

Spring 2010

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Recommended Citation

Deemer, Carolyn, "Porgy and Bess: A Racial Paradox" (2010). *B.A. in Music Senior Capstone Projects*. 5.
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PORGY AND BESS: A RACIAL PARADOX

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Bachelor of the Arts Senior Project

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Cedarville University, April 26, 2010

ABSTRACT

This project examines the racial implications of George Gershwin's folk opera *Porgy and Bess*. This study specifically addresses the question: Did *Porgy and Bess* have a positive or negative impact on race relations between the African-American and white communities? To answer that question, this I have examined the perceptions that various groups expressed upon viewing the opera.

In my research, I have studied the responses from black and white society in the United States, as well as the intentions of Gershwin himself. I discuss these responses in terms of the opera's immediate reception, through primary source documents, newspaper articles, and letters. Through Gershwin's own writings and the observations of his acquaintances, I demonstrate that he had the interests of the African American community in mind when he wrote *Porgy and Bess*.

Since *Porgy and Bess* premiered in 1935, social movements such as the Civil Rights era have significantly affected race relations in the United States. From my unique position in history, have devoted a significant portion of my paper to discussing how the shift in thinking beginning that time period affected the reception of *Porgy and Bess* throughout the years. To identify this change in sentiment, my research draws upon a range of books and journal articles, in addition to the opinions of performers and critics over time.

The results of this study indicate that Gershwin certainly wrote the opera with a high degree of respect and appreciation for African-American culture. His new approach to the black actor demonstrated a degree of respect practically non-existent in the prevailing entertainment of his day. That being said, critics have argued that there is

much left to be desired in the practical aspects of the opera. After all, they note, this “folk opera” was indeed written by a white man, with little true perspective on African-American, much less, Gullah culture.

The concluding section discusses general principles that can be gleaned from a study of the paradox of *Porgy and Bess*, as well as some responses that will specifically benefit Christians seeking racial reconciliation.

This paper discusses the multi-faceted racial implications of George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. This production, labeled a "folk opera" by its creator, required an all-black cast and became arguably the most important of American operas. It was written by a white Jewish man in the year 1935, and therefore provides an interesting study into the kind of impact that such a work had on the African-American people at the time. The purpose of this study is to examine the reception of the opera in an effort to determine whether it was beneficial or harmful for the African-American community at the time and through the years.

Those who would argue that the opera was beneficial for race relations might point first of all to Gershwin's own intentions in writing the opera. A large part of the inspiration for *Porgy and Bess* came from the fact that Gershwin was just fascinated by the culture of the South Carolina "Gullah Negroes," the subject of his opera. At the very least he and his audience certainly valued them for the "otherness" that they brought to the stage. However, regardless of what initially drew Gershwin to the opera, it is apparent that he treated them with dignity unusual for his time. In an age when the predominant depiction of blacks on stage was in the context of minstrel shows or other humiliating comedic performances, Gershwin's work shows a high degree of respect for its subjects. This emphasis on respect is further supported through Gershwin's personal writings which prove that he valued the Gullah community and African-Americans in general as people. Gershwin expected that in writing an opera based on the story of southern blacks, the subject would allow him to "write light as well as serious music and

that it would enable [him] to include humor as well as tragedy...”¹ Thus, he makes clear from the beginning that his intention to give the black American more depth of character than as a cheesy, smiling pantomime. From the inception of the story, Heyward’s *Porgy* “is not subhuman or a buffoon but a human being whose problems are no better or worse than those of whites, merely different.”² Even the medium of opera created a noticeable break with the shallowness of performances to which black actors had been so frequently relegated. Now they were being put on a stage that was unquestionably a form of “high” art. The question then became, was this move enough to make a significant positive impact on race relations in America?

