’s participation in it. His conversion narrative, with its emphasis on his continuing commitment to giving only beneficial portrayals of African Americans, is simultaneously evidence of Poitier’s weakness and power. On one hand, he was forced to publicly extol Goldwyn’s integrity; on the other, his approval was essential for the film’s public acceptance, particularly among blacks.

For some, the news of Poitier’s capitulation was welcome. Hazel A. Washington had criticized him for his original insistence on script approval rights, saying, “far too many of our gang reach the pinnacle, then let their heads outgrow their hats. . . . This could have been such a wonderful role for Sid.”⁸⁹ Others saw his return to the project as selling out: “We took Sidney Poitier’s statement backing Goldwyn for what it is worth—Poitier had his brains washed by Goldwyn a long time ago. . . ditto Pearl Bailey, Sammy Davis, Jr., William Walker, Broc [*sic*] Peters, and Joel Fluellen. . . All of these want to go on working and eating, we assume.”⁹⁰

⁸⁸Joan Barthel, “He Doesn’t Want to Be Sexless Sidney,” *New York Times*, 6 August 1967.

⁸⁹Hazel A. Washington, “This is Hollywood,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, 14 November 1957.

⁹⁰Almena Lomax, “A Great Negro Editor Writes in the L.A. Tribune,” *Los Angeles Tribune*, 15 August 1958. Ellipses and capitalization are from the original. This was a paid advertisement by the Council for Improvement of Negro Theatre Arts.

The response of the African American public to the film was similarly mixed, as revealed in the pages of the *New Pittsburgh Courier* at the time. Columnist Izzy Rowe wrote, “The acceptance and rejection of the ‘Porgy and Bess’ film by our folks all over the country has left this pinch-hitting scribe all shook up. In one place, the ‘race’ pickets to keep the brother out, and in another he walks with his sign to get him in.”⁹¹ The film was reported to have broken box office records at one Harlem cinema,⁹² but months later an editorial claimed,

Studios are beginning to see that films like “The Defiant Ones” and “All the Young Men”. . . are doing better at the box office than types of films like “Porgy and Bess.” From an economic standpoint, this is important because the Negro market—nearly 18 million Americans—aren’t supporting the type of thing “Porgy and Bess” represents.⁹³

The film’s rocky reception among African Americans led to Goldwyn’s unprecedented decision to donate all of the film profits to charity via the Samuel Goldwyn Foundation, with funds to “be shared by worthwhile organizations throughout the country regardless of race, creed, color or national origin,” as the *New York Amsterdam News* admiringly reported.⁹⁴

Despite such extreme efforts to court and soothe African Americans, *Porgy and Bess* reached a nadir in their estimation in the years following the film’s release, and an increasing number of black performers became unwilling to participate. This

⁹¹Izzy Rowe, “Izzy Rowe’s Notebook: Facts and Fancies,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 13 February 1960.

⁹²Izzy Rowe, “Izzy Rowe’s Notebook,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 30 April 1960.

⁹³Ches Washington, “Uncovering Hollywood: Lil Cumber Says Give 20th Century-Fox Credit for Giving Negroes Jobs in Films,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 19 November 1960. Poitier had appeared in *The Defiant Ones* and *All the Young Men*.

⁹⁴“‘Porgy and Bess’ Profits Will Aid Needy Groups,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 15 August 1959.

was not necessarily due to a concurrent rise in roles for black actors in other vehicles.

Jesse H. Walker summed up one noteworthy situation in the mid-1960s:

The fact that “Porgy and Bess,” now playing at City Center, has white singers in its cast wouldn’t be worth more than a passing note, but for the explanations given out as to why producer Jean Dalrymple was not able to hire enough Negroes. In one newspaper she is reported as assuming that the failure of casting calls to produce enough Negro singers was partly due to the World’s Fair. The latter and the increasing number of musical tent shows for the summer she says have cut into the talent supply.

Mebbe so, mebbe not. You can count on one hand the number of Negro singers appearing at the World’s Fair. And on the other the number getting set for summer musical tent shows. What’s overlooked, possibly, is the simple fact that many Negro singers would prefer not to appear in “Porgy and Bess,” a show which admittedly has beautiful music, but a woeful tale of Catfish Row which some folks get tired of seeing revived time and time again.⁹⁵

As Chapter 2 demonstrated, there was by this time no allure of high art to counterbalance black artists’ disinclination to reenact the “woeful tale.” *Porgy and Bess* had been divorced from its original operatic conception for so long that it was viewed as simply another musical. Those who performed in it could anticipate receiving neither professional rewards nor approval from the African American community, which had once been enthusiastic about the prestige conferred by the work.⁹⁶

In the mid-1970s, with the Maazel recording and the Houston Grand Opera production, the cultural cachet of *Porgy and Bess* as an opera was revived. It was truly a leap of faith for African American singers, many of whom had managed to

⁹⁵Jesse H. Walker, “Theatricals,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 16 May 1964.

⁹⁶For an example of how far *Porgy and Bess* had fallen in performers’ estimation, see the dismal review by Perdita Duncan, “Music in Review: ‘Porgy and Bess,’” *New York Amsterdam News*, 16 May 1964. She describes a performance so emotionally tepid that it “became just another musical that did not need the inner understanding of an all-Negro cast.”

develop careers in opera without getting anywhere near Catfish Row, to take part in a work that had fallen into such low esteem. *Porgy and Bess* was no longer viewed as a unique opportunity for them—on the contrary, it was by now well known that it could prove a dead end. Even Leontyne Price, the one enduring star whose career was launched by the opera, provided a cautionary tale. As Clamma Dale said in 1977, “We all knew the story of Leontyne Price and the difficulty she had in breaking out of the Bess image in the early 1950s.”⁹⁷

It was only because *Porgy and Bess* was being restored to its full operatic glory that its artistic merit had the potential to outweigh its racial and professional liabilities. This balancing act is reflected in the black press coverage of the Houston production. According to Mel Tapley of the *New York Amsterdam News*,

“Porgy and Bess,” which really represents most of the stereotypes that whites believe about us—promiscuity, ignorance, killings—with the baling hook taking the place of the usual razor—and dope addiction, is an entertainment must because its music and voices transcend all of these narrow limitations. As the leading singers are exceptional, their supporting cast, too, is tremendous.⁹⁸

Tapley’s attitude—wary of stereotypes, but impressed by the performances and music—is strikingly similar to that of many African American critics in the 1930s. His perspective, like theirs, springs from the fact that an ambitious opera was being performed by singers who deserve the opportunity to shine.

There had been some changes for performers, however, since 1935, and the black press coverage of the Houston production reflects these. First, *Porgy and Bess*

⁹⁷Thomas Willis, “Clamma Dale—A New Bess for All Seasons,” *Chicago Tribune*, 10 April 1977.

