"Gershwin Gone Native!": The Influence of Primitivism and Folk Music on "Porgy and Bess"

Katherine Dacey
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd

Part of the American Studies Commons, Music Commons, and the Theatre and Performance Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-eyhe-gm91

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
"GERSHWIN GONE NATIVE!"
THE INFLUENCE OF PRIMITIVISM AND FOLK MUSIC ON "PORGY AND BESS"

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of American Studies
The College of William & Mary

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by
Katherine Dacey
2001
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Author

Approved May 2001

Arthur Knight

Richard Lowry

Katherine Preston

Department of Music
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section/Appendix</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF MUSICAL ILLUSTRATIONS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION I. TERMINOLOGY</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION II. MUSICAL AND LITERARY DISCOURSES OF</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATIONALISM AND PRIMITIVISM BEFORE THE JAZZ AGE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION III. PRELUDE TO THE CHARLESTON TRIPS</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION IV. THE TRIPS TO CHARLESTON</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION V. LATER ASSESSMENTS OF THE CHARLESTON TRIPS</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION VI. THE QUESTION OF MUSICAL “AUTHENTICITY”</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX OF MUSICAL ILLUSTRATIONS</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer wishes to thank the late Professor Mark Tucker for supervising this essay during its crucial stages of development. His patience, insightful comments, and wry sense of humor in the face of excessive use of semicolons were greatly appreciated. The writer also wishes to thank the ad hoc committee that inherited this project from Professor Tucker: Professors Arthur Knight and Katherine Preston. The writer is especially grateful for their gentle guidance and eleventh-hour editorial suggestions.
LIST OF MUSICAL ILLUSTRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Initial brass entrance, “I Ain’t Got No Shame,” <em>Porgy and Bess</em> (Act II, Scene ii)</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Nonsense syllable interlude, “I Ain’t Got No Shame”</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Use of <em>Sprechstimme</em> to suggest black speech, “I Hates Yo’ Struttin’ Style,” <em>Porgy and Bess</em> (Act II, Scene I)</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>“Queenie’s Ballyhoo,” <em>Show Boat</em> (Act I, Scene iii)</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Traditional arrangement of “Somebody Knockin’ at de Door,” <em>The Book of American Negro Spirituals</em></td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Quotation of spiritual, “Somebody Knockin’ at de Door,” <em>Porgy and Bess</em> (Act II, Scene iv)</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Integrated sonority from the “Dance of the Adolescents,” <em>The Rite of Spring</em></td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Distribution of tritones in the octatonic and diatonic major scales</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Notation representing Gullah vocal technique, “My Man’s Gone Now,” <em>Porgy and Bess</em> (Act I, Scene ii)</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess*, Hollis Alpert observes that George Gershwin wrote his "own spirituals" because "using traditional material would have seemed old hat by the time the opera was presented." Alpert points out that the 1927 staging of the play *Porgy* featured actual spirituals and folk songs, as did *The Green Pastures* in 1930 and *Run, Little Chillun!* in 1933. But as Gershwin himself stated, he had a more ambitious project in mind: to create a work that simultaneously invoked the grand operas of fin-de-siecle Europe and the raw, energetic music of black America.

The resulting fusion inspired some contemporaries—especially in the black community—to charge Gershwin with writing a "stiff and artificial" opera filled with "lampblack Negroisms." Later critics of *Porgy and Bess* have reaffirmed these initial reviews, citing the use of dialect, stereotypical characters, and pseudo-spirituals as proof that Gershwin had written an opera about blacks, not a black opera. It is undeniable that some of Gershwin's material had antecedents in the minstrel show but not all of the folk elements were drawn from caricature.

This debate over *Porgy and Bess*’s "authenticity" frequently overlooks those native elements that Gershwin gleaned from his trips to South Carolina. At the urging of librettist DuBose Heyward, Gershwin twice visited Charleston, SC, the setting for *Porgy and Bess*. Acting as a local guide, Heyward accompanied Gershwin to church services, concerts, and other venues where the composer could hear representative regional music, especially Low Country spirituals. Although their outings hardly constituted fieldwork (especially when contrasted with the meticulous efforts of contemporaries R.W. Gordon and John Lomax), their musical touring clearly had a purpose: to identify the signature elements of Low Country music that could be transplanted successfully to a European-style opera.

Most of Gershwin's biographers, including Edward Jablonski, David Ewen, and Charles Schwartz have given short shrift to these trips, recounting them merely to suggest a connection between what Gershwin heard in the field and the "exotic" effects in arias such as "O, Doctor Jesus." A careful examination of several numbers, however, reveals that Gershwin's exposure to Low Country music had a profound impact on his imagination.

Comparing such regional songs as "W'en I'm A-Gone, Gone, Gone" with selections from *Porgy and Bess*, and focusing on the techniques that Gershwin used to evoke the Carolina sound, this paper will demonstrate that the opera has authentic native elements that were a direct result of the Charleston trips. This paper will also acknowledge Heyward's contribution to the authenticity of *Porgy and Bess*. His knowledge of local black music as well as his fascination with black folk customs kept his lyrics tied, however loosely, to traditional Low Country spirituals.
“GERSHWIN GONE NATIVE!”
INTRODUCTION

In 1934, just a year before *Porgy and Bess* appeared on Broadway, the *New York Herald Tribune* ran the sensational headline, "Manhattan Tone Poet Climbs Into His Cliff Dwelling Loaded With Negro Lore." The accompanying article described the first of George Gershwin's two visits to Charleston, South Carolina, where the composer announced he was doing field research for his opera adaptation of the 1927 play *Porgy*. With his Charleston-born collaborator DuBose Heyward as guide, Gershwin had traveled the Low Country in December 1933 and again in June 1934, stopping at churches, wharves, and out-of-the-way places to hear regional music. Though their outings hardly constituted serious fieldwork (particularly when contrasted with the meticulous efforts of such contemporaries as R.W. Gordon and Allan Lomax), their musical touring had a clear purpose: to identify the Low Country rhythms and harmonies that might successfully be transplanted to European-style grand opera.

After *Porgy and Bess*’s October 1935 premiere, critics debated the extent to which these Low Country trips influenced Gershwin in composing the opera. *New York American* reviewer Leonard Liebling argued that *Porgy and Bess*’s score was "full of local meaning," an opinion shared by the *Literary Digest* in an article entitled "Charleston (and Gershwin) Provide Folk-Opera." The *Charleston News and Courier*, on the other hand, suggested that Gershwin had compromised Heyward’s "truthful" depiction of Charleston’s black community with a less regionally-specific mixture of "jazz, spirituals, and conventional arias." Only in "Summertime" and the saucer-burial scene did the *Courier*’s anonymous reviewer hear evidence that Gershwin had "spent two years [sic] in Charleston close in contact with its negro inhabitants" studying their "savage"

---

music. The left-wing magazine *New Theatre* offered the most scathing commentary on *Porgy and Bess*, characterizing Gershwin, Heyward, and director Rouben Mamoulian as “hot-cha merchants” who had “cooked up” a production “flavored and seasoned to be palmed off as ‘authentic’ of the Charleston Gullah Negroes.”

At the heart of this debate was the issue of authenticity. Was Gershwin—who was white and Jewish—capable not only of recreating black melodies but also of understanding the harmonies, rhythms, and vocal nuances that gave African-American music its distinctive character? Though some of Gershwin’s white critics felt his spirituals bore little relation to the music of Charleston’s black community, almost all praised his score for truthfully evoking the spirit of blues and Sorrow Songs. Irving Kolodin’s review for *Theatre Arts Monthly* typifies this essentialist viewpoint:

> The degree to which [Gershwin] has absorbed negro turns of expression is exemplified by a conversation with a member of the cast to whom I said, ‘Doesn’t the lullaby (“Summertime”) suggest to you certain elements of “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child?”’ and who answered: ‘No, it is more like “St. Louis Blues.”’ If two listeners can find associations so various in a thing as different as ‘Summertime’ is from either of the others, it must represent the seizure of an essential element in Negro music.

African-Americans, however, did not universally embrace *Porgy and Bess* as an opera with authentic “Negro music.” Zora Neale Hurston, for example, criticized Gershwin for commingling spirituals and street cries with “Conservatory rules” and opera conventions. In Hurston’s estimation, Gershwin had “squeez[ed] all of the rich, black juice out of the songs” and “present[ed] a sort of musical octoroon to the public.”

---

3 “Charleston and (Gershwin) Provide Folk-Opera,” *The Literary Digest* CXXX (October 26, 1935): 18.
4 “Second Thoughts on ‘Porgy’ in Opera Form,” *The News and Courier* (October 27, 1935): 2C. It is interesting to note that the Courier’s anonymous reviewer didn’t consult his own newspaper’s account of Gershwin’s Charleston trips. If he had, it is unlikely that he would have portrayed Gershwin as living in close contact with Charleston’s African American community for two years!
5 Edward Morrow, “Duke Ellington on Gershwin’s ‘Porgy,’” *New Theatre* (December 1935), 6. Morrow indulges in his own form of racial romanticism at the end of this article. He calls upon the Duke Ellingtons and Langston Hughes of the world to write music on “themes from their blood.” This music “will express terror and defiance in colorful Negro musical idioms which have remained melodious despite a life of injustices. They will compose and write these things because they feel the consequences of an existence which is a weird combination of brutality and beauty.”
Other observers, such as composer William Grant Still, felt that a hybrid of black and European music could capture the Sorrow Songs’ essence, but that such a hybrid could only be classified as “authentic” if written by an African-American. He dismissed the notion that composers could adopt the “idioms of people foreign to them,” arguing that “idiom” is “rarely something that can be acquired or discarded at will.”

At the far end of the spectrum was arranger J. Rosamond Johnson, who welcomed any skillful attempt to introduce black folk music into the concert hall. After Porgy and Bess’s premiere, he pronounced Gershwin the “Abraham Lincoln of Negro music,” classifying “at least eighty per cent” of Porgy and Bess’s “musical idioms” as genuinely “Negroid” in character. Even in those passages where Gershwin employed more obviously “European” techniques such as fugue, Johnson argued, he sincerely “convey[ed] the Negro’s religious fervor” without using the “Negro spiritual in its traditional form.”

The black community’s original debate over the “authenticity” of Porgy and Bess has continued to shape critical and scholarly evaluations of the opera. The release of Otto Preminger’s 1959 movie Porgy and Bess renewed the 1935 controversy. Periodicals such as Variety, Jazz Review, and Ebony ran strong indictments of the opera’s music and characters, arguing that Sportin’ Life, Porgy, and Bess represented stereotypes from a less enlightened era of race relations. In his review of the MGM film, critic LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka) pronounced Gershwin’s score a “hideous and dishonest dilution” of black musical practice, an opinion echoed by Era Bell Thompson in an article entitled “Why Negroes Don’t Like Porgy and Bess.” Well into the 1970s, however, other critics continued to defend the essentialist position first voiced by Irving Kolodin in 1935. In the 1970 edition of George Gershwin: His Journey to Greatness, biographer David Ewen characterized the “musical art” of Porgy and Bess as “basically Negro in physiogamy and spirit, basically expressive of the heart and soul of an entire race.”

Only in the last decade have cultural historians staked out a moderate position that incorporated elements of Jones’s and Ewen’s arguments. Jeffrey Melnick, for example,

---

8 William Grant Still, “Horizons Unlimited.” In William Grant Still and the Fusion of Cultures in American Music (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1972), 120.
acknowledges Gershwin's aptitude for composing music with a strong African-American imprint. At the same time, Melnick characterizes Gershwin as a savvy opportunist who visited South Carolina as a "public relations move" to bolster his credentials as a composer of "Black" music in much the same spirit as an early generation of blackface performers claimed to have done field research in the rural South.\textsuperscript{13}

Implicit in these discussions is the idea that Gershwin—though capable of writing bluesy tunes—merely imitated richer, more complex forms of black musical expression without capturing their nuances or cultural meaning. A close study of the opera's score, however, reveals that Gershwin's exposure to Low Country music had a subtle but profound impact on his imagination. In the lyrics to such numbers as "Gone, Gone, Gone" and "O, Doctor Jesus," the modal harmonies of his spirituals, and the vocal polyphony of the hurricane scene (Act II, Scene iv), the listener can hear signature elements of Low Country music.

Simply detecting and cataloguing the presence of Gullah musical traits hardly puts the authenticity issue to bed. To fully answer the question, how did Gershwin make compositional use of Low Country style, we need to ask why he felt such elements were necessary for the success of his opera. We also need to consider the influence of nationalism and primitivism on Gershwin; the extent of Gershwin's exposure to Low Country music; and his musico-dramatic reasons for invoking the Gullah sound.

