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Hannah Edgar
University of Chicago

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Abstract

At the apex of their careers, composers George Gershwin and William Grant Still produced what they believed were their finest works: respectively, *Porgy and Bess* (1935), an opera by a white American composer about African American subjects, and *Troubled Island* (1949), an opera by an African American composer about Haitian subjects. However, both works fared poorly upon their premiere, with critics decrying *Porgy and Bess* and *Troubled Island* as “unoperatic.” Besides providing historical context to both operas, this paper argues that the critical rhetoric surrounding them was tinged by racialized notions of what musical “blackness” sounded like, or *should* sound like, to white ears. This paper focuses on critics’ coinage of “the cheap” or “popular” as a euphemism for music inspired by African American musical traditions like jazz, the blues, and spirituals. The paper concludes that, while the art music canon *can* be responsive to social justice movements, critics’ scorn of works like *Porgy and Bess* and *Troubled Island* contributes to the entrenchment of an implicitly racialized high–low musical dichotomy.

Keywords

William Grant Still, George Gershwin, music criticism, race, opera

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Hannah Edgar
Year IV – University of Chicago

As Georg Friedrich Haas’ “I can’t breathe (In memoriam Eric Garner),” Vijay Iyer’s “Suite for Trayvon (and Thousands More),” Ted Hearne’s *Coloring Book*, and other recent social justice-oriented compositions demonstrate, contemporary classical music is buzzing with the reverberations of the Black Lives Matter movement. This redoubled sociopolitical engagement has cast a critical mirror on the classical canon in recent years, and, as usual, the reflection is overwhelmingly white. In forging a way forward, a look at the past offers illuminating insights: What has been the rhetoric of exclusion in Western concert music? What were its terms, its euphemisms? And how did we get here, now? This paper will examine racial hegemony in Western art music, specifically how critical receptions of works reinforce otherized conceptions of Blackness. Two prominent twentieth-century composers will be analyzed as case studies, and contrasted: George Gershwin—a white composer whose *Porgy and Bess* remains in the canon despite its controversial history—and

William Grant Still—one of the most prominent twentieth-century African American composers whose opera *Troubled Island* has been relegated to the fringes of the repertoire.

Though Still and Gershwin's careers took on dramatically different trajectories, foundational elements of their compositional approaches overlap. Both traded in the popular music industry before launching their "serious" concert careers. However, at the time, their associations with that industry—not to mention the very distinction between popular and art music—were inherently racialized. Still, who knew since boyhood that he wanted to compose orchestral music, later said that popular music "was the only commercial field open to [him] and others like [him]." ¹ With few other options, he viewed his early experiences playing and arranging show tunes as a stepping stone, but not "an end in itself."²

Although he had similar ambitions as Still throughout his songwriting career, Gershwin's vocational prospects were never as tightly constrained. Gershwin passed fluidly between the worlds of Tin Pan Alley and the concert hall, though some of his contemporaries used this fluidity to challenge his status as a "serious" composer: His major orchestral works (e.g. *Rhapsody in Blue*, *An American in Paris*, the Concerto in F) were often discussed in terms of an apparent elevation of jazz, or even a debasement of classical music. In 1925, an essay for *Vanity Fair*

¹ Coincidentally, Gershwin sent an effusive autographed copy of *Rhapsody in Blue* to W.C. Handy, the "Father of the Blues" and Still's employer during his songwriting days.

² William Grant Still, "A Composer's Viewpoint," in *William Grant Still and the Fusion of Cultures in American Music*, edited by Robert Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1972), 126.

written by critic and *Four Saints in Three Acts* composer Virgil Thomson read disapprovingly of “highbrow jazz” like *Rhapsody in Blue*. He argued that jazz, which he called “dance music... [with no] intrinsic musical quality beyond this elementary muscle-jerking,” could be elevated through symphonic treatment, but was still not a suitable subject for such.³ Thomson’s essay is only somewhat nuanced: He asks critical questions about classically trained composers’ positionality to and appropriation of jazz, while praising the works of Black composer R. Nathaniel Dett (though he misspells his name as “Delt”). However, given that the classical idiom has been conventionally forged by white Europeans and the jazz idiom by Black Americans, the rhetoric of Thomson’s dismissal—especially in equating jazz with a certain base physicality—hinges on racialized value judgments and a problematic ghettoization of both genres.

