

I HEAR AMERICA SINGING: ADVENTURES IN AMERICAN OEPR
Kip Cranna, Dramaturg Emeritus, San Francisco Opera
September – November 2020, Thursdays 10:00am online

Class No. 2, September 24, 2020: Musical Examples
Examples are from YouTube unless otherwise noted

George Gershwin: <i>Porgy and Bess</i> (1935)	“Summertime”	Leontyne Price, soprano
George Gershwin: <i>Porgy and Bess</i> (1935)	Video Excerpts: Glyndebourne Production The Glyndebourne Chorus The London Philharmonic Sir Simon Rattle, conductor Trevor Nunn, director, 1992	Willard White as Porgy Cynthia Haymon as Bess Harolyn Blackwell as Clara Damon Evans as Sportin' Life Gregg Baker as Crown Cynthia Clarey as Serena Marietta Simpson as Maria Bruce Hubbard as Jake
George Gershwin: <i>Porgy and Bess</i> (1935)	Video Excerpts: San Francisco Opera Orchestra and Chorus John DeMain, conductor Francesca Zambello, director, 2009	Eric Owens as Porgy Laquita Mitchell as Bess Lester Lynch as Crown Michael Austin as Robbins Angel Blue as Clara Eric Greene as Jake

Porgy and Bess: Information and Synopsis
(courtesy of Metropolitan Opera)

Once hailed as the harbinger of a new type of Southern novel, DuBose Heyward’s *Porgy* (1925) emerged at a time of rapid social change. Against a backdrop of urbanization, industrialization, and the mass exodus (known as the “Great Migration”) of African Americans from the rural South to northern cities, Heyward’s novel depicts a black Charleston community and its residents with a sympathy and depth of emotion that were groundbreaking for the time. Like many writers of the literary Southern Renaissance of the 1920s, Heyward explored themes of family, community, and religion, all intertwined with the convoluted forces of race and historical inheritance. White critics of the day saw *Porgy* as an authentic and universal portrayal of Southern black life, and they attributed this “authenticity” to Heyward’s own family history. Born to an old Charleston society family of constrained finances, Heyward spent time among the black laborers on his

aunt's plantation, sold burial insurance in Charleston's black neighborhoods, and worked as a clerk for a shipping line, where he came into contact with the black stevedores on the waterfront. But perhaps most influentially, in his youth, his mother helped support the family by collecting (and performing for tour groups) folk tales drawn from the region's Gullah community.

When George Gershwin read Porgy in 1926, he was immediately struck by the novel's operatic potential: He had long considered stories of the black South to be the truest representation of American folklore and a necessary foundation for his first full-length opera. By the time Gershwin was ready to begin composing in 1933, DuBose Heyward and his wife, Dorothy, had already adapted the novel into a wildly successful stage play, and many of their alterations are retained in the libretto that the Heywards, Gershwin, and Gershwin's brother Ira developed for the opera. As in the play, Sportin' Life takes on a larger and more malign role than in the novel, Bess is less pitiful, and the work arguably ends on a more optimistic note, with Porgy transformed by his resolve to follow Bess to New York. But above all, it is Gershwin's music, with its jazz rhythms and irresistible melodies, that elevates Heyward's constrained character types into vividly realized people whose loves and hopes now live on in operatic productions across the globe.

The Story

Act I: Catfish Row, a tenement neighborhood of Charleston, South Carolina, in the 1920s

The inhabitants of Catfish Row relax after a day's work. Clara sings a lullaby to her baby, imagining a future free from hardship. The drug dealer Sportin' Life; Clara's husband, Jake; and some of the other men play craps under the disapproving eye of Serena, whose husband, Robbins, is also gambling with the group.

Porgy arrives and is about to join the game when Crown and his partner Bess appear. The fiery-tempered Crown joins the dice game. Drunk and high on drugs, he loses, starts a fight, and kills Robbins with a cotton hook. Crown runs off, telling Bess that he'll be back for her. The community shuns Bess as they await the arrival of the police. Sportin' Life offers to take her to New York with him, but she refuses. Only Porgy is sympathetic, offering Bess shelter and protection, which she gratefully accepts.

The following evening, Robbins's widow, Serena, leads the mourners in prayers. A collection plate is passed around to raise money for Robbins's burial. Porgy and Bess enter, and Bess offers Serena a contribution. Serena refuses the money,

assuming that it comes from Crown, but when Bess explains that the money is actually Porgy's, Serena accepts it.

