

Class 11: Porgy and Bess

A. What *is* this thing?

1. Title Slide 1 (website title)
2. Section title A (Broadway/Metropolitan)

I have generally been giving you my faves in this course, but I'll admit that though I admire a lot in *Porgy and Bess* by **George Gershwin** (1898–1937), I have always been disturbed by the question of where it belongs: on Broadway, Gershwin's own world where it premiered in 1935 at the Alvin Theatre, or in opera houses such the Met in 2019? This will be the main theme of today's class, but I need to get one other question out of the way first: is it a Black show or a White one?

3. Black/White incongruity

I hear you answer, "A Black one, of course" Isn't it *the* quintessential Black opera? Yet I'm sure you see the cultural discrepancy here. *Porgy and Bess*, about poor Black folks in South Carolina, was the product of rich White folks in New York. Not just the writers; the first production was conducted, staged, choreographed, and designed by Whites. And this is still too often the case. So while non-Black casting of the show is strictly forbidden, why it is pretty much the norm to hire White directors to tell these Black folks what to do?

4. Comments about the opera

The public loves *Porgy and Bess*. But many leading critics, both White *and* Black, and even many Black singers who have earned a living from it, have been equally disturbed by the discrepancy. Here is a sample of dissenting views.

5. The Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*? Slide 1

For contractual reasons, you can only perform *Porgy* these days under the title "The Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*," which implies that George Gershwin wrote the music and brother **Ira Gershwin** (1896–1983) wrote the lyrics, as in their many Broadway shows. But in fact it is not that simple. Let's look at how the opera actually came about.

6. The Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*? Slide 2
7. The Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*? Slide 3
8. The Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess*? Slide 4

The original property was a novel, *Porgy*, written by the upperclass **DuBose Heyward** (1885–1940), a descendant of a signer of the Declaration of Independence, who was interested in the folklore in around his native Charleston. Its success led to him collaborating with his Ohio-born wife **Dorothy** to turn it in to

a play, which opened on Broadway in 1927. When George Gershwin expressed an interest, DuBose adapted the play into a libretto, and wrote most of the songs. True, Ira Gershwin did join in, and contributed some unforgettable lyrics, including the brilliant “It ain’t necessarily so.” But there are 30 numbers in the opera; Ira wrote 3 of them, and collaborated on 3 more; DuBose Heyward wrote the remaining 24. The Gershwins’ *Porgy*? I don’t think so.

9. Broadway and Met posters

So *Porgy and Bess* has been shuttling between Opera House and Broadway for years. Let’s compare the difference. Here is the first half of the famous duet, “Bess, you is my woman now,” first as sung by **Eric Owens** and **Laquita Mitchell** in the 2007 production at the San Francisco Opera, then as performed in cabaret by **Norm Lewis** and **Audra McDonald**, the stars of the 2011 Broadway revival. Apologies for cutting this off just before each pair really start singing with each other in duet, but this is enough for you to tell me what you think.

10. Gershwin: *Porgy and Bess*, “Bess, you is my woman now” (SFO)

11. Gershwin: *Porgy and Bess*, “Bess, you is my woman now” (Broadway)

12. Broadway and Met posters (repeat)

What did you think? The Broadway performers treat the singing as an outgrowth of natural dialogue, and keep coming back to it (perhaps more so in a cabaret setting than they could on the stage). But the singing in the opera version arises out of the orchestra, which establishes a continuous mood that starts before the singing and continues throughout; this musical continuity is an essential element of opera.

13. Laquita Mitchell, Lester Lynch, and Chauncey Packer

The discrepancy in styles is most apparent in the scene that opens Act Two. As you will see when I show my main clip, the prostitute **Bess** is the woman of a hoodlum called **Crown**. But he kills a man in a fight over a craps game and has to flee. The cripple **Porgy** is the only one who will take Bess in, and indeed they fall in love with each other, as you have heard. Act Two opens with a Church picnic on nearby Kittiwah Island; Porgy can’t go, so Bess is alone. After a brief chorus, the drug-dealer **Sportin’ Life** (**Chauncey Packer**) gathers the crowd around for a mock sermon, “It ain’t necessarily so.” It is one of Ira Gershwin’s most brilliant inventions, and belongs absolutely in the Broadway world. But when Crown, who has been hiding out on the island, corners Bess before she can board the boat, we are back to the text by DuBose Heyward and Gershwin’s operatic mode. Tell me what you think of the contrast.

14. Gershwin: *Porgy and Bess*, Kittiwah Island scene (SFO)

15. — stills from the above

Did you hear the difference? Did it disturb you at all?

B. So here we go!

16. Section title B (fade up on opening)

17. Numbers in opening section

So now for my chunk of the week, pretty much the first half-hour of the opera, once more from **Francesca Zambello's** San Francisco production. Here is a list of the sections you will hear. My questions are the usual ones about how the scene builds, but with one extra for this particular show: do you now notice the mixture of Broadway and Opera numbers, and how do you think they affect the whole?

18. Gershwin: *Porgy and Bess*, opening (SFO)

19. Numbers in opening section (repeat)

Let's discuss!

20. Ending title ("Giving Bess a home")