Critics of the opera argue instead that *Porgy and Bess* was harmful to race relations. In contrast to the encouraging belief that Gershwin’s opera showed a respect for African-American culture, many have also criticized *Porgy and Bess* for being out-of-touch with the reality of the culture, lives and music of blacks of the day. Richard Crawford notes that although *Porgy and Bess* was “the best-known American theatrical work about blacks, it was not only written but produced, directed, and staged by whites, which means that whites reaped the monetary profits of its success.”³

Following along the lines of that criticism, one significant issue to note is that Gershwin’s opera could not possibly have reflected the African-American population as a

¹ Isaac Goldberg. *George Gershwin: A Study in American Music*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1958, 328.

² James Standifer. "The Tumultuous Life of Porgy and Bess." *Humanities* 18, no. 6 (November 1997): 2, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 25, 2010).

³ Richard Crawford, "Where Did Porgy and Bess Come From?" *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36, no. 4 (Spring 2006): 23. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 25, 2010).

whole. *Porgy and Bess* centered on the Gullah population of South Carolina, a people group who still spoke an African-English dialect of Creole and held to local traditions. Meanwhile, the very blacks chosen for the roles in the opera often, “had no trace of Southern dialect and had to be carefully trained for the right nuances and inflections.”⁴ Anne Brown, the original Bess, also made reference to this discrepancy in culture, while giving an interview on her experience with the opera. She pointed out that, “Some of us were college students [from the North] and didn’t know the dialect of the southern Negro.”⁵

It would be damaging to take this representation of one community and attribute its experiences as characteristic of each and every black community in the country. “Gershwin, immersed in the flavor and characters of his opera, frequently would astonish the company by showing them how to interpret their parts authentically.”⁶ This seems to be an example that perhaps the most “negroid” aspect of this opera was that it was performed by an all-black cast. Or maybe the charm lay in the fact that the audience believed the opera’s depiction to be representative of a culture clearly very foreign to them and accepted the act as authentic.

Composer William Grant Still, a contemporary of Gershwin’s, expressed the potential for African-American music to have great influence of the music of America:

Colored people in America have natural and deep-rooted feeling for music, for melody, harmony and rhythm. Our music possesses exoticism without straining for strangeness. The natural practices in this music open up a new field which can be of value in larger musical works when

⁴ Goldberg, *George Gershwin: A Study in American Music*, 325.

⁵ Robert Wyatt and John A. Johnson, *The George Gershwin Reader*, New York: Oxford University Press: 2004. 230.

⁶ Goldberg, *George Gershwin: A Study in American Music*, 325.

constructed into organized form by a composer who, having the underlying feeling, develops it through his intellect.⁷

Still's comment, made before the development of *Porgy and Bess*, clearly aligns with George Gershwin's philosophy in choosing to write an opera with an all-black cast. Gershwin's decision certainly reflects a faith in the strength of the tradition of African-American music as well as his esteem for the singers themselves.

Although Gershwin recognized the key contribution of Negro music to jazz, he believed jazz to be a purely American art form, first and foremost saying,

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 [sic] 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. Its dominant note is vibrant syncopation⁸

It would appear that Gershwin's primary focus, above social change, was just to explore the capacities of American "folk" music and to experiment with combinations of tradition. In *Porgy and Bess* he combined high art with street life, and the resulting music was merely the offspring of the union. Gershwin describes this natural outgrowth of the styles in a *New York Times* article from 1935:

Because *Porgy and Bess* deals with Negro life in America it brings to the operatic form elements that have never before appeared in the opera and I have adapted my method to utilize the drama, the humor, the superstition, the religious fervor, the dancing and the irrepressible high spirits of the race. If doing this, I have created a new form, which combines opera with theater, this new form has come quite naturally out of the material.⁹

⁷ William Grant Still, "An Afro-American Composer's Point of View" in *American Composers on American Music* (London: Oxford University Press: 1933), 182-183.

⁸ Howard Pollack, *George Gershwin: His Life and Work*, Berkley: University of California Press: 2006, 171.

⁹ James Standifer. "The Tumultuous Life of Porgy and Bess." 4.

