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Performing Catfish Row in the Soviet Union: The Everyman Opera Company and *Porgy and Bess*, 1955–56

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Abstract
For three weeks in 1955 and 1956 the Everyman Opera Company staged Porgy and Bess *in Leningrad and Moscow. In the previous two years, the Robert Breen and Blevins Davis production of Gershwin's opera had toured Europe and Latin America, funded by the U.S. State Department. Yet when Breen negotiated a performance tour to Russia, the American government denied funding, stating, among other reasons, that a production would be "politically premature." Surprisingly, however, the opera was performed with the Soviet Ministry of Culture paying the tour costs in full. I argue that this tour, negotiated amid the growing civil rights movement, was a non-paradigmatic example of cultural exchange at the beginning of the Cold War: an artistic product funded at different times by* both *the United States* and *the Soviet Union. Through an examination of the tour's archival holdings, interviews with surviving cast members, and the critical reception in the historically black press, this essay contributes to ongoing questions of Cold War scholarship, including discussions on race, identity, and the unpredictable nature of cultural exchange.*

In May 1953, Soviet ambassador to the United States Andrei Vishinsky attended a performance of *Porgy and Bess* by the Everyman Opera Company at New York's Ziegfeld Theatre. He was so impressed that he suggested to one of its producers, Robert Breen (1909–90), that the opera be performed in the Soviet Union. The Everyman Opera Company had just returned from its first European tour, sponsored by the U.S. State Department, which had guaranteed round-trip transportation and four weekly payments of $15,000 (the equivalent of $133,000 in 2014) for salaries and housing expenses.[1] Breen was eager to take advantage of the opportunity to perform in Russia and approached Mary Stuart French, a State Department representative and fellow American National Theatre Association board member. French had been instrumental in convincing the Department to sponsor the appearances of *Porgy and Bess* in Vienna and West Berlin as part of the international cultural exchange program.[2] Unfortunately, on 24 June 1953, Breen was contacted by an official at the State Department with disappointing news: "The Department does

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[1] Hollis Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Classic* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 184. http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/ (according to Consumer Price Index estimates. Same reference for subsequent listings).

[2] Ibid., 160.

not believe that, all things being considered, you would want to present 'Porgy and Bess' in Moscow at the present time."[3]

The State Department's refusal to provide financial resources to send *Porgy and Bess* to the Soviet Union in 1953 and two years later in 1955, when the proposal was brought up again, stood in contrast to its enthusiastic support of the production in other countries around the world. As historian David Monod reveals, the international/European tours of *Porgy* "became the most heavily governmentally subsidized artistic production of the 1950s."[4] During two tours, the Everyman Opera Company performed the Gershwin and Heyward opera in Western and Eastern Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Central and South America (see Figure 1). Between 1952 and 1955, the U.S. government spent over $800,000 ($7.1 million in 2014) on direct subsidies, in addition to an unspecified amount in United States Information Agency advertising and research.[5]

Yet when Breen finally negotiated a trip to the Soviet Union in late 1955, the U.S. State Department declined to change its position. In a surprising turn of events, *Porgy and Bess* relied *exclusively* on monetary support from the Soviet Ministry of Culture—a fact that is often only briefly mentioned in scholarship on this tour or on the early Cold War.[6]

Moreover, while historians of the Cold War uncover the troubling details of overt and covert forms of cultural exchange and cultural propaganda during this time, much of this study focuses on the way that U.S. and Soviet officials allocated financial and institutional resources to generate propaganda that portrayed their own countries in the best political, economic, and artistic light.[7] The production of this famed American opera in the Soviet Union was an unusual example of "cultural propaganda" or "cultural exchange," thereby adding to and complicating our understanding of the role of unofficial or unsanctioned culture in the U.S. government's foreign policy.

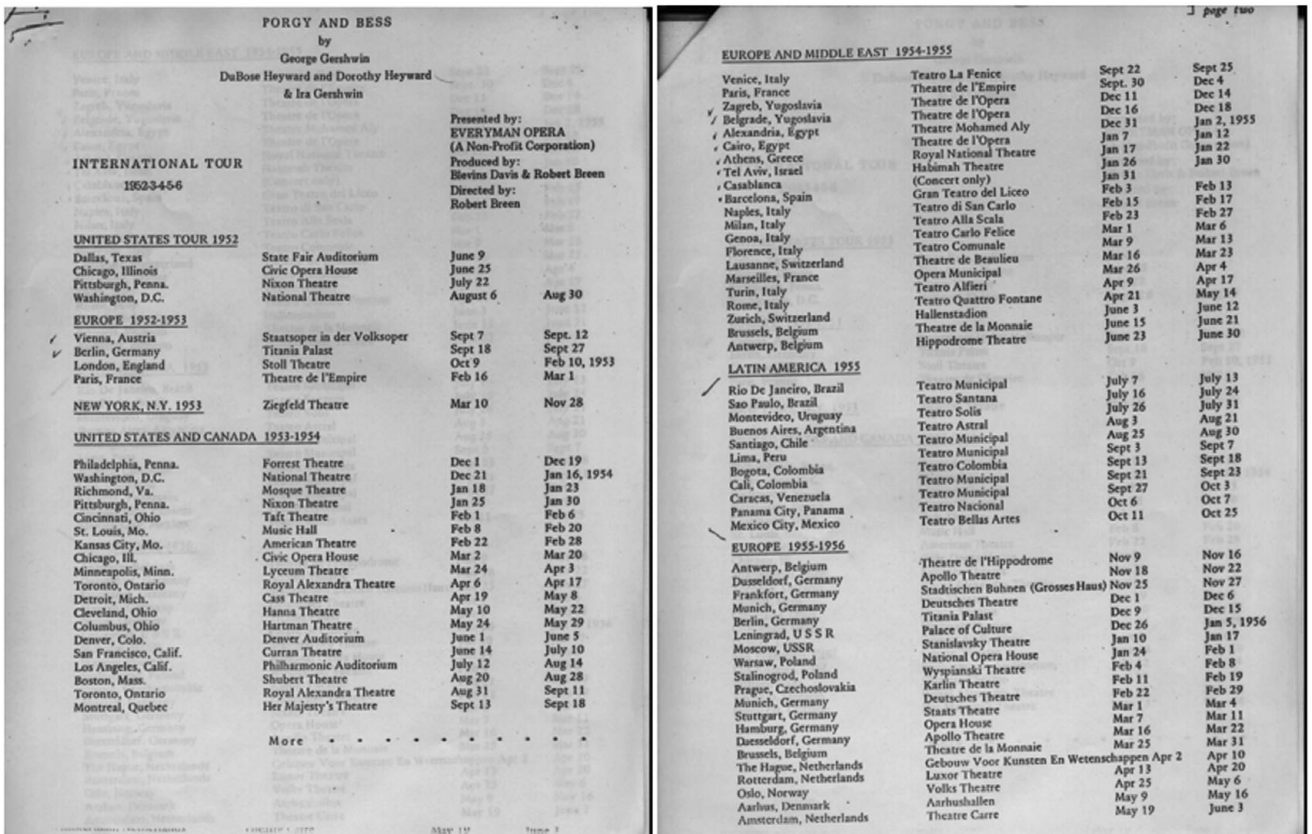
[3] Russell Riley, Director of Educational Exchange Service in the State Department, to Robert Breen (RB), 24 June 1953, F108 Booking—Europe/Russia, '55 (2), Robert Breen Collection (BC), Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute, Ohio State University (OSU).

[4] David Monod, "Disguise, Containment and the *Porgy and Bess* Revival of 1952–1956," *Journal of American Studies* 35, no. 2 (2001): 284.

[5] Ibid., 284.

[6] Alpert and Monod are two of the few scholars to note that the Soviets funded this tour and not the U.S. State Department.

[7] For example, see Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The C.I.A. and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999); Anne Shreffler, "Ideologies of Serialism: Stravinsky's *Threni* and the Congress for Cultural Freedom," in *Music and the Aesthetics of Modernity*, ed. Karol Berger and Anthony Newcomb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 217–45; Mark Carroll, *Music and Ideology in Cold War Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). More recently, the work of Emily Abrams Ansari and Danielle Fosler-Lussier has examined the complex nature of cultural exchange, propaganda, and diplomacy in both theory and practice. These accounts, however, still focus on formally recognized programs sponsored by the U.S. government, and apart from a few exceptions, on a later time period. For example, see Danielle Fosler-Lussier, *Music in America's Cold War Diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015) and Emily Abrams Ansari, "Shaping the Politics of Cold War Musical Diplomacy: An Epistemic Community of American Composers," *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 1 (2012): 41–52.



PORGY AND BESS
by
George Gershwin
DuBose Heyward and Dorothy Heyward
& Ira Gershwin

Presented by:
EVERYMAN OPERA
(A Non-Profit Corporation)
Produced by:
Blevins Davis & Robert Breen
Directed by:
Robert Breen

INTERNATIONAL TOUR
1952-3-4-5-6

UNITED STATES TOUR 1952

Dallas, Texas	State Fair Auditorium	June 9	
Chicago, Illinois	Civic Opera House	June 25	
Pittsburgh, Penna.	Nixon Theatre	July 22	
Washington, D.C.	National Theatre	August 6	Aug 30

EUROPE 1952-1953

Vienna, Austria	Staatsoper in der Volksoper	Sept 7	Sept. 12
Berlin, Germany	Titania Palast	Sept 18	Sept 27
London, England	Stoll Theatre	Oct 9	Feb 10, 1953
Paris, France	Theatre de l'Empire	Feb 16	Mar 1
NEW YORK, N.Y. 1953	Ziegfeld Theatre	Mar 10	Nov 28

UNITED STATES AND CANADA 1953-1954

Philadelphia, Penna.	Forrest Theatre	Dec 1	Dec 19
Washington, D.C.	National Theatre	Dec 21	Jan 16, 1954
Richmond, Va.	Mosque Theatre	Jan 18	Jan 23
Pittsburgh, Penna.	Nixon Theatre	Jan 25	Jan 30
Cincinnati, Ohio	Taft Theatre	Feb 1	Feb 6
St. Louis, Mo.	Music Hall	Feb 8	Feb 20
Kansas City, Mo.	American Theatre	Feb 22	Feb 28
Chicago, Ill.	Civic Opera House	Mar 2	Mar 20
Minneapolis, Minn.	Lyceum Theatre	Mar 24	Apr 3
Toronto, Ontario	Royal Alexandra Theatre	Apr 6	Apr 17
Detroit, Mich.	Cass Theatre	Apr 19	May 8
Cleveland, Ohio	Hanna Theatre	May 10	May 22
Columbus, Ohio	Hartman Theatre	May 24	May 29
Denver, Colo.	Denver Auditorium	June 1	June 5
San Francisco, Calif.	Curran Theatre	June 14	July 10
Los Angeles, Calif.	Philharmonic Auditorium	July 12	Aug 14
Boston, Mass.	Shubert Theatre	Aug 20	Aug 28
Toronto, Ontario	Royal Alexandra Theatre	Aug 31	Sept 11
Montreal, Quebec	Her Majesty's Theatre	Sept 13	Sept 18

More . . . . . .

