

# New Met production of *Porgy and Bess* prompts racist criticisms of America's greatest opera

By Barry Grey  
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On Monday night, the New York Metropolitan Opera opened its 2019-2020 season with a new production of George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. This production has a particular distinction in that it is the first ever based on a critically researched and authoritative performance edition of Gershwin's score, the product of 20 years of work led by musicologist Wayne Shirley, who is currently at the University of Michigan's Gershwin Initiative.

There is no doubt that the poignant love story of the crippled beggar Porgy and the beautiful but abused and addicted Bess, and the suffering and struggle of the African American working class community of Charleston's Catfish Row, is among the world's most beloved operas and Gershwin's masterpiece.

Yet the fact that the current production is the first in 29 years to be staged by the country's most prestigious opera house is indicative of the trials and tribulations that have confronted the work since it premiered on Broadway in October 1935. These have come not from the broad public, which has embraced the opera (and many of its numbers) since its inception, thrilled by its glorious and complex music and moved by its deeply democratic ethos, but from within certain more privileged constituencies—the American classical music establishment, academia, sections of the black professional upper-middle class, including certain African American artists, composers, writers and actors.

Gershwin, the prolific composer—along with his lyricist brother Ira—of hit Broadway musicals and dozens of memorable songs that have become part of the Great American Songbook, rejected the artificial separation of popular music from “serious” or “classical” music. He wrote concert classics that incorporated elements of jazz such as *Rhapsody in Blue*, the *Concerto in F* and *An American in Paris*, which have become part of the symphonic repertoire the world over. He called his *Porgy* a “folk opera” and deliberately had it debut on Broadway in order to appeal to a broader audience. But what he wrote was a musically dense and dramatically powerful opera in the full sense of the word.

One example of the dismissal of *Porgy* by much of the American music establishment was a savage review of a production at the New York City Opera written in March of 1965 by the then-music critic of the *New York Times* Harold C. Schonberg. He wrote:

“Porgy and Bess”—Gershwin, you know—seems to have taken root as an American classic, and everybody accepts it as a kind of masterpiece. It turned up last night as given by the New York City Opera Company. All I can say is that it is a wonder that anybody can take it seriously.

It is not a good opera, it is not a good anything, though it has a half-dozen or so pretty tunes in it: and in light of recent

developments it is embarrassing. “Porgy and Bess” contains as many stereotypes in its way as “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”

In more recent decades, with the domination of racial and identity politics on the campuses and within what passes for the American intelligentsia, its promotion by the Democratic Party and elevation as an ideological bulwark of bourgeois rule, the opera has been repeatedly accused of denigrating and exploiting black people. It is, according to the terminology of African American Studies departments and a well-funded industry that—with the aid of pseudo-left organizations—churns out racist propaganda, a prime example of “cultural appropriation.”

We will deal with the retrograde concept of “cultural appropriation” further on. First let us examine how this racist approach to *Porgy and Bess* is reflected in the media reception of the new Met production.

The table was set, so to speak, by the *New York Times*, which led its Sunday arts section with a full-page photo of the two leads, Eric Owens and Angel Blue, and the headline “The Complex History and Uneasy Present of ‘Porgy and Bess.’”

Taking pains to raise the standard racist arguments against the opera and its composer, while simultaneously acknowledging the greatness of the work, the author, Michael Cooper, wrote:

More urgently, is “Porgy” a sensitive portrayal of the lives and struggles of a segregated African-American community in Charleston, SC? (Maya Angelou, who as a young dancer performed in a touring production that brought it to the Teatro alla Scala in Milan in 1955, later praised it as “great art” and “a human truth.”)

Or does it perpetuate degrading stereotypes about black people, told in wince-inducing dialect? (Harry Belafonte turned down an offer to star in the film version because he found it “racially demeaning.”)

Is it a triumph of melting-pot American art, teaming up George and Ira Gershwin (the sons of Russian Jewish immigrants) with DuBose Heyward (the scion of a prominent white South Carolina family) and his Ohio-born wife, Dorothy, to tell a uniquely African-American story? Or is it cultural appropriation?...

Or is the answer to all these questions yes?

