

TOLEDO OPERA

Porgy and Bess

Concert Opera Performance with Digital Scenery Projections



Teacher's Guide and Resource Book

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TOLEDO OPERA

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Porgy and Bess

**Student Night at the Opera
February 11, 2016**

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Thank you for your participation in Toledo Opera's Student Night at the Opera program. You may use this Teacher's guide for *Porgy and Bess* as a tool to assist you in preparing your students for their exposure to opera.

Opera is a complete art form and expression of culture. It encompasses music, theatre, dance, design, literature, history, and social movement in one sweep. This guide will provide you with background on the composer, history of the source material for the opera, a synopsis of the story, a bit about the political climate of the time, and extension exercises that can be incorporated into your curriculum. For additional information about opera, visit our website in the Learn section under [About Opera](#).

We'll see you at the Opera!

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Porgy and Bess

Characters

Type

PORGY, *a crippled beggar*
CROWN, *a stevedore**
BESS, *his girl*
JAKE, *a fisherman*
CLARA, *his wife*
MARIA, *keeper of the cook-shop*
MINGO
ROBBINS, *an inhabitant of Catfish Row*
SERENA, *his wife*
SPORTIN' LIFE, *a dope peddler ***
PETER, *the honeyman*
LILY, *Peter's wife*
UNDERTAKER

Voice

Bass-Baritone
Baritone
Soprano
Baritone
Soprano
Contralto
Tenor
Tenor
Soprano
Tenor
Tenor
Soprano
Baritone

SETTING: Catfish Row, Charleston, South Carolina 1920's

SYNOPSIS

ACT I

Scene 1: Catfish Row, a summer evening

Clara sings a lullaby to her baby (*Summertime*) as the working men prepare for a game of craps***. Clara's husband, Jake, tries his own lullaby (*A Woman is a Sometime Thing*) with little effect. Porgy, a cripple and a beggar, enters on his goat cart to organize the game. Crown, a lowlife, and his woman Bess enter, and the game begins. Sportin' Life, the local supplier of cocaine and bootleg alcohol, also joins in. One by one, the players get crapped out, leaving only Robbins and Crown, who have become extremely drunk. When Robbins wins, Crown starts a fight, and kills Robbins. Crown runs, telling Bess to fend for herself. All the residents reject her, except Porgy, who shelters her.

Scene 2: Serena's Room, the following night

The mourners sing a spiritual to Robbins (*Gone, Gone, Gone*). To raise money for his burial, a saucer is placed on his chest for the mourners' donations (*Overflow*). A white detective enters, in a speaking voice telling Serena (Robbins' wife) that she must bury her husband soon, or his body will be given to medical students. He arrests Peter (a bystander), whom he will force to testify against Crown. Serena laments her loss in *My Man's Gone Now*. The undertaker enters, and agrees to bury Robbins as long as

Serena promises to pay him back. Bess and the chorus finish the act with *Leavin' for the Promise' Lan'* .

Scene 3: Catfish Row, a month later, in the morning

Jake and the other fishermen prepare for work (*It take a long pull to get there*). Clara asks Jake not to go, and to come to a picnic, but he tells her that they desperately need the money. This causes Porgy to sing from his window about his outlook on life (*I got plenty o' nuttin'*). Sportin' Life waltzes around, selling cocaine, but soon incurs the wrath of Maria (*I hates yo' struttin' style*). A fraudulent lawyer, Frazier, arrives and farcically divorces Bess from Crown. Archdale, a white lawman, enters and informs Porgy that Peter will soon be released. The bad omen of a buzzard flies over Catfish Row, causing Porgy to sing *Buzzard keep on flyin' over*.

As the rest of Catfish Row prepares for the picnic, Sportin' Life asks Bess to start a new life with him in New York; she refuses. Bess and Porgy are now left alone, and express their love for each other (*Bess, you is my woman now*). The chorus re-enters in high spirits as they prepare to leave for the picnic (*Oh, I can't sit down*). Bess leaves Porgy behind as they go off to the picnic. Porgy reprises *I got plenty o' nuttin'* in high spirits.

* a stevedore is a dock worker or longshoreman who unloads ships

** a drug dealer

*** a dice game played against other players or the bank. Name comes from the French, "Crapaud", which means "toad"

ACT II

Scene 1: Kittiwah Island, that evening

The chorus enjoys themselves at the picnic (*I ain't got no shame doin' what I like to do!*). Sportin' Life presents the chorus his cynical views on the Bible (*It ain't necessarily so*), causing Serena to chastise them (*Shame on all you sinners!*). Crown enters to talk to Bess, and he reminds her that Porgy is "temporary." Bess wants to leave Crown forever (*Oh, what you want wid Bess?*) but Crown makes her follow him into hiding in the woods.

Scene 2: Catfish Row, a week later, just before dawn

Jake leaves to go fishing with his crew, and Peter returns from prison. Bess is lying in Porgy's room, sick with a fever. Serena prays to remove Bess's affliction (*Oh, doctor Jesus*). The Strawberry Woman and the Crab Man sing their calls on the street, and Bess soon recovers from her fever. Bess talks with Porgy about her sins (*I wants to stay here*) before exclaiming *I loves you, Porgy*. Porgy promises to protect her from Crown. The scene ends with the hurricane bell signaling an approaching storm.

