



G. Gershwin: Porgy & Bess

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[Fanfare](#) (Peter J. Rabinowitz - 2009.05.01)

Starting in 1952, as a salvo in the cultural Cold War, the State Department sponsored a world tour of Porgy and Bess, choosing the work for reasons that look particularly quaint today. This set documents one performance from that run, taped at the Titania Palast in Berlin in September 1952. The edition was a hodge-podge by producer Robert Breen that changed the orchestration, cut some of the music, added a few bits (like an instrumental recap of “Bess, You Is My Woman Now” before act II, scene 3 and an extra verse in “It Ain’t Necessarily So”), and shuffled material around in a way that may throw you. (In fact, the transfer of the “Buzzer Song” to act III so confused some critics that, when Guild released this same recording last year, they mistakenly insisted it had been eliminated entirely.) But whatever you think of the political impulse and the editorial impulsiveness, it would be hard to deny that the production had a spectacular cast. The title roles were taken by William Warfield and his young wife, the then virtually unknown Leontyne Price (this may be the earliest recording of her voice to have been commercially issued); and they were supported by Cab Calloway, as well as a couple of singers who had participated in the original 1935 production (Helen Dowdy as Lily and the Strawberry Woman, Ray Yeats as the Crab Man).

Most attention, I’m sure, will be focused on Price, who sings with an astonishing purity of tone (even when she’s teasing), as well as a sure dramatic sense. From the beginning, you can appreciate the conflicts she faces, and her reprise of “Summertime” at the end will break your heart. Still, to my ears, her voice—indeed, her whole demeanor—is slightly too operatic, too cultivated. That quality is heightened by the contrast between her polish and the improvisational earthiness of the Catfish Row residents, who dig into their parts with abandon, often treating the written text as but a scaffold for ornamentation. In act I, they scorn Bess as a whore who’s beneath them; vocally, she sounds out of her element for entirely the opposite reason. Still, it’s hard not to be taken in by her vocal command and by the sheer beauty of her timbre.

Warfield is even better, with superb enunciation, a fluid control over the long cantilenas, and a warm vocal sound that instantly conveys Porgy’s inner spirit: you can well understand why he accepts Bess’s weaknesses and why he returns from jail with gifts for the whole community. Cab Calloway, as Sporting Life, is slightly less flamboyant than I would have expected, but he’s doubly seductive as a result; Helen Colbert and Helen Thigpen are superb as Clara and Serena. The only disappointment among the soloists is John McCurry, a marginally undercharacterized Crown, neither sufficiently menacing nor, in the hurricane scene, reaching the heroism of Lester Lynch on the recent Mauceri recording (30:3).

Ensemble work is exceptional. As I’ve suggested, Catfish Row is represented by

singers comfortable with the vernacular traditions that Gershwin had used as his basic material: the give-and-take in the crowd scenes is utterly transfixing. Indeed, while this opera has a problematic vision at its core (it's certainly hard to take its representation of African-American life without wincing), no other recording so successfully banishes your qualms while you're listening—for no other recording gives *Catfish Row* such an infectious sense of community. Smallens, who presided over the premiere, conducts with tremendous energy, favoring quickish tempos and avoiding the score's temptations to sentimentalize during such hit numbers as "Summertime" and "Bess, You Is My Woman Now." This performance of *Porgy* took place only seven years after the collapse of a regime that banned the music as degenerate. But the Berlin orchestra brought in for the occasion seems to have transcended history quickly: they sound entirely immersed in the idiom.

The original tapes were made on what appears to have been state-of-the-art equipment, and the sound is astonishingly clear and vivid for a live recording of that vintage; Audite's reprocessing is marginally smoother than Guild's, although the differences are minimal. Not a first choice if you're going to live with a single recording (I'd pick the Rattle for that), but as a supplement, this is enthusiastically recommended.