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EUROPE AND MIDDLE EAST 1954-1955

Venice, Italy	Teatro La Fenice	Sept 22	Sept 25
Paris, France	Theatre de l'Empire	Sept. 30	Dec 4
Zagreb, Yugoslavia	Theatre de l'Opera	Dec 11	Dec 14
Belgrade, Yugoslavia	Theatre de l'Opera	Dec 16	Dec 18
Alexandria, Egypt	Theatre Mohamed Aly	Dec 31	Jan 2, 1955
Cairo, Egypt	Theatre de l'Opera	Jan 7	Jan 12
Athens, Greece	Royal National Theatre	Jan 17	Jan 22
Tel Aviv, Israel	Habimah Theatre	Jan 26	Jan 30
Casablanca	(Concert only)	Jan 31	
Barcelona, Spain	Gran Teatro del Liceo	Feb 3	Feb 13
Naples, Italy	Teatro di San Carlo	Feb 15	Feb 17
Milan, Italy	Teatro Alla Scala	Feb 23	Feb 27
Genoa, Italy	Teatro Carlo Felice	Mar 1	Mar 6
Florence, Italy	Teatro Comunale	Mar 9	Mar 13
Lausanne, Switzerland	Theatre de Beaulieu	Mar 16	Mar 23
Marseilles, France	Opera Municipal	Mar 26	Apr 4
Turin, Italy	Teatro Alfieri	Apr 9	Apr 17
Rome, Italy	Teatro Quattro Fontane	Apr 21	May 14
Zurich, Switzerland	Hallenstadion	June 3	June 12
Brussels, Belgium	Theatre de la Monnaie	June 15	June 21
Antwerp, Belgium	Hippodrome Theatre	June 23	June 30

LATIN AMERICA 1955

Rio De Janeiro, Brazil	Teatro Municipal	July 7	July 13
Sao Paulo, Brazil	Teatro Santana	July 16	July 24
Montevideo, Uruguay	Teatro Solis	July 26	July 31
Buenos Aires, Argentina	Teatro Astral	Aug 3	Aug 21
Santiago, Chile	Teatro Municipal	Aug 25	Aug 30
Lima, Peru	Teatro Municipal	Sept 3	Sept 7
Bogota, Colombia	Teatro Colombia	Sept 13	Sept 18
Cali, Colombia	Teatro Municipal	Sept 21	Sept 23
Caracas, Venezuela	Teatro Municipal	Sept 27	Oct 3
Panama City, Panama	Teatro Nacional	Oct 6	Oct 7
Mexico City, Mexico	Teatro Bellas Artes	Oct 11	Oct 25

EUROPE 1955-1956

Antwerp, Belgium	Theatre de l'Hippodrome	Nov 9	Nov 16
Dusseldorf, Germany	Apollo Theatre	Nov 18	Nov 22
Frankfort, Germany	Stadtischen Buhnen (Grosses Haus)	Nov 25	Nov 27
Munich, Germany	Deutsches Theatre	Dec 1	Dec 6
Berlin, Germany	Titania Palast	Dec 9	Dec 15
Leningrad, U S S R	Palace of Culture	Dec 26	Jan 5, 1956
Moscow, USSR	Stanislavsky Theatre	Jan 10	Jan 17
Warsaw, Poland	National Opera House	Jan 24	Feb 1
Stalinogrod, Poland	Wyspianski Theatre	Feb 4	Feb 8
Prague, Czechoslovakia	Karlin Theatre	Feb 11	Feb 19
Munich, Germany	Deutsches Theatre	Feb 22	Feb 29
Stuttgart, Germany	Staats Theatre	Mar 1	Mar 4
Hamburg, Germany	Opera House	Mar 7	Mar 11
Daesseldorf, Germany	Apollo Theatre	Mar 16	Mar 22
Brussels, Belgium	Theatre de la Monnaie	Mar 25	Mar 31
The Hague, Netherlands	Gebouw Voor Kunsten En Wetenschappen	Apr 2	Apr 10
Rotterdam, Netherlands	Luxor Theatre	Apr 13	Apr 20
Oslo, Norway	Volks Theatre	Apr 25	May 6
Aarhus, Denmark	Aarhushallen	May 9	May 16
Amsterdam, Netherlands	Theatre Carre	May 19	June 3

Figure 1. International tour schedule of *Porgy and Bess*, 1952–56. Porgy and Bess: International Tour, Robert Breen / ANTA Theater Collection, Mason Archival Repository Service, George Mason University, http://hdl.handle.net/1920/5084.

The Soviet tour did not conform to the usual model of cultural diplomacy, whereby a home country financed and sent abroad an artist or performing group to various host countries. This model characterized not just the earlier European, Latin American, and North African tours of *Porgy and Bess*, but also many of the later examples of cultural exchange through which the State Department sent musicians like the "jazz ambassadors" to Africa and the Middle East or exchanged American composers for Soviet ones.[8] Instead, the Everyman Opera Company relied on what Danielle Fosler-Lussier calls the "pull" of Soviet political interest and cultural desire that *Porgy and Bess* be performed in Russia.[9]

In this article I show how race, representation, and identity were critical aspects of the Soviet Ministry of Culture's willingness to pay for the production, the cast members' decision to perform, African American newspaper critiques, and State Department officials' unwillingness to fund the trip. I analyze these perspectives through personal interviews with cast members, correspondence and documentary material, and reviews and advance articles in both the Soviet and the African American press. During a period of significant outcry for greater civil rights for African Americans and international criticisms of the way the U.S. government was handling the "Negro Question," *Porgy and Bess* represented race and class in America in an explosive way. The "Negro Question"—a term used during this period—referred to a range of issues concerning African Americans in the United States, from the political and economic structural inequalities they suffered, to the burgeoning civil rights movement and the government's response to it. As the first American theatrical production in the Soviet Union since the Bolshevik Revolution, the Everyman Opera's performances created a defining moment in Cold War cultural history.[10] In contrast to previously recorded or printed media, *Porgy and Bess* was, for many Russians, the first *live* encounter and impression of "America," "American people," and "American art."

I argue that misplaced fears, miscalculations, and misunderstandings concerning *Porgy and Bess* from both the U.S. and Soviet sides were derived from the differences between artistic and racial representation and perceptions of authenticity and veracity. U.S. government officials and African American critics were concerned about the production, but for vastly different reasons and with varying degrees of ambivalence. The State Department feared Soviet negative propaganda, while the black press (some members of whom were sympathetic to the communist party), challenged the opera's negative stereotypes, fearing essentialist interpretations from the Soviets. What is most evident from Soviet reviews and descriptions

[8] Penny von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004) and Emily Abrams Ansari, "Musical Americanism, Cold War Consensus Culture, and the U.S.–U.S.S.R. Composers' Exchange, 1958–60," *Musical Quarterly* 97, no. 3 (2014): 360–89.

[9] Danielle Fosler-Lussier, "Music Pushed, Music Pulled: Cultural Diplomacy, Globalization, and Imperialism," *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 1 (2012): 53–64.

[10] "'Porgy' Accepts Bid from Soviet," *New York Times*, 1 September 1955. The Chocolate Kiddies were a touring jazz band that performed a musical revue throughout Europe in the mid-1920s. They also played in Russia, but whether they performed simply as a band or as part of the revue remains unclear. Susan C. Cook, "Jazz as Deliverance: The Reception and Institution of American Jazz During the Weimar Republic," *American Music* 7, no. 1 (1989): 30–47.

of the production, however, is that, surprisingly, most critics understood the opera through a socialist realist lens. Contrary to U.S. officials' concerns, the reviews' main focus was on the artistic aspects of the production, rather than overt propaganda. And contrary to African American concerns, the Soviets incorporated the characters of *Porgy and Bess* as part of the international working class.

U.S. government officials and diplomats not only miscalculated the Soviet focus on artistic aspects of the opera, but also the degree of Russian interest in cultural exchange. At the same time, the extravagance of the cast members' appearance and fashion at social events outside of the production contradicted the Soviet reading of the characters in the folk opera as working class. Finally, contrary to African American critics' discontents, artists in the production communicated enthusiasm regarding the opportunity to perform internationally with a talented and highly accomplished cohort. The significance of *Porgy and Bess* in the Soviet Union ultimately shows the multiple perspectives that need to be taken into account in order to understand both the malleability and blunt instrumentality of musical and racial representation during the beginnings of the Cold War and the civil rights movement.

The State Department, the "Negro Question," and the Possibility of Cultural Exchange

Porgy and Bess—the opera set to music by George Gershwin, with a libretto by DuBose and Dorothy Heyward and lyrics by DuBose and Ira Gershwin—has had a controversial history since its first production in 1935.[11] Virgil Thomson called the opera "fake folklore," questioning Gershwin's right to speak for a community not his own, and the critic Edward Morrow, in an interview with Duke Ellington, included editorializing on "Gershwin's lamp-black Negroisms, and the melodramatic trash of the script."[12] In 1967, African American scholar and cultural critic Harold Cruse famously wrote that the opera "must be criticized from the Negro point of view as the most perfect symbol of the Negro creative artist's cultural denial, degradation, exclusion, exploitation and acceptance of white paternalism."[13] Nonetheless, the

[11] For the most recent historical account of the life of *Porgy and Bess*, see Ellen Noonan, *The Strange Career of Porgy and Bess: Race, Culture, and America's Most Famous Opera* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012). See also Alpert, *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess*. For the origins of the opera, see Richard Crawford, "Where Did Porgy and Bess Come From?" *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36, no. 4 (2006): 697–734.

[12] Virgil Thomson, "George Gershwin," *Modern Music* 13 (1935): 13. One year later, Ellington's manager wrote that the bandleader was upset that Morrow quoted off-record material while adding his own "pet notions" to criticize the opera. See "Ellington on Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*—and a Response from the Office of Irving Mills (1935/1936)," in *The Duke Ellington Reader*, ed. Mark Tucker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 114–18.