⁹⁸Mel Tapley, “Irene Oliver Hailed as Heavenly Bess,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 16 October 1976.

was no longer an indispensable entryway into the opera house for African American singers; Leontyne Price, Grace Bumbry, and others had been singing traditional opera roles for several years. Raoul Abdul, writing for the *New York Amsterdam News*, observed, “When ‘Porgy and Bess’ first came to light, there were very few Black singers with the kind of operatic experience necessary to cope with the score. Now, Black singers are in every major opera company in the world and they can handle anything from Monteverdi to Ginastera.”⁹⁹ Singers now had far easier access to operatic experience outside of *Porgy and Bess* than they had in 1935, and had more to choose from in terms of roles and repertoire. Significantly, Abdul quibbles in his review with the lead singers’ approaches to their characters—evidence that the mere fact of their being onstage and sounding good was no longer all that could be asked for by a black critic.¹⁰⁰

A second change since 1935 was that the general attitude of the African American community toward *Porgy and Bess* was now widely understood to be hostile. Sidney Poitier had been the first performer to speak out publicly about his ambivalence about the work and his reasons for participating. Beginning in the 1970s, it became (and remains) almost mandatory for performers to discuss how they initially felt about *Porgy and Bess*, their current position on the work’s artistic and dramatic merits, and their understandings of their characters. It no longer goes

⁹⁹Raoul Abdul, “Porgy and Bess Taking a Giant Step,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 2 October 1976.

¹⁰⁰Abdul claims that Donnie Ray Albert’s approach “emphasize[d] the toughness of Porgy’s character rather than its lyrical side. This was valid, but it lacked the poetry of others who have played the role.” Dale’s Bess, he writes, “was a little too Urban [*sic*], but a brilliant conception” (*ibid.*).

without saying that the work is worth appearing in; singers must defend both the work and their participation in it. The fact that several prominent black opera singers, such as Shirley Verrett and Jessye Norman, have never appeared in *Porgy and Bess* suggests both that the opera is no longer a rare and indispensable opportunity for aspiring African American performers, and that there is something to be gained by steering clear of the work.

In some cases, performers have explicitly addressed the reactions of African Americans to *Porgy and Bess*. An article for the black *St. Louis Sentinel* begins:

“The Blacks just don’t come out!!—I don’t know if they fear the word opera or not,” said Wilhelm[en]ia Fernandez, one of the three actresses now portraying Bess. . . .

She went on to say, “And it’s not just in St. Louis, but it’s everywhere! On nights that I did not perform and went to the theater, I saw Blacks just merely get up and walk out.”

[She]. . . also said that she and other cast members have gotten bad vibes from blacks who seem to give the impression of asking, “how could you play that part?” But Willie said, “it’s just a form of art to us—we just work and perform, it’s not like we actually live degrading lives.”¹⁰¹

The mainstream press, too, began in the 1970s routinely to cover performers’ awareness that they were taking part in a work unpopular with many in the black community. In an extensive *Chicago Tribune* article about the HGO production, Thomas Willis reports,

All of the performers I talked to in the current production are aware that many members of the black community still regard Gershwin’s folk opera with suspicion. Part of this is inevitable. Naomi Moody, . . . one of the strongest Besses, pointed to a universal social fact when she said: “Blacks sometimes get turned around. One of the problems we have is that we’re quick to say we’re being ridiculed without stopping to think and see if we really are.”

Donnie Ray Albert, the only Porgy who has been with the production

¹⁰¹Angela Beal, “Blacks Urged to Become Involved in the Opera,” *St. Louis Sentinel*, 25 August 1977.

from the beginning, said he thinks a good part of it is that blacks are “coming in late on a white-dominated art—full-voiced opera singing. It’s still taking time to get blacks involved with this facet of American art.”

Gail Nelson, newest of the four Besses, believed it may be because some people still want to forget the past and are “ashamed of the way some of our people act. It’s time they realized that every culture has its good and bad people. With ‘Roots’ and everything today, we can see the past. We know that we came from a free, intelligent culture and that we’ve maintained it through the struggle and strife. It’s something to take pride in and go from there.”¹⁰²

The common theme among these three performers is that the African American public needs to be educated in order to understand *Porgy and Bess* as an opera and to keep its message about black life in perspective. Because of their intimate familiarity with the work, they see it not as a straightforward symbol of the white appropriation and degradation of African American culture (à la *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, another work that has accrued negative racial connotations despite its author’s entirely different intentions), but as a complex and particular work of art. Although it is clear that they do not agree with mainstream black ideas about *Porgy and Bess*, they are not indifferent to how other African Americans perceive the opera, and hope that in time they will be persuaded of its worth.

In the very recent past, performers have continued to acknowledge their own qualms about *Porgy and Bess*, as well as to speak persuasively about the quality and humanity of the work. The fact that the mainstream press has come in the last 35 years to pay as much attention as the black press to the opera’s racial “problems” and the performers’ responses suggests two things: (1) that African Americans’ concerns about *Porgy* finally penetrated the consciousness of the majority, and (2) that a

¹⁰²Thomas Willis, “The Black Experience Takes Rich Root in a Hit ‘Porgy and Bess,’” *Chicago Tribune*, 10 April 1977.

number of whites have come to share these concerns.¹⁰³

Porgy and Bess and Its Performers: Realism and Idealism

Given all this enlightenment going around, one might imagine that *Porgy and Bess* would no longer be a dead end for a black singer. Between the work's restoration to full (and classic) opera status, the impressive careers of several African American opera stars, and an increasing tendency toward "colorblind" casting on many American opera stages, it hardly seems possible that those who perform Gershwin's opera risk getting stuck on Catfish Row. In an interview I conducted recently, I was quickly disabused of my assumption that the "*Porgy* ghetto" was a thing of the past.

On 3 November 2005 I spoke by telephone with Angela Simpson, a soprano who has played the role of Serena many times, including in the New York City Opera production that was televised on PBS's *Live from Lincoln Center* program in 2002, and the Washington National Opera production in November 2005. Her first professional role was in the chorus of the Metropolitan Opera's second production of *Porgy and Bess*, in 1989, so she has many years of experience with the work. In our conversation she made it clear that she loves the opera and deeply respects Gershwin's score. She also rejected the idea that it is stereotypical or degrading to African Americans, and suggested that Gershwin's choice to have the white

¹⁰³A few recent examples include: Esther Iverem, "'Porgy': New Dialogue on an Old Opera," *Washington Post*, 4 February 1998, section D, p. 1; Cori Ellison, "'Porgy' and the Racial Politics of Music," *New York Times*, 13 December 1998, sec. 2, pp. 32, 38; Barbara Zuck, "Changing Attitudes on Race Affect 'Porgy and Bess,'" *Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch*, 3 October 2004.

characters speak their lines was a deliberately ironic commentary on the fact that typically it was black performers who were excluded from singing on the operatic stage.

When I asked Simpson whether she viewed *Porgy and Bess* as a potential career trap for a black singer, it was to get a perfunctory question out of the way; given her positive attitude about the work and my own assumptions about the opera world in 2005, I expected her to dismiss the idea casually. Instead, she answered, “I’ve been caught in the *Porgy and Bess* wheel. . . . It has given me work, and I’m not complaining about that, but it’s hindered me in performing in other operas.” She said she had toured with various productions all over the United States, and in fifteen years, there was “only one company that hired me for another role just from hearing me in *Porgy*. I did not have to audition, I did not have to—I just did my job. And it was Piedmont Opera [in Winston-Salem, North Carolina], and they hired me to sing *Aïda*, just from hearing me perform *Porgy and Bess*. . . . And that’s *one* out of fifteen years.”¹⁰⁴

Simpson described how opera companies in different locations would occasionally offer the touring cast members of *Porgy and Bess* “cattle-call auditions.” She said that these resulted in a few performers being hired for other roles, but overall she felt that the auditions were a patronizing gesture and did not reflect genuine interest on the part of the companies. As a principal performer, Simpson did not think that she should be required to audition: “I would think just listening to *Porgy* and

¹⁰⁴Angela Simpson, interview by author, 3 November 2005.

hearing the music you can tell someone's voice type, if their voice could sing an Aïda or a Turandot, or sing a Tosca. You can tell—the music is very revealing.”

