

# FROM THE OPERA HOUSE TO THE SCHOOL HOUSE

PORGY AND BESS RESOURCE GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS



## DEAR EDUCATOR

We are delighted that you are here to learn more about America's most beloved opera—the official state opera of South Carolina—*Porgy and Bess*. With intersections of the arts, history, cultural studies, and literature, Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* is one of the richest pieces of artistic material to explore in a language arts or social studies curriculum or to delve deeply into for its musical merits. Engaging Creative Minds has teamed up with Ravinia, North America's oldest music festival, located just outside of Chicago, to provide you with information, insights and activities designed to introduce your students to the opera's many facets and prepare them for a concert performance.

Known for presenting some of the best performing artists in the world, from Carrie Underwood to John Legend, Ravinia also hosts the summer residency of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. In an expansive park setting, groups of friends and families dine alfresco while listening to music under the stars or enjoy concerts in any of three performance venues. One of the artists who left an indelible impact on the festival—even though he performed here only once, shortly before his death—was George Gershwin, whose music has been performed at Ravinia on a regular basis ever since, from a multitude of Gershwin-themed evenings to inclusion on the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's programs year after year. His *Rhapsody in Blue* has been performed on its Pavilion stage by many of the world's great pianists, including Kevin Cole, Herbie Hancock, and Lang Lang. *Porgy and Bess* has been presented at Ravinia on several occasions, including this past summer under the direction of acclaimed composer, musician, and conductor Bobby McFerrin. The evening's stirring performance, the beauty of the singing, the emotional chord that the opera struck, reminded everyone once again how very powerful this music drama is.

In addition to the festival's outstanding concert programming, Ravinia has a robust education program, REACH\*TEACH\*PLAY, which brings the joy of music to thousands of public school students and provides professional development to hundreds of teachers each year. Thanks to the foresight of the Boeing Corporation, a company with philanthropic ties to both of our cities that knew of our respective efforts, a connection was made between Ravinia and Engaging Creative Minds, and a generous grant from Boeing has made our partnership possible.

*Porgy and Bess* was the result of a winning collaboration between one of Charleston's native sons and one of the country's best composers. We are happy to continue that tradition of collaboration as we come together to offer you this set of resources and workshops.

Christine Taylor  
Director  
Ravinia's REACH\*TEACH\*PLAY

Robin Berlinsky  
Executive Director  
Engaging Creative Minds



Based on the belief that music increases the quality and joy of life and enhances a sense of self-worth, the mission of Ravinia's REACH\*TEACH\*PLAY education programs is to provide a portfolio of quality music education and live performances that engage diverse and underserved children, their families, and schools; includes classical, jazz, and world music; and moves people toward a deeper, lifelong connection to music.

The mission of Engaging Creative Minds is to inspire the creative and innovative potential of all students to achieve academically and become imaginative, adaptable, and productive adults, resulting in stronger communities and an increasingly competitive South Carolina workforce.

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# SYNOPSIS

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## ACT I

### Scene 1

After a frenzied orchestral introduction, the curtain rises on a summer evening in Catfish Row, a former mansion on the waterfront of Charleston, SC, now occupied by fishermen, stevedores, and other working-class people. The only light shines from the room of Jasbo Brown, who plays a hypnotic piano blues (“Jasbo Brown Blues”) as couples dance and sing in the street. Clara rocks her baby son and sings a tender lullaby (“Summertime”), accompanied by a chorus of women. Several men “roll dem bones” in a craps game. Robbins joins the gambling against the protests of his wife, Serena. Clara’s son is taken from her arms by the father, Jake, who sings a cynical warning (“A Woman Is a Sometime Thing”). Peter, the honey man, peddles his wares as Porgy enters on a goat cart. The crap-shooters decide to wait for the liquor-loving stevedore Crown. They notice that Porgy has grown “soft” on Crown’s woman, Bess. Crown takes some “happy dust” from the dope peddler Sportin’ Life, making a volatile mixture with alcohol. An argument with Robbins ensues, and Crown kills him with a cotton hook. The murderer escapes, and Sportin’ Life attempts to lure Bess to New York. She takes refuge in Porgy’s room.

### Scene 2

A crowd of mourners gathers in Serena’s room around the lifeless body of her husband (“Gone, Gone, Gone”), dropping contributions for the funeral into a saucer placed on his chest. The police detective arrives to investigate. He tells Serena that unless enough money is raised for a proper burial by the next day, the board of health will give the body to a medical student. Porgy denies any knowledge of the crime, and the policeman arrests the honey man as a witness. Serena sings her own lament (“My Man’s Gone Now”). The undertaker agrees to bury Robbins for a sum below his usual fee. Bess urges all to board the train at the station, headed for the Promised Land.

## ACT II

### Scene 1

Jake and the other fishermen gather on the docks in the morning to repair their nets (“It Take a Long Pull to Get There”). Annie reminds the men of the picnic. In his window, Porgy sings a joyous banjo song (“I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin”). Sportin’ Life attempts to peddle more happy dust, but Maria chases him away. Lawyer Frazier arrives looking for Porgy. Frazier asks Porgy if that is Crown’s Bess in his room, but he responds that she is “Porgy’s Bess.” Porgy offers to buy her divorce from Crown, but discovers they were never married. Mr. Archdale, a white lawyer, arrives in the courtyard to bail out Peter, whose family once belonged to the Archdales. A buzzard hovers overhead (an evil omen), but the rejuvenated Porgy tells him to keep on flying. Sportin’ Life tries again to interest Bess in happy dust. Porgy seizes Sportin’ Life’s arm and threatens to break his neck the next time he bothers Bess. Everyone prepares for the picnic, leaving Porgy and Bess alone to sing of love (“Bess, You Is My Woman Now”). Maria convinces Bess to attend the picnic on Kittiwah Island, without Porgy. The excited crowd readies to depart (“Oh, I Can’t Sit Down”).