[13] Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Morrow, 1967), 103. For a fuller account of African American responses to *Porgy and Bess*, see Richard Crawford, "It Ain't Necessarily Soul: Gershwin's 'Porgy and Bess' as a Symbol," *Yearbook for Inter-American Musical Research* 8 (1972): 17–38. For a review of early African American responses, see Ray Allen and George P. Cunningham, "Cultural Uplift and Double-Consciousness: African American Responses to the 1935 Opera *Porgy and Bess*," *Musical Quarterly* 88, no. 3 (2005): 342–69.

opera (or simply its music) has been popular and widely produced into the twenty-first century.[14]

The same year as the opera's premiere, Congress chartered the American National Theatre Association (ANTA) to support non-commercial theater in the United States. Fifteen years later, the U.S. State Department appointed this organization to choose arts presentations for performance in West Germany. While the Department provided funding and retained veto power, ANTA selected the artists and approved budget outlays. ANTA's secretary, Robert Breen, resigned from the organization in 1952 to produce *Porgy and Bess* with Blevins Davis—"a millionaire with a passion for theatre"—but Breen maintained close connections with ANTA board members.[15] In the following years, ANTA selected *Porgy and Bess* several times to perform around the world as part of its International Exchange Program.

Meanwhile, tours of musicians and dancers overseas received an additional financial boost in 1954 when President Eisenhower issued an executive order to establish the President's Emergency Fund, to be used at his discretion for the support of cultural presentations abroad. As Emily Abrams Ansari describes in detail, this fund inaugurated the State Department's Cultural Presentations Program.[16] Eisenhower cited *Porgy and Bess* specifically as an excellent example of how the government would send "ambassadors of the arts" to cultivate better international understanding.[17]

Thus the State Department's initial support of *Porgy and Bess* aligned with the government's strategy to engage increasingly in deliberate political and diplomatic efforts by sending certain upwardly mobile artists and celebrities abroad.[18] Historian Donna Binkiewicz characterizes the 1950s as a period when the United States was accused internationally of becoming conformist, materialist, complacent, and aesthetically deplorable.[19] Representative Frank Thompson, Jr. (D-NJ) articulated this concern in an article, "Are the Communists Right in Calling Us Cultural Barbarians?" According to him, "the Communist parties in various countries and the

[14] See also Christopher Lynch, "Cheryl Crawford's *Porgy and Bess*: Navigating Cultural Hierarchy in 1941," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 10, no. 3 (2016): 331–63.

[15] Monod, "Disguise, Containment and the *Porgy and Bess* Revival," 283. The only payment Robert Breen ever received was $5,000 for his directing duties (Alpert, *Life and Times of Porgy and Bess*, 173).

[16] Emily Abrams Ansari, "'Masters of the President's Music': Cold War Composers and the United States Government" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2009), 53.

[17] Dwight D. Eisenhower to Blevins Davis, Robert Breen / ANTA Theater Collection, Mason Archival Repository Service, George Mason University, http://hdl.handle.net/1920/5089. Financial documents prepared by the company's accountant, Charles H. Renthal, show that the international tour of *Porgy and Bess* relied tremendously on U.S. government funding. Charles H. Renthal Account, 6 September 1955, F5 P&B Russia (mostly) Oct–Dec 1955, BC, OSU. Renthal's audit from 1954 to 1955 (the second State Department tour) show a $283,000 loss. The State Department covered $285,000 (roughly $2.5 million in 2014).

[18] For a thorough discussion of how "cultural diplomacy" and "propaganda" have acquired new meanings for our understanding of "cultural exchange," see Ansari, "Masters of the President's Music," chapter 2.

[19] Donna M. Binkiewicz, *Federalizing the Muse: United States Arts Policy and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1965–1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 4.

USSR find it extremely easy to spread their lies that we are gum-chewing, insensitive, [and] materialistic."[20]

At the same time, the United States faced criticism from the Soviet Union for the way it treated African Americans and other minorities. Legal historian Mary Dudziak writes that from 1946, Soviet periodicals described lynchings and poor labor conditions for African Americans in the South.[21] By 1949, the U.S. embassy in Moscow reported that the Negro question was one of the principal Soviet propaganda themes criticizing the United States.[22] A year later, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge (R-MA) referred to race relations as "our Achilles' heel before the world," and the State Department asserted that "no American problem receives more wide-spread attention, especially in dependent areas, than our treatment of racial minorities, particularly the Negro."[23]

The U.S. government responded to Soviet and other international criticisms on the "Negro question" in several ways. One response was to stifle African Americans who criticized the U.S. government, especially those who were politically active and publicly associated with communism, by preventing them from travelling abroad and speaking to international audiences.[24] Granted, a cultural exchange was different from a perceived threat to U.S. security. But while I have not found any cast members openly connected with the Communist party, as might be published in *Red Channels*—which named 151 artists and journalists for their alleged communist manipulation of the entertainment industry—blackness was often associated with communism during this period. The tour's timing in 1955, as well as the overall social and political situation provided the justification to suppress any hint of dissent or resistance. Company members were frequently asked during the tour why the outspoken vocalist Paul Robeson was not performing with them.[25] In fact, Robeson addressed the cast members in a New Year's greeting published in the Soviet state paper *Pravda*: "I know that they [the cast members] are proud of the heroic struggle of their people, who defend equality and human dignity in

[20] Frank Thompson, "Are the Communists Right in Calling Us Cultural Barbarians?" *Music Journal* 13, no. 6 (1955): 5, 20.

[21] Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 37. For example, the U.S. embassy in Moscow sent the State Department a translation of an editorial from the Soviet periodical *Trud*, which was purportedly based on information gathered from the "progressive American press," including the *New York Times*.

[22] Ibid., 38.

[23] Quoted in Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 76. Minutes of meeting of U.S. delegation to UN, 10 November 1950. Lodge and other government officials were concerned particularly about foreign perception and negative attention to the "Negro question" in non-aligned countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and South America.

[24] Historian Michael Krenn writes that U.S. policymakers "discounted, attacked, ignored, and tried to suppress what they perceived as more 'radical' voices among African-Americans" such as Paul Robeson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the Council on African Affairs. Michael Krenn, *Black Diplomacy: African Americans and the State Department 1945–1969* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), 6.

[25] Kate Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922–1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 204; and Truman Capote, *The Muses Are Heard, an Account* (New York: Random House, 1956), 71.

Mississippi, and South Carolina where the events of the opera in which they perform unfold."[26]

An altogether opposite State Department strategy toward addressing the "Negro question" was to send certain black artists abroad to be living representatives of African American progress and improved economic opportunity in the United States. Penny von Eschen analyzes how the government sent Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie as "goodwill jazz ambassadors" in the late 1950s and 1960s. They performed throughout Africa, South America, and Asia with the purpose of promoting a positive image of black American life and American race relations.[27] Danielle Fosler-Lussier notes the differences between the State Department tours of Louis Armstrong and Marian Anderson, both in the types of music they performed (jazz versus classical) and their remarks about political matters and civil rights controversies.[28] While Armstrong toured throughout Africa, plans for his trip to the Soviet Union in 1957 were cancelled after he denounced the Eisenhower administration's handling of the standoff between African American students and segregationists at Little Rock, Arkansas, Central High School.[29] The Soviet Union did not welcome a jazz ambassador until Benny Goodman in 1962, seven years after the *Porgy and Bess* tour.

The State Department's international strategies in response to the "Negro question" were further complicated by the Everyman Opera Company's production. On the one hand, *Porgy and Bess* was an American opera, written by American artists on an American theme, presenting a concrete example of high art to the Soviets and the rest of the world. On the other hand, the opera highlighted the social and economic marginalization of African Americans, especially when black characters interacted with white characters on the stage.[30] These issues are crucial in understanding the U.S. government's response to the possibility of *Porgy and Bess* as a formal cultural exchange, especially in the Soviet Union, as compared to Western Europe, Latin America, or Africa.

For a nation so culturally, regionally, and racially diverse, any work of art would be insufficient and incomplete in depicting "American life." But if one purpose of cultural exchange was to show foreign audience members an example of what it was like to live in a different geographic and political environment, then *Porgy and*

[26] Leonid Baratov, "Porgy and Bess," *Evening Moscow*, 12 January 1956, also in Baldwin, 204. Catfish Row was set in South Carolina.

[27] Penny von Eschen, "Who's the Real Ambassador? Exploding Cold War Racial Ideology," in *Cold War Constructions: The Political Culture of United States Imperialism, 1945–1966*, ed. Christian G. Appy (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 115. While jazz was certainly popular among young listeners in the Soviet Union (they could tune in surreptitiously to the Voice of America radio program), the U.S. "jambassadors" were sent primarily to non-aligned countries as a way to counter Soviet communist influence. See also Darren Mueller, "The Ambassadorial LPs of Dizzy Gillespie: *World Statesman* and *Dizzy in Greece*," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 10, no. 3 (2016): 239–69.

[28] Fosler-Lussier, *Music in America's Cold War Diplomacy*, 101.

[29] Ibid., 107. Fosler-Lussier notes that the State Department continued to assist Armstrong after 1957, including expediting the band's visas for Latin America. It did, however, "avoid official involvement" unless the matters concerned issues involving American commercial enterprises, 119.

[30] In the Everyman Opera production, the white characters included the Policemen and the Detective. There was no Archdale character.

Bess offered an unflattering portrayal of national identity and everyday life in the United States. Much of the opera had the potential to be reduced to issues of racial representation: from the cast's skin color, to the dialect, to the influences of jazz and African American spirituals in the music. During a time of great political and diplomatic uncertainty, it is understandable why such tensions and concerns would be high among U.S. government officials. The central event immediately preceding the State Department's decision regarding the funding of this opera and the Soviets' subsequent agreement to finance the tour in full was the Geneva Summit. A simple two-word phrase that emerged in the popular press—"politically premature"—captured the particularly difficult intersection between politics and race in this matter of cultural and national identity.

The U.S. State Department and *Porgy and Bess* as "Politically Premature"

The Geneva Summit of the "Big Four" began on 18 July 1955. The Summit's purpose was to initiate discussions on pressing foreign policy matters concerning trade, global security, and the incipient nuclear arms race.[31] In attendance were Dwight D. Eisenhower (president of the United States), Anthony Eden (prime minister of Great Britain), Nikolai A. Bulganin (premier of the Soviet Union), and Edgar Faure (prime minister of France), as well as each of their foreign ministers. Nikita Khrushchev, as first secretary of the Communist Party (a position he assumed in 1953) was also in attendance. It was a momentous diplomatic occasion: not only the first meeting of the powers since the Potsdam Conference of 1945, but also the first occasion on which the Americans encountered the new Soviet leadership after Joseph Stalin's death in 1953.[32]

As historian J. D. Parks argues, the Soviets took the initiative between 1953 and 1955 in restoring communication between the scientists, athletes, and artists of the two countries; American officials and the American public, on the other hand, were more cautious of Soviet advances, viewing them as "a new form of threat, albeit a more subtle one."[33] In April 1954, the first significant cultural exchange between the Soviet Union and a capitalist country occurred: the Comédie Française's trip to Russia, performing *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, *Tartuffe*, *Le Cid*, and *Poil de carotte*.[34]

Robert Breen saw the Geneva Summit as an opportunity to convince both the Americans and the Soviets of the value of bringing a production of *Porgy and*

[31] Gunter Bischof and Saki Dockrill, eds., *Cold War Respite: The Geneva Summit of 1955* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

[32] Bulganin, Khrushchev, and the other Soviet officials had concluded from the Geneva Summit that the United States, in fact, was not interested in a hot war. According to Khrushchev, the summit "convinced us once again that there was not any sort of pre-war situation in existence at that time, and our enemies were afraid of us in the same way as we were afraid of them." Vladislav Martinovich Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 109.