The reception of *Porgy and Bess* was emblematic of similar rhetoric. After its New York premiere, it was criticized as being more akin to musical theater than opera, despite being explicitly defined as the latter and calling for classically-trained singers. Critic Paul Rosenfeld dismissed *Porgy* as “an aggrandized musical show,” while Thomson, sharpening his pen again for *Modern Music* magazine, wrote that “Gershwin does not even know what an opera is.”⁴ Again, the implication was clear: Gershwin had failed because *Porgy and Bess*’ spiritual- and blues-influenced idiom was too popular in tone—a euphemism for artistic inferiority.

Most importantly, both Still and Gershwin took after Antonín Dvořák in their belief that spirituals (and later, jazz and

³ Virgil Thomson, “The Cult of Jazz,” *Vanity Fair*, June 1925, 54.

⁴ Virgil Thomson, “George Gershwin,” *Modern Music* Vol. 8, No. 1 (November–December 1935), 17.

blues) ought to be an integral part of a uniquely American music. Still's vision of American music was wholly cosmopolitan: He composed works informed by Latin American, Native American, and European folk themes, as well as Black spirituals. "Just as America was once known as the 'melting pot,' so is American folk music as rich and as interesting as the music of all the national and racial groups that come to these shores... Just as most of these people are now Americans, so can their music be classified as American," he once wrote.⁵

Gershwin, too, believed that the heterogeneity of American music was its most essential feature. He had long dreamed of producing a full-length opera on American themes set in his home city.⁶ "I'd like to write an opera of the melting pot, of New York City itself, with its blend of native and immigrant strains... black and white, Eastern and Western," he wrote to a friend in 1929.⁷ Gershwin's goal was to craft a unique musical voice that "should achieve out of this diversity, an artistic unity." Gershwin eventually abandoned the draft in favor of *Porgy and Bess*. However, his decision to refocus the ambitious project on a poor Black community in the South at a time when most American composers of "serious" music turned to Anglo-Saxon themes was nothing short of radical.⁸ Moreover, Gershwin

⁵ William Grant Still and Verna Arvey, "Our American Musical Resources," in *The William Grant Still Reader: Essays on American Music*, edited by Jon Michael Spencer (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 194.

⁶ David Zax, "Summertime for George Gershwin," *Smithsonian*, August 8, 2010. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/summertime-for-george-gershwin-2170485/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ray Allen, "An American Folk Opera? Triangulating Folkness, Blackness, and Americanness in Gershwin and Heyward's *Porgy and Bess*," *The Journal of American Folklore* 117, no. 465 (2004), 254.

stipulated that the opera have an all-Black cast at a time when other staged works were freely using blackface singers and when opportunities for classically-trained vocalists of color were few. As baritone Todd Duncan, who originated the role of Porgy, recalled, “The fact that the show had an all-black cast was part of [the backlash to *Porgy and Bess*]... Remember, that was 54 years ago, a time when Negroes weren’t allowed into this theater or that, into this church or that restaurant.”⁹

In subtitling *Porgy and Bess* “an American folk opera” as opposed to a “Negro folk opera,” Gershwin centers historically African American musical traditions in his rendering of American folk music, echoing Dvořák’s sentiments some decades before.¹⁰ Gershwin outlined his reasoning for identifying *Porgy and Bess* as a “folk opera” in a somewhat circular statement to the *New York Times*:

Porgy and Bess is a folk tale. Its people naturally would sing folk music. When I first began work on the music I decided against the use of original folk material because I wanted the music to be all of one piece. Therefore I wrote my own spirituals and folksongs. But they are still folk music – and therefore, being in operatic form, *Porgy and Bess* becomes a folk opera.¹¹

⁹ Howard Reich, “A bold venture to restore Gershwin’s music,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 24, 2017.

¹⁰ Allen, “An American Folk Opera?”, 254.

¹¹ George Gershwin, “Rhapsody in Catfish Row,” *The New York Times*, October 20, 1935, cover.

The self-conscious demarcation of *Porgy and Bess* as a “folk opera” indicates a certain preoccupation with authenticity. Gershwin knew that *Porgy*’s story was not one he could claim as his own. Thus, at Heyward’s urging, Gershwin lived for several weeks on Folly Island, off the coast of Charleston, in a Gullah community similar to *Porgy*’s fictional Catfish Row. Gershwin attended church services and visited schools there and on neighboring islands. Rather than taking in Gullah culture as a detached outsider, Gershwin eagerly threw himself into the community, playing piano for visitors in his small summer cottage.¹² As Heyward later recalled, “I shall never forget the night when at a Negro meeting on a remote sea-island, George started ‘shouting’ with them, and eventually to their huge delight stole the show from their champion ‘shouter.’ I think he is probably the only white man in America who could have done it.”¹³ Anne Brown, who sang Bess in the premiere production of *Porgy and Bess*, remembered Gershwin claiming that a Folly Islander had been so impressed by his command of rhythm that he told the composer he “could be [his] own son.”¹⁴

However, these idyllic recollections are somewhat complicated by *Porgy and Bess*’s source material: Heyward’s 1925 novel and 1927 play. Though Heyward had been the one to convince Gershwin to temporarily live on Folly Island, he himself subscribed to a decidedly primitivistic view of African Americans, invoking the even-then-antiquated *bon sauvage* trope in his novel.