### Scene 2

The people engage in all manners of carefree activity on Kittiwah Island—singing, dancing, overeating, and drinking (“I Ain’ Got No Shame”). Sportin’ Life preaches a blasphemous sermon (“It Ain’t Necessarily So”). Serena interrupts, calling them all sinners. A whistle summons everyone to the boats. Bess suddenly encounters Crown, who asks for happy dust. Bess tells him that she is “livin’ decent” with Porgy. Crown becomes more insistent, claiming, “I got’s a woman an’ dat’s you.” Bess wonders about his real intentions (“What You Want Wid Bess?”). A passionate kiss from Crown, and Bess agrees to remain on the island.

### Scene 3

A church bell tolls morning in Catfish Row several days later. Jake and his fishermen companions prepare their boat, the Sea Gull. Pete returns from jail. From Porgy’s room drifts the delirious voice of Bess, who has been sick for more than a week. Serena prays to “Doctor Jesus” for Bess, as the others

join. Street vendors appear on Catfish Row (“Strawberry Woman” / “Crab Man”). Bess’s fever breaks, and she calls for Porgy, who knows she’s been with Crown. Though no longer worthy of Porgy, Bess asks to stay (“I Loves You, Porgy”). Clara worries about Jake sailing on the blackened sea. Suddenly, the ominous hurricane bell tolls.

#### Scene 4

As the storm rages outside, frightened residents of Catfish Row huddle in Serena’s room, raising their voices in prayer (“Oh, Hev’nly Father”). Lightning flashes and thunder claps. Clara again comforts her baby boy with a lullaby. There is a knock on the door, and Peter thinks it is death. Someone opens the door—Crown has come for Bess (“A Red-Headed Woman”). Jake’s overturned boat appears in the river. Clara gives her baby to Bess and rushes out into the storm. Crown mocks Porgy and the other men, calling them cowards, and runs after Clara. He will come back for Bess.

### ACT III

#### Scene 1

It is night, and the storm has passed. The fishermen’s widows mourn their husbands (“Clara, Clara”). Sportin’ Life ridicules them, because there are so many other men interested in good-looking women. In the window, Bess sings a lullaby (“Summertime”) to Clara’s baby. Crown enters the courtyard and sneaks toward Porgy’s room. As he passes the window, Porgy plunges a knife into his back, then strangles him. Porgy laughs and tells Bess she has a man now—“You got Porgy!”

#### Scene 2

A detective arrives in Catfish Row to interrogate Serena, suspecting that Crown was murdered to avenge her husband. The coroner asks Porgy to identify the body. When he refuses, police officers drag the frightened man away. Sportin’ Life tells Bess that Porgy will be arrested and locked up for life. To cheer her up, Sportin’ Life offers some happy dust. Bess loses her willpower and takes it. Sportin’ Life persuades her to join him in the big city, where they will live the highlife together (“There’s a Boat Dat’s Leavin’ Soon for New York”).

#### Scene 3

Another week has passed on Catfish Row. Porgy returns from jail, convicted of contempt of court for refusing to view Crown’s body. Happily home again, Porgy is surprised to find Serena holding Clara’s baby. When he asks for Bess (“Oh Bess, Oh Where’s My Bess”), the others break the sad news. Thinking Porgy gone forever, Bess has left with Sportin’ Life. Porgy asks how far away New York is and to which direction. His friends answer: a thousand miles to the north. Mounting his goat cart, Porgy sets off after Bess (“Oh Lawd, I’m on My Way”).



PORGY  
AND BESS  
SPEAKS  
TO US  
TODAY



I'm at the wake now. Serena's losing it... uh oh, here come the cops...

Can't believe Bess just left the picnic with Crown... she's messed up.

Summer ain't easy with this storm blowing down Catfish Row. God help us all.

My mouth is shut, but Porgy's gotta go talk to the cops. Too bad he ain't talkin' to Bess... she traded one mistake for another. That Sportin' Life must be one heck of a silver-tongued snake.

Omg! Crown killed Robbins! I think Bess is hiding w/ Porgy. Somethin' about to go down!

Don't tell anyone, but I'm thinkin' Porgy's got somethin' for Bess. I'll find out what's up at Kittiwah.

Wonder what's makin' Bess seek Crown when she's got Porgy waitin' around?

So much death. First Jake and Clara. Now Porgy kills Crown. I don't know who to feel sorry for anymore.

Have ya heard? Porgy's gone to NY tryin' to find that no-good Bess... at least he's getting out of Catfish Row huh?



# 1935

The cast rehearses *Porgy and Bess* on the way to its 1935 world-premiere performance.

## WHAT IS *PORGY AND BESS*?

From the work's first performance to today, the question of how to define Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* has been hotly debated. While many familiar musical works fall squarely in one genre (Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* is clearly an opera, for example), Gershwin's masterpiece is so rich and diverse, both in the musical styles he uses and in the way *Porgy and Bess* is put together, that in some ways it defies one singular characterization. Throughout this guide we will discuss some of the musical styles that influenced Gershwin as he wrote *Porgy and Bess*, explore common elements that help define each of these styles, and compare and contrast musical elements found in opera and musical theater. Ultimately we will ask the question, How would you characterize *Porgy and Bess*?



## IN HIS OWN WORDS

How would Gershwin himself have categorized his new and eclectic masterpiece? With a new and eclectic term, of course. He called it a “folk opera,” and writing for the *New York Times*, he explained the term: “Since the opening of *Porgy and Bess* I have been asked frequently why it is called a folk opera. The explanation is a simple one. *Porgy and Bess* is a folk tale. Its people naturally would sing folk music. When I first began work on the music, I decided against the use of original folk material because I wanted the music to be all of one piece. Therefore I wrote my own spirituals and folk songs. But they are still folk music—and therefore, being in operatic form, *Porgy and Bess* becomes a folk opera.” Gershwin went on to talk about how he intended to bring into the world of opera aspects of “Negro life in America” that were unique, such as specific humor, drama, exuberance, and spirituality. He also wrote that he purposely combined elements traditionally found in opera with elements of musical theater that he had had great success with to give *Porgy and Bess* “staying power” as a musical work. True to Gershwin’s vision, *Porgy and Bess* has stood the test of time.

