Gershwin’s Great Achievement in *Porgy and Bess*:

Appropriation of “Low Culture” through Sophisticated Compositional Techniques

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George Gershwin represents the American melting-pot perhaps more than any other composer. Gershwin assimilated every major style of music existing in America and crafted music deeply rooted in America’s many traditions that continues to resonate with a sound that is distinctly American. Gershwin’s career grew out of popular song: his first job was as songplugger at Tin Pan Alley’s Jerome H. Remick and Company; his first published song, “When You Want ‘Em, You Can’t Get Em, When You’ve Got ‘Em, You Don’t Want ‘Em” of 1916 was very much in the ragtime style; and his first instrumental, “Rialto Ripples” was a piano rag that earned him early distinction\(^1\). Gershwin had been interested in opera for years, and *Blue Monday* of 1922 was his first “serious” work; the twenty-five minute work is jazzy in style and served as a first step toward opera.\(^2\) The 1924 premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue* further established Gershwin as a composer of serious, jazz-influenced music in the symphonic style. George Gershwin’s *magnum opus* though, *Porgy and Bess*, was premiered at New York City’s Alvin Theatre on October 10, 1935. It had an initial run of 124 performances, but the opera did not have its first financial success until a 1941 Broadway run. This version contained huge cuts and functioned more as a “drama of separate musical numbers linked with spoken dialogue”\(^3\) than as Gershwin’s vision of a through-composed full opera. *Porgy and Bess* represents Gershwin at his most masterful regarding compositional technique as he incorporates every major musical style existing in America into a whole that is musically compelling and uniquely American. In short, the skill and

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\(^2\) Jablonski, p. 51

seamlessness with which Gershwin weaves popular, jazz, blues, Broadway, and gospel styles renders *Porgy and Bess* an American masterwork of high art. This paper will attempt neither a discussion on extra-musical topics in *Porgy* nor a comprehensive musical analysis; rather, we will examine specific compositional techniques that Gershwin deploys that provide this work artistic depth that set it apart from lesser musical works. Topics will include use of the spiritual, original folk-like tunes, recitative, chorus, orchestral introduction, construction of scenes, and contemporary influences.

Identifying and defining works as containing great artistic merit is inherently problematic. In order to label a work as *high art*, we must first look quickly at that term. I define high art as the products or icons of high culture; high culture is often represented by the intelligentsia or aristocracy and its accompanying train of elitism and value judgments. High culture also often enjoys government of philanthropic support, especially in Northern Europe today. High culture contrasts with its opposite, low culture, which today might be represented by everything of immediate and obvious mass appeal: fast food, gossip magazines, current best sellers, sports, reality TV, popular music, slapstick, toilet humor, and pornography. Gershiwn’s great achievement is the unification of popular elements of his time with European grand opera. His goal was to appeal to both masses and cultural elite, and writing in the New York Times, he considered his work a *folk opera*:

*Porgy and Bess* is a *folk tale*. Its people would naturally sing folk music. But they are still folk music—and therefore, being in operatic form, *Porgy and Bess* becomes folk opera... It was my idea that opera should be entertaining. Therefore, when I chose *Porgy and Bess*, a tale of Charleston Negroes, for a subject, I made sure that it would enable me to write light as well as serious music and that it would enable me to include humor as well as tragedy.4

4 Jablonski, p. 290.
Looking now to specific musical constructions, Gershwin made extensive use of the spiritual, usually as a communal song. Gershwin’s treatment allows for African-American principles of improvisation leaves room for personal interpretation. He composed his own, rather than using preexisting material, and they vary greatly in emotional content. “Summertime,” labeled a “lullaby,” is extremely reminiscent of the Southern spiritual “Sometimes I feel like a Motherless Child.” The song is introduced harmonically by an ambiguously floating alternation of scale degrees 6 and 7 over a minor triad; this gives an air of humid warm summer night.

Example 1 shows this developed into parallel minor chords with an added 6th in the style of Debussy that depicts time at a standstill and a future without prospects for improvement. This floating harmony brilliantly captures Clera stuck in oppression and yearning to “spread yo’ winds and take the sky.” Gershwin avoids monotony in second strophes of songs, and in “Summertime” he adds a mourning contrapuntal violin and new colors in the English Horn. The use of warm harmonies and warm timbres though lends a sense of comfort and rest that supports Clera’s assertion that “there’s a nothin’ can harm you.”