Scene 3: Serena's Room, dawn of the next day

The residents of Catfish Row drown out the sound of the storm with prayer. A knock is heard at the door, and the chorus believes it to be Death (*Oh there's somebody*

knocking at the door). Crown enters dramatically, seeking Bess. The chorus tries praying to make Crown leave, causing him to goad them with the un-Christian *A red-headed woman make a choo-choo jump its track*. Clara sees Jake's boat turn over in the river, and she runs out to try and save him. Crown says that Porgy is not a real man, as he cannot go out to rescue her from the storm. Crown goes himself, and the chorus finishes its prayer. Clara dies in the storm, and Bess will now care for her baby.

Scene 4: Catfish Row, the next night

The chorus mourns Clara and Jake (*Clara, Clara, don't you be downhearted*). Crown enters to claim Bess, and a fight ensues, which ends with Porgy killing Crown. Porgy exclaims to Bess, *You've got a man now. You've got Porgy!*

Scene 5: Catfish Row, the next afternoon

A detective enters and talks with Serena and Maria about the murders of Crown and Robbins. They deny knowledge of Crown's murder, causing the detective to question an apprehensive Porgy. He asks Porgy to come and identify Crown's body. Sportin' Life tells Porgy that corpses bleed in the presence of their murderers, and the detective will use this to hang Porgy. Porgy refuses to identify the body, and is arrested for contempt of court. Sportin' Life forces Bess to take cocaine, and then tells her that Porgy will be locked up for a long time. He tells her that she should start a new life with him in New York with the dazzling *There's a boat dat's leavin' soon for New York*. She shuts the door on his face, but he knows that doubt at Porgy's return will make her follow him.

Scene 6: Catfish Row, a week later

Porgy is released from jail and returns to Catfish Row richer, after playing craps with his cellmates with his "lucky bones", as he calls his dice. He gives gifts to the residents, and does not understand why they all seem so downhearted. He sees Clara's baby is now with Serena and madly asks where Bess is. Maria and Serena tell him that Bess has run off with Sportin' Life to New York. All three sing the trio *O Bess, oh where's my Bess*. Porgy calls for his goat cart, and leaves for New York to find Bess in the closing song *Oh Lawd, I'm on my way*.

Catfish (Cabbage) Row, Charleston



photo courtesy: filmssc.com

From Page to Stage

Novelist/Playwright/Librettist: DuBose Heyward (1885-1940)



Dorothy and DuBose Heyward in 1927

Porgy and Bess first began as the novel, *Porgy*, written by DuBose Heyward in 1925. A descendant of Thomas Heyward, Jr., who was a signer of the United States Declaration of Independence as a representative of South Carolina, DuBose became a Charleston insurance and real-estate salesman with a long-standing and serious interest in literature. He became financially independent and abandoned his business to devote full time to writing.

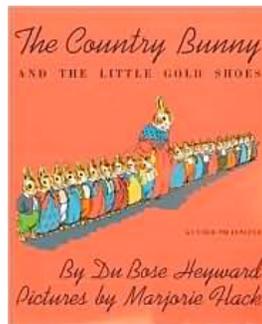
Heyward and his wife Dorothy spent many years in Charleston observing the lifestyle of the African Americans of that area. He also participated in an amateur Southern traditional singing society open to anyone whose family had lived on a plantation, whether as owner or slave. In Charleston Heyward found a majority of the inspiration for his book, including what would become the setting (Catfish Row) and the main character (a disabled man named Porgy). Literary critics cast Heyward as an authority on Southern literature. During his time in Charleston, DuBose taught at the Porter Military Academy.

The non-musical play, *Porgy*, adapted by DuBose and Dorothy opened on Broadway in 1927, eight years before the opera *Porgy and Bess*. It was a considerable success—

more so at the time than the Gershwin opera. It was the play that was used as the opera's libretto. The novel differs greatly from the play, especially in the ending. The plotline of the opera follows the play almost exactly. Large sections of dialogue from the play were set to music for the recitatives in the opera.

The novel *Porgy* became a bestseller. Heyward continued to explore writing with another novel set in Catfish Row, *Mamba's Daughters* (1929), which he and Dorothy again adapted as a play. His novella *Star Spangled Virgin* was about the breakdown of the small farming economy of an island in the Virgin Islands.

He also wrote the screenplay for the adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1933). His work included a collection of poems, *Jasbo Brown and selected poems* published in 1931 and a children's book, *The Country Bunny and the Little Gold Shoes* published in 1939.



"DuBose Heyward has gone largely unrecognized as the author of the finest set of lyrics in the history of the American musical theater - namely, those of Porgy and Bess. There are two reasons for this, and they are connected. First, he was primarily a poet and novelist, and his only song lyrics were those that he wrote for Porgy. Second, some of them were written in collaboration with Ira Gershwin, a full-time lyricist, whose reputation in the musical theater was firmly established before the opera was written. But most of the lyrics in Porgy - and all of the distinguished ones - are by Heyward. I admire his theater songs for their deeply felt poetic style and their insight into character. It's a pity he didn't write any others. His work is sung, but he is unsung."

