





INTRODUCTION

Porgy and Bess, the American operatic masterpiece by George Gershwin, DuBose Heyward, and Ira Gershwin, reached its 75th anniversary in 2010. Its journey from novel to play to opera was as difficult and improbable as the one its hero contemplates at the opera's climax—an expedition from South Carolina to New York in a goat cart. For that alone, the opera's journey should be not only commemorated, but celebrated. First and foremost, however, *Porgy and Bess* should be celebrated as a groundbreaking work by a set of spectacularly gifted artists. It should be celebrated for what it has come to represent to so many—a work of art in music that has not only entertained but inspired listeners, provided opportunity to underrepresented performers, and challenged the status quo. It should be celebrated in a way that recognizes *Porgy and Bess* as having become part of the fabric of American life and acknowledges its status as a cultural icon—one that fills the listener with joy as it touches on the complex nature of what it is to be an American.

A great deal has already been written about *Porgy and Bess*, the groundbreaking opera; *Porgy*, the hit play upon which it is based, and *Porgy*, the best-selling novel that started it all. The volume of material that is available in print and over the Internet is vast. The remarkable life stories and prolific artistic output of the Gershwin brothers have been the subject of books, documentaries, and spectacular musical tributes. *Porgy and Bess* itself has become standard repertory in opera houses worldwide. Attention also has been duly paid to producers, productions, and tours, as well as the conductors, stage directors, designers, singers, and dancers who have brought this work so vividly to life.

Todd Duncan and
Anne Brown, the original
Porgy and Bess

PORGY & BESS A 75TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

Our goal here is to distill the story of *Porgy and Bess* and its creators from the abundance of available literature and offer a new recounting that celebrates the first 75 years of this very special work. We'll also offer some thoughts about *Porgy's* future.

THE TIMES IN CONTEXT

Even a general survey of *Porgy and Bess* must come to grips with a catalogue of relevant changes in American life, the scope of which can be difficult to take in. In order to fully understand the true genius of George Gershwin and the lasting impact of *Porgy and Bess*, it is helpful to see their story in context.

In 1898 when Moishe and Rose Gershvin welcomed their second son, Jacob, into the world, life already included his older brother Israel but neither the movies, nor the radio, nor the airplane. During their youth and in the years leading up to *Porgy and Bess*, George and Ira would watch the movies grow up and learn to talk, George would host his own radio



George and Ira
Gershwin

show, and the two brothers would fly on Trans World Airlines from New York to Hollywood. There, in later years, they would write film scores for pictures like *Shall We Dance*, starring Fred Astaire, whom George had met and befriended when they were both teenagers, and Ginger Rogers.

In 1925, a little-known and struggling writer named DuBose Heyward published his first novel, *Porgy*. Its most remarkable feature was the author's sympathetic treatment



of his story's African American protagonists as fully developed human beings, a radical choice for the time, and one that placed Heyward's work in the vanguard of contemporary Southern literature. His accomplishment is even more remarkable when placed into the context of history. By the mid-1920s, the second iteration of the Ku Klux Klan had exploded into a national movement that claimed to include 15 percent of the country's "eligible population"—by their count between 4 and 5 million men (and some women). Heyward was not a civil rights activist per se, but his choice of subject matter was deliberate and motivated by his own experiences with debunking racial stereotypes.

A UNIQUELY AMERICAN HISTORY

In its journey from idea to cultural treasure, *Porgy* led a complicated but fascinating life, one that parallels major events in the history and social evolution of America. Competing bids to theatricalize the best-selling novel came from a variety of sources, including Cecil B. DeMille, a towering figure in the history of American film. DeMille purchased the silent-film rights, but the project was canceled for financial reasons. Producing the play *Porgy* on Broadway in the late 1920s required a talent pool of trained African American actors, which did not exist. The opera's gestation period was unusually long and spanned the latter part of the Roaring Twenties, the 1929 stock market crash, and the first years of the Great Depression. Once it had been composed, differences in opinion about how best to shape the opera presented themselves immediately and remain part of the opera's story today. Throughout the 75-year history of *Porgy* on stage, its performers have held widely divergent views of the opera's place in African American history.