Fundamentally, according to Simpson, most major companies do not take the performers of *Porgy and Bess* seriously as opera singers.¹⁰⁵ Thus, despite being universally acclaimed by critics for more than fifteen years of show-stopping performances as Serena, she has not had the breadth of opportunities that should have come, in my opinion, to someone with such tremendous vocal and dramatic gifts.

Given the numerous musical, dramatic, and personal difficulties that *Porgy and Bess* poses to performers, and the uncertainty of its professional rewards, it is remarkable that so many African Americans over the years have taken part. That they have done so may be attributed, I believe, to two main factors. First, and most obviously, it has offered black opera singers a consistent source of work. Even today, this is no small thing.¹⁰⁶

Secondly, generations of performers have loved the opera. For most of them, the source of the allure has been the score. Todd Duncan, the first of many to be seduced, describes the first time he heard it, in George Gershwin's apartment:

He started out with the opening [imitating the trumpets with his voice] and I said to myself, “Oh, my God. Gee, this junk!” And then he segued with [hums the orchestral opening of “Summertime”]. . . . And Ira with his rotten voice

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶A related issue is that it offers singers a rare opportunity to work among other African Americans. Angela Simpson described the camaraderie of *Porgy and Bess* casts: “A lot of the time it's like a little reunion because the same people are in other productions. . . . One of the principals [in the Washington National Opera production] said to me they hate it at the end because it's like they're leaving home and they're going on to other productions in which they may have one or two African American singers, but for the most part it's their Caucasian counterparts, and it's not that same feeling” (ibid.).

starts [horribly off pitch] “Summertime, and the living is easy.” And he [George] looked up at me and smiled. Then George sang, “Fish are jumpin’” with Ira finishing the verse, “And the cotton is high.” Then George [now a raspy, guttural voice imitation, worse than Ira’s]. “Oh, your daddy’s. . .” But when he got to the second verse I could have wept. I said to myself, “Well this is so beautiful. Where did this man get this from?” I just couldn’t get over it. And then he went into the next part where Porgy’s theme enters. It was like the royal gates opened. I said to myself, “This is so graphic.” And he had me hooked from then on. I was very skeptical before this day.¹⁰⁷

Although only the original Theatre Guild cast members got to experience it with George Gershwin literally at their sides, the score has continued to win performers’ respect and admiration.

This is so despite the fact that many have mistrusted the libretto’s content. For example, Francois Clemmons, who sang the part of Sporting Life on the 1975 recording for the London label (conducted by Lorin Maazel), admitted, “I used to have reservations about ‘Porgy’—he is a kind of Uncle Tom with his ‘yes sir boss.’ But it is an accurate portrayal and a lot of black people had to do that to stay alive. But more than that, it is a great musical work. The music transcends the story.”¹⁰⁸ According to Elizabeth Graham, a recent Bess, “The first time I saw it, I was kind of surprised that I didn’t feel any of the things I had read about it. . . . I looked at it as a period piece, and I looked at it as a beautiful love story. And the music—there is no more beautiful love duet than ‘Bess, You Is My Woman Now.’”¹⁰⁹ Although performers have reached different conclusions about the characters and situations that

¹⁰⁷Todd Duncan, “Todd Duncan: From an Interview by Robert Wyatt (1990),” in *Gershwin Reader*, 222-3.

¹⁰⁸Paul Delaney, “Maazel and Cleveland Orchestra Record the First Complete ‘Porgy and Bess’ in Stereo,” *New York Times*, 24 August 1975.

¹⁰⁹Barbara Zuck, “Changing Attitudes on Race Affect ‘Porgy and Bess,’” *Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch*, 3 October 2004.

Porgy and Bess depicts, they are all but unanimous in affirming the value of the score and their delight in performing it.

One way that many singers have attempted to explain their commitment to the score is by emphasizing that *Porgy and Bess* is indeed an opera, with important similarities to other classic operas. Simon Estes and Grace Bumbry emphasized that its roles are as technically demanding as those composed by Wagner or Richard Strauss.¹¹⁰ Willard White, among others, has pointed out that the work, like other operas, deals with universal human emotions.¹¹¹ And on the issue of whether Gershwin's music was "racially authentic," while some singers have argued strongly that it *is* authentic—that Gershwin did sufficient homework in Charleston, or was naturally a "brother"¹¹²—others have concluded simply that it is as authentic, and as convincing, as Bizet's Spanish Gypsy music or Puccini's Japanese music—which is to say, quite enough so for an opera.

Bobby McFerrin eloquently ties all of these themes together in a comment from 1998, shortly before he directed a concert performance of *Porgy and Bess* at Avery Fisher Hall in New York. He knows the score from childhood, when his father, Robert McFerrin, provided Sidney Poitier's singing voice for the soundtrack of the Goldwyn film. Explains the younger McFerrin,

¹¹⁰See, for example, Samuel G. Freedman, "After 50 Years, 'Porgy' Comes to the Met as a Certified Classic," *New York Times*, 3 February 1985.

¹¹¹Says White, "Music is about pain and the purging of that pain. . . . There's no color to music." Standifer, prod., *Porgy and Bess: An American Voice*.

¹¹²"When I was asked if I wanted to audition for the role of Porgy, I said no," said Jimi Malar, who sings Porgy in the [Seattle Civic Light Opera] production. "I thought: 'What could a white man (Gershwin) know about what it's like to be black?' But then I listened to the music and studied the score, and to my amazement I found that George Gershwin is a soul brother." Wayne Johnson, "'Porgy' Rings True to Life," *Seattle Times*, 23 April 1982.

The main issue with blacks is, how can a white person write the black experience? Well, they can't. It's as simple as that. But Gershwin spent a lot of time in Charleston at churches, homes and nightclubs, listening and getting the rhythms in his body. He was humble enough to let the music in and be a conduit for it in the best way he could. So it's not anthropology. But the bottom line is, he captured something in a special way. Was "Carmen" written by a Gypsy? Was "Don Giovanni" written by a Spaniard? No. But do these operas capture something about the human condition? Do they have gorgeous music? You bet.¹¹³

White critics and historians have often used this same argument in an attempt to dismiss the racial debate over *Porgy and Bess*'s racial content, saying it is no different from other operas with "exotic" elements. This argument is weakened by the fact that Gershwin's opera is not a traditional European opera coated with black lacquer; African American culture specifically informs every aspect of the opera, from music to libretto to performance.¹¹⁴ When black performers compare *Porgy and Bess* to other operas, however, they are not denying the importance of race to the Gershwin work. It is difficult to conceive of African Americans singing "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'" or "Oh, Doctor Jesus" without being acutely aware of the racial part of the equation. They are too intimately involved in the work to engage in such denial.