-Stephen Sondheim



George Gershwin DuBose Heyward Ira Gershwin
-courtesy of the Ira and Leonore Gershwin trusts

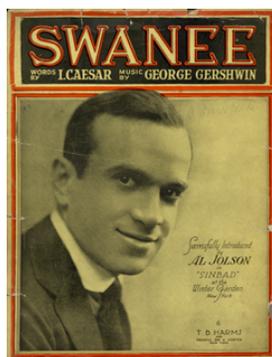
at Work



Composer: George Gershwin

1898-1937

George Gershwin was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1898, the second of four children from a close-knit immigrant family. He began his musical career as a song-plugger on Tin Pan Alley (*what's Tin Pan Alley, you ask? Tin Pan Alley is the name given to the collection of New York City-centered music publishers and songwriters who dominated the popular music of the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century*) but was soon writing his own pieces. Gershwin's first published song, "When You Want 'Em, You Can't Get 'Em," earned him five dollars. Soon after, however, he met a young lyricist named Irving Caesar. Together they composed a number of songs including "Swanee," which sold more than a million copies.



In the same year as “Swanee,” Gershwin collaborated on his first complete Broadway musical, *La, La, Lucille*.

In 1924, George collaborated with his brother, lyricist Ira Gershwin, on a musical comedy, *Lady, Be Good*. It included such standards as “Fascinating Rhythm” and “The Man I Love.”

It was the beginning of a partnership that would continue for the rest of the composer’s life. Together they wrote many more successful musicals including *Oh Kay!* and *Funny Face*, starring Fred Astaire and his sister, Adele. While continuing to compose popular music for the stage, Gershwin began to make his mark as a serious composer. This is not a surprise as George began to study piano as a child and worked with teachers who were prominent classical musicians of the time.

When he was 25 years old, his jazz-influenced *Rhapsody in Blue* premiered in New York’s Aeolian Hall. Gershwin followed this success with his orchestral works *Piano Concerto in F*, *Second Rhapsody*, and *An American in Paris*.

Gershwin also experimented with some new ideas in Broadway musicals. *Strike Up The Band*, *Of Thee I Sing* (the first musical comedy ever to win a Pulitzer Prize) and *Let ‘Em Eat Cake* were innovative works dealing with social issues of the time.

Finally, in 1935 he presented a folk opera, *Porgy and Bess*. Now recognized as one of the major works of American opera, it included such memorable songs as “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” “I Loves You, Porgy,” and “Summertime.”

In 1936, after many successes on Broadway, brothers George and Ira decided to return to Hollywood. Again they teamed up with Fred Astaire, who was now paired with Ginger Rogers. They made the musical film, *Shall We Dance*, which included such hits as “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off” and “They Can’t Take That Away From Me.” Soon after came *A Damsel in Distress*, in which Astaire appeared with Joan Fontaine. Gershwin had plans to return to New York to work on writing serious music. He planned a string quartet, a ballet and another opera, but these pieces were never written. After becoming

ill while working on the Goldwyn Follies, George Gershwin died of a brain tumor at the age of 38. Today he remains one of America's most beloved popular musicians and composers.



George Gershwin in 1937



Brothers at work



Ira Gershwin

lyricist

Ira Gershwin (1896-1983)

While his younger brother, George began composing and working in Tin Pan Alley from the age of sixteen, Ira worked at a number of jobs including as a cashier in his father's Turkish baths. It was not until 1921 that Ira became involved in the music business. Alex Aarons signed Ira to write the music for his next show, *Two Little Girls in Blue* (written under the pseudonym "Arthur Francis"). Gershwin's lyrics were well received and allowed him to successfully enter the theatre world with just one show.

It was not until 1924 that Ira and George Gershwin teamed up to write the music for their first Broadway hit *Lady, Be Good!* Once the brothers joined together, their combined talents became one of the most influential forces in the history of American Musical Theatre.

Together, they wrote the music for more than two dozen scores for Broadway and Hollywood. Following his brother's death, Ira waited nearly three years before writing again.

After this interlude, he teamed up with such accomplished composers as Jerome Kern, Kurt Weill, and Harold Arlen. Over the next fourteen years, Ira Gershwin continued to write the lyrics for films and Broadway.

His critically acclaimed book *Lyrics on Several Occasions* of 1959, an amalgam of autobiography and annotated anthology, is an important source for studying the art of the lyricist in the golden age of American popular song.

American Music and the Gershwins

The Gershowitz family, before the birth of sons, Israel and Jacob (Ira and George), immigrated to New York from St. Petersburg, Russia in the early 1890's. The family officially changed the name to Gershwin when George began to work professionally in the music world. As immigrants who had to make do in a new world and prove themselves, George and Ira are definitely prime examples of the blossoming of the American Dream.