Although *Porgy and Bess* is the opera that gained great fame, Gershwin had experimented with the concept of an all-black opera before. “Blue Monday,” written in 1922, was a short Negro opera and forerunner to *Porgy and Bess*. In this opera, though, Gershwin used white singers performing in blackface.¹⁰ The result lacked the soul and particular style that the composer envisioned in the making of a black opera, which would lead him later to require an all-black cast for *Porgy and Bess*. All around, this initial attempt was considered to be a fiasco.

Four Saints in Three Acts, an opera written by Virgil Thompson in 1933 might be seen as another forerunner to *Porgy and Bess*. It is a lesser-known opera that also demonstrates a high level of respect for the African-American singer and for African-American culture as a whole.¹¹ Not only did *Four Saints in Three Acts* share common subject matter, they also shared many of the same singers. The entire chorus, the Eva Jessye Choir from *Four Saints in Three Acts*, as well as some supporting actors, were brought on for the production of *Porgy and Bess*.¹²

It was clear from the beginning that Gershwin intended to portray the black population of South Carolina truthfully in *Porgy and Bess*. He spent time studying their culture and music so that he would have something from which to draw what he perceived to be authenticity. In writing to Heyward, he expressed his desire “to see the town [Charleston] and hear some spirituals and perhaps go to a colored café or two if there are

¹⁰Jason Oby, *Equity in Operatic Casting as Perceived by African American Male Singers*, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press: 1998, 20.

¹¹ Jason Oby, *Equity in Operatic Casting as Perceived by African American Male Singers*, 19

¹² Jason Oby, *Equity in Operatic Casting as Perceived by African American Male Singers*, 21

any.”¹³ His fascination with African-American music during that trip even led him into a “shouting”¹⁴ contest. It was said that he “out-shouted” the best of the black folks there, a story that Anne Brown, the original Bess, well remembers. In an interview she reminisced how one old man had remarked, “You sure can beat out them rhythms, boy. I’m over seventy years old and I ain’t never seen no po liitle [sic] white man take off and fly like you. You could be my own son.”¹⁵

Gershwin’s desire to portray the real struggles and humanness of the story is evidenced by his own words, claiming that “The sort of thing I had in mind for *Porgy* is a much more serious thing than Jolson could ever do.”¹⁶ Gershwin made this statement as the reason he was unwilling to compromise on the story of *Porgy*. He agreed to give Heyward permission to work with the Metropolitan Opera to produce *Porgy* should he change his mind, despite the previous agreement that they had made to work together. Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein, who had recently produced *Show Boat*, would be the producers and Al Jolson, a popular white vaudeville singer would bring in crowds as *Porgy*. However, despite this tempting offer, Gershwin would not compromise his vision for the folk opera. Thankfully, neither did Heyward.

¹³ Richard Crawford. "Where Did Porgy and Bess Come From?" *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36, no. 4 (Spring 2006): *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 25, 2010).

¹⁴ In the words of DuBose Heyward: “This is a complicated rhythmic pattern beaten out by feet and hands as an accompaniment to the spirituals.”

¹⁵ Robert Wyatt, and John A. Johnson. *The George Gershwin Reader*, 236.

¹⁶ Edward Jabloski and Lawrence D. Stewart, *The Gershwin Years: George and Ira*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1996, 180.

“The street attitude towards Porgy changed as attitudes towards civil rights changed in America.”¹⁷ Some critics believed it to be a specter of a racist era which needed to be entirely left in the past. Others were more lenient with what they considered to be a great American opera. Many in the cast still enjoyed the opera, but they realized that some changes needed to be made. Gratefully the Civil Rights era was the perfect time to make them.

