



## Current Perspectives on *Porgy and Bess*

by Randy Jones

The celebration of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of George Gershwin's "folk opera" *Porgy and Bess* naturally presents the opportunity to assess how the opera is currently viewed. The opera has been marred by controversy over its history, especially regarding how Blacks have been characterized in its storyline. At the same time, however, *Porgy and Bess* has contributed significantly to the professional careers of numerous Black vocalists since its premiere in 1935 and is considered to be one of America's greatest operas.

As part of an assessment of current attitudes, the author interviewed five American singers face-to-face or via email between May and July, 2010. The singers have performed in stage productions of *Porgy and Bess* and represent a diverse range in career length and variety of roles taken. Some of them have only performed in one production of *Porgy and Bess*, while others have toured with the opera extensively. All have been cast in European productions of the opera, yet only three have performed it on an American stage.

The singers discussed their experiences with the opera and their views about it. They expressed strong opinions about the current restrictions observed in the United States that limit singing role assignments – soloists and chorus – to Blacks. They also speculated on whether lifting those restrictions would have an impact on vocal instructors, non-Black singers, and American opera companies.

Tenor **George Shirley** made his debut with a small opera troupe at Woodstock, New York, as Eisenstein in their production of *Die Fledermaus*. He then journeyed to Italy and made his European debut as Rodolfo in *La Boheme*. In 1961, he won the Metropolitan Opera Auditions by performing "Nessum dorma," beginning an eleven-year association with the house. While at the Met, he sang 28 different roles from 26 operas, especially those of Mozart, Verdi, Puccini, Strauss and Wagner. Shirley received a Grammy Award in 1968 for singing the role Ferrando in the RCA recording of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*. He is currently Joseph Edgar Maddy Distinguished University Emeritus Professor of Voice at the University of Michigan.

**Jones:** Professor Shirley, I'd like to gauge your views of and experiences with the opera *Porgy and Bess* from your perspective as a singer and a teacher. How long have you been singing professionally? What made you decide to pursue that career?

George Shirley



**Shirley:** I began singing professionally in 1959 following 1½ years as a high school music teacher in Detroit and three years in the US Army as a member of the US Army Chorus in Washington, DC. I met a private teacher in DC who had had an operatic career in Europe and the US, and he convinced me I could have a career in opera. I decided to give it two years to see if it would work. He was right.

**Jones:** In 1998, you sang the role of Sportin' Life for the first time in Bregenz, Austria, some 63 years after *Porgy and Bess* premiered. Had you sung any other roles or any arias from the opera prior to that point? If yes, please tell me about that past experience.

**Shirley:** I may have sung one of Sportin' Life's arias for a birthday celebration concert honoring pianist William Duncan Allen; I seem to have a vague memory of that possibility. If that really did happen I believe it was the only time prior to the Bregenz performances. I had such a good time interpreting the role in Austria that I have now sung "It Ain't Necessarily So" a number of times. I had been offered the role back in 1965, but I turned it down because I knew I could do a memorable interpretation of Sportin' Life, but I didn't want to take a chance on the possibility that opera house managers would forget I could sing Rodolfo, Tamino, and other "standard" roles. I was well aware of the fact that black males hired for P&B rarely were considered for other roles for which they were qualified. Even though I was already at the Met, my cultural paranoia ruled on this issue, with the result that my first Sportin' Life performances came when I was 64 years old! I was told one of the Bregenz Festival artistic management team protested my age, but the director, conductor and General Manager of the Festival were supportive of my participation. My slogan became "There's no pimp like an *old* pimp..."

**Jones:** Why did you decide to take the role of Sportin' Life for that production? Did you see any challenges from taking the role that were any different from those of any other roles you had accepted up to that point?

**Shirley:** The Intendant of the Deutsche Oper, the late Götz Friedrich, contacted my manager with a request that I consider the role of Daddy Peter. I had sung in two other operas Friedrich had directed, so he knew my work. I declined his offer for Daddy Peter, but suggested Sportin' Life instead, and he bought it. I didn't see the role as more challenging than others I had sung; in fact, I found it easier because I had observed such personalities in my neighborhoods and schools during my youth in Detroit. It felt comfortable, like I was at home in the 'hood. Sportin' Life became an amalgam of a lot of sly tricksters I had seen hanging out at the Picket Fence Bar on Oakland Avenue around the corner from where I lived most of my youth. It was great fun to bring these guys to life in the weeds of "ol' Spo-tin-life," the archetype of Mephistopheles himself!

**Jones:** How did you relate to Bess and the other characters in the opera?

**Shirley:** Relating to the other characters was not a problem, for I could see them "first-hand." I could put a real face from my youth on each character without a struggle. There was a girl in junior high school who fit Bess perfectly. Porgy was one of my closest friends cruelly referred to by some as "Crip." Crown was every bully I'd ever known.

**Jones:** What was the cast make up for that production? Were most singers imports from outside of Austria? What was the racial makeup of the cast, both the soloists and chorus?

**Shirley:** To my knowledge, all cast members, save for those who portrayed the police, were Blacks. One Bess was from London, and I believe a number of singers were from the islands, and some Americans were resident in Europe.

**Jones:** How did the audience respond to the production? How did critics respond? How many performances were there?

**Shirley:** Audience response was enthusiastic as was critical reaction. The public had rallied around the cast the year before when problems had arisen over housing and rehearsals. I wasn't in the first year run, but was told that serious issues had almost brought production to a halt. The clash between the basically American cast and the German director was a foregone conclusion. When the blowup hit the press before opening night, the Bregenz community responded with offers for better lodging, basically taking the singers' side. When I arrived to perform in the following season's production, there was great tension in the air before rehearsals began. One of Götz's assistants started rehearsals in Götz's absence. When he finally showed up for rehearsals things were well underway, and he was quite subdued in relating to the cast. He was also suffering ill health that led to his decease two years later.

**Jones:** Have you performed Sportin' Life or any other *Porgy* roles in a production or recording since the 1998 production? Have you programmed any of the arias in recital?

**Shirley:** I've not performed the role again, but have on occasion sung the arias in concert – not recital – appearances or at convention banquets, e.g., The Voice Foundation Symposium in Philadelphia and the National Opera Association Convention in Los Angeles.

**Jones:** In the 12 years since the Austrian production, have your views about the opera changed?

**Shirley:** No. I still feel it to be the greatest American opera written to this point. It, like *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci*, captures the raw side of life with a powerful story and memorable music. To those who are uncomfortable with how Blacks are portrayed in *P&B* I say that I understand the discomfort, given the history of stereotyping we have had to deal with. But I am much more uncomfortable with the images I see almost daily of Blacks on television in what passes for contemporary black life in films, etc. Jamie Foxx's performance for the Oscars this year was a case in point. Foxx is a brilliant performer, but why he had to do what amounted to a minstrel show was beyond me, and I found it much more offensive than anything in *P&B*!

**Jones:** The Gershwin Family has placed restrictions on performance of staged productions, requiring singing roles be assigned to Black singers. Do you believe this has affected whether a singer chooses to learn roles from the opera? In what ways?

**Shirley:** *P&B* has provided countless black singers with an avenue for showcasing their operatic talents. If the casting hadn't been restricted to Blacks, Whites would have jumped at the chance to perform these great roles, some out of a legitimate desire to do them justice, and others to make of them a minstrel show. By restricting access, the Gershwins protected their masterpiece and guaranteed Blacks a powerful operatic forum. *P&B* remains for most Europeans the *only* American opera worthy of the name in spite of the fact that other fine operatic works by American composers exist. As indicated above, I avoided learning and performing the work early on because I didn't want to be typecast. In so doing I was able to establish my career in standard repertoire before finally giving myself the pleasure of performing Gershwin's opera. I have counseled young black singers to attempt to follow the same path to a career.

