

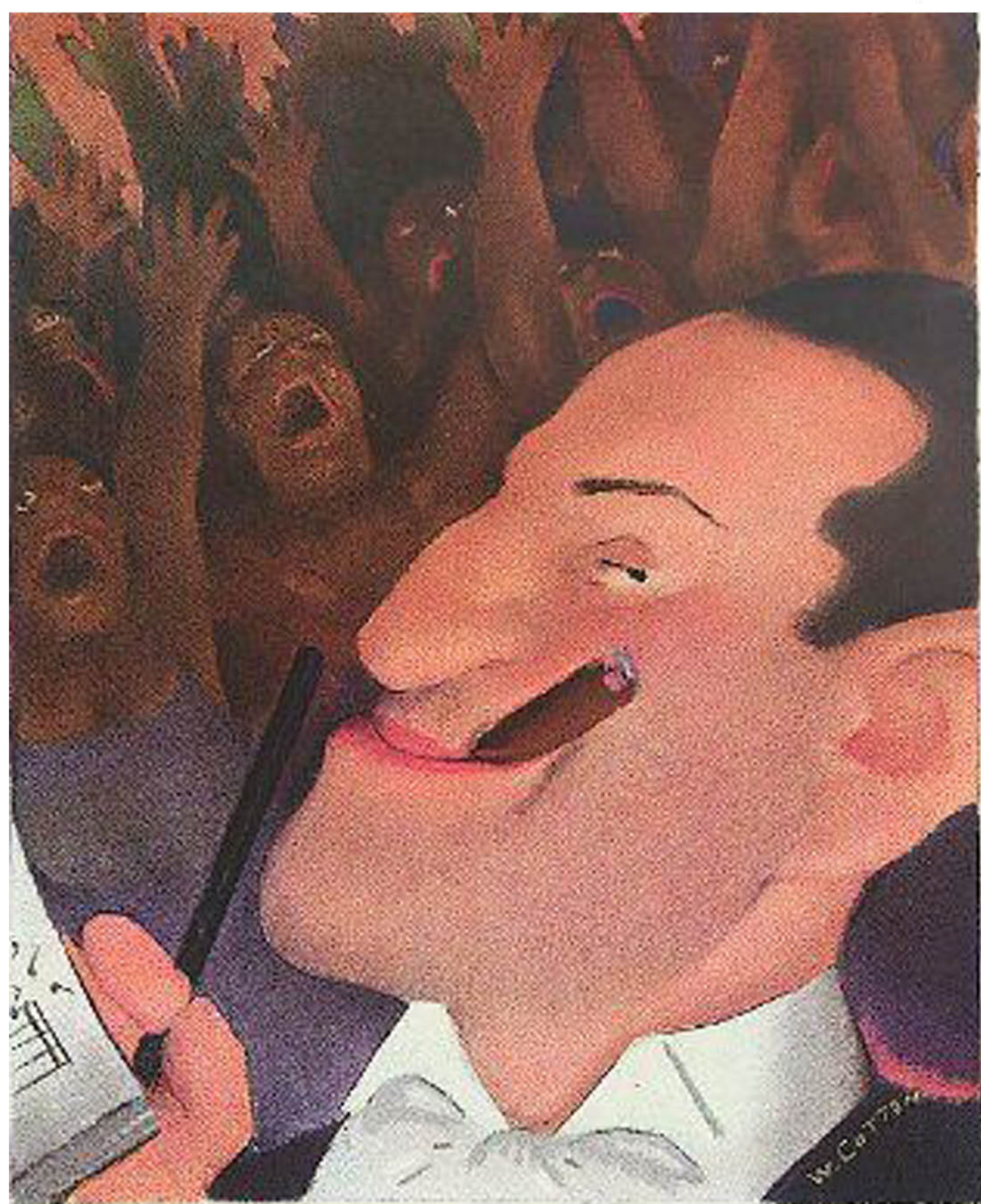
STAGE

December 1935

page thirty-six

SCORE by GEORGE GERSHWIN

In the music for *Porgy and Bess* Mr. Gershwin richly expands and intensifies the original *Porgy*



At every forward step in his career, George Gershwin has broken new ground. He has done this, not out of a conscious determination to provide periods for his biographer, but through his undisguisable nature. With the *Rhapsody in Blue* he rescued jazz from the arbitrary, cramping, four-square structure of the popular refrain. It is important to remember that these musical liberations have been, at their source, liberations of the composer himself.