When Etta Moten took the role of Bess in 1942, she refused to sing the word “nigger,” a word that occurred throughout the opera. Previously the cast had always been afraid to address the issue, even though they cunningly avoided it in other, less confrontational ways. Eva Jessye, the choral director remembers:

The word “nigger” occurred many times in the first scripts. Members did not like this but were afraid to object, that being the tenor of the times. But they could not bring themselves to speak it right out, so agreed to drown it out where ever and whenever it occurred in performance, thenceforth, disregarding all score markings or conductor’s directions. The total ensemble would bombard the word with an avalanche of sounds, groans, screams... fit to raise the dead, to the puzzlement of the conductor.¹⁸

In 1955 Marian Anderson was the first black opera singer to perform with the Metropolitan Opera, and that after a failed attempt sixteen years earlier. She had, in the meantime gained substantial recognition elsewhere but was accepted last in this area of elite art due to her race.¹⁹ Gershwin realized that he must bypass the Metropolitan Opera as a venue for a necessarily all-black cast indicating that he understood that his opera would not see racial reconciliation for a considerable amount of time. Moreover, as a

¹⁷ James Standifer. "The Tumultuous Life of Porgy and Bess." 5.

¹⁸ James Standifer. "The Tumultuous Life of Porgy and Bess." 5.

¹⁹ Jason Oby. *Equity in Operatic Casting as Perceived by African American Male Singers*, 8-9.

composer with a career at stake, he had to choose a venue that he believed to be feasible. *Porgy and Bess* wasn't performed in the Metropolitan Opera until fifty years after it first opened.²⁰

Working through the Theater Guild he performed in such venues as Broadway and the National Theater in Washington D.C. In a performance at the latter, there was a large dispute over its segregation policies. The National Theater agreed to suspend its segregation policies to accommodate Todd Duncan and Anne Brown when they were confident enough in their positions to command respect for their race. Sadly, after their week-long run ended, the theater returned to being segregated.

Some African-American opera singers can trace the roots of their careers to *Porgy and Bess*, among them Leontyne Price and Todd Duncan. "It was not until the sixties, however, with the rise of Leontyne Price, that America had its first bona fide black operatic diva."²¹ Leontyne Price had been singing the role of Mistress Ford in *Four Saints in Three Acts* when she was brought on to perform the role of Bess in a European tour of the opera.²² Todd Duncan, who debuted the role of Porgy, was the first African-American male to solo with the New York City Opera.²³ However, these roles were hard

²⁰ The opera had been successfully staged in Vienna's Volksoper, Milan's La Scala, Denmark, and even the Soviet Union before securing an opportunity to perform in the Metropolitan Opera house. This piece that was widely acclaimed as American through and through was only allowed into the showcase of great American art after many civil rights disputes and after the rest of the world had acknowledged it as stunning.

²¹ Jason Oby. *Equity in Operatic Casting as Perceived by African American Male Singers*, 9

²² James Standifer. "The Tumultuous Life of Porgy and Bess." *Humanities* 18, no. 6 (November 1997): *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 25, 2010).

²³ Jason Oby. *Equity in Operatic Casting as Perceived by African American Male Singers*, 10

won, and usually involved legal battles as well as ideological or merit-based ones.²⁴ As long as racism was entrenched in people's minds and hearts, even the most talented performers would be denied entrance to roles. Where they weren't denied roles, their families might be prohibited from seeing them act in those roles due to segregated seating, as was almost the case with the National Theater. Additionally, at the end of the day, black performers, regardless of how talented, were legally prohibited from moving freely in society. Those unjust laws proved that legal as well as ideological changes needed to be made.

Gershwin specified in his will that *Porgy and Bess* should only be interpreted by an all-black cast. This single fact guarantees, at the very least, that black opera singers will always have the opportunity to perform in this work. From the days of overt discrimination through the present day in the face of lingering racial profiling in many operas, Gershwin's insistence has provided an aid that his indirect influence never achieved. That is to say, although his opera may not have garnered as high a respect for African-Americans as he might have hoped or as optimists might tout, Gershwin has created a lasting opportunity for black performers. They will ever have opportunities in *Porgy and Bess*, even in the face of more sophisticated racism that still plagues opera to this day.