\textsuperscript{13} Jeffrey Melnick, \textit{A Right to Sing the Blues: African-Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 122, 128.
SECTION I
TERMINOLOGY

A few terms require definition. Throughout this essay, I use the designation Low Country to describe the geographic region surrounding Charleston, SC. The Sea Islands, which form a long archipelago along the coastlines of South Carolina and Georgia, are generally considered part of the Low Country. Gullah refers both to those African-Americans descended from Sea Island slaves and to their language, a creole of English and various West African dialects. The term requiring the most explanation is primitivism. Over the course of 250 years, historians, literary critics, and musicologists have applied this label to artistic endeavors as varied as the folkish poetry of August Gottfried Burger and the “Indianist” compositions of Arthur Farwell. Informing such primitivist endeavors is the belief that the songs, handicrafts, and folk tales of “primitive” people—be they Russian serfs, Wolof tribesmen, Bohemian peasants, former slaves, gypsies, children, or madmen—provide windows into man’s original nature. Invoking the aesthetic of “primitive” people is a means of commenting on the modern condition, of suggesting the corrupting influence of technology and urbanization on “civilized” man. For composers in Eastern Europe and the United States, integrating the rhythms, meters, and harmonies of the “primitive” people living within their borders also played a crucial role in the development of national musical styles. It is this application of the term primitivism (as it refers to musical nationalism) that I use in my paper.14

14 The literature on musical primitivism is rather thin, especially when contrasted with the literature on primitivism in the visual arts and popular culture. Leon Plantinga’s book Romantic Music: A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984) provides a concise summary of primitivism in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe; see pages 107-120. For discussion of primitivism’s influence on twentieth-century music, see the work of Gershwin’s contemporary Marion Bauer. Her book, Twentieth Century Music: How It Developed, How to Listen to It (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1933), provides a good summary of American attitudes towards “primitive” music and its potential role as a nationalist signifier. An excellent history of European attitudes towards “primitive” people and
At the time he set out for Charleston in December 1933, Gershwin enjoyed almost unprecedented acclaim as a composer of crowd-pleasing music. His string of Broadway successes—*Lady, Be Good* (1924), *Funny Face* (1927), *Girl Crazy* (1930)—and heavily promoted concerts at Lewisohn Stadium kept him in the public eye following the celebrated premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924). Periodicals such as *Vanity Fair*, *The Nation*, and *The American Spectator* published lively debates on the merits of Gershwin’s “serious” compositions such as the *Concerto in F* (1925), while the society pages chronicled his Manhattan party-hopping.

The presence of such a musical celebrity in Charleston, therefore, sparked considerable newspaper coverage. Headlines in the Charleston *News and Courier* were sensational, proclaiming, “Gershwin Gone Native... Sleek Composer, Burned by Sun, Lets Beard Grow, Wears Only Torn Pants While Writing the Opera *Porgy*.” Reporter Frank Gilbreth embellished the composer-gone-native theme in the accompanying article, suggesting that the hot Carolina sun was transforming the New York sophisticate into the mirror image of Heyward’s Crown, “the tremendous buck in *Porgy* who plunges a knife into the throat of a friend too lucky at craps and who makes women love him by placing huge black hands around their throat and tensing his muscles.” The *New York Herald-Tribune* painted a similar picture of Gershwin, “bare and black above their artwork can be found in the first chapter of Frances Connelly’s book, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725-1907* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); see pages 1-36.
the waist," clad only in "once-white linen knickers" as he worked on Act I of *Porgy and Bess*. The *Tribune* also mentioned Gershwin's trips to "Negro churches, funerals, and revival meetings" adding that whenever he sat down to play piano rags, "a group of Negroes" would "collect in front of his cottage and beat the sand with their feet."16

Gilbreth's racially charged description of Gershwin as a "black" man living close to nature and making "savage" music is symptomatic of Jazz Age mania for the "primitive," which, to Jazz Age Americans, generally meant African and African-American art, music, and lore. Enthusiasm for the "primitive" was hardly a new phenomenon; western composers' fascination with folk and exotic musics dated to the eighteenth century and was deeply intertwined with colonialism, nationalism, and positivism. The first wave of primitivism corresponded with an aggressive period of colonial expansion into Africa and the Americas by England, Spain, France, and the Netherlands. Contact with the aboriginal people on these continents led Europeans to speculate on the origins of their own civilization. In treatises such as Giambattista Vico's *La scienza nuova* (1725) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762), authors cited diverse sources—"Homeric poetry, the Bible, Roman descriptions of ancient Germans, Gauls, and Picts, as well as traveler's accounts of New World peoples"—in support of their theory that "primitivity" was "an infant state of development through which all cultures passed."17

Informing Vico and Rousseau's writing was the belief that "primitive" people had a special "capacity for deep feeling and great passion," a capacity their "civilized" counterparts lacked because of their profound alienation from the natural world. As art historian Frances Connelly explains in *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725-1907*, Enlightenment philosophers touted "the imagination and feelings" as "wellsprings of creativity, a source that too much reason could obscure." Thus, Vico and Rousseau praised "primitive" people for their guileless, direct expression in songs and stories.18

15 Frank Gilbreth, "Gershwin, Gone Native, Finds It 'Shame to Work at Folly,','* The News and Courier* (June 29, 1934): 9A.
18 Ibid. 22-23.
English and German writers, inspired by Vico and Rousseau's celebration of “simplicity, naïveté, and spontaneity,” searched for evidence of the “primitive” among their homeland’s country folk. In Scotland, for example, James MacPherson claimed to have unearthed and translated the poetry of the “Celtic Homer,” an obscure, third-century poet known as Ossian, while continental author Johann Gottfried von Herder published several volumes of what he “believed to be German folk poetry,” including his widely-read Stimmen der Volkem in Liedern (1788-89). Few of these early efforts at documenting the “unspoiled utterances” of the folk included musical notation, though, as musicologist Leon Plantinga notes, literati and musicians “believed that modern folk or primitive poetry, like the Homeric epics, was meant to be sung.” Thus, composers were free to invent their own melodies and accompaniments for these poems. Their settings tended to be strophic, harmonized with basic diatonic chord progressions, and free of excessive melisma and word painting. Though treatises on song-settings proliferated in the eighteenth century—such as Christian Gottlieb Krause’s Von der musikalischen Poesie (1753)—there was little interest in making Lieder closely resemble contemporary folk practice. To be sure, the Lied repertoire included many songs based on traditional melodies. But in the minds of eighteenth-century Lied composers, the deliberate simplicity of their settings made them a kind of folk music in their own right.

Two nineteenth-century developments gave impetus to the collection and publication of folk melodies: the rise of the nation-state and the emergence of academic disciplines devoted to the “science” of music. Romantic scholars collected tunes for contradictory reasons. On the one hand, they were searching for music that was least influenced by foreign sources, the music most likely to express something of the national character. Béla Bartók, in numerous essays on his Hungarian homeland’s music, acknowledged that “the impulse to begin folk song research” was “attributable to the awakening of national feeling” in the nineteenth century. Any “discovery of the values

of folklore and folk music” that confirmed pre-existing stereotypes of national character “excited the national pride.”21

On the other hand, scholars believed that the systematic collection, cataloguing, and comparison of musical examples from around the world would prove the widely held belief that all societies followed the same evolutionary path towards “civilization.” Using musical data, scientists would be able to pinpoint the exact stage of development that any given society was experiencing. In the United States, for example, ethnographer Alice Fletcher—who lived among the Omahas, Winnebagos, and Nez Perces in the 1880s—declared that her documentation of Indian songs revealed

... how far a people had advanced in the art of musical expression, who were... organized in a social state where there was no class distinction or coordinated labor; where the food supply was still dependent in a considerable degree upon the hunter; where warfare was constant, and conducted by private enterprise rather than directed by a centered government; where the language of the people had never been reduced to writing and where there was no possible training of the mind in literature or art.22

More importantly, Indian songs provided a window into the European’s musical past. “These songs,” she declared, are valuable because they “reveal to us something of the foundations upon which rests the art of music as we know it today.”23

Ethnographers such as Fletcher believed that their fieldwork needed to conform to the same empirical standards as research in the physical sciences. In such a positivist climate, it was no longer acceptable to jot down tunes as sung by a maid or a country landowner. The would-be ethnographer felt it imperative to go into the field and transcribe songs as they were performed by their creators—even when these vernacular traditions featured odd meters, non-diatonic harmonies, unusual cross-rhythms, and pitches that defied easy notation.

23 Alice Fletcher, Indian Story and Song from North America (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1900), vii-viii.
For Eastern European nationalists, the fieldwork of Bartók and Miliy Alexeyevich Balakirev offered promising raw materials for a new compositional aesthetic—one less indebted to the German tradition that dominated western art music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By recovering musical cultures that predated German musical hegemony, composers hoped to find rhythms, modes, characteristic melodies, and polyphonic textures that could function as signifiers of national character. In the first decade of the twentieth century, a corollary theme emerged in the writings of some Eastern European composers. They felt the German musical tradition was “sliding into a period of decadence” that could only be remedied by the “rude truth” of primitive music. Bartók, for example, argued that the “excesses of Romanticism” had become “unbearable” to him and his peers. He urged his contemporaries to study folk music because “it is the classical model of how to express an idea musically in the most concise form, with the greatest simplicity of means, with freshness and life, briefly yet completely and properly proportioned.” Thus, the Eastern European nationalists had the dual burden of developing their own musical language while simultaneously attempting to reform the dominant German tradition.

In the United States, critics, scholars and composers also expressed interest in folk music as both a remedy for Romantic excess and a building block for a distinctly American form of musical expression. Fascination with the folk peaked in the 1930s as critics lamented the lack of an indigenous art music distinct from the European tradition. In 1924, Marion Bauer, composer and future chairwoman of New York University’s Music Department, claimed that America had yet to produce a “Walt Whitman of music,” a composer whose style was as “entirely American” as Whitman’s groundbreaking verse. Ultra-modernist composer Henry Cowell concurred. In the introduction to his 1933 anthology, American Composers on American Music: A Symposium, Cowell acknowledged that “American composition, up until now, has been tied to the apron-strings of European musical tradition.”

24 Connelly, The Sleep of Reason, 21-22.
Like many of their Jazz Age peers, Bauer and Cowell worried that America might never develop a musical tradition comparable to that of Germany. Music's power to represent abstract ideas—especially those of national character—gave a special urgency to their yearning: they heard the octatonic harmonies of Stravinsky's ballets as "Russian," the mazurka rhythms of Chopin's piano pieces as "Polish," and the bel canto arias of Verdi's operas as "Italian." But to their ears, most American music composed between 1800 and 1920 was indistinguishable from German examples of the same period. The advent of jazz, however, offered tantalizing promise: if composers could integrate its distinctive rhythms, harmonies, and timbres into art music, they would have a sure-fire formula for writing characteristically American music.

These composers faced a quandary, however: America lacked the "peasant classes" so essential to the European conception of folk song. Taking their cue from European observers like Dvorak, American composers decided that the "melodies which grow up as representative of a more or less uniform musical style among the peasant classes—or in any class of an even lower culture" came from black America.28 In the 1920s and 1930s, Americans used the term "primitive" to signify those characteristics of black music that seemed vestiges of African tradition. Americans prized polyrhythms, pentatonic scales, and unusual vocal techniques for their power to infuse cultivated genres of music with raw energy. At the same time, critics and scholars branded black music "bizarre," "naïve," and "elementary."29 No matter how artistically invigorating jazz and spirituals might be, they were still viewed as lesser accomplishments than the string quartets and tone poems of Europe.

This simultaneous enthusiasm for and antipathy towards black music—a hallmark of American primitivism—had parallels in Europe. As Judit Frigeysi explains in her book, Belá Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest, Bartók esteemed Hungarian folk music because he believed the peasants to be "closer to an original understanding of life" than the bourgeoisie. Folk songs "represented an original state of musical culture" characterized by the "utmost intensity of expression within the simplest form." At the same time, however, Bartók viewed the peasantry as less intelligent and emotionally

29 Bauer, "The Influence of the Jazz-Band," 518.
developed than the educated classes. Thus, their music "lacked the sophistication necessary to hold the complex feelings of the best art music." \(^{30}\)

Likewise, many of jazz’s most enthusiastic champions entertained views of black Americans that were equally condescending. Marion Bauer, for example, marveled at the fact that "jazz is the first occidental music to employ the quarter-tone," and speculated that its presence in popular song represented a "return to natural sound." At the same time, she described jazz as "the offspring of the dregs of the civilized world," and opined that only an "alchemist" could transform "materials of such vile origin" into a genuine American masterpiece.\(^{31}\)

The anti-establishment agenda of primitivism particularly suited American ambivalence towards its European cultural heritage. As Bauer noted in 1924, the enthusiasm for primitive music stemmed from profound disillusionment with the learned styles of Europe. "Today, one claims a return to rhythm, to brutality, to noise, as a reaction from a period of precocity and intellectualism," she argued in "The Influence of the 'Jazz-Band.'"\(^{32}\) An intimately related idea was the notion that white America’s folk traditions—Sacred Harp singing, country fiddling, sentimental ballads—lacked the "noise" and "rhythms" so essential to repudiating European-influenced concert music. Composer Louis Gruenberg, for example, argued that the "various races that constitute the American people brought from their native homes their inherited musical instincts, and in this way we received English, Irish, Russian, German, French, Italian, and other national ingredients out of which... our musical life was constructed." None of these imported folk-styles, however, had "the primitive impulse as its basis." Only jazz, with its insistent rhythms and unconventional harmonies, fell into the category of "primitive" music, music that was "completely undeveloped and awaiting our exploitation."\(^{33}\)

Though many turn-of-the-century composers had sought similar inspiration in Native American music, the enthusiasm for Indian dances and chants subsided as the memory of Wounded Knee was supplanted by that of World War I. Arthur Farwell

\(^{31}\) Bauer, "The Influence of the 'Jazz-Band.'" 518.
\(^{32}\) Bauer, "The Influence of the 'Jazz-Band.'" 518.
\(^{33}\) Louis Gruenberg, "Jazz As a Starting Point," The Musical Leader 49 (May 28, 1925): 594.
(1872-1952) was among the many Americans exploring the possibility of Indian music in the first decades of the twentieth century in pieces such as *Impressions of the Wa-Wan Ceremony of the Omahas* (1905), *Navajo War Dance* (1905), and *Three Indian Songs* (1908). A few composers continued mining this vein into the 1920s. In 1926, for example, *The New York Times* reported that the American Grand Opera Company of Seattle planned to stage *Winona*, an "Indian opera" by Alberto Bimboni.\(^{34}\)

By and large, however, most Jazz Age Americans interested in the "primitive" were building on the work of white composers like Henry Gilbert—best known for *Dance in the Place Congo* (1908; revised in 1916)—and Louis Gruenberg—known for *The Daniel Jazz* (1924) and *Jazzberries* (1925). Many of their compositions were burdened by minstrel-era stereotypes of African-Americans as lazy, impetuous, incapable of reasoning, and not far removed from their jungle origins. When Gilbert's ballet *Dance in the Place Congo* premiered at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1918, for example, a reviewer for the *Boston Evening Transcript* described the ballet's setting as "a flat space beside the bayou, overhung with trees, surrounded by the huts of the lazy slaves" where the "pickaninnies dance across the stage, or stride about, eating their watermelon."\(^{35}\) Gruenberg's 1933 opera *The Emperor Jones* abounded in similar racist clichés. The cast included a "Congo-witch doctor" decked out in antelope horns and an animal pelt; a native leader who resembled an "aped-faced old savage... dressed only in a loincloth"); and a chorus of shrieking natives.\(^{36}\) Gruenberg used polytonal chords and African drums to suggest the violent, bestial nature of O'Neill's characters.