The *Rhapsody*, for all its indebtedness to Tchaikovsky, Debussy, the Hungarians, and the Afro-Americans, as well as to Grofé's inspired touches in the orchestration, is a remarkable personal product, as unmistakably American as it is unmistakably Gershwin.

I thought of it in this connection as the curtain fell on the premiere of *Porgy and Bess*, and as, in the excitement of the occasion, a so-called cold Boston audience began to clap, stamp, and shout for the authors. Heyward, for some reason, did not appear on the stage. There, flushed with relief from weeks of mounting tension, stood Mamoulian and Gershwin, yielding to the embraces of the singers.

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I thought, too, of what Sam Behrman had said to me the night before. "It's immense!" he cried, and his eye-glasses gleamed right at me through the obscurity. "Do you know what? This ought to be given all over the world. Except Germany. The Hitlerites don't deserve it!" Could just such a scene as this take place anywhere else in the world today, with the exception of Soviet Russia? A Russian and Armenian had, respectively, prepared the scenery and the production; two Nordics, man and wife, had provided the novel and the play upon which the libretto was based; two Jews, brothers, had joined talents for lyrics and music, the labor of George being, naturally, the most considerable single expenditure of energy that had been brought to bear upon the venture. A cast of Negro singers and actors had interpreted this collaborative inspiration. It was an American symbol.

That symbol, for those who could understand, was already present in the more typical productions of our Tin Pan Alley. The Negro, from the first, has lent vitality and rhythm to our music. To the minstrel show, a form now more than a hundred years old, he helped to contribute, behind the black-face, both the elements that were to be commercialized in Tin Pan Alley: the sentimental ballad and the song of syncopation. The honest simplicity of the Negro, coupled with his natural passion for rhythm, infused even his religious music with broken, off-beat, "secular" effects.

The sophisticated White, who does not easily associate dance with religion, cherishes a suspicion of rapid, and especially syncopated, rhythms in his sacred or more serious music. This, as we shall presently see, has a direct relation to the criticism of *Porgy and Bess* in certain quarters.

Why the Jew of the North should, in time, take up the song of the Southern Negro and fuse it into a typically American product is an involved question. Perhaps, underneath the jazz rhythms and the general unconventionality of musical process lies the common history of an oppressed minority, and an ultimately Oriental origin. In any case, the human focus of this particular type of musical Americanism has been, from his very first notes, George Gershwin.

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Mr. J. Rosamond Johnson, who makes such a humorous bit out of the lawyer, Frazer, in *Porgy and Bess*, told Gershwin during the rehearsals that he was the musical Abraham Lincoln of the colored people. Johnson, a highly sensitive musician, could feel the spirit of liberation that inevitably associates itself with even the humblest and most vulgar expressions of jazz.

Now when Gershwin sat him down to pen a concerto, without even knowing what a concerto might be; when he wrote a series of preludes, in the consecrated forms of Chopin, yet based upon jazz material, he was obeying his fundamental impulse. That impulse, if I may express it without depending too much upon a pun, is literally liberative rather than deliberative. If Gershwin, in his own way, has a touch of genius in addition to his immense talent, it is not because he has produced impeccable masterpieces; he has not. There are any number of composers in the United States who can teach him textbook matter in all the orthodox musical forms.

No. If Gershwin has this touch of genius, it is because he seems to be in the grip of a power that he only half understands; because, with all his application, he is a natural force; because, and in no evasively metaphysical sense, his writing is much more than a conscious, and self-conscious, transcription of ideas. I seriously believe that no one is more surprised at Gershwin's inspirations than Gershwin himself.

