

## Surveying Current Perceptions of *Porgy and Bess*

by Randye Jones

George Gershwin's "folk opera" *Porgy and Bess* celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary with nearly as much controversy as when it premiered in 1935. While the opera is known for sparking the professional careers of many African American vocalists, its storyline has been thought to portray African Americans negatively. Secondly, despite the unquestioned musical quality of *Porgy and Bess*, companies, directors, and critics continue to debate whether to treat it as an opera, a musical, or a hybrid of the two. Furthermore, singing roles in staged productions of the opera—at least in the United States—are restricted to Black vocalists, challenging companies that would have to import enough Blacks to fill the opera's solo and choral parts.

Where does this opera currently stand? Does its popularity continue to wax and wane as it has done over the decades because of perceptions of character treatment, or has the strength of its music finally begun to establish *Porgy and Bess* in the standard repertoire as one of the best representatives of twentieth-century American opera? Do singers and teachers, especially non-Blacks, continue to look to other sources for arias to study because of the current performance restrictions, or have they begun to prepare for the day when the restrictions are lifted?

In an attempt to assess the current perceptions of the opera, the author invited amateur and professional singers, voice teachers and coaches, opera directors and conductors, and others who have an interest in *Porgy and Bess* to share their opinions through an online survey.

Around the same time of the survey, the author conducted either face-to-face or email interviews with five vocalists—George Shirley, Adrienne Webster, Stephen Swanson, Angela Simpson, and Simon Estes—to obtain a more direct assessment of current attitudes regarding the opera. Their combined musical experience spans professional operatic stage performance, vocal instruction and operatic direction. Each discussed their experiences with *Porgy and Bess* and their views regarding the potential impact of opening staged singing roles in the United States to non-Blacks. Where appropriate, some of their comments are integrated within this article. The full interviews were published in the May 2011 edition of the International Music Score Library Project Journal.

### **Survey Methodology**

The online survey was conducted using Survey Methods and was open between April 12 and May 24, 2010. To encourage a wide range of responses, announcements were sent via email to several music- and opera-related discussion lists. Email or oral invitations were also made directly to individuals known to have professional connections to or interest in the opera. To gain a high percentage of responses from African American musicians, the author sent an invitation to a distribution list called Afrocentric Future Voices, which has a membership of over 500 singers, vocal instructors and composers or others involved in vocal music in some capacity.

A number of survey questions offered opportunities for respondents to expand upon or clarify their replies. Some questions were bypassed depending on the respondent's reply to a preceding question.

If respondents gave more than one answer when only one answer was requested, their first answer was the one counted.

The survey consisted of 42 questions, only one of which was a disqualifying question that all respondents were required to answer. This question dealt with the respondent's familiarity with the opera. One respondent indicated no familiarity with the opera; thus, that person was immediately directed to the demographic questions at the end of the survey.

Participants took the survey anonymously so that they could respond freely to a controversial subject. However, the survey management system did record computer IP numbers, which allowed the participants to re-enter the survey using the same computer and complete the survey if they were unable to do so initially.

Following the live interview with Estes, conducted after the survey closed, the author sent an email with an additional series of questions to respondents who had indicated that they were voice instructors as well as to professional vocalists who did not consider themselves to be African American. Their responses were added to the end of the online survey.

## Short Biographical Information on Interview Subjects

Tenor **George Shirley** made his debut with a small opera troupe at Woodstock, New York, as Eisenstein in its 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 that 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 his performance as Ferrando in the RCA recording of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*. At the time he responded to the email interview on May 31, 2010, he was Joseph Edgar Maddy Distinguished University Emeritus Professor of Voice at the University of Michigan.

Mezzo-soprano **Adrienne Webster** graduated with honors from the University of Michigan in Vocal Performance and has recently completed her Master's degree 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 Patterson Diversity Award. Webster completed a seven-country European tour as the Strawberry Woman in *Porgy and Bess* under the auspices of New York Harlem Productions. Webster created the role of Marva Trotter in the world premiere of Frank Proto's opera, *Shadowboxer*. She is also author of the article, "I Ain't Got No Shame: A Case for the Positive Effects of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*." Ms. Webster submitted her email responses to the interview questions on July 28, 2010.

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. His responses come from an interview held with the author at the university on May 28, 2010. (Note: Mr. Swanson was the author's major professor at the University of Iowa during the time of the interview.)

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. Ms. Simpson submitted her interview responses via email on July 27, 2010.

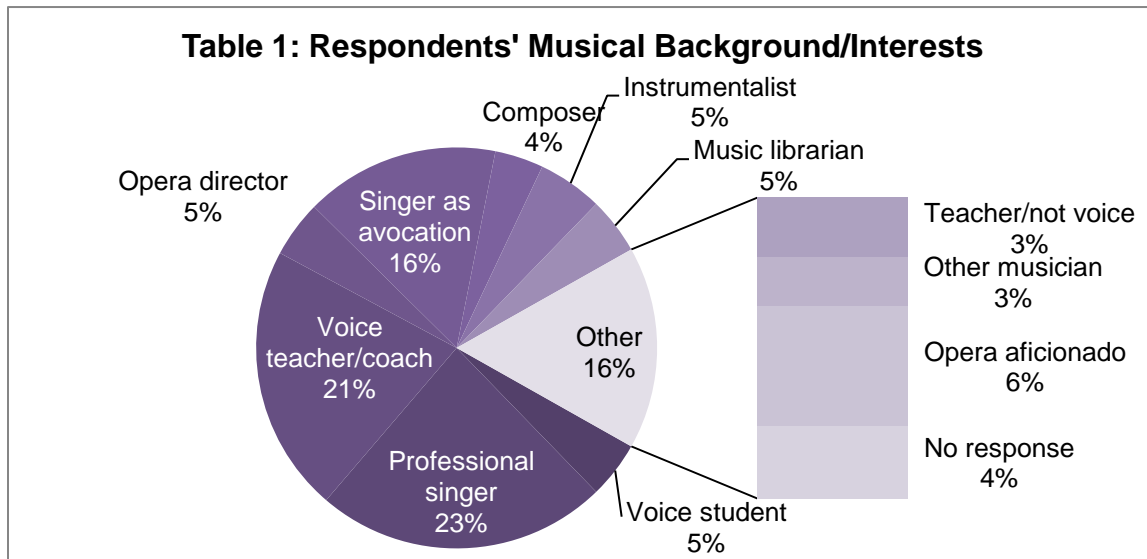
Bass-baritone **Simon Estes** has recorded prolifically on numerous major labels and has performed internationally on both operatic and concert stages. He has been featured at houses such as the Lyric Opera in Chicago, San Francisco Opera, Deutsche Oper, La Scala, Covent Garden's Royal Opera House, The 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 Hollander*, 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 in 1985. 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. Estes was interviewed by the author on June 2, 2010, at Wartburg College.