It is true that Gershwin's opera in its original form was much longer than the standard versions performed today. He heard it played and sung from beginning to end with orchestra, cast, and chorus only once—and that was at a large pretryout rehearsal. The moment that particular rehearsal ended, the



The first page of the *Porgy and Bess* score, in George Gershwin's hand

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cuts began. Some of them were made for artistic reasons and others out of sheer practicality. Changes to the score continued throughout a week of tryout performances in Boston right up until the Broadway opening on October 10, 1935. From that point on, Gershwin did not make any further changes himself. His tragically early death in 1937 precluded future generations from knowing if, given the opportunity, he would have gone back to his opera to make changes for specific production circumstances or supervise a composer-approved edition of a fully restored score.

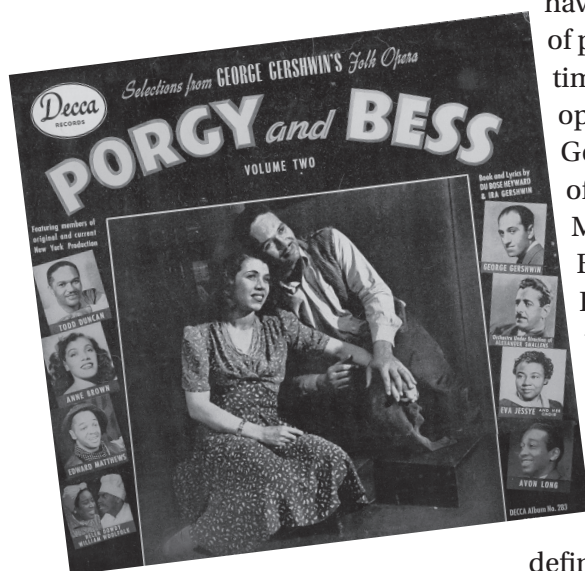
The 400-year-old history of opera suggests that he would

have. From its earliest days, the practice of post-premiere tinkering has been a time-honored tradition in the world of opera. For role models in this practice, Gershwin had an all-star lineup consisting of some of opera's greatest composers. Monteverdi, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, Bellini, Mussorgsky, Verdi, Wagner, Puccini, and Richard Strauss, all known to Gershwin, continued to reshape their operas after opening night. However, many feel, not without justification, that the version Gershwin heard at *Porgy's* opening night—and made no effort to change during his lifetime—is the

definitive edition of the piece. Producers

and directors who have taken the opposite approach have restored music that was eliminated along the way to the New York opening, or substituted spoken dialogue for sung recitative, or changed the order of how the musical numbers are performed, or any and all of the above. In 1959, André Previn adapted and conducted the opera's score for a film version produced by Samuel L Goldwyn and directed by Otto Preminger.

But that debate pales in comparison to the disagreements over the work's artistic categorization and societal impact. From the very beginning of its performance history, producers, critics, and audiences alike struggled with tagging *Porgy and Bess* as an opera or a musical—or a hybrid of both. The relationships African Americans forged with *Porgy and Bess* were wide ranging and complex. *Porgy* was variously praised as a leap forward for black performers and vilified for its perpetuation of reviled stereotypes. Generations of African American artists have spoken to this topic in very



