

Class 5: Opera on Broadway

A. What's the Difference?

1. Class title 1 (*Porgy and Bess*)

The featured work today will be *Porgy and Bess* (1935) by **George Gershwin** (1898–1937). I will be showing clips in the 2009 production from the San Francisco Opera. Which raises the question: is *Porgy and Bess*, which began as a long-running show on Broadway, in fact an opera, and what is the difference? To explore the question, I will begin a few years later with *Carmen Jones*, the 1943 adaptation by **Oscar Hammerstein** (1895–1960) of the 1875 opera *Carmen* (1875) by **Georges Bizet** (1838–75), where the two media go head-to-head, so to speak, with the same work.

2. Section title A (*Carmen Jones*)

For most of my professional career, as I'm sure you know, I was an opera director. But how did I get into opera in the first place? For one thing, my mother was a fan, and used to sing arias while accompanying herself at the piano; this was in Northern Ireland. But more specifically, my parents sent me to boarding school in England, and I used to have half a day to fill between the boat arriving at about 7:00 AM and my train leaving around 2:00 PM. So I used to find whatever downtown movie theater opened earliest and get myself a ticket. On this occasion—it would have been 1954 when I was 13—they were showing *Carmen Jones*, which had just become a movie by **Otto Preminger**. I only saw half of it, but the impression was indelible. As soon as I could, I bought a record of orchestral excerpts from the opera, and then the whole thing. I bought the score and learned to play it. I was hooked.

3. Pearl Bailey in *Carmen Jones*

One number that made a definite impression on me was “Beat out dat rhythm on a drum,” which is Hammerstein's version of the opening of Act II in the opera. But let's hear the original first. Carmen is in a night club waiting for her lover, who is due to be released from jail. She sings a 3-verse song while people are dancing; this is the second of three verses, which get faster and louder each time. The singer is **Elena Maximova**.

4. Bizet: *Carmen*, danse bohémienne, second verse

Writing for a production during WW2, Hammerstein relocates the action to a segregated WW2 US Air Force where the men are training and the women packing parachutes. This is the off-base bar where the GIs go on leave. Carmen is the woman in pink you see at the very beginning, but she does not sing in this version; instead we get her friend Frankie, sung by **Pearl Bailey**. This is a perfect opportunity to compare opera and musical theater; watch and see what differences you hear.

5. Hammerstein: *Carmen Jones*, “Beat out dat rhythm on a drum”
6. Stills from both the above

What differences did you catch between the two? Both numbers are inserted for entertainment rather than to advance the plot, but Hammerstein is perhaps more upfront about it; he is quite prepared to take away a number from the title character and give it to a secondary one, just so that she will have her moment to shine. There are obvious differences in setting—but then modern opera directors do not feel constricted by the original settings either. And differences in language, absolutely; Bizet’s libretto is merely there to inspire and carry the music, but Hammerstein’s words are clever and are meant to be heard as a separate element. And most importantly, there are differences in delivery; Pearl Bailey is a whole lot more free than Elena Maximova; that simply goes with the territory.

7. Dorothy Dandridge and Marilyn Horne

You should hear the differences in delivery very clearly from the next comparison. Here are two Carmens: the operatic mezzo-soprano **Marilyn Horne**, and **Dorothy Dandridge** who takes the role in the *Carmen Jones* film. Let’s hear the first 8 phrases of Carmen’s entrance aria, the famous *Habañera*.

8. Habañera comparison: *Carmen Jones* and *Carmen*

Other than language, what differences did you hear? The operatic sound is much fuller, isn’t it? It is less concerned with the words and rather less free in rhythm. On Broadway however (even Broadway on film), the words are the king, and even the music can be manipulated by the singer to create a natural character. The difference is even greater in **recitative**, the bit that links dialog to song. Let’s watch the actual recordings now: the recitative and one verse of the aria in the concert where Horne was singing, and then the complete Dandridge scene in the movie.