### **Background Information on Survey Respondents**

By the online survey's close on May 24, 2010, 153 participants of the thousands contacted had responded, with the survey management system reporting a 73% completion rate of those who began it.

In order to ascertain respondents' musical backgrounds and interests, survey questions asked how they would best describe themselves. Not unexpectedly—considering the survey's subject as well as the interest groups and the individuals contacted—a majority of respondents (104) described themselves as vocalists (voice student, professional singer, singer as avocation) or voice teachers/coaches. The other background category of particular interest for this survey was opera directors (8) because they significantly influence how operas are presented. [Table 1]

Particular interest was also given to those respondents who indicated that they considered themselves to be African American (36 of the 112 who responded to that question). Unfortunately, none of the African American respondents described themselves as an opera director.



Asked how many years of private vocal study they had completed, 88 respondents, or nearly 59%, had at least five years of private vocal study. Conversely, only 29, just over 19%, had never studied voice privately.

Sixty-three percent of respondents held at least a master's degree, while less than 1% had not completed a bachelor's program.

When asked what percentage of the student enrollment of the last school they attended was of African descent, 39 respondents indicated that the enrollment was 5% or less. Another 37 estimated that Black enrollment was between 5% and 10%, and 20 stated that the enrollment was 10-25%. Ten reported 25% or higher Black enrollment.

Most of the respondents held at least one music degree. When asked to identify all of their degrees, 47 respondents indicated their degrees were in vocal performance/pedagogy; 20, music education; 16 in instrumental performance; 12 were in musicology; nine in opera performance/directing; six in conducting; two in library science with a music concentration and two in music composition. Six reported degrees in non-music-related areas.

### **Familiarity with *Porgy and Bess***

The high level of interest in *Porgy and Bess* was clearly reflected in the replies to questions about familiarity with and exposure to performance or study of the opera. One hundred five (69%) indicated that they were very familiar with the opera, and 47 (30.4%) stated they were somewhat or slightly familiar with it.

When asked how they had first been introduced to the opera, 69 respondents recalled hearing a recording, followed by those who had learned and/or performed music from the opera (41) and those who had attended a live performance (17) or heard/watched a broadcast performance (13). Of the rest who answered the question, one respondent stated that s/he was “told stories about it by grandmother who saw the original production,” and a second saw the motion picture when it premiered in 1959.

Respondents were asked to indicate all the ways they had been exposed to the opera. One hundred respondents had also read something about the opera, 99 stated that they had heard recordings, 98 had heard or viewed a broadcast performance, 86 had studied music from the opera, and 73 had attended live performances.



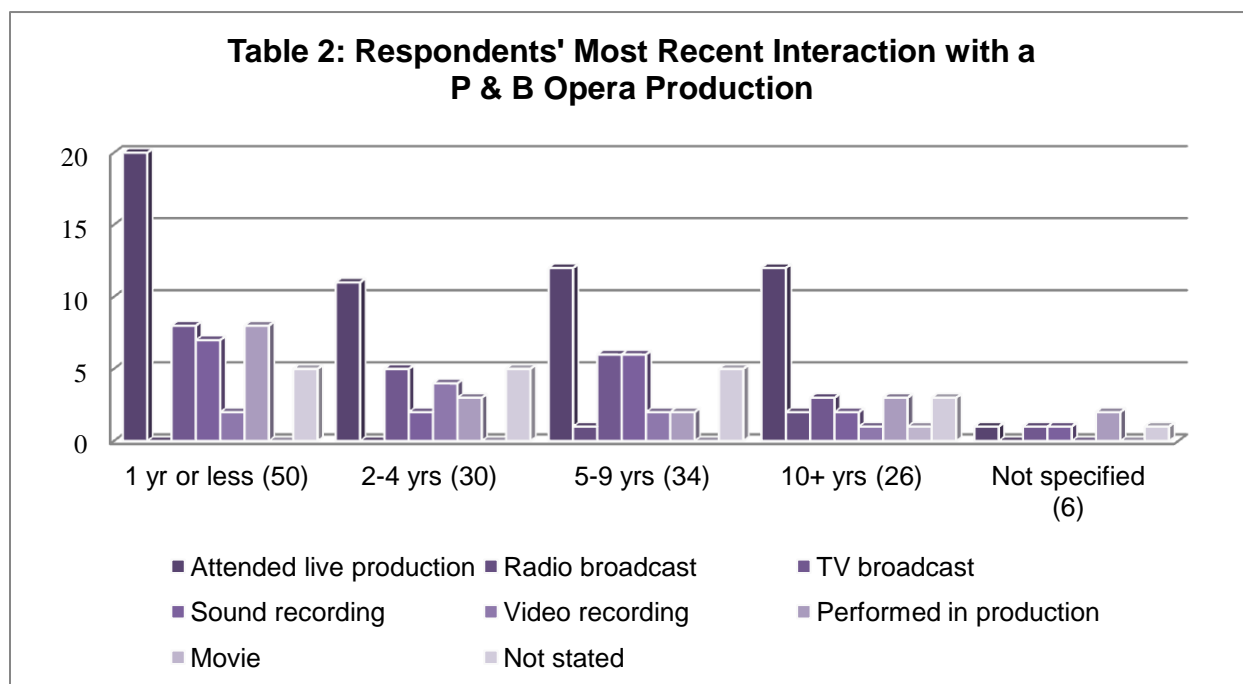
The next series of questions asked about the most recent production of *Porgy and Bess* the respondents had heard or watched. Fifty respondents had seen or listened to a production within the last year, and 30 had done so within the past two to four years. Sixty-one had not seen or heard a production in at least five years. Curiously, while nine respondents said they had never seen nor heard a production of the opera, six of those respondents selected a type of production that they had seen or heard in the follow-up question.

Of those who had seen or heard the production, 56 had attended a live production, 23 had watched on television, 18 had heard a sound recording, 18 had performed in a production, nine had watched a video recording of the opera, three had heard radio broadcasts, and two did not respond. Only one respondent had seen the motion picture, not unexpectedly since the MGM film—with Sidney Poitier (role sung by Robert McFerrin) and Dorothy Dandridge (sung by Adele Addison) in the title roles—has neither been re-released since its original release in 1959 nor are commercial video recordings of the film readily available.