**Jones:** From today's perspective, how would you suggest a non-Black vocalist approach singing a role in the opera, especially if he or she could do so in the United States?

**Shirley:** Until occasional casting of Blacks in white roles in contemporary works such as *Susannah* and *Summer and Smoke* becomes acceptable, I sue for casting in *P&B* to remain as is. What should happen is that more works must be written that reflect

America's diversity, thus providing Whites and Blacks the opportunity to sing black and white roles in operas that in essence "tell it like it is," the hero/heroine in one work being Black and the villains White, and in the next opera Whites the noble personages and the Blacks the reprobates, with all sorts of admixtures in between, as in life.

**Jones:** How long have you been teaching voice privately? Has most of your experience as a teacher been in an academic environment?

**Shirley:** I began teaching singing lessons privately when I moved to Ann Arbor in 1987. I began teaching on the academic level in 1971 when I was invited to join the faculty at Staten Island Community College as an adjunct professor. I did this for two years, then served as Artistic Director at The New School for the Arts in Montclair, New Jersey. In 1980 I was invited to join the faculty at the University of Maryland, College Park, where I remained until I came to Michigan in 1987. I've taught workshops and master classes on and off since the '70s, and I spent ten years on the faculty of the Aspen Music School and Festival.

**Jones:** Have you taught any portions of *Porgy and Bess* to your students over your teaching career? What percentage of those students has been non-Black? Have any of your students expressed concerns about learning material from the opera?

**Shirley:** On rare occasions I have taught arias from *P&B* when a student wished to learn the material, or when I felt it appropriate for the student. I'd say less than one percent have been non-Black. I have a private student now who is of Indian heritage who is studying Clara's aria. None have expressed reservations about learning the material.

**Jones:** Have any of your students asked about learning arias, scenes, or roles from *Porgy and Bess*? If yes, how did you address that request?

**Shirley:** Whenever someone has expressed such a desire I have followed through. If ever a student asks about performance possibilities outside of a solo performance, I will discuss those possibilities with them. I have no wish for non-Black students to feel that, under present circumstances, they will have opportunity to sing a role from the opera professionally. Thus far I've had no one seriously express that desire. Blacks, however, realize that *P&B* remains still the most direct avenue to the operatic stage open to them.

**Jones:** What criteria have you used to determine whether to introduce material from the opera to a student?

**Shirley:** The voice and musicality; the ability to understand and grasp the style without handling text or music in a manner that caricatures either.

**Jones:** Have you ever coached a student who was preparing a role for a performance either at the University of Maryland, University of Michigan or elsewhere? If yes, please describe the circumstances. Has the university staged scenes from the opera at any point in your tenure here? If yes, were they presented by a racially mixed cast singing the roles? If no, is this a project that would likely be considered at the University of Michigan?

**Shirley:** I do not recall ever coaching someone in the role, only the arias. Neither scenes nor production have been staged during my academic career at either school. I don't know if UM would consider producing the opera or not, since the focus is on giving students experience in roles they are most likely to perform once they enter the profession.

**Jones:** What general impressions do you have from other vocal instructors regarding their interest in teaching arias or roles from the opera? What do you believe influences those impressions?

**Shirley:** I think my colleagues would assign the material if they felt it appropriate for the singer. I've not discussed it with them.

**Jones:** Current copyright law indicates that the opera will not enter the public domain until 2030. At that time, any restrictions in place regarding role assignment would no longer be in effect. What impact, if any, do you think that will have on vocal instructors' decisions to teach roles from *Porgy and Bess* to their students, especially non-Black students?

**Shirley:** I believe white singers will want to sing these roles because the music is powerful and beautiful, and the characters passionate. By 2030 I trust that casting will be colorblind, although given the present trend towards "looking the part" before one puts on make up and costume, I won't hold my breath... Whatever happens, I will pray that the opera will be treated with the respect it deserves, and that opportunities for black singers will not be reduced because the flood gates have opened.

**Jones:** If circumstances allowed one of your non-Black students to be the first to sing a *Porgy and Bess* role on an American stage, would you be likely to advise him/her to take the role? If yes, why would you suggest the student take it, and what would you hope the student would accomplish from the performance?

**Shirley:** If I had a student who, as the first white singer to do so, could sing a great Porgy or Bess, I'd advise him/her to seriously consider all the ramifications of the undertaking of this historic challenge. Even if all barriers for all singers were removed by then, and a black singer who didn't look like Lena Horne could be cast as, for instance, Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, there might still be some backlash from the appearance of a white soprano as Bess after so many years of black ownership of the role. I would strive to ensure that my student be apprised of all possible reactions to her stepping in as a "first" in this case, and I would hope that the sincerity and honesty she would bring to the role would win over even the most doubtful and incredulous of observers, thus placing her on a footing equal to that of the greatest interpreters of the role.

**Jones:** Thank you, Professor Shirley, for sharing your insights.

*Leontyne Price in Porgy and Bess*  
Photo: Carl Van Vechten. May 1953





Adrienne Webster

Mezzo-soprano **Adrienne Webster** graduated with honors from the University of Michigan in Vocal Performance and has recently completed her Master's in Music at the University of Maryland. Her awards include first place in the Adrian Boyer Concerto/Aria Competition at Bay View Music Festival, first place in the Michigan Union Opera Competition, Competition for Emerging Artists (formerly the "Leontyne Price Competition") National Runner-up, and the Willis Paterson Diversity Award. Ms. Webster completed a seven-country European tour singing as the Strawberry Woman in George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* under the auspices of New York Harlem Productions. Most recently, she created the role of Marva Trotter in the world premiere of Frank Proto's opera, *Shadowboxer*. She is also author of "I Ain't Got No Shame: A Case for the Positive Effects of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*."

**Jones:** Ms. Webster, I'd like to gauge your views of and experiences with the opera *Porgy and Bess* from your perspective as a singer. How long have you been singing professionally? What made you decide to pursue that career?

**Webster:** I've been singing professionally for at least eight years... though I just graduated from the University of Maryland with my Master's degree in May, 2010. I have always loved to sing – since I was a little girl... starting out like most black singers I know, in the church choir. I didn't even know that singing (classical singing) was a career until I was in high school. That's when I started to really seriously put myself on a path to a singing career – going to college as a voice major and also obtaining a teacher's certificate. I then went on to grad school after a two-year break in which I taught and began touring with *Porgy and Bess*.

**Jones:** You have toured in the role of Strawberry Woman in *Porgy and Bess*. Had you sung any other roles or any arias from the opera prior to that point? If yes, please tell me about that past experience.

**Webster:** Not really. I used to sing "Summertime" at parties whenever someone would ask me to sing...but other than that, my only experience with the opera before I began touring was singing in the chorus with the Michigan Opera Theatre Production in 2006.

**Jones:** Why did you decide to take the role of Strawberry Woman for that tour? Did you see any challenges from taking the role that were any different from those of any other roles you had accepted up to that point? If yes, how did you address those challenges?

**Webster:** Actually, when I was first hired, I was only in the chorus...and I was surprised to get that because it was very competitive and the other people who were auditioning had much bigger voices. I felt very lucky to be hired at all. It wasn't until I got to Italy in 2007 that I auditioned for the role of the Strawberry Woman. I have a little special glissando that I do that made me stand out. I've been doing the role with this company ever since that audition...this is my fourth year. My biggest challenge was overcoming

my own vocal insecurities. I was the youngest singer in the company (and I still am today). I felt like everyone else had better voices, and I thought I was constantly being compared to the other people who sang Strawberry Woman. In my eyes I wasn't as good as they were. My insecurities have plagued me for some time, sad to say. But I've since overcome them by not comparing myself and realizing that I'm not in competition with anyone. According to my contract, I am Strawberry Woman. There is no need to feel inadequate. If they didn't want me to sing the role, they wouldn't have hired me... over and over again.