# GEORGE GERSHWIN

1898–1937

George Gershwin was one of the most significant American composers of the 20th century, known for popular stage and screen songs as well as classical compositions. Gershwin's music stands alone, yet to be copied or emulated and has become accepted throughout the world as emblematic of American music and culture. From "Swanee" to *Rhapsody in Blue* to *Porgy and Bess*, Gershwin's music transcends time.



Born in 1898 in New York City to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents, George Gershwin began his venture into music at age 11, when his parents bought his older brother, Ira, a piano. However, it was George who tinkered at the piano and sought out many different expert teachers until he became a great musician. The brothers worked together on many projects, including *Porgy and Bess*. Ira served as the librettist, providing the words for the music George composed.

After only four years of playing the piano, he left school to become a song plugger on Tin Pan Alley, performing excerpts from songs for potential buyers of sheet music. Gershwin quickly became known as one of the most accomplished and popular pianists. Wanting to write his own compositions, Gershwin composed his first piece at 18 years old. Pulling from the popular music of the day that he had come to know so well from song plugging, he composed the popular hit “Swanee” in 1919, which sold over one million copies.

As time went on, Gershwin’s musical style grew in complexity as he was influenced by jazz musicians, accomplished classical composers, and piano masters. But one of his most frequently performed pieces, *Rhapsody in Blue*, almost didn’t happen. While Gershwin was a pianist for an annual musical, the bandleader Paul Whiteman asked him to write a jazz piece that would elevate the genre to a new level of respectability. One day while playing pool, his brother showed him an advertisement announcing that Whiteman’s latest concert would feature a new composition by George Gershwin. Even though he was left little time before the deadline, Gershwin composed his most recognizable masterwork, *Rhapsody in Blue*.

The themes for *Rhapsody in Blue* came to Gershwin while he was on a train ride to Boston. He was inspired by rhythms and percussive rattles and bangs of the train. He later stated to a biographer, “I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our metropolitan madness.” The composition showed extraordinary talent and an innovative approach to creating a truly American sound.

## BEST-KNOWN WORKS BY GEORGE AND IRA GERSHWIN

*Rhapsody in Blue*, *Porgy and Bess*, “Fascinating Rhythm,” “They Can’t Take That Away from Me,” “Someone to Watch Over Me,” *An American in Paris*, “Swanee,” “Nice Work If You Can Get It,” “’S Wonderful,” “I Got Rhythm,” “Embraceable You,” *Of Thee I Sing*, *Cuban Overture*



# GERSHWIN AT RAVINIA

Due to the Great Depression, Ravinia Park was silent for four years, from 1932 through 1935. In 1936 the park reopened under the auspices of the newly formed Ravinia Festival Association. On July 25 of that year, nearly 8,000 music lovers from throughout the Chicago area made the trip to Highland Park for a concert featuring the music of George Gershwin with the composer himself joining the Chicago Symphony Orchestra onstage. It was reported that some audience members climbed trees around the Pavilion to catch a glimpse of the famous musician.

The ambitious program that evening featured Gershwin at the piano for his Concerto in F and *Rhapsody in Blue* (with his friend William Daly conducting) and on the podium to lead *An American in Paris*, a medley of his Broadway hits, and a symphonic suite from *Porgy and Bess*. Gershwin later wrote to Thomas H. Fisher, a vice-chairman of the Ravinia Festival and member of the executive committee.

Dear Mr. Fisher,

I must write you a few words to tell you how much I enjoyed playing at Ravinia Park. It was my first visit, and a more delightful spot for a concert I cannot imagine.

The audience was unique. I have never seen so distinguished a crowd at a summer concert, and their response to my efforts was heart-warming. I have played many concerts, but that evening at Ravinia will have a niche all its own in my pleasant memories.

Sincerely yours,

George Gershwin

Gershwin rehearsing at his hotel for his Ravinia appearance in 1936



# HISTORY OF CREATION

George Gershwin's journey to create his folk opera, *Porgy and Bess*, began two years after he premiered *Rhapsody in Blue*. While preparing for the production of his musical *Oh Kay!*, a friend gave Gershwin the novel *Porgo* (later renamed *Porgy*) by DuBose Heyward. Gershwin felt immediately inspired by Heyward's portrayal of African American life in Charleston, SC. He also saw, in the setting of the story, the great potential to explore the use of spirituals, folk, blues and jazz styles in an unconventional and original way. He wrote to Heyward in the summer of 1926 and expressed his interest in turning *Porgy* into an opera.

## PORGY, THE NOVEL AND THE PLAY

DuBose Heyward was born in Charleston in 1885. His family, like many other fading Charleston socialites, strove to maintain the appearance of the aristocracy that was swiftly crumbling. Charleston had served as the center of the slave trade; almost half of the African slaves who survived the journey to America passed through Charleston. However, the American Civil War left the city and many fortunes in ruin, and 20 years later Heyward's father had gone from heir to a rice plantation to laborer in a rice mill.

When Heyward was two years old, his father was killed in a mill accident. His mother became more interested in local history and the "Gullah" culture she had once learned about as a child from her African-American nanny.

She turned this knowledge into a somewhat lucrative venture, leading tours of Charleston for curious Northerners.

Heyward was sick often homebound as a child. He learned to entertain himself by drawing and writing short stories. He dropped out of school at age 14 and worked as a cotton checker for a steamline ship. It was there that he developed a rapport with the Gullah men who worked as stevedores on the ships. The docks also gave Heyward a view of the vivacious side of Charleston, from saloons packed with warehouse workers to riverboat sailors and streetwalkers. Heyward would often witness the Baptist churchgoers paying a visit to the area to warn against sinful activities—to little avail. Later, when writing became his full-time pursuit, these encounters strongly influenced his stories and poetry.

In the summer of 1923, Heyward met Dorothy Kuhns, a bright aspiring playwright and his future wife and collaborator.

