

WHEN GEORGE GERSHWIN SET OUT TO WRITE HIS FIRST OPERA, HE WAS already a celebrity. The creator of *Rhapsody in Blue*, *An American in Paris*, and, together with his brother Ira, some of the most beloved popular songs of the day, Gershwin had already conquered both concert halls and Broadway theaters with his distinctive musical style. For his first foray into grand opera, Gershwin wanted a subject worthy of the genre's depth and richness. As a composer whose work wove together numerous strands from the American musical tapestry, Gershwin also wanted a story that would express a vital aspect of the American experience. He finally found his subject in the loves and losses of a community of working-class African Americans in Charleston.

The resulting opera, *Porgy and Bess*, offered an unprecedented representation of black artists in serious roles on the operatic stage, but it also inevitably carried the baggage of some critics' and audiences' racist assumptions about its characters. Now, more than 80 years later, *Porgy and Bess* can be understood as part of the complex patchwork of American history, in which uplifting moments sometimes lie next to ugly ones. Yet even as audiences' understanding of the work has changed over time, Gershwin's music has consistently offered an abundance of musical riches: soaring melodies, jazz-infused harmonies, and songs of abiding heart and hope.

This guide presents *Porgy and Bess* as a unique cultural statement connected to seminal issues in American life. The materials on the following pages invite students to examine the work's literary imagery, study the distinctly American musical forms that inspired Gershwin's score, and consider the thorny issues of race and interpretation that the opera raises. By delving into the opera's music, drama, and history, this guide will forge interdisciplinary classroom connections, inspire critical thinking, and help students gain an appreciation for the opera's immortal melodies, characters, and themes.



OWENS



BLUE



SCHULTZ



WALKER



SINGLETARY



MOORE



GRAVES



BALLENTINE

THE WORK: *PORGY AND BESS*

An opera in three acts, sung in English

By George Gershwin, DuBose and Dorothy Heyward, and Ira Gershwin

Based on the novel *Porgy* by DuBose Heyward

First performed September 30, 1935, at the Colonial Theater, Boston

PRODUCTION

David Robertson, Conductor

James Robinson, Production

Michael Yeargan, Set Designer

Catherine Zuber, Costume Designer

Donald Holder, Lighting Designer

Luke Halls, Projection Designer

Camille A. Brown, Choreographer

David Leong, Fight Director

STARRING

Eric Owens
PORGY

Angel Blue
BESS

Golda Schultz
CLARA

Alfred Walker
CROWN

Donovan Singletary
JAKE

Latonia Moore
SERENA

Denyce Graves
MARIA

Frederick Ballentine
SPORTIN' LIFE

A co-production of the Metropolitan Opera; Dutch National Opera, Amsterdam; and English National Opera

Production a gift of The Sybil B. Harrington Endowment Fund and Douglas Dockery Thomas

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This guide includes five sections:

- **THE OPERA'S PLOT AND CREATION:** The source, the story, who's who in *Porgy and Bess*, and a timeline with key dates for the Gershwins' work
- **CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES:** Two activities designed to align with and support various Common Core Standard strands used in ELA, History / Social Studies, and Music curricula
- **PERFORMANCE ACTIVITIES:** Two activities to be used during the *Live in HD* transmission
- **POST-SHOW DISCUSSION:** A wrap-up activity that will help students reflect on the transmission, express their opinions about the performance, and integrate the *Live in HD* experience into their understanding of the arts and humanities more broadly
- **STUDENT RESOURCE PAGES:** Classroom-ready worksheets supporting the activities in the guide

This guide is intended to cultivate students' interest in *Porgy and Bess*, whether or not they have any prior acquaintance with opera or the performing arts. It includes activities for students with a wide range of musical backgrounds and seeks to encourage them to think about opera—and the performing arts as a whole—as a medium of both entertainment and creative expression.

In particular, this guide will offer in-depth introductions to:

- The characters and imagery of *Porgy and Bess*
- Issues surrounding the work's history and interpretation
- Gershwin's approximation of blues and spirituals in his operatic score
- Creative choices made by the artists of the Metropolitan Opera for this production
- The opera as a unified work of art, involving the efforts of composer, librettist, and Met artists

SUMMARY: It is a quiet evening in Catfish Row, a neighborhood in Charleston, South Carolina. Men gamble, women gossip, and everybody jokes good-naturedly. The evening takes a turn for the worse, however, when the dockworker Crown and his girlfriend, Bess, arrive. Crown is drunk and belligerent, and when he loses a game of dice, he furiously stabs his opponent and flees, leaving Bess behind to fend for herself. Only one person is willing to help the beautiful but troubled Bess: the disabled beggar Porgy.

With Porgy, Bess discovers a life of stability and happiness. But Crown's hold on Bess isn't easily broken, and when he unexpectedly returns, her sense of safety is shattered. Desperate to protect his beloved Bess, Porgy kills Crown. Yet this murder will soon set in motion a series of unintended consequences—for Bess is haunted by more than one demon, and she faces temptations that will shake the very foundations of her fragile, newfound hope.

THE SOURCE: THE NOVEL *PORGY* BY DUBOSE HEYWARD Once hailed as the harbinger of a new type of Southern novel, DuBose Heyward's *Porgy* (1925) emerged at a time of rapid social change. Against a backdrop of urbanization, industrialization, and the mass exodus (known as the "Great Migration") of African Americans from the rural South to northern cities, Heyward's novel depicts a black Charleston community and its residents with a sympathy and depth of emotion that were groundbreaking for the time. Like many writers of the literary Southern Renaissance of the 1920s, Heyward explored themes of family, community, and religion, all intertwined with the convoluted forces of race and historical inheritance. White critics of the day saw *Porgy* as an authentic and universal portrayal of Southern black life, and they attributed this "authenticity" to Heyward's own family history. Born to an old Charleston society family of constrained finances, Heyward spent time among the black laborers on his aunt's plantation, sold burial insurance in Charleston's black neighborhoods, and worked as a clerk for a shipping line, where he came into contact with the black stevedores on the waterfront. But perhaps most influentially, in his youth, his mother helped support the family by collecting (and performing for tour groups) folk tales drawn from the region's Gullah community.

When George Gershwin read *Porgy* in 1926, he was immediately struck by the novel's operatic potential: He had long considered stories of the black South to be the truest representation of American folklore and a necessary foundation for his first full-length opera. By the time Gershwin was ready to begin composing in 1933, DuBose



VOICE TYPE

Since the early 19th century, singing voices have usually been classified in six basic types, three male and three female, according to their range:

SOPRANO

the highest voice type, normally possessed only by women and boys

MEZZO-SOPRANO

the voice type lying below the soprano and above the contralto; the term comes from the Italian word “mezzo,” meaning “middle”

CONTRALTO

the lowest female voice, also called an alto

TENOR

the highest standard voice type in adult males

BARITONE

the male voice lying below the tenor and above the bass

BASS

the lowest voice type

Heyward and his wife, Dorothy, had already adapted the novel into a wildly successful stage play, and many of their alterations are retained in the libretto that the Heywards, Gershwin, and Gershwin’s brother Ira developed for the opera. As in the play, Sportin’ Life takes on a larger and more malign role than in the novel, Bess is less pitiful, and the work arguably ends on a more optimistic note, with Porgy transformed by his resolve to follow Bess to New York. But above all, it is Gershwin’s music, with its jazz rhythms and irresistible melodies, that elevates Heyward’s constrained character types into vividly realized people whose loves and hopes now live on in operatic productions across the globe.

ACT I: *Catfish Row, a tenement neighborhood of Charleston, South Carolina, in the 1920s.* The inhabitants of Catfish Row relax after a day’s work. Clara sings a lullaby to her baby, imagining a future free from hardship. The drug dealer Sportin’ Life; Clara’s husband, Jake; and some of the other men play craps under the disapproving eye of Serena, whose husband, Robbins, is also gambling with the group.

Porgy arrives and is about to join the game when Crown and Bess appear. The fiery-tempered Crown joins the dice game. Drunk and high on drugs, he loses, starts a fight, and kills Robbins with a cotton hook. Crown runs off, telling Bess that he’ll be back for her. The community shuns Bess as they await the arrival of the police. Sportin’ Life offers to take her to New York with him, but she refuses. Only Porgy is sympathetic, offering Bess shelter and protection, which she gratefully accepts.

The following evening, Robbins’s widow, Serena, leads the mourners in prayers. A collection plate is passed around to raise money for Robbins’s burial. Porgy and Bess enter, and Bess offers Serena a contribution. Serena refuses the money, assuming that it comes from Crown, but when Bess explains that the money is actually Porgy’s, Serena accepts it.

When the police arrive, they accuse Peter of Robbins’s murder. Peter tells them that Crown was responsible, but the police unfairly take him away as a material witness. Serena convinces the undertaker to bury Robbins for less than his usual fee, and Bess leads everyone in an exultant spiritual.

A month later, Porgy and Bess have fallen in love. As he watches Jake and the other fishermen mend their nets, Porgy happily reflects that although he is poor, he has everything he needs: a woman he loves, God, and song. Sportin’ Life enters, but before he has an opportunity to peddle any of his “happy dust,” Maria, the matriarch of Catfish Row, chases him away. The “lawyer” Frazier sells Bess a divorce; the fact that she and Crown were never married is just a “complication.”

Everyone is preparing to leave for a church picnic on nearby Kittiwah Island. Sportin’ Life again asks Bess to come with him to New York. He offers her drugs, but she refuses, and Porgy chases him off, telling him to leave Bess alone. Porgy and Bess celebrate

their newfound happiness and look forward to being together forever. Porgy insists that Bess should go to the picnic without him. At first, she refuses, not wanting to leave him alone, but eventually she joins the others as they set off for the picnic.

On Kittiwah Island, the community is in high spirits. Sportin' Life describes his cynical view of religion until Serena chastises him. When the steamboat whistle announces that the time has come to leave, everyone starts to pack up their belongings. Bess hurries toward the ship—until Crown, who has been hiding on the island since Robbins's murder, calls out to her. He wants Bess, whom he still views as his property, to run away with him. Bess explains that she now has a new life with Porgy, but Crown, resorting to brutality and violence, forces her to remain with him.

ACT II: A week later, ominous weather threatens the coast, but the fishermen of Catfish Row still leave at dawn for their day's work at sea. Bess, meanwhile, is heard talking deliriously from Porgy's room. She has been feverish and ill ever since returning from Kittiwah Island. Peter, released from police custody that morning, advises Porgy to take



her to the hospital, but Serena invites her friends to pray for Bess's recovery instead. Bess finally emerges into the courtyard. She explains to Porgy that she wants to stay with him but Crown has threatened to take her away. Bess is terrified. Porgy promises to protect her, no matter what. Suddenly, a clanging bell warns of an approaching hurricane. The fishermen are still at sea.

The following morning, as the hurricane rages outside, everyone cowers together in Serena's room to pray for deliverance from the storm. Suddenly, there's a knock at the door: It's Crown, seeking shelter and looking for Bess. Bess refuses to go with him, insisting that she wants to stay with Porgy. Crown mocks Porgy and drowns out everyone's prayers with a vulgar song. At the storm's height, Clara sees Jake's boat floating upside down on the water and rushes out to save her husband. Bess begs the men to go after Clara. Throwing his strength and bravery in everyone's face, Crown heads out into the storm.

By the following night, the storm has passed. The women grieve for those who have been lost, including Jake, Clara and, they assume, Crown. Sportin' Life appears, mocks their weeping, and hints that Crown is still alive. Bess sings a lullaby, comforting Clara's baby. Under the cover of darkness, Crown steals in and approaches Porgy's door, but Porgy, who has been waiting for him, strikes and kills Crown.