**Jones:** How did you approach the role, relate to the character of Strawberry Woman? How did you relate to the other characters in the tour's production?

**Webster:** I had lots of help from cast members who took me under their wings. They would tell me Strawberry Woman "isn't really selling Strawberries." I have to say, I have a much better grip on the role now that I'm not so much in my head about the singing. Since I started with this company, I've played the title role in Bizet's *Carmen*, the Sorceress in *Dido and Aeneas*, Ramiro in *La finta giardiniera*, created the role of Marva Trotter in the world premiere of *Shadowboxer*, and I've earned a Master's Degree... so I've grown as an actor and singer and it's fun to use my new tools to enhance both of those techniques – and blend them together, to re-invent the role I've sung now in some 300+ shows. As far as relating to the other characters, I always try to help. One of the most important lessons I learned in the Maryland Opera Studio, was that everything you do onstage is about the other person. Your job is to make the people around you shine. I try to give focus and help the action make sense. I am a small part of a whole cast... but I am important and the most important thing I can do is support my fellow colleagues onstage.

**Jones:** What was the cast make up for that production? What was the racial makeup of the cast, both the soloists and chorus?

**Webster:** The cast is all of African descent,... though not everyone is American. There is one person from England, one person from South Africa and some of our singers live in Europe. The rest of the cast lives in the States and we are from all over. There are more young singers in the group than in past years but the cast is very diverse as far as age is concerned. But all the singers are black and the Detective & policemen are white.

**Jones:** How did the audience respond to the production? How did critics respond? How many performances were there?

**Webster:** The audiences eat this show up!!! We have standing ovations every night. Sometimes, the audience even starts clapping together in unison so that we can have more and more bows. It's really exhilarating! We do about eight shows a week. Our director knows more about how the critics respond...I don't read the reviews...they are usually in a language I don't speak fluently...I prefer to just take what the audience demonstrates as a sign that the show is good.

**Jones:** Have you performed that role or any others in other productions or recordings since the tour? Have you programmed any of the arias from the opera in recital? If yes, where were the performances?

**Webster:** Actually I have not performed in any other productions of *Porgy and Bess* since starting the tour...mainly because I've been in school and was not able to do any of the major productions that were going on near me...for example...Washington National and Virginia Opera did productions recently that I couldn't even audition for because I was in school. I have programmed "Summertime" on recital since touring...that recital was in Detroit at the historical Bushnell Congregational Church.

**Jones:** Since being on tour, have your views about the opera changed? If yes, in what ways?

**Webster:** It's funny, I really didn't know much about *Porgy and Bess* before I did my first production with Michigan Opera Theatre in 2006. Since performing with the New York Harlem Productions tour since 2007, I've learned a ton about the history of the opera and how others view it. It's sad that so many people look down on it and don't take it seriously. Anyone who actually opens the score knows it's definitely a true masterpiece and an opera and NOT a musical (though it originally premiered on Broadway).

**Jones:** The Gershwin Family has placed restrictions on performance of staged productions, requiring singing roles be assigned to Black singers. Do you believe this has affected whether a singer chooses to learn roles from the opera? In what ways?

**Webster:** Yes I do! I know many singers who won't go near the opera because it's easy to "get stuck on Catfish Row." While it's an opera that provides opportunities for talented black singers, it also carries a stigma that can be hard to escape. I actually wrote a paper on *Porgy and Bess* which was inspired by my participation in the European production. The name explains my view, it is "I Ain't Got No Shame: A Case for the Positive Effects of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*."

**Jones:** From today's perspective, how would you suggest a non-Black vocalist approach singing a role in the opera, especially if he or she could do so in the United States?

**Webster:** It's a sticky question because while I think it's just fine for a non-Black singer to sing arias from the opera, I don't think it's okay for them to sing roles in the opera. It was written for black singers.

**Jones:** Current copyright law indicates that the opera will not enter the public domain until 2030. At that time, any restrictions in place regarding role assignment would no longer be in effect. What impact, if any, do you think that will have on vocal instructors' decisions to teach roles from *Porgy and Bess* to their students, especially non-Black students?

**Webster:** It's hard to believe it will actually happen in 2030. It was supposed to happen some years ago, but did not. I believe more students will learn the arias and scenes from opera and possibly be curious to enough to learn a role...but I also believe that the tradition of having Black singers play the various roles in the opera will not change. I don't think the opera entering the public domain will have that much of an impact on how it's viewed. By that time, it will be nearly 100 years old – with a very established history and reputation for being the most famous "black opera" in the world. It's truly hard to predict what will change when those racial specifications are taken away.

**Jones:** Thank you, Ms. Webster, for sharing your experiences and insights.



*"My Man's Gone Now" sung  
by Cynthia Clarey at  
Glyndebourne (1986)*





*Stephen Swanson*

Baritone **Stephen Swanson** has had a professional career as a concert soloist and an opera singer with over 90 operatic roles, as a teacher of singing, and as an opera stage director. In addition to degrees from North Park College and Northwestern University, he completed a two-year AGMA apprenticeship with the Wolf Trap Company and an internship at the International Opera Studio of the Zurich Opera. He recorded the title role in the reconstruction of the original orchestration of Victor Ullmann's *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*. Swanson concertizes extensively, including performances of the Brahms *Ein deutsches Requiem*, Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, and his signature piece, Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. He has served as a Professor of Voice at The University of Iowa since 1994.

**Jones:** Thank you very much, Professor Swanson, for allowing me some of your valuable time this morning.

**Swanson:** It's a great pleasure.

**Jones:** I'd like to get your views of and experiences with the opera *Porgy and Bess* from your perspective as a singer, as a teacher, and as an opera director. First of all, let me ask you, how long have you been singing professionally?

**Swanson:** I suppose I could take it from my graduation from college, my undergraduate degree, so that would be 42 years.

**Jones:** What made you decide to pursue a career as a professional singer?

**Swanson:** I just blundered into it. I had a marvelous high school choir director. One of the finest musicians I've ever worked with and I've worked with a lot of people. I actually originally intended to go into something like engineering where I figured I could make a living, and my parents insisted I go to the church-supported school, which is North Park College in Chicago, Illinois. At that time, it was one of the better choir colleges in the country and would be considered the same level as Luther or St. Olaf. My older brother, said, 'hey you know you are a pretty good singer, why don't you just audition for a music scholarship. So I taught myself two arias from *Messiah*, and they gave me a full-ride to study music. At any rate, my intention to be a music major for a couple of years and then changing got waylaid by the fact that I had so much fun studying music, I've never stopped. I just kept going and going and going and auditioning and singing, and it's just been one big, happy ride.

**Jones:** You sang the role of Jake in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1975. Had you had sung the role or any arias from the opera prior to that point?

**Swanson:** Oh yes, I was a part of a quartet in Chicago that was called The Artists' Showcase Quartet. We were called that because we had all performed on the television program *Artists' Showcase* which was put on by WGN television at the time. As a part of

the repertoire, I did Porgy's duet, "Bess, You is My Woman Now" and "I Got Plenty of Nuthin." It was a set of three pieces with a soprano who was also not an African American. She sang "Summertime." It was always a tremendous success with the audience. Otherwise, I had not studied the opera. I had listened to the opera, of course, and I'd seen the movie, the one with Sidney Poitier and Dorothy Dandridge.