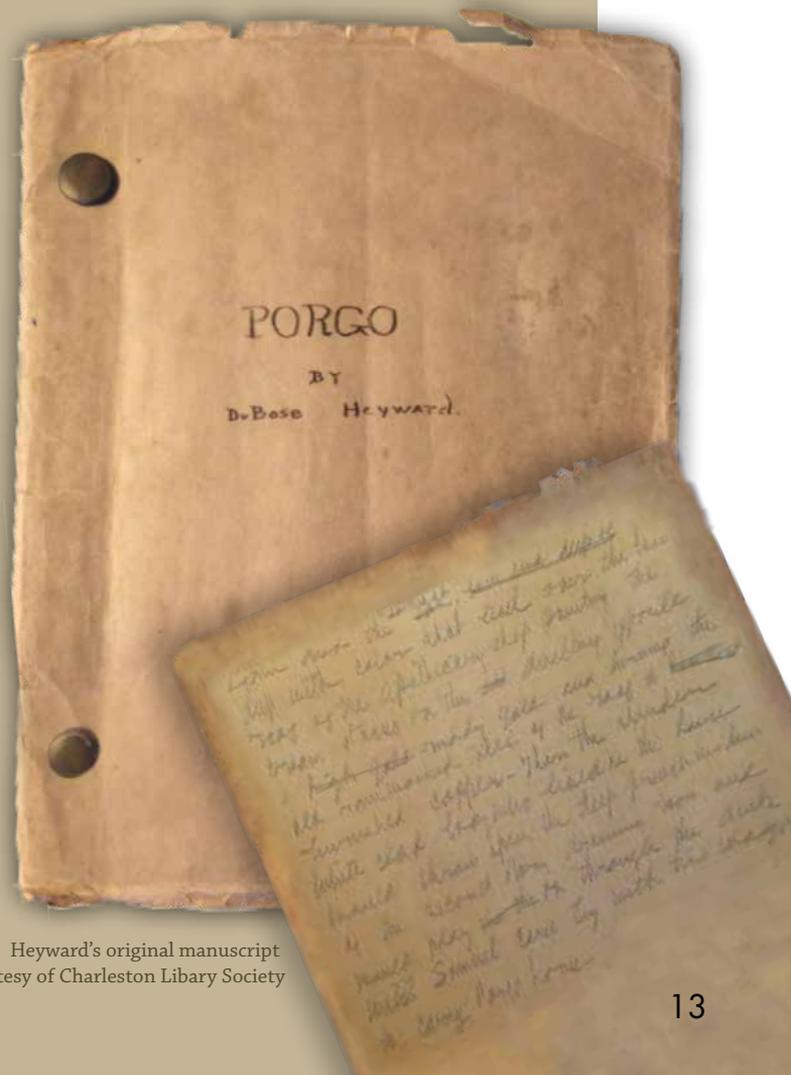


When reading the *Charleston News and Courier* one morning, Heyward took interest in a police story about a crippled beggar known as “Goat Cart Sammy” who attempted a shooting and escaped in his goat-drawn wagon. He felt the story had “great dramatic possibilities,” and it triggered his instinct to write a larger work about the Gullah culture he had encountered—the men, religious women, strong boatmen, tempting swindlers, and marketplace calls all appeared in the resulting novel. The setting for the story is based on a neighborhood he encountered in Charleston named “Cabbage Row,” dubbed “Catfish Row” in Heyward’s story. A decrepit apartment complex that once was a grand colonial house reflected the changes Charleston had undergone over the past century. After reading the first draft of the book, Dorothy expressed her interest in adapting the story for the stage. DuBose was hesitant, thinking Broadway would not be receptive to a serious portrayal of African-American life.

The novel, *Porgy*, was published in September of 1925 and met with great acclaim. “No more beautiful nor authentic novel has been published in a decade” said the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and the *New York World* stated, “a literary advance in the South must be acknowledged when writers of that land come to realize, as Heyward does, the incredibly rich material in Negro life which so far has been rejected.”

The Heywards, fueled by confidence from the rave reviews, began work on adapting the book into a stage play. Early on in this process, DuBose received the letter of interest from Gershwin. George Gershwin was a household name by that time, and this potential collaboration was a big opportunity for the couple. A full eight years elapsed between Gershwin’s initial proposal and the completion of the opera.

In the interim, Gershwin composed a large catalogue of works, from *An American in Paris*, a symphonic poem employing such unconventional instruments as car horns and a celesta, to *Strike up the Band* and *Girl Crazy*, popular musicals with hummable melodies, and deepened his knowledge of styles and themes and sharpened the musical tools he would use to craft *Porgy and Bess*.



Heyward’s original manuscript  
courtesy of Charleston Library Society

## GERSHWIN REVISITS *PORGY*

In 1932 Gershwin felt again compelled to create an opera that expressed the spirit of the American people, this time more prepared for the challenge. The Heywards had produced *Porgy* the play with an all-black cast in New York that ran for a successful 367 performances between October 1927 and October 1928. They were thrilled when Gershwin reached out to them again with interest in *Porgy*, and shortly a contract was signed. Gershwin certainly considered the project a “labor of love” about which he was extremely serious and dedicated, turning down other opportunities at the height of his career to focus on *Porgy*.

While the original text included traditional Gullah folk songs, Gershwin informed Heyward that he would like to instead create his own original folk songs for the opera, though keeping in them the spirit of the community. If this was to be the case, Heyward thought it best that the New Yorker make his way down to Charleston to experience the city firsthand. Gershwin made a few trips to Charleston in 1933 and 1934, including a long stay on Folly Island just off the coast. He enjoyed engaging with the community and participated in prayer meetings and Gullah “ring shouts.” During a visit with Heyward

to Macedonia Church, Gershwin first heard the spiritual “Oh, Doctor Jesus,” which he would appropriate for Serena’s character in the second act of the opera. Gershwin saw the value in many of the same social scenes as Heyward previously had—the street-vendor cries, the communal prayers—and ultimately brought these cultural vignettes to life through music in a way that was completely original but undeniably recognizable.

As George worked on the musical themes for the opera, his brother Ira collaborated with the Heywards to write the lyrics.