Author Jason Oby, in analyzing the pros and cons of Gershwin's will, suggests that, "Some singers have developed extraordinary careers after a *Porgy* commencement. Others languish in '*Porgy* purgatory,' happy not to be in the hell of a temporary

²⁴ Jason Oby. *Equity in Operatic Casting as Perceived by African American Male Singers*, 8-11.

employment agency, but regarding the heaven of a more diversified operatic participation with longing.²⁵

Other responses to this day see the opera not as a racist representation of the times, but as a genuine attempt to capture a sense of the Gullah culture and to celebrate African-American roots. Marvis Martin, who sang Bess for the 1998 revival of the opera said, “I’m so touched every time I sing *Porgy and Bess*. I wish Gershwin were still alive so I could thank him for caring so much about my community, about my roots.” She went on to say that she was glad that he “captured it as accurately as he did.”²⁶

From opening night both black and white people began praising *Porgy and Bess* as an effective representation of the American people, in which the subset of African Americans was included. One such accolade came from reporter Danton Walker of the *Sunday Daily News*. He exulted in October of 1935 that *Porgy and Bess* was, “an opera which musically is in the American idiom, lyrically in the American vernacular, and the perfect expression of a folk tale of the American soil.”²⁷

Isaac Goldberg, another contemporary of Gershwin, draws a parallel between *Porgy and Bess* and *The West Side Story* saying that they both helped their subjects by giving them a sense of humanity to those who might not otherwise experience their world.²⁸

This depiction is not necessarily rooted in the fact that they are painstakingly authentic;

²⁵ Jason Oby, *Equity in Operatic Casting as Perceived by African American Male Singers*, 22.

²⁶ Paul Thomason, "The Problem with Porgy and Bess." *Opera News* 63, no. 2 (August 1998): 5. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 25, 2010).

²⁷ Ray Allen, “An American Folk Opera? Triangulating Folkness, Blackness, and Americanness in Gershwin and Heyward's *Porgy and Bess*.” *Journal of American Folklore* 117, no. 465 (2004): 251.

²⁸ Goldberg, *George Gershwin: A Study in American Music*, 331.

instead their appeal lies in their emphasis on the shared humanity between majority and minority cultures.

The feature of *Porgy and Bess* that white critics of the time seem to have predominantly focused on was Gershwin's musical form rather than his subject matter.²⁹ George Gershwin wrote in a time when it was very politically and socially appropriate to address the theme of African-American culture in entertainment. Additionally, America was beginning to develop an interest in nationalism that Europe had seen years earlier. Therefore, it was natural that Gershwin should want to explore the "folk" music of the United States. To those not familiar with the specific culture of the Gullah Negroes, or, even of the more widespread black experience in America, Gershwin's work seemed as authentic a representation as one could hope to achieve.

Not everyone responded well to the opera though. Rather, many people questioned the authenticity of the opera and its potential to effect change in a badly segregated nation. Ray Allen raises the thought-provoking question:

Were such endeavors by white creators truly noble efforts to elevate the art of black folk music to the prestigious concert stage or simply neominstrel practices (this time minus the blackface) aimed at commodifying black otherness for consumption by white audiences who longed for glimpses of authentic culture to countervail their increasingly complex modern world?³⁰

²⁹Goldberg, *George Gershwin: A Study in American Music*, 233.

³⁰Ray Allen, "An American Folk Opera? Triangulating Folkness, Blackness, and Americanness in Gershwin and Heyward's *Porgy and Bess*." 224.