Gershwin was keenly aware of the rhetoric that accompanied such compositions, a rhetoric that stretched back to Dvorak's oft-quoted statement that "negro melodies... are the folk-songs of America, and your composers must turn to them."\(^{37}\) In the decades following Dvorak's remarks, many composers with similar musical objectives had

---


publicly declared their affinity for spirituals and jazz in The New York Times, The Outlook, Musical America, Modern Music, The Nation, and Vanity Fair. In 1918, for example, the African-American composer R. Nathaniel Dett told Musical America that the United States had “a wonderful store of folk music—the melodies of an enslaved people who poured out their longings, their griefs and their aspirations in the one great, universal language.” Dett directed American composers to “take the rough timber of Negro themes” and “fashion” operas, concertos, and chamber music that “will prove that we, too, have national feelings and characteristics, as have the European people whose forms we have zealously followed for so long.”

Gruenberg contributed a similar manifesto to the fledgling journal Modern Music in 1924. He argued that “we have at least three rich veins indigenous to America alone: Jazz, Negro spirituals, and Indian chants.” These folk-song sources could form the cornerstone of a “new idiom,” one that expressed the “decidedly” American personality “recognizable the world over.”

In an essay that appeared in Henry Cowell’s 1933 volume American Composers on American Music: A Symposium, Gershwin reiterated ideas found in Dett’s and Gruenberg’s articles, arguing that “the great music of the past” has been “built on folk music.” Gershwin acknowledged that many different genres, among them “jazz, ragtime, Negro spirituals and blues, country fiddling, and cowboy songs,” could provide the “foundation for development” of a national “art music,” but that jazz captured the “feeling of the American people more than any other style of folk music.”

Gershwin again invoked the rhetoric of the American musical nationalists during his Charleston trips. He insisted that Porgy and Bess was more than just a revue of spirituals; it was a traditional European opera infused with the signature elements of African-American music. The resulting hybrid, he argued, would be the first American opera of comparable stature to nationalist masterpieces by Wagner and Mussorgsky. “The production will be a serious attempt to put in operatic form a purely American theme,” he declared. “If I am successful, it will resemble a combination of the drama and

---

romance of ‘Carmen’ and the beauty of ‘Meistersinger.’ I believe it will be something that has never been done before. Green Pastures? This will be infinitely more sophisticated.”41 At the same time, Gershwin was striving to escape some of the primitivist clichés that had dogged Gilbert and Gruenberg. Though Gershwin had many motives for visiting Charleston, his search for “real negroes of the South Carolina Lowcountry” reflected his desire to avoid the mistakes he had made in his first foray into opera, Blue Monday (1922).42

---

41 “Gershwin Gets His Music Cues For ‘Porgy’ on Carolina Beach,” V:2.
42 “Gershwin Arrives to Plan Opera on ‘Porgy’,” The Charleston News and Courier (December 4, 1931), 1.
SECTION III
PRELUDE TO THE CHARLESTON TRIPS

Blue Monday, a twenty-five minute operetta in George White's revue, Scandals of 1922, was Gershwin's first attempt to incorporate African-American elements into a European musical form. Featuring a plot and characters that, in the words of one Gershwin biographer, suggested "the worst of nineteenth-century Italian verismo" rather than the Harlem locale in which the story took place, Blue Monday alienated audiences.43 Reviewer Charles Darnton of The New York World offered the most famous and dismissive appraisal of Gershwin's freshman effort. After seeing the premiere of Scandals, Darnton charged Gershwin with writing "the most dismal, stupid, and incredible blackface sketch that has probably ever been perpetuated."44 Although bandleader Paul Whiteman would restage the opera in 1926 with a new title (135th Street) and new orchestration by Ferde Grofé, George White bowed to critical pressure and dropped Blue Monday from Scandals of 1922.

From Darnton's comments, Gershwin learned two lessons. First, the credibility of an opera based on black themes was seriously jeopardized by corked-up white performers. Second, the music needed to play a definitive role in establishing the story's location in the black community. As biographer Charles Schwartz points out, Blue Monday's score sounded more like the music of Tin Pan Alley than the "hot" jazz of its Harlem locale.45

DuBose Heyward's novel Porgy—published in 1924—rekindled Gershwin's operatic imagination. Porgy depicted an impoverished black community in Charleston with vivid references to folk custom as well as colorful phrases in Gullah, the local patois

---

44 Charles Darnton, newspaper review, August 29, 1922. Quoted in Schwartz, Gershwin: His Life and Music. 61.
of English and West African that had survived in and around the Low Country long after the demise of slavery. The melodrama so familiar to opera audiences—the beggar Porgy’s ill-fated romance with the hard-drinking, downtrodden Bess—was almost incidental to the evocation of black life in Charleston.

In Heyward’s novel, Gershwin found the answer to his previous dilemma. Here was a source that seemed unimpeachably “authentic” in its portrayal of black characters, customs, and dialect. And in Heyward, Gershwin recognized someone equally fascinated with the “primitive” aspects of black culture and skilled in presenting black folkways to white audiences. He first approached Heyward in 1926 with a proposal to adapt Porgy for the opera house, but, lacking confidence in his composing skills, did not begin earnest negotiations with the writer until 1933. In the meantime, Heyward and his wife Dorothy adapted Porgy for the stage. Their play captivated audiences in 1927 with its dramatic use of traditional spirituals and work songs. Gershwin, however, was unfazed by the transformation of the novel into a successful play and in 1933 forged ahead with plans to write a grand opera on a “Negro theme,” finally closing a deal with Heyward and the Theater Guild in November.

Once the deal was signed, Heyward began urging Gershwin to visit Charleston so that he could imbibe the local music and language. Like dozens of other white artists and folklorists, Heyward viewed the local black population—known as the Gullah or Geechee people—as being closer to their African roots than blacks living in Northern cities.\(^\text{46}\) For nearly a century, pilgrims such as Laura Towne, Elsie Clews Parsons, and R.W. Gordon had traveled to Charleston area to observe the Gullah way of life, which had remained relatively unchanged since the end of the eighteenth century when Gullah ancestors were first imported from West Africa to the rice and indigo plantations of the Sea Islands.

---


\(^\text{46}\) The term *Gullah* is a corruption of *Angola*, where many turn-of-the-century historians erroneously believed the Low Country slaves had come from. Although Heyward and many of his contemporaries used the term more generically to refer to all Low Country blacks, *Gullah* originally applied to the black population of the Sea Islands, a long archipelago that hugs the South Carolina and Georgia coastline. The term *Geechee*, more commonly used to refer inhabitants of the Georgia Sea Islands, may come from *Gidzi*, a language spoken by the present-day residents of Liberia. See Patricia Jones-Jackson, *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 133.
Sea Island geography created conditions ripe for the retention of African customs. The sultry climate and relative remoteness of the islands deterred the establishment of white communities. Most planters were absentee landlords who visited their farms only during the height of harvesting season, creating a gross imbalance in the slave-to-white ratio: in 1850, for example, 112 white males were outnumbered by 3,581 slaves in one of the region’s largest and most accessible parishes. Unlike their counterparts in the Tidewater or Chesapeake areas, Sea Island slaves seldom labored under the direct supervision of white overseers. Their limited need to communicate with whites gave rise to a creole that blended African and English vocabulary with African syntax. The lexicon was drawn from a host of related West African languages—Hausa, Kongo, Vai, Wolof, Twi, Kikongo, Kongo, Mandingo, Temne, Ibebio, Igbo, and Ga—reflecting the slave community’s diverse origins. Over time, as memories of the Old World dimmed, fewer African words remained in the vocabulary, though Gullah retained many of the grammatical constructions of its West African progenitors.

Other Africanisms—such as decorating funeral mounds with the deceased’s belongings—persisted in the Sea Islands as well. But it was the distinctive music-making and story-telling practices that drew folklorists to the region. When northern abolitionists began missionary work among the recently-emancipated Sea Island slaves, they encountered a style of religious dance wholly unfamiliar to them. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a New England clergyman, provided one of the most famous and vivid descriptions of this dance, known to locals as “shouting” or “ring shout.” In a “little booth made neatly of palm leaves covered in on top,” Higginson recalled, men chanted “at the top of their voices,” “accompanied with a regular drumming of the feet and clapping of the hands, like castanets.” The shouters then formed a “circle” “winding monotonously round some one in the centre,” the dance growing in intensity as the singers repeated “obscure syllables” with “slight variations interwoven.” Diary entries and field reports of Sea Island residents provide a similar depiction of Gullah music-making.

Between 1864 and 1867, Higginson published a series of ground-breaking articles in *The Atlantic Monthly* on African-American music. He attempted to describe ring shout, spirituals, field hollers, and chanteys for an audience of white northerners wholly unfamiliar with black music-making. He also contributed to the first published collection of spirituals, *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867), which featured more than 70 Sea Island songs that had been gathered by Higginson, Laura Towne, and others in the years immediately following emancipation. The missionaries’ attempts to transcribe blue notes, cross-rhythms, and dialect were crude and clumsy; many of the melodies were simplified to conform to the principles of western diatonic notation, eradicating some of the music’s most distinctive features. Though some missionaries appreciated the haunting, modal quality of the vocal lines, not surprisingly, most devoted their attention to praising the more obviously Christian element of the shout: its simple, direct lyrics celebrating the heroism of Moses and Noah.

The region’s music continued to attract white interest well into the twentieth century. A new breed of visitor came in the 1920s, however. Armed with portable recording equipment, folklorists such as R.W. Gordon and Lydia Parrish were determined both to document Sea Island spirituals accurately and to demonstrate definitive links with African musical practice. As Gordon explained in a 1927 *New York Times* article:

> Too many of the collections now in print have been marred by careless editing; versions from different periods have often been combined to form a ‘complete’ version, or condensations [sic] have been made by the omission of all that seemed incongruous or not understandable. Very little attention has been paid to any tracing of origins or to the study and interpretation of local differences.49

Both Gordon and Parrish published their findings, Gordon in a 1927 series of articles called “Folk Songs of America” that covered the gamut from ring shout to black sea-chanteys, and Parrish in a 1942 volume entitled *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands*. As John and Alan Lomax would do in the late 1930s, Gordon also made numerous field recordings of the music for the Library of Congress’s newly-created Folklife Archive, some of which were issued commercially in the late 1920s.
In the same spirit, turn-of-the-century folklorists such as Joel Chandler Harris, Charles C. Jones, Elsie Clews Parsons, and Ambrose Gonzales spent time among the Gullah collecting folktales. The antics of Ber Rabbit (known to most Americans as Bre’r, or Brother, Rabbit), Ber Buzzard, and Nnabe the tortoise had clear parallels in Africa, where griots, or storytellers, regaled audiences with tales of small, cunning animals who outwitted their more powerful neighbors. Other stories persisted as well: the Igbo “singing bones” genre, in which the bones of a murder victim reveal the name of his killer, continued to be a favorite among the Gullah as late as the 1980s.50

Gullah lore and music beguiled white artists like DuBose Heyward for many of the same reasons as they intrigued folklorists: the Gullah language, dance steps, stories, and songs bore the unmistakable stamp of Africa. The Gullah way of life also held romantic appeal for artists disenchanted with the steady march of Southern urbanization. Untouched by such modern conveniences as running water, electricity, or paved roads, residents of the more remote islands continued to farm, raise children, and treat maladies in the same fashion as their forebears. Charleston-born poet Hervey Allen summarized the symbolic allure of the Sea Islands in his 1924 book Carolina Chansons:

There is a deliberateness in all sea-island ways,
As alien to our days as stone wheels are.
The Islands cannot see the use of life
Which only lives for change...
For all their poverty,
These patient black men live
A life rich in warm colors of the fields,
Sunshine and hearty foods,
Delighted with the gifts that earth can give,
And old tales of Plateye and Bre’r Rabbit.51

The reality, of course, was rather different than Allen and Heyward imagined. Though many of the islands remained cut off from Charleston, accessible only by boat, the new century clearly left its imprint on Gullah life. The advent of radio and phonographs introduced new songs and stories into the island repertoire.52 Limited

---

50 Jones-Jackson, When Roots Die, 111.
52 Jones-Jackson notes that the 1940s Louis Jordan song, “Straighten Up and Fly Right,” was inspired by the popular African-American folk-tale about Brer Buzzard and Brer Monkey. In a rendition of the Buzzard and
natural resources and job opportunities sparked an exodus from the islands to Charleston, Savannah, Philadelphia, and New York City that began in the 1930s. And the building of bridges from the mainland to James, Johns, and St. Helena islands brought an influx of white vacationers to a region whose climate they had once deemed hazardous to the health.

