George Gershwin: Porgy & Bess

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Gramophone (David Gutman - 01.03.2019)

GRAMOPHONE

Gershwin's Porgy and Bess

The 'great American opera' continues to cause controversy, on stage and on disc. David Gutman assesses the available recordings.

[…] More remarkable is the recently disinterred German radio tape of Blevins Davis and Robert Breen's famous all-black touring production, again under Smallens. Sponsored by the US State Department, this 'contradictory cultural symbol' reached Moscow late in 1955, albeit losing its initial lustre as original cast members moved on. Even if the 1952 recording is heard today as textually unsatisfactory (provoking the particular ire of Nikolaus Harnoncourt), it has noisy theatrical energy and provides the earliest evidence of the limitless vocal potential of Leontyne Price. Her then husband William Warfield occasionally sounds strained or lightweight but it should be recognised that he was singing from a kneeling position, authentically confined to Porgy's goat cart. The multi talented Cab Callowayas Sportin' Life is a powerful presence too, transmuting the 'dandified' stereotype into something more compelling in his celebrated rendition of 'It ain't necessarily so'. The mono sound has come up superbly. Absent however are such key elements as the glorious orchestral coda of Act 1 scene 1 when Porgy takes in Bess after Robbins's murder. The pivotal 'Buzzard Song' can hardly suggest a world turning to its dark side when it's patched into the final scene. Supporting roles are less strongly taken; the three acts become two.

Flawed as it is, this astonishingly vivid off-air recording conveys the excitement of a classic touring production featuring one of the 20th century greatest voices at the start of her career.

»audite« Ludger Böckenhoff • Tel.: +49 (0)5231-870320 • Fax: +49 (0)5231-870321 • info@audite.de • www.audite.de

THE GRAMOPHONE COLLECTION

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The great American opera continues to cause controversy: on stage and on disc. **David Guttman** assesses the available recordings

Porgy and Bess begins with an upbeat Rhythm which Todd Duncan, the original Porgy, heard as music being desperately done in the Harlem Negro community he was in at the time *Porgy* premiered it on her him on the piano in 1934. There had indeed been plans to turn DuBose Heyward's 1925 novel, *Porgy*, subsequently a play co-authored by Heyward's wife, Dorothy, into a Jerome Kern musical for Al Jolson. But Gershwin's treatment would be subtitle 'an American Folk Opera' ... much more serious than Kern's work. Gershwin, who had composed a staged, fully sung drama, using operatic techniques (recitatives, arias, leitmotifs) to depict the life of an American community with which he felt a special affinity, building on his longfield interest in the African-American experience.

In Heyward's remarked first scene, the house lights dim, a dance-hall piano takes over and the drama's potentially enhancing 'Do does do' chanting is introduced. Gershwin's treatment of all this before we segue into the first statement of 'Summertime' – comfortably familiar now yet by no means harmonically unambiguous. Listen as content and disquiet is written in, accept that, even today, only three audio recordings offer this presumably complete! For 40 years we could see it in the scene but only hear a version in Cuthbert Bus, which Gershwin culled from the opera. Unlike Robert Russell Bennett's famous 'Symphonic Suite' of Symphonic Picture (1942), this 1934 orchestral score puts through composed material on a par with the obvious vocal hits. Even that one-all-time-spotlight-scham Porgy's similar displacement in Act 3 of Wozzeck (Gershwin had recently attended the American premiere).

Whatever we or you expect *Porgy and Bess* to be, however, Porgy is a similarly ambiguous character, a double-black-man-character, attempts to rescue Bess from the clutches of Crown, her violent and possessive lover, and Sportin' Life, drug dealer and potential pimp. That the whole undertaking could become a signifier of degradation for many African-Americans is perhaps the unintended consequence of stripping out the storytelling, distancing the characters from the audience. The composer spent a month experimenting at first hand the cronies of the circle Gullah people of the Sea Islands on the Atlantic coast near Charleston, South Carolina. This is not to say that he directly 'appropriated' their culture, instead, he created original music striking in style and sensibility while simultaneously pulling in radically Eldorian tropes from his own background (the orchestration between Act 1 Scene 1 and Act 1 Scene 2 of the modern folk of Western shadow stitchers' are too close to be merely coincidence).

The world's melodic idiom is typically infused with the inflected thirds, fifths and seventhe of black American popular music, creating tunes which Wilfrid Mellers was not alone in finding 'more memorable than those of any 19th-century opera'. At the same time, Gershwin wanted *Porgy and Bess* to combine 'the drama and the music of Wagner and Puccini and Mussorgsky'. For admirers on the 'classical' side of the fence, the Excelsior suggests parallels not with minimally but rather with Janáček's invocation of universality where poverty of circumstance dictates nudity. We see Gershwin's spirituals for melody in his wise and charmer but there is – or should be – so much more: lights coloured by legal writing, conversational recitative, jazz, blues, Broadway musicals and polyrhythms, productive borrowings from Debussy and Puccini as well as the Negro spiritual. Gershwin's eagerness upon could have been a singing post in his quiver to create credibly American grand opera, there was seemingly no limit to what his direction of musical inventiveness, resourcefulness and craftmanship! Instead, the potential was realized with his tragically premature death in 1937.

