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Porgy and Bess -- a Folk Opera

A REVIEW

By HALL JOHNSON

WHEN it was first announced that an operatic version of Porgy was in preparation, I had grave misgivings about it. From my previous knowledge of the original novel and the subsequent dramatic version, I was unable to believe that a musical setting could add anything to the value of the story,—that, in fact, it could not do anything but weaken and sentimentalize it. Here was a play, it seemed, which simply did not "invite" music other than, maybe, a few incidental tunes for atmosphere. Nor was I reassured by the names of those to be connected with the production. It is one thing to approach a task with good intentions. But the best of intentions can never take the place of adequate preparation and seasoned experience in the particular requirements of that task. And it seemed to me that a job of such a special nature made very special requirements. To begin with, there was the question of opera as a musical form; there was the question of Negro music, the behavior of Negroes in general and of Porgy and Bess in particular; and then there was Mr. Gershwin, who was to make an artistic unity of all these ingredients. This would be a stiff test, even for a specialist, and I was not optimistic. However, I wanted to be able to like it and I did want it to be, at least, a good show.

After having sat and stood through four performances of Porgy and Bess, I am now certain that I do like it and that it is a good show. I like it because I have always admired Gershwin's music and this opera, whatever its faults contains some very good Gershwin. Nobody should have expected it to be a perfect Negro opera. That would have been miraculous. In fact, it is only as good as it seems to be because of the intelligent pliability of the large Negro cast. While obviously working under strict direction, they still are able to infuse enough of their own natural racial qualities into the proceedings to invest them with a convincing semblance of plausibility. This is true even in the musical and dramatic moments most alien to the real Negro genre. If these singing actors had been as inexperienced as the composer, Porgy and Bess might have turned out to be as stiff and artificial in performance as it is on paper. Fortunately for all concerned, this is not the case. And I think it is a good show for no other reason that that it presents these capable people in an interesting and varied entertainment.

A distinguished Negro musician writes an extended review of "Porgy and Bess," a folk opera now playing at the Alvin Theatre.

For Porgy and Bess is interesting, in its faults as well as in its virtues. And it is varied, oh, so varied! Now, even the freest conception of opera (grand-, folk-, or any other kind), must respect some sort or form, since it is the musical embodiment of a story and a story without form is aesthetically unthinkable. Hence, while extreme interest is the one desirable quality, this interest is absolutely dependent upon the logical development of the chosen form. Extreme variety, therefore, whether in the material or in its treatment, is valuable only to the degree in which it can subserve the general interest. This requires it to be so subtly blended into the form that there are no seams nor wrinkles; otherwise the interest is broken up and dispersed. Successfully handled, the variety-element in an opera should be noticeable only in retrospect, after the performance is all over. The performance in progress must give the impression of one experience, seen and felt through its own necessary and illuminating ramifications.

From a purely technical angle, the chief fault in Mr. Gershwin's opera is inexpert craftsmanship in the manipulation of the variety-element. We are confronted with a series of musical episodes which, even if they do not belong together, could be made to appear as if they do by a better handling of the musical connecting tissue. Without necessarily using the "left-motif" system, there could and should be more consistent thematic development in the orchestral interludes which join these episodes. When the responsibility of bridging the gap is left to conversational recitativo, our composer is even less successful. The speeches are set to musical lines which harmer their intelligibility by the use of misplaced accents and unnatural inflections. The Mendelssohn of Elijah or the Strauss of Salome would be excellent school-masters for Mr. Gershwin in this subject of recitativo. Even better, for his current needs, would be a perusal of the freer verse-lines of any of the Negro spirituals, wherein the significance of every word is inmeasurably heightened by its tonal investiture. These things are of paramount importance in opera, the most artificial of musical forms. By the very act of constantly singing, the actor is denied any serious attempt at dramatic realism,
so it is the music which must be the authoritative story-teller. The orchestra must govern and define the changes of mood, the recitativo must be more eloquent than the spoken word and the solo and ensemble numbers must grow naturally out of the ebb and flow of the story as told in the music. One life must animate the whole. So, while *Porgy and Bess* may be delightful as a musical show, it is a bit disconcerting as opera.