One thing remained unchanged in the face of modernization, however: the black population was never subject to white domination. Since the creation of the Freedman's Bureau in 1865, many island residents had owned their land outright, avoiding the vicious cycle of debt associated with Delta sharecropping. The population, too, was still remarkably isolated from white society. As late as 1940, blacks outnumbered whites by as much as a sixteen-to-one margin on Edisto, James, Johns, Wadmalaw, and St. Helena Islands.53 More importantly, most Sea Island institutions for social governance were completely within the black community. Sociologist T.J. Woofter noted in his 1930 study of St. Helena Island that from 1910 to 1930, the number of criminal cases referred to the circuit court averaged only two per year. Instead, church councils policed the communities, hearing disputes and meting out punishments for all but the most serious crimes.54

For Low Country novelists like Julia Peterkin and Heyward, therefore, the Gullah represented the very essence of folk culture. (Even Heyward's characters—who inhabit pre-World War I Charleston—seemed as untainted by modernization and the dominant culture's values as Peterkin's antebellum plantation-dwellers.) In Peterkin's *Black April* (1927) and Heyward's *Porgy*, both authors carefully reconstructed Gullah dialect and custom to depict African-Americans as fully-realized characters. As scholar Susan Millar Williams points out, Peterkin's characters "have ancestors and histories" and "speak a distinctive regional language instead of a comic dialect."55 Likewise, Heyward's story offers up lengthy descriptions of local practices not to ridicule them but

---

*Footnotes*


22
to underscore the Gullah’s African ancestry. More importantly, Peterkin and Heyward brought a local perspective to their novels: both were descended from slave-owning Charleston families and had exposure to Gullah-speaking people. Their works reflected their insider knowledge of local tradition; descriptions of hoodoo, midwifing techniques, and ring shout form integral elements of *Black April* and *Porgy*, not splashes of local color.

Gershwin needed just such an insider to help him create an opera that would be more than a grand opera with an American backdrop. Though less interested in preserving the rituals he observed than other Sea Island pilgrims—such as Lomax, Parsons, Gordon, and Heyward—Gershwin clearly viewed his trips to the region as an essential step in creating a genuine folk opera. “I felt that I should come to Charleston and see what it’s like and study the negroes as best I can,” he told journalist Frank Gilbreth during his 1933 visit. “I want to absorb as much as I can.”

---

56 “George Gershwin Arrives to Plan Opera on ‘Porgy,’” 1.
Heyward, too, had motivation for encouraging Gershwin's visit. Heyward was eager to preserve the tone of his novel as it was translated to other mediums. Though he recognized that many of the didactic interludes on ring shout, "plat-eye ha'nts," omens, and herbal remedies would have to be trimmed from the libretto in the interest of time, he wanted to preserve the authentic atmosphere of Porgy. Thus, he urged Gershwin to come visit Charleston to hear for himself the shouts, prayers, and work songs that had inspired the original novel.

On March 2, 1934, Heyward fired off a cranky missive to Gershwin. "I have been hearing you on the radio," he wrote, "and the reception is so good it seemed as though you were in the room. In fact, the illusion was so perfect I could hardly keep from yelling at you 'Swell show, George, but what the hell is the news about PORGY!!!'" Nearly three months had passed since Gershwin's brief stopover in Charleston, SC. During that December, 1933 visit, Heyward accompanied Gershwin to an "experience service" at the Macedonia Church; to the waterfront, where they listened to the colorful cries of "fish and vegetable hucksters"; and to Cabbage Row, the real-life inspiration for the opera's setting. But Heyward felt that Gershwin's two-day visit had barely exposed the composer to the sounds of Charleston's Gullah population. Heyward urged Gershwin to return for a lengthier stay so that he might get "deep into the sources here." Another three months lapsed before Gershwin's radio contract permitted him to board a train for South Carolina. He arrived on June 19, 1934, setting up shop for a one-

57 In the Gullah tradition, a "plat-eye ha'nt" is a kind of poltergeist or malicious spirit that lives in wooded areas and swampy lowlands.
59 At an "experience service," men and women stand before the congregation and "testify," or relate experiences that lead to their initial conversion or renewal of faith in God.
60 "George Gershwin Arrives to Plan Opera 'Porgy.'" 1.
month stay on Folly Island, just a short distance from Charleston.

During his stay at Folly Island, Gershwin met daily with Heyward to work on Act I of the opera. They made occasional excursions to neighboring James Island to observe Gullah music-making in a variety of informal settings as well as in the context of religious services. Gershwin also indulged in non-musical activities, playing rounds of golf with cousin Henry Botkin, judging a beauty contest at the Folly Island Pier, and watching sea turtles come ashore to nest. At the end of his stay, he accompanied Heyward to Hendersonville, North Carolina, where Heyward owned a summer cottage. During this two-day layover in North Carolina, Gershwin and Heyward chanced upon a Pentecostal church service in progress, a service that the composer would later cite as the inspiration for the six-voice prayer in Act II, Scene iv. Gershwin then returned to New York City in late July.

Among the more musically fortuitous events of the trip was a specially-arranged performance by the Charleston Society for the Preservation of the Spiritual.63 Formed in 1922, the Society claimed seventy-six members, most of who hailed from Charleston’s well-to-do white society. They collected, arranged, and performed the traditional music of the Low Country’s black population. In their statement of purpose, Society members pledged to “take advantage of all reasonable opportunities of hearing [spirituals] sung by the negroes, particularly in out of the way places, where they are still sung as they used to be.” This distinction was crucial for them. They were determined to preserve not only the melodies and the texts, but the very “character and rendition” of the songs as performed by African-Americans.64

To “educate the rising generation” about the vanishing folksong tradition, the Society launched a three-pronged initiative of concerts, archival recordings, and publications. They made their debut at St. Phillip’s Church in Charleston on May 4, 1923.

---

62 Letter from DuBose Heyward to George Gershwin, March 2, 1934.
63 I am not certain as to the date of the concert. I could find no mention of it in any of the newspaper coverage; my sole source of information about this concert is Hollis Alpert. Alpert does not cite where he learned of the concert; my guess is that Gershwin mentioned it in some of the less-frequently quoted correspondence from this period. Given Heyward’s fascination with Gullah culture and his contributions to the Society’s 1931 publication, The Carolina Low-Country, it seems quite probable that Heyward introduced Gershwin to the Society and its repertoire. See Hollis Alpert, The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess, An American Classic (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 89.
with twenty members. As their numbers grew, they began touring, bringing their recreations to cities in South Carolina, Georgia, New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Massachusetts. Their concerts attracted sufficient attention to merit mention in African-American philosopher Alain Locke's 1936 treatise, *The Negro and His Music*. "A 'Society for the Preservation of the Spirituals' organized in Charleston, SC by a white singing organization," he wrote, "is a striking symbol of this common duty to restore them to dignity and respect."

The Society also dedicated considerable effort to making recordings of the music, captured both in the field and recreated in the concert hall. In 1937, the Society donated more than 30 hours of 78 RPM discs to the Library of Congress. Not only does the collection feature samples of spirituals and work songs, but it also contains more unusual material such as calls made by fish, fruit, and vegetable vendors on the Charleston docks. The Society's most lasting contribution, however, was the publication of *The Carolina Low Country* (1931), an anthology of essays, poems, drawings, and fiction expressing "the feelings of the members of the Society and all others of similar heritage towards the songs themselves, and the black people who sing them, and towards the region in which they live, its natural aspects, its history, its triumphs, defeats, despairs, and recoveries." DuBose Heyward and R.W. Gordon both contributed essays to *The Carolina Low Country*, Heyward on the lingering effects of slavery on race relations and Gordon on regional spirituals.

Heyward's fascination with local black customs dovetailed nicely with the group's mission of preserving regional music. In his 1927 staging of *Porgy*, Heyward had borrowed several pieces from the Society's repertoire: "Somebody Knockin' at De Door," "W'en I'm A-Gone," and "Primus' Lan'." The Society's June 1934 concert (presumably given in honor of Gershwin) may have provided Gershwin with his first sustained exposure to the texts and melodies of the Sea Islands—even if the performances themselves did not accurately reflect local practice. More importantly, Heyward's involvement in this group had taught him a great deal about the region's

---

66 Some Society members recorded themselves performing these street calls.
music, knowledge that he was eager to impart to Gershwin.
Among Gershwin's biographers, there is a remarkable consensus on the events and purpose of the composer's second trip to Charleston in 1934. Most agree that Gershwin went to appease Heyward (who worried that long-distance collaboration was impeding *Porgy and Bess*'s development) and to hear spirituals in an effort to spice his score with authentic regional flavor. And most biographers concede that Gershwin also went to Charleston for a vacation, though some authors—such as Edith Garson and Robert Payne—tend to ignore Gershwin's non-musical activities in their romantic accounts of Gershwin communing with the "folk."

In the presentation of the details, too, there is considerable overlap among the work of David Ewen, Edward Jablonski, Charles Schwartz, Robert Payne, and Hollis Alpert. All characterize Gershwin's living quarters as "primitive," describing his Folly Island cottage as "bare," furnished only with a wrought-iron bed, an upright piano, a wash basin, and a "naked" light bulb hung from the ceiling. They also stress that Gershwin viewed his trips to neighboring James Island as an anthropologist might view a visit to a Pueblo village: James Island was a "laboratory" for collecting folk material and observing black music-making. In their accounts of his trips into the field, too, these authors present a remarkably united front. All include DuBose Heyward's recollection that Gershwin participated in a ring shout, joining the circle of shuffling, clapping spiritual singers only to steal the show from the group's "champion shouter" with more elaborate dance moves and clapping patterns. And all provide similarly colorful

68 After Isaac Goldberg's death in 1938, Edith Garson completed Goldberg's biography *George Gershwin.* Since she wrote the chapters on *Porgy and Bess,* I refer to her in discussions of this portion of Goldberg's Gershwin biography.
descriptions of the Pentecostal prayer service that Gershwin and Heyward attended in Hendersonville, North Carolina.69

A limited pool of source materials helps explain some of these narrative similarities. Jablonski, Schwartz, Payne, and Alpert all quote from a June 23, 1934 letter Gershwin wrote to his mother in which he compares his surroundings to a “battered old South Sea Island.” Frank Gilbreth’s three articles for The News and Courier are another oft-quoted source in these Gershwin biographies; almost all of Gershwin’s biographers describe the composer as “bare and black above the waist” during his stay at Folly Island.

The most influential source, however, was DuBose Heyward’s 1938 article, “Porgy and Bess Return on Wings of Song,” published a year after Gershwin’s death. Both the shouting incident and the description of the Pentecostal service (and its subsequent impact on Gershwin) come from this essay. More significantly, it is the tone of Heyward’s article as much as the anecdotes, that plays a major role in shaping the literature on the Charleston trips. Heyward’s accounts of ring shouts and prayer services are so vivid that biographers have taken it for granted that the Charleston trips influenced Porgy and Bess. But to accept the language and content of “Wings of Song” without probing Heyward’s motives or examining the opera’s score limits the biographer’s ability to comment meaningfully on Gershwin’s use of Gullah elements in Porgy and Bess.

One point overlooked by Gershwin biographers is the timing of Heyward’s essay, written less than a year after the composer’s death. Assessing his collaborator’s musical skill and instinctive appreciation for black folk-song, Heyward adopts an elegiac tone that inflates Gershwin’s and diminishes his own contributions to Porgy and Bess. Heyward casts himself as a minor player to emphasize the significance of Gershwin’s achievement in creating an American opera that simultaneously evoked the “primitive” sound of Low Country spirituals and the grandeur of such European masterpieces as Tristan und Isolde.

69 Gershwin’s biographers differ somewhat on the date and location of this event. Almost all believe that the “Holy Rollers” cabin visited by Heyward and Gershwin was located outside of Hendersonville, NC, where
Another point ignored by biographers is the essay's fervid tone. Heyward's adjective choices and anecdotes reveal his fascination with the "primitive"—an obsession that permeates his letters, essays, plays, and poetry. On February 6, 1934, for example, Heyward had reported to Gershwin that he had unearthed some Gullah dances and songs suitable for the Kittiwah Island picnic scene. In a letter accompanying his first draft of Act II, Scene ii, Heyward wrote Gershwin, "I have incorporated material that is authentic and plenty 'hot.'"70 This "hot" material included "a type of secular dance that is done [in the Sea Islands] that is straight from the African phallic dance, and that is undoubtedly a complete survival." He also suggested that a "native band of harmonic[a]s, combs, etc." would, in concert with the phallic dance, "make an extraordinary introduction to the primitive scene between Crown and Bess."71 In a toned-down form, Heyward's secular dance became the ensemble number "I Ain't Got No Shame" that had several choruses consisting only of "primitive" syllables to be performed over "African drums" and marked by Gershwin con brio e molto barbardo.

Similar images of "primitive" Africans fill the pages of Heyward's prose. In the novel Porgy, Heyward describes his protagonist as a noble savage not far removed from his ancestral homeland: "There is a suggestion of the mystic in [Porgy's] thoughtful, sensitive face," Heyward wrote. "[Porgy] is black, with the almost purple blackness of unadulterated Congo blood."72 Heyward also relies heavily on dialect and folk custom to give both his novel and play a more authentic atmosphere. The stage directions for Porgy, for example, portray Catfish Row as a preserve of undiluted African customs:

As the curtain rises, revealing Catfish Row on a summer evening, the court reechoes with African laughter and friendly banter in 'Gullah,' the language of the Charleston Negro, which still retains many African words. The audience understands none of it. Like the laughter and movement, the twanging of a guitar from an upper window, the dancing of an urchin with a loose, shuffling step, it is part of the picture of Catfish Row as it

---

70 By "hot," both Heyward and Gershwin meant music that was fast, loud, and had overtly sexual qualities.
71 Letter from DuBose Heyward to George Gershwin, February 6, 1934. Quoted in Ewen, George Gershwin: His Journey to Greatness. 220.
really is—an alien scene, a people as little known to most Americans as the people of the Congo.\textsuperscript{73}

Other semi-didactic presentations of superstition and folk practice—including lengthy discourses on omens, conjuring, "plat-eye ha'nts," and shouting—punctuate the play's script.