The next afternoon, the police detective returns to Catfish Row, accompanied by the coroner. They are investigating Crown's murder. Serena and the other women pretend to know nothing about it. The police then go to Porgy's room and tell him he must come with them and identify Crown's body. Horrified by the idea of looking at Crown's dead face, Porgy refuses to go. The police drag him off.

With Porgy gone, Sportin' Life sees an opportunity to get Bess for himself. He convinces her that Porgy will be locked up indefinitely and tells her that if she follows him to New York, he can offer her a wonderful new life. At first, Bess spurns him, but when he convinces her to take some "happy dust," he knows that she will soon be dependent on the drug—and him.

A week later, the inhabitants of Catfish Row greet each other as a new day dawns. Porgy returns from jail in a jubilant mood, distributing gifts that he bought with money he won playing dice in jail. Unaware of his friends' unease, he calls out for Bess—but there is no answer. Eventually, Serena and Maria reveal that Bess has gone to New York with Sportin' Life. Hearing this, Porgy calls for his crutch and sets out to find Bess as if on his way to the Promised Land.

WHO'S WHO IN *PORGY AND BESS*

CHARACTER		VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
Porgy ("POR-ghee")	A disabled beggar	bass-baritone	A kind man possessing stoic patience as well as profound devotion, Porgy feels isolated and alone until Bess comes into his life.
Bess	A beautiful but troubled woman	soprano	Bess looks forward to a stable future with Porgy, but her addiction and her susceptibility to bad advice will soon wreak havoc on her newfound happiness.
Crown	A dockworker, Bess's lover	baritone	Brutal, with a taste for drink and drugs, Crown relishes violence and won't easily give up his hold on Bess.
Clara	A new mother	soprano	Clara envisions an idyllic future for her child; her lullaby is the opera's refrain of hope.
Jake	A fisherman, Clara's husband	baritone	Jake's aspirations for his family lead him to risk his life at sea.
Serena	A pious woman	soprano	Serena's faith inspires the opera's musical prayers of mourning and healing.
Sportin' Life	A drug dealer	tenor	Sportin' Life is Catfish Row's proverbial snake in the grass: He tempts Bess with drugs and wants to lure her away for himself.
Maria	Matriarch of Catfish Row	contralto	The moral center of the community, Maria upholds Catfish Row's sense of decency—and doesn't hesitate to pronounce judgment on Bess.
Residents of Catfish Row	Other fishermen, dock workers, tradespeople, and laborers	sopranos, mezzo-sopranos, tenors, baritones, and basses	The chorus amplifies the opera's action with their prayers and expressions of mourning and joy.

George Gershwin



George Gershwin
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- 1898** George Gershwin is born on September 26 in Brooklyn, New York, the second son of Moishe Gershovitz and Rose Bruskin, both Russian Jewish immigrants. Around the time of his arrival in the U.S., Moishe adopts the name of Morris Gershwin. He and Rose become naturalized citizens in 1898.
- 1910** The Gershvins embrace the trappings of middle-class America and purchase a piano. According to family lore, as soon as it is set in place, George sits at the instrument and plays a popular tune. He soon begins piano lessons in the family’s neighborhood on the Lower East Side.
- 1914** Always an indifferent student outside of his piano lessons, Gershwin drops out of high school and takes a job working for a music publisher in Tin Pan Alley on 28th Street, the center of sheet music production for consumption by the general public. Gershwin works as a “song plugger,” tasked with playing and singing the firm’s songs for prospective customers.
- 1917** Gershwin leaves Tin Pan Alley and begins working on Broadway, initially as a rehearsal pianist but soon as a song composer. His first full score is for the slapstick musical comedy *La-La-Lucille!*, which opens on Broadway in 1919.
- 1921** *Shuffle Along*, an all-black musical comedy by a quartet of African American vaudeville performers, premieres on Broadway. The show is a sensation, attracting sold-out audiences and launching the careers of Josephine Baker and Paul Robeson. Attended by George and Ira Gershwin, as well as many of the other Broadway celebrities of the day, *Shuffle Along* proves that musicals with African American casts can be financially successful, and it inspires a succession of all-black musicals throughout the 1920s.
- 1922** Gershwin composes *Blue Monday*, a one-act opera for six African American characters and chorus.
- 1924** Gershwin’s first extended concert work, *Rhapsody in Blue*, premieres at New York’s Aeolian Hall with the composer himself at the piano. The work immediately wins acclaim for the way it melds the sounds of jazz with the classical piano concerto, and Gershwin calls it “a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America—of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our blues, our metropolitan madness.”
- 1925** DuBose Heyward, a little-known poet from Charleston, South Carolina, publishes his first novel, *Porgy*.

1926 Gershwin receives a copy of Heyward's *Porgy* from Ira's sister-in-law and finds in it his long-sought source for a truly American operatic story. He contacts Heyward and the two begin conversations about turning it into an opera.

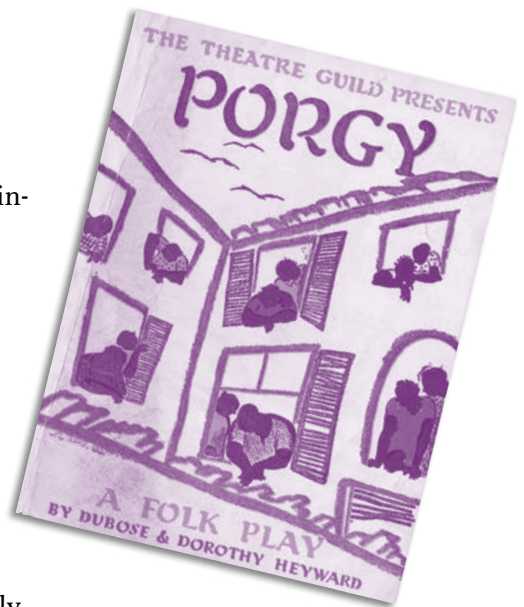
1926–27 Dorothy Heyward, together with her husband, adapts *Porgy* for the stage. The play premieres at New York's Guild Theatre on October 1, 1927, and will prove to be one of the greatest theatrical successes of the 1920s.

1933 Gershwin and Heyward begin work on the opera via correspondence. Heyward and Ira Gershwin collaborate closely on the lyrics.

1934 Heyward invites Gershwin to spend time in the Carolinas to learn some of the region's music. Gershwin has already visited Heyward twice (bookending a New Year's vacation to Palm Beach with short stints in Charleston the previous winter), but the five weeks he spends with Heyward in the summer of 1934 offer him a chance to make serious progress on the opera. While in Charleston, Gershwin attends a number of spiritual performances and prayer meetings. In January 1935, Gershwin completes a condensed score.

1935 *Porgy and Bess* premieres on September 30 at the Colonial Theater in Boston; the show is nearly four hours long. Knowing that an opera of this length will be extremely grueling for Broadway singers (who typically perform eight shows a week), Gershwin agrees to make cuts to the score before its opening in New York the following month. On October 10, *Porgy and Bess* has its Broadway premiere at the Alvin Theatre.

1937 Gershwin begins suffering from headaches. Doctors discover a brain tumor and perform emergency surgery, but Gershwin dies on July 11. At his funeral, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise remarks, "There are countries in Central Europe which would have flung out this Jew. America welcomed him and he repaid America by singing America's songs with the gusto of a child, with a filial tenderness of a son."



An announcement for *Porgy*, the play, in 1927



George Gershwin, with his cousin Henry Botkin, vacationing on Folly Island, near Charleston, in 1934

School Spirit

Music

IN PREPARATION

For this activity, students will need the reproducible resources available at the back of this guide entitled *School Spirit*, a sheet of staff paper, and the audio selections available online or on the accompanying CD.

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

Music History, Music Theory, Chorus, Orchestra, Band

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To familiarize students with the music and story of *Porgy and Bess*
- To deepen students' understanding of spirituals, blues, and jazz
- To develop students' music and performance skills through guided improvisation activities

The score of *Porgy and Bess*, like the great American melting pot itself, is made up of numerous influences and elements. Jazz rhythms, musicalized street sounds, the hummable melodies of popular song, the emotional stance of the blues, and many more characteristics are brought together to form Gershwin's distinctly American style. But it is the African American spiritual that contributes one of *Porgy and Bess*'s most distinctive musical characteristics. Gershwin's respect and care for this genre is clear through his treatment of it in the opera score, particularly in moments of great emotion and solemnity; it is also evidenced by the time he spent studying Gullah music off the coast of Charleston while composing the opera.

Through a series of close listening exercises and a structured improvisation game, this activity will introduce students to two of Gershwin's spiritual-inspired songs, as well as some of the attributes of Gullah music more generally. By completing this activity, students will deepen their knowledge of *Porgy and Bess*'s story and music, learn about a crucial genre of American folk music, and develop the confidence to perform in front of a group of their peers.



Street vendors, Charleston. Kilburn Brothers photographers. c. 1879

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Students will:

- Listen to excerpts from spirituals recorded in a Gullah community in South Carolina and develop a working knowledge of this musical genre
- Analyze how Gershwin adopted and approximated elements of the spiritual style in *Porgy and Bess*
- Learn about a common spiritual structure (“call and response”)
- Develop an improvised spiritual

GUIDE TO AUDIO CLIPS FOR THIS ACTIVITY

For this activity, there are two audio selections from *Porgy and Bess*, as well as two selections from the Smithsonian Folkways album *Been in the Storm So Long*. These selections are available online or on the accompanying CD.

TRACK 1: *Been in the Storm So Long*, “Lay Down Body” (excerpt)

TRACK 2: *Been in the Storm So Long*, “Been in the Storm So Long” (excerpt)

TRACK 3: *Porgy and Bess*, “Where Is Brother Robbins?”

TRACK 4: *Porgy and Bess*, “Oh, Doctor Jesus”

STEPS

Students will begin their study of the African American spiritual by listening to music from the Gullah community, the community in coastal South Carolina whose music and traditions inspired both DuBose Heyward’s novel *Porgy* and Gershwin’s opera. They will then turn to a selection of excerpts from *Porgy and Bess*, finding points of similarity and difference between the true Gullah spirituals and Gershwin’s approximations thereof. Finally, the class will participate in a group improvisation, drawing on the knowledge they have developed and their own personal experiences to perform a new composition.

Several of the musical terms referenced in this activity are included in the *Ten Essential Musical Terms* listed elsewhere in this guide. You may want to review these terms with your class before beginning the exercise, using your voice or musical instruments as necessary to illustrate the ideas and techniques described. Alternatively, you may prefer to discuss the terms as they occur over the course of the activity.

STEP 1: Begin the class with a brief introduction to *Porgy and Bess*. Explain to students that the opera is set in Charleston, South Carolina, in the 1920s, and that it portrays a group of African Americans and their loves, losses, and challenges. The chorus plays a particularly important role in this opera, responding to and commenting on the action through song. Also explain that a vital aspect of Gershwin’s music is its usage of styles borrowed from the African American spiritual.

As a class, discuss students’ prior understanding of and experience with spirituals. Can students think of any examples? (Students may be most familiar with “We Shall

COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND *PORGY AND BESS*

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.9

Compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction use or alter history.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8-12.11

Interpret, analyze, and evaluate narratives, poetry, and drama artistically and ethically by making connections to: other texts, ideas, cultural perspectives, eras, personal events, and situations.