One hundred twenty respondents stated that the production they had seen was performed or recorded by a professional opera company, seven saw local or regional productions, and two saw school productions. All of the local/regional and school productions were presented in the United States, as were all but 14 of the professional productions. None of the respondents indicated that their most recent interaction was via a radio broadcast within the last five years, suggesting that the entities—professional opera companies—that would have likely broadcast over radio either have not recently performed the opera or they used some other medium for presentation.

Unfortunately, none of the five respondents who had earlier indicated that their most recent connection with an opera production was as a performer stated the type of production; however, all five of the performances were given in the United States.

[Table 2]



In their comments about the most recent productions they had experienced, respondents discussed strengths and weaknesses in the performers' singing and acting, staging and costumes, cuts in the opera, and characterizations. Most of the comments were positive, with only two negative comments related to their perceptions of the opera's racial stereotyping of African Americans. The 19 neutral respondents either had no strong recollections of the production or their reviews were mixed. This comment seemed to be emblematic of those responses:

Typical mix of talent, budding talent, talent challenged and talentless one finds in the relatively small, local productions. The lady who sang Bess

had a voice like an angel, but what I remembered most was one of the supporting roles (don't remember which) who sounded like a peacock being tortured with an ice pick.

Forty-nine respondents commented positively about the production. These remarks generally rated the performers, staging and music highly. They also tended to be more understanding of the portrayal of the characters in the opera.

One comment reflected the positive views of the music and the performers this group of respondents gave:

It was an interesting production, to say the least. The *[name deleted]* Opera did some interesting things, but they also employed several cuts, no doubt to fit it in a designated time slot. It worked to some degree, but overall I thought that at times the production tried to be a poor-man's Broadway version, and not the powerful opera that Gershwin intended it to be.

This respondent's views about the opera's characterization of African Americans typified most of the more positive comments:

The one I saw was good. I was familiar at the time with the controversy over racial stereotyping. From my perspective as a white man, I did not see it. Perhaps if I were Black, it would have hit me harder. But literature is a product of the times. Movies, books, theater are all filled with themes that reflect the times in which they were written. Does *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* stereotype Southern Whites? And so on....

Amongst the 45 very positive comments, the respondents tended to express their reactions to the productions on an emotional level. One person stated:

This was a *[name deleted]* Opera production. Very good overall, well-staged. Not having seen or heard P&B for a while, I was pleasantly surprised at how moving this great work remains. I couldn't help weeping during "Bess, You Is My Woman" and "Oh Where's My Bess?"

Some of the emotional responses came despite weaknesses perceived by the respondent:

*[Name deleted]* Opera's production had absolutely wonderful singing, superb ensemble sound, riveting soloists — and the most bizarre stage direction, set and lighting one could imagine. Director *[name deleted]* did not respect the material, and managed to take the shine off every major emotional moment in the libretto. The final touch — as the crowds part for Porgy, he stands for a minute and throws away his crutch! What — he's going to HOP to New York? But wonderful music and acting.

Each of the singers interviewed recalled very positive audience and critical reactions to their productions. In his description of the opera's success for the mid-1970's company production in which he sang, Swanson stated:

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 Dreses 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.

Webster, who was touring with a production of the opera at the time of her responses, stated, "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!"

Estes related the audience reactions to two different productions in which he sang. "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."

[Note: Estes and Swanson performed in the same Zurich production.]

### **Performance and Perceptions**

Respondents were asked if they had ever studied arias or roles from *Porgy and Bess* as a performer or director. Forty-four of those who answered had

studied/performed at least one aria, 11 had studied/performed at least one extended excerpt, 11 had worked on a complete role, 35 had studied the complete opera, and 16 had never studied the opera. Eighty-six percent of the African Americans who replied to this question had studied at least a portion of the opera, compared to 27% of those who did not indicate that they were African American. Of the eight opera directors who participated in the survey, one had studied the entire opera, one at least one extended excerpt, and three at least one aria. However, all three of the directors who stated that they had never studied the opera mentioned arias they had studied in the follow-up question.

When asked to name arias or roles studied, 56% of those who listed arias had studied “Summertime,” with 16 respondents listing that as the only work from the opera they had studied. The arias and duets studied were: “Summertime” (Clara), 39 respondents; “My Man’s Gone Now” (Serena), 19; “Bess, You Is My Woman Now” (Porgy, Bess), 10; “It Ain’t Necessarily So” (Sportin’ Life), 7; “I Got Plenty o’ Nothin’” (Porgy), 6; “I Loves You Porgy” (Porgy, Bess), 4; “There’s a Boat Dat’s Leavin’ Soon for New York” (Sportin’ Life), 3; “A Woman Is a Sometime Thing” (Jake), 1; and “Doctor Jesus” (Serena), 1. Thirty-six respondents had studied at least two arias.

Thirty-eight respondents indicated that they had studied at least one major or supporting role. Those roles were: Serena (soprano), 10; Bess (soprano), 8; Clara (soprano), 8; Maria (contralto), 6; Strawberry Woman (mezzo-soprano), 6; Porgy (bass-baritone), 6; Jake (baritone), 6; Sportin’ Life (tenor), 4; Crown (baritone), 3; Lily (soprano), 3; Robbins (tenor), 2; Jim (baritone), 2; Frazier (baritone), 2; Annie (mezzo-soprano), 2; Mingo (tenor), 2; Undertaker (baritone), 1; Crab Man (tenor), 1.

All of the respondents who had described themselves as voice students (three African Americans and three who did not identify themselves as such) had studied at least one aria, with one having already learned an entire role and two studying the entire opera. Of the professional singers, only 19% had never studied any parts of *Porgy and Bess*.

None of the five singers interviewed recalled preparing arias, excerpts or roles from the opera during their years of vocal study, and only Estes and Swanson recalled giving professional performance of excerpts from the opera before their professional staged performance. Estes mentioned that he had performed in a concert version of *Porgy and Bess* at the 1976 Cincinnati Fest under the baton of James Levine. Swanson stated:

...Somewhere between 1969 and 1974... 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.

Simpson wrote about the circumstances that led to her decision to explore the role of Serena, "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.”

The question “What do you know about the opera’s portrayal of African Americans” opened the floor for far-ranging comments. Eleven of the 107 respondents mostly saw the portrayal in a negative way, a view expressed in the following comment: “It reflects the perceptions and attitudes of white men in the 1930s, which can make people of all races uncomfortable today.”