“Leavin’ for the Promised Land” is another song of Gospel influence which Gershwin makes central to the drama of his opera. It evokes the sounds of the railroad with numerous dramatic accelerandos, train whistles, and colorful orchestration including enthusiastic bends in the brass instruments, sandblocks, jazzy saxophone lines, flutter tonguing trumpets, and fast runs in the strings. The form is a sophisticated ABA, beginning with call-and-response that mirrors the biblical text; the interior section is an exciting build beginning with a pianissimo ostinato that
slowly adds clapping, and a chant (rap) beneath a modal melody, reflecting an African congregational atmosphere that develops into a rhythmic flurry; the song closes in a thrilling cabaret and big-band flourish. This song employs an advanced harmonic language of 6/9 chords that was common in the contemporary popular song style (example 2), voiced here as stacked fourths.

Musical example #2

Musical example 3

Gershwin also skillfully integrates the train whistle chord (example 3) to the harmonic fabric to produce a song that not only contains a train whistle, but grows organically from that sonority.

Gershwin also redefines the sound of a spiritual to great effect in the final scene of act 2 during the hurricane. The prayer at cue 232 features six soloists entering imitatively, each pleading freely at her own tempo and with great emotional fervor for the safety of their friends out in the storm.

Another category of song that Gershwin employs is the original folk-like tune without gospel influence. These tunes are incredibly catchy and have played a large part in ensuring the opera’s success; independent and not requiring the dramatic setting, many of these songs have become part of the American folksong book. Curiously, many songs stand for a specific emotion and serve no role in advancing the plot, very much in the aria tradition of Opera seria. Examples include “My Man’s Gone Now” (anguish of a lost loved-one), “Bess, You Is My Woman Now”
(proclamation of committed love), and “A Woman Is A Sometime Thing” (frustration with women). “I Got Plenty o’ Nothin’” is one of few major-mode songs in the opera and is introduced by intensely chromatic and dissonant fugue, as shown in example 4. This banjo song has an extremely simple melody that is set strophically, and the text would have spoken directly to an audience reeling from the effects of the Great Depression. Gershwin makes this style his own by adding creative clarinet riffs and unique orchestration that raise the song from its low origins. Porgy is accompanied by the men in a simple style that includes some soulful scoops.

The song with the most savage, tribal feeling is “I Ain’t Got No Shame,” which is sung at the picnic on Kittiwah Island. Vocables and low tom drums evoke an African drum circle, complete with a blaring call for others to join from the horn. A screaming clarinet solo adds to the primitive frenzy and the chorus sings in unison over a pounding beat from the orchestra. All hell seems to break out in the song’s second half as the orchestra slams dissonant and off-balanced chords over a beat in 5/4 time. This is sung by the entire community of Catfish Row.
and reflects the hedonist, free-wheeling, and communal structure of that society. A direct segue leads into “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” which is a mockery of Biblical call-and-response. There is an outline of the blues in the alternation of I and IV harmonies and the emphasis on scale degrees 5, b5, and b3; Gershwin’s filtering of the blues is further confirmed later by scat singing. Gershwin, as usual, further integrates the song with skillful orchestration on the second strophe before leading into a sultry Cocktail Lounge dance. Grace notes, scoops, and slides in the strings add to their nightclub ambiance. The chorus is also notably involved—the community is almost constantly part of both music and drama.

Regarding texture, Gershwin demonstrates his comfort with recitative by transitioning effortlessly into and out of “A Woman Is A Sometime Thing” using motives from the surrounding music. The songs are so memorable and periodic in structure that a clear distinction between recitative and song is maintained, but they are able to melt into one another seamlessly. This song is set strophically, but each statement is varied. The orchestra adds brilliant textures which are constantly changing, including pizzicato strings and muted trumpet. Gershwin’s harmony continues to employ added 6th and 9ths, in addition to chromatic alterations of b5, 7#5, etc. Musical example #5 shows how the harmony grows out of “Summertime” motion.