**Jones:** When were you a member of the Artists' Showcase Quartet?

**Swanson:** Oh my, it would have been between, somewhere between 1969 and 1974.

**Jones:** Why did you decide to take the role of Jake for the production in Switzerland?

**Swanson:** Well I was in the house, and it was assigned to me. I was a house singer. At that point, they post things on the door, and you don't say no. Aside of that, it's a great role and I was just delighted. I also knew I'd never get a chance to sing it in the United States. So for me it was a marvelous opportunity to sing and participate in what I think is one of the great operas of the 20th Century.

**Jones:** Did you see any challenges from taking the role that were any different from any of the others that you had performed up to that point?

**Swanson:** I spent a lot of time in the Swiss public library with the American dictionary of slang. There is a lot of terminology I didn't know. I found it fascinating, but I went through the entire score because I had to know what each word meant. It wasn't that Jake had terminology that I didn't know, because he didn't, but Porgy used a lot of terms. I spent a good three hours running through the score and looking up words. The only word that comes back to my mind is – when he comes to the crap game after his first entrance – he has the text "I've got a pocket full of buckra money." I didn't know what buckra was, apparently a derogatory term for white people. If he'd said 'honky,' I'd of known what he meant. Of course, Gershwin did not write the book for this. I wonder if, as a northerner, he had to have these things translated for him. I've haven't studied anything about it.

**Jones:** Were there any other concerns you had to address in preparation for the role?

**Swanson:** Not really. If this was in the United States, I would have spent some time researching history and background. I didn't have those resources available to me. Aside from that, Jake is really just a young entrepreneur who's got a beautiful relationship with his wife and loves his child, like any good father does, and he's out to get ahead. I didn't feel I had to go to find out anything else about him. He's a spectacular character.

**Jones:** What was the cast make up for that production? Were most imports from outside of Switzerland?

**Swanson:** Yes. All the leads were African Americans. The secondary leads were young people who had spent one year in the opera studio, which I was one of those. The woman that sang opposite me, Diane Bolden, was an African American who sang Clara. There were two other roles, Robbins was sung by a young American, also not African American, and a small mezzo role that was also sung by an American in the studio. Everybody else was an African American brought in from the United States. I think Simon Estes at that time had his residency in Zurich or was coming very close to developing residency in Switzerland. There was a world career that was really starting to move.

**Jones:** He sang in that production?

**Swanson:** Simon Estes sang Porgy.

**Jones:** I need to remember that in my questions to him. What about the chorus?

**Swanson:** The chorus was the standard Zurich opera chorus. So they were all Swiss.

**Jones:** Do you know why the opera company chose to do that opera?

**Swanson:** Oh my, I don't know. I know it was a terrific financial success for them. It sold out top to bottom. It constantly sold out. They were in the process of changing over from an opera house that had all house singers to an opera house that was bringing in guests, and this is part of that transitional period. They had a new general Intendant named Claus Helmut Drese, who basically went through that ensemble with an axe. He made a lot of people really unhappy with him. The show was such a gigantic success that Drese was able to bring it into the summer festival without bringing in a single extra guest. They charged summer festival prices which were way above the normal season prices, and it still sold out.

**Jones:** And you sang throughout that production?

**Swanson:** Yes, I did.

**Jones:** How would you say the audience responded to the cast?

**Swanson:** Very, very positively. The Swiss tend to be extremely reserved people. I once had somebody said, "A typical applause from a Swiss audience sounds like a bunch of one-handed people wearing gloves." They went crazy at times. They just absolutely loved the show. We had an absolutely spectacular Serena. I'm sorry I can't remember her name right now, but there were times when she would sing "My Man's Gone Now" with so much passion and understanding and pathos – she was just a terrific singing actress – ending with that huge two octave moan at the end of the aria, that the audience... At times you know there is that moment where you have a nice applause after a major aria, there is a moment where you have ruckus applause after a major aria. Then the ultimate is the quiet before the storm where the audience just was mesmerized and you could feel this amazing tension in the air. Nobody wanted to move and then, BOOM, it just exploded. The conductor, the first time that happened, didn't realize what was going on and conducted through it. Then he had to stop because the audience just wouldn't let the orchestra go on. At that point you realize there was sincere magic going on that stage. There are times – I would guess maybe 60% of the time – she was able to make that type of magic. Terribly difficult aria and wow, she just really gave it her all. It was just an amazing performance.

**Jones:** What about your role?

**Swanson:** I had two nice little arias in it. "It Takes a Long Pull to Get There," which is with chorus and "A Woman is a Sometime Thing." I always got nice applause. But neither of those were show stoppers. Jake dies in the second act, so he's not a character that goes through the entire piece. Clara also dies in the second act. So, basically Diane and I would sit downstairs in the canteen and wait until our turn was done, and we would come back up for applause at the end of the show. I was well received in the role.

**Jones:** How did critics respond to the opera?

**Swanson:** They loved it. Again, this is a gigantic success. And it ended up being kind of the lynch pin for Drese's change over into a star system. Once he realized what he had, he combined two things that were really major changes for Zurich. One was *Porgy and Bess*. In the same season he also did the first collaborative opera between Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Jean-Pierre Ponnelle in what ended up being a historic collaboration on the three big operas by Monteverdi.

**Jones:** Have you performed the role or any others in the production or recording since this '75 production?

**Swanson:** No. I view this as a once in a lifetime opportunity and enjoyed every minute of it. But I was pretty sure I'd never sing it again.

**Jones:** So you've also not performed any of the arias in concert?

**Swanson:** Not to my recollection. I don't believe so, no.

**Jones:** In the 25 years since that production, have your views about the opera changed?

**Swanson:** No, I still love it. I really sincerely think this a masterpiece of twentieth-century opera. The use of crossover styles, I think, tends to make it immortal. I think it is a great, great piece. But then again, of course, I'm viewing it from my distance point of view. I don't know if an African American looking at this says, "Ha, they were being all looked at as drug dealers or pimps or gamblers or whatever." To me, it's a piece that I think is going to stay in the repertoire. I think it's just too powerful.

**Jones:** The Gershwin family has placed restriction on performance of stage productions requires singing roles to be assigned to Black singers. Do you believe this has affected whether a singer chooses to learn roles from the opera, especially here in the United States?

**Swanson:** I think definitely. I'm of mixed feelings on this. I certainly think the family's wishes should be respected and probably should be respected after the copyright ends on it. I think the piece itself transcends race. I think the piece is about humanity. I don't think it's about the African American condition. There certainly are attitudes that come out – especially the attitude of the white policeman when he comes in and harasses the citizens of Catfish Row – that do play a role, but not nearly as big as the inter-human relationships between these people. This is not a trivial piece.

**Jones:** From today's perspective, how would you suggest a non-Black vocalist approach singing a role in the opera, especially if he or she should have the opportunity to do so in the United States?

**Swanson:** My, I've never thought of the answer because I've never considered it a possibility. I think it should be approached the same way you would approach any other great piece of operatic literature. When I sang Alfio in *Cavalleria Rusticana*, I read a whole bunch of information about country life in Sicily and the old honor codes. I tried to get into the mindset of these people. [*Porgy and Bess*] would probably take some serious background into it. It probably would not hurt if somebody spent some serious time looking at how jazz harmonies fit into a piece. The piece needs to be approached with the same type of respect you'd approach any great piece of operatic literature, and I think at that point you are going to have a successful performance. I don't know if it would be accepted in the United States. The Gershwin family's wishes are very, very clear on this, so my tendency is to think that it probably could not happen.