Another point overlooked by biographers is that Heyward downplays his role in introducing Gershwin to the more African sound of Sea Islands music. Heyward characterizes Gershwin as a kind of folklorist, attuned to nuances of expression and complexity in black music that most whites—including Heyward—were oblivious to. In his account of the Pentecostal prayer service, for example, Heyward recalls that Gershwin "caught my arm and held me. The sound that had arrested him was one to which, through long familiarity, I attached no special importance. But now, listening to it with him, and noticing his excitement, I began to catch its extraordinary quality."\textsuperscript{74}

But Heyward's portrayal of himself as musically naïve is unconvincing. Gershwin clearly relied on Heyward to guide him to the "real" music of Charleston. (In preparation for his December 1933 trip, Gershwin revealed his limited knowledge of Low Country music by suggesting that the two men "go to a colored café or two" to hear regional music, as Gershwin did when he was interested in hearing the hot jazz of Harlem.\textsuperscript{75}) He deferred to Heyward's expertise in writing "It Take a Long Pull Tuh Get There," consulting Heyward for tempo markings and rhythmic patterns consistent with the chanteys used by Charleston boatmen. And Heyward's description of the Pentecostal prayer service suggests that he had a well-developed ear for black music:

\begin{quote}
It consisted of perhaps a dozen voices raised in loud rhythmic prayer. The odd thing about it was that while each started at a different time, upon a different theme, they formed a clearly defined rhythmic pattern, and that this, with the actual words lost, and the inevitable pounding of the rhythm, produced an effect almost terrifying in its primitive intensity.\textsuperscript{76}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{74} Heyward, "Porgy and Bess Return on Wings of Song." 39-40.

\textsuperscript{75} Letter from George Gershwin to DuBose Heyward, December, 1934. Quoted in Schwartz, \textit{Gershwin: His Life and Music}. 253.

\textsuperscript{76} Heyward, "Porgy and Bess Return on Wings of Song." 39-40.
Heyward’s comments also reveal that he shared with many of his contemporaries the belief that American Jews had a special role to play in introducing mainstream audiences to black music. In a revealing passage, Heyward implies that despite Gershwin’s sophisticated musical ideas, he was, at heart, a sensualist like the Gullah themselves:

The most interesting discovery to me, as we sat listening to their spirituals, or watched a group shuffling before a cabin or country store, was that to George it was more like a homecoming than an exploration. The quality in him which had produced the *Rhapsody in Blue* in the most sophisticated city in America, found its counterpart in the impulse behind the music and bodily rhythms of the simple Negro peasant of the South.77

As cultural historian Macdonald Moore argues in *Yankee Blues*, there was a long tradition of viewing Jews as cultural go-betweens—a view that colored public perception of other twentieth-century American composers such as Aaron Copland and Ernest Bloch. Moore notes that Jews were frequently “characterized as Oriental middlemen between whites and blacks,” simultaneously sensual and calculating.78 Jeffrey Melnick refines Moore’s argument, pointing out that Gershwin was one of the first Jewish composers to actively embrace the notion that “Jews had a natural propensity—racial and/or religious—to produce ‘Black’ music.” In numerous interviews, Gershwin helped perpetuate the “widely-circulated idea that as a Jew he had more or less inherited African-American music, and that out of these materials he was legitimately developing an American art music.”79

Though Heyward is careful not to mention Gershwin’s Jewish heritage, other biographers seized on this passage from “Wings of Song” to further the argument that Gershwin was uniquely suited to writing black music for white audiences. After *Porgy and Bess* debuted in 1935, for example, Gershwin biographer Isaac Goldberg pronounced Gershwin “our foremost writer of American-Negroid music,” and speculated that Gershwin drew upon the “common Oriental ancestry of both Negro and Jew” for authentic inspiration. This theme of cultural consciousness persisted in Gershwin

---

77 Heyward, “*Porgy and Bess Return on Wings of Song.*” 39.
biographies well beyond the 1930s, resurfacing in Robert Payne’s *Gershwin* (1970) and Joan Peyser’s *The Memory of All That* (1993). The argument in these works is more refined; Jews are no longer identified as a “race” by either Payne or Peyser, but both authors assert that Gershwin’s Jewish identity, with its attendant similarities to African-American experience, afforded him an insider’s perspective on black musical practice. Payne, for instance, claims that “a group of Gullah Negroes shuffling along a dusty road or lifting their voices in spirituals” produced in Gershwin “an almost terrifying sense of communion.” This sense of communion, Payne argues, is evident in *Porgy and Bess*’s admixture of Jewish and black music:

The roots of the melodies and nearly all the most haunting passages of *Porgy and Bess* can be traced to Chassidic sources mingled with Gullah. The burial scene in the opera derives it power from ancient Jewish laments. Porgy is not wholly Negro. There are times when he wears the face of a young Jewish exile singing the Lord’s song in a strange land.

Reviewing the work of Ewen, Jablonski, Schwartz, Payne, and Alpert reveals a clear pattern. Gershwin’s biographers have used Heyward’s essay for two purposes: to enliven their accounts of how *Porgy and Bess* came into being and to suggest quickly—but not explicitly—a connection between what Gershwin heard in the field and the “exotic” effects in such numbers as “O, Doctor Jesus.” To move beyond these two perspectives developed by Gershwin biographers, however, we need to examine the actual score for evidence of Gullah musical practices.

---

80 For further discussion of Joan Peyser’s treatment of this delicate subject, see Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*, 244.
82 Ibid. 137.
SECTION VI
THE QUESTION OF MUSICAL "AUTHENTICITY"

The first generation of Gershwin scholars—such as Jablonski and Ewen—lacked the music theory background necessary for analyzing the structures, harmonies, and motives in Porgy and Bess. Though they agreed that black influence was evident in Gershwin's score, their analyses tended to be vague, praising Gershwin for his "intuitive" ability to write music that sounded authentically African-American without referring to specific features of the score in support of their arguments. Only in the last ten years have musicologists have begun to scrutinize Porgy and Bess with the same degree of sophistication reserved for canonical operas such as Tristan und Isolde. Like their predecessors, scholars such as Stephen Gilbert and John Andrew Johnson have acknowledged the African-American influence in Porgy and Bess. But the bulk of their analyses have focused on Gershwin's orchestration, use of leitmotivs, and self-quotation, relegating discussion of possible Gullah influence to a few sentences.83

This tendency to assume African-American influence without substantiation can be traced back to the initial reviews of Porgy and Bess. In 1935, for example, critics Irving Kolodin and Olin Downes took great pains to catalogue the various influences manifest in Porgy and Bess. Though they noted the "modal" harmonies and "improvisatory" melodies in "O, Doctor Jesus," the saucer burial scene, and the hurricane prayer, their assessments tended to fixate on the legacy of various European composers. Downes characterized Gershwin's musical vocabulary as a combination of "opera," "operetta" and "sheer Broadway entertainment" tempered with "harmonic admixtures of Puccini

83 Wilfrid Mellers is one such author; see Music in a New Found Land: Themes and Developments in the History of American Music (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 392-414. Gilbert's book is more neutral, couched in the kind of theory-speak one finds in journals such as Perspectives on New Music; see the final chapter of The Music of Gershwin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
and Stravinsky." In a similar vein, contemporary critics like Johnson and Hollis Alpert have compiled their own source lists for *Porgy and Bess*. In his 1990 book *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess*, Alpert summarizes the opera's influences as "classical sources, spirituals, jazz, blues, and yes, Broadway," while Johnson names Pietro Mascagni's 1890 opera *Cavalleria rusticana* and Eubie Blake's 1922 revue *Shuffle Along* among Gershwin's seminal influences.

Such laundry lists emphasize an essential feature of Gershwin's score: it is a pastiche of Old and New World genres, a feature that no thoughtful scholar would ignore. But in stressing *Porgy*'s classical and Broadway roots, musicologists have overlooked the influence of folk traditions on *Porgy and Bess*, as if Gershwin's ability to adopt a specific harmonic or melodic gesture from one source (Jerome Kern's 1927 musical *Show Boat* or Stravinsky's 1913 ballet *The Rite of Spring*) and integrate it into the musical vocabulary of his own work only applied to musical traditions with written notation. Had Alpert or Johnson listened to field recordings made by Gershwin's contemporaries Alan Lomax and R.W. Gordon, or investigated Gershwin's connection with the CSPS, they might have concluded that Gershwin applied the same talent for observation to the music-making he witnessed in the Low Country as he had to the scores of Stravinsky and Mascagni.

To prove this supposition, I have divided the remainder of my argument into three sections. First, I investigate the lyrics and song structures in *Porgy and Bess*, considering the influence of *Show Boat* and Low Country spirituals on such numbers as "I Ain't Got No Shame" and "Leavin' for the Promised Land." Second, I analyze the distinctive harmonies of "The Buzzard Song" and "O, Doctor Jesus," comparing Gershwin's harmonies with those found in *The Rite of Spring* and the CSPS's repertoire. Finally, I examine the vocal polyphony of *Porgy and Bess*'s crowd scenes, tracing their inspiration to Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg* and Gullah performance practice. Through such contrasts, I intend to demonstrate not only that Gershwin incorporated Low Country rhythms and harmonies into his musical vocabulary, but that

---

84 See Downes, "'Porgy and Bess,' Native Opera, Opens at the Alvin" and Kolodin, "Porgy and Bess: American Opera in the Theatre."
85 Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess*, 113.
he selectively invoked the Gullah tradition, reserving the use of Low Country elements for scenes of dramatic intensity.

* * * * * *

Responding to charges that *Porgy and Bess* was nothing more than a gussied-up musical comedy, Gershwin told *New York Times* readers that the mere presence of self-contained, appealing songs (like "Summertime" and "It Ain't Necessarily So") did not disqualify his opera from serious consideration. "Songs are entirely within the operatic tradition," he explained:

Many of the most successful operas of the past have had songs. Verdi's operas contain what is known as 'song hits.' *Carmen* is almost a collection of song hits... I believe my song-writing apprenticeship has served invaluably in this respect because the song writers of America have the best conception of how to set words to music so that the music gives added expression to the words.86

In spite of Gershwin's attempt to link himself to composers Giuseppe Verdi and Georges Bizet, however, many observers attributed the character and timing of *Porgy and Bess* to Gershwin's fifteen years of musical comedy experience, rather than fin-de-siecle opera. And indeed, the impact of Gershwin's Broadway "apprenticeship" is hard to ignore. Throughout the opera, Gershwin employs a Broadway showman's sense of pacing: rousing, full company numbers like "It Ain't Necessarily So" are followed by intimate duets like "What You Want Wid Bess" while heart-piercing solos like "Summertime" are answered by bright, up-tempo ensemble pieces like "A Woman Is a Sometime Thing."87

Where Gershwin owes a conspicuous debt to other Broadway composers is in *Porgy and Bess*'s comic interludes. One of these numbers, "I Ain't Got No Shame," opens Act II, Scene ii of the opera. As the residents of Catfish Row arrive on Kittiwah Island for a picnic, African drums begin pounding out a two-against-three rhythm: one drummer plays an accented line of triplets in compound 6/8 meter, while the second drummer plays a recurring figure of an eighth note plus two sixteenths in straight duple meter.

87 For a fuller discussion of *Porgy and Bess*'s Broadway roots, see "Pace and Architecture" in John Andrew Johnson, "Gershwin’s 'American Folk Opera': The Genesis, Style, and Reputation of 'Porgy and Bess' (1935)" (Doctoral dissertation: Harvard University, 1996), 440-532.
Twenty-seven measures into the vamp, the second drummer begins accenting the eighth notes (which fall on the downbeats of the duple meter line). This simultaneous articulation of duple and triple patterns creates a complex, African-sounding texture. When the brass enter in measure 35, their straightforward motive—a quarter note plus two eighths tied to a half note in the subsequent bar—adds yet another layer to the rhythmic texture. (FIGURE 1) Though this figure isn’t syncopated per se, the hemiola of the drum lines creates the impression that the brass, too, are playing a syncopated rhythm. The ensemble then spills onto the stage in frenzy of activity: “Negroes are dancing, some play mouth organs, combs, bones,” read the stage directions. “One plays a washboard, another a washtub. Everyone is full of gaiety.” After a rousing chorus of “I ain’t got no shame/Doin’ what I like to do,” the ensemble answers the drums and brass with a syncopated line of nonsense syllables at a tempo marked con brio e molto barbaro. (FIGURE 2)

As noted in the previous section, Heyward felt the lush, jungle-like setting of Kittiwah Island would naturally inspire his characters to revert to their African origins, and suggested that the scene begin with a recreation of an “African phallic dance.” With no Sea Island models to work from, however, Gershwin turned to a genre he knew well, patterning “I Ain’t Got No Shame” after a similar “gone native” scene in Show Boat. In Act II of the Kern/Hammerstein musical, the proprietors of the 1893 World’s Fair hire black performers to pose as Dahomey tribesmen for an exhibit on West African village life. Over a steady pulse of tom-toms, the male chorus enters singing a nonsense language that is meant to sound like Dahomian (FIGURE 3):

```
Dyunga Doe! Dyunga Doe!
Dyunga Hungyung gunga
Hungyung gunga go!
Kyooga chek!
```

(Although this scene appeared in the original production of Show Boat in 1927, it has been trimmed from subsequent revivals because of its racist, cartoonish depiction of African-Americans.)