![Musical example 5](image)

Gershwin also continues to emphasize blues tones of #4 and b7 while constantly varying the musical texture: the song opens with sustained strings (harmonic foundation) with brass licks interspersed before moving to tutti hits on 2 and 4 in m9. When the head melody is restated, it is
doubled in muted trumpet. The bridge features a subdominant pedal, violin harmonic, quietly rocking string quarter figure; the second strophe is varied further. Thus, Gershwin skillfully maintains interest with logical and musical development of texture. He builds the song’s exciting finish through the simple concept of repeating a melodic figure with increasingly alarming counterfigures. Musical example 6 shows the sophisticated harmonic progressions used in this song.

Musical example 6

The short orchestral Introduction serves the standard function of setting the tone, key, and introducing several melodies that will recur throughout the work. Steven Gilbert points out that “this initial run, trill, and ostinato response comprise one of Gershwin’s two all-time best beginnings (the other, that of Rhapsody in Blue, also consists of a trill and run)⁵”. After the flourish, which will appear later in similar forms to herald something new, a scene of frantically scurrying sixteenth notes with unpredictable syncopations sets the scene for a harsh and uncompromising world being pulled apart. The syncopated fanfare melody presented in the brass harmonized in parallel 13th chords introduces Gershwin’s harmonic language. The musical style is clearly appropriated from Broadway but relates motivically to the scurrying sixteenth notes:

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the fanfare’s prominent pitches (C#, F#, and B) share a pitch class set (0 2 7) with the scurrying sixteenth notes (F#, G#, and C#).

The chorus is on stage throughout and “gives voice to the thoughts and feelings of the community.” The chorus functions in several capacities: first, it appear frequently behind soloist in song (“I Got Plenty of Nothin’”); featured (“Oh, I Can’t Sit Down” and “I Ain’ Got No Shame”); collaboratively with soloist, alternating primacy (“Roll dem bones”); or as individuals interacting naturally in a group (crap game). The chorus is used extensively and is absolutely critical musically and dramatically.

Gershwin was very keen that Porgy and Bess would be sung throughout, and the overall texture is that of arias (songs) growing from through-composed and freely-formed passages that are essentially tuneful and serve to advance the plot. Occasional traditional recitatives are utilized, but they are usually short and declamatory; there are also some passages in which the singers approximate pitch over strings playing a vamp figure or sustained chords. There are few moments without a tune though, as Gershwin’s pen was so melodic that he was able to advance the plot using a free melodic construction. The melodies in these sections often relate to a nearby song, and the orchestra is almost always developing some cell which is associated with a character or emotion. This thematic unity is extremely important in unifying the huge number of musical styles utilized. The recitatives are also frequently constructed to allow the singer some melodic and rhythmic freedom.

The songs are great, but Gershwin is at his most symphonic between songs. The gambling scene in act 1 that leads to Robbin’s death contains a few proper songs after “Summertime,” including “A Woman is A Sometime Thing,” but is otherwise melodic and free with

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participation from all characters. It is notable that aria and recit occasionally exist simultaneously: the reprise of “Summertime” at cue 51 is layered over advancing action of betting on the crap game. This innovative texture very effectively conveys action while Serena recapitulates as a symbol of comforted entrapment. In this case, Gershwin skillfully reharmonized and reorchestrated the melody adding new colors and countermelodies without detracting from the text advancing the action. The orchestra is fully integrated to the drama, almost never independent from the singers, and is always actively supporting this action.

We will now look at the opera’s first scene in which a Honky-tonk piano sets stage of dingy bar room in Catfish Row. Tonally, Gershwin hovers on a B dominant tonality in the orchestral introduction and resolves this to e minor in the “Jasbo Brown’s Blues;” midway through though, the tonal center moves up to G major, ultimately arriving at b minor for Summertime. This broad outline of the e minor—what Schenker would call a bass arpeggiation—subtly embraces e minor, the opera’s main tonality. This music is clearly inspired by Gershwin’s younger years composing piano rags, as well as by his contemporaries’ popular works, like Zez Confrey’s Kitten on the Keys of 1921. Gershwin asserts his compositional skills with sophisticated harmony supporting a simple melody:

![Musical example 7. Vocal score page 5, cue 2](image)

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7 Gilbert, p 183.
In this scene, the chorus sings entirely in unison on “Da-doo-da. Wa, wa.” This simple and direct refrain serves as the foundation for the following remarkable and complex development of the Introduction’s fanfare melody of beginning at cue 9.