The work of Ira and George Gershwin runs deep in the American consciousness. The opening clarinet glissando from George's *Rhapsody in Blue*, the taxi horn theme from his *An American in Paris* and the brothers' songs – "I Got Rhythm", "Embraceable You", "The Man I Love", "Someone to Watch Over Me", "Fascinating Rhythm", and many others – are instantly recognizable.

Ira Gershwin was a joyous listener to the sounds of the modern world. "He had a sharp eye and ear for the minutiae of living." He noted in a diary: "Heard in a day: An elevator's purr, telephone's ring, telephone's buzz, a baby's moans, a shout of delight, a screech from a 'flat wheel', car honks, a hoarse voice, a tinkle, a match scratch on sandpaper, a deep resounding boom of dynamiting in the impending subway, iron hooks on the gutter." [1]

In 1987, Ira's widow, Leonore Gershwin, established the Ira Gershwin Literacy Center at University Settlement, a century-old institution at 185 Eldridge Street on the Lower East Side, New York City. The Center is designed to give English-language programs to primarily Hispanic and Chinese Americans. Ira and George spent many after-school hours at the Settlement.

The George and Ira Gershwin Collection is at the Library of Congress Music Division.

In 2007, the Library of Congress named its Prize for Popular Song for the Gershwin brothers. Recognizing the profound and positive effect of popular music on the world's culture, the prize will be given annually to a composer or performer whose lifetime contributions exemplify the standard of excellence associated with the Gershwins. On March 1, 2007, the Library of Congress announced that Paul Simon, one of America's most respected songwriters and musicians, was the first recipient of the annual Library of Congress Gershwin Prize for Popular Song. The second Gershwin Prize for Popular Song was awarded to Stevie Wonder by U.S. President Barack Obama on February 25, 2009.

1. Rosenberg

The Origins of *Porgy and Bess*: Making of an American Opera



The Metropolitan Opera

In 1930 Gershwin received a commission from the Metropolitan Opera to write a grand opera, one distinctly American. He was free to select the libretto. While Gershwin was impressed with the Met's offer, he knew that the venue would present some formidable problems: He wanted to do *Porgy* and it would require an all-Negro cast. The Met's doors were closed to Negro performers; not one was on its roster. For three years, Gershwin delayed the decision while he searched for another story. Nothing suited his needs like the *Porgy* story, and neither he nor Heyward wanted it done in blackface, as was the practice of that time. The composers of *Show Boat*, Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II, made an attractive offer to Heyward for the musical rights--the famous Al Jolson was to play Porgy. Kern, Hammerstein, and Jolson planned to turn the book into a musical comedy using a cast in blackface. The pressure forced both Gershwin and Heyward, who intuitively knew the potential of *Porgy*, to announce in October of 1933 the composition of a folk opera based on the Heyward book to be performed on Broadway with an all-Negro cast. It would be produced by the Theatre Guild, which had produced the Heywards' highly successful stage play. Neither Heyward nor Gershwin could imagine fully the challenges and exhilaration the task would provide.

Heyward converted the stage version of *Porgy* into a libretto in late 1933 and early 1934, sending the typescript to Gershwin scene by scene. According to Joseph Swain, Gershwin spent eleven months composing the music, from February 1934 to January 1935, and nine more months orchestrating it. The collaboration between Heyward and George Gershwin (and later Gershwin's brother Ira) was a harmonious one. Heyward provided plot, dialogue, and even some lyrics: "Summertime," "My Man's Gone Now," and "A Woman is a Sometime Thing" have sources in the play text. When Heyward eventually had trouble coming up with lyrics that fit certain scenes in the opera, Ira Gershwin became the versifier and polisher. The several musical styles evident in *Porgy and Bess* derive from this two- and three-sided collaboration.

-from The Complicated Life of Porgy and Bess by James Standifer

The Original Bess: Making of an American Opera

Anne Brown, Who Was Gershwin's Bess, Dies at 96

By DOUGLAS MARTIN

Published: March 18, 2009, New York Times

Anne Brown, a penetratingly pure soprano who literally put the Bess in "Porgy and Bess" by inspiring George Gershwin to expand the character's part in a folk opera that was originally to be called "Porgy," died Friday in Oslo. She was 96. Her daughter Paula Schjelderup announced the death.



Anne Brown with Todd Duncan in a 1942 production of "Porgy and Bess."



Ms. Brown in 1998

Ángel Franco/The New York Times

"Porgy and Bess" burst onto the American scene in 1935 as a sophisticated musical treatment of poor blacks. Critics could not make out whether it was a musical comedy, a jazz drama, a folk opera or something quite different. Time told: it became part of the standard operatic repertory, including that of the Metropolitan Opera.

Drawing from the gritty experiences of South Carolina blacks, “Porgy and Bess” introduced songs that came to be lodged in American culture. Ms. Brown was the first person Gershwin heard singing the part of Bess, a morally challenged but achingly human character who was relatively minor in the original 1925 DuBose Heyward novel and the 1927 hit stage play by DuBose and Dorothy Heyward.

