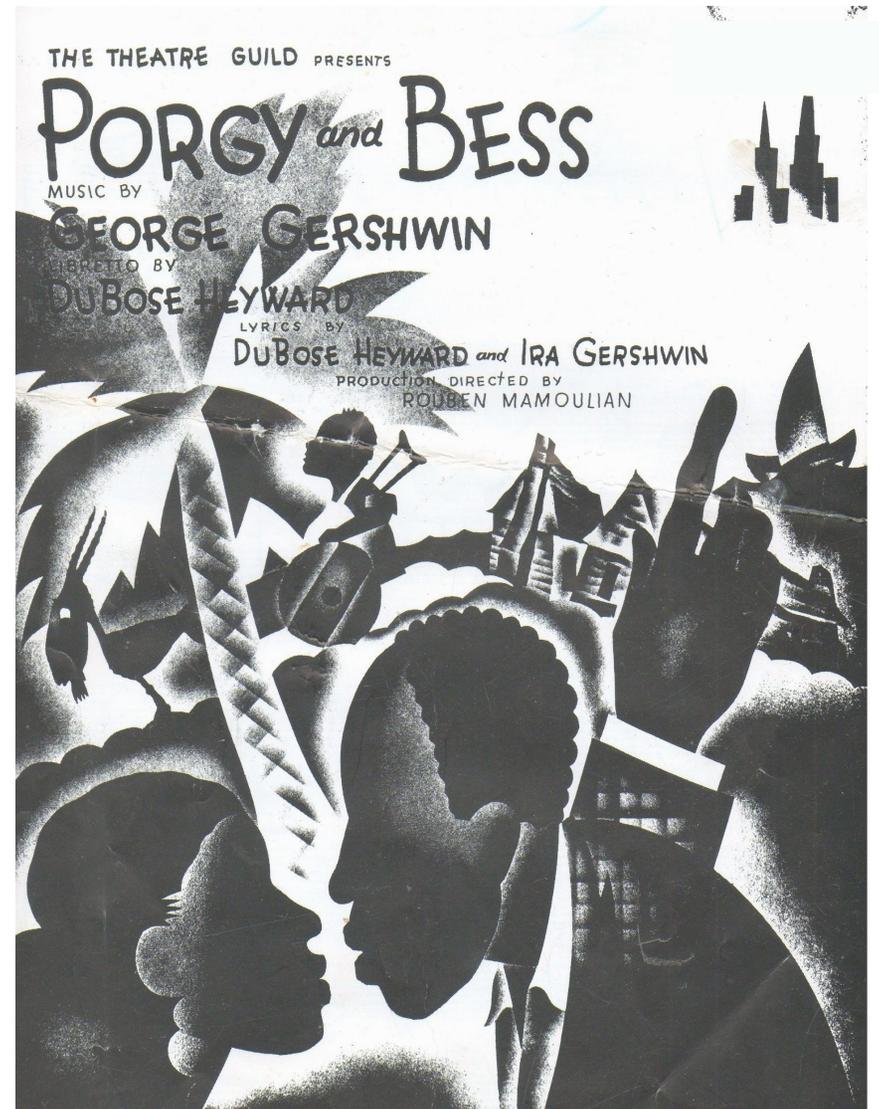


Left alone in Act Three, Bess is powerless against the temptations of Sportin' Life and her own addiction to "happy dust"; she follows him to New York. The police release Porgy, not believing that he could have killed Crown, who is a murderer himself anyway. With money earned on crap games in the jail, Porgy buys presents for his neighbors and a dress for Bess. He is devastated to learn that she has left, but determines to go after her nonetheless.

# Great Scenes in Opera



For more detail and lots of color, see the class website:

<http://www.brunyate.com/RenInstOpera/>

I will always answer eMail to:  
[rogerbrunyate@gmail.com](mailto:rogerbrunyate@gmail.com)

11. Porgy and Bess

April 23, 2026

# 11. Porgy and Bess

MIXED HERITAGE, MUDDLED LEGACY. **George Gershwin** (1898–1937) described *Porgy and Bess* as a folk opera, meaning that he composed music intended to sound like Black folk tunes, within the context of a traditional opera. But opera or not, *Porgy and Bess* opened in a Broadway theater in 1935 and ran for 124 performances. Since then, it has been presented in both contexts. So it is an opera or a musical? Both, probably.

*Porgy* began as a novel by **DuBose Heyward** published in 1925. The next year, he and his wife **Dorothy** made it into a successful Broadway play. Gershwin had approached Heyward about a collaboration earlier, but it was not until 1934 that they began work. Although the publishers currently require that the show be advertised as *The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess*, implying a collaboration between George and his brother **Ira** similar to their Broadway hits, most of the lyrics were actually written by Heyward. Ira's contributions tend to be the Broadway-style numbers that rely on wit rather than plot development; the resultant clash of styles is one of the reasons why *Porgy* is so difficult to pigeonhole. *rb.*

## A. What *is* this thing?

Often called “the” African-American Opera, *Porgy and Bess* (1935) is a curious anomaly, written by a collaboration of four white authors, in a dialect that none of them spoke and set in a community to which none of them belonged, yet required to be performed only by Black singers who neither inhabit that community nor speak that language either. Yet for all its occasional Broadway pizzazz, this is a genuine opera that can rise to moments of true human drama.

We explore some of its ambiguities by comparing a number sung by both Opera and Broadway singers, and then the extreme contrast between two adjacent numbers in the opera itself.

**Gershwin:** *Porgy and Bess*, duet (Eric Owens and Laquita Mitchell)

**Gershwin:** *Porgy and Bess*, duet (Norm Lewis and Audra McDonald)

**Gershwin:** *Porgy and Bess*, Kittiwah Island scene (cast and description below)

## B. So here we go!

The opera opens on **Catfish Row**, a poor part of Charleston. A pianist plays honky-tonk jazz, workers sing wordlessly as they tote cotton bales, a crap game is in progress, and there are various vignettes of everyday life. The San Francisco production that we shall watch, however, cuts directly to Clara's great song, “Summertime,” (Heyward's lyrics as fine as the music), which sums up the entire atmosphere. It is followed by her husband Jake's song, “A woman is a sometime thing,” which shows more of the Broadway influence. We meet the prostitute Bess, her pimp Crown, and also the crippled beggar Porgy. It is all everyday life until the crap game turns violent.

**Gershwin:** *Porgy and Bess*, opening scene (San Francisco Opera 2013; Eric Owens, *Porgy*; Laquita Mitchell, *Bess*; Angel Blue, *Clara*; Eric Greene, *Jake*; Chauncey Packer, *Sportin' Life*; Lester Lynch, *Crown*; c. John DeMain, d. Francesca Zambello)

## The Rest of the Show

In Act Two, all of Catfish Row except Porgy go for a church picnic on **Kittiwah Island**; they celebrate by a dance followed by a church meeting that is hijacked by the drug-dealer Sportin' Life. They leave, but Crown has been hiding out on the island, and corners Bess alone. Some days later, the community is sheltering from a hurricane. Crown suddenly breaks in, having swum over from the island. He claims Bess, and starts to beat her about. Porgy comes to her defense and stabs Crown to death. He is arrested.