Another comment was more direct: “As I said earlier, I feel like the portrayal of African Americans is far too stereotypical and like a white person's portrayal of black people as opposed to black.”

Conversely, 23 comments were far more positive. They noted no racial stereotypes. One respondent stated that “I never really thought about it as being a ‘racial’ opera but rather one that deal with a social milieu.”

This comment represented the perspective that Gershwin had written about complicated characters who happened to be African American:

The opera doesn't portray African Americans. It portrays people. Some critics have assumed that because white people wrote it and because these characters are poor and uneducated, the work suggests all African Americans cannot learn or cannot succeed due to some inherent weakness. The piece does not say that anymore than the French writers



of *Carmen* are saying all Spanish women are whores. It's a work of art with complex characters depicted through wonderful, positive, dramatic music.

The majority of respondents, 34, noted negative portrayals, but they also tended to note the era in which the opera—and the novel that it was based upon—had been written:

Gershwin first wrote a one-act opera (1922?) with some dramatic and musical themes similar to *Porgy* but with an all white cast in blackface. It was a failure and removed from the George White Scandals after one performance. A planned non-operatic version of the novel was planned for Al Jolson in blackface but it was never produced. The 1935 opera on Broadway was headed by an all-white staff, but in spite of its demeaning aspects gave employment/exposure to many great African American artists.

One respondent concluded that the characterizations were important to the substance of the story and the opera as a whole:

...I've heard the music and the full opera over a period of 50+ years. I've taught the songs and read a lot about Gershwin, esp. the writing of *Porgy*. (In case this [*question*] does not show up later: The story has an historic setting and those people are the ones that should tell it. The time and place are extremely important in this telling. No 'modernisation' would do

any justice/purpose. Only a few characters could be from a mixed community, if ever sung that way & starts diluting its integrity.)

Three respondents anticipated a later survey question that asked whether singing roles could be successfully performed by non-Blacks:

It is dated but then so is most opera. I am not black. I would not be asked to perform. I did the music outside the country where it was looked upon as interesting that I am American performing work by an American composer. That of course is not the way we think of it here. I have no problem with black singers portraying the roles. They do not get enough work as it is.

The next question asked participants whether their understanding of the portrayal of African Americans in *Porgy and Bess* influenced decisions regarding whether to perform the opera. Ninety-five respondents said that it had not influenced them or that they were unsure whether it had. The 24 respondents who replied “Yes” were then asked as a follow-up how their understanding had influenced them. Only one respondent was definitively negative with the comment, “I never will [sing it]!”

Fourteen positive comments focused on Gershwin’s intent: “It’s the great American opera, by a Russian-American Jew with the deepest respect for African-American culture, striving to show its nobility and musical genius. I try to promote its performance.”

Some of the responses focused on the impact on African American careers over the years: “This opera has been a gift to African Americans who have wished to pursue

a professional career in opera and the beautiful music has been a gift to the entire world.”

Five respondents were concerned about the portrayals and the effect the decision to take a role might have on African Americans’ professional careers: “It is discouraging that many of my colleagues, who are wonderful singers and have performed the work, have become pigeon-holed into only doing Porgy's. Many lament this and regret doing the show.”

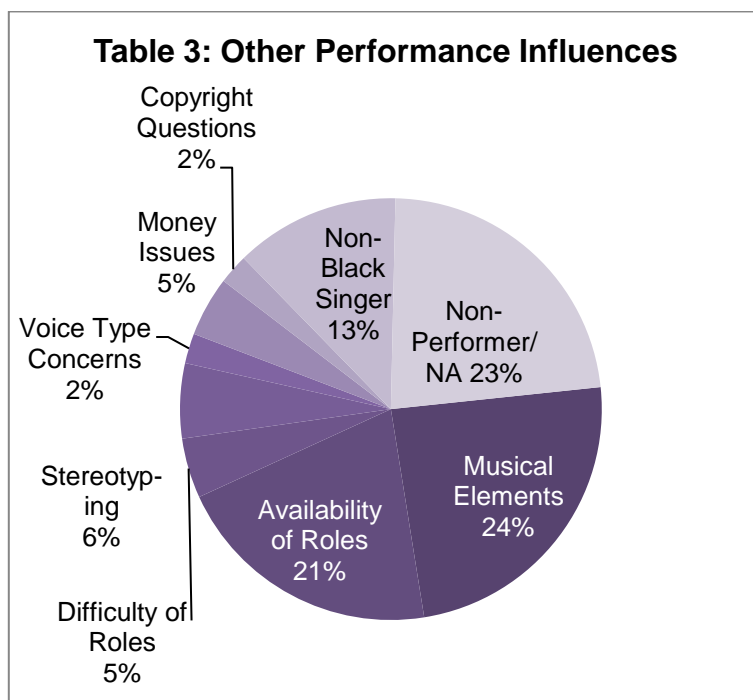
Shirley’s remarks to a similar question in his interview also reflect this view:

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..."

Some respondents were also concerned about how opera company decision-makers chose to produce the opera: “As stated, you just never know what the director is going to do with the piece. In other words, there's a trust factor missing.”

All respondents were then asked if there were other factors that influenced their decisions whether to perform the opera. The responses tended to fall into one of nine categories. [Table 3]

A slight majority of the 87 respondents to this question were primarily influenced by the quality of the music:



I have always thought this was a fabulous opera and, as with all operas, the characters were dramatized. However, the roles are amazing opportunities. I recall William Warfield talking about the very human role of Porgy and how much he enjoyed it. He also loved singing "It Ain't Necessarily So" in recital because he said it was a great song and he never got a chance to sing it in the opera.

Because the second largest group of respondents was not performers, the question did not apply to them. The next largest group was influenced by the availability

of roles. They were especially concerned that accepting a role in *Porgy and Bess* would potentially inhibit their opportunities to get other roles.

A respondent who described her/himself as a voice teacher stated that “I was advised as a young student to be careful of becoming a *Porgy* singer.”

Shirley’s reactions also reflected this view, “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.”

While some respondents in this group recognized the negative portrayals of African Americans that have been attributed to the opera, they concluded that the strength of the music outweighed the effects of those portrayals.

I have always heard and thought that once you perform in *Porgy and Bess*, it's hard to get anything else. Once producers see that you have performed the opera, they save your resume in the pile entitled 'the next time we do *Porgy and Bess* we'll call her'. [Name deleted] & [name deleted] seem to have multiple opera roles coming in. But [name deleted] suffers from 'too much Bess' and 'not much else.'