GEORGE GERSHWIN  
33 RIVERSIDE DRIVE  
NEW YORK, NEW YORK

March 29 - 1932

My dear Mr. Heyward:

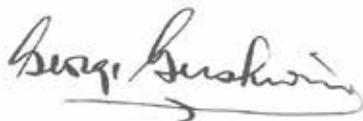
I am about to go abroad in a little over a week, and in thinking of ideas for new compositions, I came back to one that I had several years ago - namely, *PORGY* - and the thought of setting it to music. It is still the most outstanding play that I know, about the colored people.

I should like very much to talk with you before I leave for Europe, and the only way that I imagine that would be possible would be by telephone. So if you will be good enough to either telephone me collect at TRafalgar 7-0727 - or send me your telephone number by telegram, I will be glad to call you.

Is there any chance of your being abroad in the next couple of months?

I hope this letter finds you and your wife in the best of health, and hoping to hear from you soon, I am

Sincerely yours,



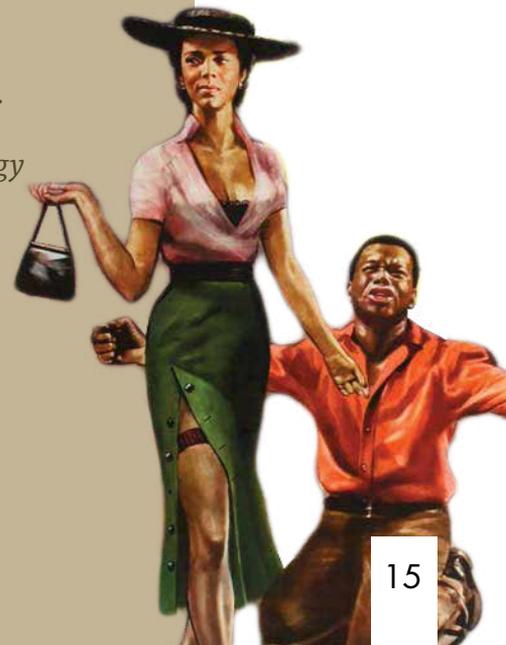
DuBose Heyward  
Dawn Hill  
Hendersonville, North Carolina

# PORGY AND BESS TIMELINE

## KEY

▶ *Porgy and Bess* related ▶ Gershwin related ▶ American history related

- 1898 ▶ Born September 26 in Brooklyn, NY
- 1910 ▶ Begins piano lessons
- 1910–70 ▶ The Great Migration
- 1912 ▶ Studies under noted piano teacher Charles Hambitzer, his first mentor
- 1913 ▶ Drops out of high school to pursue music; first job as a “song plugger” on Tin Pan Alley
- 1919 ▶ First hit song, “Swanee”; first Broadway musical score, *La La Lucille*
- 1924 ▶ *Rhapsody in Blue* is premiered in New York, bringing jazz into the classical music hall
- 1925 ▶ DuBose Heyward publishes *Porgy*, the novel
- 1926 ▶ Gershwin reads *Porgy* and is inspired to adapt it to opera.
- 1927 ▶ New York’s Theater Guild produces stage adaption of *Porgy* by Dorothy Heyward
- 1928 ▶ *An American in Paris* is premiered at Carnegie Hall, performed by the New York Symphony Orchestra



- 1934 ▶ George Gershwin travels to Charleston and spends some time composing part of the opera at Folly Beach. He attends black church services on James Island, participating in call-and-response hymn singing. A lot of his musical ideas come from this experience
- 1935 ▶ Broadway opening of *Porgy and Bess*
- 1936 ▶ First national tour of *Porgy and Bess*; National Theatre performance in Washington, DC, opens for the first time to a desegregated house, on the insistence of the performers
- 1936 ▶ Gershwin performs *Rhapsody in Blue* at Ravinia, drawing massive crowds; people even climbed trees to see him play
- 1936 ▶ Billie Holiday records “Summertime”
- 1937 ▶ Gershwin dies suddenly at the age of 38
- 1942 ▶ *Porgy and Bess* is revived for Broadway
- 1943 ▶ European premiere of *Porgy and Bess* in Copenhagen with an all-white cast
- 1952 ▶ US State Department selects *Porgy and Bess* to represent the United States in a tour of 22 countries; cast includes William Warfield, Leontyne Price, Cab Calloway, and Maya Angelou
- 1954 ▶ *Brown v. Board of Education* decision declaring segregation in public schools unconstitutional
- 1955 ▶ La Scala (Milan) presents *Porgy and Bess*, its first opera written by an American composer
- 1955 ▶ Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat for a white passenger, sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycott
- 1958 ▶ Miles Davis records instrumental version of *Porgy and Bess*
- 1959 ▶ Film version of *Porgy and Bess* starring Sidney Poitier; the singing voice of Porgy in the film is sung by Bobby McFerrin’s father



- 1971 ▶ Charleston Symphony presents *Porgy and Bess* with an amateur cast for 17 performances at the Gaillard Auditorium. The stage director, Ella Gerber, was the only director sanctioned at that time by the Gershwin estate
- 1976 ▶ The Houston Grand Opera performs and records the original score under the direction of John DeMain. This is considered one of the most important recordings of this work
- 1985 ▶ New York's Metropolitan Opera presents the opera for the first time, directed by Nathaniel Merrill and conducted by James Levine
- 1990s ▶ The Charleston Symphony, under the direction of David Stahl, gives two performances of *Porgy and Bess* and tours the opera to cities throughout the Southeast
- 2012 ▶ American Repertory Theatre produces *Porgy and Bess*, revised into musical theater format, starring Audra McDonald, Norm Lewis, and David Alan Grier, winning two Tony Awards
- 2015 ▶ Concert production of *Porgy and Bess* presented at Ravinia, conducted by Bobby McFerrin
- 2016 ▶ Spoleto Festival USA presents *Porgy and Bess*, starring Lester Lynch and Alison Cambridge, conducted by Stefan Asbury, directed by David Herskovits, and featuring the visual design of Jonathan Green



# GERSHWIN'S DREAM TEAM

George Gershwin painstakingly put together a team of superb singers, actors, and a production team that not only shaped the opera during its creation, but influenced how the opera was presented and received for decades to come. Surprisingly, Gershwin and Heyward were the two people involved with the production who were most familiar with Charleston and the Gullah culture. During rehearsal, Gershwin was often the one giving notes to the performers on how to authentically interpret their characters. Most of the principal cast members were trained opera singers with degrees from Juilliard, the New England Conservatory, Fisk University, etc., who had studied in New York and Europe.