FUN FACT: The poet Walt Whitman was a perceptive music critic and frequently found inspiration for his own artwork in music. As early as 1854, he prophesied that a truly “native” American grand opera would require banjos in the orchestra and be written in the dialect of the black South. Both of these characteristics appear in *Porgy and Bess*.

Overcome” or other freedom songs of the Civil Rights Movement.) If students are unfamiliar with the term, you may wish to take a step back and ask them to discuss what the adjective “spiritual” means and then, based on their responses, guide them toward a definition of the spiritual as a musical genre.

Finally, explain that the spiritual holds a highly esteemed position in African American heritage and has been used as a means of demonstrating black American cultural achievement as well as responding to the long history of racial oppression in America.

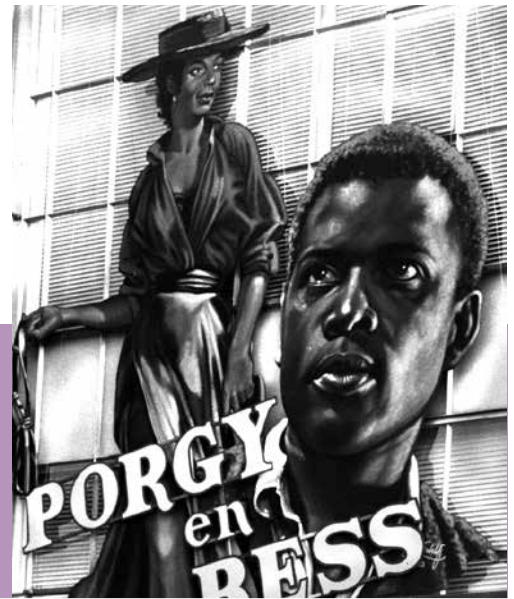
STEP 2: Let students know that, while composing *Porgy and Bess*, George Gershwin spent five weeks in the Sea Islands of South Carolina, where he learned about the local Gullah culture, attended prayer meetings, and studied the inhabitants’ performance of spirituals. To delve further into this rich heritage, we will now listen to two historical recordings of Gullah spirituals, provided on **Tracks 1 and 2**. Distribute the reproducible handouts and ask students to jot down their impressions of what they hear, using the space provided. Draw students’ attention to the text, the distribution of the voices, and any pitches or scales they can discern. As students are able, they should incorporate musical terminology from the *Ten Essential Musical Terms* into their written observations.



Seated young lady holding a nine string banjo.
Anonymous photographer. Ambrotype. c. 1870

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PORGY AND BESS AT THE MOVIES

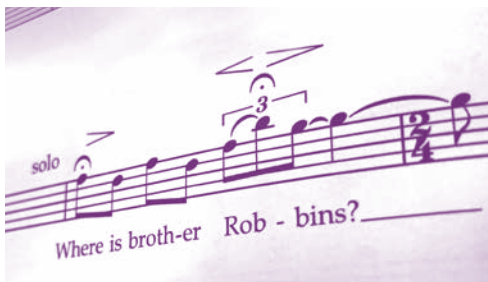


In 1937, George Gershwin predicted that his opera would be filmed “sooner or later.” Over the next 20 years, the Gershwin and Heyward estates regularly received and rejected offers from producers to turn *Porgy and Bess* into a film. In 1957, they relented and granted Samuel Goldwyn the film rights. In fact, Goldwyn had wanted to create a movie based on Gershwin’s opera since attending its premiere in 1935. Goldwyn hired as director Otto Preminger, who had recently produced and filmed *Carmen Jones*, the all-black musical version of Bizet’s *Carmen*.

Work on the movie coincided with the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement, and *Porgy and Bess* became the locus for controversies regarding the artistic treatment of African American life. Harry Belafonte, who had starred in Preminger’s *Carmen Jones*, turned down an offer to play Porgy, explaining, “In this period of our social development, I doubt that it is healthy to expose certain images of [African Americans]. In a period of calm, perhaps this picture could be viewed historically.”

The final film, released in 1959, featured Sidney Poitier as Porgy, Dorothy Dandridge as Bess, and Sammy Davis Jr. as Sportin’ Life. Created in the style of a movie musical, the condensed score includes songs, choruses, and brief sections of recitative, in addition to spoken dialogue. The film won an Academy Award for André Previn’s film score and received Oscar nominations for cinematography, costume design, and sound. It was not successful, however, at the box office. In 1972, when Goldwyn’s rights expired, Ira and Leonore Gershwin recalled all film permissions. As their nephew explained, “My aunt didn’t want it distributed. She and my uncle [Ira] thought it was a Hollywoodization of the piece. We now acquire any prints we find and destroy them.” In 2011, the Preminger film was added to the Library of Congress’s National Film Registry, which preserves films that it judges to be culturally, historically, or aesthetically important and of enduring significance to American culture.

Sign outside a Dutch cinema when the 1959 film was released

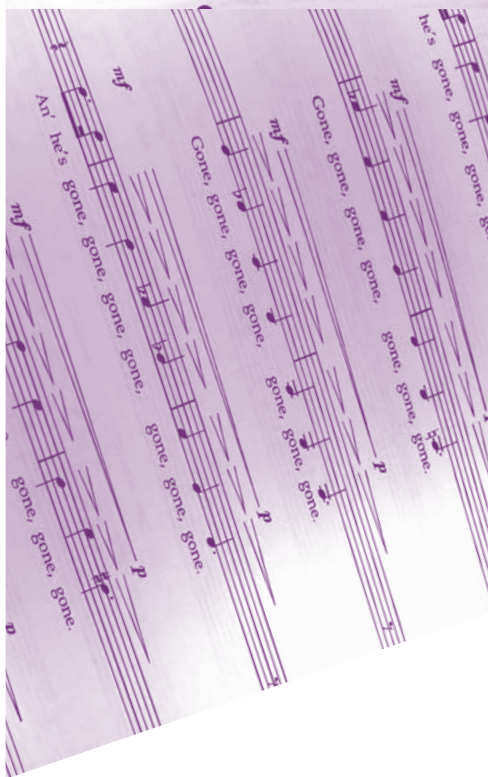


Track 1: "Lay Down Body"

Observations: Each line of the text alternates between a solo singer and the full group, an excellent example of "call and response" structure. The text for the full group remains the same throughout ("Lay down a little while"). The singers employ many blue notes (on the third, fifth, and seventh scale degrees; note the particularly expressive bending on the fifth scale degree), but the range is narrow, and all pitches in the melody are drawn from a small collection of notes. The performers keep time by stomping along to the beat. Although simple, the text expresses a desire for rest for a body worn down by hardship.

Track 2: "Been in the Storm So Long"

Observations: The voice enters in a rhythmically free style, ornamenting and bending notes. The range is narrow, and the melody is drawn from a blues scale. The text is a reflection on hardship and weariness.



After listening to both excerpts, invite students to share their observations. What are some attributes that these spirituals have in common? You may want to list some of the characteristics students have identified on the board.

STEP 3: Now let's turn to Gershwin's music. Although many of the songs from *Porgy and Bess* are widely known (such as "Summertime," "I Loves You, Porgy," and "It Ain't Necessarily So"), the excerpts featured in this exercise are less frequently performed outside of the opera and will thus be less familiar. Have students turn to the next section of the reproducible handout, which contains the texts for the excerpts from *Porgy and Bess* presented in **Tracks 3 and 4**. As they listen, students should make notes on the characteristics these excerpts have in common with the Gullah spirituals they studied in the previous step.

Track 3: "Where Is Brother Robbins?"

Observations: After a fully orchestrated introduction, a solo voice enters in a rhythmically free style, accompanied by a much thinner texture with a sustained drone. The chorus responds in a call and response style. Solo voices alternate with the repeating responses of the choir, set to the unchanging text of "He's a-gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone." The melody includes blue notes—namely, lowered seventh and third scale degrees. This text presents the loss felt by the community at the death of one of their own.

Track 4: "Oh, Doctor Jesus"

Observations: The solo voice proceeds in a rhythmically free, speech-like style, accompanied only by a sustained chord. At the ends of Serena's phrases, other voices enter in a call and response style. Their lines repeat some melodic material and also include

spoken interjections. The melody uses a number of blue notes (on the third, fifth, and seventh scale degrees); the singer also uses additional bending of pitch for expressive purposes. The text is a prayerful entreaty for healing and delivery from hardship.

Referring back to the list of characteristics of spirituals on the board as well as their notes, students can now draw conclusions about how Gershwin approximated the style of spirituals in his music. How are Gershwin's operatic spirituals different from the Gullah spirituals?

STEP 4: We will now begin practicing some elements of improvisation, using a common characteristic of spirituals (and a feature of several of the examples above): call and response. Remind students that in call and response, different groups seem to respond to one another as they sing consecutive lines of music.

Begin by having students explore rhythm alone. If space allows, have students stand in a large circle. Start with a basic 4/4 meter and have the class clap a pattern of four quarter notes. Repeat this several times so that students are able to internalize the meter. Next, let students know that each of them will be asked to fill in a measure (four claps) with an improvised rhythm. It can be any combination of quarter notes, half notes, eighth notes, triplets, dotted rhythms, or syncopation—or any combination of the above—as long as their rhythms fill a complete measure.

Give students a moment to think about the possibilities, then explain how the exercise will work. The entire class will clap a "response" of two plain measures of four quarter notes. In the second measure, you will identify the student who will improvise a call. (Bonus points if you recite the student's name rhythmically within the space of the measure—for instance, "Next is James!" could be chanted to the rhythm of two quarters and a half note.) After you announce the responder, the class will drop out for a measure while that student performs their rhythmic improvisation. Immediately upon completion, the class should resume clapping quarter notes. The goal is to achieve seamless transitions between group and improviser, so that a regular beat is never disrupted. Cycle through the entire class so that everyone has a chance to perform their improvised measure.

STEP 5: Next, we will use a similar format to improvise melodic material. The structure we will be working within is a variation of a blues scale—namely, the version Gershwin uses in "Oh, Doctor Jesus" (transposed to a range more comfortable for the student voice). On the board, write out the following scale:



FUN FACT: From the time of its premiere, critics have debated whether to classify *Porgy and Bess* as an opera or a musical. This confusion extended even to the editors of the *New York Times*, who sent their top reviewers for serious music as well as the popular musical theater to the work's New York premiere on October 10, 1935. The *Times* printed both critics' reviews in adjacent columns. Members of the orchestra staked a claim that it was in fact a musical, although they had financial reasons to do so: The wage scale for musical comedies was higher than the scale for opera that they were receiving.

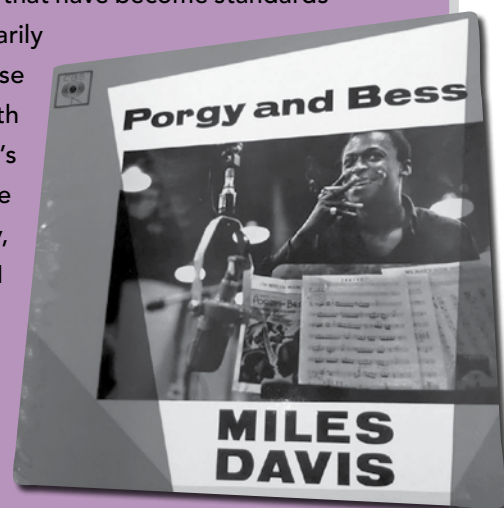
Point out that the scale includes several blue notes: a lowered third, a lowered fifth (in addition to the perfect fifth), and a lowered seventh. Play the scale on the piano several times, then have students vocalize it on a neutral syllable or play it on their instruments. Repeat this several times. After several iterations, play a D-A drone on the piano:



Next, divide the class in half. Have one part of the class sing or play the drone while the other half plays the blues scale, then switch parts and repeat.