Conversely, others stated the importance of the availability of the roles to their careers:

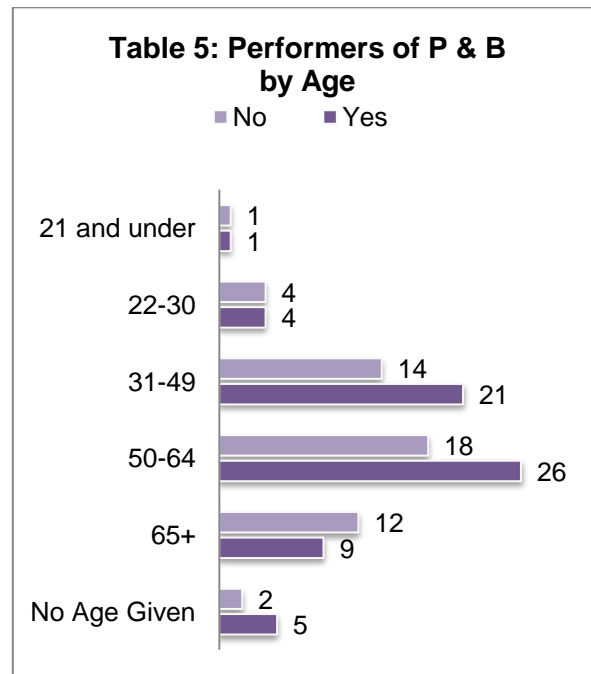
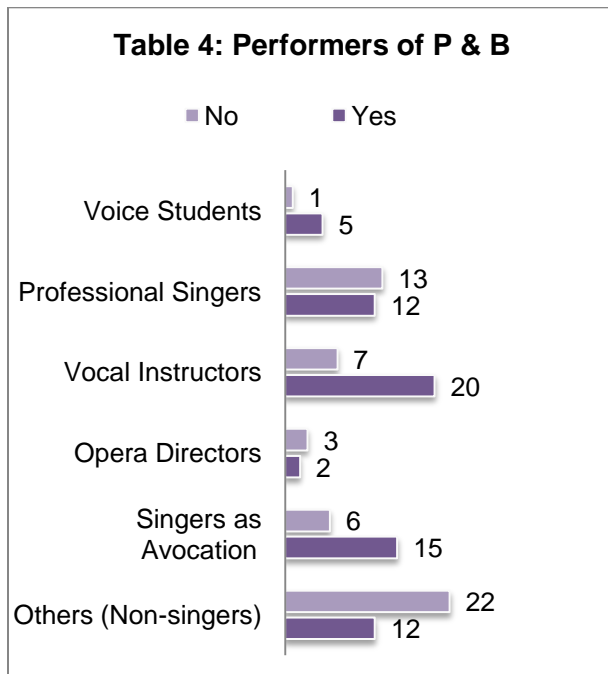
*Porgy and Bess* was a significant part of my operatic career. I supported myself as opera singer for several years. If it were not for *Porgy*, I would

have given up long ago. I was able to travel the world and sing the opera in many great venues.

Webster’s comments reflect both sides of the issue:

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*.”

Sixty-six respondents stated that they had performed portions of the opera in public. [Table 4] Seventy-eight percent of African Americans had performed at least an aria from *Porgy and Bess*, while 32% of the remaining respondents had done so.



When breaking down those who answered this question by age, only those who were 65 or older had a higher percentage of No responses (57%) than Yes. [Table 5]

A follow-up question asked whether respondents anticipated performing arias or roles from *Porgy and Bess* in the future. Forty-nine percent selected “No” over “Yes” or “Not sure,” with 16 of the respondents who had previously performed from the opera indicating that they had no future plans to sing from it. However, only five of those 16 currently describe themselves primarily as singers.

Of the five singers interviewed, only Swanson indicated that he had not performed any portions of the opera since his staged production premiere.

Next, respondents were asked whether they anticipated teaching arias or roles from the opera to their students in the future. Forty-two percent answered yes, indicating that they would base their criteria on technical or interpretative considerations for their students and importance of the opera itself to the deep and diverse development of their students’ repertoires. In their comments, responses included this observation, “I will teach music from the opera because of its historical significance. Gershwin did a fine job at capturing the essence of the Afro American prototype of the time. He also was able to use Black musical idioms authentically.”

A similar comment came from another respondent, “I think I've done enough of the roles to teach any one of the arias in the opera. Singing *Porgy and Bess* requires the same strength, pacing and stamina one would utilize in any Puccini opera - there's no difference.”

However, even among those who replied “Yes,” there was still concern about the performance of parts from the opera by non-Blacks:

If I am fortunate enough to have an African American soprano who can do the aria justice, you better believe she'll learn "Summertime"! I learned it myself, but I was discouraged from performing it by my teacher as I am Caucasian and would not have done the aria justice. I agreed with her decision! I believe this opera needs African American voices to make it work.

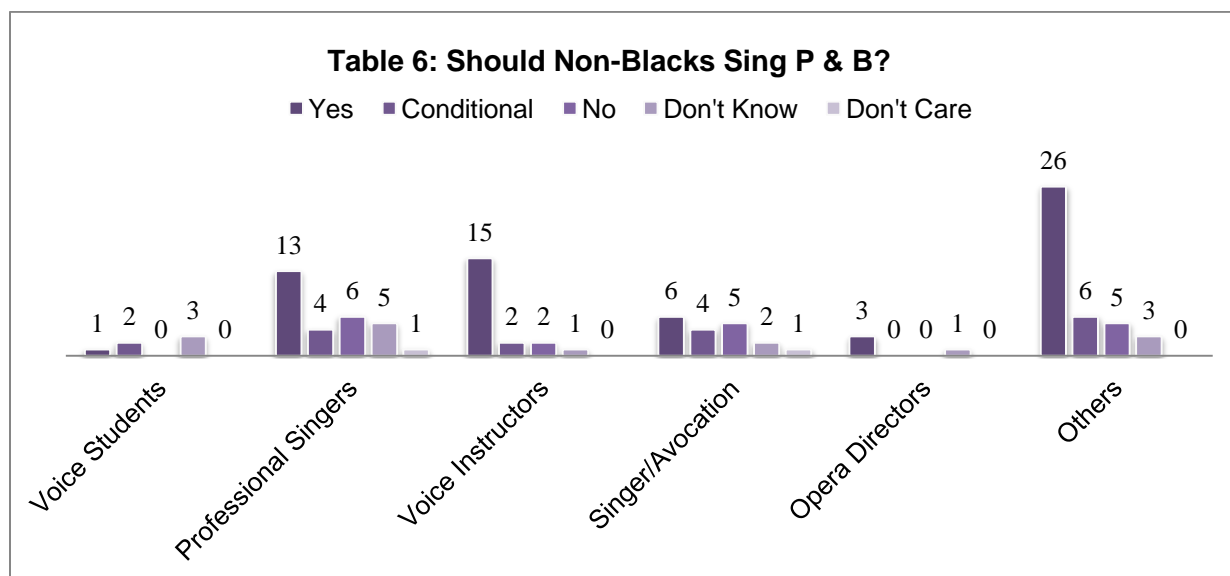
From the 20% who replied “No,” the comments mostly reflected two concerns: teaching the music to their non-Black students and “looking for more positive images and representations.” Those who replied “Not Sure” (16%) shared the same concerns, “If the arias/roles are appropriate for a future student, then of course I would teach them. But with this specific opera, "appropriateness" for learning these roles is not limited to the singer's vocal and acting ability.”