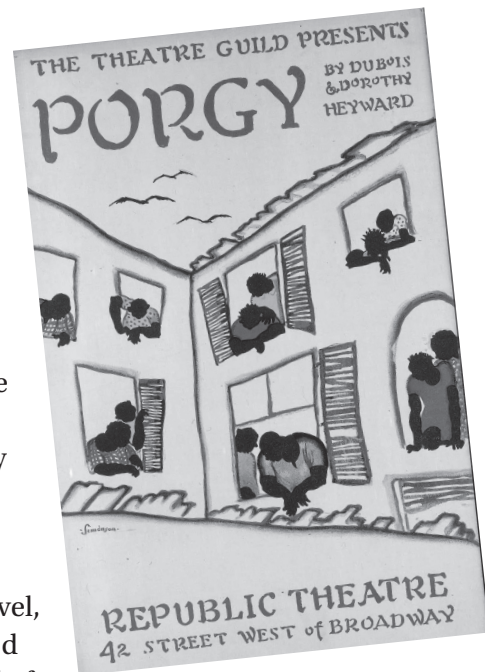
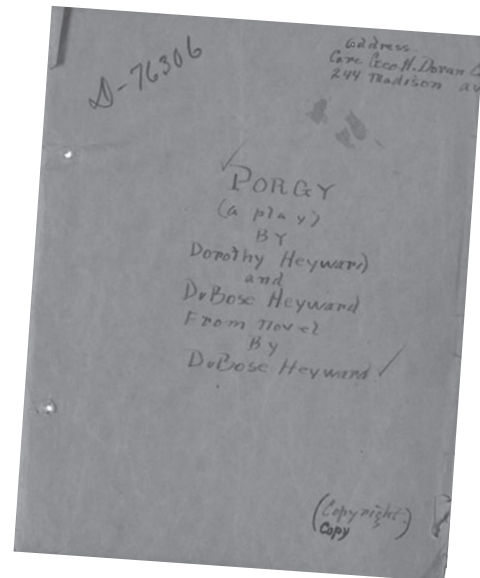
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different ways. Gershwin and Heyward were determined men with strongly held opinions who both formed lasting relationships with African Americans. Their views on art and race, particularly Heyward's, would evolve over time, but their first concern was always telling Porgy's story with authenticity and in a way that would be compelling for their audience. Although the composer and authors were unlikely catalysts for long-term social, artistic, and intellectual debate, their work prompted exactly that.

PORGY, THE NOVEL AND THE PLAY

DuBose Heyward's book, published in 1925, set the tone. Unconventional and daring for its time, it portrayed its African American protagonists as characters rather than caricatures. This artistic choice was all the more unexpected, coming as it did from the descendant of a long line of plantation-owning and slave-holding Southern aristocrats. The inspiration for the actual tale came from real life, but the motivation for telling it emanated from Heyward's search for artistic truth. This truth was to be reached by inhabiting the story's environment with precision, and creating its characters with honesty. His importance to our celebration of *Porgy's* 75th anniversary cannot be overestimated.

The novel's instant success led to an equally successful dramatization for Broadway, also called *Porgy*, coauthored by Dorothy Heyward and her husband. The play had the same unconventional and daring qualities as the novel, but bringing it to the New York stage demanded something that didn't exist at the time—a pool of trained African American actors large enough to cast a serious black drama on Broadway. During rehearsals, the Armenian émigré director Rouben Mamoulian had to painstakingly instruct his cast in the fundamental skills required for serious dramatic work in the spoken theater. While on the job, the cast had to learn to listen to each other



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The cast of *Porgy*,
the play

on stage and perform in an ensemble, rather than attempting to stand out as a solo or group vaudeville act, as many had been trained to do. Conforming to the rehearsal and performance discipline of spoken theater was a sobering departure from their prior experience, working with a trained director and learning to motivate character were unfamiliar practices, and so on—the experience ran counter to everything they’d learned. Mastering the technical tools of their new trade was necessary to begin the hard separation from dead-end employment in pandering stand-alone vaudeville numbers or chorus work in uptown clubs. Although these were and still are basic techniques, the African American actor in the early 20th century generally had been neither required nor given the opportunity to learn them—but learn them they did. The play *Porgy*, which opened on October 27, 1927, and ran for an astonishing 367 performances, had given African American performers an entry into a previously forbidden theatrical world.