Now, what should be the requisites for writing good Negro opera,—or a good opera about Negroes,—which is an altogether different affair? Both must be a musical recounting of a good story of Negro life dominated by Negro thought. If the operatic technique is sound, no matter what the musical idiom, the result can be a good opera about Negroes. A good Negro opera, however, must be not only good opera but must be written in an authentic Negro musical language and sung and acted in a characteristic Negro style. Perhaps it is Mr. Gershwin’s fault if he has not written a good opera, but he can hardly blame it if he has not quite satisfied our notion of what a good Negro opera should be. This would require more time and application than any composer not a specialist in this line could be expected to put into it. The informing spirit of Negro music is not to be caught and understood merely by listening to the tunes and Mr. Gershwin’s much-publicized visits to Charleston for local color do not amount even to a matriculation in the preparatory-school that he needed for his work. Nothing can be more misleading, especially to an alien musician, than a mere visits to Negro revivals and funerals. Here one encounters the “outside” at its most external. The obvious sights and sounds are only the foam which has no meaning without the beer. And here let it be said that it is not the color nor the aloofness of the white investigator which keeps him on the outside. It is the powerful tang and thrill of the “foam” which excites him prematurely and makes him rush away too soon, to write books and music on a subject of which he has not even begun to scratch the surface. It is to be regretted that the whites who have remained longer and learned more seem to count no serious musicians among their number.

Mr. Gershwin has at his command, however, a certain Negroid flavor which has lent piquancy to some of his earlier compositions and which shows up to occasional advantage in his opera. But, while we agree that a composition in a definite racial vein must not necessarily reek in every single measure with that particular style, still, we feel that, in a work of the proportions of *Porgy and Bess*, there should be more than just an occasional flavor. I am, doubtless, discrediting many places where Mr. Gershwin himself is sure he has caught the “color.” That is to be expected and can be easily accounted for. But there is, in his approach to Negro music, another flaw, much more serious because more elementary, which should be noticed first.

One basic quality exists in genuine Negro music which even the fairly musical layman must have recognized long ago. That is the quality of utter simplicity,—in theme and in style. It is only in the singing of large groups of Negroes that a contrapuntal or harmonic complexity may occasionally seem to be present, and this illusion is due to the simple approach of the individual singers. Each sings his part as he feels it. The result is musical because each contrapuntal part keeps constantly in mind the announced theme; it sounds complicated because the rap creator of each part is not bothering himself at all about the elaborate improvisation his neighbor may be preferring at the same moment. But the fundamental idea of simplicity

*Todd Duncan and Anne Wiggins Brown in “Porgy and Bess”*
is still active, following the law that simple people reacting to elementary situations will express themselves simply and directly, Mr. Gershwin must be aware of this law. Still, in the heavy, involved treatment of his thematic material, he suggests sophisticated intricacies of attitude which could not possibly be native to the minds of the people who make up his story.

If this is a matter of deliberate choice on Mr. Gershwin's part, we will still try to accept him on his own grounds. After all, he is an individual artist, as free to write about Negroes in his own way as any other composer to write about anything else. The only thing a really creative artist can be expected to give us is an expression of his own reaction to a given stimulus. We are not compelled to agree with it or even to like it. It is not to be considered as just another photograph of our old estimates snap-shotted by a new photographer. True, we should expect Mr. Gershwin to have a more intimate contact with his subject than the European composers who have attempted Negro idioms. But, if he has and does not care to profit by it, we still must accept his contribution as the sum-total of what he really feels. What we are to consider then is not a Negro opera by Gershwin, but Gershwin's idea of what a Negro opera should be. The fact that it is advertised under the broader sub-title, American Folk Opera, does not disguise the specific direction of his attempt.