Of the singers interviewed, only Shirley stated that he had worked with any of his voice students on portions of the opera. He noted that, “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.”

In the next series of questions, respondents were asked whether they believed that non-Blacks should perform arias or roles from *Porgy and Bess*. Of the 117

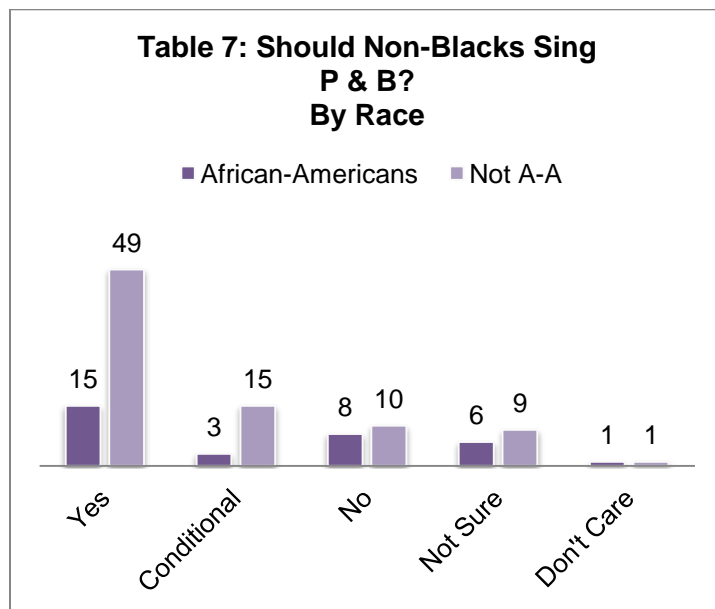


responses, 55% responded yes, 15% answered yes but with conditions, 15% indicated no, 13% were not sure, and two respondents said they did not care. [Table 6]



When these responses were sorted by race [Table 7] and age [Table 8] groups, both groups revealed higher percentages of positive compared to negative responses.

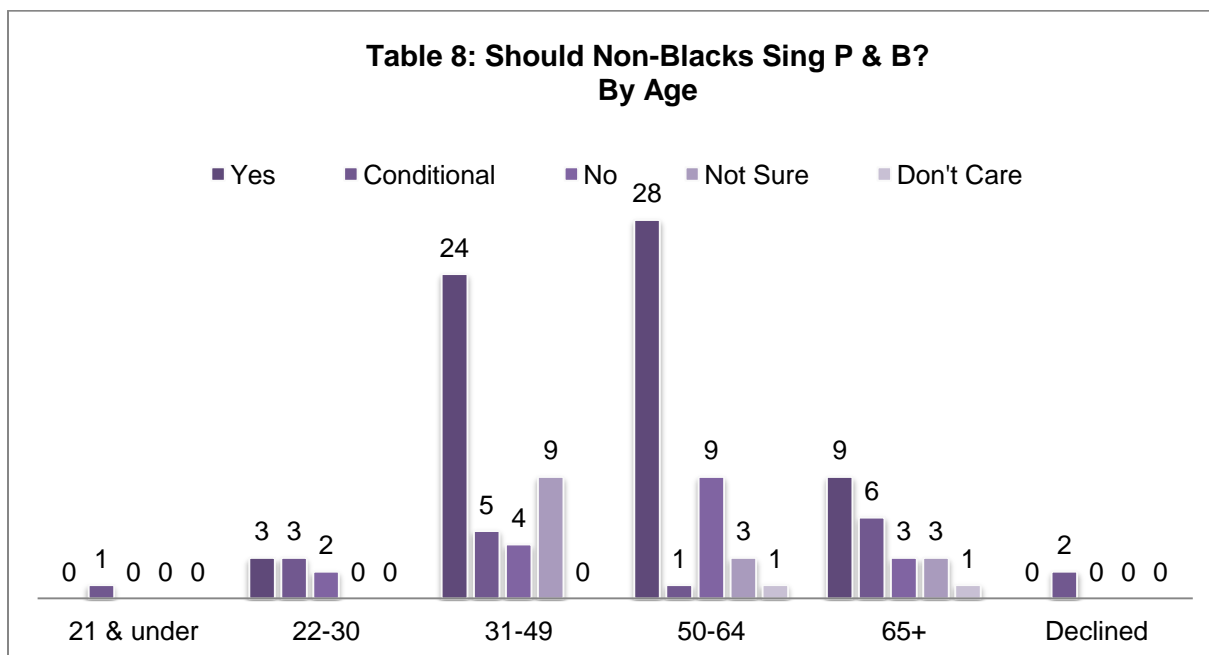
Comments related to this question suggested strongly held opinions by the respondents.



One of those who responded “Yes” commented, “To be a consummate opera singer from the U.S.A., one should also grasp some ethnic knowledge of the melting pot

that America is, just as we must learn the German, Italian, Russian, Czech, French cultures.” Another respondent expressed a similar argument:

In the past, whites would "mimic" blacks in how we act, talk and sing.....that has mostly changed with few exceptions. Singers like Michael Bolton show that whites can sing R&B or soul music with the same passion and feeling without trying to "sound" black. Also, Blacks sing Lieder, Italian art songs, etc. with perfect diction - e.g. Kathy Battle or Leontyne Price.....same situation. In the past, Blacks could only sing in P&B. That's how we got work. But there are more options now.