9. Bizet: *Carmen*, Habañera (Marilyn Horne)

10. Hammerstein: *Carmen Jones*, Habañera (Dorothy Dandridge, dubbed by Horne)

11. Marilyn Horne

So why did I choose to compare Dandridge to Horne, a soprano who seldom if ever sang *Carmen* on an actual stage, as she had a middle-aged figure even when quite young? Because she is the singer in *both* excerpts! Dandridge was indeed a singer, but the 20th-Century Fox wanted an operatic voice in the role. They originally hired another Black soprano, Leontyne Price, but Price got sick and the virtually unknown Horne took over. But of course the singing and speaking voices have to match. So Horne spent hours with Dandridge, learning how to imitate her voice and delivery. She is actually White, but on the movie she sounds Black. In the initial release, Horne’s name did not even appear on the credits.

12. Stills from the two productions below

I want to get away from the film and show a clip from *Carmen Jones* presented, as Hammerstein intended, on an actual stage. This is not the original, but a revival in London from 1991, and the stage is that of the Olivier Awards (the British Tonys), so presumably simpler than the main production. The situation is that Carmen’s friends are preparing to go on a trip to Chicago to see the heavyweight

champion **Husky Miller** fight. But **Carmen** is waiting for Joe to get out of jail, where he has been imprisoned for letting her escape, and decline. Before playing the Hammerstein scene complete, I'll give you the opening of the equivalent section in the opera (this time from the Met). This time, the situation is slightly different: the two men are smugglers, and need to girls to distract the customs officers. Again, please note the differences.

13. Bizet: *Carmen*, quintet (beginning)

14. Hammerstein: *Carmen Jones*, quintet (London 1991)

15. — stills (repeat)

Virtually the same music, but what differences did you see? Changed situation. Different words, clever, and demanding to be heard. And above all a staging that puts it over as entertainment rather than drama. All five performers are Black, incidentally, but I am rather disturbed by which both men seem to play into the traditions of **blackface**—but then sensibilities in Britain are less acute than those over here.

B. Porgy the Musical

16. Section title B (Audra McDonald in the 2012 Broadway production of *Porgy and Bess*)

Let's briefly look ahead to *Porgy and Bess* before we take it up properly in the second hour. Gershwin called it a "folk opera" because he wrote tunes intended to sound like folk music but incorporated them into an operatic texture. Yet it played in a regular theatre and ran for 124 performances, giving it the credentials of a musical; subsequent productions tended to use cut versions that reduced the score and orchestration to something even more typical of a musical. In 1976, however, the Houston Grand Opera mounted a production using operatic voices and restoring the entire score. But there has been a reaction against that too. In 2011, director **Diane Paulus** did a version with the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge MA that later came to Broadway. This made some changes to the plot, included new dialogues, and generally presented the piece in a more typical musical-theater style. **Audra McDonald**, the Bess, won a Tony as did the production as a whole, but the whole enterprise was controversial. **Stephen Sondheim** was outraged, and wrote a blistering letter to the *Times*. All the same, it makes a neat bookend to our comparison of opera and musicals.

17. Stills from the productions below

You can tell the difference vocally by comparing just one of the numbers, the duet "Bess, you is my woman now." I'll play the opening, sung by the British singer **Sir Willard White**, a true operatic voice that almost shocks you with its smoothness and power. Then I'll flip to the complete duet sung in concert by **Norm Lewis** and McDonald. Note especially the way Lewis starts, almost hesitant, only gradually turning from speech to song. Because the connective tissue in opera is sung recitative, but in a musical it is speech. I might not like to hear this voice in opera, but it is perfect for Broadway.

18. Gershwin: *Porgy and Bess*, “Bess, you is my woman now” (Willard White, beginning)
19. Gershwin: *Porgy and Bess*, “Bess, you is my woman now” (Lewis & McDonald, full)
20. — stills (repeat)

So same material, more or less, just a different way of presenting it. Which do you prefer? I’ll play another couple of clips from this version so as you can get the flavor. First, two scenes from the trailer. In the first, Bess allows herself to be seduced by her former lover **Crown**, who is wanted for murder and has hidden out on a barrier island; then immediately afterwards, the scene in which she says goodbye to Porgy. These are both operatic in their intensity, yet the acting in this stripped-down production has an intensity that I wish you could find more often in opera, but alas you don’t.