As he composed the opera, often with Ms. Brown at his side, Gershwin added more and more music for her. Her voice was also the first he heard singing several other parts in the opera. “Porgy and Bess” went on to be produced on countless amateur and professional stages all over the world.

Because Gershwin died at 38 in 1937, Ms. Brown was the only Bess he ever knew. Her own story has an operatic flavor. She grew up in a protective middle-class home with crystal chandeliers and music; her father later worried about her going to New York, where she was accepted at Juilliard, much less playing the part of a tawdry woman like Bess. She was lauded for her talent, but as a child was rejected from a Baltimore Catholic elementary school because she was African-American.

Even after winning the Margaret McGill prize as the best singer at Juilliard, she had no hope of reaching the top tiers of opera. Not until 1955 did the Met feature a black singer, Marian Anderson.

Ms. Brown ultimately moved to Oslo. “To put it bluntly, I was fed up with racial prejudice,” she said in an interview with The New York Times in 1998.

Anne Wiggins Brown was born in Baltimore on Aug. 9, 1912. Her father, a surgeon, was the grandson of slaves, and her mother was a music lover who played the piano daily. Family legend had it that Ms. Brown could sing a perfect scale when she was 9 months old, The Washington Post reported in 1994.

After attending what was then Morgan College, Ms. Brown was rejected by the Peabody Institute in Baltimore, a leading conservatory. She was encouraged by the wife of the owner of The Baltimore Sun to apply to Juilliard. She had earned an undergraduate degree and was in her second year of graduate studies at Juilliard when she read that Gershwin was writing his opera. She wrote to ask for an interview. His secretary called to ask her to go to his apartment, with lots of music.

She brought music by Brahms, Schubert and other classical composers, which Gershwin played as she sang, she recalled in numerous interviews. When he asked her to sing a Negro spiritual, she balked. She considered the request racial stereotyping, but finally sang “A City Called Heaven” without accompaniment.

Gershwin was quiet after she finished. He finally told her that it was the most beautiful spiritual he ever heard. They hugged.

Soon, Gershwin telephoned to say, “I’ve finished up to page 33 or so,” and asked her to come over to sing it. Finally, in the last days of rehearsals, Gershwin took her to a restaurant to have an orange juice and told her he was expanding the title of the opera to include Bess, her part. Ms.

Brown talked Gershwin into letting Bess sing “Summertime” in the third act, reprising the song the character Clara sings earlier.

Although the show received mixed reviews in October 1935, Ms. Brown was praised. Olin Downes in *The Times* said her work was “a high point of interpretation.” She went on to appear in the Broadway play “Mamba’s Daughters” (1939), a revival of “Porgy” in 1942 and the Gershwin movie biography “Rhapsody in Blue” (1945), playing herself. She performed extensively in Europe, South America and elsewhere, and taught voice for many years in a drama school in Oslo; one of her students was Liv Ullmann. Her own singing career was cut short by a lung illness in the 1950s.

In 1948, Ms. Brown made a concert tour of European capitals and settled in Oslo, where she became a Norwegian citizen and married Thorleif Schjelderup, who won third place in ski jumping at the 1948 Winter Olympics. The marriage ended in divorce, as did two previous marriages.

Ms. Brown is survived by her daughters Paula and Vaar Schjelderup; four grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

In 1998, Ms. Brown received the George Peabody Medal for Outstanding Contributions to Music in America from the Peabody Institute, which has operated as a division of Johns Hopkins University since 1977.

In the interview with *The Times*, Ms. Brown suggested she had been born 30 years too soon. “If I had been born even 20 years later I might have sung at the Metropolitan Opera,” she mused. “I might have marched for civil rights. I would have been here for that. I would certainly not have lived in Norway, and my life would have been very different.”

With bright eyes, she added, “Of course, I would not have met Mr. Gershwin, and that would have been a shame.”

Courtesy Operachic.typepad.com



The Real Porgy

[DuBose Heyward], in his youth had worked as a cotton checker with the Gullah stevedores on the waterfront; they often came to him with their problems. Hardly a block away from where he lived on Church Street in downtown Charleston was a decaying pair of buildings inhabited by [African Americans] behind which was an inner court. It was a noisy, overcrowded, troublesome place, which drew the police frequently to settle altercations. Ground-floor shopkeepers put their vegetable stands on the street, and for that reason the place was familiarly known as Cabbage Row.

Heyward passed it every morning on his way to work on Broad Street, a few blocks away, where his insurance business was located. On one of these March mornings, with his wife away in New York, he stopped off at his sister's house on the same street to have breakfast with her. While eating, he browsed through the day's edition of the *Charleston News and Courier*. An item in the police blotter caught his eye.

It read:

Samuel Smalls, who is a cripple and is familiar to King Street, with his goat and cart, was held for the June term of Court of Sessions on an aggravated assault charge. It is alleged that on Saturday night he attempted to shoot Maggie Barnes at number four Romney Street. His shots went wide of the mark. Smalls was up on a similar charge some months ago and was given a suspended sentence. Smalls had attempted to escape in his wagon and was run down and captured by the police patrol.