## PORGY – TODD DUNCAN

Todd Duncan was a professionally trained singer and a professor of classical music at Howard University. A colleague of Gershwin's recommended Duncan for the part of Porgy, however neither Duncan nor Gershwin were quite thrilled about the match. Knowing the composer only for his catchy Tin Pan Alley tunes, Duncan at first thought Gershwin's music was beneath his breadth of training, and Gershwin had his heart set on a different singer for the role. Despite their concerns, they agreed to hold an audition in Gershwin's apartment. Duncan came prepared with several German and Italian art songs, but no accompanist. Gershwin sat down at the piano and sight-read the music one time through, then played the piece again entirely from memory, holding eye contact with Duncan throughout the entire song. It was then that Duncan realized the musical genius of Gershwin and accepted the role of Porgy.



“Do you realize, Annie, that we are making history?”  
–Todd Duncan to Anne Brown after the first full run-through

## BESS – ANNE BROWN

Anne Brown was a 20-year-old vocal student when she heard the news that Gershwin was looking for singers for his first opera, so she wrote to him for an audition. She was brought in to audition several times and developed a playful and collaborative relationship with the composer. Gershwin used her as a sounding board and had her sing the parts for the female roles as he was writing them, before finally (and expectedly) offering her the role of Bess.



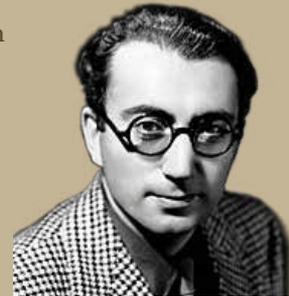
#### SPORTIN' LIFE—JOHN W. "BUBBLES" SUBLETT

Gershwin's first choice for the energetic role of Sportin' Life, John W. "Bubbles" Sublett, is known as the father of rhythm tap. He was well respected throughout the entertainment community and even gave tap-dancing lessons to Fred Astaire. However, Bubbles could not read music and shared some of the less-than-desirable traits of his character, often showing up very late for rehearsals and flirting with the girls in the chorus. The director and conductor wanted to replace him, but Gershwin knew Bubbles would add a special spark to the opera and devoted his time to helping the vaudeville star learn his rhythms and notes through dance.



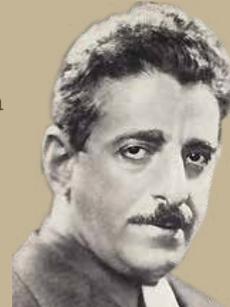
#### DIRECTOR – ROUBEN MAMOULIAN

Rouben Mamoulian was the brash, young, talented émigré from Eastern Europe who directed the Heywards' stage play, *Porgy*, and then the premiere of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. Many critics attributed *Porgy*'s success to the passionate direction of Mamoulian, who developed a deep connection with his cast. Ironically, Mamoulian, who went on to have a successful career in theater and films, was fired from the 1959 film version of *Porgy and Bess*, which was directed by Otto Preminger.



#### CONDUCTOR – ALEXANDER SMALLENS

Alexander Smallens immigrated to the United States from Russia and served as the assistant conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra. He had recently conducted an opera that was performed by an all-black cast, Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*. Gershwin attended and met with Smallens backstage to ask him to conduct the premiere of *Porgy and Bess*. Smallens went on to conduct revivals of *Porgy and Bess* in the 1940s, as well as its first world tour in 1952.



#### THE CHORUS – EVA JESSYE CHOIR

In the same production during which he met Smallens, Gershwin heard the wonderful work of the Eva Jessye Choir. Gershwin invited the all-black choir of professional singers to audition for the opera. The choir chose to sing a shout-sung-style spiritual, and Gershwin immediately felt inspired by its sound and asked them to play what is considered "the heart" of the opera.



"At the rehearsals, George occasionally complained that many of the people in the cast had unfortunately been born in the North. Everyone laughed at this since many of us had never even visited the South! Some of us were college students and didn't know the dialect of the Southern Negro."

—Anne Brown

## PORGY AND BESS TAKES THE STAGE

Before its Broadway premiere, the production of *Porgy and Bess* traveled to Boston's Colonial Theatre for a few out-of-town performances. Gershwin had been advised by the Theatre Guild to make significant cuts to the opera after the run-through. The enthusiasm of the Boston audience—which praised and applauded the singers after every scene, concluding in a 15-minute standing ovation for Gershwin at the end—provided a boost of confidence to the company. However, several additional cuts were made before it returned to New York,

*Porgy and Bess* premiered on Broadway at the Alvin Theatre on October 10, 1935. While the star-studded New York audience reacted with cheers and tears, the critics' reviews were mixed. Most praised the singers and the production, but some expressed confusion with Gershwin's compositions and debated whether the piece should be called an opera or musical theater.



“Let it be said at once that Mr. Gershwin has contributed something glorious to the spirit of Heyward’s community legend. Whether or not Mr. Gershwin’s score measures up to its intentions as an American folk opera lies [with] Mr. Downes, who is beating his brown in the adjoining cubical [where] there is an authoritative ring to his typewriter tonight. But to the ears of a theatre critic, Mr. Gershwin’s music gives a personal voice to Porgy’s loneliness ... that was inarticulate in the original play.”

—*New York Times*

### THE NATIONAL THEATRE

Not long after closing in New York, the opera went on its first national tour, visiting Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and Detroit. The production’s final stop was at the National Theatre in Washington, DC, which held a “whites-only” policy at the time. Brown and Duncan refused to sing. Theater officials, not wanting to lose the performance, countered with allowing blacks to sit in the balcony for the matinee performances. Duncan refused: “Nothing would do, other than black people be allowed to buy tickets for any seat in the house.” The officials ultimately agreed to open the house to all people for the week’s run of *Porgy and Bess* on March 16, 1936. In a historic feat, hundreds of African Americans took their seats throughout the National Theatre to view Gershwin’s opera.

