

Gershwin's Porgy and Bess

North Carolina Master Chorale
Alfred E. Sturgis, Music Director

Rochelle Small, Soprano
Jason McKinney, Baritone
Susan McClaskey Lohr, Piano
Tar River Philharmonic Orchestra

Sunday, May 10, 2009 at 3pm
Meymandi Concert Hall, Progress Energy Center for the Performing Arts

Program

Porgy and Bess

George Gershwin (1898-1937), arr. R.R. Bennett

INTERMISSION

Rhapsody in Blue

Gershwin

Tribute to George Gershwin

Gershwin, arr. Jack Jarrett

NOTES

Porgy and Bess Concert Suite

The son of poor Jewish immigrants, George Gershwin was a natural-born pianist and left school at 16 to become a pianist with a Tin-Pan Alley firm. He soon began writing songs himself, eventually teaming up with his brother Ira as lyricist to become one of the most successful teams of song and musical comedy writers on Broadway.

In 1923 Paul Whiteman, the self-styled "King of Jazz," heard Gershwin play piano arrangements of a few of his songs. In an attempt to move jazz from the dance hall to concert hall, Whiteman commissioned him to write an extended jazz composition. The result was the *Rhapsody in Blue*. Since Gershwin had no experience in orchestration – in the Broadway tradition, this job was usually left to professional orchestrators – he turned to his colleague Ferde Grofé, of *Grand Canyon Suite* fame, to do the job. Its performance at the Paul Whiteman Concerts in 1924 made history. Although the critics – true to form – mostly panned it, the audience loved it.

Gershwin himself played the piano part and became an instant celebrity.

Banking on his fame, he and Ira embarked a string of immensely successful musicals; opening night of a George Gershwin musical comedy became a social and media event with Gershwin himself usually leading the orchestra. Although the shows are seldom revived intact, most of the songs have become enduring classics.

Gershwin's realized his ambition to write a real opera in 1935 with *Porgy and Bess*, a blending of spirituals, jazz and blues. Its gritty story of life and death in Catfish Row, a poor black tenements of Charleston, South Carolina, reflected Gershwin's identification with the poor and oppressed. When he received a commission from the Metropolitan Opera to write a quintessentially American opera, he adapted a novel by Dubose Heyward, who collaborated with the two Gershwin brothers. The composer insisted that the cast be entirely African-American. But the Met had never employed so much as a single black extra and was not about

to change its policy in 1930, and the composer refused to have it performed in blackface. *Porgy and Bess* finally premiered on Broadway under the aegis of the Theater Guild in 1935.

While over the years, *Porgy and Bess* has proved popular and durable, it has also raised issues both aesthetic and political: Its mix of musical styles has set it in a class by itself, which Gershwin himself dubbed "folk opera;" some critics have objected to its negative portrayal of the black community, with its focus on poverty,

PORGY AND BESS SYNOPSIS

Act I, scene 1. The opera opens on a crap game in Catfish Row. Clara, wife of Jake, one of the gamblers, sings a lullaby to her baby ("Summertime"). Jake has his own take on the domestic scene ("A Woman is a Sometime Thing") Porgy, a crippled peddler arrives in his goat cart at the same time as Crown, a "tough stevedore" and his woman, Bess. Crown kills another player, Robbins, who has beaten him in the game while the chorus reacts in horror. Bess urges Crown to flee and gives him money while she remains in Catfish Row. Sportin' Life, a dope pusher, suggests that Bess drown her worries in a trip to New York, but she refuses and Porgy takes her under his wing.

In scene 2, in Robbins's apartment, the residents of Catfish collect money for his funeral and his widow Serena. ("Gone, Gone, Gone") Then, in fear of Crown, they mislead the police by accusing an old deaf man of the murder. Serena continues the lamentation ("My Man's Gone Now") but Bess sings ("Leavin' for The Promise Land") as the act ends.

Act II takes place a few weeks later by which time Porgy and Bess have become lovers, despite Crown's parting warning to Bess that she's permanently his woman ("I Got Plenty O'Nuttin'"). Bess purchases a "divorce" from "lawyer" Frazier, and the residents of Catfish Row prepare for a picnic on Kittiwah Island. Sportin' Life continues his predatory advances to Bess, who again rejects him. She tells Porgy she doesn't want to go to the picnic if he can't go and

promiscuousness and drugs. It has, nevertheless, during its 75-year history featured some of the greatest African-American performers, opera singers and entertainers, including Leontyne Price, William Warfield, Paul Roberson, Sammy Davis, Jr. Diahann Carroll and Pearl Bailey.

Sadly, Gershwin succumbed to a brain tumor in 1937, joining the many composers who never saw their 40th birthday.

the two affirm their love ("Bess, You is My Woman Now").