"Just think of that old wreck having enough manhood to do a think like that," Heyward said to his sister, and he clipped out the item and put it in his wallet...

...Several Charlestonians remembered [Smalls], although with less than fondness.

"He was neither very virtuous nor very villainous," one recalled. If anything stood out about him it was the acrid smell of goat. On one of his arrests they picked him up as a complete unit—goat, cart, and Sammy—and set him before the judge, who didn't quite know what to do with him. He was a nuisance in the jail, so he was usually released. Local interest in him grew years after Porgy appeared, but by then he was gone from view, and efforts were made to discover his history. A surviving wife was located, and a grave that might have been his; a few stepped forward to say they were his relatives.

And Cabbage Row, which soon enough became established as the model for the Catfish Row of the novel, play, and opera, also aroused much interest.

-from The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess by Hollis Alpert (pgs. 19-21)

The People of Catfish/Cabbage Row

From www.gullah.sc

Gullah In South Carolina

www.Gullah.sc is South Carolina's premier web site to learn about Gullah people, language, traditions, and tourism events. Gullah is the language spoken by the Lowcountry's first black inhabitants. The language and culture still thrive today in and around the Lowcountry, especially the areas of Charleston and Beaufort, South Carolina.



In the Low Country there are a number of tours that offer visitors the ability to learn all about the Gullah traditions, authentic arts and crafts, Gullah presentations, music, and to learn more about the Gullah history, and the the rich and varied contributions made by Black Charlestonians.

Gullah : People, Heritage, and Lifestyles

The Gullah are African Americans who live in the Low Country of South Carolina, which includes both the coastal plain and the Sea Islands. Historically, the Gullah region once extended north to the Cape Fear area on the coast of North Carolina and south to the vicinity of Jacksonville on the coast of Florida. Today the Gullah area is confined to the South Carolina and Georgia Low Country. The Gullah people are also called Geechee.

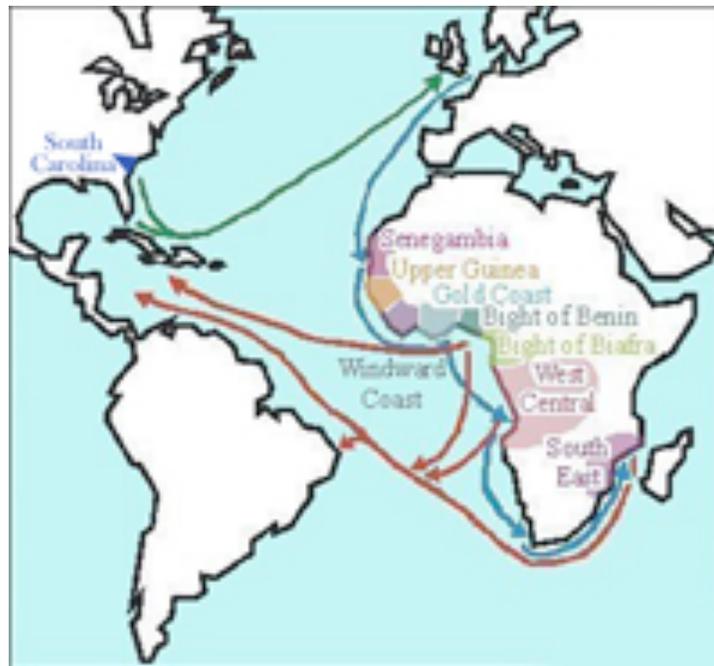


farming and fishing traditions.

The Gullah are known for preserving their African linguistic and cultural heritage. They speak an English-based creole language containing many African loanwords and significant influences from African languages in grammar and sentence structure. The Gullah language is related to Jamaican Creole, Bahamian Dialect, and the Krio language of Sierra Leone in West Africa. Gullah storytelling, food, music, folk beliefs, crafts,

"Gullah" and "Geechee"

The name "Gullah" may derive from Angola, a country in southwestern Africa where many of the Gullahs' ancestors originated. Some scholars have also suggested it comes from Gola, an ethnic group living on the border area between Sierra Leone and Liberia in West Africa. The name "Geechee" may come from Kissi (pronounced "Geezee"), a tribe living in the border area between Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia.



African Roots

Most of the Gullahs' ancestors were brought to the South Carolina through the port of Charleston. Charleston was the most important port in North America for the Atlantic slave trade, and almost half of the enslaved Africans brought into what is now the United States came through the port of Charleston.

The largest group of Africans brought into Charleston and Savannah came from the West African rice-growing region that stretches from what are now Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, and Liberia. South Carolina and Georgia rice planters once called this region the "Rice Coast". The second-largest group of Africans brought through Charleston came from Angola in Southern Africa, but smaller numbers also came from the Gold Coast (modern Ghana) and the West Indies.