He noted further that “African-American critics were pleased at the attention the novel *Porgy* brought to southern folk culture, but raised doubts about the accuracy with which Heyward, as a white man, could portray their people.”³¹

Duke Ellington, a hugely influential African-American big band leader, was widely quoted in an article by Edward Marrow as having harshly attacked Gershwin’s music.³² However, Ellington himself moved to correct the misrepresentation that article had given. He insisted that his biggest complaint was that the music, “though grand, was not distinctly or definitely negroid in character.”³³

Hall Johnson, a contemporary of Gershwin criticized the work from the standpoint of an African-American composer and choral director. He summarized his discontent with *Porgy and Bess* with the poetic description of African-American culture:

So that our folk-culture is like the growth of some hardy, yet exotic, shrub, whose fragrance never fails to delight discriminating nostrils even where there is no interest in the depths of its roots. But when the leaves are gathered by strange hands they soon wither, and when cuttings are transplanted into strange soil, they have but a short and sickly life. Only those who sowed the seed may know the secret at the root.³⁴

To this day, one of the problems with operatic works is that black people can get cast as black roles, but not as normal people. They are either portraying black culture, as is the case with jazz, or are chosen for roles in works dealing with the underbelly of their experience, such as the themes of slavery or gangs. They are overlooked for roles which

³¹ Ray Allen, “An American Folk Opera? Triangulating Folkness, Blackness, and Americanness in Gershwin and Heyward's *Porgy and Bess*.” 245.

³² Howard Pollack, *George Gershwin: His Life and Work*, 167.

³³ Howard Pollack, *George Gershwin: His Life and Work*, 167-168.

³⁴ Ray Allen. “An American Folk Opera? Triangulating Folkness, Blackness, and Americanness in Gershwin and Heyward's *Porgy and Bess*.” *Journal of American Folklore* 117, no. 465 (2004): 252

don't directly call for a person of color. Those roles tend to be reserved for white people. *Porgy and Bess* can help to reinforce that stereotype, while admittedly providing for those trapped in this cycle.³⁵

Authors like Oby point out that this continued preference for white over black singers likely reflects America's continued disunity on the whole. Our arts reflect our residual patterns of thinking. However, the arts have a profound impact on the culture and therefore have a special ability and responsibility to push us in the direction of more racial unity.

Todd Duncan, the original Porgy, in an interview with author Robert Wyatt, shared his experiences working with Gershwin, and his thoughts behind the character.³⁶ Todd Duncan wasn't an uneducated Southern singer of spirituals. Rather, he was a classically-trained singer, who had been teaching at Howard University in Washington D.C. at the time. He was skeptical at first about the opera, thinking it would not do justice to the popular opinion of African-Americans. He expressed his initial reservations and how he ultimately embraced Gershwin's music remembering, "I knew it would cause controversy among my people because of its representation of black life and music. But, Gershwin had me sold right then and there [upon first hearing the music]."³⁷

³⁵ Jason Oby. *Equity in Operatic Casting as Perceived by African American Male Singers*, 19-22

³⁶ Robert Wyatt, and John A. Johnson. *The George Gershwin Reader*, 220-228.

³⁷ James Standifer. "The Tumultuous Life of Porgy and Bess." *Humanities* 18, no. 6 (November 1997): 4, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 25, 2010).

Duncan ends his interview by saying, “had I not met George Gershwin, things would have been different for me. In what ways I’ll never know.”³⁸ Duncan was obviously an accomplished musician and had achieved a level of success in teaching at Howard University. However, from the beginning of his time in the role of Porgy he earned as much in a week as he had previously been earning in a month teaching at the university.³⁹ Additionally, he had the experience of a lifetime travelling the globe presenting a popular American opera that showcased as a subject, his own race.

Anne Brown, who played the original Bess, also participated in an interview with Wyatt and describes her opinions of the opera and her role in it. She too had a classical background, as she had been studying at Juilliard at the time she was chosen for the role of Bess. So both Porgy and Bess were certainly anything but poor Southern African Americans. However, their background suited them perfectly to an opera that wasn’t itself the most authentic of productions. It was intended to represent the life of Southern blacks, but in a genre that was thoroughly classical. Brown originally had reservations regarding Gershwin’s opera; however, from her interactions with the man, she determined that the opera “expressed [Gershwin’s] acceptance of all forms, his love for the elements of the rhythm and the harmonies of black men.”⁴⁰

Although Duncan and Brown were excluded from outings with the stage managers, Gershwin himself took great interest in his cast and openly interacted with them outside of their work with the opera. Brown said that from the beginning Gershwin was always very kind and respectful to her. “George, he would come to my house, come to our

³⁸ Robert Wyatt, and John A. Johnson. *The George Gershwin Reader*, 228.