Instead, performers who invoke *Carmen* or *Madama Butterfly* in discussions

¹¹³Cori Ellison, "'Porgy' and the Racial Politics of Music," *New York Times*, 13 December 1998, sec. 2, p. 38.

¹¹⁴Dozens of critics and other writers about *Porgy and Bess* over the years have argued that because it is an opera, it should not be judged on the basis of its racial content. For example, Joseph Swain, in *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey*, writes that "The social and political implications of *Porgy and Bess* for the black community are very real and quite complex, and require discussion, but ultimately they are irrelevant to any dramatic appraisal of the work.... [M]odern opera lovers forget politics as part of their suspension of disbelief that allows them to enter into the medium in the first place" (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 57. Lawrence Starr makes a more nuanced but essentially similar argument when he writes that elements like the use of dialect and "superficial resemblances. . . to authentic black [musical] idioms" serve to assist "the dramatic illusion on the surface without bearing on the real essence of the opera." See "Toward a Reevaluation of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*," *American Music* 2/2 (Summer 1984), 27.

of *Porgy and Bess* are expressing an idealistic commitment to opera, both as an art form and as a career. In a perfect world, race would not be bitterly divisive, and *Porgy and Bess* would be no more contentious than any other opera. Moreover, an African American would have as good a shot at the role of Carmen or Cio-Cio San, or Don Giovanni or Boris Godunov, as any other American. This is not yet the world we live in, but by demonstrating onstage that they are the equal of singers of any race, and by explaining offstage that *Porgy and Bess* is the equal of other great operas, African American performers subtly strengthen our sense that such a world should, and can, and ultimately will exist.

A 1983 interview with Todd Duncan makes this point most clearly. He was intensely conscious of the chasm between ideals and reality in his own life as an African American performing artist.

“I’ll never forget that night in Iowa in 1948,” Duncan recalls. “Over 3,000 people had come to hear me. They clamored for encore after encore. They put the lights out, but the people continued to rave. . . they wouldn’t leave.

“Well, I just felt that the heavens had opened up. I felt the glory of every note still in my throat and my being.”

Duncan was on top of the world until he returned to his drawing room on a Pullman train only to receive the kind of treatment with which blacks of the day were familiar.

“The conductor hollered, ‘Hey, boy, you don’t belong in here.’ All of my simple joy was crushed,” he remembers.¹¹⁵

Duncan, clearly, did not live in a world that let him forget about his race for more than a few hours at a time. Nor did he ever discount the specifically black aspects of *Porgy and Bess*: on various occasions, Duncan made plain that the racial aspects of

¹¹⁵Earl Byrd, “Todd Duncan—Gershwin’s First Choice,” *Washington Times*, 6 April 1983.

the opera are important for a well-informed performance—that “I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin’,” for instance, makes deliberate mockery of the values of well-off whites.¹¹⁶

Thus, later in the interview when Duncan compared *Porgy and Bess* to other operas, it was not because he believed (or wished to persuade others) that race is irrelevant. Rather, he was making a plea for an idealistic perspective on art: that it can be racially specific and still be broadly human. The plea was directed as much at his fellow African Americans as to anybody else.

Inevitably. . . it is his 1935 portrayal of Porgy to which interviewers return, and always the question, “Was the role demeaning to you as a black man?”

“I’ve been asked that question 1,800 times,” he replies, laughing. “At the time, one or two teachers at Howard University said I was bringing down this and that and the other, pulling down the dignity of myself and Howard. . .

. . . “It was no more demeaning than ‘Samson and Delilah’ or ‘Romeo and Juliet,’ just two lovers who happened to be Negroes. If you did a play about virgins and angels and doctors and dentists, it would be a boring story.

“‘Porgy and Bess’ had all the elements, all the human, basic emotions of man: drugs, murder, the sporting life—that’s theater, life in the raw and no race has a monopoly on that.”¹¹⁷

Duncan knew very well that *Porgy and Bess* was going to be understood differently from other operas because it dealt with African Americans, but in countering that reality with an idealistic perspective, he was urging: Let us do our art. Let us performers carry on *as though* there were no difference, and please try to receive it in that spirit.

This is very much in keeping with what Gershwin himself did in writing *Porgy and Bess*. He behaved as if he didn’t know that he was mixing all sorts of

¹¹⁶Todd Duncan, “Todd Duncan: From an Interview by Robert Wyatt (1990),” in *Gershwin Reader*, 224.

¹¹⁷Byrd, “Todd Duncan,” *Washington Times*, 6 April 1983.

things that weren't supposed to be mixed—genres, races, styles, moods, and audiences. It was a brave, idealistic act to compose an opera in the first place, given his personal and professional background. But he did not allow other people's expectations and conventions to prevent him from creating his art. He carried on as if the world were already the way it ought to be.

When performers understand the idealism and collaborative spirit of *Porgy and Bess* and its creator, they often find much to identify with, because they share Gershwin's idealism and determination. They, like him, refuse to be hampered by conventional wisdom—in their case, that African Americans are not interested in opera, and that even if they are interested and have talent, they cannot make a career out of it. When performers come to *Porgy and Bess*, they refuse to accept that it is less of an opera than other works, that it is less demanding or serious an undertaking than *Carmen* or *Salome*, that it is demeaning or degrading in its depiction of Catfish Row.¹¹⁸ And, in a good production with a cooperative, communicative director, they bring their own experiences and ideas to bear, actively shaping the work. They work from the idealistic—and no less correct for that—assumption that their blackness is a source of strength and understanding, not conflict.

Part of the problem with the many productions between 1941 and 1975 that turned *Porgy and Bess* into a musical was that they sprang from pragmatism, not idealism. By scaling back Gershwin's ambitions, taking away much of what was

¹¹⁸As Edwin Deas (*Porgy* in the 1998 concert performance directed by Bobby McFerrin) put it, "If I felt there was any condescension, I wouldn't be singing it" (Cori Ellison, "'Porgy' and the Racial Politics of Music," *New York Times*, 13 December 1998), 38).

striking and courageous about the work, producers and directors took away its power to expand what was possible in opera. By cutting the score, they sent the message to performers that the work in its original guise had been flawed, and that nothing *they* possessed could fix it—their talents, skills, and understandings could never be enough. Performers were demoted from artistic collaborators to dime-a-dozen entertainers. For African Americans who had beaten the odds to become opera singers, Gershwin stopped being a partner on the journey when his ambitions, which were so like theirs, were curtailed in order to make *Porgy and Bess* more marketable, less provocative. It sank into ignominy in the late 1950s and 1960s and directors faced increasing difficulty finding African Americans to cast, partly because the musicalized opera, with its reduced expectations and goals, had come to symbolize the opposite of what performers sought, both personally and professionally.

By contrast, since *Porgy and Bess* was returned to its full, brazen, operatic splendor in the mid-1970s, many performers have expressed not only admiration for it, but a sense of active engagement with it, and often with the composer himself. They understand that Gershwin expected and needed them to help him pull off his courageous, idealistic gamble, by contributing their skill, creativity, and imagination. For example, Naomi Moody, one of the Besses in the first HGO production, described how her background enabled her to fulfill Gershwin's desires: "In my church, we sang out of the hymnals; but when I'd go to a storefront congregation to sing 'The Lord's Prayer,' they wouldn't like me if I sang just the notes. I had to combine the way I'd been taught with their way of bending the notes and rhythms.