Origin of Gullah Culture

The Gullah have been able to preserve so much of their African cultural heritage because of geography and climate. By the mid-1700s, the South Carolina Low Country was covered by thousands of acres of rice fields; and African farmers from the "Rice Coast" brought the skills that made rice one of the most successful industries in early

America. But the semi-tropical climate that made the Low Country such an excellent place for rice production, also made it vulnerable to the spread of malaria and yellow fever. These tropical diseases were carried by mosquitoes brought aboard the slave ships from Africa. Mosquitoes bred in the swamps and inundated rice fields of the Low Country, and malaria and yellow fever soon became endemic.

Africans more resistant to tropical fevers than the European slave owners. More Africans were brought into the Low Country as the rice industry expanded, and by about 1708 South Carolina had a black majority. Fearing disease, many white planters left the Low Country during the rainy spring and summer months when fever ran rampant, leaving their overseers in charge of the plantations. Having much less contact with white colonists than slaves in white majority colonies, the Gullahs were able to preserve their African language, culture, and community life.

Gullah customs and traditions

African influences are found in every aspect of the Gullahs' traditional way of life: Gullah word "Guber" for peanut derives straight from Kongo(Congo) word "N'guba." Gullah rice dishes called "red rice" and "okra soup" are similar to West African "jollof rice" and "okra soup". Jollof rice is a style of cooking brought by the Wolof and Mandé peoples of West Africa.



The Gullah version of "gumbo" has its roots in African cooking. "Gumbo" is derived from a word in the Umbundu language of Angola, meaning "okra."

Gullah People and the Civil War period

When the Civil War began, the Union rushed to blockade the Confederate shipping. Many White planters on the Sea Islands, fearing an invasion by the US naval forces, abandoned their plantations and fled to the mainland. When Union forces arrived on the Sea Islands in 1861, they found the Gullah people eager for their freedom, and eager as well to defend it. Many Gullahs served with distinction in the Union Army's First South Carolina Volunteers. The Sea Islands were the first place in the South where slaves were freed. Long before the War ended, Quaker missionaries from Pennsylvania came down to start schools for the newly freed slaves. Penn Center, now a Gullah community organization on Saint Helena Island, South Carolina, began as the very first school for freed slaves.

After the Civil War, the Gullahs' isolation from the outside world increased in some respects. The rice planters on the mainland gradually abandoned their plantations and moved away. A series of hurricanes devastated the crops in the 1890s. Left alone in

remote rural areas in the Low Country, the Gullahs continued to practice their traditional culture with little influence from the outside world well into the 20th Century.

Gullah People and Modern times

Over the years, the Gullahs have attracted many historians, linguists, folklorists, and anthropologists interested in their rich cultural heritage. Many academic books on that subject have been published. The Gullah have also become a symbol of cultural pride for blacks throughout the United States and a subject of general interest in the media. This has given rise to countless newspaper and magazine articles, documentary films, and children's books on Gullah culture and to a number of popular novels set in the Gullah region.

Cultural survival

Far from being near extinction, Gullah culture has proven to be particularly resilient. Gullah traditions are still strong in urban areas of the Low Country, like Charleston. Many Gullahs migrated to New York starting at the beginning of the 20th century, and these urban migrants have not lost their identity. Gullahs have their own neighborhood churches and sometimes send their children back to rural communities in South Carolina during the summer months to be reared by grandparents, uncles and aunts. Gullah people living in New York also frequently return to the low country to retire.



Racial Controversy and Changing Times

Porgy and Bess reflects the odyssey of the African American in American culture.

--Lawrence Levine

Porgy and Bess belongs in a museum and no self-respecting African American should want to see it, or be seen in it.

--Harold Cruse

-from *The Complicated Life of Porgy and Bess* by James Standifer

Porgy and Bess came on the scene when racial segregation was still widely practiced throughout the United States and main stream theatre, music, and art mostly represented the white European sensibilities.

Heyward's novel, *Porgy*, was seen as a glimpse into the exotic world of another culture. Many felt that his humanist treatment of African American culture helped the cause of racial integration because it led to deeper understanding of the African American experience of the time.

Critics of the work felt that the novel, play, and opera, representing a population rampant with drugs, crime, poverty, and prostitution, only reinforced negative stereotypes that would lead to deeper prejudice and conflict.

Yet this became a rare opportunity for African American singers to take the main stage. (*Four Saints in Three Acts* by Virgil Thomson & Gertrude Stein (1934) had an all-black cast.) Gershwin's music, a wildly diverse mixture of traditional classical, modern experimental for the time, and jazz—a style coming from the Black community itself--became a vehicle for many cultural changes. With the emergence of the Harlem renaissance (the flowering of African American cultural and intellectual life during the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in New York City), Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* fit right into the cultural awakening and new appreciation of the African American experience.

Today life is different in the United States. Although racism and bigotry still exist in our country, we have come a long way toward integration, especially in the arts. So the question arises: Is *Porgy and Bess* still relevant and appropriate? If this piece were written today, representing only the poor and seedy side of Black America, it would not be produced because it shows a society that is no longer representative of what we, as Americans strive for. However, looked at as an historical piece, representative of the views and cultural standards of the time, it is a lesson, a landmark from which have grown, and a humanist story with some of the most unforgettable music of all time.