Though Gershwin’s evocation of “Africa” through compound meters and polyrhythms is far more sophisticated than Kern’s, a quick inspection of Kern’s score
demonstrates important similarities between "Dahomey" and "I Ain't Got No Shame.
Both composers rely on the same stock gestures to suggest their characters’
"Africaness": prominent drum lines, pseudo-African language, "barbaric" tempi. The
dramatic similarity of the two scenes is also hard to ignore. In both scenes, the black
characters' surroundings awaken atavistic memories of African tribal life. The singing
and dancing that follows the recovery of these "primitive" memories reinforces
Depression-era stereotypes of black Americans as simple, happy, and prone to outbursts
of singing and dancing—stereotypes that Gershwin entertained publicly in his 1935
essay, "Rhapsody in Catfish Row," in which he told New York Times readers that he had
"adapted his [compositional] method to utilize the drama, the humor, the superstition,
the religious fervor, the dancing, and the irrepressible high spirits of the [Negro] race."88

Another comic interlude in Porgy and Bess that owes a debt to Show Boat occurs in
Act II, Scene i. Maria, the worldly-wise matriarch of Catfish Row, confronts the drug-
peddling interloper Sportin' Life. In a half-spoken, half-sung aria, "I Hates Yo' Struttin'
Style," Maria describes the punishment she'll inflict on Sportin' Life if she catches him
selling "happy dust" in front of her store:

I's figgerin' to break yo' bones, yes sir, one by one,
An' then I's goin’ to carve you up an’ hang you in de sun.
I’ll feed yo’ meat to buzzards an’ give ‘em bellyaches,
An’ take yo’ bones to Kittiwah to pizen rattlesnakes.

Her melodic line frequently lingers on certain pitches, punctuated by leaps of and
glissandos spanning a major sixth or an octave. As she becomes more animated, her
vocal line becomes more disjunct, with frequent leaps of a third or fourth used to
exaggerate the natural rise and fall of her "speaking" voice. The most striking feature of
the aria, however, is its notation. Gershwin uses Sprechstimme, a notational system
favored by Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg for achieving a "type of vocal
enunciation between speech and song."89 (FIGURE 4) The note heads are replaced with
an "x" to indicate that the performer should declaim rather than sing the given pitch; the
stems remain unaltered, reminding the performer to observe the full note value.

769.
Perhaps recognizing that Maria was cut from the same dramatic cloth as Queenie, the mother hen of Show Boat's performing troupe, Gershwin again looked to Kern's 1927 musical for inspiration. "I Hates Yo' Struttin' Style" strongly resembles "Queenie's Ballyhoo," a hectoring, humorous song from Act I of Show Boat. After the Magnolia Blossom's star performers fail to draw an audience for the evening show, Queenie steps in, declaring, "I'll show you how it's done." Queenie then chides passers-by in a good-natured fashion, demanding to know,

What fo' you gals dress up dicty?
Where's yo' all gwine?
Tell dose stingy men o' yours
To step up here in line!

Though Queenie's part is written in conventional notation, rather than the self-consciously European Sprechstimme used by Gershwin, Kern strove for the same effect of heightened speech. He offers his performer the option of shouting the lyrics instead of singing them. To further suggest the sound of speech, Kern uses long strings of repeated pitches that are periodically interrupted by leaps of a perfect fourth or fifth. (FIGURE 5)

To be sure, "Queenie's Ballyhoo" and "I Hates Yo' Struttin' Style" are not imbued with the same primitivist overtones as "I Ain't Got No Shame"; nevertheless, these two patter-songs are firmly rooted in stereotype as well (in this case, Queenie and Maria conform to the "Mammy" stereotype so prevalent in fiction celebrating antebellum life).

For the sacred songs in Porgy and Bess, however, Gershwin rejected the model of Show Boat's most famous tune, "Old Man River." Kern's song—with its references to "taters and cotton," its neat, eight-bar phrases, and diatonic harmonies—is a direct descendant of Stephen Foster's minstrel songs "Old Folks at Home" (1851), "My Old Kentucky Home," (1853), and "Old Black Joe" (1860). In "Old Folks at Home," for example, Foster blended traditional spiritual themes (exile, unmitigated toil, separation of families) and pseudo-black dialect with the harmonies, song structures, and nostalgic mood of antebellum parlor music: 90

---

All up and down the whole creation,
Sadly I roam,
Still longing for the old plantation,
And for de old folks at home.\textsuperscript{91}

Likewise, “Old Man River” borrowed heavily from contemporary popular song to give voice to \textit{Show Boat}'s black characters. Kern's song certainly makes nods to the “Sorrow Song” and blues traditions through the use of banjo accompaniment and dialect verse. And, like Foster's songs, “Old Man River” is not meant to be a caricature of African-American vocal music, but instead a commentary on the exploitation and isolation of the freedman:

\begin{quote}
Don’t look up an’ don’t look down,
You don’t dast make de white boss frown,
Bend yo’ knees an’ bow yo’ head,
An’ pull dat rope until yo’re dead.\textsuperscript{92}
\end{quote}

But the sentiments expressed in Foster and Kern’s songs—especially the images of freedmen feeling themselves at the mercy of white society—hardly suited the Gullah, whose social and cultural autonomy had impressed so many historians and folklorists. Nor did the neat parameters of popular song provide an adequate framework for recreating Gullah spirituals. Though many Low Country songs were short and repetitive, shouters frequently altered the length and rhythmic patterns of melodies to suit the occasion; the harmonic and metric regularity of the 32-bar verse was too unyielding to accommodate these improvisations.

In three of the most dramatic scenes in the opera—Robbins' funeral, Bess's brush with death, and the hurricane's arrival—Gershwin turned to Low Country models for guidance. In Act I, Scene ii, for example, the residents of Catfish Row gather to mourn the murder of Serena’s husband, Robbins. Their lament “Gone, Gone, Gone” strongly resembles “W'en I'm Gone, Gone, Gone,” a song associated with the Tomotley Plantation outside of Charleston. Its chorus, which was reprinted in \textit{The Carolina Low-Country}, reads:

\begin{quote}
W'en I'm uh gone, gone, gone
W'en I'm uh gone tuh come no' mo'
Chu'ch I know you gwine to miss me w'en I'm uh gone.\textsuperscript{93}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{92} Jerome Kern, “Ol' Man River,” \textit{Show Boat}. Act I, Scene i.
Heyward’s refrain from the saucer burial scene is remarkably similar: “Where is brudder Robbins?” sing the residents of Catfish Row. “He’s a-gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone.”

The aria “O, Doctor Jesus,” also seems to have a real-life counterpart. After his visit to the Macedonia Church in December, 1933, Gershwin told reporters that a woman had sung a prayer that had left a deep impression on him and Heyward:

O Dr. Jesus
Put your hands around my waist
And give me a belly-band of faith.94

Heyward recreated the experience service in Act II, Scene iii. Serena, the most pious woman on Catfish Row, offers to pray for Bess, who is gravely ill after being left behind in the unsavory climate of Kittiwah Island. Like the woman in the Macedonia Church, Serena addresses her prayer to “Doctor Jesus,” asking Him why He “ain’ lay yo’ hand on dis po’ sister’s head,” and beseeching Him to “lif’ up dis woman an’ make her well.”

Likewise, the coda to “O, Captain Jesus” (from the hurricane scene in Act II), like “Gone, Gone, Gone” and “O, Doctor Jesus,” bears a strong resemblance to an actual Gullah song. But unlike the aforementioned numbers, the coda to “O, Captain Jesus” features both the lyrics and melody from a popular Low Country spiritual—thus contradicting the conventional wisdom that Porgy and Bess cites no Sorrow Songs (a position that Gershwin himself promoted in interviews about the opera). This spiritual—“Somebody Knockin’ at De Door”—was part of CSPS’s repertoire and had been used in the 1927 staging of Porgy.95 In the 1935 opera, however, Gershwin interpolated only the spiritual’s refrain. A side-by-side comparison with a 1926 arrangement of “Knockin’” by Gershwin’s friend and colleague J. Rosamund Johnson reveals the similarity between Gershwin’s “spiritual” and the genuine article.

93 Smythe et al. The Carolina Low-Country, 282-83.
94 Gilbreth, “Gershwin, Prince of Jazz, Pounds Out Rhythm at Folly,” 12. Gershwin friend Kay Halle recalled a similar story to the one reported in the News and Courier. In the 1970s she told Robert Kimball and Alfred Simon that, “When George was writing Porgy and Bess, he went down to South Carolina and wrote me that he had gone to a church and had heard the spiritual, ‘Doctor Jesus, Lean Down From Heaven and Place a Belly Band of Love Around Me.’” Quoted in Kimball and Simon, The Gershwins. (New York: Atheneum, 1973), 177.
95 The chorus performed “Somebody Knockin’ at de Door” during the hurricane scene of the 1927 production of Porgy.
Johnson's setting for solo voice and piano, the melody spans a fifth, generally moves by step or third, and is characterized by the rhythm:

\[ \text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet} \mid \text{\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet\textbullet} \mid \text{\textbullet} \]

(FIGURE 6) Gershwin's treatment of "Knockin'", at first glance, seems rather different; no single part presents a complete, unaltered version of the melody. But a closer examination of Gershwin's score reveals that the original tune's basic features (such as its rhythmic pattern) are retained. Gershwin evokes the melody through cross-relations among the parts; for example, on the words, "knockin' at de do'," the intervallic structure of the original melody (down a major second, down a minor third, up a minor third) can be teased out of the alto and soprano parts. (FIGURE 7)

Like the lyrics of "Gone, Gone, Gone," the structure of several Porgy songs also draw inspiration from Sea Island examples. "Leavin' for de Promise' Lan'," the "rhythmic" spiritual that concludes the saucer-burial scene, has a form typical of many Gullah spirituals. A soloist (Bess) sings a slow, deliberate line resembling a preacher's exhortation. Bess's line is of uncertain tempo; not until the full company joins her on the words "Keep that wheel a-rollin'," does the piece begin to develop a complex rhythmic texture and drive. The rhythmic accompaniment becomes increasingly faster and more intricate, moving from steady, unaccented half notes to syncopated quarter/eighth note combinations to eighth/sixteenth note combinations.96 (FIGURE 8)

In both their field recordings and paper transcriptions of Low Country music, the CSPS documented a similar phenomenon. CSPS member Katharine Hutson described these "rhythmic spirituals" as an evolving exchange between a lead shout and his congregation:

The leader usually sings the opening phrase alone and the congregations swings in as it catches the words. Sometimes the leader will begin each verse on the regular beat; at other times, when the rhythm of the spiritual warrants, he will begin one or two beats ahead of the regular beat, while the congregation is

96 Increasing rhythmic complexity is a hallmark of many African-American genres, from spirituals to jazz. Here, however, I think Gershwin is specifically attempting to evoke the "shouting" tradition that survived in the Sea Islands long after it had died out in other areas of the South.
still holding the last note of the spiritual.97

In addition to the standard transcriptions of spiritual melodies, the appendix to The Carolina Low-Country included a few attempts to document the rhythmic accompaniment and interplay of solo and group voices. The transcribers included separate lines of music indicating the rhythmic contribution of the hands and feet; they also indicated (as best they could) which passages which performed alone and which were performed by the entire ensemble.

In the Santee River spiritual “Welcome Table,” for example, the initial accompaniment to the melody is a simple line of quarter notes; the hands and left foot accentuate the weak beats, while the right foot stamps out the strong beats. (FIGURE 9) As the congregation joins the leader in singing, “I’m gwine tuh set at duh welcome table,” the hands assume a new pattern, clapping out a syncopated eighth-note rhythm against the steady quarter notes of the feet. “Come en Go Wid Me,” another spiritual from the pages of The Carolina Low-Country, also cleaves to this mold. The opening phrase of the song, performed alone by the lead shouter, is accompanied by the same pattern of quarter-note foot-stomping and hand-clapping. On the second statement of “Come en go wid me,” the full ensemble joins the leader. On the third refrain, the ensemble begins subdividing the beat further by clapping one eighth + two sixteenths + two eighth notes. (FIGURE 10)

Another piece that informed the sound of Porgy and Bess was Igor Stravinsky’s 1913 ballet The Rite of Spring: Scenes from Pagan Russia. Though many eighteenth and nineteenth-century composers had relied heavily on four of the six diatonic modes (Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, and Mixolydian) to suggest the open fifths and gapped scales characteristic of folk music, Russian composers such as Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Stravinsky used the octatonic scale—a scale comprised of alternating whole and half step intervals—to represent the harmonic affect of Russian folk song. In the best-known tableau from the Rite, the “Dance of the Adolescents,” Stravinsky superimposed the two diatonic sonorities implied by the members of the C# octatonic scale, Eb and C Major, to

97 Smythe et al., The Carolina Low-Country, 225.
produce what theorist Robert Morgan calls an "integrated sonority"—a chord which is simultaneously dissonant and consonant.\(^{(98)}\) These integrated sonorities caused a sensation in 1913, prompting critics to use words like "primal," "eerie," "lugubrious" and "primitive" to describe their affect.\(^{(99)}\)

Stravinsky also used tritones to further underscore the pagan nature of the ballet's ritual sacrifice. The tritone—whose haunting sound had a long association with evil and superstition—is a unique interval in western music. Through stepwise motion, its pungent dissonance can be resolved in two utterly different ways. Consider the tritone spanning the interval from F to B. If its dissonance is resolved outwards to the adjacent notes E and C, the implied sonority is C Major. But if the dissonance is resolved inwards to the other notes adjacent to F and B, G\(_{b}\) and B\(_{b}\), the implied sonority is G\(_{b}\) Major, which, in the cycle of diatonic key signatures, is remote from C Major (by "remote" I mean that the two scales have almost no common tones). Diatonic modes have only one tritone per octave; octatonic modes, however, have four. (FIGURE 12) Thus, Stravinsky's exploitation of the tritone, like his use of integrated sonorities, can be traced back to the octatonic scale.\(^{(100)}\)

By the time Gershwin wrote *Porgy and Bess*, the integrated sonorities made famous by Stravinsky had become a musical shorthand for invoking the "primitive." Though Gershwin didn't understand the octatonic origins of Stravinsky's chords, he saw integrated sonorities and tritones as tools for achieving primitive effect.\(^{(101)}\) In Act II, Scene i, for example, Porgy's neighbors disperse screaming when a buzzard wheels over


\(^{(100)}\) Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*. 937.

