

The legacy of the Gershwins and *Porgy and Bess*

An interview with Marc George Gershwin and Michael Strunsky, nephews of George and Ira Gershwin

By Barry Grey
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The following is an interview with Marc George Gershwin and Michael Strunsky, nephews of George and Ira Gershwin. Marc George Gershwin, the son of Arthur Gershwin, younger brother of George and Ira, heads the George Gershwin Family Trust. Michael Strunsky, the son of W. English Strunsky, the brother of Ira Gershwin's wife Leonore, heads the Leonore S. Gershwin 1987 Trust. Together they manage the musical estate of the great composer and his lyricist brother.

Gershwin and Strunsky participated in a seminar held at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in conjunction with a landmark concert performance of Porgy and Bess on February 17. The performance was based on a draft of an authoritative critical edition of the score, which corrects countless errors in the current published score and restores the opera in full, without cuts, to the original conception of its creators, George and Ira Gershwin and DuBose Heyward. The critical edition is the product of a nearly six-year collaboration between the university and the Gershwin family estates.

The performance and accompanying seminar were marred by racist attacks on the opera led by a section of the University of Michigan faculty. (See: "At the University of Michigan: Racist attacks mar landmark performance of Gershwin's Porgy and Bess").

The interview below was conducted on February 17. It began with Gershwin. Strunsky joined the discussion at a later point.

Barry Grey: What is your association, and that of the Gershwin Trust, with the University of Michigan and the critical edition of *Porgy and Bess*?

Marc George Gershwin: I am the copyright owner of *Porgy and Bess*. It came from George, who had no will, to my grandmother, and in turn to her children and grandchildren. My active participation dates back to 1980. It was the Rose Gershwin Trust and then it became the George Gershwin Family Trust, which encompassed all of George's music, etc.

BG: And the connection to the University of Michigan?

MGG: My middle son went here. We had been having conversations on and off about the poor condition of the orchestral parts of *Porgy and Bess*. The work on the critical edition of *Porgy* started before there was any relationship with the university. We

had talked to other people, but it was just exploratory. Critical editions for American composers are not common. Kurt Weill had them, but it's not common.

The University of Michigan said it would carry out the project. That was about five, six years ago. Wayne Shirley had started work on a critical edition at the Library of Congress. It became a bigger and bigger project, more encompassing. There was more enthusiasm, more funding started coming in, including from university graduates who were Gershwin lovers.

Ira could probably never have conceived of this type of thing happening.

BG: I would assume that you have a very high estimation of the work of your uncles.

MGG: Dealing with productions that come along, you build up this vast knowledge. Have I studied *Porgy and Bess*? No. But having seen *Porgy and Bess* in seven countries, probably 30 or 40 different productions, some of those multiple times, you become an expert through osmosis. You know the problems, you know the characters. It just builds up.

I have met a lot of families of contemporaries of George and Ira. There's always this kind of reverence for George. And I've had to grow into that. Why is he different from the others? How significant is George Gershwin among the great composers of the world?

BG: Your father, Arthur, was a brother?

MGG: Yes, there were three brothers and a sister [Frances]. George was not religious, but my father would talk about Passover seders George had. Our sterling silver at home was George's.

I think sometimes, who was this person? I think it must have been easy for George. It just came so easily, and why? There wasn't anything there in his immediate family. Maybe way back in Russia there may have been something, who knows?

What I always found really remarkable is how each of the brothers became the complimentary side of the other. You see the way they wrote music. They're sitting next to each other. That's the way they worked. They always lived next to each other. As brothers, they were more than just collaborators.

The old story is that George had a commission to write *Rhapsody in Blue*. He started writing it on a train to Boston. The

manuscript, which is at the Library of Congress, was so rushed that it has music, and then blank pages, and then more music. They didn't have time for Ferde Grofé [the orchestrator] to put the music down. Paul Whiteman would just nod to George when it was his turn to play.

BG: One of George's great achievements in my opinion was his fusion of popular music with "high art." He was consciously trying to reach a mass audience, reach the people.

MGG: There was the economic aspect of it. The classic question asked of Ira was what do you do first, the music or the lyrics? Ira said, "The contract."