That's what Gershwin wanted—operatic singing, but with soul.”¹¹⁹

Larry Marshall, who played *Sporting Life* many times, responded immediately to the composer's attentiveness to the music of different cultures:

I remember hearing how Gershwin had blended the classical and the spiritual—the jazz—and the result was incredible. In *Sportin' Life* I could hear how he had taken the influence of the spiritual and orchestrated it. . . .

I can hear Gershwin's Jewish background blending with our spiritual—there are the same kind of intervals. And in much of his music there were those bluesy things. In his runs there was so much jazz.¹²⁰

Two important things are implicit in this passage. First, Marshall feels a sense of personal connection to, and cultural ownership (“*our* spiritual”) of, the jazz and spirituals that pervade the score. Second, he does not resent Gershwin's mixing of African American idioms with the those of his own Jewish background. Marshall perceives and welcomes the cross-cultural collaboration present in the score.

There are good reasons why an African American person might not be inclined to view a white composer's use of black music as a collaboration. Fundamentally, the cultural playing field is not, and has never been, level; *Porgy and Bess* can easily (and simplistically) be seen as an example of the degrading commodification of black culture by white profiteers.¹²¹ But many black performers, by getting to know the opera in its specificity, have come to see Gershwin's use of African American culture as honorable and productive. By rejecting the relevance of

¹¹⁹Thomas Willis, “The Black Experience Takes Rich Root in a Hit ‘*Porgy and Bess*,’” *Chicago Tribune*, 10 April 1977.

¹²⁰Frederick Waterman, “‘*Porgy and Bess*’ to Open in Boston,” *Boston Herald*, 2 September 1983.

¹²¹Two of the strongest expositions of this perspective can be found in Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Morrow, 1967), and Rudi Blesh, *Shining Trumpets: A History of Jazz*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1958).

the unidirectional exploiter/exploited dynamic to Gershwin's creation of *Porgy and Bess*, performers have in many cases come to understand the work as genuinely collaborative, as a project whose success depends as much on the enthusiastic and imaginative participation of its black cast as on the efforts of its composer. They recognize that the opera relies on African American performers to finish it onstage—not to salvage or correct it, as some black reviewers have contended, but to complete it in indispensable ways.¹²²

Those contributions are musical and cultural, dramatic and personal. On the musical front, black performers bring with them, in addition to operatic training, a firsthand understanding of music's various roles and manifestations in African American culture. In a *New York Times* article, several of those involved in the 1983 Radio City Music Hall production reflected on the complexity and significance of the performers' particular musical backgrounds:

Henrietta Davis, one of the four Besses, bristles initially when asked how her origins as a black woman affect her portrayal. She is an opera singer and approaches Gershwin with the same devotion she might give to Puccini. Yet later her attitude softens: "My father is a pastor in San Francisco, and the gospel influence on my life has helped." Says George Faison, the show's choreographer, "This may not be black music, but being black gives you an edge."

"Catfish Row is just one of many black experiences," adds [assistant director and production supervisor Helaine] Head, "and our cast represents all of them; it brings urban and rural backgrounds together. But despite the differences, the cast shares a common vocabulary—especially in the religious experience most blacks in America have. There is an ethnic line that runs through everyone here, and 'Porgy and Bess' manages to tap into that."¹²³

¹²²Hall Johnson was perhaps the first black critic to suggest that the performers bore most of the responsibility for the work's (limited) success. "Porgy and Bess—A Folk Opera," *Opportunity*, January 1936, 24.

¹²³Bernard Holland, "Gershwin Bows at Radio City," *New York Times*, 3 April 1983.

The two-sidedness of the relationship between cast and opera is clear: it is not just the performers' backgrounds nor Gershwin's perceptiveness that makes the music of *Porgy and Bess* work, but the fecund combination of the two.

A particularly poignant example of this principle at work can be found in James Standifer's 1999 film, *Porgy and Bess: An American Voice*. At one point, the elderly William Warfield tenderly sings a portion of "Bess, You Is My Woman Now" *a cappella*, to demonstrate to the interviewer that as an African American he has a natural understanding of how the melody should be shaped and shaded. Listening, one is simultaneously convinced of Warfield's point and reminded of the gloriousness of Gershwin's melody—composition and performance are mutually enriching.¹²⁴

Performers also approach their characters imaginatively, finding ways to relate to them, to understand their motivations, and to work against the all-too-popular perception that Porgy is an Uncle Tom figure, Bess is simply a sexy whore, and the other roles are likewise cookie-cutter stereotypes of African Americans. No one has been more outspoken about her approach to her role than Clamma Dale, who played Bess in the 1976 Houston Grand Opera production. She found points of personal connection with Bess, while also differentiating herself from the character, and the character from the stereotype, in important ways:

"What's always gotten Bess over," [Dale] begins, "are her looks and her charisma and her ability"—fingers snap in the air—"to turn everybody on and to make the party happen."

Clamma chuckled. She just might as well have been talking about herself.

"She has obviously had a long struggle which is not my struggle. I feel

¹²⁴Standifer, *Porgy and Bess: An American Voice*.

she came from extreme poverty and I also feel that she left home very early. This is all my own side of the script. But she's not a prostitute, she's not a slut; she does exactly what most married women do—you get married, a man takes care of you, and in return you make love to him. That's the contract. In Bess' experience there just wasn't a marriage contract."¹²⁵

Although Dale is unusually specific in her remarks to the press, many performers have offered insights about their characters over the years, emphasizing Porgy's dignity, Bess's vulnerability, Crown's heroism, and the like.¹²⁶ I have not come across any instances of a cast member claiming that the work's characterizations are inherently offensive and must be fixed or improved upon by the performer.¹²⁷ Dale and others have highlighted certain aspects, and created "silent scripts" for themselves, but no one has claimed to be radically revising the opera.¹²⁸ This would run counter to the open, trusting, collaborative attitude toward the composer and the work that cast members have conveyed in their statements to the press—at least, those cast members who have been involved in the most successful and operatic productions, such as those by the Theatre Guild, the Houston Grand Opera, and at Glyndebourne.

¹²⁵ Anna Quindlen, "Clamma Dale: The Mouth That Roars," *New York Post*, 25 September 1976.

¹²⁶ For example, see Robert Wyatt's interviews with Todd Duncan and Anne Brown in *Gershwin Reader*.

¹²⁷ While performers do not criticize the characterizations found in the score and libretto, they have sometimes taken issue with directors' approaches to them. Irving Barnes, who played Porgy during the Breen tour and went on to direct the opera in Serbia, offers one such critique: "[Porgy] mustn't cower when the police come. He should be matter of fact. Some directors would like you to think that Negroes haven't been standing up for their rights for the last 100 years. Actually, it was going on all the time. Nat Turner wasn't the only one" (Dan Morgan, "A Serbian 'Porgy and Bess,'" *Washington Post*, 13 December 1971).

¹²⁸ Even Dale, who claimed in one article to be "creating this role for the first time," said in another, "The way this production [the HGO] is put together the action pivots around Bess, which is the way I think Gershwin wanted it" (Anna Quindlen, "Clamma Dale," *New York Post*, 15 September 1976; Howard Kissel, "Broadway Black Theater: Goodnatured Politics," *Women's Wear Daily*, 30 August 1976).