Porgy and Bee may be easier to accept now that it can be seen by disengaged audiences as a period piece rather than a distorted reflection of contemporary reality – today's Kinsch (Kinsville) Island is one of the premiere golf destinations on the East Coast. That said, just as The Merchant of Venice remains a problem play, Porgy and Bess, despite the opera's problems, can not going every surprise soon. Even before opening night, questions were being raised. Could an all-white creative team speak for African Americans without exclusive encompassing? Anna Brown, the first Bess, a 22-year-old Juilliard graduate, found her own father, a deacon, objecting to the depiction of a drunk in her community. He didn't like it. Ira Aldridge, the great black actor, in 18th and it proposed the image of blacks as lazy people, singing hymns and taking dope. A lot of the black educators thought it was Uncle Tom. But I felt that if it brought it forward in American music and in opera roles for black singers, then we should do it.'

The racial question was turned on its head when the show moved to Washington DC. With the cast refusing to sing before segregated audiences, the National Theatre suspended its policy of segregating African-American attendees to a separate section, if only for the duration of the show. Other compromises. The score only reached the stage after the director Rouben Mamoulian helped rehearsal a into a sexier, more sensuable entity pitched somewhere between through-composed reverse and patchwork quilt Broadway musical. Through unpatchable, it ran in New York for a creditable 124 performances.

The requirements, still enforced by the Gershwin estate, that *Porgy and Bee* be sung by black singers, has led to further complicated things. The rationale is not intrinsically different from the older argument against colour-blind casting across the board. Then again, if the main aim was to detail any prospect of a *Porgy* played in make-up, shouldn't the instruction be more fairly regarded as a form of affirmative action? It was another 20 years before Robert McFerrin, Sidney Poitier's singing voice on the soundtrack of Columbia's unauthentic film adaptation (Preminger, 1959), appeared in the role of Porgy, the first of the concentrated African-American artist. The opera had an all-white European premiere in Copenhagen before arrangement Nazis forced its closure. The greatest modern exponent of the title role is a Jamaican-born Brit. Will it always make sense to deny the lead to a suitably qualified Caucasian? In 2010, defying the approved racial creation, Hungarian State Opera moved the action to a refugee camp. Controversial perhaps, but it was hard that received more than the momentum unnoticed by the estate. Lyon Opera's 2008 production (brought to Edinburgh in 2010) contains one of the few to have subjected naturalistic representation to the minority enabled by video technology.

Porgy and Bee has been adapted with the contemporaneous sensing revised directed by Cheryl Crawford. With narrative converted into spoken dialogue, *Porgy and Bee!* The charge of misogyny, thrown up in part by the nature of grand opera as well as the eloquent performance history of this particular piece, feels gratuitous. Bess isn't a heroine like Puccini's sticky Cio-Cio-San or Dvořák's Rusalka, yet to accuse the whole enterprise of misogyny ignores the sensitivity, compassion and compromisation of the Catfish Row community. Easily closer if Maria's role is so pivotal that her electrifying confrontation with Sportin' Life – the point-counterpoint of 'Clara yo' sweetin' angle' a disappears altogether.

PORGY ON DISC

The world's diverse recording history begins in 1935 with a modest chunk of highlights on Victor, the company's parent, just after the show opened, and nearly with the composer conducting. **Alexander Smallens**. Here the stars are established opera singers. Helen Jepson's soprano is memorable but Lawrence Tibbett, who had performed in Smallens's Louis Gruenberg's *The Emperor Jones*, makes a vocally immersive, dramatically thrilling impression, not least in the sensuous Act 2 aria or ariosa cum 'Bessie's Lullaby'. Tibbett's Porgy is the most extended attempt featuring a mix of the original Broadway cast and 1942 entire line-up were made for Jack Kapp's American Decca label. A concentration of these sides, retrospectively designated the official cast album (a concept originating with Oklahoma!), is helpfully presented in a Naxos package bringing together three early versions and more. While Avon Long, the replacement Sportin' Life, sounds uncomfortably mannered in duet sidescenes with Lee Robinson's dainty Bess, Jascha Heifetz creates his own favourites for violin and piano. The music (1940-42) arranger Hugh Anne Brown a 1981 prize, reluctant to embrace a point that might be thought demeaning.

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