“When last night’s audience, at the close of Act II, broke into an outburst of applause elicited by the frenzy of the terrified gathering of the Negroes shrinking from the storm ... it was evident that Mr. Gershwin, in the finest pages of the score, had given us something suspiciously like an authentic folk-opera in an unmistakably American vein.”

—*New York Herald Tribune*

## LOSS OF GERSHWIN

Just over one year after the historic performance of his opera in Washington, DC, Gershwin fell ill. He continued to conduct and work on films, complaining only of occasional dizzy spells, headaches, and occasional mood changes. By June 1937 he was admitted to the hospital and fell into a coma on July 9. Doctors discovered Gershwin had a brain tumor. The tumor was surgically removed, but Gershwin would not survive; he passed away on July 11, at the age of 38. While Gershwin's unexpected death was tragic, the music of his *Porgy and Bess* lived on. The opera underwent many revivals and adaptations, and has been performed around the world.



2015 Ravinia performance of *Porgy and Bess*

Bobby McFerrin, Nicole Cabell, Brian Stokes Mitchell, Vocality,  
[Josephine Lee, Chorus Director]

# A TALE TOLD IN BLACK AND WHITE

“I consider *Porgy and Bess* good music, and I think it will make a good film. In our fight for equality and dignity, we often lose sight of good art form. This could have been white or black, in the same locale, the dialogue would have been the same.”

—Robert McFerrin, singing voice of Porgy for Sidney Poitier in the 1959 MGM film version of *Porgy and Bess*

“The music is great, but I wouldn’t do it as the DuBose Heyward script was written. All that crap shooting and razors and lusts and cocaine is the old conception of the Negro.”

—Harry Belafonte, who turned down the 1959 film role

At the turn of the 20th century, the most popular depictions of African Americans in musical theater were through the unfortunate “minstrel singers” (white singers and dancers who wore blackface and sang “coon songs,” racist songs depicting negative stereotypes of blacks). By the 1920s, the Great Migration—the movement of thousands of blacks from the rural South to urban centers in the North—heralded the dawn of the Harlem Renaissance and generated interest in African-American performers, songwriters, and musical styles. In this changing climate, both Heyward and Gershwin sought to create a more uplifting, authentic, and validating portrayal of African Americans.

For its time, Heyward’s portrayal of African Americans as complex lead characters in his novel and play was groundbreaking. They challenged more blatantly racist portrayals of blacks who had been, to that point, primarily depicted as buffoons or worse. Gershwin’s use of jazz, blues, spirituals, and ring shout in the opera—and his adherence to their authentic melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic structures—led to a wider recognition and appreciation of African-American music.

The Heywards and Gershwins also rebuffed racist attitudes of the time period and created a change in the artistic landscape of the country by insisting, during their lifetimes and through their estates, that the works be performed by black artists.

However, while generally regarded as a popular and beloved opera today, and having been credited for shattering racial stereotypes of its day, throughout its history, *Porgy and Bess* has paradoxically elicited a great deal of criticism for the way in which it depicts African Americans. This contradiction has been explored by many cultural and social historians, debated in the press (almost since its debut in 1936), and exposed in the conflicted reflections of its cast members for over six decades.

Black criticism of *Porgy and Bess* has waxed and waned in parallel motion with African-American civil rights history in the 20th century. The opera was initially embraced by some of the great African-American thinkers of the time. However, the concern that a portrayal of poor blacks gripped by crime, drug addiction, and violence would be the prevailing image made it increasingly unpopular in the African-American communities.

The racial stereotypes of these deeply flawed characters continue to be perpetuated in the theater and on the screen. By the 1950s, the height of the civil rights movement, many blacks expressed outright disdain for a work that they felt did little to uplift the African-American people. Many actors and musicians refused to have anything to do with the opera. Ironically, an international tour of *Porgy and Bess* in 1952 gave great visibility to the opera and the cast members involved, including Maya Angelou, and prominent stars had roles in the 1959 film version.

Critics of the work also argued that Heyward and Gershwin, while celebrating what they perceived as “authentic” to the black residents of Catfish Row, were motivated by their own overly simplistic and, some might say, limited and prejudiced perspectives of African Americans. Considered in this light, the characters singing in a vernacular dialect could be construed as ignorant and minstrel-like.

“Yesterday afternoon he [Gershwin] and Mr. Heyward went to a Negro church and listened to the singing. ‘I’m sure that even Mr. Heyward was surprised by the primitiveness of this particular service, and it gave me [lots] to think about,’ Mr. Gershwin said.”

—*Charleston News and Courier*, December 4, 1933

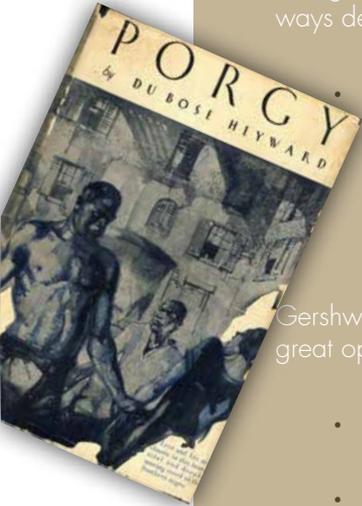
Thanks to the tenacity and courage of many cast members, directors, and producers, subsequent productions of the opera further challenged racist attitudes and broke historic and cultural ground by desegregating the theaters in which the productions were performed. Because the piece gained such an esteemed place in the American music canon, as well as internationally, it has afforded performance opportunities to thousands of black musicians, opera singers, and actors for the past 75 years. However, many black performers have felt pigeonholed into *Porgy and Bess* as the only roles they have been considered suitable for.

The two great debates about *Porgy and Bess*—Is it opera or musical theater? Does it celebrate black culture or denigrate African Americans?—moved toward resolution in the 1970s and was galvanized with the 1976 Houston Grand Opera production. Gershwin had made several cuts in his brief post-production relationship with the opera. Further cuts made in subsequent productions and tours in the 1940s led to the work’s financial viability and popularity as a musical theater piece, but did little to support its status as an opera. The Houston revival restored most of Gershwin’s original music, including recitatives and orchestral interludes to the piece. With that restoration, it was embraced as a legitimate opera, and audiences and critics focused more on its merits as an exemplary musical work than on its role as social commentary.