This work, using multicultural musical elements, created in this country, by immigrants, about immigrants, helping us chart our amazing growth as a nation, is the earliest artistic representation of our foundation that we have.

Everybody's singing...

Summertime,
An' the livin' is easy
Fish are jumpin'
An' the cotton is high

Oh yo' daddy's rich
An' yo' mamma's good lookin'
So hush little baby
Don' yo' cry

One of these mornin's
You're goin' to rise up singin'
Then you'll spread yo' wings
An' you'll take the sky

But till that mornin'
There's a-nothin' can harm you
With daddy an' mammy standin' by

Summertime,
An' the livin' is easy
Fish are jumpin'
An' the cotton is high

Yo' daddy's rich
An' yo' mamma's good lookin'
So hush little baby
Don' yo' cry

“Summertime” is the name of an aria from *Porgy and Bess*. The lyrics are by DuBose and Dorothy Heyward, and Ira Gershwin. The song soon became a popular jazz standard.

George Gershwin is said to have based this song on a Ukrainian lullaby, *Oi Khodyt Son Kolo Vikon* (A Dream Passes By The Windows), which he heard in a New York City performance by Oleksander Koshetz's Ukrainian National Chorus.

Gershwin began composing the song in December 1933, attempting to create his own spiritual in the style of the African American folk music of the period. It is sung multiple times throughout *Porgy and Bess*, first by Clara in Act I as a lullaby and soon after as counterpoint to the craps game scene, in Act II in a reprise by Clara, and in Act III by Bess, singing to Clara's baby.

Courtesy wikipedia

Student Activities

Adapted from activities courtesy of San Francisco Opera Guide.

The Five C's: More to the story

Using the Five C's, have your students analyze the opera as drama:

CHARACTERS: Are they interesting? Believable? Are their actions, words, thoughts consistent?

CONFLICT: What conflicts are established? How are they resolved?

CLIMAX: To what climax does the conflict lead?

CONCLUSION: How well does the conclusion work? Is it consistent? Satisfying? Believable?

CONTEXT: What are the historical, physical, and emotional settings? Sets and costumes?

AFTER THE OPERA

-  Have the students write a review of what they saw. Was the production a good representation of the five C's?
-  Have the students create their own designs for sets, costumes, wigs, make-up, etc.
-  Have your students write a letter to one of the characters giving them advice for the future.

Prompts for Discussion and Activities

1. Study the lyrics to *Summertime*. Why do you think this has become such a well known and widely heard song? What is it about the simplicity of lyrics and mood they create that is touching to the heart and soul? Listen to a recording of the song. How does the melody express the lyrics? Pick a simple subject and write a short poem trying to focus on how the subject makes you feel. How would you set it to music? Choose one instrument as accompaniment. How does the sound of this instrument help express the subject of the poem?
2. If this story were to be created today, what changes would be made to express our current culture?
3. *Porgy and Bess* does not have a clear ending. We never know if Porgy finds Bess. Write an

ending. What happens in New York?

4. Think about patterns of migration. What cultural contributions have been made in your community from the various cultures that make it up?

5. DuBose Heyward took a section of his neighborhood and fictionalized it. He turned Sam Smalls into Porgy and turned Cabbage Row into Catfish Row. Think about your neighborhood. How would you adapt the places you visit and people you see everyday and put them into a story. Pick one neighbor or one business in your community and write a short story about them using your imagination.

6. Read about Soprano Anna Brown. Look up other artists who were breaking racial and stereotypical ground during their lives. Write about the artistic journey of that person.

Composition

Be a Composer!

Porgy and Bess began life as a novel and a play. Almost every stage piece (opera, musical, play) started as some other story. This story is called the *source material*. Choose a novel you have read or a good story and think about how you would go about adapting it into an opera or piece of musical theatre. You would have to choose which parts of the drama would be highlighted with which sorts of music. When would there be duets, or trios, or quartets? Or big soaring arias? How would you set your opening scene? Would you have a big chorus to set up the place and time or would it begin in a more quiet way? Write out an outline and try to structure the beginnings of an opera.



Production Questions and Activities

Which department do you think you would like to work with at the opera?

Development

Which product or company do you think should sponsor *Porgy and Bess*? Write a proposal to the president of the company explaining why you think it would be beneficial for them to give funding to a production of *Porgy and Bess*. Remember to tell the president what benefits there are for her or his company!

General Director

If you were running a company, which aspect do you think would be more important to you, spending money on artistic expenses or maintaining a balanced budget? Do you think one outweighs the other? Write a statement of your philosophy as if you were the General Director and had been asked how you make your decisions.

Information Services

If you were to design a website for *Porgy and Bess*, what would it look like? Who would it reach? Who would be the “audience”?

Marketing

Create an advertisement for *Porgy and Bess*. Decide whether you should put it on TV, radio, newspaper, a bus, etc. Include whatever you feel is the biggest “selling point” of the opera-- what makes it exciting? Why should people come to see it?

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Cover art: Porgy and Bess

Production shot from *Porgy and Bess*, 1935. Copyprint. Rouben Mamoulian Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.