[33] J. D. Parks, *Culture, Conflict and Coexistence: American-Soviet Cultural Relations, 1917–1958* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1983), 134.

[34] John van Eerde, "The Comédie Française in the U.S.S.R.," *The French Review* 29, no. 2 (1955): 131–39.

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Bess to Russia. Immediately preceding the Summit, he sent variations of the same letter to U.S. delegates in attendance, including the personal secretary to President Eisenhower, urging the U.S. government to endorse *Porgy and Bess*. "It would certainly be good timing to immediately implement the . . . agreement 'in principle' with a tangible example in the form of PORGY AND BESS. And—to agree and announce it here on the spot [Geneva]."[35]

Breen also sent telegrams to Bulganin and Khrushchev:

> It is respectfully proposed that immediate plans for the initial, concrete realization of this concept be engineered by arranging exchange of: the American Negro Folkopera PORGY AND BESS by George Gershwin and Dubose Heyward and the MOISEYEV STATE FOLKLORISTIC BALLET of the U.S.S.R. This offer is in no way a perfunctory "gesture," but is a concrete and genuine proposal, which has the blessings of the proper authorities within the American Government.[36]

The Moiseyev Dance Company had been founded in 1936 by Igor Moiseyev, the ballet master of the Bolshoi. The Soviet Union began sending the company abroad in 1955 to showcase the country's many folk traditions and dance styles. On the one hand, the suggestion of this group showed an attempt at parallelism, linking *Porgy and Bess* with American folk art. On the other hand, Breen had suggested that the State Department exchange *Porgy and Bess* with the Bolshoi Ballet, a "high art" form.[37] In either case, however, Breen acted preemptively—perhaps out of ambition, business sense, naiveté, or a combination of all three—by attempting to arrange this cultural exchange without actually having the "blessings of the proper authorities" (i.e., U.S. government officials).

The State Department refused yet again to provide funding for a tour to Russia. The *New York Times* reported first on 27 September 1955 that the decision *not* to support *Porgy and Bess* was reached by Herbert Hoover, Jr., under secretary of state (son of the former president), and Theodore Streibert, director of the United States Information Agency. According to the article, State Department officials explained that "cost and political considerations had combined to bring about the decision" and that "they felt that such a tour was 'politically premature.'" If the company was able to finance the tour on its own, however, the officials said that "they did not expect the department to put any obstacles in its way."[38]

The newspaper reported the phrase "politically premature" at least twice more in the following two months. On 1 October 1955, challenging the State Department's decision not to fund the Soviet tour, the *Times* asked, "Can it ever be said to be 'premature' to give a demonstration of true democracy within those lands where Communist tyranny has so long held sway?"[39] And on 11 November, Welles Hangen,

[35] RB to Llewellyn Thompson, 14 July 1955, F27 PR–Europe–Russia (Edward R. Murrow: China)–part 1, BC, OSU. Underline and capitalization in original, same for subsequent references.

[36] RB to Premier Nikolai Bulganin, 30 July 1955, F27 Public Relations—Europe—Russia—(E. Roosevelt, N. Khrushchev [*sic*])—part 1, BC, OSU.

[37] Joseph B. Phillips, Acting Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs to RB, 4 February 1954, Booking—Europe/Russia, '55 (2) F108, BC, OSU. The Moiseyev Dance Company did come to the United States in 1958.

[38] "U.S. Will Not Pay for 'Porgy' Visit," *New York Times*, 28 September 1955.

[39] "Porgy and Bess," *New York Times*, 1 October 1955.

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the paper's Moscow correspondent, claimed that the opera would play in Moscow "despite the State Department's opposition." Furthermore, purportedly quoting the company's tour manager, Anatole Heller, Hangen wrote that "the State Department was maintaining its stand that the company's trip to the Soviet Union ... would be 'politically premature.'"[40] Ultimately, then, *Porgy and Bess* would be financed by the Soviet Ministry of Culture and (undisclosed) private sources.

Four days after Hangen's final article in the *New York Times*, Breen felt obliged to write to Robinson McIlvaine, deputy assistant secretary for public affairs (State Department), that he was disturbed to see the article and to apologize for its release, fearing damaged relations with the State Department because of the problematic phrase. Breen shifted the blame away from himself and Heller, however, emphasizing that the two words "politically premature" had earlier origins and had not been coined by Anatole Heller.[41] McIlvaine reported back to Breen on 16 November that he had tracked the phrase down to a telephone conversation between the *Times* and an officer of the State Department who had nothing whatsoever to do with the President's Emergency Fund, which could have supported the Soviet tour.[42]

Despite solving the mystery of the phrase's provenance, though, the State Department never changed its mind about financing the trip. The Department had already informed Breen that it would not fund performances in the Soviet Union purportedly due to its review of the large allocation of monetary resources the company had previously received. In a 21 October 1955 letter to Robert C. Schnitzer, General Manager for ANTA, McIlvaine explained:

> The decision ... regarding Porgy and Bess was made on the basis of certain operating facts such as (1) Porgy and Bess had already received $707,000 [$4.9 million in 2014] in assistance for tours of Europe, the Mediterranean and Latin America. This additional grant would bring the total assistance up to $1,107,000 [$9.8 million in 2014] or 25% of the entire two-year world-wide program, (2) The $400,000 [$3.5 million in 2014] required would represent more than 95% of the 1956 budget for the European area necessitating the cancellation of other major projects already scheduled or under consideration.[43]

McIlvaine also wrote, "As I am sure you realize, the aim of this fund is to present, as best we can, a balanced picture of United States culture, as represented by the performing arts (opera, dance, music, drama, etc.) and by sports groups and individuals." (Note that this letter was written after the first appearance of "politically premature" on 27 September).

One interpretation of McIlvaine's statement places emphasis on simply having a wide representation of performing arts genres. But another interpretation focuses on what a "balanced" picture of America itself meant. As Mary Dudziak notes, U.S. policymakers in the 1950s "saw American race relations through the lens of a black/white paradigm. To them, race in America was quintessentially about the

[40] Welles Hangen, "Soviet to Finance 'Porgy' in Moscow," *New York Times*, 11 November 1955.
[41] RB to Robinson McIlvaine, 15 November 1955, F5 P&B Russia—part 2, BC, OSU. The "earlier *Times*" piece refers to "U.S. Will Not Pay for 'Porgy' Visit," *New York Times*, 28 September 1955.
[42] Robinson McIlvaine to RB, 16 November 1955, F5 P&B Russia—part 3, BC, OSU.
[43] Robinson McIlvaine to Robert Schnitzer, 21 October 1955, F5 P&B Russia—part 3, BC, OSU.

'Negro problem.'"[44] Michael Krenn contends that their attitude was rooted in the "nearly all-white composition" of the State Department's personnel and diplomatic corps.[45] He argues that officials in the department did not think about race in the same way as African Americans: rather than a lived experience of actual people, "for U.S. foreign policy officials, race was, first and foremost, basically a matter of domestic concern. They felt uncomfortable dealing with it at home, and, since America's record on the issue was not a particularly exemplary one, they felt even more uneasy dealing with it in the international arena."[46] Breen had even suggested to his wife in March 1955 that earlier State Department responses revealed that younger officials were especially "frightened" by the *Porgy and Bess* proposal and would "think first of their jobs."[47] According to Breen, for these officials, "the 'safest' approach from their point-of-view would be to say 'no' and forget it."[48]

A number of legal and diplomatic considerations, though, also stood as obstacles to a United States–Soviet Union cultural exchange at this time. The Lacy–Zarubin Agreement, which formalized artistic exchanges (as well as scientific, academic, and athletic ones, inter alia), was signed only in January 1958, two years after the *Porgy and Bess* tour.[49] Before this agreement, Stalin had effectively cut Russia off from cultural exchanges and foreign ideas, and the U.S. McCarran Act of 1950 had "made it virtually impossible for nonofficial Soviet-bloc visitors to enter the United States."[50] Even after the death of Stalin and the reinvigoration of the All-Union Society for Cultural Ties (VOKS) on the Soviet side, the fingerprinting requirements of the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 (a.k.a. the McCarran–Walter Act) prevented large groups of Soviet artists to enter the United States because the Soviet government refused to allow its citizens to be fingerprinted en masse.[51]

State Department concerns regarding the presentation of this opera in the Soviet Union were made most explicit in the company's last-minute briefing on 17 December 1955, the day of its departure from East Berlin to Leningrad.

[44] Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 14.

[45] Krenn, *Black Diplomacy*, 44.

[46] Ibid., 6. By contrast, Noonan cites John Taylor's idea that the State Department declined to sponsor the trip because Soviet willingness to host an official U.S. cultural program could require them to reciprocate with visas to Soviet performers. See Noonan, *The Strange Career of* Porgy and Bess, 196. Monod suggests that Breen did not receive support because of the company's shoddy management of its financial affairs, conflicts with ANTA management, and also a feeling that the opera had already received too much money. Monod, "Disguise, Containment and the *Porgy and Bess* Revival of 1952–1956": 284.

[47] RB to Wilva Breen, 3 March 1955, F108 Booking-Europe/Russia (2), BC, OSU. Earlier in the letter, Breen warned his wife that "THIS IS NOT A SUBJECT WE CAN DISCUSS WITH OUR CAREER FRIENDS IN THE STATE DEPT. They are too lowly stationed and would only be fearful and dampen the thing as they did before. This is a matter that only the highest authorities must deal with" (emphasis in original).

[48] Ibid.

[49] Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

[50] Gould-Davies, "The Logic of Soviet Cultural Diplomacy," 198–99.

[51] The State Department also turned down a proposal to help finance a tour of the Soviet Union by the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1956, shortly after the *Porgy and Bess* production. See Parks, *Culture, Conflict and Coexistence*, 161–62. The Boston Symphony Orchestra did make a trip that same year, supported by Eisenhower's International Exchange Program.