When the police arrive, they accuse Peter of Robbins's murder. Peter tells them that Crown was responsible, but the police unfairly take him away as a material witness. Serena convinces the undertaker to bury Robbins for less than his usual fee, and Bess leads everyone in an exultant spiritual.

A month later, Porgy and Bess have fallen in love. As he watches Jake and the other fishermen mend their nets, Porgy happily reflects that although he is poor, he has everything he needs: a woman he loves, God, and song. Sportin' Life enters, but before he has an opportunity to peddle any of his "happy dust," Maria, the matriarch of Catfish Row, chases him away. The "lawyer" Frazier sells Bess a divorce; the fact that she and Crown were never married is just a "complication."

Everyone is preparing to leave for a church picnic on nearby Kittiwah Island. Sportin' Life again asks Bess to come with him to New York. He offers her drugs, but she refuses, and Porgy chases him off, telling him to leave Bess alone. Porgy and Bess celebrate their newfound happiness and look forward to being together forever. Porgy insists that Bess should go to the picnic without him. At first, she refuses, not wanting to leave him alone, but eventually she joins the others as they set off for the picnic.

On Kittiwah Island, the community is in high spirits. Sportin' Life describes his cynical view of religion until Serena chastises him. When the steamboat whistle announces that the time has come to leave, everyone starts to pack up their belongings. Bess hurries back to the ship—until Crown, who has been hiding on the island since Robbins's murder, calls out to her. He wants Bess, whom he still views as his property, to run away with him. Bess explains that she now has a new life with Porgy, but Crown, resorting to brutality and violence, forces her to remain with him.

Act II

A week later, ominous weather threatens the coast, but the fishermen of Catfish Row still leave at dawn for their day's work at sea. Bess, meanwhile, is heard talking deliriously from Porgy's room. She has been feverish and ill ever since returning from Kittiwah Island. Peter, released from police custody that morning, advises Porgy to take her to the hospital, but Serena invites her friends to pray for Bess's recovery instead. Bess finally emerges into the courtyard. She explains to Porgy that she wants to stay with him but Crown has threatened to take her away. Bess is

terrified. Porgy promises to protect her, no matter what. Suddenly, a clanging bell warns of an approaching hurricane. The fishermen are still at sea.

The following morning, as the hurricane rages outside, everyone cowers together in Serena's room to pray for deliverance from the storm. Suddenly, there's a knock at the door: It's Crown, seeking shelter and looking for Bess. Bess refuses to go with him, insisting that she wants to stay with Porgy. Crown mocks Porgy and drowns out everyone's prayers with a vulgar song. At the storm's height, Clara sees Jake's boat floating upside down on the water and rushes out to save her husband. Bess begs the men to go after Clara. Throwing his strength and bravery in everyone's face, Crown heads out into the storm.

By the following night, the storm has passed. The women grieve for those who have been lost, including Jake, Clara and, they assume, Crown. Sportin' Life appears, mocks their weeping, and hints that Crown is still alive. Bess sings a lullaby, comforting Clara's baby. Under the cover of darkness, Crown steals in and approaches Porgy's door, but Porgy, who has been waiting for him, strikes and kills Crown.

The next afternoon, the police detective returns to Catfish Row, accompanied by the coroner. They are investigating Crown's murder. Serena and the other women pretend to know nothing about it. The police then go to Porgy's room and tell him he must come with them and identify Crown's body. Horrified by the idea of looking at Crown's dead face, Porgy refuses to go. The police drag him off.

With Porgy gone, Sportin' Life sees an opportunity to get Bess for himself. He convinces her that Porgy will be locked up indefinitely and tells her that if she follows him to New York, he can offer her a wonderful new life. At first, Bess spurns him, but when he convinces her to take some "happy dust," he knows that she will soon be dependent on the drug—and him.

A week later, the inhabitants of Catfish Row greet each other as a new day dawns. Porgy returns from jail in a jubilant mood, distributing gifts that he bought with money he won playing dice in jail. Unaware of his friends' unease, he calls out for Bess—but there is no answer. Eventually, Serena and Maria reveal that Bess has gone to New York with Sportin' Life. Hearing this, Porgy calls for his crutch and sets out to find Bess as if on his way to the Promised Land.