**Jones:** Professor Swanson, how long have you been teaching voice privately?

**Swanson:** Oh my goodness, I've got to think. I started in Europe sometime in the mid-1980's, so I guess around 25 years.

**Jones:** Has most of your experience as a teacher been in an academic environment?

**Swanson:** No, I kind of blundered into teaching when I was singing in Europe. I had the reputation of being the indestructible singer because I very, very rarely cancelled a performance. If I did cancel a performance, it was not because of vocal indisposition, it

was because I had come down with some sort of illness. In my biggest year, I did 128 performances in a little over ten months, and they were all leading roles. I ended up with a reputation of being someone who knew how to use his own voice. Because of this, I'd have colleagues come to me and ask me for tips. From there, word just spread a little bit, and stage directors began sending people to me who were having trouble. So, I just kind of learned on the job.

**Jones:** Have you taught any portions of *Porgy and Bess* to your students over your teaching career?

**Swanson:** No, not since coming back to the United States. Well that's not really true. It depends on if you count "Summertime" as I've taught it to people who use it as a Jazz standard. I've not covered it as an opera. Things have changed drastically in the United States as to what is politically correct and what is not politically correct. For example, I doubt very much that if I were in the equivalent of the Artists' Showcase Quartet now, we would do anything from *Porgy and Bess*. At least in this school, political correctness weighs against using that piece. I'm not sure that's good, but I wouldn't suggest it unless I had an African American student who was interested in the piece. Then of course I'd encourage it tremendously. I love the piece.

**Jones:** What criteria would you use to determine whether or not to introduce material from the opera to a student?

**Swanson:** This is going to sound the exact opposite of what I've said. I would probably only introduce it to an African American. It's not because I don't think the piece deserves it, it's because we've got some kind of bizarre political correctness things going in this world that I do not agree with but I'm not going to try to fight. I have a very, very good African American tenor right now in my studio, but he's several sizes too big vocally to do Sportin' Life. Also, I'm virtually positive that he would not be interested in singing "It Ain't Necessarily So" because of his religious views.

**Jones:** I presume, then, that no scenes from the opera have been performed here?

**Swanson:** Nothing done here. Political correctness, which I find a misnomer. Let me give you an example that's not in Iowa. My daughter just graduated from a West Coast school that has a lot of students from Hawaii. The school does a musical each year or so. Last year, they did *The Mikado*, and there was a huge uproar from the Asian students about this being disrespectful of their culture. Well, Gilbert and Sullivan were disrespectful of everything. There was nothing Gilbert and Sullivan found worth respecting, including the king, the queen, England, the empire, and everything else the empire ever touched. Anyway, the school had expended a great deal of money on Japanese wigs. Human hair, the real thing, and they ended up ruining the wigs because they didn't want them to look like they were mocking Japanese culture. I would be delighted to work any of the arias [from *Porgy and Bess*], especially "My Man's Gone Now," if I should happen to have a soprano who could sing it, or any of the arias from *Porgy*. But I'm reasonably sure that the students would find this impossible to actually use someplace besides my studio. It's worth studying, but I can find other repertoire that they will be able to use in audition, and people won't say, "Well, why are you doing an audition with *Porgy*? You will never sing it." By the way, Diane Bolden, my friend who sang Clara, ran into the same thing when she auditioned Pamina because there is so much text about Pamina being white. Diane would offer Pamina as an audition, and they would laugh at her, although she sang Pamina like a goddess. I'm afraid the same thing would happen here, so I just don't do it.

**Jones:** What impressions have you gotten from other vocal instructors – and I'm not necessarily talking just about here at the university – regarding their interest in teaching arias or roles from the opera?

**Swanson:** I've never discussed it, so I don't know. I'm sorry.

**Jones:** What impact, if any, do you think removing the restrictions on singing role assignments would have on vocal instructors' decisions to teach roles from *Porgy and Bess* to their students?

**Swanson:** I would sincerely hope they'll open it out because, like I said, I think the piece deserves it. A lot depends on what's acceptable in racial makeup, the way you do an African American as a makeup artist. Maybe the piece doesn't really need to be done in African American makeup. The material could certainly be set in any poverty area. But, a lot of the dialogue, I think, locks it pretty much into the African American community. So, I don't know.

**Jones:** Switching gears one more time. Would you tell me a little bit about your experiences as a opera director?

**Swanson:** I started opera direction after I'd finished my master's degree. My old college needed someone to direct some shows. I studied Boris Goldovsky's method of opera direction that starts with score analysis. Basically, you try to make the action fit the score to the point that it almost feels like a film. This is my whole approach to staging. The first piece I staged was Menotti's *The Medium*, and then I did *Man of La Mancha*. Then I went to Europe and didn't do any staging for a long, long time. I came back here and started with Benjamin Britten's *Albert Herring*. I've only done a couple of other pieces here. I think I do a decent job as a stage director, but that is certainly not my first calling.

**Jones:** No *Porgy and Bess*?

**Swanson:** No *Porgy and Bess*. I don't have an African American cast. There's scenes I'd love to do from there, though.

**Jones:** Do you believe that the Gershwin family performance restrictions affect decisions by opera directors and companies about whether or not to produce the opera?

**Swanson:** I doubt it, at least not in the United States. It might have at the beginning. I don't know. I'm not a historian. I think last year, Los Angeles did it. There are so many really great African American singers that I don't think that's ever a real issue. Maybe there are some cities that still have a residual of problems with race issues. I don't know.

**Jones:** The opera has been performed with racially mixed casts in Europe with great success for quite a number of years. How do you believe such casts would be received in the United States?

**Swanson:** It shouldn't make a difference, but I think the press would chew it up, at least right now. The makeup would have to be done brilliantly. I think my makeup was done well. My wig was done by hand and made for my head. My nose would never pass. I just don't have any features that would make me work as an African American. But the makeup it was done by a very fine makeup artist, and it was about as good as it could be, I think. As long as nobody does stupid things, I see no reason why it shouldn't work.

**Jones:** From your perspective as an opera director, do you believe the restriction on role assignment should be lifted?

**Swanson:** In my heart, yes; in practicality, probably no. Actually, it probably could be lifted, and I doubt it would make any difference. I think the United States would still try to cast it with as many African Americans as they could. How can I put this? I think I was a good Jake, and I think I made the role work. But I doubt I'm a better Jake than

the African American baritones I know, and if I was doing the casting myself, I'd have cast somebody else.

**Jones:** Last question. I want to go back to your perspective as a singer. If circumstances allowed you to be the first non-Black to sing the role of Jake on an American stage – for example at the Met, would you accept the role?

**Swanson:** Yes, no question, in spite of the fact that I'd probably get nailed for it by the critics. It's a wonderful role, and it's a wonderful piece. Anytime you can sing a great piece of literature, you don't turn it down. You just don't do that. If I would have had the chance to sing Porgy I would have done it. It's a great role. I'm not heavy enough to sing Crown, but I've tried to do that. Yeah, I'd do it.

**Jones:** What would you hope to accomplish from the performance?

**Swanson:** I would hope to portray a joyous caring loving husband and nothing more. I think he is a pretty human character. And if I can portray that I would accomplish what I wanted to accomplish.

**Jones:** Well Professor Swanson, I want to thank you very much for your time this morning.



*Angela Simpson*

Dramatic soprano **Angela Simpson** has performed extensively at houses including Washington National Opera, San Francisco Opera, La Scala, Houston Grand Opera, San Diego Opera, Miami Opera, and New York City Opera. She created the role of Cilla in Michigan Opera Theatre's world premier of Richard Danielpour's *Margaret Garner*, starring Denyce Graves. Ms. Simpson has regularly sung the role of Serena in concert and stage productions of *Porgy and Bess*. Her performances include the Opéra Comique's premiere production and the New York City Opera's "Live from Lincoln Center" broadcast. Most recently, she recorded the role in a concert version of the opera under the baton of Nikolaus Harnoncourt. The recording was released in November 2010 under the RCA Red Seal label.