The first wave of reviews published Tuesday (the WSWS will publish its own review of the Met production at a later date) have generally been highly favorable. All of the reviewers, however, feel obliged to qualify their enthusiasm for the performance by cataloging the opera's supposed

“baggage,” viewed from the standpoint of race. It seems they allow themselves to be moved by the piece only reluctantly, and sense its humanity and truth despite themselves.

George Grella, for example, writes in *New York Classical Review*:

Since its debut, *Porgy and Bess* has been consistently hectored by two questions: is it an opera and is it some combination of condescension and racial exploitation (lately termed cultural appropriation)?

The debut of a new production of *Porgy and Bess*, which opened the season at the Metropolitan Opera Monday night, could leave no objective listener with any doubt as to the answer to the first question. And based on the excited responses from the audience during the performance, and the rapturous applause and shouts at the end—from the kind of patron mix one sees in everyday life in New York City but rarely in a classical music venue—the work has gone quite a ways toward settling the latter in a heartening and beneficent way.

There are charges of stereotyping and caricature of the inhabitants of Catfish Row, but the real problem of the opera, the irredeemable original sin of *Porgy and Bess* that every reviewer is duty-bound to raise, is the fact that its creators were white. (Even worse, three of the four—George and Ira Gershwin and Dubose Heyward—were men.)

Thus, the *Washington Post*'s Anne Midgette writes: “Like so many operas, ‘Porgy’ is dated: written by white men and rife with stereotypes of its time.”

Anthony Tommasini of the *New York Times* writes: “But ever since its premiere in 1935, the work has divided opinion, and the debate lingers. ... ‘Porgy’ was created, after all, by white people. ... That ‘Porgy and Bess’ is a portrait of a black community by white artists may limit the work.”

Justin Davidson of *Vulture.com* notes: “True, the only depiction of African-American life that makes it to the opera stage with any regularity was written by three white guys.”

The very fact that the race, gender or nationality of the artist is today uncritically presented as a central issue in evaluating a work testifies to the degeneration of bourgeois thought in general and the terrible damage inflicted over many years by identity and racial politics. The use of such criteria in past periods was associated with the political right, which employed them to promote anti-democratic and racist agendas.

While today the attack on *Porgy and Bess* on grounds of the “whiteness” of its creators is cloaked in the supposedly “left” trappings of Democratic Party politics and post-modernist (that is, anti-Marxist) criticism, the earlier practitioners of such an approach were more frank in giving vent to its ugly sources and implications.

Reviewing the premiere of *Porgy and Bess* in 1935, the prominent American composer and music critic Virgil Thomson wrote:

The material is straight from the melting pot. At best it is a piquant but highly unsavory stirring-up together of Israel, Africa and the Gaelic Isles. ... [Gershwin's] lack of understanding of all the major problems of form, of continuity, and of serious or direct musical expression is not surprising in view of the impurity of his musical sources. ... I do not like fake folklore, nor fidgety accompaniments, nor bittersweet harmony, nor six-part choruses, nor gefilte fish orchestration.

Most critics and professors who attack the opera for the “whiteness” of

its authors are not anti-Semites, but, whether they like it or not, there is an objective link between their approach and that of Richard Wagner, one of the pioneers of anti-Semitism in the field of music. In 1850, he authored the infamous tract “Das Judentum in der Musik” (“Jewishness and Music”), in which he denounced Jewish composers in general and Felix Mendelssohn and Giacomo Meyerbeer in particular.

A racial approach to art has a definite logic. It leads in the end to abominations such as the Nazis' Aryan art, with its book burning and banning of Jewish- and black-infected “degenerate art.”

It is a historical fact that the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants who fled tsarist persecution composed an opera that expressed in a powerful and beautiful way both the poverty and oppression of blacks in the segregated South and their nobility of spirit and burning desire for genuine freedom and equality. What is so strange or problematic about that?

George Gershwin was a genius and without doubt the greatest American composer of his time. That is an important factor to reckon with. There were and are many talented black composers—Duke Ellington and William Grant Still, to name just two—who produced great music, but none has to date produced a musical piece about the black experience in America that compares to *Porgy*. Unfortunately, in the attacks on the opera by some black artists—initially including Ellington, although the great jazz composer later changed his opinion—there was an element of jealousy. The same applies to composers of the academy who dismissed Gershwin's work as technically deficient and low-brow.