Today *Porgy and Bess* has established itself as one of the most beloved operas of the 20th century. It is the lasting legacy of a masterful composer and a tribute to the melding of America’s rich heritage and diverse cultural traditions. The beautiful and moving musical score has helped to carry the work through changing eras and will continue to stand the test of time.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Though accepted as one of the great operas, Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* has in many ways defied categorization.



- What are some of the factors that make it difficult to pigeonhole the piece into any one category?  
What are some of the best examples of cross over music today? And what elements are found in these pieces? Are they similar to the genre bending categories of *Porgy and Bess*?

Gershwin died tragically in 1937 at the tender age of 38. *Porgy and Bess* was his last great opera, which he only saw in its first two years of performance.

- If Gershwin had lived longer, would he have written other operas? What might they have been about? Or sounded like?
- Would he have made further revisions to *Porgy and Bess*? What would he have said about his famous opera 10, 20, or 30 years after its debut?

The story of *Porgy and Bess*—based on the novel and subsequent play, *Porgy*, by DuBose and Dorothy Heyward—is a complicated tale of community life, internal and external conflict, love, triumph, and tragedy. It is a rich plot with characters to love, hate, or sympathize with.

- What part of the story did you find most compelling?
- Which character appeals to you?
- Which character evokes your sympathy?
- Which character would you like to chuck into Charleston Harbor?
- If you were to rewrite the story, which scene would you change?
- Would you rewrite the ending?

As the first widely acclaimed opera to feature an all-black cast and portray the lives of a group of African Americans, *Porgy and Bess* is as important culturally and historically as it is musically.

- In what ways did *Porgy and Bess*, at the time it was first written, advance opportunities for African Americans in the arts and in society?
- In what ways might *Porgy and Bess* have created negative perceptions of African Americans through racial stereotypes?
- If you were an aspiring opera singer, would you want to perform in *Porgy and Bess*? What are the factors that would influence your decision?

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### Workshop Presenters – February 13, 2016

*Thanks to all of our workshop presenters for sharing creative teaching strategies for exploring the many facets of Porgy and Bess in the classroom.*

Ann Caldwell and the Magnolia Singers

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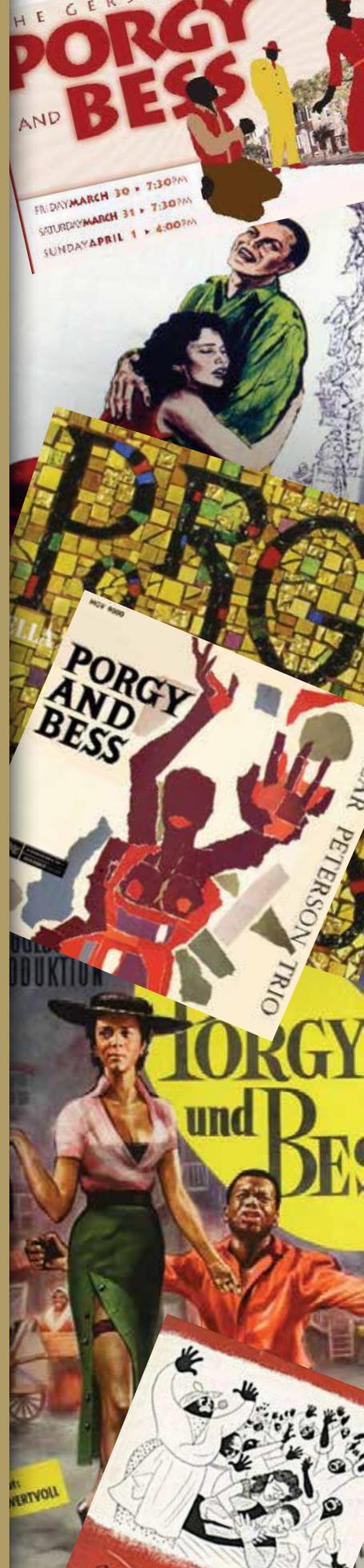
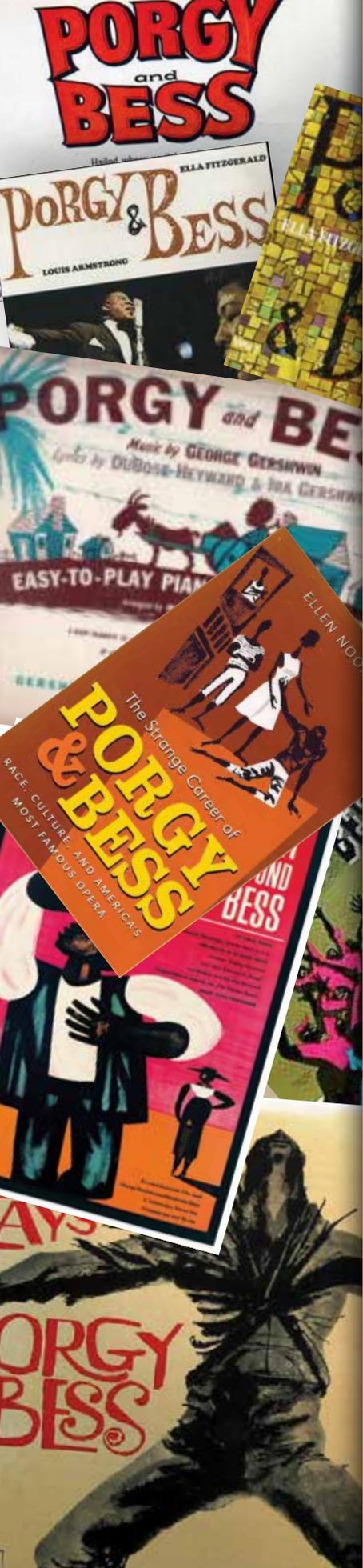
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