³⁹ Robert Wyatt, and John A. Johnson. *The George Gershwin Reader*, 225.

⁴⁰ Robert Wyatt, and John A. Johnson. *The George Gershwin Reader*, 232.

parties, and always the first thing he did was to sit down at the piano and begin to play. And that he would do for the whole evening!”⁴¹

It is interesting to note that the criticisms from African-American critics revolve around the idea that Gershwin had no frame of reference from which to write a Negro folk opera. This was the very comment that Isaac Goldberg, a contemporary of Gershwin, gave for why Native American-based folk operas didn't work. The composers had no context in which to write.⁴² Goldberg notes that Gershwin had originally toyed with ideas that would have been more within his realm of experience, such as an opera about New York and the mixing of cultures there, or perhaps a Jewish story, which would have been informed by his Russian Jewish heritage.⁴³ Instead, he landed upon *Porgy*.

Regardless of Gershwin's perception of his exposure to true southern African-American culture, the fact remains that he only visited briefly and then spent one summer there. Other than those two visits, he proceeded to write the rest of his music in the north, with no further input from black musicians. This is understandable, given that he was hosting a radio show in New York at the time; however, it still leaves room for doubt as to how badly Gershwin wanted his work to embody authenticity. He understood the importance of African-American input into the live performance of the opera to lend it a note of authenticity, but gravely underestimated the importance of their culture in the very fabric of his work. Or did he?

Another interpretation of Gershwin's writing could be that the composer simply wanted the flavor of the southern black culture as a jumping off point, for a theme to run

⁴¹ Robert Wyatt, and John A. Johnson. *The George Gershwin Reader*, 234.

⁴² Goldberg, *George Gershwin: A Study in American Music*, 318.

⁴³ Goldberg, *George Gershwin: A Study in American Music*, 318-319.

through his opera. He may have wanted just enough authenticity to evoke visions of the South; however it is clear that *Porgy and Bess* was no documentary on southern black life.

One observation that must be made for the sake of fairness is that Gershwin was far ahead of his time in his desire to portray black people more seriously. Though he has been criticized for his lack of authenticity, he did represent through his actions that he respected and valued the African-Americans with whom he was working.

Heyward, in staging *Porgy* as a play, and Gershwin with his “folk opera” both assumed that merely finding an all-black cast, they would achieve neither the sense of authenticity they were seeking, regardless of the actors’ personal backgrounds, nor the material with which they were supplied. Certainly this may be viewed as a lack of appreciation for the depth of experience that these actors had but I believe that both men chose their casts out of respect for the African-American community based on the knowledge that they had at the time.⁴⁴

Had the producer’s intentions been merely to represent colored folk from an outside perspective, they might just as easily have chosen to produce their works in black-face, a perfectly acceptable practice at the time. In fact, when Gershwin turned down Al Jolson’s offer to perform the show in blackface at the then-segregated Metropolitan Opera, Gershwin proved the seriousness of his endeavor.

⁴⁴ This is readily apparent in the acting of Duncan and Brown who were both more accustomed to singing classical music than anything else. Nevertheless, their skin color made them perfect candidates, in Gershwin’s eyes. What’s more, he needed classically trained singers to be able to perform his challenging opera well.

One of the biggest reasons that *Porgy and Bess* was able to make advances in the state of racial reconciliation was not simply because its producers wanted to rectify misunderstandings; it was because its producers listened to the performers who knew what needed to be rectified! They listened to Brown and Duncan about desegregating the National Theater for their performance there, and to Moten about taking out the word “nigger.” These were not changes that the Gershwins and Heyward would necessarily have noticed themselves; they, being white, likely did not feel the full sting of a society so entrenched in racism. However, their willingness to respectfully listen to their performers allowed for a fruitful dialogue between those attempting to affect change and those who actually knew what changes needed to take place. If there are to be further victories in the area of civil rights they will be most expedited by cooperation between representatives of both the majority and minority involved. The former has the *power* to effect change, the latter the knowledge of what *needs* to be changed.

