

# Porgy and Bess: George Gershwin's Masterpiece

Some day he'll come along, the man I love, and he'll be a musical genius, the man I love.

by Michael Curtis



They don't appear too often, musical geniuses, and when they do, they sometimes die too young. Of these immortals Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart died at 35, and George Gershwin, originally named Jacob Gershowitz, born of Jewish Ukrainian and Lithuanian parents, in Brooklyn in 1898, died in Los Angeles of a brain tumor at 38. Mozart began composing at age 5, composed over 600 works, symphonic, concertante, chamber, operatic, and choral. His friend Joseph Haydn said of him, "posterity will not see such a talent again in 100 years." Haydn was almost exactly right. Gershwin who began playing piano at 10, and left school at 15 and became a song plugger in Tin Pan Alley, began composing at 17, a song which earned him 50 cents, and wrote both popular, jazz, and classical music, combining highbrow and lowbrow sensibilities. Mozart died while writing his Requiem. Gershwin died just after he

finished his masterpiece *Porgy and Bess*, now performed in a new production by the New York Metropolitan Opera.

Gershwin's first piano teacher referred to him as a genius, and history has concurred. From his early years he was a virtuoso pianist, producing hundreds of piano rolls.

Gershwin was a dominant figure in the pantheon of the composers of popular songs and jazz standards, making up the Great American Songbook from the 1920s to the 1950s, who ranged from Irving Berlin to Cole Porter. Gershwin composed, mostly with lyrics by his older brother Ira, a considerable number of songs for Broadway musicals and Hollywood films, now regarded as standards. It is worth mentioning a few since many have become part of American culture. His first hit was *Swanee*, lyrics by Irving Caesar, composed in 1919, and made into a major hit by Al Jolson's recording. Among later well-known ballads are *Fascinating Rhythm*, *Lady be Good*, *Embraceable You*, *I Got Rhythm*, *The Man I Love*, *A Foggy Day in London Town*, *Someone to Watch over Me*, and *Our Love is Here to Stay*. He was nominated posthumously in 1937 at the Oscar Academy Awards for his song *They Can't Take That Away From Me*, but the award for best original song went to *Sweet Lelani*, a ballad made well known by Bing Crosby.

But Gershwin was different from the other composers of the Songbook, Jerome Kern, Rodgers and Hart, Harold Arlen, Irving Berlin, and Cole, Porter, in his ambition to write classical music and operas. He was the bridge between classical and popular music. In 1922 he wrote a one act opera, *Blue Monday*, a short piece of about 20-30 minutes, regarded as the first piece of symphonic jazz, an attempt to combine popular music with classical music, and one influenced by the African-American culture of Harlem. Like his later famous opera, *Blue Monday* was composed of African-American characters, but unlike *Porgy and Bess* it was performed by white singers in black-face, and linked to the production of George White's 1922 *Scandals*.

Eager to master classical music, Gershwin went to Paris to study with well-known composers, Nadia Boulanger and Maurice Ravel, but was rejected by both of them, on the grounds that his classical study would ruin his jazz influenced style. Ravel posed the question, "Why become a second rate Ravel when you're already a first rate Gershwin?"

The first rate classical Gershwin emerged in the Rhapsody in Blue, a 20 minute piece commissioned by the orchestra leader Paul Whiteman, and first played in New York on February 12, 1924 with George at the piano. As a result of its success, Gershwin at 25 was now regarded as a serious composer. His classical contributions continued with his Concerto in F, a work of three movements in 1925, the Second Rhapsody, a piano and choral work in 1931, and the Cuban Overture in 1932, which as he explained "combined the Cuban rhythms with my own thematic material. It is a symphonic overture which embodies the essence of the Cuban dance." In 1928 George had composed An American in Paris, an orchestral piece influenced by the time he spent in Paris. The ingenious score used a full orchestra plus a celesta, saxophones, and four Parisian taxi horns, each played in a specific key.

Gershwin was familiar with Black music, especially that of Eubie Blake and African-American culture. He was attracted by the novel, *Porgy*, written by Edward DuBose Heyward, a native of Charleston, South Carolina, in 1925, and adapted as a play two years later. With Heyward as the librettist, Gershwin decided to compose a "folk opera" about the inhabitants, a variety of poor, Blacks living in Catfish Row, Charleston. The result was *Porgy and Bess*, a work difficult to characterize in simple fashion, with its varying aspects of Broadway musicals, blues, minor Jewish chords and liturgical music, Black Church passages, spirituals, street cries, splicing actions and rhythms, traditional arias, and recitatives, jazz fugues, syncopated wind chords, and popular songs that have endured on their own. A clarinet motif introduces the beautiful and

moving song, Summertime. *Porgy* is a remarkable work, a landmark of American culture, dealing sympathetically with the vivid characters and the deprivation of their lives. The abused Bess, the gambler Sporting Life, the crippled beggar Porgy, become figures of pathos, and the life of Catfish Row, is honestly depicted with its poverty, drug addiction, racial tension, passion, and violence. It is an opera, not written for a Black audience but for the whole society. It is more than an anthology of Gershwin songs. Similarly, Stephen Sondheim held that *Porgy* had the finest set of lyrics in the history of the American musical theater.

Critics have argued that the opera deals with stereotyped Black culture or with contradictory cultural symbols, but though it does deal with violence, and drug dealing, it is not detrimental to Black culture, and Blacks are portrayed seriously, and without malice.

*Porgy and Bess* is the most important 20<sup>th</sup> century American opera, full of remarkable music for a humble setting. It was honored in 1993 by a U.S. commemorative postage stamp. It is an extraordinary combination of the narrative voice and the dialect of Catfish Row.

Gershwin's score is remarkable because the music is so closely related to the characters and events. It is a mixture of orchestral devices, syncopation, and solo piano and chorus. Songs convey wickedness, other heroic pathos, others opera arias tinged with the blues.

It was always controversial. Duke Ellington is said to have initially been critical of Gershwin's "lampblack negroisms," but later repudiated his comment. Certainly, a more potent criticism has been that the characters in the opera might be seen as promoting stereotypes of a Black community in poverty and drug taking.

At first, well know Black performers, actors and singers,

including Harry Belafonte, refused to play Porgy. Yet Gershwin always insisted that only Blacks should sing in the opera. He rejected Al Jolson's request to perform in black-face.

To some extent the controversy lingers, did *Porgy* do justice to blacks or was it only a minstrel show? Was it too black, or too white? Yet this criticism is unjustified. It is true that Gershwin had written *Blue Monday* in 1922 about Blacks but with all white singers performing in black-face, but he insisted that only black singers should perform in *Porgy*.

Gershwin has been honored in many ways, by the 1979 film *Manhattan* by Woody Allen which features Gershwin's music all the way through, and by the first Gershwin prize by the Library of Congress in 2007 which was given to Paul Simon. *Porgy and Bess* is a masterpiece of American culture. Gershwin created a new form, combining opera with theater. As he himself explained in 1935, *Porgy and Bess* "dealt with Negro life in America and brings to the operatic form elements that have never before appeared in the opera, and I have adapted my methods to utilize the drama, the humor, the superstition, the religious fervor, the dancing and the irrepressible high spirits of the race."