On Segregated Casting

One final, inescapable issue remains to be addressed: the all-black casting requirement. Where did this stricture spring from, what has it meant to the work, and does it still make sense for *Porgy and Bess* today?

Gershwin seems always to have assumed that his *Porgy* opera would use a black cast, and I know of no occasion on which he suggested that he had considered having it otherwise.¹²⁹ Ira Gershwin, exercising tight control over the work in the years between George's death and his own in 1983, required that African Americans alone perform the principal roles in American stagings.¹³⁰ The George Gershwin Trust has continued to enforce this stipulation.¹³¹

It is not possible to know exactly what George Gershwin's reasons were for seeking out a black cast for the Theatre Guild production. His "Rhapsody in Catfish Row" essay sheds little light on the question; it includes some essentialistic claims about how African Americans are natural singers and dancers who easily embody a variety of emotions and styles, and he writes of Duncan and Brown that "we were able to find these people because what we wanted from them lies in their race," but the implication is that there was sufficient musical and dramatic talent to be found

¹²⁹There are rumors of plans to do *Porgy and Bess* at the Metropolitan during Gershwin's lifetime with a white cast. A Detroit newspaper claimed in March 1936 that the Met had publicly stated that it planned to stage the opera with Lawrence Tibbett as Porgy, but I have been unable to confirm this. See Ralph Holmes, "'Porgy and Bess' Stunning Grand Opera at Cass," *Detroit Evening Times*, 10 March 1936.

¹³⁰There have been occasions where nonblacks sang in the chorus, as in the New York City Opera production of 1964. Concert (non-staged) performances, and staged performances outside of the United States, have been permitted to use white singers.

¹³¹For more on the legal aspects and implications of the Gershwin Trust's control over performances of the opera, see Olufunmilayo B. Arewa, "Copyright on Catfish Row: Musical Borrowing, *Porgy and Bess*, and Unfair Use," *Rutgers Law Journal* 37/2 (Winter 2006), 277-353.

among black performers, not that they had some particular racial quality that he sought.¹³²

One may speculate that Gershwin was motivated by a combination of admiration and commercialism. On the one hand, it is well known that he was an admirer of African Americans and their culture in its various forms, and that he was intensely attracted to the music made by black jazz musicians such as James P. Johnson, church choirs such as those he heard in Charleston, and classical composers like William Grant Still. *Porgy and Bess* is a testament to Gershwin's esteem. On the other hand, Heyward's play had been a hit in 1927 in part because white viewers had been intrigued by the realism that seemed to be imparted by the use of a black cast, and Gershwin surely did not wish to lose that commercial drawing power, even if it meant forgoing a production at the Metropolitan.¹³³

There is no question that he respected the artistry and talent of African American singers. One would like to go further, to believe that he deliberately created opportunities for these undervalued and underexposed artists, but I know of no evidence for this appealing idea. The fact that he was confident of finding African Americans to perform his difficult opera, despite the scarcity of educational and professional opportunities for black opera singers up to that time, is a testament to his

¹³²George Gershwin, "Rhapsody in Catfish Row," *New York Times*, 20 October 1935; reprinted in *George Gershwin in His Time: A Biographical Scrapbook, 1919-1937*, ed. Gregory R. Suriano (New York: Gramercy Books, 1998), 112; reprinted in *Gershwin Reader*, 218.

¹³³Whether Gershwin chose the Theatre Guild over the Met due to his desire for a black cast, his hope for a long and remunerative theatrical run, or because, as he himself said, "I hoped to develop something in American music that would appeal to the many rather than the cultured few" is unclear—perhaps all of the above reasons contributed. George Gershwin, "Rhapsody in Catfish Row," in *Gershwin in His Time*, 112; in *Gershwin Reader*, 218.

belief in their abilities despite relative inexperience. This belief led him to compose an opera that, deliberately or not, has given generations of singers access to operatic stages that many would not otherwise have had.

If Gershwin was motivated partly by the expectation that his opera's reception would benefit from the use of a black cast the way the play's had, his expectation was vindicated, at least initially. White critics of the Theatre Guild production were duly impressed and fascinated, although they sometimes attributed the excellent performances to qualities they believed to be racially inherent, such as liveliness and rhythmic precision.¹³⁴ Black critics were, for the most part, happy to see African Americans onstage in an ambitious and serious production. Gershwin's score received a mixed response, but the casting decision was approved all but unanimously.

In the 1950s the casting requirement became politically significant. The world tour of the Breen production was partially financed and consistently endorsed by the U.S. State Department precisely because it was performed by African Americans: in the midst of the Cold War, government officials believed that the sight of so many highly educated, glamorous, and talented black artists would convince audiences abroad that racial inequality was not as big a problem in America as the Communists

¹³⁴A particularly fine example of a white critic's willingness to generalize about African Americans comes from Ralph Holmes of the *Detroit Evening Times*: "I have never seen an opera so convincingly sung and acted at the same time. Either this represents some peculiar gift of the colored artist or the inspiring genius of the Armenian Mamoulian." Note that the consistently high quality is due *either* to an inherent racial gift *or* to the director's genius—the possibility that these are simply extremely talented individuals is not considered. Ralph Holmes, "'Porgy and Bess' Stunning Grand Opera at Cass," *Detroit Evening Times*, 10 March 1936.

made it out to be. The fact that the cast members were being entrusted with such an important ambassadorial role, too, was expected to send an important signal. The performers played their offstage roles superbly, appearing always well-dressed and in good spirits, answering questions about segregation and lynchings back home with optimism and diplomatic tact.¹³⁵

Back in the United States, “I got plenty o’ nuttin’, and nuttin’s plenty for me” ran directly against the sentiments of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and millions of others who had had enough of legalized inequality. African Americans grew impatient with *Porgy and Bess*, and the use of a black cast exacerbated their hostility. Lawrence Sharp, writing for an African American weekly out of Dallas at the beginning of the Breen production’s run, reported that “a very prominent young [presumably black] lady here in Dallas. . . . disliked the moral of the story, because she feels that the characters have studied at the [Juilliard] School of Music in New York and they should have tried to depict the Negro life as it is today rather than what it has been.”¹³⁶

The Goldwyn film, at the end of the 1950s, was even more vexing, because it featured already well known and highly esteemed performers in this increasingly unpopular story. Wrote Era Bell Thompson,

We do not want to see six-foot Sidney Poitier on his knees crying for a slit-skirted wench who did him wrong. We do not want the wench to be beautiful Dorothy Dandridge who sniffs “happy dust” and drinks liquor from a bottle at

¹³⁵See David Monod, “Disguise, Containment and the *Porgy and Bess* Revival of 1952–1956,” *Journal of American Studies* 35/2 (2001): 275–312; John Harper Taylor, “Ambassadors of the Arts: An Analysis of the Eisenhower Administration’s Incorporation of *Porgy and Bess* into its Cold War Foreign Policy” (Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University, 1994).

¹³⁶Lawrence Sharp, “Sharps ‘N’ Flats,” *Dallas Express*, 21 June 1952.

the rim of an alley crap game. . . .

