

# "Porgy and Bess" as Gershwin Intended

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Measha Brueggergosman (in red) as Bess and Jonathan Lemalu (on his knees) as Porgy in Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess," Cincinnati Opera, June 28, 2012 at Music Hall

Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess" is a blinding masterpiece, one of the finest *verismo* operas and, arguably, America's greatest opera.

Its fluctuating course -- from opera to musical to film to Great American Songbook -- attests to its universal appeal. Cincinnati Opera, in its first ever performance of "Porgy" Thursday evening at Music Hall, has joined the worldwide affirmation that it belongs preeminently on the opera stage.

Though Gershwin's ultimate intentions for "Porgy and Bess" remain an open question, it is possible to deduce them from its performance history. In its original, off-Broadway form, presented in September 1935 in Boston, it lasted over four hours. Gershwin made cuts when it opened in October on Broadway, where it ran for three months, followed

by a brief tour, with no further changes. A-year-and-a-half later, in July, 1937, Gershwin was dead of a brain tumor. Beginning with its first revival in the 1940s, it has been open season on the work, with mutations and cuts essentially re-casting it as a musical (i.e. divided into numbers rather than through-composed and with spoken dialogue instead of sung recitatives).

For the Cincinnati production, stage director Lemuel Wade and conductor David Charles Abell went back to Gershwin's abridged 1935 version to reproduce, as closely as possible, his final thoughts. Cincinnati Opera asserts that this production is the first fully staged performance of this version of the opera since Gershwin's time. It includes, for the first time also, a feature Abell discovered in a stage director's notes for the Broadway premiere, the "Occupational Humoresque," a collage of street noises heard at the beginning of the final scene, which never made it into any published score.

Starring in the handsome production -- a rental from Houston Grand Opera's 1995 collaboration with a consortium of U.S. opera companies -- were soprano Measha Brueggergosman as Bess and bass-baritone Jonathan Lemalu as Porgy. It was, in fact, a theater of voices, with outstanding singers in every role, including baritone Gordon Hawkins as Crown, tenor Steven Cole as Sporting Life, soprano Jacqueline Echols as Clara and soprano Adrienne Danrich as Serena. Making impressive Cincinnati Opera debuts were mezzo-soprano Brandi Samuel as Maria, baritone Michael Preacely as Jake, tenor Larry Hylton as Robbins and tenor Everett McCorvey as Peter the honey man. (McCorvey is director and executive producer of University of Kentucky Opera Theater, which performed "Porgy and Bess," also directed by Wade, in a 2011 production using digital scenery technology.) The robust sound of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra in the pit made the operatic restoration complete. The 3,400-seat hall

was nearly full for the performance.

After the bustling orchestral introduction, the scene opened on Catfish Row, conceived **as a multi-unit, dark frame building with sky and seascape in the background, lit dramatically by Opera lighting designer Thomas Hase**. Cradling an infant on her shoulder, Echols sounded Gershwin's great lullaby "Summertime" in a pealing, pristine voice. A sense of community was created instantly as the men of Catfish Row gathered for their Saturday night craps game ("Roll Them Bones"). We were in Gershwin land for sure as Jake (Preacely) took the baby from Clara to sing his own lullaby, "A Woman is a Sometime Thing."

Lemalu as the crippled Porgy was a commanding presence from the very beginning, pushing himself on a "goat cart" (a little platform on wheels) to join the craps game. Lemalu's large, warm voice was ideally suited to his roles as lover, protector and figure of integrity in Catfish Row. Soprano Brueggergosman entered in a bright red dress, **bathing the stage in extra heat as the horizon grew red in the light of the setting sun**. Her lustrous voice ran the gamut, from Crown's flagrant (and abused) "woman," to Porgy's grateful, welcoming lover and, finally, victim of Sporting Life's "happy dust" (heroin).

The bullying, blasphemous Crown, brashly interpreted by Hawkins in song and deed, dominated the action appropriately (and earned affectionate "boos" from the crowd during his curtain call afterward). Cole was slinky and slimy as Sporting Life, mincing walk and all (even a handspring to conclude his show-stopping "It Ain't Necessarily So"). His "victory" over Bess (with the aid of "happy dust"), having convinced her that Porgy might not return after his arrest, was a similar tour de force ("There's a Boat Dat's Leavin' Soon for New York").

All of the Catfish Row characters came alive here: the pious, finger-wagging Serena (Danrich), the bossy, loud-mouthed Maria (Samuel) and the timid Peter (McCorvey). Samuel drew an extra round of applause after her foul-mouthed, cleaver-brandishing rebuke of Sporting Life in act two ("I Hate Your Strutting Ways"). Baritone Reginald Smith was hilarious as Frazier, the self-styled lawyer who persuades Bess to buy a "divorce" from Crown, then charges extra when he learns they weren't married in the first place (a "complication," he says). The Vendors' Trio in act two provided a welcome relief from tension as Porgy watched over Bess, with soprano Taylor Johnson as the strawberry woman, McCorvey as the honey man and tenor Luther Lewis as the crab man. The roles for whites in the opera, all spoken, were vividly re-created by Brian Isaac Phillips, Jared Joplin and Ian Bond as the detective, coroner and policeman, respectively.

There were many unforgettable moments during the evening: Lemalu's "Bess, You Is My Woman Now," which bloomed into a rapturous duet with Brueggergosman; Porgy and Bess' "reconciliation" after she returns from Kittiwah Island and her forced tryst with Crown ("I Loves You Porgy" **with a green sky and lightning in the background**); and Lemalu's "I've Got Plenty of Nothing," accompanied by clarinet and banjo in the CSO. The Chorus, trained by the Opera's Henri Venanzi, was a standout throughout, both dramatically and vocally, as in the finale to act one, "Oh, the Train is at de Station," led by Brueggergosman. The fatal scrap between Crown and Robbins over the craps game in act one was a tad unconvincing, but fights are ticklish to stage. Better was that between Porgy and Crown in act three, with Lemalu diving for Hawkins' legs and eventually dispatching him with a knife.

Set changes, largely made in full view of the audience by rolling pieces on and off or flying them in, kept the action moving along, from Catfish Row to Kittiwah Island where the act two picnic takes

place. Ultimately, however, the scenes were painted by Gershwin's music, which draws vividly upon a multitude of sources, including jazz, the African-American spiritual ("Gone, Gone, Gone," as Serena's friends gather in her room to mourn Robbins' death), the blues ("My Man's Gone Now," heartbreakingly sung by Danrich as Serena), gospel and hymns ("Doctor Jesus" as Serena prays over Bess during her illness) and work songs ("It Take a Long Pull to Get There," sung by Jake and the fishermen as they prepare to go to sea in act two). Gershwin's classical training shows masterfully as well in his complex, ensemble writing and brilliant tone painting. The hurricane scene, with the community gathered in Serena's room in act two, pleading with God for deliverance, was literally electrifying with lightning bolts and chromatic scales ripping up and down in the CSO. (Rossini and Verdi wrote no better storm scenes.)

"Porgy and Bess" ends on a sad, but hopeful note, with Porgy, having learned that Bess has left for New York with Sporting Life, gathers his courage and goes after her. It made for a truly inspirational finale, with the company joining Lemalu in "O Lawd, I'm on My Way," with full orchestra and jazz trumpet.

Repeats are 7:30 p.m. June 30 and July 6 and 3 p.m. July 8 at Music Hall. Tickets at (513) 241-2742, the Music Hall box office, or order online at [www.cincinnatiopera.org](http://www.cincinnatiopera.org).