Example 8 shows the layering harmonies first in fifths (inversion of the fanfare’s initial presentation in fourths); cue 10 adds the 3rd and 6th; at cue 11 adds #11; then the G#; finally Gershwin reaches a screaming dissonance at cue 13 by adding the G natural and a dissonant black-key countermelody.

Musical example 8

This sequence becomes progressively more dissonant while the orchestration becomes increasingly dense and out of control; meanwhile, the choir repeats their mantra in unison. Gradually, Gershwin adds percussion for hocket effect drawing on African roots. This sequence is so carefully constructed, demonstrating Gershwin’s consummate ability as a composer and orchestrator; the work’s greatness is heightened when considering that Gershwin has made this
incredibly dissonant and tense scene completely accessible to the concert-going public. In transitioning into “Summertime,” Gershwin uses a reminiscence motive that binds the work together in Romantic contexts and transforms itself into an outline Summertime melody, yielding a smooth and satisfying modulation.

Another scene demonstrating Gershwin’s remarkable compositional craft is Bess’s meeting with Crown on Kittawah Island—the segment between “It Aint Necessarily So” and “What Do You Want Wid Bess” which closes scene 2 of act 2. Crown’s emergence from the thicket is introduced first by Crown’s leitmotiv as shown in example 9.

Crown explains how desperate he is for company, hiding on the island to intensely chromatic and lyrical music. As Bess says she cannot stay with him, Crown’s leitmotiv is developed simultaneously as the rising step motive that introduced “Summertime.” Each segment of dialogue in the opera is supported masterfully by music that heightens emotional identification with that text; in this scene, Bess teetering between lust (Crown) and rationality (Porgy) is represented by ravishingly Romantic outbursts contrasting with more cerebral and measured phrases. A touching moment occurs before cue 153 at the high point of Bess and Crown’s meeting; the leitmotiv builds into a C7(#9) chord: E and Eb simultaneously symbolizes Bess’s inner conflict between lust for Crown and clean happiness with Porgy. This tense scene culminates at cue 155 with Bess’s recit over strings in which her pitch gradually works up from
low E to B above the staff; the tension is unbearable when she reaches this high note as Crown overwhelms her and takes control.

The resulting song, “What You Want Wid Bess,” is very raunchy and forms most intense point of the opera. The melody is introduced by grungy brass figure and a sloppy syncopation of harmonically unrelated chords in the brass. The disjointed, craggy, and bluesy melody embodies Bess’s emotional state: battered by years of financial and personal hardship, distraught by the recent murder, and torn between two lovers. The constant stressing of the flat third within a major chord and accompanying harmonic tension from the orchestra exaggerates her plight. Gershwin’s gift for fresh orchestration and intriguing inner voices provides contrast and lyricism at cue 158. Bess’s fragile emotional state is further represented by the song’s frequent and free modulation from B to Eb for the melody’s second phrase; here, Gershwin is pivoting on the common tone F#. The song proper ends with bitonal harmonic explosion of a G chord over C# progressing to a B(add6) chord with Bess on the high G#: Gershwin’s Broadway experience provides a thrilling close to the song. The scene closes with Crown’s domination of Bess which is depicted musically by chromatic flourishes from WW, brass fanfares, an urgently weaving oboe solo as Crown presses himself nearer. The head motif of the “What You Want Wid Bess” is developed with increasing agony leading toward the scene climaxes. Bess’s rape is accompanied by intense raunch from orchestra: savage pounding of chord with split third beneath the song’s head motif in canon between trumpets and screaming woodwinds. Stravinsky employed this chord with both a major and minor third frequently for its power. This entire scene tightly structured around several melodies, and while Gershwin relies constantly on melody, his craft is so well refined that all the “low elements” are woven together into a brilliant setting of the drama.
Gershwin employs several other devices of the modern symphonic style, including recurring themes and his own treatment of leitmotifs. The block chords and tritone bass motion of “Moderato molto deciso” suggests marching of fate, and appears throughout the opera. Example 10 demonstrates Gershwin developing a motif that will be associated with a character, Sportin’ Life as he prepares and foreshadows “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” Sportin’ Life’s song. A complete study of leitmotifs in Porgy and Bess is beyond the scope of this paper.