How many jazz greats have performed and improvised on Gershwin tunes, including his opera? Miles Davis produced an entire album based on it. The list includes Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday and many more. It also includes country and pop artists such as Willie Nelson and Brian Wilson.

More than 80 years after its premiere, history itself has demonstrated the universality of *Porgy and Bess*. It is about black people, but, more fundamentally, it is about the human condition. Its basic themes are universal. It is a love story. It is a story about oppression, community, struggle, loss and the will to fight.

Do not songs such as “Summertime,” “I Got Plenty of Nothing” and the exquisite love duet “Bess, You Is My Woman Now” express the most profound and universal of human aspirations and emotions? Those who attack the opera for its “whiteness” generally avoid discussing the music.

Nor can there be any doubt that Gershwin's own background, in the context of the convulsive social and political conditions of the Depression 1930s—the spread of fascism in Europe, revolutionary upheavals internationally and mass struggles of the American working class, and the approach of the Second World War—played a significant role in inspiring him to write *Porgy*.

During the summer of 1934, Gershwin stayed on Folly Beach, located on a barrier island near Charleston, South Carolina, collecting material and ideas for his opera and visiting revival meetings of the Gullah blacks who lived on adjacent James Island. He wrote to a friend: “We sit out at night gazing at the stars, smoking our pipes. The three of us, Harry [Botkin], Paul [Mueller] and myself discuss our two favorite subjects, Hitler's Germany and God's women.”

Dubose Heyward, who spent part of the summer with Gershwin on Folly Beach, published an article in 1935 in *Stage* magazine in which he described Gershwin's interaction with the people who became the prototypes for the characters of his opera. “To George it was more like a homecoming than an exploration,” he wrote. “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.

“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 that he is probably the only white man in America who could have done it."

Gershwin himself was not overtly political, at least in his public life, but his sympathies and associations were with the liberal and socialist left. He penned Broadway shows of a broadly anti-war and socially dissident character, such as *Strike Up the Band*, *Of Thee I Sing* and *Let 'Em Eat Cake*. The impact of the Russian Revolution, only 18 years prior to the debut of *Porgy*, contributed to the generally optimistic and democratic impulse behind his music. The sister of Ira Gershwin's wife Leonore, Rose Strunsky, translated Leon Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* into English.

The singers who worked closely with Gershwin on *Porgy*, including the original Porgy and Bess, Todd Duncan and Anne Brown, spoke with affection of their interactions with the composer, insisting he never evinced the slightest prejudice or condescension. They were always among the most ardent defenders of the opera.

The Gershwins insisted that the singing roles go only to black performers, in part because they wanted to break down the exclusion of African American artists from the concert hall and because they did not want the opera to be performed in blackface.

As for the element of caricature in *Porgy and Bess*, what opera does not have caricatures? The vengeful dwarf in *Rigoletto*, the seductive gypsy in *Carmen*, the tubercular seamstress in *La Boheme*, the rascally but clever servant in *The Marriage of Figaro*. One could go on and on. The issue is: Do the inhabitants of Catfish Row transcend their "types" and express genuine humanity? The opera's audiences all over the world have answered in the affirmative.

And what of the charge of "cultural appropriation?" Could there be a more banal, reactionary and anti-artistic concept? What is art, if not the interaction of multiple influences of many origins, conditioned by social and historical development and distilled in the creative imagination of the artist to produce works that have universal significance?

Should we denounce Shakespeare, a male, for inventing Ophelia? Should we reject Verdi for writing operas about Egyptians? Should we ban blacks from playing white characters? What about that racist Mark Twain who had the impertinence to create the escaped slave Jim?

The balkanization of art is the end of art.

Here is how Gershwin, who aspired to create a genuine American idiom, described his own development. In an article titled "Jazz is the Voice of the American Soul," published in 1926, he wrote:

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.

And what is the voice of the American soul? It is jazz developed out of ragtime, jazz that is the plantation song improved and transformed into finer, bigger harmonies. ...

I do not assert that the American soul is Negroid. But it is a combination that includes the wail, the whine, and the exultant note of the old "mammy" songs of the South. It is black and white. It is all colors and all souls unified in the great melting pot of the world. ...

But to be true music it must repeat the thoughts and aspirations of the people and the time. My people are Americans. My time is today.

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