STANDARD DEVIATIONS

George Gershwin is one of the most distinctive voices in American music. With an exhilarating combination of jazz rhythms, sweeping melodies, and wistful intonations of the blues—as well as native charm, wit, and verve—Gershwin’s songs, concert works, and opera offer an indelible representation of the American national identity. Indeed, *Porgy and Bess* is unique in the operatic canon for the extent to which its music has entered the popular consciousness, even for people who have no prior experience of opera or even classical music. Owing to the adoption of the opera’s arias by popular musicians ranging from Ella Fitzgerald to Janis Joplin to Christina Aguilera, these songs have taken on a life outside of the opera hall, and in many cases have become jazz “standards” (works that are widely known by jazz musicians and audiences and that are often used as the starting point for reinterpretation and improvisation). Songs from *Porgy and Bess* that have become standards include “Summertime,” “Bess, You Is My Woman Now,” “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” and “I Loves You, Porgy.” For decades, jazz artists have used these songs as inspiration for their own takes on Gershwin’s tunes; album-length recordings by Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong (1956) and Miles Davis’s all-instrumental version for big band (1957) are particularly noteworthy. The song “Summertime” has been recorded by Sarah Vaughan, Billie Holliday, John Coltrane, and Janis Joplin, while Nina Simone’s 1958 recording of “I Loves You, Porgy” launched her career. These performances, along with many other renditions, have contributed to *Porgy and Bess*’s accessibility outside of classical music. In the hands of these gifted artists, Gershwin’s songs have developed new meanings and relevance away from their birthplace on Catfish Row.



Before proceeding, explain how the exercise will work. Operating within the context of the same 4/4 meter from Step 4, each student will have a chance to improvise a melodic pattern drawn from any of the notes in the blues scale, in any order. It may proceed by step or interval. Each improvisation should be one measure long and may use any rhythm, including straight quarter notes if students prefer. Each performance (or “call”) will alternate with two-measure-long group “responses” of the drone. During the second measure, you will identify the next student to perform. Make sure that the scale is visible on the board. At various points over the course of the exercise, be sure to reassure students that there are no wrong creations; it doesn’t have to be perfect, and no one will laugh.

STEP 6: We will now bring all the elements of the preceding steps together to construct a new spiritual. Explain to students that in the next step of the activity, they will perform a spiritual-style improvised call and response with pitch, rhythm, and words. Ask students to think back to the structure of “Lay Down Body” and Gershwin’s “Where Is Brother Robbins?,” in which a soloist alternates lines with the full chorus. Let them know that in our piece, each student will perform their own “call,” and the whole group will answer with a “response,” which will be the same each time. While students are performing their individual calls, the rest of the group will hum along with a drone to help maintain the pitch centers.

Remind students of the earnest and plaintive tone of the spirituals we’ve studied in the class, in which the singer laments the difficulties of life—a common feature of both spirituals and the blues. Ask students to be respectful of that heritage as they brainstorm the text they will sing in their calls. They will have two measures to sing a brief line describing something they find a hardship, difficult, or sad. Give students a minute to collect their thoughts; they may like to write down their text as well as some sketches on how they will rhythmicize this text and add pitch.

After students have made their notes, move on to composing the response. For this repeating section, specify that you will use “Yes, it’s hard, hard, hard, hard, hard” as the text. As a group, develop a rhythm that accommodates all of these words within the space of two measures, using an upbeat for “Yes, it’s.” Notate your rhythm on the board, and have students write the notation down on their own staff paper as well. You might develop something like the following:



FUN FACT: Gershwin had high hopes that *Porgy and Bess* would take its place in the pantheon of grand opera. While working on the opera in 1934, he remarked, “The production will be a serious attempt to put into operatic form a purely American theme. If I am successful it will resemble a combination of the drama and romance of *Carmen* with the beauty of *Meistersinger*.”

A scene in an English National Opera performance of James Robinson's staging

TRISTRAM KENTON / ENGLISH NATIONAL OPERA



Or you might incorporate a greater degree of rhythmic complexity, with dotted rhythms and syncopation in a more jazz-influenced style, such as in the following:



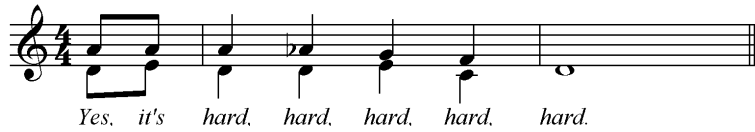
Next, beginning with your rhythm, use the same process of group decision-making to develop a melody using the blues scale from Step 5 above. Make sure your melody ends on the first scale degree. Your result could be as simple as this:



Or it could look more like this:



For more advanced classes, you could even add a simple harmony:



Give students time to notate the result of the group composition on their own staff paper, then lead the class in performing the response. Divide the class into parts if necessary, then practice the response until everyone is comfortable with the music.

Take a moment to explain the performance process. The improvisatory performance will begin with the entire class humming the drone for two full measures. During this time, you will identify the first student to sing his or her “call.” The rest of the class will continue humming while the soloist performs. At the end of the second measure, the entire group will enter with the “response”—keeping in mind that it enters on an upbeat. At the close of the response, the class will once again hum the drone for a measure. During that time, you will announce the next student to sing a “call,” and so on, until each student has had a chance to perform their call. It will likely be helpful for you to keep everyone on track by conducting, clearly indicating the downbeat and other entrances. A sample of this process is notated below.



FOLLOW-UP: The practice of improvisation can feel alien and uncomfortable. Reassure students that overcoming their fear and making daring choices are an integral part of artistic expression: Everyone has to do it! Congratulate students on their work in the lesson and thank them for sharing not only their improvisatory musical choices but also their personal experiences in their choice of text.

As a follow-up activity, encourage students to take notice of their sound environments. What are the pitches or rhythms that they encounter in their everyday lives, either through music or the ambient sounds that surround them? Ask students to repeat and internalize some of those sounds, and then use them as the basis for free improvisation.

*English / Language Arts***IN PREPARATION**

For this activity, students will need the reproducible resources available at the back of this guide entitled *We, Too, Sing America*, copies of the synopsis, and the audio selections from *Porgy and Bess* available online or on the accompanying CD. For the take-home activity, students will each need a letter-size foam sheet with holes punched in each corner. You will also need short strings of yarn to “sew” the quilt panels together.

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

English / Language Arts, Poetry, African American Culture and History, Visual Arts, Humanities

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To deepen students’ familiarity with *Porgy and Bess*’s themes and imagery
- To develop students’ close reading and literary analysis skills
- To help students understand *Porgy and Bess* within the context of early 20th-century literature and art
- To consider how an opera can be interpreted as a historical document, reflecting the social, political, and artistic movements of its day

We, Too, Sing America

Long before Gershwin composed his opera *Porgy and Bess*, DuBose Heyward’s novel *Porgy* was inspiring serious discussions in the African American press about its portrayal of African Americans. In fact, debates surrounding the relative authenticity of *Porgy and Bess*’s characters continue to this day. A central concern of many critics is the fact that *Porgy and Bess* was based on a novel by a white Southerner and lyricized and set to music by the sons of Russian Jewish immigrants—none of whom belonged to the group of people whose story is being told on stage. Yet many of the opera’s themes were also treated by African American artists of the day, and the opera engages in an open artistic dialogue with a great corpus of artists who, although they lacked the prominence of DuBose Heyward and the Gershwin brothers, recorded their experiences of America in profound and important ways.

This exercise will situate *Porgy and Bess* within the rich history of African American literature and art. By completing this exercise, students will develop a deeper understanding of not only *Porgy and Bess* but also the vital body of American art and literature that inspired the Gershwins’ work. Students will:

- Ponder the purpose of art and examine how different writers conceptualized their responsibilities as artists
- Study a selection of excerpts from *Porgy and Bess*, analyzing the imagery, themes, and musical representation in these scenes
- Compare these selections to works by contemporaneous African American poets and visual artists
- Respond to this study by creating a community art project

GUIDE TO AUDIO CLIPS FOR THIS ACTIVITY

For this activity, there are four audio selections from *Porgy and Bess*, available online or on the accompanying CD.

TRACK 5: “Summertime”

TRACK 6: “My Man’s Gone Now”

TRACK 7: “It Take a Long Pull to Get There”

TRACK 8: “Oh Lawd, I’m On My Way”

STEPS

In this activity, students will compare the language, themes, and imagery of Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* with works by African American artists. Through their study, students will develop a deeper understanding of the opera’s time period, as well as some of the thorny issues raised by its subject matter.

STEP 1: Begin class with a grand but open-ended question: Why do the arts matter? Or, put another way, what do the arts do? Potential responses may cite the entertainment value the arts provide, the emotions they elicit in the observer, the escape

they provide from everyday life, and the valuable stories they tell, among many other possibilities. This is a huge subject for study, but for the purposes of this lesson, limit the discussion to a few observations before letting the class know that in the early 20th century, when Gershwin was developing his opera *Porgy and Bess*, there was a vibrant debate among African American writers about the purpose of art. Students will now look at two of these perspectives.

Pass out the reproducible handouts for this activity and guide students' attention toward the quotes by W.E.B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes, two African American writers working around the time that *Porgy and Bess* was composed. Assign a student to read each quote aloud, and then have students respond to these authors' views on the purpose of art. (It may be useful to ask a few students to describe, in their own words, each author's main point.) Then, invite students to hypothesize what kinds of art Du Bois and Hughes would approve of. For instance:

- If all art is propaganda, as Du Bois claims, what are the political causes that he thinks art should address? How should it do so?
- What is one of the themes that Hughes mentions as a subject for African American art? Why might he mention this theme in particular?

COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND *PORGY AND BESS*

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8-12.11

Interpret, analyze, and evaluate narratives, poetry, and drama artistically and ethically by making connections to: other texts, ideas, cultural perspectives, eras, personal events, and situations.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.9

Demonstrate knowledge of 18th-, 19th- and early 20th-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.11

Create a presentation, art work, or text in response to a literary work with a commentary that identifies connections and explains divergences from the original.

TRIGGER WARNING:

The painting by Aaron Douglas in this exercise includes imagery that references a hanging.

I, TOO, SING AMERICA.
I AM THE DARKER BROTHER. THEY
SEND ME TO EAT IN
THE KITCHEN WHEN COMPANY
COMES, BUT I LAUGH,
AND EAT WELL, AND GROW
STRONG. TOMORROW, I'LL
BE AT THE TABLE WHEN
COMPANY COMES. NOBODY'LL
DARE SAY TO ME "EAT IN THE
KITCHEN." THEN, BESIDES,
THEY'LL SEE HOW BEAUTIFUL I AM AND BE
ASHAMED—I, TOO, AM AMERICA.

LANGSTON HUGHES

FUN FACT: *Porgy and Bess*'s European premiere took place in 1943 in Nazi-occupied Copenhagen. Although the opera was performed by white singers in blackface makeup, an opera about African Americans that was written by a Jew fell far outside the Nazi's code of "proper" theatrical matter, and the ranking Nazi officer in Denmark filed a formal complaint about the theater. Nevertheless, the show was a smash public success, and Danish radio stations took to following compulsory Nazi propaganda broadcasts with the opera's hit number "It Ain't Necessarily So."

- Which author seems to promote a more realistic approach to artistic portrayal? Can art be both propaganda and naturalistic?
- If the purpose of art is to help a group of people, what types of stories should artists tell? How should they depict the characters in these stories?