Scene 2 takes place at the picnic where the chorus sings "Oh, I Can't Sit Down." Sportin' Life entertains them with the ballad ("It Ain't Necessarily So"). A hurricane is threatening and the revelers quickly run to the boats back to Charleston. Crown suddenly appears and confronts Bess, who is unable to resist him, and the two remain on the island despite the storm.

Back in Serena's room a few days after the picnic, Bess, apparently sick from exposure, has been rescued from the Island although Crown, Jake and Clara are still missing. She tells Porgy about her confrontation with Crown but claims she still loves him ("I Loves You, Porgy").

In Act III, the injured Crown unexpectedly returns and crawls his way to Porgy's door where Porgy stabs and then strangles him. When the police come to arrest the killer, the crowd protects Porgy, whom the police ask to identify the body. But Sportin' Life warns Porgy that Crown's wounds will bleed in the presence of the killer and Porgy is ultimately jailed a week for contempt of court for refusing to look at the body. While he is gone, Sportin' Life offers "happy dust" to Bess, who is simply too weak physically and emotionally to resist her need for more and she runs off with him to New York. ("There's a Boat That's Leavin' Soon for New York") When Porgy returns, he hitches up his goat cart to find Bess as the opera ends ("Lawd, I'm on My Way")

Artist biographies

Rochelle Small, Soprano

Soprano Rochelle Small's appearances have been many and varied, ranging from invitations by the Manhattan Borough President's Office for annual commemorations of September 11th in the Manhattan Remembers 9/11 ecumenical sunrise services at Battery Park in New York City to an open air concert with the Harlem Philharmonic Orchestra at the Ulysses S. Grant Memorial. Her solo experiences have ranged from guest appearances with the Philharmonia Oltenia of Bucharest, Romania in an evening of opera arias to a moving rendition of Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* with the Unity in Diversity Orchestra in New York City.

Rochelle recently appeared as an effervescent Woglinde in Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, and Waldvogel in *Siegfried* with the Wagner Theatre, and was invited back to reprise them along with Woglinde in their production of *Das Rheingold* this summer as part of the theatre's ten year anniversary.

Born in Wichita, Kansas, Rochelle enjoys singing in English, French, German, Italian, Latin, and Spanish, and is equally at home in operatic and recital repertoire. Rochelle's greatest passion is sharing classical music with those who might not otherwise be exposed to it through performances in nursing homes, homeless shelters, hospitals, and schools. Rochelle is the two-time recipient of the highly prestigious Kansas Cultural Trust's Promising Young Artist Award.

Jason McKinney, Baritone

Originally from Milwaukee WI, USA, baritone Jason McKinney has studied voice at the North Carolina School of the Arts, with soprano Marilyn Taylor and tenor Glenn Siebert, where he was the recipient of the Helen Odom scholarship, the Music Dean's Talent scholarship, and the Chancellor's Grant for Excellence. Jason was the winner of the 2001 and 2002 Civic Music Association of Milwaukee's Harold Levin scholarship competition and was awarded the

Judges Choice award at the 2001 Metropolitan Opera's district competition. In 2004 Jason won that competition in the South Carolina District and continued on the Place second in the Southeastern Regional Finals. Jason has had the opportunity to premier new works by Kenneth Frazelle, Shelley Olson, Daniel Sonnenberg, Chandler Carter and Lawrence Dillon.

On the stage Mr. McKinney has performed with numerous opera companies in the US and in Europe. As a concert soloist Mr. McKinney has performed to critical acclaim in Europe, Mexico the U.S. and Australia. When not on the Stage Mr. McKinney sings as the cantor in his Synagogue in Spartanburg, SC.

Susan McClaskey Lohr, Piano

Susan McClaskey Lohr got an early start in her native Kentucky, accompanying soloists and choirs beginning at age ten. She received degrees in Choral Music Education and Piano Performance at the University of Kentucky, where she studied with James Bonn and Nathaniel Patch and accompanied all of UK's undergraduate choral groups.

Susan was a staff accompanist at the National Music Camp in Interlochen, MI and served on the piano faculty of Meredith College. She has collaborated with such musical luminaries as conductors Robert Shaw and Robert DeCormier and soprano Gwendolyn Bradley of the Metropolitan Opera.

Highlights of her career as the North Carolina Master Chorale accompanist include duo piano performances of Carolina Ballet's *Carmina Burana*, Brahms' *Liebeslieder* and *Neue Liebeslieder Walzer* with the Chamber Choir and this season's presentation of Stravinsky's *Les Noces*.

Susan also is pianist for Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Raleigh and works as a Realtor for Coldwell Banker Howard Perry & Walston. She's married to pianist and composer Tom L. Lohr and they have twin sons Matt and Evan.