Walter N. Walmsley, Jr. and Roye L. Lowry, counsels of the American Embassy in Moscow, addressed many questions from the mundane, such as the availability of Kleenex ("Perhaps ... but better to bring a supply"), and the cost of living ("Everything but subway and haircuts outrageously expensive"), to more logistical concerns, such as whether one should accept invitations to private homes ("By all means go!"), or if there was any personal privacy (microphone tapping likely in the hotels, but "official 'tailing' is for protection").[52]

Yet perhaps the most important topics in the briefing dealt with "political questions" and the "Negro question." Walmsley advised cast members that "all propaganda potentials will be taken advantage of—what they may say is unpredictable," and that company members should be careful to distinguish between social conversation and interviews, because the "Soviets will seek meanings and interpretations in anything we say." With regard to political questions: "Don't answer them; we are on a cultural mission. There are always reasons behind questions—Soviets want support of their theories."[53] In terms of the Negro question, Walmsley reminded the company that laws among the forty-eight states varied, but that no federal statutes existed concerning discrimination or segregation.[54]

Truman Capote's extraordinary first-hand account of the tour in *The Muses Are Heard* corroborates the information contained in the log, while also emphasizing that cast members showed special concern for how to answer questions dealing with race.[55] Capote was assigned by *The New Yorker* to travel with, and write about, the company from its Berlin departure to the premiere in Leningrad. [56] The resulting series of articles was republished as a 182-page book.[57] According to Capote, John McCurry (Crown) asked, "The big problem is ... what do we say when they ask us political stuff? I'm speaking of the Negro situation."[58] Walmsley responded, "You don't have to answer political questions, any more than they would answer

[52] Daily Log, 17 December 1955, F5 P&B Russia—from 25 Nov 1955—part 3, BC, OSU. The Department had given a similar briefing to the company before its performances in Yugoslavia.

[53] Clare Croft describes similar State Department briefings before dance tours, including the 1962 New York City Ballet tour to the Soviet Union. In interviews, dancers recalled explicit instructions to identify their work as apolitical. Croft points out that "in these warnings, it seems apparent that 'political' usually equals what artists say, not what they do as dancers." Clare Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 20.

[54] Daily Log, 17 December 1955, F5 P&B Russia—from 25 Nov 1955—part 3, BC, OSU.

[55] Truman Capote, *The Muses Are Heard, an Account* (New York: Random House, 1956).

[56] Truman Capote, "Porgy and Bess in Russia: When the Cannons Are Silent," *The New Yorker*, 20 October 1956, and "Porgy and Bess in Russia: The Muses Are Heard," *The New Yorker*, 27 October 1956.

[57] Gerald Clarke, Capote's biographer, speculates that several encounters in *The Muses Are Heard* may have been fabricated for rhetorical purposes: to insert personal commentary at no personal cost. Gerald Clarke, *Capote: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 294. For the purposes of this article, my quotations from Clarke's book are corroborated with periodical accounts in mainstream and black presses.

[58] Roye L. Lowry, Second Secretary of the Embassy, who briefed the company with Walmsley, reported to Ambassador Charles Bohlen that he "found them [the cast members] much more alert to the realities of their situation in the Soviet Union than we had been led to expect. They did not, of course, have factual knowledge about a good many of the details of day to day living in the Soviet Union." Lowry to The Ambassador, 1956 02 13, Subject: Porgy and Bess Tour in the Soviet Union, 032 Porgy, Box 119, Central Decimal File, 1955–1959, Record Group 59, National Archives II, College Park.

questions of that nature put to them by you." Other cast members pressed on. Jerry Laws (Mingo) asked, "Should we answer it the way it is? Tell the truth? Or do you want us to gloss it over?" Walmsley responded, "Believe me, sir, the Russians know as much about the Negro situation as you do. And they don't give a damn one way or another. Except for statements, propaganda, anything they can turn to their own interests."[59]

The State Department briefing displays some of the officials' worries: how to separate political issues of race from a cultural mission and withhold material the Soviets could use as propaganda to discredit the United States. It also provides evidence of a strategy to present positive information about the country's racial situation. Dudziak writes that American embassies during this period cooperated with the State Department "in an effort to present what they considered to be a more balanced perspective" on the "Negro problem." This endeavor included "efforts to disseminate favorable information" rather than focusing on the problems.[60] An example of this point was Walmsley's emphasis on the lack of federal statutes, even if individual states practiced de jure and/or de facto segregation.

State Department officials were not alone, however, in expressing their resistance to having *Porgy and Bess* performed in the Soviet Union. African American critics were also vociferously against the production. Their reasons had less to do, however, with the political nature of representing American life and national identity in the Soviet Union than with a reluctance to present the opera's problematic portrayal of African Americans in other countries.

African American Concerns with Racial Representation in the Soviet Union

Many authors in the black press opposed sending *Porgy and Bess* to the Soviet Union. Articles in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *Chicago Defender*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier* show that African American critics were afraid that it would showcase negative, essentialist stereotypes, either newly introducing them to the Soviet public or reinforcing previous exposure.[61] These depictions troubled the African Americans who believed that most Soviets (or Europeans or Asians) would likely never encounter a black person again. They feared that Soviets would not understand that *Porgy and Bess* was an inaccurate representation of African

[59] Capote, *The Muses Are Heard*, 12.

[60] Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 48.

[61] The African American press has previously been little cited in *Porgy and Bess*'s performance history. Notable exceptions include David Monod, Ray Allen, George Cunningham, Ellen Noonan, and Gwynne Kuhner Brown. I address this problem by including evidence from the three largest and most influential historically black periodicals. The weekly *Baltimore Afro-American* (1892–present), also commonly known as *The Afro*, is the oldest African American family-owned newspaper in the United States. The editorials in the *Chicago Defender* (1905–present) often reflected a more militant position that denounced racial inequities, referring to African Americans as "Race men and Race women." The *Pittsburgh Courier* (1910–present, currently the *New Pittsburgh Courier*) was the most widely circulated black newspaper of its time, with a national circulation of 450,000 in the 1940s. All three newspapers' archives can be found on LexisNexis.

Americans even though the opera's writers (the Gershwins and Heywards) strove for some form of musical and racial authenticity.[62]

The concern was powerfully conveyed by the editor of the *Chicago Defender* on 20 August 1955: "'Porgy and Bess' will be performed for a people without any background for the subject, and, moreover, people without any concept of the Negro's actual condition in America. ... We are somewhat disturbed by the plan to send 'Porgy and Bess' with a Negro company to Moscow. ... The saga of Catfish Alley [*sic*, Catfish Row] essentially concerns the antics of a primitive, superstitious, ignorant and shiftless group." The editor argued that to produce it would "lift Negroes out of the context of the American scene, and reinforce the Russian belief that Negroes are a backward people."[63] Similarly, a correspondent for the *Baltimore Afro-American* wrote on 8 October 1955 that the Russians indeed knew little about "colored Americans except lynchings, slums, flagrant discrimination and 'OL' Man River."[64] These writers worried that Russian audiences would see and hear a particular representation of African Americans—one that was not only negative, but also fragmentary.

In an extended, commanding account in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, P. L. Prattis voiced his strong opposition not just to the Soviet portion of the international tour, but to the entire tour itself:

> I love "Porgy and Bess," have seen it at least six times. But I don't like it in Europe and Asia. Over there, those folk don't know me too well. Through the years, Hollywood has been indoctrinating Europeans, Asians, even some Africans and South Americans, with queer notions about me. I am supposed to be afraid of the dark and of graveyards. I go wild, simply wild, over watermelon and chicken. I'll dance a jig at the drop of a dime. I am a servant—always. I live in slums—always. I share in none of the things which make America a great country. All I'm pretty good at is singing and praying—and only that because it is sort of entertaining to white folk.[65]

Prattis's concerns thus focused on the power of *Porgy and Bess* as a form of "indoctrination" in "queer notions" about black people, ranging from superstition and religion, lack of self-control, and "naturally-born" skills in entertainment. It is also interesting to note, however, that Prattis's opposition to the production stood in contrast with his love of the opera, an ambivalence felt by other African American critics as well.

Additional articles appeared to be positive, but their praise veiled a subtext of irony and critique. For example, an article in the *Baltimore Afro-American* on 22 October 1955 was titled "Choice of 'Porgy' for Russian Tour is Alternately Rapped

[62] For further discussion of DuBose Heyward's background and George Gershwin's "ethnographic" project on Folly Island, see Howard Pollack, *George Gershwin: His Life and Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), and George Gershwin, "Rhapsody in Catfish Row," *New York Times*, 20 October 1935. Gershwin wrote that his aim in *Porgy and Bess* was to bring "the drama, the humor, the superstition, the religious fervor, the dancing and the irrepressible high spirits of the race" to the operatic stage.

[63] "Catfish Alley in Moscow," *Chicago Defender*, 20 August 1955.

[64] "'Porgy' Promises to Educate Russians," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 8 October 1955.

[65] P. L. Prattis, "Horizon: What Is 'Representative'?" *Pittsburgh Courier*, 15 October 1955. See also Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) for other references to Prattis's articles.

and Lauded." The reporter, however, spent most of his time "rapping" rather than "lauding." He quoted Westbrook Pegler—a Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist and one of the most outspoken critics of the opera—who had written that *Porgy and Bess* was "a story of low morals in a minority of the American people. It is not regarded by respectable Americans white or colored as a fair or decent commentary on the American colored person." Similarly, regarding tour performances at La Scala, Pegler speculated that "the few Italians who saw it must have wondered whether this was sabotage by our State Department."[66]

These accounts and many others reveal a clear apprehension that the opera would portray African Americans in a negative light. Yet the reasons why critics may have cared how the Soviets understood the opera were also important. Brandon Terry, a political theorist and historian, suggests that black critics may have feared that if the Soviets saw the opera, they would think that African Americans suffered injustice not as a result of capitalism, but because they were indeed an "ignorant and shiftless group" of people deserving of their economic plight and political disenfranchisement.[67] Inherent criminality—captured by the characters of Crown, Sportin' Life, and eventually, Bess—could be seen as *essential* and not *circumstantial*, that is, a part of their very being rather than a product of their material living conditions. While a fair Marxist-Leninist interpretation would focus on the materialist aspects of African American subjugation rather than any inherent racial fault, black political and social leaders' concerns cannot be discounted as legitimate predictions of Soviet understanding.[68]

In fact, some African American anxieties, especially concerning overt, excessive, and uncontrollable sexuality, were confirmed in Welles Hangen's review of the Moscow production for the *New York Times* and Truman Capote's account in *The Muses Are Heard*. Hangen wrote that the sudden transition in the picnic scene from a "prim religious outing to a bucolic orgy" left many audience members confused.[69] According to Capote, what most disturbed the Soviet audience was the opera's depiction of sex, from its "shake-that-thing brand of choreography" to the violent rape scene between Crown and Bess.[70]

Robert Breen likewise worried that Russian audiences would mistake *Porgy and Bess* as an accurate representation of the living and working conditions of all African Americans instead of a fictional story first written in the 1920s by a white author. Breen was concerned enough to take at least two actions to address the issue. The first was a new program insert for the Moscow performances (they were not included in the Leningrad performances, which came earlier). In a memorandum from 3 January 1956, addressed to Vladimir Stepanov and N. Savachenko, Soviet Ministry of Culture assistants assigned to the company, Breen wrote:

[66] "Choice of 'Porgy' for Russian Tour Is Alternately Rapped and Lauded," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 22 October 1955.