Musical example 10. Vocal score page 208, cue 30.

Another technique of intellectual symphonic style that Gershwin employs to great effect is the learned fugue. While skillful counterpoint mingle freely with homophonic folk-like tunes, a few fugue sequences are especially memorable for their powerful treatment of this device. The craps scene of Act 1 employs imitation and fugue in numerous instances to illustrate the splintering factions and disarray of the Catfish Row society. Robbin and Crown’s battle at cue 130 is an extremely dense four-voice fugue with initial entries every beat that introduce a lengthy contrapuntal section; soon after the fugal exposition, Crown’s leitmotiv enters and is developed concurrently. Andrew Davis and Howard Pollack view the opening act as a rotational form in which themes are restated and developed by inversion and retrograde, leading the listener gradually to a climax. The combination of two alternating themes to make the subject of the
fugue mirrors the drama of a craps game spiraling into violence and murder. The principle motif had been developed throughout preceding build of tension and is developed after the fight as Crown goes into hiding. Example eleven demonstrates how Gershwin crafts a tense scene from surrounding materials, including Crown’s leitmotif, that is fully integrated to the opera and ultimately results in Robbins’ murder.

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There are several analyses of *Porgy and Bess* from a Schenkerian perspective. In *Tonality as Drama*, analyst Edward Latham applies Schenkerian theory to several large-scale dramatic works, believing that that many twentieth-century American composers adopted a strategic approach to tonality. In chapter 5, he argues that *Porgy and Bess* contains a large-scale *urleinie* whose interruption on scale degree two serves the lack of resolution in Porgy’s failure to attain
Bess. Smaller objectives of the characters are also analyzed from this perspective that achievement is mirrored by large-scale closure of fundamental lines. While extremely interesting, the reader must keep in mind that the selection of keys in vocal works is in part determined by vocal ranges—this fact would certainly influence the composer’s unconscious effort to resolve tonal drama.

Gershwin is known to have admired the music of Berg, and Allen Forte identified several areas of the composer’s possible influence on Gershwin in “Summertime.” He notes that the two-chord oscillation is similar in motion to Wozzeck’s lullaby “Mädel was;” the chords also share harmonic quality of an inverted minor seventh chord including the same pitches (B, D, F#, and G#). Forte thinks that numerous other clear correspondences:

exist between Wozzeck and Porgy and Bess at salient dramatic moments. I refer to the four-bar ostinato rhythm that accompanies Serena’s mournful aria “My Man’s Gone Now” in act 1, and the four-bar polka obstinate figure in Wozzeck, act 3 scene 3. Another example is the extraordinary and expressionistic ascending choral glissando against the chromatic descending orchestral parts in Porgy and Bess at cue 201 of act 1, which may be compared to the drowning scene in Wozzeck of act 3, scene 4.

There is still further similarity: the rhythmic motifs that are developed when Crown murders Robbins return with “fearful symmetry when Porgy kills Crown at the same point in the third act”, showing a remarkable parallel to Lulu, whose first-to-third act symmetry is also defined by a fateful rhythmic motive.

Gershwin studied composition with Joseph Schillinger, and retrograde and retrograde inversion were favorite Schillinger devices. His influence on Gershwin’s compositional procedures is obvious from sketches of Porgy and Bess that contain Schillinger-like diagrams of

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11. Forte, p. 166.

these rotational procedures. These appear in Porgy’s theme, first given at cue 70 subject to these procedures in Act III while Porgy is describing his experiences in jail.\textsuperscript{13} The music at cue 99 is also subject to Schillinger’s procedures: small cells are developed and combined in ongoing variation.

In summary, we have investigated specific compositional techniques which Gershwin employed to make popular styles his own; experienced in each style, Gershwin was able to filter each style through his own compositional skills to craft an organic and fully integrated opera. Gershwin’s great achievement is his marriage of “low music” such as blues, jazz, and pop idioms to high art, the modern intellectual symphonic style. It was through this assimilation of popular styles that he found his own unique compositional voice that became known as an American sound before Aaron Copland. Although each style retains some stylistic independence, Gershwin shows their potency when used together, and in this way \textit{Porgy and Bess} is a powerful symbol of an America still struggling to embrace and assimilate its diverse heritages.

Bibliography