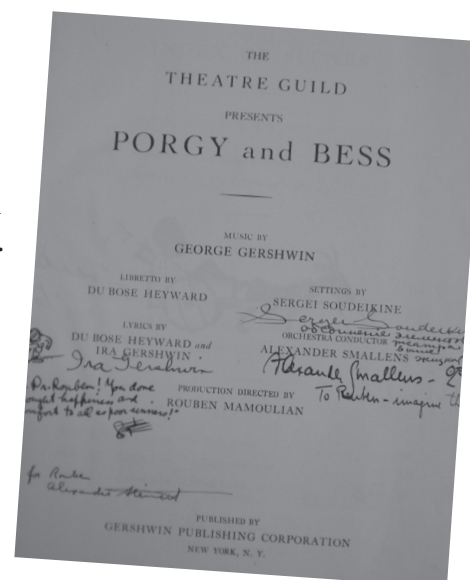


PORGY AND BESS, THE OPERA

The opera *Porgy and Bess* would prove to be unique in an even greater way. The period of its creation and its subsequent performance history have been unlike that of any other American opera. As far as George Gershwin was concerned, *Porgy and Bess* was an opera composed in the operatic tradition, rather than in the musical-comedy idiom of the mid-1930s.

Like the book and play, it would break its own share of boundaries. Certainly, it would contradict the public's perception of what constituted opera at the time of its New York opening. *Porgy and Bess* examined American themes rather than those of European history, mythology, or Roman and Greek literature. It had the structure of opera, built from its customary musical forms of arias, duets, trios, choral ensembles, orchestral interludes and the like, but it was to be composed using the American musical idioms of jazz, "Negro" spirituals, and American popular song. "If I am successful," Gershwin wrote to a friend, "it will resemble a combination of the drama and romance of *Carmen* and the beauty of *Meistersinger*, if you can imagine that."

However, from its glittering opening on October 10, 1935, at Broadway's Alvin Theatre and for some years to come, the power to "imagine that" was somewhat lacking. Critics and audiences stationed themselves on either side of the great genre divide. If *Porgy and Bess* was an opera, then what was it doing in a Broadway theater? Since Gershwin himself called the solo musical numbers "songs" rather than "arias," didn't he mean us to understand the piece as a musical? Could American vernacular music really support the dramatic weight of larger-than-life operatic subject, and so forth. *Porgy* was confusing in a few ways. More than anything else it was confusing in its newness. Initially, *Porgy and Bess* did not have the long and successful run that its creators, producers, and cast had hoped for. However, it was far from a failure. Within a few short years, Gershwin's mix of traditional operatic form with American vernacular music came to be recognized as one of the work's principal glories rather than its central failing. Few now question the ultimate success of Gershwin's efforts.



The printed libretto, with autographs by the Gershwins and director Rouben Mamoulian

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The cast of *Porgy and Bess*, the opera

AN AMERICAN WORK OF ART

Much of the criticism so often directed at *Porgy and Bess* is aimed precisely at the things that make it a prototypically American work of art. First, its creators did not fit the customary profiles of those historically associated with their roles. Most particularly, the composer was a product of the popular-music business rather than the classical music conservatory. This caused the musical establishment to criticize his work, some of them savagely. Whether they were right or wrong is for the listener to decide, but Gershwin's



talent-driven perseverance, despite his lack of establishment approved credentials, operatic or otherwise, mirrored the enterprising spirit and boundless energy so indented with Americans in the 20th century.

Second, its creators were, for the most part, first- or second-generation immigrants who had come to America for a life less fettered by the prejudices and hierarchies of the past. The composer and one of the librettists were American-born sons of Russian Jewish immigrants. The director was an Armenian immigrant who, while still a student in Moscow, fled the Bolshevik Revolution. The opera's premiere was conducted by a Russian-born Jew who also had fled intolerance. Their growth as artists was more or less guaranteed not to happen in their countries of origin, but in America they stood a chance—a chance at a better life and the possible realization of their artistic dreams.

Third, their work, *Porgy and Bess*, was something unprecedented and completely unexpected. Gershwin laid out the form of his opera along the well-known lines of traditional European opera, but he purposely composed its music in a new style not previously associated with the old form, that of American vernacular music. The result was something startling in its newness, and yet it was as organic to its time and place as *La Traviata* was to Verdi's. The musical language of *Porgy and Bess* is associated with the indigenous musical folklore of its creators' homeland in a way that is no less effective than the folkloric operas of Mussorgsky, Janacek, Dvorak, Smetana, and others.