¹² “Gershwin Gets His Music Cues for ‘Porgy’ on Carolina Beach,” *New York Herald-Tribune*, July 8, 1934, D2.

¹³ Zax, “Summertime for George Gershwin.”
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/summertime-for-george-gershwin-2170485/>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

"I saw the primitive Negro as the inheritor of a source of delight that I would give much to possess," he wrote in his introduction to *Porgy*.¹⁵ As a result, Gershwin's selection of source material problematizes his adaptation: Is *Porgy and Bess* then sympathetic or condescending?

Though Gershwin was confident in his new work, many critics, both Black and white, read *Porgy and Bess* as the latter. Post-Harlem Renaissance intellectuals were understandably leery of white mediations of African American culture, which often reeked of minstrelsy. Though Virgil Thomson—who was white—had plenty of aesthetic qualms about *Porgy and Bess*, he waged his most damning crusade against its entire premise. "Folklore subjects recounted by an outsider are only valid as long as the folk in question is unable to speak for itself, which is certainly not true of the American Negro in 1935," he wrote.¹⁶ After Gershwin's death, in a last-ditch effort to make the opera marketable, cuts were made to the work so that it resembled a conventional Broadway musical.¹⁷ It was not until the Houston Grand Opera's epochal 1976 production that *Porgy and Bess* returned to the operatic repertory.¹⁸

How could a work once so maligned, and inherently problematic, become canonized decades after its creation? In a compelling essay published in the 2012 book *Blackness in Opera*,

¹⁵ James Standifier, "The Tumultuous Life of Porgy and Bess," *Humanities* Vol. 18, No. 6, November/December 1997.

¹⁶ Thomson, "George Gershwin," 17.

¹⁷ Standifier, "The Tumultuous Life of *Porgy and Bess*," <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/1997/novemberdecember/feature/the-tumultuous-life-porgy-and-bess>.

¹⁸ Lawrence Starr, "Towards a Reevaluation of *Porgy and Bess*," *American Music*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Summer 1982), 25.

Gwynne Kuhner Brown argues that the collaborative nature of individual productions can do much to redeem the opera's flaws. She cites the 1976 Houston production and, interestingly, the original 1935 production as having consciously addressed the "inherent power imbalance... between white directorial staff and black performers."¹⁹ Years after the premiere, Todd Duncan and Anne Brown, who inaugurated the roles of Porgy and Bess, respectively, spoke highly of Gershwin's willingness to adapt what he'd composed for his performers. For example, Duncan said that Gershwin specifically "tailored the part" for his voice:

I think that no one—other than his family and those strictly connected with the opera—had a closer association and contact with George Gershwin while he was writing *Porgy and Bess* than I did... He tried everything and he would ask me, "Is this too high for a baritone?" "No, no, not if he doesn't stay up there too long," I would say. "How's this, should I change this note?" "No, no. As a matter of fact, I'd like to do it higher," would be my answer. I even made a few changes in "I Loves You Porgy," notes which fit my voice better and he would say, "That's good, let's use that."²⁰

¹⁹ Gwynne Kuhner Brown, "Performers in Catfish Row: *Porgy and Bess* as Collaboration," in *Blackness in Opera*, ed. Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan, and Eric Saylor (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 171.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

Gershwin's amenability while writing *Porgy and Bess* implies that his approach, though undoubtedly that of an outsider, may not have been as reductive or naïve as his critics claimed. Even so, the work largely fell out of the repertory between the 1935 premiere and the 1976 Houston revival. Productions of *Porgy and Bess* hit their nadir in the 1960s, during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements; similarly, it seems hardly coincidental that only two productions of *Porgy and Bess* have been staged by major American opera companies in the past five years.²¹

In some ways, William Grant Still's career is a case study in the opposite direction. Despite a prescriptive reputation as the "dean" of African American composers, Still was celebrated as one of the greatest American composers of his time. Like Gershwin, his works were widely performed while he was alive; *unlike* Gershwin, his works have received limited posthumous hearings and become something of a programming novelty.