In those days you had to do a show a year. Or even two shows. There is a definite progression in the shows. It keeps building up. It became far more sophisticated. Listen to the music in *Let 'Em Eat Cake* [1933] and you ask, "What's going on here?" Compared to, let's say, *Lady, Be Good* [1924] and the musical comedies of the early 1920s, there's something developing that is definitely a change.

BG: Let me ask you about a question about what they call cultural appropriation, the claim that Gershwin as a white man was exploiting or patronizing blacks. Questioning the legitimacy and value of *Porgy and Bess* racial grounds.

MGG: My perspective is they were doing an opera as they conceived it based on the DuBose Heyward book. George was at the point where he wanted to do something and he came across the book. If it wasn't for George's stature, it probably would not have been done.

BG: In my view the opera is extremely democratic and it ennobles. I don't think it is disparaging toward the characters at all.

MGG: What stands out is the genius of the music. He was doing an opera. I don't think he was thinking what were the social implications. The chatter about the racial questions... I don't think they had conversations like that.

BG: Do you know anything about their politics?

MGG: They weren't overly political. Jewish artistic theater-type people in New York in the 1920s and 1930s. *Strike Up the Band* [1930] was anti-war. But it was in the tradition of Gilbert and Sullivan.

BG: Do you think Gershwin's stature is growing?

MGG: The fact that there's a *Porgy* course here, that there are two or three Gershwin courses... No one's doing this for Irving Berlin, Jule Styne, Cole Porter.

At this point, Michael Strunsky joined the conversation.

Michael Strunsky: In my heart of hearts, *Porgy and Bess* is absolutely an opera. I'm very puzzled by the black community's lack of acceptance because it's as realistic as you possibly can imagine. George and Ira and Dubose—Dubose was the chronicler of that community.

BG: I don't think that a lot of people who teach courses here speak for the black community as a whole.

MS: You think?

BG: Let me ask you about this concept of cultural appropriation, which I find appalling. That it is somehow illegitimate for, say, a white author to write a book about black people or produce an opera about black people.

MS: If it is, I can't do anything about it.

MGG: Let me switch the question around. Should *Hamilton* be portrayed by black people? George Washington, Hamilton...?

MS: By the way, the roles that were filled by black people are now sometimes filled by white people, and the roles that were filled by white people are now sometimes filled by black people.

Porgy and Bess should be performed by black people because it was black people in that specific community, and part of the reason it has drama is because the community was persecuted.

I'm very upset by this stressing whether black performers are good or bad. It's a great piece.

MGG: My grandson goes here and he took a course this year on *Porgy and Bess*. The black studies professor, she spoke and I thought she had an attitude yesterday.

BG: She began by saying that when she was told they were planning to stage the opera at U of M, she said don't do it. Because she has a racialist outlook.

MGG: It's as wrong as the other way around. We have here the youth, and they are performing it and loving it. This is the future of Gershwin and *Porgy and Bess*.

MS: It would have been a totally good thing if we didn't get hung up on this black rights issue. That's not what we're here for. We're here to make this piece as stunning and good and reliable as possible. That's what this critical edition is. It's reliable and as close as anyone can conceivably imagine to what was going through George's head.

MGG: And putting it down so we now know what's right.

MS: There was a lot of getting sidetracked from what this critical edition is to do. We want to make this music as George and Ira thought it should be.

MGG: No one's ever going to do this again, because it's not a performance edition. When you go to the theater it's going to be reduced. This is completely scholarly.

MS: I'm not critical of people who take *Porgy and Bess* and do something to it. I don't have to like it, but at least we're starting with the base. And that's what we're here to do.

MGG: We want it to be the way we perceive it should be done, as we know that George and Ira and Dubose... While we and our kids are on the watch, that's the way it's going to be done.

Sherwin Goldman, who produced the opera a lot—he was the person responsible for the Houston Grand Opera production—he said it is about community. Catfish Row is a community. It has its hierarchy. They take care of their own. They're scared of the police, people still are today. The same problems that existed in the 20s and 30s still exist today, one way or another, and this is an image of it.

The goal is to put on a good opera, tastefully done.

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