Fourth, *Porgy and Bess* challenged existing social convention. DuBose Heyward, a white descendent of Thomas Heyward, Jr., a South Carolinian signer of the Declaration of Independence who was, in turn, a descendent of English emigrants himself. DuBose chose as his subject matter themes of love, death, betrayal, forgiveness, addiction, dignity, and community. He then wrote about their effect not on his own people but on the American descendents of African slaves. Before Heyward's novel, this had been unheard of. Dorothy Heyward's play then proved to white audiences that a group of black actors were capable of rising to the same artistic heights, and in the same way, as their white counterparts. And later still, the opera's realistic portrayal of the African American was enhanced by the depth of its musical characterization, something that was utterly new to the milieu of opera. By the time of the opera's opening night, exactly ten years after the opening night of the play,

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Anne Brown recreates Bess in the movie *Rhapsody in Blue*.

Gershwin's original cast included graduates of America's finest music conservatories.

Lastly, the opera resisted categorization by genre. *Porgy and Bess* was challenging to theater audiences for being too much like opera, while opera patrons could fault the piece for being too much like musical theater. Indeed, it was something new. Given world events in the mid-1930s, the scope of *Porgy and Bess*'s achievements could only have happened in America.

OTHER PLAYERS

Rafts of other players figure prominently in the story of *Porgy and Bess*. Lawrence Langer and Theresa Helburn, founding managers of the Theatre Guild in New York, produced the premieres of both the play and the opera on Broadway.



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Legendary producer Cheryl Crawford, who began as an assistant stage manager on the original production of the play, would later produce a more Broadway-friendly revival of the opera in 1942. It was one of *Porgy*'s most successful runs. The indefatigable Robert Breen, with his financial partner Blevins Davis, produced the justifiably famous Everyman Opera tour of *Porgy* in the early 1950s. For four staggeringly successful years, Breen, who also directed the show with immense verve, brought the first all-black production of *Porgy and Bess* to the wider world. With the sponsorship of the US State Department, Gershwin's opera could be seen and heard throughout Europe. Performances were given all across South and Central America, Mexico, Canada, the Middle East, and several Eastern Block countries. In a move that was unprecedented, Breen managed on his own, without State Department financial support, to take his company deep into the USSR during the dangerously escalating Cold War. Truman Capote was to chronicle this leg of the journey in *The New Yorker*.

Ellen Gerber, the Everyman Opera's stage manager, went on to stage 21 productions of *Porgy and Bess* herself throughout the '60s and '70s. The larger-than-life movie mogul Samuel L. Goldwyn was intent on producing a film adaptation of *Porgy* that would be the high point of his long and notable career. The result was not what he had hoped. In 1975, the distinguished American conductor Lorin Maazel released a new recording of *Porgy* that became the benchmark against which all other recordings claiming to be "complete" would be judged. "Every bar of the 599 page vocal score is included," read the liner notes.

Porgy's legacy was advanced further by American



Theresa Helburn and
Lawrence Langer of the
Theatre Guild

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producers of our own time, like Sherwin M. Goldwin, a tough businessman with the force of will and musical taste to bring *Porgy* back before the public as Gershwin intended it—as an opera with wide audience appeal. Goldman formed a partnership with the enterprising general director of the Houston Grand Opera, David Gockley, an impresario famously willing to think outside the box of operatic convention. As conducted by John DeMain and directed by Jack O'Brian, both in the early phases of what would prove to be brilliant careers in opera and theater, their award-winning production dominated the American theatrical and operatic landscape throughout the '70s and '80s.