The impulse to compare Still to Gershwin is a long-standing one. According to Still's wife, Verna Arvey, and others, Gershwin was inspired to write "I Got Rhythm" (1930) after hearing an improvisation Still had tossed off as an oboist in the pit orchestra for the musical *Shuffle Along* (1921). When the same theme appeared in the Scherzo of Still's *Afro-American Symphony* later the same year, listeners were quick to assume that Still had

²¹ According to Operabase, besides the widely-publicized January 2012 production at New York's Richard Rodgers Theatre, only the Toledo Opera and Lyric Opera of Chicago have staged productions. (A production is scheduled for the Metropolitan Opera's 2019–20 season, for which researchers at the University of Michigan are currently compiling a critical performance edition. This version will be nearest to Gershwin's intended *Porgy and Bess*, restoring cuts made by subsequent productions of the opera.)

borrowed it from Gershwin, when in all likelihood, the reverse was the case, since George and Ira Gershwin had attended performances of *Shuffle Along*. In the same essay, Arvey wryly responds to a Cornell professor's claims that Gershwin inspired Still to "make use of Jazz and Negro folksong" in his works: "It seemed so unrealistic to assume that a Negro composer could have been motivated by a white composer who made no secret of his own devotion to Negro musicians and their music."²² Additionally, musicologist Ray Allen notes that the sour reception of *Porgy and Bess* may have helped to create a space for Black composers like Still and Duke Ellington, who became the foremost incorporators of Black spirituals and folk music in their orchestral works.²³

However, audience acceptance did not preclude biased hearings. The racialization of the popular returns in Copland's withering assessment of Still's music, which he characterized in a 1937 issue of *Modern Music* as "naïve" and "based on the slushier side of jazz [...] mak[ing] a frank bid for popular appeal."²⁴ In 1925, a review by *New York Times* critic Olin Downes underscores the impossibility of Still's position. Earlier in his career, when Still ventured into the modernist idiom of his teacher, Edgard Varèse, Downes—among the minority who would eagerly embrace

²² Verna Arvey, "Memo for Musicologists," in *William Grant Still and the Fusion of Cultures in American Music*, edited by Robert Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1972), 88.

²³ Allen, "An American Folk Opera?," 256. Allen notes, as a point of contrast, that white composers who had used black folk sources in their music—e.g. Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson—conspicuously avoided doing so post-*Porgy*.

²⁴ Aaron Copland, "Scores and Records," *Modern Music*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (November–December 1937), 47. Ironically, Copland wrote this criticism of Still at the peak of his own turn to folk-infused *Gebrauchsmusik*.

Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* a decade later—objected: “Is Mr. Still unaware that the cheapest melody in the revues he has orchestrated has more reality and inspiration in it than the curious noises he has manufactured?”^{26,25} (He likewise criticized Still's contemporary, R. Nathaniel Dett, for “not going nearly far enough in striking the racial note” in his 1928 oratorio *The Ordering of Moses*.)²⁶

Both cases speak to a malignant frustration Still endured throughout his career. By merit of his Blackness, critics demanded his music simultaneously represent the exotic—to caricature itself—and eschew the “cheap” and popular. However, as has been demonstrated, popular music was conceptually tied to Blackness, leaving Still, a Black classical musician and composer, in an impossible position. Still's music was prevented from being canonized in that these preconditions offered him no point of entry.

These issues came to a head with Still's beleaguered 1949 opera *Troubled Island*. Still's works had been performed by major orchestras and ballets across the country, and *Troubled Island* possessed all the ingredients of a critical success: a libretto by

²⁶ Olin Downes, “Exotic Richness of Negro Music and Color of Charleston, S.C., Admirably Conveyed in Score of Catfish Row Tragedy,” October 11, 1935, 30. Downes described Gershwin as having “an instinctive appreciation of the melodic glides and nuances of Negro song,” despite also not “utiliz[ing] all the resources of the operatic composer.” He, too, likened *Porgy and Bess* more to musical theater than opera, for reasons that are unclear besides the score's potential to “reap a quick popularity.”

²⁵ Olin Downes, “Music,” *The New York Times*, February 9, 1925, 15. The review misidentifies Still as “Richard Grant Still.”

²⁶ Olin Downes, “Cincinnati Hears Music by Berlioz,” *The New York Times*, May 8, 1937, 22.