21. Gershwin: *Porgy and Bess*, Broadway trailer
22. Joshua Henry as Jake and Nikki Renée Daniels as Clara

One of the problems with classifying *Porgy and Bess* as an opera is that, as well as writing scenes like the ones you just glimpsed, Gershwin introduced some numbers with little or no dramatic pretext, just because they are the kind of catchy singles he was known for; they work fine in a Broadway musical; they fit less well into a Lincoln Center opera. You might say that the first song, **Clara’s** “Summertime,” is one such; it is certainly the most excerpted number in the show. But the second song, “A woman is a sometime thing”—a male answer to “Summertime,” sung by Clara’s husband **Jake**—absolutely fills the bill. And the 2011/2012 Broadway version makes no bones about treating it as pure musical theater.

23. Gershwin: *Porgy and Bess*, “A woman is a sometime thing”
24. Class title 2 (A Complex Legacy)

C. Porgy the Opera

25. Section title C (*Porgy and Bess* in San Francisco)

When I promised to play sections from *Porgy and Bess* in an opera house performance to show both the most and the least operatic elements of the work, I was thinking that I would dot around here and there with a bit of this and a bit of that. But one of the most operatic features of this or any opera is its ability to develop a drama through music over an extended period of time. So instead of multiple clips from, I will play only two scenes: the 27-minute opening and the 13-minute closing of Act I, as the acts are divided in **Fancesca Zambello’s** 2009 production in San Francisco. You will hear a few well-known numbers: “Summertime,” which opens the show; “A woman is a sometime thing,” as a comparison with the Broadway version; and in the second excerpt, “It ain’t necessarily so.” There is also a little vignette in the opening scene when **Peter the Honey Man** comes in, one of Gershwin’s many attempts to inject a little comic local color. But most of the music is involved in introducing the characters, having them interact in recitative or music that is never intended to be extracted as a separate song, all building to the climax where Bess’s lover **Crown** attacks a man who beats him in the craps game. Keep notes, if you

like. After we've watched, I'll ask you two questions. What is the difference in function between "Summertime" and "A woman is a sometime thing"? What is the effect of the other kinds of music?

26. Gershwin: *Porgy and Bess*, opening scene (San Francisco)

27. — still from the above, broken into sections

So why does Gershwin start with "Summertime"? It is for a relatively minor character, and it was not yet the hit it would become. I think its intent is simply scene-setting, both verbal and musical. And what about "A woman is a sometime thing"? It gives us a bit of humor, and an opportunity for a production number, if you want to go that way, though this production is comparatively restrained. The Honey Man sequence is also a moment for relaxation, which is needed since most of the rest of the scene is serious, and makes no attempt at popular style. Note that Porgy does not have an extractable song here; his "I got plenty o' nuttin'" comes much later.

28. Kittiwah Island in the first production

The only time the opera leaves Catfish Row is the picnic on Kittiwah Island that ends Act I in this version. There is a big production number to end the previous scene as they get on the boat, and a rather smaller one now as they get off it. This is definitely musical theater, although it works also in opera; the baptism business you will see is the invention of the director, but the point is that this is a *church* picnic. **Sportin' Life**, the local pimp and drug dealer, has his own take on religion, in what is probably the most standalone number of the show: George Gershwin calling upon his brother Ira in his most witty, Cole-Porterish mode. But Gershwin uses it to set up the contrast to the tense scene with Bess and Crown, who has been hiding out on the island. The abrupt switch from Broadway to Opera is a sharp as you could imagine, and is a perfect example of both the strengths and problems of this extraordinary score.

29. Gershwin: *Porgy and Bess*, picnic scene (San Francisco)

30. Class title 3 ("So where does it belong?")