

notes

April 27/28

SIMON SINGS PORGY & BESS

By Dr. Richard E. Rodda

30 SECOND NOTES: The Des Moines Symphony's year-long centenary celebration of the music of Leonard Bernstein continues with *Chichester Psalms*, composed for a choral festival at Chichester Cathedral in England. George Gershwin's *Porgy & Bess* is not only one of the epochal works of American musical theater but it also occupies an important place in the social maturation of our land — its premieres in Charleston, South Carolina, where the story is set, and Washington, D.C. were desegregated both on the stage and in the audience for the first time in the histories of those cities. The concert opens with Dmitri Shostakovich's appropriately titled *Festive Overture*. 🎵



DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

**Born September 25, 1906
in St. Petersburg;
died August 9, 1975 in
Moscow.**

FESTIVE OVERTURE, Op. 96 (1954)

- First performed in Moscow by the Bolshoi Theater Orchestra on November 7, 1954, conducted by Vassili Nebolsin.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on October 24 & 25, 2009 with Bright Sheng conducting.

(Duration: ca. 6 minutes)

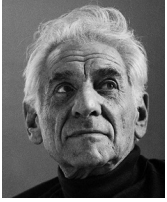
Among the grand symphonies, concertos, operas and chamber works that Dmitri Shostakovich produced are also many occasional pieces: film scores, tone poems, jingoistic anthems, brief instrumental compositions. Though most of these works are unfamiliar in the West, one — the *Festive Overture* — has been a favorite since

it was written in the autumn of 1954.

Shostakovich composed it for a concert on November 7, 1954 commemorating the 37th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, but its jubilant nature suggests it may also have been conceived as an outpouring of relief at the death of Joseph Stalin one year earlier. One critic suggested that the *Overture* was “a gay picture of streets and squares packed with a young and happy throng.” As its title suggests, the *Festive Overture* is a brilliant affair, full of fanfare and bursting spirits. It begins with a stentorian proclamation from the brass as preface to the racing main theme of the piece. Contrast is provided by a broad melody initiated by the horns, but the breathless celebration of the music continues to the end.

The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, three oboes, three clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, triangle and the usual

strings consisting of first violins, second violins, violas, violoncellos and double basses.



LEONARD BERNSTEIN

**Born August 25, 1918 in
Lawrence,
Massachusetts;
died October 14, 1990 in
New York City.**

CHICHESTER PSALMS FOR CHORUS, BOY SOLOIST & ORCHESTRA (1965)

- First performed by the New York Philharmonic on July 15, 1965, conducted by the composer.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on April 20, 1974 with Andrew Schenck conducting, the Drake Community Chorus, and Scott Pedersen as soloist. Two subsequent performances occurred, most recently on April 6 & 7, 2003 with Joseph Giunta conducting and featuring the Luther College Nordic Choir.

(Duration: ca. 18 minutes)

The *Chichester Psalms* was commissioned by the Very Rev. Walter Hussey, Dean of Chichester Cathedral for the 1965 Southern Cathedrals Festival, in which the musicians of Chichester have participated with those of the neighboring cathedrals of Salisbury and Winchester since 1959. The musical traditions of these great cathedrals extend far back into history, to at least the time when the eminent early-17th-century virtuoso and composer Thomas Weelkes occupied the organ bench at Chichester. The mood of the *Chichester Psalms* is humble and serene, unlike the powerful but despairing nature of Bernstein's "*Kaddish*" *Symphony* of 1963, composed shortly before this work. Both use traditional texts sung in Hebrew, but the

message of the *Psalms* is one of man's closeness to God rather than the one of frustration and anger and shaken faith engendered by God's inexplicable acts as portrayed by the "*Kaddish*." It is indicative that the composer chose the 23rd Psalm ("The Lord is my Shepherd") for the second movement, the heart of the *Chichester Psalms*.

The first movement opens with a broad chorale ("Awake, psaltery and harp!") that serves as the structural buttress for the entire composition. It is transformed, in quick tempo, to open and close the dance-like main body of this movement (in 7/4 meter), and reappears at the beginning and end of the finale in majestic settings. The bounding, sprung rhythms and exuberant energy of the fast music of the first movement are a perfect embodiment of the text, "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord all ye lands."