**Jones:** Ms. Simpson, I'd like to gauge your views of and experiences with the opera *Porgy and Bess* from your perspective as a singer and as a teacher. How long have you been singing professionally? What made you decide to pursue that career?

**Simpson:** I have been singing professionally for 27 years. I've wanted to sing as a career from the time I saw my first movie musical which was Otto Preminger's *Porgy and Bess*.

**Jones:** Please describe your professional debut in *Porgy and Bess*. Had you sung any other roles or any arias from the opera prior to that point? If yes, please tell me about that past experience.

**Simpson:** In the beginning, I started in the chorus of P&B at the Met in 1989. That was a fantastic experience within itself. My debut performance as the character Serena was in 1992 with Virginia Opera's production of the opera in the Teatro de Colon in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It was the typical debut scenario; I was the cover, and the soprano became ill. In that same production, I was the Strawberry Woman and Lily, which made my role a little difficult during Serena's prayer scene. Lily is in that scene, but the Strawberry Woman enters right after it. Needless to say, I had to be quick on my feet and had a lot of help off stage to change costumes. The director wanted the characters to be two totally different women.

**Jones:** Why did you decide to take the role of Serena? Did you see any challenges from taking the role that were any different from those of any other roles you had accepted up to that point?

**Simpson:** I've wanted to learn/perform the role of Serena from the time I was in the Met chorus in 1989. I heard Camilla Johnson sing the role for the first time and became completely in awe of her talent. Plus the role was very dramatic, and the music was absolutely gorgeous! At that point in time, I had not accepted any other roles. I was very new into my career. But after the fact, with the other roles that I have learned/performed, there were not many challenges.

**Jones:** How did you approach the role, relate to the character of Serena? How did you relate to the other characters in the program?

**Simpson:** The main crux of the character is that she is the religious matriarch of the community and that her husband is killed. Now being so young, I could not identify with emotion of someone close being killed or dying, so I had to rely on my acting skills to convey the right emotion of the character. The religious part I could relate to as because my faith is an important part of my life. As a Black woman, I related to the character as much as a black woman in our community would today. Even though they were not related, it still was a close-knit community, a family. So I related to them as such, even the not-so-nice characters.

**Jones:** What was the cast make up for the Graz production? Were most of the singers imports from outside of Austria? What was the racial makeup of the cast, both the soloists and chorus?

**Simpson:** The Graz production was made up of mostly African-Americans in the main roles; Serena, Crown, Maria, Sportin' Life, Daddy Peter. The Clara was South African, Jake, British; Porgy was a New Zealander and Bess was from Belgium. All of these performers are of African descent. The role of the Detective was Caucasian actor. I would say 95% of the cast was from outside of Austria. The chorus was a local one from Graz, so they were Caucasian.

**Jones:** How did the audience respond to the production? How did critics respond? How many performances were there?

**Simpson:** The audiences responded very well to the concert. There were supertitles for the performances so the audience could understand what we were singing. The critics



had mixed reviews but for the most part were very pleased with the performances. There were five performances.

**Jones:** Have you performed that role or any others in other productions or recordings since the 2009 recording? Have you programmed any of the arias in recital? If yes, where were the performances?

**Simpson:** Before the Graz 2009 performances, I have performed this role on tour with the Virginia Opera and the Houston Grand Opera, at La Scala, France's Opera Bastille, Michigan Opera Theatre, New York City Opera, Bregenz Festival, Washington National Opera, and numerous houses in the United States and Europe. The 2009 RCA recording is the only one I have done thus far.

**Jones:** Since the Austrian production, have your views about the opera changed?

**Simpson:** Since my early performance, my views about the opera have not changed. I think it is the one of the most treasured American operas of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Jones:** The Gershwin Family has placed restrictions on performance of staged productions, requiring singing roles be assigned to Black singers. Do you believe this has affected whether a singer chooses to learn roles from the opera? In what ways?

**Simpson:** All singers can learn roles from this opera whether they can perform in a staged production or not. "Summertime" is a perfect soprano aria in English for a competition requirement, as is "I've Got Plenty of Nothin'" for a baritone. I have seen many Caucasian singers sing these arias in concert and recital. This is no different than me learning "In questa reggia". The only difference is that I CAN be hired as a Turandot for a production where as they cannot be hired for a staged *P & B*.

**Jones:** From today's perspective, how would you suggest a non-Black vocalist approach singing a role in the opera, especially if he or she could do so in the United States?

**Simpson:** I suggest that they should approach it like any other operatic role they would learn. Just because it's in English doesn't make it any easier to learn. It took me two years to prepare Serena for performance.

**Jones:** How long have you been teaching voice privately? Has most of your experience as a teacher been in an academic environment?

**Simpson:** I have just begun teaching privately a few months ago, so I can only answer where it is applicable. I am teaching at the Academy of Fine Arts here in Charlotte, NC. It's not an academic environment. It's a non-profit organization that teaches the arts to children and adults.

**Jones:** Have you ever coached anyone who was preparing a role for a performance? If yes, was the production presented by a racially mixed cast singing the roles?

**Simpson:** I have coached a few colleagues in the role of Serena. One young lady wanted my opinion if I thought the role was good fit for her voice. The production she was auditioning for was a full African-American cast.

**Jones:** Current copyright law indicates that the opera will not enter the public domain until 2030. What impact, if any, do you think that will have on vocal instructors' decisions to teach roles from *Porgy and Bess* to their students, especially non-Black students?

**Simpson:** Honestly, no impact whatsoever. My personal feeling is that because the copyright law has been in effect for so long, no one would really be interested in seeing a

non-Black cast in these roles. Audiences like tradition, especially an opera audience. That's not to say that hiring a non-Black singer in these roles might be a curiosity for some, but in the long run Gershwin wrote this music for Black singers. It's our culture, our history, and in this operatic world, the one thing we have for ourselves. So I really don't think that teachers would really push for their students to learn these roles for staged performance.

**Jones:** If circumstances allowed one of your non-Black students to be the first to sing a role on an American stage, would you be likely to advise him/her to take the role?

**Simpson:** No, I would not suggest that they take the role.

**Jones:** Thank you, Ms. Simpson, for sharing your views and your valuable time.



*Simon Estes*

Bass-baritone **Simon Estes** has recorded prolifically on numerous major labels and has performed internationally on both operatic and concert stages. He has been featured at houses such as the Lyric Opera in Chicago, San Francisco Opera, Deutsche Oper, La Scala, Covent Garden's Royal Opera House, The Washington Opera, L'Opéra de Paris, and the Salzburg and Glyndebourne Festivals. He is recipient of the bronze medal at the Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow. In the title role of *Der fliegende Holländer*, he became the first Black male to sing a major role at Bayreuth. Estes also introduced the role of Porgy to the Metropolitan Opera stage. He has served on the faculty at Juilliard and is currently on the faculty at Iowa State University, Boston University, and Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa.

**Jones:** Prof. Estes, I'd like to gauge your views of and experiences with the opera *Porgy and Bess* from your perspective as a singer and as a teacher. First of all, how long have you been singing professionally?