We do not like to hear our intelligent (*Porgy* has the highest per cent [*sic*] of college degrees ever recorded by a movie) stars speak in dialect, see them reduced to the level of Catfish Row when they have already risen to the heights of La Scala. We do not want to see them crawl even in make-believe dust after they have walked with their heads in the clouds.¹³⁷

Harold Cruse's 1967 claim that *Porgy and Bess* "should be performed by white performers in blackface, because it is distorted imitation all the way through" reflects the fact that, for many African Americans, the work could scarcely have been more offensive if it had been performed that way. Seeing black singers take part in a work that "present[ed] the 'simple black people' just the way white liberal paternalists love to see them," as Cruse put it, was difficult to endure.¹³⁸

The return of the work to its original, operatic scope and stature in the mid-1970s did much to improve how the participation of black performers was viewed. *Porgy and Bess* as an opera could transcend its libretto and achieve the universality and timelessness of art in a way that had eluded *Porgy and Bess* the mere musical. Moreover, the ambitiousness of the work as envisioned by Gershwin, and of the production after decades of pared-down productions, required a similar level of ambition from performers. It drew on their training, their imaginations, their dramatic abilities, and their commitment both to opera and to *this* opera, to a greater degree than any production since 1935. The fact that the first fully staged production of the reconstituted opera was particularly well performed (by Clamma Dale, Donnie Ray Albert, Larry Marshall, and others) underscored that *Porgy and Bess* was no longer a

¹³⁷Era Bell Thompson, "Why Negroes Don't Like *Porgy and Bess*," *Ebony*, October 1959, 54.

¹³⁸Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Morrow, 1967), 103-4.

ghetto in which Juilliard-trained African Americans were forced to shuck and jive, but an opportunity for genuine and hard-earned artistic triumphs.

In 1985, when *Porgy and Bess* received a production at the Metropolitan and was enshrined as an opera among operas, rather than as an exceptional work in a genre of its own, the fact that its roles were typically restricted to performers of a certain color began to stand out unmistakably from the rest of the operatic landscape. By this time, operatic roles that had previously been denied to African Americans were gradually opening up to them, and some companies were beginning to practice relatively colorblind casting.¹³⁹ For the first time, the question of whether *Porgy and Bess*'s unique casting requirement had outlived its usefulness became a topic for public debate. Music critic Donal Henahan went to great lengths to point out the philosophical inconsistencies in play:

The argument for blacks in this case is not intrinsically different from an older argument in opera against them. Dramatic plausibility was regularly thrown up as an argument against black casting in the bad old days whenever a black singer was suggested for a role. Who could possibly believe, say, in a black Ariadne in "Ariadne auf Naxos" or in a black Rosina in "The Barber of Seville"? Imagine how out of place a black Amfortas would look in an otherwise blanched "Parsifal." Ridiculous on the face of it. Well, we have gone well beyond such arguments in the 30 years since Miss [Marian] Anderson's debut. Audiences not only tolerate but adulate Jessye Norman as Ariadne, Kathleen Battle as Rosina and Simon Estes as Amfortas.¹⁴⁰

Estes, a strong proponent (and beneficiary) of colorblind casting, has been particularly outspoken in support of its application to *Porgy and Bess*. In 1985 he

¹³⁹Anthony Tommasini singles out Sarah Caldwell, conductor and director of the Opera Company of Boston in the 1970s and '80s, for being especially colorblind in her casting of operas like *La Bohème* and *Otello* (Anthony Tommasini, "All Black Casts for 'Porgy'? That Ain't Necessarily So," *New York Times*, 20 March 2002, sec. E, p. 1).

¹⁴⁰Donal Henahan, "In Opera, Race Isn't a Black or White Issue," *New York Times*, 14 April 1985.

said, “Even if Gershwin said it himself, I think it’s an injustice to the work to put this tremendous restriction on it. It makes it more difficult for ‘Porgy’ to be done.”¹⁴¹ In 2002 he was even more forceful:

“Music knows no color,” he said in a telephone interview. “This may sound extreme, but I think it’s almost unconstitutional for ‘Porgy and Bess’ to be performed only by black artists.” . . .

For years Mr. Estes has sternly criticized opera companies that resisted allowing black artists to sing any roles they were vocally suited for. He applies the same principle to “Porgy and Bess.” “People of color can sing ‘Porgy’ magnificently,” he said. “People who are not of color can sing it magnificently.”¹⁴²

For the record, Grace Bumbry (Bess to Estes’s Porgy) felt that Gershwin’s intentions should be honored, although she did not speak out at length on this point.¹⁴³

Some black performers, while affirming the principle that operas should be cast without respect to race, maintain there are reasons to exempt *Porgy and Bess*. Some have argued that the authenticity conferred on the work by African American performers *is* important, and that *Porgy and Bess* is exceptional in this regard: whereas most operas can depend on the audience’s willing suspension of disbelief, Gershwin’s opera is different. Roberta Alexander, who took over the role of Bess from Grace Bumbry in the Met production, has articulated this view.

“The thing that’s different about *Porgy* is that in all the other operas, there are technically no color lines at all,” says Alexander. “[In *Così fan tutte*], we know the two people singing Fiordiligi and Dorabella are not really sisters, and they’re not really from Naples. But they’re playing that. So it doesn’t matter if you have an Irish mezzo and an American soprano and a Swedish tenor, because they’re playing.

¹⁴¹Mary Campbell, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Hits Broadway,” *Lawrenceville (Ga.) News*, 16 February 1985.

¹⁴²Anthony Tommassini, “All Black Casts for ‘Porgy?’” *New York Times*, 20 March 2002.

¹⁴³See, for instance, Campbell, “‘Porgy and Bess’ Hits Broadway,” *Lawrenceville (Ga.) News*, 16 February 1985.

“But as soon as you get to something so incredibly twentieth-century-realistic, it puts a restriction on what you can do with your mind. Maybe someone a hundred years from now will be able to get as far away from that way of thinking as we have gotten from thinking about eighteenth- and nineteenth-century operas. But then,” Alexander adds, “you take away the exact dynamic that makes *Porgy* work.”¹⁴⁴

By emphasizing the opera’s relatively recent vintage and its realism, Alexander manages to make an argument for casting African Americans in *Porgy and Bess* that does not contradict the broader trend toward colorblind casting in *most* operas.

The difference with *Porgy and Bess* is not only a matter of it being “twentieth-century-realistic,” of course. It also has to do with the particular racial content of the work. Marvis Martin, who has played both Clara and Bess, argues that non-black performers can never be quite convincing, however well coached. She recalls doing a European production with a white chorus, whose “gestures and response[s] were not so authentic.” Martin quickly reveals herself to be uncomfortable with the broader implications of her observation, however: “Of course, that gets to be a really tricky area, because a person can have the same beef, the same gripes about me doing Mimi or Desdemona.”¹⁴⁵

Although performers seem loath to do so, one can defend the insistence on an exceptional level of realism in *Porgy and Bess*’s casting by making reference to the history of blackface minstrelsy in America. There have been countless degrading and distorted portrayals of black characters—from Jim Crow to Uncle Tom to Amos ’n’ Andy—and these have often been created and performed by whites. There are

¹⁴⁴Paul Thomason, “The Problem with *Porgy and Bess*,” *Opera News*, August 1998, 20.