Note that Hughes often uses the word "Negro" to mean "black" or "African American" in this excerpt. Before inviting students to read the excerpt, you may wish to address the use of this word in this historical essay.

STEP 2: Moving on, let the class know that George Gershwin chose the topic for his opera because he understood it to be a quintessentially American theme. Concerning the story, he remarked, "First of all, it is American, and I believe that American music should be based on American material." You may want to share with your class some of the information about the story's literary source, presented in the section entitled "The Source" earlier in this guide.

This activity will be most successful if students come to it with a firm understanding of the opera's plot. You may wish to assign the synopsis as a homework reading assignment, to be completed before class begins. Otherwise, pass out copies of the synopsis now. Allow students time to read through the synopsis, have them take turns reading it aloud, or lead them in tableau exercises or another theatrical game that will familiarize them with the plot. Once you are confident that students are comfortable recalling elements of the story, ask them to relate *Porgy and Bess* to some of the issues they discussed in the previous step. Whose story is this? Who is telling it? To whom is it being told, and why? Does your answer change depending on when your imagined audience lived? Does the opera raise political issues? If so, what are they?

STEP 3: Now let's move on to the words and music of Gershwin's opera. We'll be looking at several numbers from *Porgy and Bess* and studying their meaning. Have students turn to the following page of their reproducible handouts. This section presents four excerpts from the opera, each paired with an artwork (either poetic or visual) created around the same time as *Porgy and Bess* by an African American artist. Move through the examples one by one, first studying the operatic text and discussing it and then playing the associated musical examples found on **Tracks 5 through 8**. As you discuss the music, reassure students that they do not need to know any specialized musical vocabulary. Instead, they can use descriptive language like "slow," "cheerful," or "mournful." As students listen, they should note how certain words in the text are magnified by the music.

After leading your class through the musical excerpt, turn to the associated poem or work of visual art. Assign a student to read the brief contextual introduction (also printed below), and then have students study the example, inviting them to identify

Singing AMERICA

According to DuBose Heyward, *Porgy* was never meant to be a political work of art. Instead, he hoped that the novel and play would offer a "colorful setting" of "the old Southern slum ... without using the story as a vehicle for propaganda or discussion of the race problem." But although Heyward presented his intentions as honorable, in 1920s Charleston, the "race problem" was inescapable, and Heyward's own views were by no means neutral. As much as he created serious, emotionally complex characters in his novel, he also placed them in a world devoid of class diversity, education, or activism. These elements were ascendant at the time, but in Heyward's nonfiction writings, he found them to be of little benefit to Low Country African Americans. Instead, Heyward valued "the old, uncomplicated pattern of life" over "the forces of advancement" that lure African Americans "from our fields, fired with ambition."

The reality of segregation, although it appears only obliquely in *Porgy and Bess*, cannot be separated from the history of the opera. For instance, when the opera toured to Washington, D.C., in 1936, the scheduled venue, the National Theatre, was segregated. It was only after the cast refused to perform there and unions threatened to boycott the theater that the management agreed to allow black patrons to sit anywhere in the audience. This arrangement, moreover, held only for performances of *Porgy and Bess*; afterwards, the theater reverted to its previous policy

of segregation. Eight years before, when Heyward's stage play *Porgy* had come to the National, the management turned away an entire troupe of black actors when they arrived with their tickets and even went so far as to employ "spotters" to identify African Americans and remove them from the theater. The complex awareness of racial exclusion heard in Langston Hughes's landmark 1926 poem "I, Too, Sing America" was surely familiar to the performers of *Porgy* as well as *Porgy and Bess*.

Given the inescapable imagery of black-face minstrelsy in the portrayal of African Americans on stage at the time, it was inevitable that some audiences and critics would interpret Gershwin's opera through that lens. Reviewers understood the characters of *Porgy and Bess* as variations of minstrelsy stock characters (e.g., the uneducated and lazy plantation slave, the promiscuous "mulatto" woman, the city dandy, the mammy, etc.), no matter how complex Gershwin's characters were in the actual opera.

Yet the characters of *Porgy and Bess*, too, sing America. Finely hewn individuals with operatic emotions and desires, they live, yearn, love, fail, and rise again as operatic heroes just as moving as any Mimì or Desdemona. One can appreciate the "entire fabric made out of all these individuals," in the words of James Robinson, director of the Met's production, without forgetting that fabric's source.

FUN FACT: In 1932, DuBose Heyward was contacted by the film star Al Jolson, who had performed in a radio-play version of *Porgy* and was hoping to appear in the Gershwin's forthcoming musical as the title character. Although Jolson is not well known to modern audiences, he was one of the most famous movie stars of the day, and his 1927 film *The Jazz Singer* is generally regarded as the first "talkie" in history. Heyward approached Gershwin with Jolson's request, but Gershwin quickly rejected the movie star: Jolson was white, and Gershwin wanted to avoid a blackface opera, instead hoping to stage the opera with an entirely black cast.

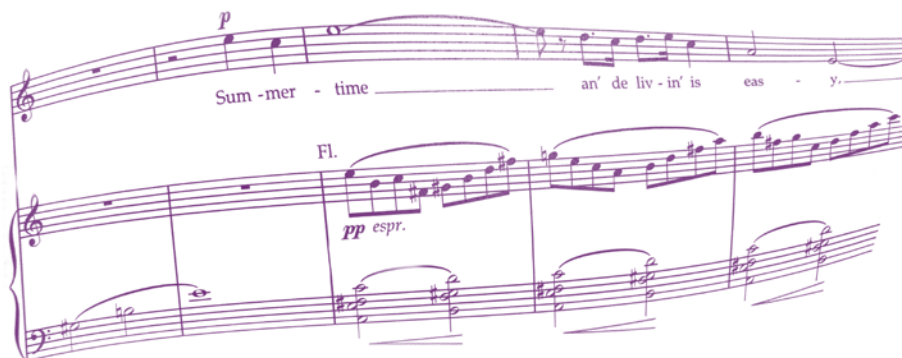
themes that this artwork and the excerpt from *Porgy and Bess* have in common. After each set, lead the class in a discussion that explores how the two examples compare to one another. A teacher's guide to the excerpts is provided below.

SET 1:

"Summertime" (Track 5)

CONTEXT: This famous song opens Gershwin's opera. Clara, a young mother, sings it as a lullaby to her baby.

When the opera begins, it is indeed summer. But in this lullaby, Clara uses the season of summer as a metaphor for a hopeful future: Fish are plentiful, and work is easy (when the cotton is high, you don't have to lean over to pick it). In the second stanza, Clara imagines a future when her child will strike out on its own. Her language, which mentions a morning when the child will "rise up" and "take the sky," recalls a religious motif: the resurrection of the righteous on Judgment Day. Clara's lullaby is a song of comfort and hope, but it still acknowledges that good fortune and easy living may be very far off indeed.



"On Summer," by George Moses Horton

CONTEXT: George Moses Horton (1798–1883) was a slave on a tobacco plantation in North Carolina. He taught himself to read, and with the assistance of a local novelist, began publishing poetry. He was the first African American to publish a book in the South. Despite his growing fame, he was not permitted to buy his own freedom, although he eventually succeeded in purchasing his "time" from his owner so that he could devote himself to poetry full-time. After the Civil War, Horton spent his last 17 years as a free man in Philadelphia. His poetry explores love, faith, and the beauty of nature (especially that of rural North Carolina), and it also serves as a protest against slavery.

Horton's exploration of the summer season features a formal poetic structure. He uses a strict ABAB rhyme scheme in each stanza, and each stanza treats a different aspect of summer's natural beauty (harvests, the stars, birds, etc.). But not all is idyllic: The sixth stanza warns of the dangers lurking behind the beautiful scene.

SET 2:

"My Man's Gone Now" (Track 6)

CONTEXT: Serena, the widow of the man murdered by Crown, sings this lament after her husband's untimely death.

Serena describes her sadness as Old Man Sorrow, a personification of her loneliness and loss. Old Man Sorrow follows her everywhere, whispering her darkest thoughts back to her and taking the place next to Serena that was once her husband's. Her music proceeds slowly, and the chorus repeats and amplifies her heartfelt lament.

"The Weary Blues," by Langston Hughes

CONTEXT: Langston Hughes (1902–1967) was a prolific poet of the Harlem Renaissance. His works, which also include novels, essays, and plays, portray the everyday troubles and joys of African Americans, often using the rhythms and sounds of jazz and invoking the artistic temperament of the blues.

This poem is a vivid example of Hughes's jazz poetry. Hughes considered jazz and blues to be uniquely African American art forms. As he wrote in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," "Jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile." In this poem, Hughes revels in the rhythms and sounds of the blues, even using a brief example of dialect poetry as he quotes his unnamed blues singer. The poem closes by imagining the blues as something that follows the singer everywhere he goes.

SET 3:

"It Take a Long Pull to Get There" (Track 7)

CONTEXT: Clara's husband, the fisherman Jake, sings this song with his fellow fishermen as they go about their work.

Jake switches between folksy descriptions of how he will prevail over the weather and ponderous repetitions of the phrase "it take a long pull to get there," in which he acknowledges the hard work and struggle needed to accomplish his goal. The result is a jarring juxtaposition of a lighthearted, bragging style and an acknowledgment of profound hardship.

FUN FACT: *Porgy and Bess's* "Catfish Row" is a fictional location, but the name is a variation on a real place in Charleston: a tenement house near DuBose Heyward's home called "Cabbage Row."

The image shows a musical score for the song "It Take a Long Pull to Get There." It features three staves of music. The first two staves are vocal lines with lyrics: "It take a long pull to get there, huh" and "It take a long pull to get there,". The third staff is a violin line (Vln.) with a long, sustained note. The music is in a key with one flat (B-flat major or D minor) and has a 7/8 time signature. The dynamic marking is *mf* (mezzo-forte).



Aaron Douglas, *An Idyll of the Deep South*, from the series *Aspects of Negro Life*, 1934. Oil on canvas. New York Public Library

Aspects of Negro Life: An Idyll of the Deep South, by Aaron Douglas

CONTEXT: Aaron Douglas (1899–1979) was a painter, muralist, and graphic artist, and one of the foremost visual artists of the Harlem Renaissance. His works incorporate African subjects and styles and were admired by prominent thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, who believed that artists should promote their heritage in their artworks. Douglas’s works include several large-scale murals that portray aspects of African American life. In the mural series *Aspects of Negro Life*, created for the New York Public Library’s Harlem branch (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), Douglas incorporated political and social commentary in his designs.

In Douglas’s mural, the central section—which depicts African Americans singing, dancing, and playing instruments—contrasts strongly with the sections on the right and left, which paint the harsh realities of life in the Deep South. On the right, agricultural laborers toil in the field, bent over with their work. On the left, figures huddle around a rope hanging from a tree, an image of a brutal lynching.

SET 4:

“Oh Lawd, I’m On My Way” (Track 8)

CONTEXT: The opera ends with Porgy’s resolution to follow Bess to New York.

This song draws on imagery from the Bible, connecting Porgy’s journey to the Israelites’ travel through the desert wilderness to the Holy Land. It is a long, long road, but Porgy asks God to take his hand. The music is grand and hopeful, and the opera ends on a triumphant note.