Now, if we accept Mr. Gershwin's point of view, becomes much easier for us to understand and forgive many things. We may even begin to enjoy the French Creole quality of Clara's lullaby and the Russian cathedral suggestions in the Wake-Scene with Serena's beautiful lament in three-four rhythm which should, by all means, have been in four-four. We can also see why the normal exigencies of good musicianship should occasionally have to give way before the necessity (?) of speaking a Broadway language on Broadway. Thus, Porgy's song, I Got Plenty of Nuttin', besides lacking every true racial quality, gets punctuated (or punctured), by a series of sudden off-tone shouts in the manner of the cheepier Escaulidos about to enter the bull ring—a style no Negro singer ever uses. And the inimitable Sportin' Life, who can moan so naturally and persuasively to Bess that Dere's a Trun' Leavin' Soon for New York, is required in the Picnic Scene to try to sing It Ain't Necessarily So. The first song becomes, through the art of John Bubbles, a real Negro gem. The second-named song is so un-Negroid, in thought and in structure, that even Bubbles cannot save it. Without the least shadow of a dramatic pretext, poor Sportin' Life, otherwise a well-drawn character, is pulled out of focus to sing to his merry friends at a picnic this would-be-sophisticated sort of song with verses compounded of flippant wise-cracks on Biblical characters. Now, we can believe that a boastful bully like Crown, in the excitement of a dreadful hurricane, might stalk fearlessly among his panic-stricken brethren and jeer at their prayers to a God who, for that moment, at least, seems to have nothing but scorn for everything weak. It is not easy, however, to believe that Sportin' Life (a genuine product of Catfish Row, for all his smart talk about New York), could be so entirely liberated from that superstitious awe of Divinity which even the most depraved southern Negro never quite loses. His immorality is fleshly, not cerebral. In a white revue and sung by the proper type of comedian, this song would be actually clever and amusing. Here, in the wrong place and in the wrong hands, it can only suggest a pathetic Gilbert and Sullivan vainly trying to go slumming in a very smudgy coat of burntcork.

These are a few of the instances where Mr. Gershwin's music has missed a Negro feeling. At other times he has succeeded in catching a real racial strain. For example, the opening measures of the love-duet between Porgy and Bess have a delightful Negroid flavor which is already familiar to the composer and his admirers. And later in the opera, when Bess is trying to resist the ferocious blandishments of Crown on the island, she sings a few pages of such vibrant beauty, so replete with the tragedy of the minor spirituals, that most of what follows is made to sound a little more false by reason of the absolute rigidity of this episode.

So much for the music of Porgy and Bess. But no matter what it may present now in point of authenticity or spuriousness, we may be sure that it would have been certain of better results if the staging had been more sympathetic. Of what good could be the true Negro operatic idiom if it is to be coupled, as in this case, with a stage-direction which affronts every sensibility of the Negro temperament? Will the time ever come when a colored performer on a Broadway stage can be subtle, quiet or even silent, just for a moment, and still be interesting? Must the light revues always be hot, fast and loud, and the serious (?) pieces always profane, hysterical and louder? Always loudness! Always anything makes for monotony and Negroes can truthfully be everything but monotonous. On the contrary, the faculty of rapid and complete change of mood has always been their principal artistic charm as well as their surest social salvation. Why does Clara have to scream the lullaby to her baby in the middle of the noisome courtyard of Catfish Row where only a drunk could
sleep? Why does Porgy have to bawl out his contentment, his new-found, inward happiness,—like a young and fiery captain of Hussars brandishing his sword before his men about to rush into battle? This inexcusably incorrect treatment falsifies and weakens the effect of the only two quiet and introspective songs in the whole piece. And why, in opera, spoil two songs in order to keep a stageful of people in turbulent motion—and for no other reason?

Again, we may pretend not to notice that Bess lags a little behind on the island for the sole purpose of being intercepted by Cio-Cio, and we can easily imagine that the watchful Maria, who passes just a few feet ahead, has just turned a sudden corner to keep from hearing and seeing the whole occurrence. Also by now we are fully and painfully aware that in all Negro group-scenes on Broadway there must be much swaying of bodies and brandishing of arms with SHADOW EFFECTS, though this has not always been so stiffly stylized as in the present Russian Pictorial Edition. But we do think that the end of Serena’s death-chant for her lost husband is sufficiently moving in itself and does not gain anything by her deliberate approach to the “baby spotlight” for a bigger and better shadow.

In opera, shouldn’t the song be more important than the shadow? There are already shadows enough and to spare.

Later, when Serena’s room is being used by the crowd as a shelter from the hurricane and the combined effort of everybody present is centered for interminable minutes on keeping the door closed, we fail to see why the door has to be left open at the end of the scene. Of course, it did let the lightning flash in on the howling crowd. Result, more shadows and more loudness! But these shadows were distinctly anti-climactic after the better shadows of the Wake-Scene and the howling was all wrong for once. One does not have to know the simpler Negroes very long to learn how absolutely quiet they can be indoors during a storm. Some even crawl between mattresses. And that door would have been CLOSED! The second-hand lightning effect did not justify the sacrifice of a more veracious direction. Indeed, a sudden bang, a sudden flash and a “black-out” would have been better theatre.