The *Concerto in F*, which he is to play with the Philadelphia Orchestra on February 4, 1936, when Smallens will also conduct a suite drawn from *Porgy and Bess*, has not yet found its rightful place in the appreciation of concertgoers. Yet it is of a piece with *Of Thee I Sing* and *Porgy and Bess*. As Gershwin does not "condescend" to popular music, neither does he "aspire" to the higher forms; music, to him, is music. His innate sense of style led him, in the composition of his folk-opera, not so much to abandon, as quietly to ignore, the operatic conventions. Once again he broke those conventions by remaining, very unostentatiously, himself.

First, there is that confusing term, folk-opera. It has bothered some persons far too much. For it is a descriptive, rather than a musical, category. When Moussorgsky conceived *Boris Godunov* as a folk opera he certainly did not use the designation as an

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excuse for relaxing his artistic discipline. It meant to him a source of inspiration. Gershwin, at his proper distance, regarded his piece in the same way. The history of the most intricate symphonic forms, and even of the most solemn ecclesiastical music, shows origins in the humblest music of the people. Music, like language, in its beginnings is a social and a utilitarian function.

Gershwin, frankly, desired to reach the people with *Porgy and Bess*. There was no condescension in his aim; none of the "bringing opera to the people" that pollutes so many grand-operatic ventures with a mixture of false democracy, ill-concealed snobbery, financial chicanery, and offensive cultural implications. He created a folk opera as inevitably as Wagner (the parallel is not mine; it is that of no less sober a critic than Lawrence Gilman) was ultimately led to create *Parsifal*. This New Yorker and his music, born of an exemplary artistic honesty, are one. For better or worse—for both, as it appears—they are a tonal self-portrait.

As far back as 1922, when Gershwin did with Buddy de Sylva that ill-fated one-act opera, *Blue Monday Blues* (later re-titled *135th Street*), he had conceived an American opera in terms of the Negro. The history of *Porgy and Bess* I need not go into, as Mr. Heyward has already told it, most entertainingly, in these pages. A few people noticed, however, even in *135th Street*, Gershwin's attempt to operatize the spiritual and to create a recitative based upon the rhythms of Negro speech.

Recitative has always been the bane of opera, whether of the Italian or the German type. It is irritatingly like speech, and at the same time, too manifestly like song. It is hybrid. In the case of the Negro, however, it was possible to rationalize this quality, for the Negro's speech naturally tends—like that of all the more primitive peoples—toward song, out of which it probably grew. I do not attribute this theory to Gershwin; he never mentioned it to me, and, besides, he is not a man of theories. I do believe, however, that it was present, perhaps subconsciously, in his thoughts. The Whites, in *Porgy and Bess*, neither sing nor recite musically. This is a rejection of the recitative altogether. Often the Negroes themselves break into speech that only approximates definite tones, which are indicated in the score not as notes

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but as crosses on a certain line or space. This, of course, is not an invention of Gershwin; what I am interested in is not so much the symbols as the underlying reason for their employment.

What Gershwin sought in the recitative of *Porgy and Bess* was speech-melody. There is an excellent, if unpretentious, example of his success in the few words spoken by Frazer during the scene of the divorce, when that tony charlatan asks how long Bess has been married to Porgy. "One yeah? . . . Five yeah? . . . Ten yeah?" (Page 223, printed score.) This is genuinely humorous, not merely because the bassoon mimics Frazer's delightfully uncertain skip of a seventh, but because the interval is the very music of Frazer's speech.

Part of speech-melody, of course, is speech-rhythm. In the song, *My Man's Gone Now* (page 154, printed score), there is a characteristic instance of Gershwin in a more subtle approach to his problems. Read the words entirely dissociated from the music. They fall into double time; most people would read them in 4/4. That is how Gershwin first conceived them, until he felt something distinctly wrong. First of all, it was too regular for deeply emotional utterance. Then again, the same words, as sung by a White or a Negro, would demand a respective difference in rhythm. As a result, the song is in slow 3/4, which gives added opportunity for the breaking up of regular accent that is so typical of Negro music, and for psychological emphasis.