[67] Brandon Terry, personal conversation with author, 3 November 2013. I especially thank Terry for many thought-provoking conversations about issues of race, exoticism, representation, comedy, and language.

[68] I thank Anne Searcy and Anne Shreffler for mentioning this point to me.

[69] Welles Hangen, "'Porgy and Bess' in the U.S.S.R.," *New York Times*, 15 January 1956.

[70] Capote, *The Muses Are Heard*, 175.

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> It is increasingly apparent that some of the Russian journalists—and therefore most likely the public—are not completely aware that PORGY AND BESS is a "period piece" and does not represent negro life in the United States today . . . Everyman Opera will be happy indeed to bear the cost of such printing [of an insert], etc.[71]

Second, Breen emphasized this point in an article of 4 January 1956 for the Soviet newspaper *Neva*: "PB [Porgy and Bess] is not in any sense documentary, and does not reflect life in the United States any more than AIDA, MADAME BUTTERFLY, or BORIS GODUNOV have a real bearing on present day Egypt, Japan or the Soviet Union."[72] There was a key difference between this opera of "otherness," however, and orientalist or exoticist operas of the European canon that I would like to point out: *Porgy and Bess* was performed by a cast racially (in this sense, phenotypically) consistent with the characters in its story. By contrast, Verdi's *Aida* was set in Egypt; it was premiered in Cairo, but its performing cast was Italian. Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* was set in Japan, with most of its characters Japanese, but at its premiere, its performing cast was again, Italian. *Porgy and Bess*, on the other hand, was a story written by white authors about black people, and if following Gershwin's explicit instructions, to be performed only by black singers. The cast's skin color thus had the power to lend the opera a degree of greater real-life accuracy or credibility, rather than foreground its fictional basis. Mistaking an Italian prima donna for an Egyptian princess was visually and sonically more difficult than believing that John McCurry really was Crown. McCurry did not need cork to appear black.

Cultural Encounters from Cast Members' Perspectives

These concerns, however, contrasted with the meaningful artistic, professional, and economic rewards that the international tour of *Porgy and Bess* provided to the cast members. For almost a century since its premiere, *Porgy and Bess* has given opportunities to African Americans to perform on professional stages where they were often otherwise excluded.[73] As Gwynne Kuhner Brown argues, "[the] willingness of first-rate black artists" to perform in *Porgy and Bess* challenged the assertion that the opera was "something done by whites to blacks."[74] African American artists gained material and professional benefits, even while critics argued that *Porgy and Bess* was socially harmful to the black community because it perpetuated racial stereotypes. Given the difficult history of racial subjugation in the United States, I want to probe this problem further in the context of the Everyman Opera production.

[71] RB to Vladimir Stepanov and N. Savachenko, 3 January 1956, F5 P&B Moscow 1956, including Russian contract, BC, OSU.

[72] Article by RB for NEVA, 4 January 1956, F27 P&B: Public Relations—Leningrad, BC, OSU.

[73] For example, Richard Crawford writes, "For the original performers of *Porgy and Bess*—most of them classically trained singers, barred from the operatic stage by racial discrimination and the scarcity of roles for people of color—Gershwin and Heyward's tale of Southern black life was a godsend, demanding their best as actors and singers while breaking down social, political, and racial barriers" ("Where Did Porgy and Bess Come From?," 712).

[74] 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 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 164.

I have conducted interviews with cast members Maya Angelou (Ruby and the principal dancer in the company) and Martha Flowers (Bess), which support the claim that black artists were enthusiastic about performing in the opera for several reasons, but especially because of its talented cast.[75] In her memoir, *Singin' and Swingin'*, Angelou remarks how a production in San Francisco in 1953 revealed to her "the greatest array of Negro talent" she had ever seen.[76] Moreover, in our interview she noted that the company hired black singers with degrees from Curtis and Juilliard just to be in the chorus—singers who were so "exquisite" that if one person dropped a note or had to cough or sneeze, another could step in and sing the line. Few professional opportunities existed for African Americans trained in classical music: "I was very grateful for the opportunity to be around so many wonderful singers and to be involved, enmeshed, in good music, and to travel throughout most of Europe."[77]

Martha Flowers agreed. Flowers, trained at Fisk University and Juilliard, joined the company in 1954 after touring Europe in Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*—another opera with an all-black cast—where she sang the role of St. Settlement. Flowers was a good friend of Angelou, who described her as "delicately made as a Stradivarius" with a voice that sounded like "hot silver melted."[78] In our interview, Flowers said that when she joined the cast in 1954, "there were no opportunities [before the civil rights movement]—literally no opportunities to sing in this country especially [for those] singing with trained voices." She elaborated at greater length:

> There was beginning to be a great deal of international concern about how African Americans were being treated in this country and . . . this made the Europeans seemingly even more sympathetic towards *Porgy and Bess* and *Four Saints in Three Acts*. It was just phenomenal how they accepted us and the music and loved the artists. It was not known to me in this country of such admiration and respect for how we had performed and done.[79]

As Flowers's comments suggest, not only did *Porgy and Bess* offer a chance for black artists to perform professionally when their opportunities might otherwise be limited in the United States, but European audiences also gave them a level of appreciation that they had rarely experienced.

As successful performing artists, Flowers, Angelou, and their colleagues demonstrated their high level of achievement to international audiences.[80] Angelou re-

[75] Although Angelou left the company in 1955, her account offers a powerful perspective on what it meant to be African American and perform in an international production.

[76] Maya Angelou, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (New York: Random House, 1976), 127.

[77] Maya Angelou, telephone interview with author, 7 June 2012.

[78] Angelou, *Singin' and Swingin'*, 147.

[79] Martha Flowers, telephone interview with author, 12 June 2012.

[80] This perspective also supports Allen and Cunningham's observation that some African Americans viewed the opera in the 1930s as a means of "racial uplift," that is, "promoting social mobility for blacks through assimilation and the adaptation of middle-class values." One irony that they do not discuss, however, is that the "self-help, racial solidarity, temperance, thrift, chastity, social purity, patriarchal authority, and the accumulation of wealth" that encompassed this late nineteenth-century bourgeois ideal was diametrically opposite of life on Catfish Row. See Allen and Cunningham, "Cultural Uplift and Double-Consciousness": 345–46.

marked that *Porgy and Bess* was composed of a whole cast of individuals with college degrees from prestigious universities, trained to dance and sing in the classical tradition. She remembered that during the tour, "people [often] sang in concerts. Wherever we were, we were out in the nightclubs and restaurants . . . Since we were rare, we were always asked to sing."[81] Flowers also noted that they were often invited to sing at embassies.

The black press frequently remarked on the cast members' activities outside of *Porgy and Bess* performances on the theater stage. The *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that four days before the Leningrad premiere, the ninety-three-member cast attended Russian ballet and opera performances, signed autographs, and sang Christmas carols and spirituals.[82] A tour highlight was the wedding of Helen Thigpen (Serena) and Earl Jackson (Sportin' Life) at what the *Baltimore Afro-American* called the Russian Baptist Church.[83] According to the *Afro*, "More than 2,500 persons crowded into the little church which has an auditorium that seats 1,500. Several thousand more jammed the small street outside of the church."[84] The idea for holding the wedding in the Soviet Union had been developed while the company was touring in Mexico City, and planning for the event included assembling a brilliant yellow trousseau for the bride with silver accessories and a chocolate-colored full-dress suit, yellow bow tie, and yellow lapels for the groom.[85] This type of public engagement—or informal cultural exchange—was a kind of racial representation that contrasted with the theatrical representation seen on stage. These artists, who were not only highly talented but also often dressed in fashionable clothing and jewelry, modeled a vision of African Americans that differed from the images of poverty and oppression in *Porgy and Bess*.

Interviews with cast members and reports from black newspapers show the complicated ways that African Americans on this tour presented deeply conflictual aspects of race, class, and national identity. They called attention to unique living human individuals who were not reducible to the characters in a fictional story. Thus the measure of their social and cultural impact in changing preconceptions based on stereotype directly correlated with the amount of informal cultural exchange they engaged in. The more they were in the public spotlight, the less they appeared like Porgy, Bess, Sportin' Life, or Crown. Artistic performance perhaps ended with the drop of the curtain, but public performance did not.

Soviet Descriptions and Reactions to *Porgy and Bess*

The Soviet responses to *Porgy and Bess* were complex, revealing an understanding of the opera and the production at different moments laudatory, critical, and

[81] Maya Angelou, telephone interview with author, 7 June 2012.

[82] "'Porgy' Clicks in Leningrad," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 7 January 1956.

[83] Probably the Moscow Church of Evangelical Christians–Baptists, but unfortunately, I have not been able to find further information about it.

[84] "Huge Moscow Crowd Charmed by "Porgy and Bess" Wedding," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 28 January 1956.

[85] Lowry to the Ambassador, 1956 02 13, Subject: Porgy and Bess Tour in the Soviet Union, 032 Porgy, Box 119, Central Decimal File, 1955–1959, Record Group 59, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

bewildered. The Everyman Opera Company's daily log indicates that the highest echelons of Soviet political leadership were in attendance on 11 January 1956, including Bulganin, Khrushchev, and a large party of other officials. They and the Russian public had access to two main sources of written information about the production: the program distributed to the Leningrad and Moscow audiences and reviews published in Soviet periodicals.[86]

These sources reveal that African American critics need not have worried about Soviet critics' essentialist interpretations of racial characteristics or inherent criminality. At least in the official record, *Porgy and Bess* was significantly—and unexpectedly—understood as a socialist realist opera. The prominence of realism, folklore, vernacular style, and the perception of an oppressed working class contributed to this understanding.[87] Officials at the U.S. embassy in Moscow also overlooked, or were unaware of, any possible aesthetic interpretations of the work and instead commented on the *lack* of overt critiques of American race relations.

