



## G. Gershwin: Porgy & Bess

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### Audiophile Audition (Peter Joelson - 2009.01.21)

It is said Gershwin considered his “American Folk Opera” his greatest achievement, though times have changed considerably since the première of “Porgy and Bess” in Boston on the last day of September 1935. Based on DuBose Heyward’s 1924 novel, “Porgy” set in South Carolina, and the later play, the tale of a prostitute, drugs and murder offended some, including African-Americans, from the outset due to perceived racial stereotyping.

The first run on Broadway lasted 124 performances, not considered a success by those standards; and, as Broadway shows started at 8:30 the length of the piece necessitated some cuts so that the audience could get home on the last bus or train. During 1936 the production went on tour, occasioning some problems along the way. The theatre for the performance in Washington, DC had operated a policy of segregation which was reversed after strong protests from the cast. (Writing this review on the day of President Obama’s inauguration serves to highlight so very strongly the changes since those days.)

The first European performance took place with an all-white cast in Copenhagen during the depths of the War and under Nazi occupation; it was received very well and ran for 22 performances before the Nazis closed it down. Perhaps the underground resistance appreciated “It ain’t necessarily so!” - a song which lends itself to political satire.

The performance on these CDs derives from a tour partly-financed by the U.S. Department of State which lasted on and off from 1952 to 1955, when the opera had its Moscow première. The superb booklet essays by Wolfgang Rathert and Rüdiger Albrecht offer much insight into the tour, especially the excellent reception and reviews in Berlin, where the production was mounted in the Titania-Palast. The recording is a single performance on 21 September 1952, conducted by Alexander Smallens, who had conducted the earliest performances in 1935 and 1936. There are some cuts from the original, with the total length running to 140 minutes.

From the very start, the extraordinary vim, energy and sense of theatre comes through the listener’s speakers, and from the very first note Leontyne Price sings the treat in store is evident. She and William Warfield had only recently married, so this performance is part of their honeymoon, and the chemistry between the two is powerful, she very young at the start of her illustrious career, he coming into his prime. Their solos are all well-nigh perfect, and, as I quoted in an earlier review, “It’s one take, folks!” Cab Calloway as Sportin’ Life is also superb, in a part which can too easily degenerate into caricature. What a fine musician he was. John McCurry and Helen Colbert, as Crown and Clara, are a powerful team, too, with fine voices. The chorus is excellent, too, so proficient at bending the beat and keeping the ensemble

intact.

This is a fun, moving, dramatic and vivacious performance. The recording sounds extremely well for its age, with depth to the balance; no allowances had to be made for the sound at all. There are stage sounds but they didn't bother me, and the audience is well-behaved and applauds enthusiastically in the right places. No libretto is supplied, just a synopsis, but I had no difficulty hearing and understanding the words.

Enough superlatives from me! I've thoroughly enjoyed becoming acquainted with this performance and recommend it very highly indeed. [Odd it took this long for this exciting recording of Gershwin's one great opera to see the light of day...Ed.]

