

Song Assessment Tool Subcommittee Notes on *Porgy and Bess*

Since the opera's beginnings, Gershwin (and later his estate) has maintained a contractual requirement that **in staged productions, all Black characters in the cast and chorus must be performed by Black singers**. But this does not preclude non-Black singers from performing selected songs outside of a production. (And indeed, *Summertime* is one of the most covered songs of all time, with more than 33,000 known recordings by artists of every kind.)

While undoubtedly this opera provided opportunity for Black operatic talent, and Black artists have actively engaged with the work from its inception to today—shaping it and its meaning—**there have been many valid criticisms**. The opera's depiction of African Americans attracted controversy from the outset.

- Several of the members of the original cast later stated that they, too, had concerns that their characters might play into a stereotype that African Americans lived in poverty, took drugs, and solved their problems with their fists.
- Virgil Thomson, a white American composer, stated that "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."^[47]
- Hall Johnson, a black composer, arranger and choir director whose musical "*Run, Little Chillun!*" had been a success on Broadway in 1933, wrote that Gershwin was "as free to write about Negroes in his own way as any other composer to write about anything else" in a 1936 essay in *Opportunity*, a journal published by the Urban League. But he added that the resulting work was "**not a Negro opera by Gershwin, but Gershwin's idea of what a Negro opera should be.**"
- A planned production by the Negro Repertory Company of Seattle in the late 1930s was canceled because actors were displeased with what they viewed as a racist portrayal of aspects of African-American life and the "Negro dialect" in which they would have had to be coached.^[50]
- Decades later, [reviewing the film](#), James Baldwin echoed that critique, writing that while he liked "Porgy and Bess," it remained "**a white man's vision of Negro life.**"
- When Otto Preminger's film version was released in 1959, during the civil rights era, the playwright Lorraine Hansberry debated him on Chicago television, declaring that **stereotypes "constitute bad art" and noting that African-Americans had suffered "great wounds from great intentions."**
- Over time, however, the opera gained acceptance from the opera community and some in the African-American community. [Maurice Peress](#) stated in 2004 that "*Porgy and Bess*

belongs as much to the black singer-actors who bring it to life as it does to the Heywards and the Gershwins."^[54]

- See additional details in the [Racial Controversy section](#) of the Wikipedia entry.

So, while there is criticism of *Porgy and Bess* by Black scholars, opera critics, and those in the arts, there is also praise. Therefore, we will not render a blanket judgment on all songs from *Porgy and Bess* one way or another, and will consider each song on its own merits. **Likewise, performing groups may come to their own decisions as to whether or not songs from this opera are appropriate for their group.**