The production's program included a cast list in English and Russian, as well as an eight-page synopsis and two short commentary essays (see Figure 2).[88] The first essay, "George Gershwin and His Opera 'Porgy and Bess'" by Gennady Rozhdestvensky (b. 1931), informed the audience that George Gershwin was a popular songwriter and the composer of *Rhapsody in Blue* (it did not mention Gershwin's Russian–Jewish background).[89] Additionally, it highlighted some important scenes in the opera, including Serena's lament. The second essay, "The Opera 'Porgy and Bess' on the Stage" by Boris Pokrovsky (1912–2009), focused more on the production, including biographical information about Robert Breen and the stage and costume designers, Wolfgang Roth and Jed Mace.[90]

More importantly, the essays focused on Gershwin's alleged ability to capture the "heart and soul" of black people and the opera's ability to recreate the world of "port loaders [stevedores], fishermen, and beggars." Pokrovsky wrote, for example, that "the world, in which the suffering of people combines with their faith in human happiness, is recreated in Gershwin's opera with great truth and strength." He continued, "The very life of Catfish Row in all its diversity of color" is captured in "the mass [choral] scenes," which are "diverse in meaning, character, [and] rhythm." Rozhdestvensky focused more on the musical aspects of the opera as evident signs of American black culture. He argued that Gershwin's "rhythmic variety and harmonic

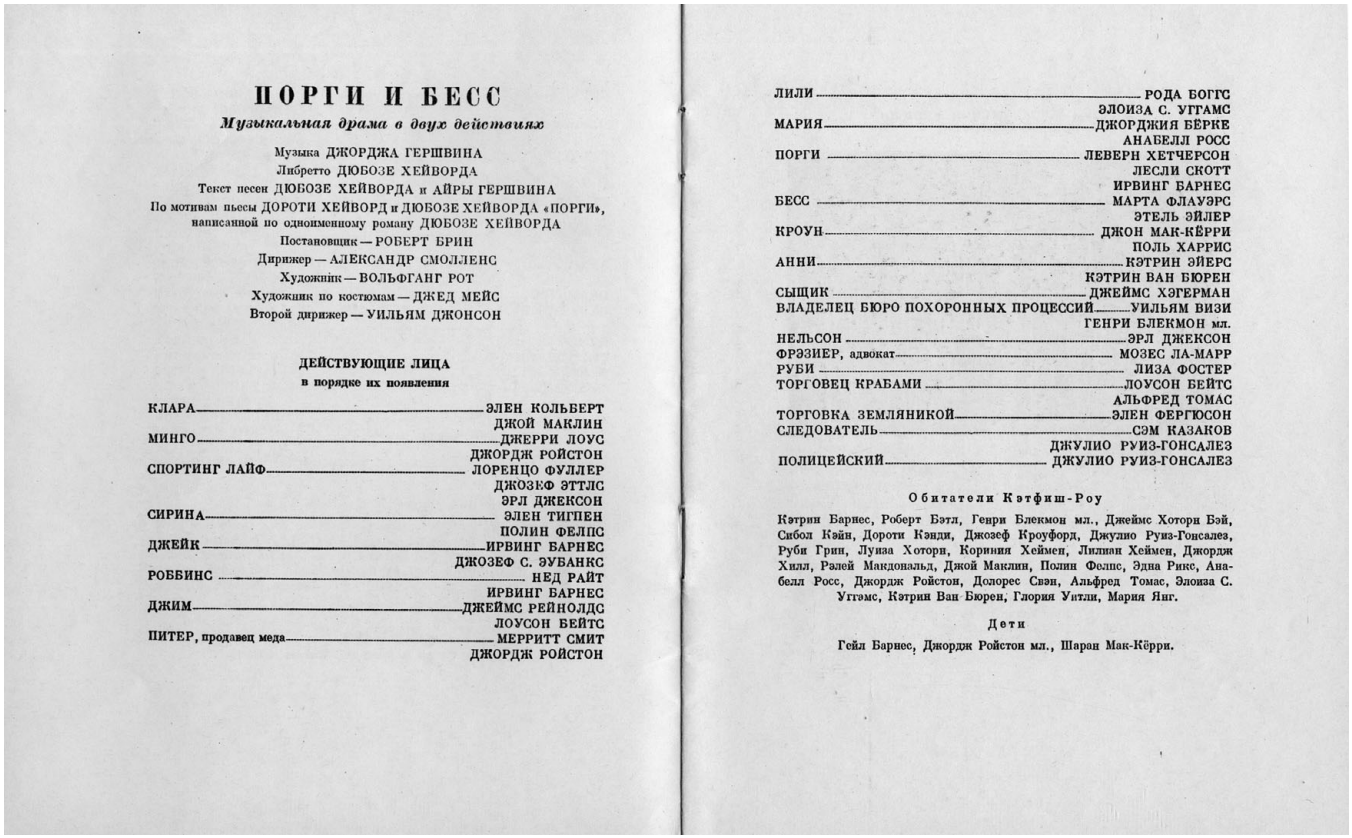
[86] Capote noted, however, that the program was not printed in time for the Leningrad premiere, leaving the audience to rely on an interpreter reading out the synopsis before each act. Capote, *The Muses Are Heard*, 169.

[87] Although a precise definition of "socialist realism" had been framed by Andrey Alexandrovich Zhdanov as "a creative method based on the truthful, historically concrete artistic reflection of reality in its revolutionary development," officials' understanding, application, and enforcement of this aesthetic ideology changed, sometimes dramatically, between 1932 and 1956. For a more in-depth historical context of socialist realism, see Richard Taruskin, "Chapter 13: Music and Totalitarian Society," in the *Oxford History of Western Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[88] Program, *Porgy and Bess*, F27 P&B: Public Relations–Leningrad, BC, OSU. I am indebted to Anastasia Snetkova and Anne Searcy for translating the synopsis and these articles, and to Searcy specifically for help with the Russian transliterations throughout this essay.

[89] Rozhdestvensky was a young and well-known conductor at the Bolshoi in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

[90] Pokrovsky was a famous Russian opera director.



ПОРГИ И БЕСС

Музыкальная драма в двух действиях

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ДЕЙСТВУЮЩИЕ ЛИЦА
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МИНГО — ДЖЕРРИ ЛОУС, ДЖОРДЖ РОЙСТОН
СПОРТИНГ ЛАЙФ — ЛОРЕНЦО ФУЛЛЕР, ДЖОЗЕФ ЭТТЛС, ЭРЛ ДЖЕКСОН
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МАРИЯ — ДЖОРДЖИЯ БЁРКЕ, АНАБЕЛЛ РОСС
ПОРГИ — ЛЕВЕРН ХЕТЧЕРСОН, ЛЕСЛИ СКОТТ, ИРВИНГ БАРНЕС
БЕСС — МАРТА ФЛАУЭРС, ЭТЕЛЬ ЭЙЛЕР
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ТОРГОВЕЦ КРАБАМИ — ЛОУСОН БЕЙТС, АЛЬФРЕД ТОМАС
ТОРГОВКА ЗЕМЛЯНИКОЙ — ЭЛЕН ФЕРГЮСОН
СЛЕДОВАТЕЛЬ — СЭМ КАЗАКОВ, ДЖУЛИО РУИЗ-ГОНСАЛЕЗ
ПОЛИЦЕЙСКИЙ — ДЖУЛИО РУИЗ-ГОНСАЛЕЗ

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Дети

Гейл Барнес, Джордж Ройстон мл., Шаран Мак-Кёрри.

Figure 2. Russian program of *Porgy and Bess*. P&B: Public Relations—Leningrad (F27), Robert Breen Collection, Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute, Ohio State University.

freshness" were inseparably connected to the supposed folklore from which they came—the songs themselves acted as "a mirror that reflect[ed] the heart and soul of a people." More specifically, Gershwin's use of "negro songs" and melodies managed to "bring to the listener the freshness and spontaneity of the feelings and thoughts of a simple people." For Rozhdestvensky, the choral accompaniment to Serena's lament, for example, ended "as though in a moan of a people crushed [or depressed] by sorrow," while the picnic scene on the island beat out "the complex rhythms characteristic of folk negro music."

Common to Pokrovsky's and Rozhdestvensky's program articles was a reading of African Americans as a "suffering proletariat." The focus on their "truth" and "strength" despite the oppression that they encounter, and more importantly, the emphasis on the use of mass choruses, "negro songs," and folklore, placed and praised the work in line with a socialist realist aesthetic. As Marina Frolova-Walker has argued, "the use of folk music was the single most prominent strand of musical Socialist Realism" because it allowed Soviet composers to walk the line between formalism and banality."[91] The claims, for example, that the characters were a "simple people" qualified and contrasted with the African American concern that black people would be interpreted as a "backward people" or an "ignorant and shiftless group."[92] Instead, through a socialist realist understanding, the characters of *Porgy and Bess* were joined with the international working class.

In addition to the program essays, the public had access to the Leningrad and Moscow newspaper reviews.[93] In a memorandum to Charles Bohlen, the U.S. ambassador in Moscow, Roye L. Lowry, the embassy's second secretary, noted that the reviews were "noteworthy for dealing with the work in terms of artistic and critical standards familiar everywhere," rather than focusing on political manipulation. Lowry explained further that "there were attempts to relate the story portrayed on the stage to Soviet political propaganda, but even in those reviews which bore down most heavily on this, the political content of the review was subordinated to artistic criticism." On the whole, he concluded, the reviews were surprisingly "favorable."[94]

Lowry was most likely referring to a politically oriented article by the composer Valerian Bogdanov-Berezovsky in the 29 December *Vecherniy Leningrad* (*Evening Leningrad*): "We, the Soviet spectators, realize the corrosive effect of the capitalistic system on the consciousness, the mentality and the moral outlook of a people oppressed by poverty. This lifts Heyward's play, as set to music by Gershwin, into the realm of a social drama."[95] Although the article's social and political critique was the most heavy-handed among the reviews, Lowry failed to notice how even in this

[91] Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism from Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 313.

[92] *Chicago Defender*, 20 August 1955.

[93] The Robert Breen Papers include translations (into English) of newspaper reviews from throughout the Soviet tour collected by the Everyman Opera Company's staff.

[94] Lowry to the Ambassador, 1956 02 13, Subject: Porgy and Bess Tour in the Soviet Union, 032 Porgy, Box 119, Central Decimal File, 1955–1959, Record Group 59, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

[95] Valerian Bogdanov-Berezovsky, "Guest Performance of the 'Everyman Opera' Company," *Evening Leningrad*, 29 December 1955.