Another principle gained from the study of *Porgy and Bess* is that racism is a problem that is entrenched in every aspect of life and therefore must be addressed on every front. While the arts likely made some headway, with productions like *Porgy and Bess*, many changes in the actual treatment of black musicians required the legal battles that would occur during the Civil Rights era. The fact that the National Theater would allow blacks to perform on stage, but not to sit in their audience; or that all-black operas were acceptable, but not mixed-cast operas shows that there were still some considerable legal obstacles to be confronted, even after Gershwin had begun to challenge ideological foundations. Societal change must be faced through a holistic approach that reaches people’s emotions and minds, resulting in a *de facto* end to discrimination. However, in

many cases it will also require a legal process, resulting in a *de jure* end to discrimination. While the latter has more power to create sweeping changes across a nation, the former is more likely to result in lifestyle changes that will ultimately afford the most opportunity to the community in question.

In addition to merely analyzing the responses to *Porgy and Bess* from a political or social standpoint, as Christians we should consider what we might learn from this study. A few things stood out to me in this study, as I have seen positions taken for and against the race relations *Porgy and Bess*.

One thing that can be learned is that we must not take people or people groups merely at face value. Instead we should seek a deeper understanding of their unique challenges and strengths. One of the most frequent criticisms from African-American audiences was that the portrayal of blacks in *Porgy and Bess* was very shallow and anglicized.

Gershwin saw what he expected to see in Gullah culture; and the white audiences that attended the performances took that representation to be the simple explanation for the whole range of African-Americans living in the United States. This is a tendency that is still a temptation today: to take a token representation of an unknown culture and apply a stereotype across the board. As Christians, we must look deeper into people, as Christ did. From the Samaritan woman at the well, to the blind man, to Zacchaeus, Christ is our model to look at the heart, rather than just the external features.

Related to the preceding conviction, I believe that it is also important to avoid objectifying people merely for our entertainment. In an age when entertainment is a rampant force in society, Christians need to conserve a standard of human dignity and not buy amusement at the expense of people. We are so numbed by a constant stream of

media and are ever striving for newer, bolder entertainment that will engage us and shock us out of boredom. Thus, we are very susceptible to the temptation to “consume” any class of stories about people just because they are novel. This was an outcry of critics of *Porgy and Bess* who lamented the observation that many whites of the time reveled in minstrel shows and other degrading racist performances just because they were “entertaining.” More than one commentator noted that showing a distant world of drugs, sensuality and exaggerated spiritual tradition were just a step up from minstrel shows; their appeal was that they still provided a “civilized” audience with a window into “primitive” behavior.⁴⁵ While we might not fall for any media that seems to us as overtly racist as a minstrel show, we as Christians need to be the standard-bearers in conserving the dignity of all men who are made in the image of God!

Above all, we need to recognize that reconciliation with God is the only way that people will ever be able to reach racial reconciliation. As sinful humans, we will always naturally tend towards racism and division wherever we find differences with others, and even the best of intentions alone will not be able to override human depravity. However, Christ came not only to bring together those who were spiritually separated, as we see in Ephesians 2, but, also those who would be divided over other matters. Paul’s epistles make it clear that there should be no division between “Jew nor Greek, slave nor free... male nor female, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian... but Christ is all,

⁴⁵ Richard Crawford. "Where Did Porgy and Bess Come From?" *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36, no. 4 (Spring 2006): 27-32. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 25, 2010).

and is in all.⁴⁶ Unity is only possible, though, when we have the same Father, Son and Spirit at work in each of us.

⁴⁶ Galations 3:28, Colossions 3:11

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