¹⁴⁵*Ibid.*

elements of Gershwin's opera that resonate with minstrelsy and its legacy, such as Porgy's banjo song, "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'," Sporting Life's resemblance to Zip Coon with his dandified urban antics, and the use of dialect in general. The casting of white American performers, however respectful and well-intentioned, would make this resonance difficult to ignore for many American viewers today. The authenticity and *acceptance* that African American performers bring to *Porgy and Bess* provide necessary reassurance for audience members that the work is not merely an exercise in "repackag[ing] minstrelsy as modernism," as Jeffrey Melnick has characterized it.¹⁴⁶ The fact that performers like Roberta Alexander and Marvis Martin do not bring up this aspect of the work in their arguments suggests either that they do not wish to taint the opera or their own careers by publicly connecting either with minstrelsy, or that they genuinely do not view *Porgy and Bess* as having anything to do with that tradition. Otherwise, it would seem like an obvious justification for exempting the work from the general trend toward colorblind casting in opera.

The other reason that some performers support the unique casting requirement is that, despite improvements, African American opera singers still do not have as many opportunities as their white counterparts. This is particularly true for males, even today; soprano Angela Simpson pointed out when I interviewed her that she had never seen or heard of an African American playing the lead in Verdi's *Otello* in a major opera house, despite knowing personally "many, many tenors" who could sing the role well.

¹⁴⁶Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 74.

When I asked Simpson for her opinion on the black casting requirement, her response was telling:

I'm kind of on the fence with it. The African American part of me says yes. . . . In this day and age we're not afforded the opportunities to perform a lot—I should say, are not afforded the opportunities to perform in more traditional operas. . . .

The other part of me. . . the artist part of me feels that [performers who are not African American] should be given an opportunity to do it, because as an African American I'm hired to sing a Tosca, I'm hired to sing Italian characters. I could be hired to sing a Turandot who's Asian. I could be hired to sing a Leonora. These traditional operas, which were originally written for Caucasian artists, we do get the opportunity to do these characters. . . .

I'm half and half with it. I'm grateful because it gives me the opportunity to perform and show my talent and to earn a living. The artist part of me, yeah, I think it's unfair.¹⁴⁷

The split Simpson identifies between the two sides of her identity on this issue points directly to the reality that *Porgy and Bess* is different from other great operas. It is a complex, even dangerous work. Although its love story is universal, its themes of community and poverty and spirituality reach across racial lines, and its music speaks to listeners around the world, the opera is forever rooted in the racial, cultural, and socio-economic specificity of Catfish Row. Those who perform it must strike a balance between idealism and transcendence on one hand, and realism on the other. Idealism is what makes Simpson's Serena speak to the listener's heart without race, or any other consideration, filtering the communication. Realism is, in part, what keeps Simpson performing *Porgy and Bess*: her desire for work, for exposure, for future professional opportunities. Her artistic side acknowledges that Samuel Ramey could make a very affecting Porgy; her African American side wants to reserve the

¹⁴⁷Angela Simpson, interview by author, 3 November 2005.

role for a talented black performer whose access to the operatic stage is still limited.

Conclusion

In getting to know George Gershwin and his opera over the last five years, I have come to believe that *Porgy and Bess* has too often been swallowed up in context, so that its specific qualities and meanings are obscured. As a student of cultural history, I am of course a believer in the importance of contexts, be they historical, intellectual, or political. They are essential for reaching a full understanding of the significance and meaning of a work of art. But in the case of *Porgy and Bess*, an idiosyncratic, “multi-brow” opera about poor African Americans, context has too often been used to turn a creative piece of art into a symbol, or symptom, of destructive interracial dynamics. Critics unable to make sense of the work in itself, or uninterested in it for itself, have issued firm judgments anyway, by placing it in various contexts. Early reviewers measured its music against *Carmen*, *Show Boat*, or *The Green Pastures*. Harold Cruse denounced it as one of many examples of white liberal paternalism and cultural appropriation.¹⁴⁸ Jeffrey Melnick saw it as part of a Jewish-American strategy for cultural advancement and assimilation.¹⁴⁹

There are measures of understanding to be gained by these and many other approaches to the opera, but also aspects that are neglected. Chief among these is the work’s near uniqueness as an American folk opera performed by African

¹⁴⁸Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Morrow, 1967), especially 103-4.

¹⁴⁹Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*.

Americans.¹⁵⁰ Neither side of the equation should be overlooked: neither Gershwin's courageous and inclusive reflection of America's heterogeneous musical culture through the use of African American idioms, nor the artistry and commitment with which black performers have brought the work to life. These things are too easily obscured when one insists on valuing cultural context over artistic specificity.

There are aspects of *Porgy and Bess*'s cultural heritage and legacy that are inescapable, troubling, and deeply important. Racism, which has left its bloody fingerprints all over American history, marks the opera in countless ways, from the genesis of its story to the ongoing professional challenges faced by those who perform it. There may be no more serious problem in American society, and the fact that this work continues to inspire discussion may be counted as one of its most significant qualities.

Nonetheless, it would be a grave mistake to carry on as though the primary value of this American operatic masterwork lies in its ability to start conversations about race. The quality of its artistic expression is truly staggering—the wealth of sensitively realized characters; the boundless invention and beauty of its melodies, harmonies, rhythms, and timbres; the compelling juxtapositions of misery and joy, spirituality and profanity, intimacy and community. The willingness of critics to undervalue this audacious and excellent project, carried off by three men who had never before created a full-length opera, indicates a distressing level of ignorance and ingratitude on the part of many, and an overreliance or overemphasis on context for

¹⁵⁰ Arguably only Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha* equally merits the description, and it has (ironically, but not surprisingly given the earlier work's obscurity) seldom been invoked as a comparison.

the remainder.

The key to *Porgy and Bess*, as to all of Gershwin's music, lies as much in performance as in the wonderful notes on the page. Performers like Angela Simpson, who must balance their identities as African Americans and as artists, show the best way to approach the opera. They know its score more intimately than any critic, and they know firsthand the significance of its various contexts. They understand that it can be an opportunity, a challenge, and a problem. Its musical and cultural complexities are impossible for them to ignore, and yet, when they go onstage they immerse themselves in the humanity of their characters, the glory of the music, and the joy of being surrounded by other African American artists. A performer's participation in *Porgy and Bess* does not signal indifference to the continuing journey toward racial equality in the United States; it signals a courageous willingness to welcome Gershwin and his great gift along the way.

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Gwynne Kuhner Brown was born in Anchorage, Alaska. She began taking piano lessons at age six. Her piano teachers have included Dean Epperson, Duane Hulbert, James Barbagallo, and Edward Auer. She graduated *summa cum laude* from the University of Puget Sound in 1995 with a Bachelor of Music in Piano Performance. In 1997 she received a Master of Music from Indiana University in Music Theory. She spent a year as a member of Amate House, a volunteer program associated with the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago; during that time she worked as a full-time volunteer at Deborah's Place, an organization in Chicago that serves women who are or have been homeless.

Brown began the doctoral program in music history at the University of Washington in 1999. That same year she began teaching as an adjunct faculty member of the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma. She became a Visiting Assistant Professor in September 2005. At Puget Sound and at the University of Washington she has taught courses in Western classical music and jazz history, opera, music theory, world music, and writing about music.