"critique," the author's primary focus was on artistic details. Bogdanov-Berezovsky noted the number of arias, ensembles, choral numbers, and "little songs of a couplet variety and dance elements close to ethnic and music-hall forms." Ultimately, Bogdanov-Berezovsky interpreted Gershwin's music, in the form of Clara's lullaby, Serena's lament, and the "penetrating and lyrically deep duet of Porgy and Bess," as "intentionally suffused with Negro musical folklore."[96]

Other reviews were focused even more on the "artistic" elements of the production, including Gershwin's purported use of folk songs.[97] Writing in *Smena*, Yuri Kovalev asserted that Gershwin "widely used the folk art of the American Negroes" and that "it [was] quite likely that the unique combination of melody and movement in Negro art (ragtime, blues) suggested to Gershwin the idea of creating a synthetic genre in which movement, music, and song would be organically fused."[98] The issue of African American representation, however, was left unaddressed. The actors were not seen to represent a black essentialism of inherent criminality, irrepressible sexuality, or mental naiveté at least in the recorded account (which was not necessarily the same as an audience member's account), but they could still represent an idealized and romanticized authenticity of black folk life and culture. This interpretation allowed the Soviets to appropriate both the characters in the opera and the actors in the production into the international proletariat. Thus, the Soviets mistook the story of *Porgy and Bess* to stand in for the wide range and diversity of African American experiences in the United States.

What further complicated and even contradicted the official Soviet view was how the cast members appeared off stage. To the chagrin of any Marxist-Leninist, the actors could not easily be seen as members of the proletariat, a fact made especially evident during events organized for them in Leningrad and Moscow. A twenty-minute video of the tour produced by the Central Studio for Documentary Film and held in Robert Breen's Papers at Ohio State University shows how the company arrived by train, stepping out in fur coats, with one actress gently carrying a small pet dog. Large crowds cheered, blew kisses, and showered their guests with flowers.[99]

After checking into the Hotel Metropol, the company boarded a bus, whereupon the video's viewer is similarly given a tour of Moscow, visiting Soviet national museums, passing by monuments, and attending a performance of Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* at the Bolshoi State Academy Theatre.[100] The video shows the Soviets hosting a large holiday party for the company in Moscow, including circle

[96] Ibid.

[97] For example, B. Zagoursky, "Porgy and Bess—Visit of Everyman Opera Company to U.S.S.R.," *Moscow Izvestia*, 12 January 1956; Morschikhin, "American Opera in Leningrad," *Leningrad Pravda*, 5 January 1956, Porgy and Bess (U.S.S.R.—Poland—Czech reviews), BC, OSU. *Vechernyaya Moskva* (*Evening Moscow*) showed similar interpretations.

[98] Yuri Kovalev, "Porgy and Bess," *Smena*, 29 December 1955, translated by Roye L. Lowry, checked by Heyward Isham.

[99] The Central Studio for Documentary Film is Центральная студия документальных фильмов, ЦСДФ (*Tsentral'naya studiya dokumental'nïkh fil'mov* (*TsSDF*)).

[100] Ludmila Stern documents a similar pattern in Soviet reception of important visitors, beginning with the VOKS reception of French intellectuals in the 1920s. Ludmila Stern, "The All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and French Intellectuals, 1925–1929," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 45, no. 1 (1999): 99–109.

Figure 3. Cast members viewing a portrait of composer Mikhail Glinka by artist Ilya Repin. Robert Breen Collection, Russian Pictures, Box 3, Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute, Ohio State University. I thank Anne Searcy for identifying the painting and artist.

dancing, festive drinking and eating, African American boys sitting on the lap of Grandfather Frost (*Ded moroz*, a Slavic folk character similar to Santa Claus), and a young Pioneer girl (a member of a Soviet mass youth organization) tying a handkerchief around an American boy's neck (see Figures 3–6).[101]

The Soviets paid substantial costs for the sake of these cultural exchanges and to bring *Porgy and Bess* to the Soviet Union. The Ministry of Culture remunerated $16,000 (64,000 rubles; $141,000 in 2014) a week, in addition to food and lodging in hotels, transportation in and out of Russia, and a domesticated goat (for Porgy's exit at the end of the opera).[102] But from his point of view, Truman Capote wanted to make clear that Soviet funding should not be construed as "cultural philanthropy." Not only did he complain that the Soviets skipped the champagne and caviar the cast members had hoped for—instead, they were disappointed with raspberry soda and yogurt—he also wrote that the Soviets saved money by making half of the salary

[101] By contrast, the high level of State Department officials' concerns for Soviet propaganda is evident in Lowry's suspicion that the Soviets would "exploit 'Porgy and Bess'" in a documentary film, with the possibility that scenes "might be presented with heavy editorial comment." This conclusion was made even after an NBC representative there "observed [and told Lowry] that the film is objective." Lowry to the Ambassador, 1956 02 13, Subject: Porgy and Bess Tour in the Soviet Union, 032 Porgy, Box 119, Central Decimal File, 1955–1959, Record Group 59, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

[102] Copy of Contract USSR, 3 December 1955, F5 P&B Moscow 1956, including Russian contract, BC, OSU.

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Figure 4. Cast members strolling down a street in Moscow. Robert Breen Collection, Russian Collection, Box 3, Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute, Ohio State University.

Figure 5. Cast members with Grandfather Frost at a reception hosted by the Soviets. Robert Breen Collection, Russian Collection, Box 3, Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute, Ohio State University.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196317000384 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 6. Cast members (right to left) Martha Flowers, Lavern Hutcherson, and Ethel Ayler. Robert Breen Collection, Russian Collection, Box 3, Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute, Ohio State University.

payments in rubles at a significantly inflated official Soviet rate of exchange.[103] Capote interpreted Soviet funding as a case of "sound business," where "the Soviet Ministry of Culture . . . surely double[d] its investment, reaping the equivalent of $300,000 in total box office receipts."[104]

No matter the profit or loss, however, we should not discount the possibility that the Soviets were sincerely interested in sharing aspects of Russian culture with their guests. One could suggest that the organized events were purely for publicity purposes, and that the Soviets wanted only to put on the best show for the cameras, but undeniable are the facts that the events were organized in advance and magnificently executed. Additionally, no matter how controlled they may have been, there was always room for the informal and unexpected—Soviet officials did not have the ability to curate every act of interpretation or moment of encounter. As

[103] Capote, *The Muses Are Heard*, 23.

[104] Ibid., 23–24. *Time* reported on 9 January 1956 that projected revenue was even higher than this amount. With a top ticket price of 60 rubles ($15 in 1955, $133 in 2014) and all twenty-five performances in Leningrad and Moscow sold out, the magazine predicted that the Soviets would gross $350,000 ($3.1 million in 2014). "The Theater: Porgy in Leningrad," *Time*, 9 January 1956. This income would lead to a profit of $200,000. Neither Capote nor *Time* understood that "profit" of this sort was nonexistent in a socialist economy. By contrast, Lowry reported to Ambassador Bohlen that the Western press was incorrect in these predicted financial returns, and that Heller, the European representative of the company, had informed Lowry that the Ministry of Culture budgeted the opera company for a 600,000-ruble loss. He pointed out, for example, that the large opera and ballet troupes of the Stanislavski Theater had to be paid throughout this period even though they were not working. Lowry to the Ambassador, 1956 02 13, Subject: Porgy and Bess Tour in the Soviet Union; 032 Porgy; Box 119; Central Decimal File, 1955–1959, Record Group 59; National Archives II, College Park, MD.

the narrator of the documentary film suggests when the young Pioneer girl ties the handkerchief around the young black boy's neck, these events provided members of the Everyman Opera Company "something to remember their young Soviet friends by!"[105] That knot was a metaphor for the capabilities of informal exchange as a physical bond and a lasting memory in the minds of all the participants.

Conclusion

I have examined *Porgy and Bess* in the Soviet Union through the intersections of race, representation, Cold War diplomacy, and the civil rights movement. Mismatched expectations and unexpected outcomes marked the many problems of racial representation. Robert Breen and the Everyman Opera Company's production of *Porgy and Bess* in the Soviet Union sparked debates that were concerned with the complex collisions of stereotype, patronage, and reception. The opera was caught in the middle of political and diplomatic jostling of "cultural exchange" with "political prematurity," the latter of which can also be interpreted as a common U.S. government response—as indeed it remains—and a lens through which State Department officials saw *Porgy and Bess* and the "Negro question."

The most critical aspect of performing this opera during both the civil rights movement and the Cold War was the clash between the opera's narrative and the real, lived experiences of the performing artists in the Everyman Opera Company. The characters in the story and the cast members in the production shared the same color of skin and lived under the same political and economic systems of racial injustice, but their lives were far different. The problems of race and representation were those of reception and perceived authenticity. If the artists Marian Anderson or Louis Armstrong strutted or shouted, or, in the words of an *Ebony* magazine author, put too much "hi-de-ho" in their concert performances, then that was different from the artists Martha Flowers, Maya Angelou, or John McCurry doing the same while playing Bess, Ruby, or Crown. The prevalent fear voiced by African American critics was that the Soviets would derive from the opera an inaccurate depiction of black life. In the words of the same *Ebony* author, the opera was an "example of America's 'mistreatment' of Negroes because of its 'yas-suh-boss' portrait of colored life in Dixie."[106]

And yet, what was most significant about the Soviet interpretation (as presented by critics in several official periodicals) was that the reception focused on the socialist realist aspects of *Porgy and Bess*. Rather that propagandizing the negative aspects of black life in the opera—the State Department's overriding concern—the Soviet critics wrote instead about the artistry of the performers. The Soviet interpretation was thus based on a number of factors that U.S. government officials and the African American press did not consider. Furthermore, the possibility that the Soviets were genuinely interested in sharing aspects of Russian culture cannot be ruled out.

[105] "American Actors in Moscow," BC, OSU.

[106] "*Porgy and Bess*: New Revival of Opera Sent to Europe Amid Renewed Controversy over its Stereotypes," *Ebony*, November 1952.

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In yet another mismatch, the Soviets' interpretation of the proletarian struggles of Bess and Porgy differed dramatically from the public appearances of the cast members throughout the tour. The most conspicuous and extravagant of these unofficial encounters was the wedding ceremony of Helen Thigpen and Earl Jackson. Moreover, the photographs and videos taken of Martha Flowers and other cast members show them in large fur coats, jewelry, gowns, and three-piece suits.

The misunderstandings, miscalculations, and misplaced fears surrounding *Porgy and Bess* in the Soviet Union remind us that music is not just multivalent, open to various interpretations, or rooted in a particular place. More importantly, as a marker of cultural or national identity, music provides only an illusion of authentic representation, while being fraught with the expectations and demands of multiple participants and stakeholders. The problems of representation and reception are particularly tricky when music is used as a form of cultural exchange or diplomacy. Music serves as only a blunt tool of instrumentality, which was especially true of *Porgy and Bess* during this time and in this setting. The history of the opera was, and continues to be, entangled with its performers, aesthetic and political interpretations, the color of black skin, and the future of racial progress.

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