\(^{(101)}\) The octatonic scale appears almost exclusively in Russian music. Very few western composers were familiar with the octatonic scale at the time The Rite of Spring debuted, and so attributed the new sound they were hearing to the emerging practice of polytonality, the simultaneous juxtaposition multiple key signatures. By the time Gershwin was composing *Porgy and Bess*, polytonality had become a part of the musical vocabulary of many modernists. But true octatonic sonorities—like the famous C/E\(_{b}\) of the Rite's "Danses des Adolescentes"—were still largely confined to Russian music and the scale unknown to Europeans and Americans alike (with a few notable exceptions, such as Béla Bartók and Claude Debussy). Not until Arthur Berger published his 1968 essay "Problems of Pitch Organization in Stravinsky" did most American scholars appreciate the Rite's octatonic underpinnings. See Berger, "Problems of Pitch
Catfish Row. Puzzled by the outburst, a white character questions Porgy about the buzzard’s significance. Porgy explains that the Gullah (like their West African ancestors) view the buzzard as a harbinger of evil and misfortune: “[D]at bird mean trouble,” Porgy sings. “Once de buzzard fold his wing an’ light over yo’ house, all yo’ happiness done dead.” In the aria that follows Porgy’s didactic recitative, Gershwin superimposes a C# Major triad (in second inversion) atop a G natural. The G to C# interval forms a tritone, injecting dissonance and tonal uncertainty into the music. Gershwin further complicates the tonality by placing a C#–D trill in the treble. The D forms a perfect fifth with the G, implying a second tonality: G Major. In the following measure, Gershwin then switches the chords, placing C# in the bass and G Major in the treble with the C#–D trill in the uppermost voices. Again, the G–C# tritone adds dissonance to the chord, creating a tonally ambiguous, sinister effect. (FIGURE 13)

Gershwin also uses tritones in the bridge of “The Buzzard Song.” He assigns the bassoons and clarinets a major second interval of Eb–F while the flute and oboe play a minor third of B–D. B, D and F form a diminished triad whose tritone compounds the dissonance of the Eb–F interval. Gershwin then repeats this gesture in the next two-bar phrase, placing the major second of G–A in the top voices and the minor third of Eb–Gb in the lower voices. The tritone in the Eb diminished triad (spelled enharmonically as Eb–Gb–A) adds to the dissonance, again establishing an ominous mood.

For music representing the Christian beliefs of Catfish Row—rather than the “primitive” or African beliefs associated with the buzzard—Gershwin turned away from the tritones and polytonal chords of The Rite of Spring in favor of a simpler, African-American derived sonority: the so-called “blues scale,” with its flat third and flat seventh scale degrees.102 Consider the aria “O, Doctor Jesus.” Its key signature suggests Bb minor or Bb Dorian, but the notes used in Serena’s melody—Bb, C, Db, D, E, F, Ab—constitute a gapped scale that is neither diatonic nor pentatonic. (FIGURE 14) The

102 The buzzard plays a prominent role in many of the Gullah “trickster” tales brought over from West Africa.
accompanying string drone of B♭-F is modally ambiguous; since it lacks a third, the listener can't determine if the piece is in the major or minor mode. Gershwin heightens the modal ambiguity of the passage by including both the major and minor third (D/D♭) in the melodic line; such a blurring of the third scale degree's identity is characteristic of African-American genres like jazz and spirituals. By eschewing the tonic and dominant chords of a minor-key setting, Gershwin's modal harmonization gives the piece a static, elliptical quality.

"O, Doctor Jesus" is also noteworthy for its major and minor second harmonies. Although these harmonies certainly occur in tonal music, they are customarily used to generate harmonic tension that demands consonant resolution. In Gershwin's aria, however, they serve an entirely different function. They are meant to suggest the spontaneous harmonies generated by Sea Island singers, harmonies that fell outside the neat triadic harmonies of diatonic chords.

The static, open harmonies of "O, Doctor Jesus" closely resemble the improvised harmonies of Low Country spirituals. In 1938, for example, CSPS member Theodore Ravenel recorded "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," performed by descendants of slaves from his grandfather's plantation. This field recording varies dramatically from the Europeanized settings so popular in concert-hall recitals. The song's customary melodic span of a ninth has been compressed to a fifth. The singers embellished the condensed melodic line with whatever notes they wished, often producing dissonant harmonies like those found in "O, Doctor Jesus," where Gershwin juxtaposes D♭, E♭, and E against the drone in the strings.

Gershwin's scoring for the crap-game in Act I suggests yet another influence on Porgy and Bess: Richard Wagner's 1868 opera Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg. Gershwin's obsession with Meistersinger is well documented in period literature. Gershwin's friend Oscar Levant, for example, recalled that Gershwin consulted Wagner's score as a kind of operatic bible. "During the period of work on Porgy," Levant remembered, Gershwin

---

103 Spirituals, prayers, sermons, and street cries recorded in Charleston, Collins Creek, Edisto Island, and Johns Island, SC, as well as performances of spirituals and street cries by The Society for the Preservation of the Negro Spiritual, Charleston, SC. Recorded in NC and SC, 1937-1939, by Rene Ravenel and others. APS 22, 515.
"referred constantly to the score of Die Meistersinger as a guide to the plotting of the vocal parts and for general precepts in vocal writing."\textsuperscript{104} Gershwin mentioned Wagner’s operas in several newspaper interviews as well. In his essay, “The George I Knew,” reporter Leonard Liebling of The New York-Herald Tribune recalled bumping into Gershwin at Saratoga in 1934. When he asked Gershwin, “What style of music is [Porgy and Bess],” Gershwin replied, “American, of course, in the modern idiom, but just the same, a cross between Meistersinger and Butterfly. Are those models good enough?”\textsuperscript{105}

A careful examination of Wagner’s score reveals that the elaborate vocal counterpoint of Meistersinger’s so-called “riot scene” (Act II, Scene vii) provided an important model for Gershwin. Wagner’s scene begins as an impromptu singing contest between two young men. As their nocturnal competition intensifies, their singing wakes Nürnberg’s residents and draws them out of their homes—some to chastise the singers, others to cheer on the competitors. A shoving match between neighbors quickly escalates into a free-for-all of punches, insults, and pratfalls. To represent the confusion and violent energy of the melee, Wagner layers seemingly independent vocal lines atop one another. Each line of music has a unique text and melodic contour. To prevent the music from devolving into chaos, however, Wagner carefully constructs a rhythmic and harmonic framework for the neighbors’ various lines of music. Each line has a similar one-to-one correspondence of syllables to notes, and each line has a similar sixteenth-note rhythm. Underneath the chorus, the orchestra has a steady stream of sixteenth notes; on downbeats, the notes of the chorus and orchestra align vertically to form discernable chords. More importantly, the vocal lines are echoed in the orchestra. For example, the journeymen’s music accompanying the line, “Heda Gesellen’ran! Dort wird mit Zanken und Streit,” is doubled in the horns and bassoons, while the women’s ascending line, “Was für ein Zanken und Streit” is matched by the strings. (FIGURE 15)

Such techniques, of course, are fundamental to ensemble writing in opera. But Meistersinger’s riot scene is unusual, both for the sheer number of simultaneous lines of

\textsuperscript{104} Oscar Levant, \textit{A Smattering of Ignorance} (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959), 140.

\textsuperscript{105} Leonard Liebling, “The George I Knew.” In \textit{Gershwin}, 125. To be sure, Gershwin cited \textit{Madame Butterfly} and \textit{Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg} because of their tremendous appeal to American audiences. But his frequent references to \textit{Meistersinger} in interviews, when taken together with Levant and Liebling’s comments, suggest that Gershwin did have Wagner’s score in mind when he began work on \textit{Porgy and Bess}.  

47
music, and the complexity of the orchestral accompaniment. (In many crowd scenes, such as the Kromy forest scene of Boris Gudonov, the orchestra provides a bare-bones accompaniment in passages of sophisticated vocal polyphony. Puccini’s crowd scene in Act II of La Boheme is one of the few in the repertoire that approaches Meistersinger’s in terms of complexity.) Though the “riot scene” is played for laughs, Gershwin found it a useful template for the crap game and knife fight that end Act I, Scene i of Porgy and Bess. Gershwin uses similar techniques to suggest the mounting anxiety of the gamblers. Like Wagner, Gershwin fits several independent vocal lines, each with a unique melody and text, into a busy orchestral accompaniment. For example, the nervous, syncopated sixteenth-note figure that recurs over and over again during the crap game is echoed in Serena’s and Maria’s vocal lines, while on critical beats, the nine vocal lines converge to form dissonant—but recognizable—chords such as the augmented g minor seventh chord (G-B♭-D-F♯) that appears on the second beat of measure 18. (FIGURE 16) Though at times dissonant and chromatic, the overall effect is orderly: no individual voices stand out from the texture.

In scenes designed to establish the opera’s Charleston location, however, Gershwin relies on the “vocal precepts” of the Gullah rather than the learned style of Richard Wagner. These precepts are best explained by what composer Olly Wilson calls the “heterogeneous” sound ideal. Wilson argues that the goal of most European music is to produce “homogeneity of sound.” To illustrate the “homogeneous sound ideal,” Wilson gives the example of a string quartet: all four voices have overlapping ranges and similar timbres. The goal of the quartet’s members is to seamlessly blend the violin, cello, and viola into a single sound. In African-American music, however, the objective in ensemble performance is just the opposite: singers and musicians employ falsetto voices, glissandos, and hand-clapping to create simultaneous, contrasting layers of sound distinguished by timbre and rhythmic subdivision. The result is a “musical texture in which individual voices are discerned within a mass of sound, each individual choral member’s response var[ying] in tempo, melodic contour, and vocal nuances that

range from speech to song."\textsuperscript{107} In short, African-American singing tends to be polyphonic and colored by a "tense, strained vocal quality."\textsuperscript{108}

One manifestation of the "heterogeneous sound ideal" is in the palette of vocal effects Gershwin uses throughout the score. J. Rosamond Johnson cited as one of Gershwin's major achievements in \textit{Porgy and Bess} the invention of "new musical symbols in order to notate the quarter-tone dissonances and glissandos" characteristic of much black singing.\textsuperscript{109} Such notation occurs in the finale of "My Man's Gone Now." Gershwin has written a two-octave glissando for the entire ensemble. To indicate that the starting and ending pitches are approximate, Gershwin devised a notation scheme that shows the possible pitches radiating diagonally off a common stem. He further clarifies his desired sound by putting the direction "wailing" in the score. (\textbf{FIGURE 17})

Another point in the score that uses innovative notation is the crab-seller's aria. At the end of each phrase, Gershwin indicates that the singer is to start a glissando on a B, but does not specify an ending pitch, leaving that to the performer's discretion. The singer's cries of "She crab" are to be "half shouted." Periodic interjections of "Devil crabs" are notated in \textit{Sprechstimme}. The result is an uncanny recreation of the distinctive vendor calls of the Charleston waterfront. Cries recorded by the CSPS, for example, contain the same exaggerated glissandos and speech-song mixture found in "Crab Man."

The second manifestation of the "heterogeneous sound ideal" is Gershwin's use of simple vocal polyphony, one based on Sea Island sound rather than the complicated polyphony used by Wagner in \textit{Meistersinger}'s crowd scenes. As Gershwin biographers from Edith Garson to Charles Schwartz have noted, the inspiration for the prayer in Act II, Scene iv comes from Gershwin's trip to the Pentecostal church in Hendersonville, NC. To seal the connection between the visit and the prayer scene, several quote from a November 5, 1934 letter Gershwin wrote to Heyward in which the composer reported that he "start[s] and finish[es] the storm scene with six different prayers sung

\textsuperscript{107} Wilson, "The Heterogeneous Sound Ideal." 334.  
\textsuperscript{108} Epstein,\textit{ Sinful Tunes and Spirituals}. 290.  
simultaneously. This has somewhat the effect we heard in Hendersonville as we stood outside the Holy Rollers’ church.”

Indeed, Act II, Scene iv does suggest the sounds of a congregation at prayer. Six distinct melodic lines, each with a unique text, are layered on top of one another. Gershwin doesn’t specify a tempo or time signature, nor are there bar lines to indicate note groupings. The absence of rhythmic accompaniment compounds the sense of stasis. The chorus hums a steady drone of an open fifth below the six lines. Fermatas are inserted at staggered intervals in each melodic line, allowing the soloists to pause and resume at will. The melodic lines frequently linger on a single pitch. (FIGURE 18) Gershwin provides no orchestral support for the hurricane prayer. Instead, the orchestra provides a backdrop of crashing waves, clapping thunder, and howling winds for the prayer.

