

A PUBLICATION OF THE METROPOLITAN OPERA GUILD

OPERA NEWS

Porgy and Bess

CINCINNATI, Cincinnati Opera

6/28/12



The cast of Lemuel Wade's production of *Porgy and Bess* at Cincinnati Opera
© Cincinnati Opera/Philip Groshong

When George Gershwin published *Porgy and Bess*, the opera had not yet been performed. During rehearsals and following the pre-Broadway Boston tryout in September 1930, Gershwin cut more than half an hour of music, shortening or omitting numbers. For the Cincinnati Opera premiere of *Porgy and Bess*, the company used a performing edition based on the version heard at the New York premiere in October 1935. This version featured the recreation of an "occupational humoresque" consisting of the noises of morning activities (men snoring, women sweeping or beating carpets, children playing, dogs barking) that had been created to open the final scene of Rouben Mamoulian's production of DuBose Heyward's play *Porgy* and then carried over to the opera. Reconstructed from a prompt score, this passage seems a distraction from the seriousness of the surrounding events at this late point in the drama. Otherwise, this edition is very effective, unfolding naturally and economically.

Performing the title roles onstage for the first time, Jonathan Lemalu and Measha Brueggergosman led a strong cast. Brueggergosman was a captivating Bess from the moment of her first entrance, dressed in flaming red and visibly pregnant. (The Canadian soprano announced in June that she was expecting a child at the end of the summer.) Brueggergosman's voice is powerful enough to carry well in Music Hall, and her distinctive vibrato can sound radiant ("Bess, you is my woman now") or vulnerable ("What you want with Bess?"). New Zealand-born Lemalu was a solid Porgy. If the timbre of his bass-baritone is not particularly individual, it is rich and warm, and Lemalu has the necessary power and stamina for this demanding role. His voice blended well with Brueggergosman's, and their duets were among the highlights of the evening.

Towering over the rest of the cast, Gordon Hawkins gave an imposing performance of Crown, positively satanic in his defiance of God in the hurricane scene. Frightening in another way was Steven Cole's dapper Sportin' Life, singing and dancing with gusto, but chilling as he celebrated Bess's return to cocaine.

Serena, the spiritual center of Catfish Row, was ably sung by Adrienne Danrich. As Clara, Jacqueline Echols opened the evening with a poised account of "Summertime," immediately followed by the counter lullaby ("A woman is a sometime thing") offered by her husband, Jake (the excellent Michael Preacely). The affectionate byplay of these two characters was an early indication of the careful thought that had gone into Lemuel Wade's direction. As Maria, Brandi Samuel offered a lively challenge to Sportin' Life, but her voice sounded unsettled, alternating between a raspy lower register and a thin, unsupported upper one.

One of the challenges of casting the opera is the number of demanding smaller solo roles — many of them quite exposed. Although Robbins is killed off in the opening scene, Larry Hylton managed to make a strong impression in his brief time onstage. Other notable performances in this category included the Undertaker of David Michael, the Strawberry Woman of Taylor Johnson and the Crab Man of Luther Lewis (who doubled as Mingo).

As already suggested, Wade directed a detailed performance, with even minor characters fully developed. Not everything was equally effective — the residents of Catfish Row huddled together during the storm presented too static a stage picture (**but kudos to Thomas C. Hase for some stunning stage lightning**), and Lawyer Frazier was assigned a fussy "funny walk" that turned him into a caricature — but such moments were rare. The set came from Houston Grand Opera's 1995 production and appeared to be informed by the original design. The limited scene changes were used to keep the action clear.

From the opening measures — taken deliberately enough for the syncopation in the solo xylophone to register — David Charles Abell led a strong performance, with only a couple of lapses in coordination between singers and orchestra. (Peter's return from prison in Act II was one instance.) With the Cincinnati Symphony in the pit, the singers could easily have been overwhelmed, but the balance was excellent throughout. The work of the chorus was thrilling, capping the evening with a rousing "I'm on my way." □

JOE LAW