**Estes:** I started in Berlin, Germany, in 1965 so that means about 46 years.

**Jones:** What made you decide to pursue that career?

**Estes:** It was a voice teacher at the University of Iowa who discovered me. I started out at a junior college in Centerville, Iowa, in 1956 when I graduated out of high school. My voice changed very late in life, so I just couldn't sing like I did when I was a little boy soprano in Centerville through the Second Baptist Church. So, a teacher, Mr. Kellis, heard me singing, and he told me, "You know, you have a voice to sing opera." I'd never seen an opera or heard an opera in my life. I started taking voice lessons with him when

I was singing in the Old Gold Singers, which was a group of choral singers on campus at the University of Iowa. He loaned me some recordings of great opera singers. I remember hearing Maria Callas, Leontyne Price, Jerome Hines, and a famous Italian bass, Cesare Siepi. I listened to those big 33 1/3s, and I took them back to him. I said, "You know, I really like that stuff." And he said, "Well, you should go to an all musical school." When I first went into college I wanted to be a doctor, then I was interested in theology and then in social psychology. I ended up getting my degree from the University of Iowa in Music. But, if it were not for Mr. Kellis, I probably wouldn't be here talking to you today because he arranged for me to go to Julliard. He got me a full scholarship, a Rockefeller Grant, in 1963 and '64. Then I started singing in '65 in Berlin. That is a little quick synopsis of what led me into the opera world.

**Jones:** Before the interview, you mentioned you sang the role of Porgy in Zurich, Switzerland?

**Estes:** 1977 and 1978, yes.

**Jones:** Had you sung the role or any arias from the opera prior to that point?

**Estes:** I had done a concert version of *Porgy and Bess* at the Cincinnati Fest, which James Levine conducted in 1976. The first stage production that I ever did was in Zurich in 1977.

**Jones:** In your autobiography, you express concern about playing Porgy in Zurich due to possible stereotyping. Why did you decide to take the role for that production?

**Estes:** Because the stage director offered it to me. However, I wouldn't come there in a calendar year and sing only Porgy because I was concerned about being stereotyped. I remember he was kind of surprised, but I said, "I will do it if you give me something else next season," and he said, "Well, okay. I'll give you *The Flying Dutchman*." It's a long story, but I will just make it very short now.

**Jones:** Did you see any challenges about taking that role that were any different from those of any other roles that you had accepted up to that point?

**Estes:** No. No challenges what so ever because in my opinion, *Porgy and Bess*, one of the greatest operas ever written, is just as fantastic as when I do a Wotan in *Die Valkyrie* or *The Flying Dutchman* or King Phillip in Verdi's opera, *Don Carlo*. Gershwin wrote *Porgy* to be sung as an opera and performed as an opera. I really genuinely believe that, having sung over a hundred roles or more, Porgy is one of the greatest and most difficult roles to sing.

**Jones:** How did you approach the role, relate to the character of Porgy?

**Estes:** As I approached the roles when I did Boris in *Boris Godunov* or Figaro, learning the music, involving myself with the understanding of the character of the role, the musical aspect of it. Because I feel music is music, I use the same approach for *Porgy and Bess* as I did for Mozart or Wagner or Verdi or Puccini.

**Jones:** How did you relate to Bess and the other characters in that production?

**Estes:** I related to them as I would have any other opera also. I don't want to sound repetitive but the point of this, when I did my first Scarpia in *Tosca*, I related to Tosca the same way I would have related to Bess or Serena in this particular opera. I use the exact same approach because *Porgy and Bess* is an opera. I use the same approach with Gershwin as I did with Wagner or Puccini.

**Jones:** For that production of *Porgy and Bess*, what was the cast makeup? Were most of the singers imported from outside of Switzerland?

**Estes:** The entire choir, they were all people that were not African American, they were all white singers. Some of the smaller roles were also white singers. The Porgy and the Bess and the Crown and the Sporting Life were all singers of color, let's say.

**Jones:** How did the audience respond to the production?

**Estes:** They loved it. The first time we did it in Zurich, when I did it, they did 25 performances of *Porgy and Bess* in one season, which is more or less, I've been told, unheard of. All the performances were sold out. When Grace Bumbry sang Bess and I sang Porgy at the Met, they did sixteen performances in one season. I was told that's very unusual and also was told, I didn't check this out, but that all sixteen performances were sold out before the premier.



*Fifty years after the premiere, Anne Brown and Todd Duncan meet with the leads, Simon Estes and Grace Bumbry, in the Metropolitan Opera production, 1985. (Winnie Klotz, photographer, Metropolitan Opera Association, Inc., Lincoln Center, New York, NY 10023.)*

From: Alpert, Hollis. *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1990, p. 325.

**Jones:** And how did the critics respond to the production in Zurich?

**Estes:** They liked it. It was very, very well received. I don't remember verbatim the exact comments that were written, but I would say overwhelmingly they were all positive. The stage production was a very good production, I must say, and the cast was very good. The house orchestra played, and it was fantastic.

**Jones:** I want to ask you about something you mentioned earlier. In 1985, on the 50th Anniversary of the opera's premier, the Metropolitan Opera staged its first performance

of *Porgy and Bess* with you and Grace Bumbry in the title roles. Why did you decide to accept that role in that production?

**Estes:** Well I was asked to do it by the Metropolitan Opera. If they had asked me to do Porgy or King Phillip or Don Carlo, if [the role] was in my vocal category, then I would say yes. I was happy to be able to participate in the first production of *Porgy and Bess* in our Metropolitan Opera House, our most prestigious opera house in the United States. It was a real honor in that respect.

**Jones:** The Gershwin family has placed restrictions on performance of stage productions requiring singing roles to be assigned to Black singers. Since this production was given in the United States, were all of the singing roles performed by Blacks?

**Estes:** Yes, they were, as I recall. At the Metropolitan Opera House, yes they were. Yes. Even the choir, the chorus I think was. I'm not sure, but I think they were all Black. I'm not sure.

**Jones:** Well, that is the restriction. Any singing role, cast or choir.

**Estes:** Well yeah, ok then, they were obviously all Black.

**Jones:** Ok, what other comparisons might you make between that production at the Met and the Zurich production?

**Estes:** Well, number one, the staging was far more elaborate at the Metropolitan Opera. The stage is much, much larger. I also did a production of *Porgy and Bess* with the Tulsa Opera, in Oklahoma, too. But the Metropolitan, I would say that of all the Porgys I have sung, it was the most elaborate one in terms of costumes, sets, and the production because they have this huge stage with all types of facilities and a revolving stage. It was a fantastic production. Every performance was sold out.

**Jones:** Well what about since then, have you recorded or...?

**Estes:** No I haven't. No, not since then. No.

**Jones:** Have you performed any of the arias in a recital?

**Estes:** That I have done. Yes, "Oh, I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'," and sometimes they'll have this small orchestra arrangement for orchestral performances of *Porgy and Bess* where I've sung the bass-baritone arias as well as a couple of Sportin' Life arias. Sometimes, they have a bass-baritone and a soprano. The soprano would sing Serena's arias as well as "Summertime." But I haven't done that for a long time. Many years.

**Jones:** In the 25 years since the Met production, have your views about the opera changed?

**Estes:** No, they really have not. I do regret that it is not performed in more opera houses, although, now they are starting to do that more in the United States... I've sung over 100 roles, and in all the major opera houses. I mention that not to try to impress you or the audience, but to let people know that *Porgy and Bess* is one of the most appreciated operas in world. Maybe appreciation is not the right word, maybe attended or enjoyed. The audiences love it. No matter where you do *Porgy and Bess*, the public absolutely adores the music; they enjoy the arias, the sets, the costumes. It's always successful.

**Jones:** From today's perspective, how would you suggest a non-Black vocalist approach singing a role in the opera, especially if he or she could do it in the United States?