The overall effect resembles the singing recorded by folklorists in the Sea Islands. Like “Eb’rybody Who Is Libin’ Got tuh Die,” a song recorded by Rene Ravenel in Upper St. Johns Parish (and also transcribed for The Carolina Low-Country), the multiple vocal lines diverge but converge at key moments, such as the end of a phrase. Occasional shouts, moans, and whoops cut through the texture of the performance, allowing the listener to pick out individual voices. The simultaneous lines of music fit together rhythmically but not necessarily harmonically. (FIGURE 19)

As Gershwin’s use of Sea Island polyphony demonstrates, he consciously rejected European and Broadway models when writing music for scenes of great dramatic intensity—the scenes most likely to inspire some religious feeling in the denizens of Catfish Row. For the saucer burial and hurricane scenes, Gershwin (with assistance from Heyward) used the words and performance techniques of the Low Country in a fashion that demonstrated not only his facility with the Gullah idiom, but his understanding of how and when the Gullah performed various kinds of music. Gershwin deploys Low Country elements selectively, using them only in those scenes featuring sacred music—the music that Gershwin told The Charleston News and Courier

---

was most representative of the Gullah character. Thus, in Porgy and Bess, the folk elements represent something fundamental to the identity of the Gullah people: their unique style of Christian worship, a style rooted in their African heritage and their American bondage.

111 Spirituals, prayers, sermons, and street cries recorded in Charleston, Collins Creek, Edisto Island, and Johns Island, SC. APS 22, 523; APS 22, 524.
112 "George Gershwin Arrives to Plan Opera on ‘Porgy,’” 1.
CONCLUSION

A year after Gershwin’s death, composer George Antheil paid tribute to his peer in an essay entitled “The Foremost American Composer.” Antheil defended Gershwin’s reputation from critics, arguing that “whatever his flaws, the flaws of George Gershwin are the flaws of America. He mirrored us, exactly. We need only to look into his music to see a whole period of our history exactly stated.” Antheil’s comment contains an important truth for scholars considering the “authenticity” of Porgy and Bess’s African-American elements: Porgy and Bess is a product of its time. Imposing contemporary standards of authenticity—standards shaped by the modern disciplines of ethnomusicology and African-American studies—does as great a disservice to Gershwin’s score as the racialist arguments advanced by an earlier generation of his apologists. Both camps ignore the strong currents of nationalism and primitivism that informed the opera and presume that one of Gershwin’s objectives in writing Porgy and Bess was to document a vanishing American folk culture.

When Gershwin began planning his opera, American composers were determined to develop a uniquely American form of cultivated musical expression. In articles titled “Native American Opera Proves Elusive” and “For An American Gesture,” pundits called upon American composers to bring new rhythms and harmonies into the concert hall, elements not found in the vocabulary of established European masters like Beethoven, Wagner, and Puccini. The music that most readily fit this definition originated in black America, where vestiges of African musical practice continued to inform the freedmen’s music. At the same time, jazz, blues, and other African-American genres held appeal for composers in search of the novel, the titillating, and the unspoiled. By evoking the sound of America’s own “primitive” music in operas and symphonies, pundits argued, composers would simultaneously reinvigorate these
moribund genres with a raw, untamed energy and develop a set of signifiers—rhythmic and harmonic—that would distinguish American music from its forebears.

Gershwin's decision to go to South Carolina reflects his desire to expand his musical vocabulary in the direction suggested by critics. While it is true that his exposure to Gullah music was not sustained or intense—he didn't live among the Gullah or make systematic efforts to record or transcribe their music for accurate reproduction in *Porgy and Bess*—his critics have unfairly assumed that his "musical touring" was nothing more than a publicity stunt. They point to songs like "I Got Plenty of Nuttin" as evidence that Gershwin didn't understand the Gullah folk idiom, while they ignore pieces such as "O, Doctor Jesus" that Gershwin intended to suggest the rough-hewn qualities of Low Country spirituals.

Duke Ellington's comments to reporter Edward Morrow epitomize this critical stance. When asked if he would characterize *Porgy and Bess* as a "black" opera, Ellington responded that he heard the influence of "everybody from Listz to Dickie Well's kazoo band," but little in the way of authentic African-American inspiration. Ellington argued that the operatic and Broadway elements in the score overpowered the natural "rhythm," "speech," and "swing" of its Gullah characters: "What happened when the girl selling strawberries came on the stage?" he asked readers of *New Theatre* magazine. "Gershwin had the girl stop cold, take her stance, and sing an aria in the Italian, would-be Negro manner."114 In 1959, LeRoi Jones echoed Ellington's sentiments when he took issue with *Porgy and Bess*'s conspicuous Broadway heritage. Jones stated that "I Got Plenty of Nuthin" [sic] "never made me think of Negroes, just Broadway and for some unfathomable reason, Oscar Levant."115

Ellington also challenged the authenticity of *Porgy and Bess* as a "black" opera on the grounds that Gershwin, as an outsider, did not understand the situations that ordinarily give rise to singing in the African-American community; thus, Gershwin's music only hints at the emotional intensity of actual spirituals, work songs, and laments. Ellington used one of his own projects—the 1935 film *Symphony in Black*—to

113 George Antheil, "The Foremost American Composer." In Gershwin. 119.
114 Duke Ellington, quoted in Morrow, "Duke Ellington on Gershwin's 'Porgy.'" 5-6.
demonstrate shortcomings in Gershwin's score: "In one of my forthcoming movie 'shorts,'" he told Morrow, "I have an episode which concerns the death of a baby... I put into the dirge all of the misery, sorrow, and undertones of the conditions that went with the baby's death." This dirge, Ellington continued, "was true to and of the life of the people it depicted. The same thing cannot be said for Porgy and Bess." 

Likewise, composer Hall Johnson found Porgy and Bess wanting in contrast to his own all-black revues. Even in the hurricane and saucer-burial scenes, Johnson explained, "[t]here is none of the jubilee spirit of Run, Little Chillun' [1933] and none of the deep-soul-stirring songs of The Green Pastures [1930]." Reflecting on Porgy and Bess in the 1970s, Verna Arvey, wife and biographer of composer William Grant Still, explicitly referred to Gershwin as an "outsider" guilty of writing music that was "lusty and stereotyped racially."

Because Gershwin did not recreate a ring shout or "experience service" in anthropologically precise detail, defenders have had difficulty countering these charges. Instead of using specific musical examples, they have responded in vague and sometimes embarrassing terms that the authenticity of Porgy and Bess lies in the composer's empathetic bond with the African-American community. While such cultural intangibles may have aided or inspired Gershwin in the creative process, it is not necessary to place Gershwin within the black (or Jewish) community to challenge his critics' position—there is solid musical evidence that Gershwin used undiluted Low Country musical gestures.

Perhaps the strongest endorsement of the opera's authenticity comes from African-American musicologist Samuel Floyd. In his 1995 book, The Power of Black Music, he scrupulously avoids the terminology "used" or "contained" to characterize Gershwin's incorporation of Gullah elements into Porgy and Bess. Floyd chooses instead

---

118 Verna Arvey, "Memo to Musicologists." In William Grant Still and the Fusion of Cultures, 90. In this essay, Arvey suggests that several of Gershwin's compositions were acts of "unconscious borrowing" from compositions by African-American composers. She singles out Gershwin's 1930 hit "I Got Rhythm" as an example of such borrowing. She claims that Gershwin attended Eubie Blake's 1922 show Shuffle Along, in which a song arranged by Still—"Rain or Shine"—appeared. The distinctive rhythm of this dance tune later
to present Gershwin as a composer of African-American music, utilizing techniques such as signification and call-and-response that he learned through excursions to Harlem nightclubs and Low Country parishes. Floyd’s depiction of Gershwin would have resonated with fin-de-siècle nationalists like Béla Bartók, who believed that it was “not enough to study [folk music] as it is stored up in museums”—the composer interested in using folk music needed to “go into the country” to imbibe the “character of peasant music.” Through first-hand observation, Bartok argued, a composer could “assimilate the idiom of peasant music so completely” that he could “forget all about it and use it as his musical mother tongue.”

Bringing together these two streams of thought, I would argue that the authenticity of Porgy and Bess lies with Gershwin’s absorption of Gullah gestures into his stylistic vocabulary—a process that enabled him to compose songs in an idiomatically authentic manner. His selective use of Gullah materials suggests that he understood the cultural significance of black music-making, reserving the Gullah’s own words, harmonies, and song structures for those scenes celebrating their religious life. His spirituals are not gross parodies of black folk music but imaginative reinterpretations re-surfaced as the main melodic idea in “I Got Rhythm.” (It also appeared in a similar form in Still’s best-known composition, the Afro-American Symphony of 1930.)

---


that honor the harmonic, rhythmic, and vocal textures of Gullah song as well as the context in which those songs were originally performed.
FIGURE 1.
Initial brass entrance, "I Ain't Got No Shame,"
_Porgy and Bess_ (Act II, Scene ii)

FIGURE 2.
Nonsense syllable interlude, "I Ain't Got No Shame,"_ Porgy and Bess_ (Act II, Scene ii)
Moderato (in barbaric manner)

**FIGURE 3.**
Opening vamp, "Dahomey,"
*Show Boat* (Act II, Scene I)

* FIGURE 4.  
Use of *Sprechstimme* to suggest speech, "I Hates Yo' Struttin' Style," *Porgy and Bess* (Act II, Scene i)
Cue: QUEENIE: i'll show you how to get 'em.

Allegretto.

QUEENIE: (Shouted or sung.)

Hey! Where yo' think yo' go-in'?

Piano

Don't you know this show is start-in' soon?

FIGURE 5.

"Queenie's Ballyhoo," Show Boat (Act I, Scene iii)

FIGURE 6.

Traditional arrangement of "Somebody Knockin' at de Door," The Book of American Negro Spirituals
FIGURE 7.
Quotation of spiritual, “Somebody Knockin’ at de Door,” Porgy and Bess (Act II, Scene iv)

FIGURE 8.
Intensifying rhythmic subdivision, “Leavin’ for de Promised Land,” Porgy and Bess (Act I, Scene ii)
WELCOME TABLE

1. I'm gwinceuh set at duh wel-come ta

2. I'm gwinceuh set at duh wel-come ta

3. I'm gwinceuh set at duh wel-come ta

4. I'm gwinceuh set at duh wel-come ta

5. I'm gwinceuh set at duh wel-come ta

Come, come, come en go wid me, Come, come.

El yuh wan' tuh git tuh heb-en, jes' etc.

Stop, interj etc. Chyrc tell Nyo-

de-mus, "Yah," etc. How len oh man wen' etc.

Jes' us tell duh lame man, "Tek

FIGURE 9.
Traditional Low Country spiritual, "Welcome Table," The Carolina Low-Country

FIGURE 10.
Traditional Low Country spiritual, "Come En Go Go Wid Me," The Carolina Low-Country

FIGURE 11.
Integrated sonority from the "Dance of the Adolescents," The Rite of Spring

FIGURE 12.
Distribution of tritones in the octatonic and diatonic major scales
At this point a great bird flies low, frightening everybody.

Subito molto animato $J = 90$  
Più mosso $J = 80$

Look out, dat's a buz-zard!

FIGURE 13.
Introduction, “The Buzzard Song,”
Porgy and Bess (Act II, Scene i)

(use of the blues scale, “O Doctor Jesus,”
Porgy and Bess (Act II, Scene i)
Riot scene, Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg
(Act II, Scene vii)
Oh, stop them, won' some one stop them!

Stop Crown!

it's aw-ful, it's sim-ply aw-ful!

Crown hurt Rob-bins!

Crown's had too

Come on, let's stop dem now, come on, let's stop dem!

drunk!

Why mus' they

Some-thing mighty bad is boun' to hap - pen!

FIGURE 16.
Crap game, Porgy and Bess (Act I, Scene i)
FIGURE 17.
Notation representing Gullah vocal sound, "My Man's Gone Now," Porgy and Bess (Act I, Scene ii)

FIGURE 18.
Six-voice prayer, Porgy and Bess (Act II, Scene iv)
FIGURE 19.
Traditional Low Country spiritual, "Eb'rybody Who is Libin'," The Carolina Low-Country
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources: Articles


“Charleston and (Gershwin) Provide Folk-Opera.” *The Literary Digest* CXXX (October 26, 1935): 18.


"George Gershwin Arrives to Plan Opera on 'Porgy.'" The Charleston News and Courier (December 4, 1933): 1, 2.


Gilbreth, Frank. "Gershwin, Gone Native, Finds It 'A Shame to Work' at Folly." The Charleston News and Courier (June 29, 1934): 9A.


*Primary Sources: Books*


Bauer, Marion. Twentieth Century Music: How It Developed, How to Listen to It. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1933.


Primary Sources: Recordings


Songs, spirituals, street cries and calls with comments by the singers. Recorded in Edisto Island, SC, June 1939 by Herbert Halpert. AFS 3147-3152A.

Spirituals, prayers, sermons, and street cries recorded in Charleston, Collins Creek, Edisto Island, and Johns Island, SC, as well as performances of spirituals and street cries by The Society for the Preservation of the Negro Spiritual, Charleston, SC. Recorded in NC and SC, 1937-1939, by by Rene Ravenel and others. AFS 22, 513-22, 516; 22, 518-22, 557.


**Primary Sources: Scores**


**Secondary Sources: Articles**


Thompson, Era Bell. "Why Negroes Don't Like 'Porgy and Bess.'" *Ebony* 14 (October 1959): 50-54.


**Secondary Sources: Books**


**Unpublished Material**


Katherine Owens Dacey

Katherine Dacey was born in Boston, MA on September 24, 1972. She received her bachelor’s degree in American History from Columbia University in May, 1994. She entered the College of William & Mary’s graduate program in American Studies in 1998, completed the coursework for the Master of Arts in May, 1999, and completed the thesis in May, 2001. She is currently pursuing a doctorate in Musicology at Columbia University.