Estes was emphatic in his support for non-Blacks performing roles from *Porgy and Bess*:

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.

Although supportive of the notion of non-Blacks singing the opera, respondents who had concerns often stated that non-Blacks should limit performance to concert venues and not extend to stage productions:

I'm not exactly sure that they should... after all, Gershwin did specify that non-African Americans not be permitted to perform the roles of African Americans. But in this day and age, we recognize that as a form of racism. While I understand that opera is becoming an increasingly visual medium in which physical image matters now more than ever, I believe this will open the door to casting under-qualified singers, which, in this field, can harm the production's success AND the singer's health.

The majority of respondents who opposed non-Blacks singing the opera were primarily concerned about whether the performance would suffer from lack of authenticity, either because of the non-Black singer's inability to sing the role or to realistically portray the characters:

It needs the richness of the African American sound. Gershwin wanted it that way, and I believe the audience does, too. Even one simple aria from the opera in concert version is just not as good when sung by a non African-American. If you can get things as authentic as possible, the performance is more effective. I am also thinking about other beloved American shows..."Fiddler on the Roof," for example. When an actor who is actually Jewish portrays Tevye, it DOES make a difference!

The next survey question asked, "Currently, the Gershwin estate requires that productions of the opera assign singing roles to African Americans. Do you believe this has any effects on decisions to perform the opera?" This question and the three that followed went directly to the issue of whether American opera companies decide to program *Porgy and Bess* because of this restriction. Fifty-eight percent of question respondents answered "Yes," while 22% responded "No" and 20% were not sure. Many noted that the challenge of casting not only affected soloists, but impacted the chorus as well:

It is becoming difficult to find quality, operatically trained African American singers to sing this opera as legitimately as *[it]* should. Companies are finding the expense of hiring and bringing in black choristers from other

cities hard to bear sometimes. [American Guild of Musical Artists] houses have taken advantage of this by not having proper language in their collective bargaining agreements in regards to this type of production which includes dance, movement, and much staging time, especially for the chorus.

Some respondents saw the impact as mixed:

I believe this has both a positive and negative impact. On the positive side, I have seen a few talented musicians get opportunities to perform on the stage when they normally would not have been considered. On the negative side, I feel like the opera is not taken as seriously as others in the standard repertoire and it's used to "throw a bone" to the African American performing community and their patrons.

Swanson's response to this question reflected the mixed reactions:

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.

The next question asked participants what they believed the impact would be on the frequency of the opera's performance when the restrictions are lifted. Twenty-seven percent anticipated significant impact, 35% concluded that there would be some impact, 22% expected limited impact, and 12% did not believe there would be any impact. Four percent of those who responded were unsure, including one who replied that the restriction would not be lifted and another stating that "it depends on where society is in 2030," the year the opera is currently scheduled to enter the public domain.

Predominantly, those who see no impact felt that the restrictions would continue to be honored, even after *Porgy and Bess* enters the public domain:

I think nothing will change. The work will continue to be performed the way it has always been performed and as frequently. Anyone with ears, eyes, and a brain will realize that performing the singing roles by anyone other than African Americans would be pointless and absurd.

Those who expect limited impact also tended to believe the African American singer would have the advantage in role assignments for *Porgy and Bess*:

...In opera, the story is a bit different - we still get whites-in-blackface singing Otello, Monostatos, etc. And we certainly get whites singing Cio-Cio-San, Turandot, Xerxes, etc. But what you do not find is a white playing a black not just in *Porgy and Bess* (where Gershwin's estate won't allow it), but in Joplin's *Treemonisha*, Delius' *Koanga*, Anthony Davis's *Malcolm X* - or singing Tituba in Ward's *The Crucible*. Who decides when it's okay to cross-cast whites as non-whites, and when it's not, is still a mystery to

me. But I think it's going to be a very long time before you start seeing mixed-race casts for *Porgy*, or *Treemonisha*, or *Koanga*. And I think even now, if it comes down to two equally qualified singers auditioning for *Otello*, and one of them is black, he's going to get cast. Reverse discrimination? Well, the way things are going with Hispanic immigration and birthrates in the U.S., and Arab ones in France, Belgium, and The Netherland, and Indian and Pakistani ones in the UK, the Caucasians may all find themselves in the minority in a few generations from now. In which case, we can all start struggling for civil and minority casting rights.

Even those who believe there will be some impact concluded that the race of the singer would be difficult to overlook:

I believe there will always be some resistance in the US toward Caucasians performing staged versions of P&B. It's not just a question of wearing dark makeup. It has to do with white contemporary singers attempting to portray this very specific category of African-Americans in this very specific time and place. Many people of both races will simply find the attempt to be offensive.

Those who envisioned significant impact focused more on the strength of the opera's music and its potential popularity once roles become available to non-Blacks:

There are so many performers who love the music from *Porgy and Bess*, and it will drastically open up the doors for other performers to pursue to

roles. However, it will also lower the frequency of African Americans performing the opera as well. It is a give and take. Both are not necessarily good or bad.

Shirley was asked what impact, if any, he thought the release of the restrictions would have on vocal instructors' decisions to teach roles from *Porgy and Bess* to their students, especially non-Black students. He stated that, "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."

The survey's final question asked participants to share any additional insights about *Porgy and Bess* or its performance. Many used the opportunity to summarize or expand upon comments made earlier. Several encapsulated the thoughts expressed throughout the survey related to casting:

Honestly, I'd forgotten about the performance restriction. Now that I remember the 1975 [School name deleted] Chamber Choir tour, I recall that all the soloists (3 or 4: [Singers names deleted] ) needed for the excerpts we performed) were African-American. I now remember thinking (naively, I suppose) that our tour group (28 voices) was fortunate to have outstanding singers who "happened" to be black.



Some reiterated Gershwin's intent to provide one of his era's few opportunities to honor Black performers:

If there are enough black singers of sufficient skill to perform this work, that is preferable. But if it can be done well artistically with a mixed cast that would be fine by me. I believe Gershwin wrote the piece in gratitude for all that he owed to black musicians. I think that debt has been paid. Wagner had strong ideas about the way he wanted his works to be performed, but we have had many years of performances that do his works justice but that do not conform to what he had in mind by way of production, costumes, etc.