Langston Hughes, choreography by George Ballanchine, and a compelling subject (the life of Haitian revolutionary Jean-Jacques Dessalines). Most importantly, it was to be both Still's first foray into opera and the first opera by an African American composer to be produced by a major company; unlike Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, Still permitted blackface performers in *Troubled Island's* character roles.²⁷

However, the seemingly-charmed *Troubled Island* hit nearly immediate roadblocks. After submitting the score for consideration to the Metropolitan Opera, Still received a perplexing rejection letter, which read, in part: "In advising you that to our regret, we do not see our way clear to accept this work, we should like to point out that this conclusion should in no way be taken as implying any criticism as to the artistic merit of the work."²⁸ When *Troubled Island* was finally staged by the New York City Opera, the strangeness continued: Despite being enthusiastically received by audiences, it was largely panned by critics. Olin Downes—the same *Times* critic who dismissed Still's early modernist compositions—described the 54-year-old (and by then widely-celebrated) Still as "a composer who is just entering the period of his maturity." As for *Troubled Island's* score, he bemoaned its "many clichés of Broadway and Hollywood" and its lack of "fresh exoticism or indeed by any other style ... than that of conventional Negroid melody and rhythm." Ultimately, Downes writes most glowingly of the third act, which "comes nearer to exotic folksong and popular rhythms" than previous

²⁷ Tammy L. Kernodle, "Arias, Communists, and Conspiracies: The History of Still's *Troubled Island*," *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (Winter 1999), 496.

²⁸ William Grant Still, "Troubled History of 'The Troubled Island,'" *The New York Times*, March 20, 1949, X7.

acts.²⁹ By anticipating “exotic” or “popular” musical signifiers and reductively describing the opera as “Negroid,” Downes echoed the same racialized expectations that had been foisted on Still for much of his career. In a letter to conductor László Hálász shortly after the premiere, Still wrote that he felt that the New York critics had “possibly... expected the work to follow the lines of the stereotype which I abhor because of its falseness.”³⁰ In other words, white critics took it upon themselves to discern authenticity and inauthenticity, judging what an opera by an African American composer about characters of African descent *should* sound like.

Some believe there may have even been a greater critical conspiracy to push *Troubled Island* out of the repertory. According to Still and his associates, both *New York Post* critic John Briggs and *New York Times* music editor Howard Taubman warned the composer that a consortium of New York critics had voted to pan his opera.³¹ Though this account has mostly been propagated by those close to Still, the circumstances around *Troubled Island*’s conflicted reception seems to indicate that, in the view of some

²⁹ Olin Downes, “Halasz Presents New Still Opera,” *The New York Times*, April 1, 1949, 30.

³⁰ Kernodle, “Arias, Communists, and Conspiracies,” 497. Written in a letter dated April 7, 1949 to conductor László Halász.

³¹ “The Private Letters and Diaries of William Grant Still and Verna Arvey,” in *Just Tell the Story: Troubled Island*, edited by Lisa M. Headlee and Judith Anne Still (Flagstaff: The Master-Player Library, 2006), 144. This episode is recounted in a letter Still wrote to his wife, Verna, dated March 26, 1949. According to his account, Briggs approached him at a *Troubled Island* rehearsal the night before to inform him that the “intellectual boys will pan” the opera. Still’s personal records imply that a similar conversation may have transpired with Taubman at a later date.

with institutional power, Still *did* go too far in composing an opera.³²

Still's widow, Verna Arvey, summarized what she believed the Gershwin–Still dichotomy to be in her essay “Memo For Musicologists”:

As composers, the difference between Gershwin and Still is obvious: Gershwin approached Negro music as an outsider, and his own concepts helped to make it a Gershwin–Negro fusion, lusty and stereotyped racially, more popular in flavor. Still's approach to Negro music was from within, refining and developing it with the craftsmanship of a trained composer.³³

However, as the fate of Still's oeuvre demonstrates, the interiority of his music was lost on many white critics, who more readily embraced his compositions which satisfied their expectation of otherness or caricature.

If the attitudes of critics during Still's career are any indication, it's no surprise that pieces like his *Afro-American Symphony* remain his most canonic. Though white critics were swift to decry Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* as racial caricature, they simultaneously demanded that William Grant Still's music live up to an *imagined* Blackness—one which was also caricatured. But, as the waxing and waning of *Porgy and Bess* demonstrates, all hope

³² For a fuller account of this conspiracy, see note 25 and 26 above.

³³ Haas, *William Grant Still*, 90.

may not yet be lost for Still. Just as social justice movements have transfigured our reception of *Porgy and Bess*, a renaissance of Still's works, while always timely, has never felt so urgent—especially one which avoids the narrow racial characterizations of the past.

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