The Metropolitan Opera came close to adding *Porgy and Bess* to its repertoire a number of times, but it wasn't until the occasion of the opera's 50th anniversary in 1985 that a new production was presented in the house. On opening night, honored guests were Todd Duncan and Anne Brown, the originators of the roles of "Porgy" and "Bess." When England's Glyndebourne Festival Opera announced a new production for 1986, it seemed to give new definition to the term "out of context"—the rolling green hills of East Sussex being about as far away from Catfish

Row as one could imagine. Gershwin's creation

played alongside operas by Mozart and Verdi and was the success of the season. To this day, it remains a hallmark in the company's history. In 1987, David Gockley reunited with Sherwin M. Goldman to revive their production in a unique coproducing arrangement between 17 different American opera companies. This joint effort brought untold thousands of operagoers to *Porgy* for the first time and firmly established its place in the standard operatic repertoire.

PORGY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In 2000, Goldman, now executive producer of the New York City Opera, had the idea to revive the production to open the company's spring season. Paul Kellogg, the company's general and artistic director, was enthusiastic about bringing *Porgy and Bess* into the repertoire of The People's Opera, as the company had been known historically. John DeMain, now a recognized, international authority on the score, was engaged to conduct, and the noted African American theater and opera director Tazewell Thompson





was brought in to restage the show from the ground up. The run of performances was a complete sellout and an artistic triumph for the company. In the spring of 2002, Goldman's production achieved another milestone in the history of Gershwin's opera. When PBS's *Live From Lincoln Center* telecast *Porgy* nationwide from the stage of the New York City Opera, Gershwin's opera could be enjoyed by an audience of millions.

In the middle of the new century's first decade, a large-scale American production was conceived and directed by Francesca Zambello and coproduced by opera companies in Washington, Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Francisco. Its interpretation of the material differed significantly

The set and cast of the original production





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from previous American productions in setting, tone, and effect. From the night of its premiere in 2005, Zambello's production has been regarded as a benchmark in *Porgy*'s history. On November 4, 2008, the night that Barack Obama was elected President of the United States, the Zambello production of *Porgy* was in Chicago. The entire cast and staff flocked to Grant Park to hear the President-elect's acceptance speech.

PORGY AND RACE

Even a general survey of *Porgy and Bess* inevitably concerns itself with the issue of race. While the opera is not, strictly speaking, about race, the 75-year performance history of *Porgy and Bess* has paralleled a series of momentous events in the history of American race relations. The opera has been affected by race relations more than once. At times, it has even found itself on the front lines in the battle for advancement of equal rights in America. On the other hand, *Porgy* has also been vehemently criticized by black historians, social critics, and artists for its perceived stereotypes.

The fact that Heyward was audacious enough to write a realistic story about "Negroes" in the mid-1920s is stunning—as is the fact that the Heywards' coauthored adaptation for the stage became a groundbreaking theatrical event. It was the Heywards, two white Southerners, who made it a contractual condition that the play be cast with African American actors rather than white performers in blackface. Gershwin, having had his own artistically unsatisfying experience with performers in blackface, came to the same decision quite apart from the Heywards and before he read the novel. From the beginning he never even considered anything other than an all-black cast. That George Gershwin, by then a household name and a well-established composer, chose this material out of all the possible topics available to him, and then spent weeks on James Island, South Carolina, soaking up the language and music of Gullah blacks, speaks to the seriousness of his intent. That he painstakingly incorporated its essence into his opera and gave the material voice with such innovation and art, speaks volumes about his character and his gifts.



A WORK OF ART THAT CONTINUES TO THRIVE

Despite its many contradictions, or perhaps because of them, *Porgy and Bess* has not only endured, but also thrived. Never far from the public eye and ear, its iconic stature ensures that it is consistently performed. Its significance to a people inspires a unique depth of feeling in its performers, which translates into performances that can become, in the words of one critic, “a religious experience.” In the end, however, it is the music of George Gershwin that keeps *Porgy and Bess* as moving, joyful, and alive as it was on October 10, 1935, and ensures its future for all people.

Join us in celebrating this 75th anniversary of *Porgy and Bess* by exploring the journey of this remarkable American creation. The story is a compelling one.

Gershwin, Mamoulian, Heyward, and the cast take their bows after the first preview in Boston, 1935.