Some comments focused on real and perceived controversies of the opera:

I think the "controversies" have more to do with political and social conflicts than with the actual work itself. I have yet to hear or read anyone who is "against" the work give adequate evidence for its exclusion solely based on what's in the score or in the libretto. People want it to "represent" race when its purpose is to "represent" people. The "dialect" of the libretto is usually one of the sticks people use to beat it with, claiming it is "unreal" and "unrepresentative." Well, I can walk down my neighborhood on any given day and hear speech that is not that different from what's in the libretto. In fact, my own family tree is filled with mostly uneducated farmers, etc., and their speech is not that far from what's in the libretto. Someone can find "stereotypes" throughout the entire history

of opera if looked for. My example from *Carmen* is but one. A Scot could say *Lucia di Lammermoor* gives a prejudicial view of all Scots (many of the characters act abominably) or *Faust* depicts all Germans as "immoral", or 90% of ALL opera does not depict women "correctly," but always weak and helpless and destroyed by men. This is to put a political definition on a work of art that is not defined by politics.

Other comments reiterated the positive and negative effects the opera has had on Black performers:

This opera gives the opportunity for black performers to perform. I say black performers, because we are not all African-Americans. The danger, to me, is that this opera is all we will be able to get hired in large numbers to do, and then get paid minimally to do it. I feel that "we" already get taken advantage of because we WANT to work, and the opera companies know this. This opera is a crowd favorite because of its easy flow, and wonderful music. Not necessarily the best story, but when you get to the final song, "O Lawd, I'm on my way," whatever opinion you have about this opera and its future, you can't help but feel uplifted!

Several days after the survey closed, the author developed an additional question to engage participants' views of whether they could foresee circumstances where they and/or one of their students would wish to be the first non-Black to sing a role from the opera on an American stage.

To explore this last question, 13 survey participants who had stated that they were either vocal instructors or did not consider themselves to be African-American—and had included an email address with the survey—were asked if would they take the role and/or advise their students to take it. They were then asked the reason for their response, and what they would hope to accomplish if they chose to take the role.

Seven participants responded. Two of them would not sing themselves nor recommend it to their students:

*[Email Respondent 1]* If one of my non-African American students was offered the chance to be the first non-African American singer to star in *Porgy and Bess*, I would advise against it. I would do this because roles for African American singers are difficult enough to come by without non-African American singers taking over one of the hallmarks of the repertory. I feel the same way about sopranos singing Carmen—or Rosina in *The Barber of Seville*.

*[Email Respondent 2]* I would not take the role as a non-Black. I would not feel that I could do it justice since there are several insanely talented black sopranos out there. To me it would make no sense at all. (In fact, I can say with confidence that I would be the WORST possible soprano to cast in *Porgy and Bess*. I'm the palest redhead you'll ever see, and critics would have a field day with THAT alone). I would also advise my non-Black students to not take a role in the opera for the very same reasons. I

think this opera was written for the gorgeous, unique African American voice, and it should stay that way.

Four respondents were uncertain or needed to feel the right conditions were in place before accepting a role in the opera:

*[Email Respondent 3]* I'm really not sure what I'd do if asked to do one of the roles. I might take it. Might not. Again, I really need to know more and also would not want to do something that would be offensive to another race or culture....

*[Email Respondent 4]* I probably would leave the decision to the singer, after discussing the history of its performance. I would say go for it, if it were a concert performance, but personally would vote no for an opera, mainly because of the confusion for the audience.

*[Email Respondent 5]* As a singer, it would depend on how sensitively the production was being staged: so many things!!! Number one being if they wanted it in black face—out of the question. For instance, if were staged as a poor white Appalachian farmer, much as Shakespeare is re-staged to be “relevant” or as illegal immigrants in southern CA near the border it might be done well; it might also be done very badly. As I said, so MANY things!!!!

*[Email Respondent 6]* Considering the historic nature of reinterpreting *Porgy and Bess* presumably still in an inner city context, but not with only African American singers, I would have to be very convinced that it was

going to be handled very well before I would consider being a part of it. Gershwin took quite a lot of pains to get the music right, including the right singers, so whoever would undertake such a reinterpretation ought to take no less pains to get it right... The music is satisfying to sing, and the plot and characters are considerably easier to access than many other operas. What I would hope to accomplish from the performance: I guess the same as with any opera: to bring to the public an outstanding work they should know.

Only one respondent answered unequivocally that he would accept the role:

Without hesitation. I believe that the opera is greater than the limited ethnic setting it has become shackled to. I think Gershwin is the greatest American composer, and I would love the opportunity to immerse myself in the musical genres he drew on for P&B. I also believe that the African-American (NOT just "African", which is a condescending umbrella term for a very wide range of cultures) musical input needs to be recognised as AMERICAN. The original motto of the USA was "e pluribus unum", and this is the immigrant dream. Americans need to remember that we're all immigrants from somewhere (I include the "Native Americans" in this, following a long and interesting discussion of the flute music of southern NA tribes, which clearly points to a Central American origin). As you can see, I think of this in terms of a civil rights statement - I, too, have a dream.

## Conclusion

Clearly, *Porgy and Bess* is undergoing a re-evaluation of the portrayal of its African American characters. A majority of respondents were willing to frame the characterizations within the era of the story and to focus on the strength of the music and George Gershwin's intent. They were also inclined to look at depth of characters, as noted in one comment: "Understand the story is more complex than on the first introduction. Especially the sense of community that is in the story."

In addition to the remaining issues about the opera's racial characterizations, there were a number of African American respondents who were concerned that performing the opera could be as much a hindrance to their careers as a help. They noted that a call to sing in *Porgy and Bess* was no guarantee that they would be called to sing in other operas.

Despite these concerns, more singers responded that they had studied and/or performed at least an aria from the opera than those who had not. Similarly, more than twice as many respondents indicated that they would teach arias or roles to their students as those who would not.

The question of whether American opera companies will stage more productions seems dependent upon either a further increase of Blacks in their rosters or on the successful performance of the roles by non-Blacks. A clear majority of survey respondents supported the premise that staged performance of the opera should include non-Black singers.

There is little doubt that the first non-Blacks who perform *Porgy and Bess* in an American production will spark controversy, whether that's in 2030 or sooner, if the Gershwin estate released the restriction on the opera's singing cast. If the views of performers, opera directors, and the opera-going public continue to shift towards tolerance—and the singers' stellar performances leave no room for criticism—the controversy will be minor, and there will be a significant growth in the performance of the opera in both the studio and on the opera stage. If, however, these conditions do not exist, the singers—and the director who hired them—will likely face career-disrupting condemnation and cause a setback in the integration of this great American “folk opera.”

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Afrocentric Voices in Classical Music

Art of the Negro Spiritual

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