The melodic line, in *Porgy and Bess*, reveals a double, apparently a paradoxical, aspect. Ever since the *Second Rhapsody*, Gershwin has been striving for a long melodic contour. It is part of the escape from the commercial orthodoxies of the jazz bar-structure. At the same time, as an intuitive

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psychologist, he has, time and again, deliberately broken up the continuity of the melodic line. Recall the sailor's chantey, *It Takes a Long Pull to Get There*, with the interpolation of the familiar toiler's "hanh!"—the expulsion of breath after effort. The interruption adds piquancy and energy to the musical effect; it adds the sudden contrast of speech to song. In a word, it humanizes the operatic process.

The drawing-out of the melodic line, as in the duet between Porgy and Bess (*Bess, You Is My Woman Now*), is, for opera, a more conventional method; its unconventionality lies in this: in each case Gershwin is at work delivering jazz from its structural restrictions. Even more unconventional than the duet, and more successful, is the bold use made by Gershwin of undisguised jazz rhythms as an accompaniment to the seduction scene on Kittiwah Island. This, to me, is another of the highlights of the opera, and one of the rare moments thus far achieved in our native music of the drama.

Let me dwell upon it, as it will help to solve another difficulty: the impression that has been felt, by critics and laymen alike, that in *Porgy and Bess* there is an inartistic commingling of popular tunes and more serious music. For, from this opinion, I must heartily dissent.

I am concerned with American music, and with the gifted gentleman who in himself seems to embody its less esoteric progress in the theatre and on the concert stage. What Sir Arthur Sullivan attempted, what Victor Herbert attempted, and what each failed at, George Gershwin has achieved. He has bridged successfully the distance between gay opera and serious. What the Englishman could not do for English opera with *Ivanhoe*, what Herbert could not do with *Madeleine* and *Natoma*, Gershwin assuredly has done for American opera in *Porgy and Bess*. He has done it, best of all, by remaining unpretentiously himself.

I do not wish to be misunderstood. I am not saying that Gershwin is a better composer than Sullivan; *Of Thee I Sing* is no *Iolanthe* or *Mikado*. Nevertheless it belongs, together with *Let 'Em Eat Cake*, in the company of Sullivan and Offenbach. I am simply saying that *Porgy and Bess* is a better opera, in every way, than such academic errors as *Ivanhoe*, and that, in his attempts to mold a popular style to the process of serious American music

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—serious, but not, therefore, solemn—Gershwin has easily bettered both Herbert and Sullivan.

I happen to know, for example, Sullivan's solitary symphony, written in a derivative, Mendelssohnian style; I have gone through his other ventures into the overture and similar forms. They are altogether lacking, with the exception of the little-known overture, *Di Ballo*, in the joyous qualities that make the Savoy operettas unique. Gershwin's spirit of jazz is our contemporary equivalent of the Sullivan rhythms as they affected Londoners from the late eighties through the turn of the century. He possesses, in addition, an Offenbachian abandon that Sullivan was restrained, by mid-Victorian prudishness, from indulging. He is altogether free—and this is important—from self-conscious musical culture.

The markedly rhythmic music of the seduction scene—recall, too, the purely percussive prelude to this picnic episode—represents Gershwin at the top as an intuitive stylist. It shows, first of all, the basic unity of the Negro's music, whether he is at work, at play, at prayer, or at love. This is music of gusto and, to use a supposedly vulgar word, of guts. Guts, to be precise, is just the word Gershwin uses—it isn't the only word he uses, but it comes nearest to being printable—to describe what he tried to get into this opera. And if you don't like the word, remember that its synonym, bowels, was old Biblical English, and good Shakespeare, for compassion. In Gershwin this compassion takes a dynamic, lusty form.

With *Porgy and Bess*, indeed, to use an impossible anatomical figure, George Gershwin has hopped up on his own shoulders and doubled his height. This fellow has plenty of somethin', and it ain't only old man rhythm! His new attitude toward opera promises to discover a new public for it. In that public, as in himself, will be symbolized the victorious clash of healthy instinct with conventional formula. It is all part of a personal and a national growth that happily coincide.