“Lift Every Voice and Sing,” by James Weldon Johnson

CONTEXT: James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938) grew up in Jacksonville, Florida, then a relatively racially tolerant community. In addition to writing poetry and novels throughout his life, he was also the first black lawyer admitted to the Florida Bar, served as the principal of a segregated school, wrote songs on Tin Pan Alley in New York, held consular posts in Latin and South America, and served as the head of the NAACP, leading civil rights campaigns and pioneering the organization’s efforts to promote black achievement. “Lift Every Voice and Sing” was written in 1900 to celebrate Abraham Lincoln’s birthday; it was later adopted by the NAACP as the “Black National Anthem,” with a melody composed by Johnson’s brother, J. Rosamond Johnson.

Johnson’s poem acknowledges that the path towards liberty is long and dark, but he also calls for every voice to sing with joy when a “new day” of freedom for his people finally dawns. Johnson’s poem praises God, who he says stood by his people during their trials and led them to the light of this new day.

STEP 4: Circle back to the discussion from the beginning of class. What aspects of African American life do these works of literature and art portray? Do they have a subtext or underlying purpose? How do students feel about Gershwin’s treatment of similar themes?

STEP 5: Now that students have developed a familiarity with the characters, themes, and imagery of *Porgy and Bess*, as well as with work by a collection of contemporary African American artists, introduce the creative project that serves as the culmination of their study: a “community quilt,” each panel of which will be created by a different student. Students will choose the subject for their panel from the array of characters, themes, and authors studied in the preceding lesson and develop a caption that encapsulates what the panel depicts. Students should pick a topic that is personally relevant or which they find exciting or moving. Examples could include something like the following:

For Clara, summertime is a metaphor for a happy future.

Blues is the language of sorrow and loss.

James Weldon Johnson wrote the “Black National Anthem.”

The struggle was long for the inhabitants of Catfish Row.

For reference, you may want to introduce students to the work of the artist Jacob Lawrence and his 60-part *Migration Series*. Each of Lawrence’s panels (which include captions describing their content) portray an aspect of the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to northern industrial cities at the beginning of the 20th century.

FUN FACT: James Weldon Johnson, author of the poem “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” and his brother, John Rosamond Johnson, both had connections to opera and musical theater. In 1916, the poet James prepared a translation of Enrique Granados’s Spanish-language opera *Goyescas* for its world premiere at the Met. In 1935, the composer and performer J. Rosamond played Lawyer Frazier in the premiere run of *Porgy and Bess*.

You should devote the remainder of the class period to helping students brainstorm their panel subject matter. A Panel Organizer sheet is provided at the end of the reproducible handouts. Students may refer back to the synopsis, the “Who’s Who in *Porgy and Bess*” chart, and the reproducible handouts from the lesson. After students decide on a topic, they can move on to thinking about how they will portray their topic artistically. They may compose a new poem, depict their topic visually, create a collage, or utilize any other form of artistic depiction that occurs to them. Explain that their panel will fit on a letter-size foam sheet, but they may use any other kind of material (including printed images and found objects) to decorate it.

As students work on collecting their thoughts, move through the room and pass out a foam sheet to each student, answering any questions that students may have. By the time class ends, students should have at least decided on a caption and made some preliminary notes on the content of their quilt panels.

FOLLOW-UP: As a take-home activity, students should complete the decoration of their community quilt squares, using any material they choose: construction paper, paper with their original text, printed images, found objects, etc. Their captions should appear somewhere on their panels as well.

When students return to class, you may choose to have them present their panels, explaining why they chose their subject, what it means to them, and why they chose to portray it the way they did. Afterward, collect all of the panels. Organize them into rows and columns, and using small strings of yarn, tie knots to “sew” your community quilt together. It can then be hung on a wall in your classroom or elsewhere in your school!

Ten Essential Musical Terms

Blues A style of music that developed in the rural Deep South at the beginning of the 20th century, characterized by a 12-bar form, call and response format, blue notes, and lyrics about hardship and difficulty.

Blue Notes In blues and jazz, blue notes are pitches that are lowered from their normal position in a diatonic scale. As blue notes, the third and seventh, and occasionally the fifth, scale degrees are lowered by a half step (though the lowered pitch may not be exact, a further expressive feature). Blues singers sometimes call this “worrying” or “bending” the notes. Gershwin’s music is rife with blue notes.

Broadway The New York theater district centered around Times Square. When used in connection with the term “musical,” it refers to the popular genre of sung drama that has been performed there since the late 19th century. Although Broadway musicals can take many forms, they usually feature songs separated by spoken dialogue, a contemporary setting, dance numbers, and the popular musical styles of the day.

Call and Response A musical structure in which different groups of singers (or soloists) seem to respond to one another. The practice of call and response may date to African American work songs, which featured a leader and chorus alternating verses and refrains, or even single phrases. Call and response is a feature of spirituals as well as blues and jazz. The structure may also apply to purely instrumental works or instrumental portions of vocal works.

Chorus A group of performers singing together. The chorus’s music can range from simple unison melodies to complex, multi-part singing with a high degree of rhythmic independence. In opera, the composer may use a chorus to represent large groups of characters, such as townspeople, soldiers, or guests at a party.

Jazz Jazz spans a vast range of styles and genres. A true American art form, jazz first grew out of performing styles developed by African Americans at the turn of the 20th century and features improvisation, syncopation, blues inflections, and “swing,” an approach to rhythm and phrasing that uses rubato, accents, and other performance choices to create forward drive.

Minstrelsy A form of American popular entertainment in the 19th century that featured stereotyped and exaggerated features of African American life. It was performed by white actors wearing blackface makeup and featured dialogue with a buffoonish Southern dialect and mangled grammar. As the 20th century progressed, blackface minstrelsy came to be understood as deeply offensive, a representation that effaced black art and performers while propagating racist stereotypes.

Polyrhythm An overlaying of different rhythms that are perceived to be independent of one another. Polyrhythms are common in much African drumming, as well as in jazz. They are also a feature of some spirituals, where polyrhythms can be created through the addition of improvised hand claps and foot stomps.

Spiritual An African American folk song with a text inspired by sacred writings or ideas. Spirituals grew out of oral traditions during the age of slavery, combining West African and Anglo-American musical features. Drawing on aspects of Protestant hymns, spirituals retell stories from the Old and New Testaments, most often those that describe triumph over powerful enemies and delivery from bondage (such as Moses’s delivery of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt). Musically, spirituals do not belong to either the major or minor mode but instead draw pitches from both. They also feature call and response, interjections such as cries and shouts, syncopation, and an improvisatory approach to the treatment of melodic repetition.

Syncopation Moving the stress of a musical phrase from a normally strong beat to a normally weak beat. For instance, in 4/4 time, a syncopated phrase might place the stress on beats two and/or four. This effect can be achieved by accenting a weak beat through melodic and/or harmonic means. It can also be achieved by attenuating the strong beat, usually by tying a weak beat to the strong beat that follows it (for instance, tying the fourth beat of a measure to the first beat of the next measure), or by placing a rest on a traditionally strong beat. It is important to note that, to successfully create the effect of syncopation, the overall meter must remain discernible—either played simultaneously in other voices or immediately before or after the period of syncopation. Otherwise, the human ear will naturally “shift” the meter to align with the accented beats and the effect will be lost.

Supporting the Student Experience during the *Live in HD* Transmission

IN PREPARATION

For this activity, students will need the Performance Activity reproducible handouts found at the back of this guide.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND *PORGY AND BESS*

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8-12.11

Interpret, analyze, and evaluate narratives, poetry, and drama artistically and ethically by making connections to: other texts, ideas, cultural perspectives, eras, personal events, and situations.

Watching and listening to a live performance is a unique experience that takes students beyond the printed page to an immersion in images, sound, interpretation, technology, drama, skill, and craft. These performance activities are designed to help students analyze different aspects of this experience while engaging critically with the performance. Each performance activity incorporates a reproducible sheet; students should bring these activity sheets to the *Live in HD* transmission and fill them out during intermission and/or after the final curtain.

For *Porgy and Bess*, the first activity sheet, “Broadway Operations,” has students consider whether *Porgy and Bess* is an opera or a work of musical theater. In fact, scholars, critics, and performers have argued over this point ever since the work’s premiere: *Porgy and Bess* opened in New York in a Broadway theater, it has been performed in opera houses across the world, and Gershwin’s songs are performed by operatically trained voices and musical-theater artists alike. As students watch the production, they should consider how closely different aspects of the work seem to align with the style of either opera or musical theater.

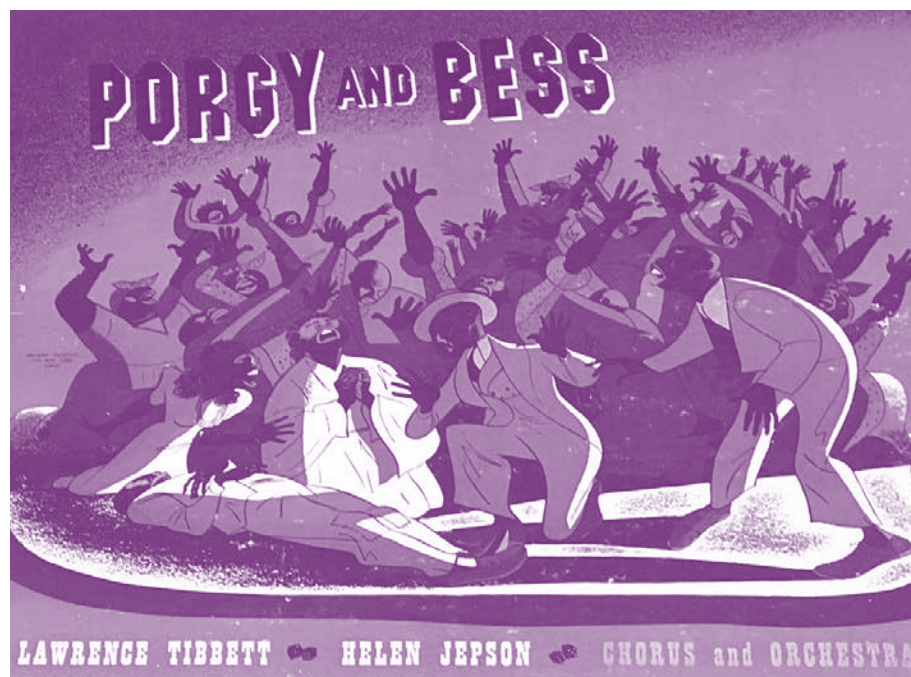
The second activity sheet is called “Opera Review: *Porgy and Bess*,” and it includes a scene-by-scene rating system to help students keep track of the opera’s story and develop their own opinions about what they see and hear. This activity is the same for each opera, and it is intended to guide students toward a consistent set of objective observations while enriching their understanding of the art form as a whole.

The performance activity reproducible handouts can be found at the back of this guide. On the next page, you’ll find a follow-up activity created specifically for reviewing the *Live in HD* performance of *Porgy and Bess*. This activity is intended to inspire careful, critical thinking about what students have seen and heard while also inspiring students to engage in further discussion and study.

Racial Representations

Students will enjoy starting the class with an open discussion of the Met performance. What did they like? What didn't they like? Did anything surprise them? What would they like to see or hear again? This discussion should be an opportunity for students to review their performance activity sheets and express their thoughts about the visual design of the Met production, the singers' performances, and *Porgy and Bess*'s music and story.

When Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess* premiered in 1935, black thinkers were sensitive to the portrayal of African Americans on the theatrical stage. They strongly believed that dramatic artworks could be powerful tools for uplifting their race—in 1925, *The Messenger*, an influential black literary publication of the Harlem Renaissance, had published an entire issue on the role of the arts in the social and political improvement of African Americans—but they were also aware that, if misused, art could be a means for perpetuating ugly stereotypes. When Gershwin's opera premiered, black critics celebrated the opera's all-black cast and chorus, which was then—as it is even today—a rare occasion for significant black representation on the opera stage. They also praised the artistry of the opera's singers and noted their educational pedigrees from Juilliard, the New England Conservatory, and Columbia University. But as for the work itself, many critics found its purported “authenticity” to be dubious; some opined that Gershwin hadn't created an authentic black opera so much as a Broadway musical with a black veneer.



IN PREPARATION

This activity requires no preparation other than attending the *Live in HD* transmission of *Porgy and Bess*.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To review students' understanding of *Porgy and Bess*
- To examine notions of cultural ownership and appropriation
- To encourage students to consider their own cultural consumption

COMMON CORE STANDARDS AND PORGY AND BESS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6-8.2.a

Use their experience and their knowledge of language and logic, as well as culture, to think analytically, address problems creatively, and advocate persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-12.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-12.1.e

Seek to understand other perspectives and cultures and communicate effectively with audiences or individuals from varied backgrounds.

This album cover art depicts African American characters in the recognized clichés of the minstrel show. The vocalists on this early recording where white opera singers.

These viewpoints invite a consideration of the ways that artworks incorporate influences from outside their creators' own culture. You might prompt students with the following questions:

- Who is qualified to tell a culture's story? Members of that culture? Scholars of it? Anyone?
- When might the use of artifacts or images from a culture outside your own be offensive?
- What types of representation should be avoided? Can you think of examples from movies or sports that are offensive? Why are they offensive?
- How can artists and authors demonstrate respect for a culture outside their own while still incorporating aspects of it into their own work?

Continue the conversation by shifting the discussion to *Porgy and Bess*. Have students apply their observations on the above questions to the following topics:

- Gershwin's musical idiom and its inspirations in jazz, blues, and spirituals
- The story's basis in DuBose Heyward's novel, a work which portrays a selectively narrow slice of life in the segregated South
- Gershwin's time spent researching black spirituals, prayer meetings, and Gullah culture in South Carolina while composing the opera
- Gershwin's insistence that *Porgy and Bess* feature an all-black cast and chorus

In conclusion, observe that the notion of cultural appropriation is a hot topic, inspiring conversations on everything from hair styles and fashion to cafeteria food. Encourage students to develop a critical apparatus for engaging in these conversations respectfully, honoring the distinctive attributes of cultures outside their own and the right of those cultures to preserve aspects they find meaningful, while also allowing for a free flowering of creativity across cultures and histories.

**Excerpts taken from
the Metropolitan Opera
broadcast of January 27, 1990**

PORGY

Simon Estes

BESS

Leona Mitchell

CLARA

Gwendolyn Bradley

JAKE

Bruce Hubbard

SERENA

Camellia Johnson

PETER

Mervin Wallace

LILY

Karla Burns

Conducted by
James Levine

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra
and Chorus

"Lay Down Body" by The Moving Star Hall Singers from the recording entitled *Been in the Storm So Long: A Collection of Spirituals, Folk Tales and Children's Games from Johns Island, SC*, SFW40031, courtesy of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. © © 1990. Used by permission.

"Been in the Storm So Long" by Mary Pickney from the recording entitled *Been in the Storm So Long: A Collection of Spirituals, Folk Tales and Children's Games from Johns Island, SC*, SFW40031, courtesy of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. © © 1990. Used by permission.

- 1 "Lay Down Body" (excerpt)
Performed by Mrs. Bertha Smith (lead), recorded in Moving Star Hall.
Excerpt from the Smithsonian Folkways recording *Been in the Storm So Long*.
- 2 "Been in the Storm So Long" (excerpt)
Performed by Mrs. Mary Pickney in her living room.
Excerpt from the Smithsonian Folkways recording *Been in the Storm So Long*.
- 3 *Porgy and Bess*, "Where Is Brother Robbins?"
- 4 *Porgy and Bess*, "Oh, Doctor Jesus"
- 5 *Porgy and Bess*, "Summertime"
- 6 *Porgy and Bess*, "My Man's Gone Now"
- 7 *Porgy and Bess*, "It Take a Long Pull to Get There"
- 8 *Porgy and Bess*, "Oh Lawd, I'm On My Way"

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

School Spirit

“Lay Down Body”

Performed by Bertha Smith (lead singer)

Lay down body,
Lay down a little while.
Lay down body,
Lay down a little while.

Oh my body now,
Lay down a little while.
Oh body,
Lay down a little while.

Lay down in the graveyard,
Lay down a little while.
Lay down in the graveyard,
Lay down a little while.

Just keep a rolling,
Lay down a little while.
Just keep a rolling,
Lay down a little while.

My observations:

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

School Spirit (CONTINUED)

“Been in the Storm So Long”

Performed by Mary Pinckney

I been in the storm so long.
You know I been in the storm so long,
Singing, Oh Lord, give me more time to pray.
I been in the storm so long.

My observations: _____

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

School Spirit (CONTINUED)

“Where Is Brother Robbins?”

WOMAN: Where is brother Robbins?

ALL: He’s a-gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone.

WOMAN: I seen him in the mornin’ with his work clothes on.

ALL: But he’s gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone.

MAN: And I seen him in the noontime straight and tall,
But death a-come a-walkin’ in the evenin’ fall.

ALL: And he’s gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone.

WOMAN: And death touched Robbins with a silver knife.

ALL: And he’s gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone.

MAN: And he’s sittin’ in the garden by the tree of life.

ALL: And he’s gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone.
Robbins is gone, gone, gone, etc.

My observations: _____

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

School Spirit (CONTINUED)

“Oh, Doctor Jesus”

SERENA: (*gets down on knees*) Oh, doctor Jesus, who done trouble the water in the Sea of Gallerie.

PORGY: (*shouted*) Amen!

SERENA: And likewise who done cast de devil out of the afflicted time and time again.

PORGY: Time and time again.

PETER: (*shouted*) Oh, my Jesus!

SERENA: Oh, doctor Jesus, what make you ain't lay your hand on this poor sister head?

LILY: Oh, my father!

SERENA: And chase the devil out of her down a steep place into the sea like you used to do time and time again.

PORGY: Time and time again. (*spoken*) Oh, my Jesus!

My observations: _____

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America

W.E.B. Du Bois, from “Criteria of Negro Art”

First published in *The Crisis*, October 1926.

CONTEXT: W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963) was an influential writer, professor, civil rights activist, and one of the founders of the NAACP. He argued for equal rights and viewed artworks as inherently political.

All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.

What is art for?

Source: *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 60–68.

Langston Hughes, from “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”

First published in *The Nation*, 1926.

CONTEXT: Langston Hughes (1902–1967) was a prolific poet of the Harlem Renaissance. In this famous essay, Hughes is reacting to a fellow African American poet’s desire to be “a poet—not a Negro poet.” By contrast, Hughes celebrates the concerns and achievements of his community, such as jazz, blues, and spirituals, seeing in them a rich trove of inspiration for artworks.

Certainly there is, for the American Negro artist ... a great field of unused material ready for his art. Without going outside his race, ... there is sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work. And when he chooses to touch on the relations between Negroes and whites in this country, with their innumerable overtones and undertones, surely, and especially for literature and the drama, there is an inexhaustible supply of themes at hand. To these the Negro artist can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears.

What is art for?

Source: *Within the Circle*, 55–59.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America (CONTINUED)

SET 1: “Summertime,” from *Porgy and Bess*

CONTEXT: This famous song opens Gershwin’s opera. Clara, a young mother, sings it as a lullaby to her baby.

Clara sits with her baby in her arms, rocking it back and forth.

CLARA: Summertime and the livin’ is easy,
Fish are jumpin’, and the cotton is high.
Oh your daddy’s rich, and your ma is good lookin’,
So hush, little baby, don’t you cry.

One of these mornings you’re goin’ to rise up singin’,
Then you’ll spread your wings and you’ll take the sky.
But till that mornin’, there’s a-nothin’ can harm you
With Daddy and Mammy standin’ by.

The image shows a musical score for the song "Summertime" from the opera Porgy and Bess. It consists of three staves. The top staff is the vocal line, starting with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The lyrics "Sum - mer - time an' de liv - in' is eas - y." are written below the notes. The middle staff is for the Flute (Fl.), marked with a piano (*pp*) and *espr.* (espressivo) dynamic. The bottom staff is the piano accompaniment, showing chords and bass lines. The music is in a key with one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America (CONTINUED)

SET 1: “On Summer,” by George Moses Horton

CONTEXT: George Moses Horton (1798–1883) was a slave on a tobacco plantation in North Carolina. He taught himself to read, and with the assistance of a local novelist, began publishing poetry. He was the first African American to publish a book in the South. Despite his growing fame, he was not permitted to buy his own freedom, although he eventually succeeded in purchasing his “time” from his owner so that he could devote himself to poetry full-time. After the Civil War, Horton spent his last 17 years as a free man in Philadelphia. His poetry explores love, faith, and the beauty of nature (especially that of rural North Carolina), and it also serves as a protest against slavery.

On Summer

Esteville* fire begins to burn;
 The auburn fields of harvest rise;
 The torrid flames again return,
 And thunders roll along the skies.

Perspiring Cancer** lifts his head,
 And roars terrific from on high;
 Whose voice the timid creatures dread;
 From which they strive with awe to fly.

The night-hawk ventures from his cell,
 And starts his note in evening air;
 He feels the heat his bosom swell,
 Which drives away the gloom of fear.

Thou noisy insect, start thy drum;
 Rise lamp-like bugs to light the train;
 And bid sweet Philomela come,
 And sound in front the nightly strain.

The bee begins her ceaseless hum,
 And doth with sweet exertions rise;
 And with delight she stores her comb,
 And well her rising stock supplies.

Let sportive children well beware,
 While sprightly frisking o’er the green;
 And carefully avoid the snare,
 Which lurks beneath the smiling scene.

The mistress bird assumes her nest,
 And broods in silence on the tree,
 Her note to cease, her wings at rest,
 She patient waits her young to see.

The farmer hastens from the heat;
 The weary plough-horse droops his head;
 The cattle all at noon retreat,
 And ruminates beneath the shade.

The burdened ox with dauntless rage,
 Flies heedless to the liquid flood,
 From which he quaffs, devoid of gauge,
 Regardless of his driver’s rod.

Pomacious orchards now expand
 Their laden branches o’er the lea;
 And with their bounty fill the land,
 While plenty smiles on every tree.

On fertile borders, near the stream,
 Now gaze with pleasure and delight;
 See loaded vines with melons teem—
 ‘Tis paradise to human sight.

With rapture view the smiling fields,
 Adorn the mountain and the plain,
 Each, on the eve of Autumn, yields
 A large supply of golden grain.

* Esteville is a town in North Carolina.

** Here, “Cancer” refers to the astrological sign of Cancer (the crab), which appears in the sky at the height of summer.

Source: *African-American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology*, ed. Joan R. Sherman (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 23–24.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America (CONTINUED)

SET 2: “My Man’s Gone Now,” from *Porgy and Bess*

CONTEXT: Serena, the widow of the man murdered by Crown, sings this lament after her husband’s untimely death.

SERENA: My man’s gone now,
Ain’t no use a-listenin’
For his tired foot-steps
Climbin’ up the stairs. Ah!

Old Man Sorrow’s
Come to keep me company,
Whispering beside me
When I say my prayers. Ah!

Ain’t that I mind workin’
Work and me is travelers
Journeying together
To the Promised Land.

But Old Man Sorrow’s
Marchin’ all de way with me
Tellin’ me I’m old now
Since I lose my man.