So, taken all, Mr. Gershwin has had several serious handicaps in trying to write his Negro opera. (1) The lack of story-telling qualities in the music, due to faulty operatic technique; (2) too little first-hand knowledge of his character-types and their real music; (3) the necessity of perverting that little to satisfy Broadway tastes; (4) the colossal handicap of a direction which flounders uncertainly between alternating periods of tableaux-rivants, Russian ballet, conventional opera and slap-stick vaudeville. (One wished for the tipsy comedian to come out and have fun with the “animated” rocking-chairs. His presence was so thoroughly implied).

Considering the many and diverse burdens American Folk Opera has had to struggle up under, Porgy and Bess has turned out surprisingly well. Manufactured and presented by such a brilliant array of names and performed with such faithful earnestness by such a clever cast, it affords quite adequate fare for the average uncritical audience without too much interest either in opera or in Negroes. This audience admires Gershwin, (as I do), for his nice tunes, whether they appear singly, in rows or in clusters, like a bunch of grapes. At the moment, it also admired the Broadway Negro style because it does not know the real and its intelligence is not yet insulted when Negro folk-material is mis-stated in foreign terms.

There are, at least, two signs of progress. Producers and audiences alike have admitted (1) the value of Negro dramatic and musical material and (2) the folly of offering it with any other than Negro performers. The next step forward will be the insistence upon authenticity of style. But the first two admissions were the hard-won results of forced comparisons and the next step will be achieved only when the public has been made to see and like Negro ma-
terial presented as its creators understand and feel it. Which places a definite responsibility upon all theatre-loving Negroes as well as upon every person, of whatever race, who loves and welcomes new expressions of beauty in the theatrical arts. The answer is simple and unavoidable.

There must be born a genuine Negro theatre in which superior training in theatrical technique must be the wise and willing servant of superior familiarity with the new material. Heretofore the reverse has always been true. Capable Negro actors, no matter how deeply immersed in the folk-ways and folk-talk of their own people, have been made to take incorrect direction from clever theatre men who knew everything about everybody but Negroes,—or, at best, had only the old spurious stage-imitations as models. And so the circle goes round and round.

Artistically, we darker Americans are in a most peculiar situation with regard to what we have to give the world. In our several hundred years of enforced isolation in this country we have had plenty of time and plenty of reason to sing each other songs and tell each other tales. These songs and stories have a hidden depth of meaning as well as a simple and sincere external beauty. But the same wall which forced them into existence has closed in tight upon their meaning and allows only their beauty to escape through the chinks. So that our folk-culture is like the growth of some hardy, yet exotic, shrub, whose fragrance never fails to delight discriminating nostrils even when there is no interest in the depths of its roots. But when the leaves are gathered by strange hands they soon wither, and when cuttings are transplanted into strange soil, they have but a short and sickly life. Only those who sowed the seed may know the secret at the root.

In other words, the folk-lore of the American Negro is not a frayed rag of a culture torn off by immigrants from the mother-garment in the old country and kept intact in the new by journals and periodic meetings. No matter what land saw the projection of its primal germ, its fecundation, growth and maturity occurred here and here it must have its say. If a thing of such beauty had come into being on some remote portion of the globe, women's clubs all over America would be paying lecturers to tell them all about it and enterprising Broadway managers would be importing samples. But the externals of it have been lying around underfoot for generations and, by long familiarity with these externals, those who would make casual use of them are persuaded that what they see is all there is.

Peasants of other countries, on coming to America, quickly (and voluntarily) lose their individual folk-qualities in the effort to become Americans. They are encouraged in this process by every American institution. So that, in the theatre, no matter what the theme of the play, who produces it or who listens to it, it is an American play for an American audience. The Negro seems to melt into this theatrical pot only in direct proportion to the ignorance of the critic or the wilfulness of the director. The essential temper of his true folk-culture is so unique that it must be weakened if it is to be assimilated. In this state it is undervalued, like some common chemical which we use daily for humble purposes without suspecting its greater possibilities. Suddenly, an obscure scientist, who has been studying its properties for years, announces that it is a sure cure for a certain halting disease. There is a period of surprise and skepticism. Then he proves the truth of his claim and there follows a period of gratitude for a new blessing.

It is possible, and not improbable, that an injection of genuine Negro folk-culture may be good for the anaemia of the American theatre. If so, who will prove it? Only we who sowed the seed can know the full and potent secret of the flower. The fact that others try to master it and fail (while we are making up our minds what to do with it), should not fill us with resentment, but with pride and fresh determination. With the greatest patience and the best of intentions, all they can ever grasp is a handful of leaves.