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The entry titled "Atlanta Opera's 'Porgy and Bess'," and any of the comments about it.

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Atlanta Opera's 'Porgy and Bess'

By [Pierre Ruhe](#) | Friday, November 18, 2005, 01:22 AM

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

OPERA REVIEW George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess." Atlanta Opera. Thursday at the Boisfeuillet Jones Atlanta Civic Center. Repeat performances Saturday evening and Sunday matinee. [www.atlantaopera.org](#).

With an all-around winning production of "Porgy and Bess," Gershwin's 1935 classic, the Atlanta Opera has, once again, far exceeded expectations.

It's the first season of new leadership for the 26-year-old company, now under general director Dennis Hanthorn. The season opener, "La Traviata" in October, was easily the best show the company had every delivered. Now "Porgy," in its long-belated company premiere, continues the rapid ascent.

But the opera itself is problematic. It's also likely the Great American Opera. When Gershwin completed "Porgy," his first "serious" stage work after a long run of Broadway musicals, he was on his way toward uniting the multiple threads of American music, seamlessly connecting gospel, blues, jazz, Yiddish and other immigrant folk songs and European classical and modernist styles.

Musically, he mostly succeeded. With 70 years of hindsight it's apparent that "Porgy's" libretto — by his brother Ira Gershwin with DuBose and Dorothy Heyward — includes too many characters and can't decide how seriously, or sympathetically, to draw the principal roles.

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The Gershwins' depiction of Charleston's most impoverished neighborhood — infested by drugs, gambling, sex, superstition and murder — has been likened to that of tourists enthralled by local underclass vice. In trying to capture the steamy, heady jumble of life on Catfish Row, they take too many detours, with a resulting lack of theatrical focus. What's the central concern? Is it the main love triangle, or the bustling neighborhood itself? The Gershwins hadn't thought that one through. At three and a half hours, it can be a long evening in the theater.

Still, it's by far the most popular American opera. The big tunes — “Summertime,” “I Got Plenty O' Nothin',” “Bess, You is My Woman Now” — are fixtures of the American songbook.

The Atlanta Opera production is built on an experienced cast, many of whom have performed the opera together elsewhere.

As Porgy, Alvy Powell, has sung the cart-kneeling beggar literally thousands of times yet with an energetic delivery, a rich bass and clear diction, he made the role seem spontaneous, humane.

Marquita Lister sang Bess, one of the most emotionally screwed-up women in the opera world. Slender, tall and charismatic, Lister has a large voice to match: purring in the middle range, glassy on top and sometimes a little out of control.

With a powerful voice and presence, Cedric Cannon commanded the part of the drug, drink and testosterone-fueled Crown. The Serena, Mary Elizabeth Williams, had the most gorgeous voice on stage. Her sorrow was deeply affecting.

Sportin' Life often steals the show. Here Chauncey Packer was the complete entertainer, sleazy and compelling, yet the others held their own against his fast-foot dance moves and ebullient persona.

Overall, this was deluxe casting, with notable contributions from Anita Johnson (as Clara, who sings the lullaby “Summertime”), Leonard Rowe (Jake), Barron Coleman (Robbins), Marjorie Wharton (Maria). Even bit parts were taken by vocally fetching singers. Maria Clark's strawberry seller received a well-earned burst of applause for her tiny number.

Most scenes include a large crowd. The chorus was prepared by miracle worker Walter Huff. The Gershwin estate dictates that the entire “Porgy” cast (except the policemen) must be African-Americans; the Atlanta Opera chorus regulars are mostly white. Huff thus recruited several dozen superb black singers — a chorus of about 40 — and drilled them into a tight, vigorous, impassioned unit. It was the best “Porgy” chorus I've ever heard.

Despite this large and active cast, stage director Larry Marshall, a veteran “Porgy” performer in his own right, did a smart job keeping the story flowing, the acting authentic, the action front and center — essential for a 4,500-seat theater.

The power behind the on-stage success came from conductor Stefan Lano. An American living in Switzerland, Lano is a serious composer and was recently named music director of Buenos Aires' venerable Teatro Colon. He's making his local debut with Gershwin's opera — which is, in effect, his audition for the Atlanta Opera's music directorship.

In that regard, his “Porgy” was magnificent. Did anyone know this orchestra could play so quietly, with such nuance or, in an instant, unleash such unbridled rage and power? Although it was his first time conducting “Porgy,” he placed the opera in the context of the early-20th century modernists, from Ravel to young Copland.

Lano correctly gauged the orchestra's sound in the cavernous Civic Center. He took a rather slow tempo for the overture's bustle of notes, for instance, emphasizing clarity without sacrificing expression.

He managed the same throughout the evening: the conductor kept the orchestra's articulation clean and the musical lines taut. And he did it without a hint of flash or ego, where the musicians in the pit and the singers on stage seemed bonded as one ensemble. They get the credit; he did the hard work. And it's yet another sign of the company's new-found confidence and quality.

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Comments

Commenting is now closed for this entry.

By Betty Guffin

November 18, 2005 8:40 AM | [Link to this](#)

Excellent review. Right on target !

By Elaine Watts

November 18, 2005 10:52 AM | [Link to this](#)

I applaud the performance, the actors and the orchestra...but the sound in the loge was terrible...many people complained during intermission about the unclear, muddled sound. It seemed a little clearer after intermission but still poor speaker quality...I was disappointed.

By Anon

November 18, 2005 11:50 AM | [Link to this](#)

I loved the show. It was a really interesting change. The chorus was fantastic, I think the best part were the group songs. However, I also had difficulty hearing, the performers sounded muffled at times.

The two Sopranos - Bess and Serena were very clear, but I had difficulty hearing the smaller parts. And I had difficulty hearing Porgy, which was essential. I could hear him, but like I said, it was a little muffled.

By ft

November 18, 2005 5:35 PM | [Link to this](#)

i think she saw a different opera than we did. traviata, as noted, was sensational. porgy — which i'll admit i don't like regardless (and i've heard both cab calloway and sammy davis do sportin life and they were terrific), has a boring, totally unfocused plot, is a story about who knows what? and has just a few good tunes to fill up a boring 3.5 hrs! very good voices, better utilized on better material.

most interesting part of the evening was the audience (both black and white) - most of whom were probably experiencing their first visit to the atlanta opera. maybe something good will come of that — but doubtful!

By Julius Willis, Sr

November 28, 2005 11:42 AM | [Link to this](#)

Where is Porgy and Bess playing next. Unfortunately, I missed it when it was in Atlanta. I would like to go see it if it is the Continental U.S. Thanks.

By Julius Willis, Sr

November 28, 2005 11:45 AM | [Link to this](#)

Where is Porgy and Bess playing next? Unfortunately, I missed it when it was in Atlanta. I would like to go see it if it is the Continental U.S. Thanks.

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