

George Gershwin (1898-1937) Suite from *Porgy and Bess* “Catfish Row” (1936)

While Gershwin wrote many musicals, *Porgy and Bess* is his only opera. He considered it his best work. Groundbreaking for the time, it featured an entirely African-American cast of classically-trained singers. Based on the novel *Porgy* and a subsequent stage play by DuBose Heyward, the opera follows the life of the title character, a disabled black man, and his lover Bess, who live in Catfish Row, a tenement in Charleston, South Carolina. Together they navigate a difficult existence, struggling to overcome his disability, her addictions, and the challenges they both face in a racist society.

For Gershwin, *Porgy and Bess* represented an opportunity to synthesize his musical interest in jazz, blues, and other black musical idioms within a classical context. He liked to refer to the work as a *folk* opera. As he explained:

Porgy and Bess is a folk tale. Its people naturally would sing folk music. 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—and therefore, being in operatic form, *Porgy and Bess* becomes a folk opera.

While *Porgy and Bess* provided significant work for black musicians and singers, especially at a time when there was little available in classical venues due to systemic segregation, it has also sustained criticism for its stereotypical portrayals of black life, which was remarked upon by both African-American and white critics at its premiere. Some singers in the original cast worried about the caricatures they might be perpetuating in performing the work, especially for mostly white audiences. As the critic and composer, Virgil Thomson, rather pointedly observed in a review of the work: “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.” Even a decade earlier, in 1926, Dave Peyton, a black journalist for the *Chicago Defender*, wrote an opinion piece entitled “Jazz-Opera” saying that the time was long overdue for African-American artists to have the opportunity to tell their own stories:

Our white brothers have taken many of our ideas musically and have successfully commercialized them... They have written many mechanical, theoretical, and melodious jazz numbers, but this ‘jazz opera’ will be written by our Race writers, who alone understand the harmonic and melodic qualities that will give the creation originality.

Gershwin completed his symphonic suite about a year following the premiere of the opera. It features Gershwin’s own imaginative orchestrations of some of the best tunes *Porgy and Bess* has to offer: “Summertime,” “I Got Plenty of Nuttin,” and “Bess, You is My Woman Now.” While many great melodies for the opera are absent, Gershwin felt it represented some of the best musical portions of his opera. Premiered by the Philadelphia Orchestra, with Gershwin at the piano, the Suite virtually disappeared in the two decades following

Gershwin's death. It was rediscovered in the late 50's, but by that time another instrumental arrangement of the music had gained popularity, *Porgy and Bess: A Symphonic Portrait*, by the great Broadway arranger, Robert Russell Bennett, who had often worked with Gershwin. It's interesting to listen to the two works side-by-side in comparison. Gershwin's version is exciting in its leaner orchestration and modernism, while Bennett's is a lush, more romantic treatment of these timeless tunes.

- I. *Catfish Row*
Evoking the neighborhood setting, which was based on Charleston's historical Cabbage Row, Gershwin draws particularly from two musical passages in *Porgy and Bess*: "Jazzbo Brown's Piano Blues" and "Summertime."
- II. *Porgy Sings*
This movement draws from Porgy's two defining arias: "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin," and his love duet with Bess, "Bess, You is My Woman Now"
- III. *Fugue*
No spoilers, but there's a murder that figures importantly to the plot. This is the dark and serious music that accompanies it.
- IV. *Hurricane*
And a Hurricane! It's opera, so a lot happens.
- V. *Good Morning, Brother (Sistuh)*
Sunnier music follows the hurricane, and we hear a rousing instrumental version of the closing number from *Porgy and Bess*, "Oh, Lawd, I'm on My Way."