The touching simplicity of the second movement recalls the pastoral song of David, the young shepherd. The sopranos take over the melody from the soloist, and carry it forward in gentle but strict imitation. Suddenly, threatening music is hurled forth by the men's voices punctuated by slashing chords from the orchestra. They challenge the serene strains of peace with the harsh question, "Why do the nations rage?" The quiet song, temporarily banished, reappears in the high voices, like calming oil on troubled waters. The hard tones subside, and once again the shepherd sings and strums upon his harp. As a coda, the mechanistic sounds of conflict, soft but worrisome, enter once again, as if blown on an ill wind from some distant land.

The finale begins with an instrumental prelude based on the stern chorale that opened the work. The muted solo trumpet and the harp recall a phrase from the shepherd's song to mark the central point of this introductory strain. The chorus intones a gently swaying theme on

the text, “Lord, Lord, my heart is not haughty.” The *Chichester Psalms* concludes with yet another adaptation of the recurring chorale, here given new words and a deeper meaning. This closing sentiment is not only the central message of the work, and the linchpin of its composer’s philosophy of life, but also is a thought which all must hold dear in troubled times:

*Behold how good,
And how pleasant it is,
For brethren to dwell
Together in unity.*

The score calls for three trumpets, three trombones, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, triangle, woodblock, tambourine, bells, xylophone, chimes, templeblocks, whip, rasp, bongos, two harps and the usual strings.



GEORGE GERSHWIN

**Born September 26, 1898
in Brooklyn, New York;
died July 11, 1937 in
Hollywood, California.**

MUSIC FROM *PORGY & BESS* (1935)

- The opera was first performed in Boston on September 30, 1935, conducted by Alexander Smallens.
- Music from the opera was first performed by the Des Moines Symphony on March 20, 1949 with Frank Noyes conducting. Various excerpts have been performed in concert on many occasions, most recently on February 15 & 16, 2014 with Joseph Giunta conducting and Sylvia McNair, soprano.

(Duration: ca. 50 minutes)

The *Rhapsody in Blue* of 1924 marked George Gershwin’s debut as a serious composer. A year later, DuBose Heyward, a poet and writer from Charleston, South Carolina, published a novel titled *Porgy* loosely based on a local character called “Goat Sammy,” a Negro cripple who got about town in a goat cart. Goat Sammy was known to many as a beggar on the city’s streets, but Heyward was struck by a news article in 1924 reporting that the man had been arrested on a charge of aggravated assault in a crime of passion. Heyward thought it extraordinary that “the object of public charity by day, had a private life of his own by night. It was a tempestuous life, and in it were the seeds of human struggle that make for drama.” *Porgy* became a best-seller. Gershwin read the book in September 1926, and he was so excited by its potential for the musical theatre that he immediately dashed off a letter to Heyward suggesting they collaborate on turning it into an opera. The writer responded eagerly and positively to Gershwin’s suggestion, but told him that he and his wife, Dorothy, were just then working the novel into a play, and that any operatic adaptation would have to wait until their drama had been staged. A delay was inevitable on Gershwin’s side anyway because he was just then reaching the pinnacle of his success as a Broadway and concert composer, and the demand for his music and shows was continuous — *Oh, Kay!*, both versions of *Strike Up the Band*, *Funny Face*, *Rosalie*, *Treasure Girl*, *Show Girl*, *Girl Crazy* and *Of Thee I Sing*, as well as the *Piano Preludes*, *An American in Paris*, the *Second Rhapsody* and the *Cuban Overture* all appeared within the next five years. The Heywards’ *Porgy* was produced by the Theatre Guild in 1927, and became one of the dramatic hits of the Broadway season.

In March 1932, Gershwin wrote to Heyward expressing his interest in reviving the plans for a

Porgy opera. Heyward, who hoped that a collaboration with America's most popular composer would afford some relief from the financial difficulties he was experiencing in those early Depression years, was eager to move ahead with the project, but he was disappointed to learn that Gershwin could not begin work until at least January of the next year. A further difficulty arose in September 1932 when Al Jolson told Heyward that he wanted to play Porgy in blackface in a musical version created for him by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II. Kern and Hammerstein were soon engaged on other projects, however, and Jolson's plan (thankfully) fell through. Finally, on October 26, 1933, seven years after he had first proposed the idea to Heyward, Gershwin signed a contract with the Theatre Guild to compose the music for an opera based on *Porgy*.