ALL: Since she lose her man.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America (CONTINUED)

SET 2: “The Weary Blues,” by Langston Hughes

CONTEXT: Langston Hughes (1902–1967) was a prolific poet of the Harlem Renaissance. His works, which also include novels, essays, and plays, portray the everyday troubles and joys of African Americans, often using the rhythms and sounds of jazz, as well as the artistic temperament of the blues.

The Weary Blues

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
 Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
 I heard a Negro play.
 Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
 By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
 He did a lazy sway. . . .
 He did a lazy sway. . . .
 To the tune o’ those Weary Blues.
 With his ebony hands on each ivory key
 He made that poor piano moan with melody.
 O Blues!
 Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
 He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
 Sweet Blues!
 Coming from a black man’s soul.
 O Blues!
 In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
 I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—
 “Ain’t got nobody in all this world,
 Ain’t got nobody but ma self.
 I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’
 And put ma troubles on the shelf.”
 Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
 He played a few chords then he sang some more—
 “I got the Weary Blues
 And I can’t be satisfied.
 Got the Weary Blues
 And can’t be satisfied—
 I ain’t happy no mo’
 And I wish that I had died.”
 And far into the night he crooned that tune.
 The stars went out and so did the moon.
 The singer stopped playing and went to bed
 While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
 He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead.

Source: *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad, assoc. ed. David Roessel (New York: Vintage, 1994), 50.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America (CONTINUED)

SET 3: “It Take a Long Pull to Get There,” from *Porgy and Bess*

CONTEXT: Clara’s husband, the fisherman Jake, sings this song with his fellow fishermen as they go about their work.

Jake and fishermen in center repair netting, swaying to the rhythm of the song as if actually rowing.

JAKE: Oh, I’m a-goin’ out to the Blackfish banks
no matter what the weather say,
An’ when I say I’m goin’ I means goin’,
an’ I’m leavin’ at the break o’ day.

JAKE, MEN: It take a long pull to get there, huh!
It take a long pull to get there, huh!
It take a long pull to get there,
But I’ll anchor in the Promised Land,
In the Promised Land.



CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America (CONTINUED)

SET 3: *Aspects of Negro Life: An Idyll of the Deep South*, by Aaron Douglas

CONTEXT: Aaron Douglas (1899–1979) was a painter, muralist, and graphic artist, and one of the foremost visual artists of the Harlem Renaissance. His works incorporate African subjects and styles and were admired by prominent thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, who believed that artists should promote their heritage in their artworks. Douglas’s works include several large-scale murals that portray aspects of African American life. In this series, created for the New York Public Library’s Harlem branch (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), Douglas incorporated political and social commentary in his designs.



Aaron Douglas. *Aspects of Negro Life: An Idyll of the Deep South*. Oil on canvas, 1934. The New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Art and Artifacts Division.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America (CONTINUED)

SET 4: “Oh Lawd, I’m On My Way,” from *Porgy and Bess*

CONTEXT: The opera ends with Porgy’s resolution to follow Bess to New York.

PORGY, ALL: Oh, Lawd, I’m on my way.
I’m on my way to a Heav’nly Lan’,
I’ll ride that long, long road,
If you are there to guide my hand.
Oh Lawd, I’m on my way.
I’m on my way to a Heavenly Land.
Oh Lawd, it’s a long, long way,
but you’ll be there to take my hand.

Moderato ben ritmato (quasi spiritual)
PORGY (with religious fervor)

Po. Oh Lawd, I'm on my way.

568 Fl./Cl. with PORGY (to m. 576)
Brass/Pno. Vln.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America (CONTINUED)

SET 4: “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” by James Weldon Johnson

CONTEXT: James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938) grew up in Jacksonville, Florida, then a relatively racially tolerant community. In addition to writing poetry and novels throughout his life, he was also the first black lawyer admitted to the Florida Bar, served as the principal of a segregated school, wrote songs on Tin Pan Alley in New York, held consular posts in Latin and South America, and served as the head of the NAACP, leading civil rights campaigns and pioneering the organization’s efforts to promote black achievement. “Lift Every Voice and Sing” was written in 1900 to celebrate Abraham Lincoln’s birthday; it was later adopted by the NAACP as the “Black National Anthem,” with a melody written by Johnson’s brother, J. Rosamond Johnson.

Lift Every Voice and Sing

Lift every voice and sing
 Till earth and heaven ring,
 Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
 Let our rejoicing rise
 High as the listening skies,
 Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
 Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
 Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.
 Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
 Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod,
 Bitter the chastening rod,
 Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
 Yet with a steady beat,
 Have not our weary feet

Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
 We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
 We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
 Out from the gloomy past,
 Till now we stand at last
 Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years,
 God of our silent tears,
 Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
 Thou who hast by Thy might
 Led us into the light,
 Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
 Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
 Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;
 Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
 May we forever stand.
 True to our God,
 True to our native land.

Source: James Weldon Johnson, *Complete Poems*, ed. Sondra Kathryn Wilson (New York: Penguin, 2000), 109–110.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

We, Too, Sing America (CONTINUED)

Quilt Panel Organizer

My chosen theme, character, or observation: _____

My caption: _____

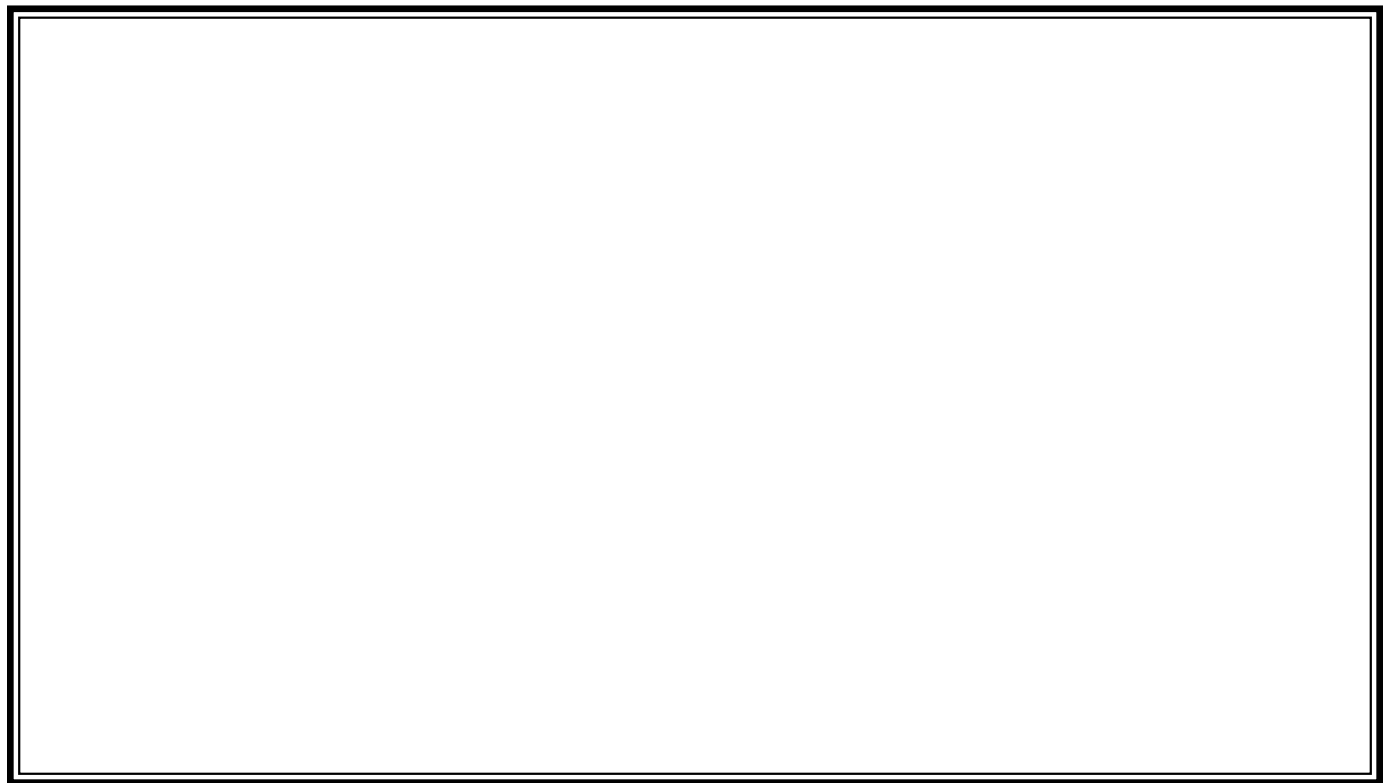
Imagery or ideas I want to include in my panel: _____

My panel will be (circle any that apply):

VISUAL LITERARY LITERAL ABSTRACT POLITICAL NATURALISTIC RHYMING IN A FORMAL STYLE

NOTES: _____

SKETCH:



PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY

Broadway Operations

Since its premiere at the Alvin Theatre on Broadway, critics and audiences have argued over whether *Porgy and Bess* is an opera or a work of musical theater. In fact, it is regularly performed in both types of venues by performers of both styles.

As you watch *Porgy and Bess*, consider the characteristics below, and rank them on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing a style most typical of musical theater and 5 representing a style most typical of opera. After the performance, add all of your scores together and divide by 13 to produce your final score!

	MUSICAL THEATER	>	>	>	OPERA
Porgy's vocal style	1	2	3	4	5
Bess's vocal style	1	2	3	4	5
Crown's vocal style	1	2	3	4	5
Sportin' Life's vocal style	1	2	3	4	5
Continuous singing	1	2	3	4	5
Spoken dialogue	1	2	3	4	5
Role of the chorus	1	2	3	4	5
Role of the orchestra	1	2	3	4	5
Dance numbers	1	2	3	4	5
Musical virtuosity	1	2	3	4	5
Accessible music in a popular style	1	2	3	4	5
Hit songs	1	2	3	4	5
Substantial length	1	2	3	4	5

My score: _____

PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY

Opera Review: *Porgy and Bess*

Have you ever wanted to be a music and theater critic? Now's your chance!

As you watch *Porgy and Bess*, use the space below to keep track of your thoughts and opinions. What did you like about the performance? What didn't you like? If you were in charge, what might you have done differently? Think carefully about the action, music, and stage design, and rate each of the star singers. Then, after the opera, share your opinions with your friends, classmates, and anyone else who wants to learn more about the opera and this performance at the Met!

THE STARS	STAR POWER	MY COMMENTS
Eric Owens as Porgy	☆☆☆☆☆	
Angel Blue as Bess	☆☆☆☆☆	
Golda Schultz as Clara	☆☆☆☆☆	
Alfred Walker as Crown	☆☆☆☆☆	
Donovan Singletary as Jake	☆☆☆☆☆	
Latonia Moore as Serena	☆☆☆☆☆	
Denyce Graves as Maria	☆☆☆☆☆	
Frederick Ballentine as Sportin' Life	☆☆☆☆☆	
Conductor David Robertson	☆☆☆☆☆	

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
A summertime lullaby MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
A dice game goes awry MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
The community mourns one of its own MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Porgy sings of his simple life MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
Bess obtains a "divorce" from Crown MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Porgy and Bess pledge their love MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
High spirits at the church picnic on Kittiwah Island MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
An unwelcome intruder detains Bess MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Bess's delirium and a fervent prayer for healing MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Bess confesses her fears to Porgy MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
A desperate vigil during the hurricane MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Crown returns for Bess and meets his end MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
The authorities investigate Crown's murder MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Sportin' Life tempts Bess again MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Porgy finds Bess gone and sets out after her MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