**Estes:** I would say the same approach that they use for any of the other composers of any other opera. The only thing is that, sometimes in *Porgy and Bess*, some of the text uses some stereotype slang talk. You know, instead of getting "I've got plenty of nothing," they use "I got plenty of nuttin." Singers have to be aware that they'd have to sing a dialect or a slang with certain language asserting of the words. But the approach to singing the opera is just a matter of the style, and I think any singer, regardless of their skin color or their nationality – if they have a voice for it, can sing it, and they can learn it.

**Jones:** Now, a few questions from your perspective as a teacher. How long have you been teaching voice privately?

**Estes:** I'd say about eleven years, yes.

**Jones:** Have most of your experiences as a teacher been in an academic environment?

**Estes:** Yes.

**Jones:** Have you taught any portions of *Porgy and Bess* to your students over your teaching career?

**Estes:** Actually, I have not. I don't think I have, no. No, that's not true. There was a singer, I think it was at Iowa State, who was singing one of the Sportin' Life arias, and I worked with him on that. I know I did.

**Jones:** Any particular reason why? Just circumstance?

**Estes:** That particular singer just wanted to sing it, and I said, "Fine. Great. Because it's amazing." We talked about this earlier. *Porgy and Bess*, the same way with Negro Spirituals, non-African Americans feel they can't or should not sing it, which is absolutely not true. And so I think that any singer can sing *Porgy and Bess* if they can sing any of the operas that are written.

**Jones:** What criteria would you use to determine whether to introduce material from the opera to a student?

**Estes:** I would introduce it to them the same way. I don't want to sound like a broken record, but because I look at *Porgy and Bess* – and I stress it this way – I continue to say what I've said. I would use the same approach working with singers as if I was going to approach *The Magic Flute*. Because it's an opera. And so the approach I would use, "Hey, let's learn the music, let's learn the style, let's learn the phrasing." I also encourage singers, if they cannot buy the music – most of them cannot afford it – but try to rent it or look at the orchestra score to see what the composer has written. Why he has this instrument playing this particular area or this line or whatever. So I use that same approach of learning *Porgy and Bess* as I would any other opera.

**Jones:** Have any of the schools where you were on the faculty attempted to perform any sections from the opera?

**Estes:** I regret to say no. Sorry, but no. I will have to mention it to one of these institutions.

**Jones:** What general impressions do you have from other vocal instructors – not necessarily just at the colleges where you have taught – regarding their interest in teaching arias or roles from *Porgy and Bess*?

**Estes:** What I regret to say, in many cases, is that a lot of the teachers don't do it because many of the teachers – a majority of the teachers – have not sung opera in

colleges and universities around the world. This is really true. A lot of people are unaware of this, but probably – I've never done a scientific study, but I would not be surprised if it was 90% of all teachers who are teaching in universities and colleges – I don't know if there would be 10% of them that have had a big – let's say international – career singing leading roles or major roles in major opera houses.

**Jones:** Do you do think that lack of experience influences their desire or interest in teaching a role such as one from *Porgy and Bess*?

**Estes:** I would probably not say a lack of desire so much. It's just a lack of experience. I'm not saying that it cannot be done, but for example, if a teacher, let's say, has never performed an opera in her or his life and maybe has not even seen – in some cases there are some teachers who have never seen a live performance of an opera. So I think they are – and I don't mean this in a negative way – somewhat at a disadvantage because they have not had the actual practical experience in that form of opera, that form of music or art. Let's take for example – if a person has never sung an opera, never been in an opera house – do they know what all is involved in putting on a production if they haven't done it? I'm not saying they can't do it, but it's like voice teaching – I speak very openly about this – I'm not saying a teacher who never had a career cannot teach voice, and I'm not going to say that every opera singer who has had a great international career is going to be a great voice teacher, but if you look at it logically speaking... I just was president of the jury of the Geneva 64th International Vocal Competition this past year. The question was posed, "Where are all the great voices today? What's going on? We don't seem to have a lot of great voices?" And I said to them, "You know I have great concern because I have done a lot of master classes in the United States, Russia, Leipzig, all over, and people are wondering what is going on today." Well, I have to ask how many professional football teams or basketball teams have a coach who didn't play the game? I don't know of any. I'm going to ask you a question. God forbid, say you have a serious heart problem, and you have to have surgery on your heart. Say there are two cardiologists on this side, on your right side, who have done thousands of operations on hearts. On the left, there are two people who have read every book about heart surgery. Who would you choose to do your surgery?

**Jones:** This really isn't a difficult question. I would want someone who has had the years of experience.

**Estes:** That's it. Today most of teachers have never performed opera. So they are not going to introduce their singers to a lot of operatic arias. They might have heard a few on a record or something, but they have not had the experience of standing next to that person, being on that stage, or working with the orchestra, working with the stage director, working with the coach, working with set designers, working with costume people, having different types of rehearsals – *sitzprobe* or *hauptprobe* or *generalprobe*. They have not had this experience. I'm not putting them down. I'm simply saying they have not had that experience. And that's why I use the same example of the professional basketball teams and football teams. I don't know any coaches of those teams that didn't play the game. And so my concern is if, like you just said yourself, if you are going to have to have your heart operated on, you're going to have to have your brain operated on, you want to have somebody who has done it and not who read about it. So that's the same thing I relate to opera and teaching.

**Jones:** Current copyright indicates that *Porgy and Bess* will not enter the public domain until 2030. At that time any restrictions in place regarding role assignment would no longer be in effect. What impact, if any, do you think this would have on instructors' decisions to teach roles from the opera to their students, especially non-Black students?

**Estes:** I would hope that it would open the doors and the eyes and the possibilities because I think it is an injustice, this rule that the Gershwin family has written in to say that white singers cannot sing this in a production. The composer has a right to say what

he wanted to say, or she wanted to say, but if you look in front of the Gershwin score – I have three of them, some even in Russian and German – I've never seen, besides *Porgy* – that it has to be a Black American singer or Serena or Bess or, they usually are, but the point of it is, I never saw that. Gershwin did the same thing that Wagner or Verdi did; he called for a soprano or a mezzo or an alto or a tenor, baritone or bass. So I think if that restriction were lifted, I think it would be great. I wish it to be lifted sooner because I think it is unfair to non-African American singers that they are denied the opportunity to sing this great music. The same way would be if they would deny me, as an African American singer, the opportunity to sing something because I'm Black. So, I think it's not right.

**Jones:** If circumstances allowed one of your non-Black students to be the first to sing a role from *Porgy and Bess* on an American stage, would you be likely to advise him or her to take that role?

**Estes:** I would absolutely advise them to do it, to take it. I absolutely would say yes without any hesitation whatsoever. As long as they've got the voice to do it, hey, sing it.

**Jones:** Why would you suggest that she or he take it and what would you hope that he or she would accomplish from performing that role?

**Estes:** I hope it would be a person who would be a great example letting the public know and the Gershwin family know or whoever owns the rights that yes, white people can sing this music also. As I say, music was not written for a skin color. We have makeup and wigs and costumes, etc. They were written for certain voices. I think it's a tragedy that white people are denied the opportunity to do this. The same way I would say it's a tragedy to not let African Americans sing roles that are not composed by African American composers.

**Jones:** Well I thank you very much, Dr. Estes, for your time and your well- considered thoughts. I truly appreciate you allowing me your time this afternoon.

**Estes:** It's been my honor to speak with you and to hear about all the wonderful things that you are doing, too, with Negro Spirituals and *Porgy and Bess*. I think it's great. Keep up the good work.

**Jones:** Thank you.





*Randye Jones*

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