Heyward had already been working for some time on ideas for the libretto of *Porgy & Bess*. (The expanded title was used to distinguish the opera from the stage play.) From his home in Charleston, where he preferred to write, he started sending scenes to Gershwin in New York in November 1933. Gershwin, however, who had just committed to do a grueling 28-day/28-concert/28-city tour in January and February celebrating the tenth anniversary of the premiere of his *Rhapsody in Blue*, had little time for composition just then, and he told Heyward he could not begin serious work until February, though he did sketch the melody for *Summertime* during a visit with friends in Palm Beach in December. Heyward invited the composer to come to Charleston after the tour, but Gershwin had contracted to do a twice-weekly radio broadcast, and the composer convinced the librettist to visit him in New York in April instead. Heyward worked with George and his brother, Ira, who had agreed to help with the lyrics, for about a month before returning

home.

When his radio series finished in June, Gershwin was at last able to travel to Charleston to see the people and scenes that were the subjects of *Porgy & Bess*. Though the visit was important for establishing the venue and some aspects of the opera's musical style, Gershwin, occupied in that vacation season with swimming, sunning and socializing, actually got little work done while he was away. He returned to New York on July 22 and worked for the next year on *Porgy* — the orchestration, entirely his own, was not completed until September 2, 1935, just four weeks before the opening in Boston. The Theatre Guild had begun preparations for the premiere by late 1934, when Rouben Mamoulian, who directed the stage version of *Porgy*, was engaged as producer and Todd Duncan, a voice teacher at Howard University in Washington, D.C., accepted the title role. Anne Brown, a 20-year-old student at Juilliard, was cast as Bess, Warren Coleman as Crown and John W. Bubbles as Sportin' Life. *Porgy & Bess* was a great critical and public success in its out-of-town tryout at Boston's Colonial Theatre beginning on September 30, 1935.

By the New York premiere on October 10, tremendous expectation had accumulated around Gershwin's adventurous work (the major dailies sent both their drama and music critics to the Alvin Theatre that evening), but, despite an enthusiastic reception from the audience, the reviews were mixed. Ticket sales declined and *Porgy & Bess* closed in New York after just 124 performances. However, its great songs — *Summertime*; *It Ain't Necessarily So*; *I Got Plenty o' Nothing*; *Bess, You Is My Woman Now*; *There's a Boat That's Leavin' Soon for New York* and a half-dozen others — immediately became standards of the pop repertory and maintained the show's reputation until 1942, when a new Broadway production had a longer run than had

any other revival to that time. An American company toured with the show throughout Western and Eastern Europe, the Near East, Mexico and South America continuously from 1952 to 1956; in February 1955, the troupe appeared at La Scala in Milan, making *Porgy & Bess* the first opera by a native American composer heard in that hallowed auditorium. In 1975, Gershwin's original score, with its recitatives and cuts completely restored, was given in a concert performance and recorded by Lorin Maazel and the Cleveland Orchestra; that complete version was staged a year later by the Houston Grand Opera Company, taken on tour and brought successfully to New York. In 1985, a full half-century after it was premiered, *Porgy & Bess* was finally given the ultimate establishment imprimatur when it was first staged at the Metropolitan Opera House. This historic Met production starred Simon Estes in the leading role of Porgy.

Porgy & Bess is set in the 1930s in Catfish Row, a Negro tenement in Charleston. The curtain rises on Clara singing a lullaby (*Summertime*) to her child. Clara's husband, the fisherman Jake, tries his own lullaby (*A Woman Is a Sometime Thing*). Crown quarrels with Robbins during a crap game, kills him and escapes. Robbins is mourned by his wife, Serena (*My Man's Gone*

Now). Crown's girl, Bess, finds refuge with the cripple, Porgy, who loves her devotedly. They sing of their happiness (*I Got Plenty o' Nothin' and Bess, You Is My Woman Now*). During a picnic on Kittiwah Island, Sportin' Life, the local dope peddler, describes his cynical attitude toward religion (*It Ain't Necessarily So*). Crown, who has been hiding on the island, confronts Bess and persuades her to stay with him. Having fallen sick, she returns to Porgy, who nurses her back to health. They reassure each other of their love. During a storm, Crown returns to Catfish Row. Porgy strangles his rival. The police suspect Porgy and arrest him. Sportin' Life tempts Bess to accompany him to New York with a package of his "happy dust" (*There's a Boat That's Leavin' Soon for New York*). Released from jail a few days later, Porgy finds Bess gone. Undaunted, he sets off in his goat cart to follow her (*Oh, Lawd, I'm On My Way*).

The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two alto saxophones, tenor saxophone, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, triangle, woodblock, bells, xylophone, piano, celesta and the usual strings.