



Extract No. 41

Summertime from Porgy and Bess

George Gershwin

SUMMARY

Text and Context

- Porgy and Bess – fusion of popular/jazz styles with 'classical' opera genre - “folk opera”
 - 1920/30s jazz + blues + folk-influenced melodies + spiritual-like choruses + opera structure + symphony orchestra
 - opera structure: songs are interconnected by orchestral interludes – no spoken dialogue
 - focuses on the lives of the impoverished black community of South Carolina in the earlier 20th century
- Shortened syllables and unusual spellings – represent the African-American dialect of the Southern states of the USA.
- Performance style
 - swing quavers – dotted rhythms become triplet figures
 - gentle syncopation
 - slides – *portamento*
 - these jazz idioms would be second nature to the all-black cast
- 'Summertime' – early in the opera, but reprised later on (after the orphaning of the baby, lending added poignancy to the line “With Daddy an' Mammy standin' by”).

Structure

- Modified strophic form
 - i.e. the music for verse one is repeated with modifications for verse two
 - violin counter-melody
 - vocalise (wordless singing)
- Melodic fragments in the orchestra 'fill the gaps' in any rests in the solo part
- Perfect cadence delayed until the very final few bars

Melody

- Based almost entirely on the *minor pentatonic scale* (degrees 1, 3, 4, 5, 7) of B minor.
 - Only exception is the C-sharp (degree 2) in b. 14 (repeated b. 32).
- 1930s popular music influence – chromatic melody (e.g. bb. 14-15 accompaniment)
- Influence of the blues, e.g. classing E-natural and E-sharp in b. 14 (repeated b. 32)
 - art music – false relation
 - jazz music – “blue note”
- Syllabic setting
 - but note the performance style of introducing slides (*portamenti*) between some notes
 - mostly improvised but notated at bb. 20 & 39.

Instrumentation/Texture

- Influence of popular/film music
 - backing chorus of women's voices (verse two)
- Influence of western art music
 - string-based orchestra, with use of wind (flute, oboe) for colouring
- Mainly melody-dominated homophony
 - accompaniment purely supportive
 - counter-melodies introduced in verse two



Rhythm/Metre

- Syncopation
 - Mostly improvised, but some printed
 - e.g., b. 15 (a “lean” in jazz terminology), b. 16 (a “push”)
 - Complex rhythmic figures
 - e.g., b. 19 oboe
 - Cross rhythms
 - e.g., b. 25 (triplets against 'straight' crotchets)
 - Swing quavers (not notated) – written dotted rhythms become triplet figures in performance
 - vocal line only (except the cello/bass in bb. 40 & 44)
- some written into the accompaniment, e.g. lazy triplet figures in the strings, bb. 12 & 30; and in the oboe part, bb. 19 & 37.

Harmony/Tonality

- Although there are modal flavours (unsharpened sevenths, e.g. bb. 20 & 38), the extract is clearly in B minor:
 - Melody entirely contained within the natural minor scale of B, and almost entirely on the *minor pentatonic scale* (degrees 1, 3, 4, 5, 7) of B minor (only exception is the C-sharp (degree 2) in b. 14 (repeated b. 32))
 - B minor triad outlined by the melody in bb. 7-10 & 15-19
 - First and third phrases end in the dominant (F-sharp in bb. 10 and 18-19, and the fourth phrase ends on the tonic (bb. 22-24).
- Influence of the blues
 - Falling minor thirds at the outset (link from previous number) – very common blues figure. Change from F-natural to F-sharp (b. 2)
 - signals the start of a new number
 - asserts the dominant (plus dominant pedal, bb. 3-7), and thus the tonality of the piece
 - melody in bb. 3-7 (clarinet) plays each note of the natural minor scale (B minor) on which the piece is built, before oscillating on the sharpened 6th and 7th (melodic minor scale) representing the rocking back and forth of the baby in Clara's arms
- Influence of 1930s popular music
 - chromatic harmony (b. 20-22)
 - use of secondary dominants:

12

Em⁷ dim⁷ F[#]/A[#] C^{#7} F[#]

Bm: IV VII⁷ of V_b V⁷ of V

over this progression, is overlaid:

- passing notes (both diatonic and chromatic)
 - blues notes (e.g. E-natural against E-sharp in b. 14)
- added sixth chords (bb. 8-11)
- Unexpected harmonies:
 - Resolving E⁷ in 19³ not to the expected A major, rather to D major (second inversion)
 - this sudden, almost radiant change of harmony to accompany “hush, little baby”
 - Modal-like cadence from 21-22 (G major over A-natural in the bass to B minor)
 - a “wistfully inconclusive” return to the tonic
 - Chord progression in bb. 40-44 based on cycle of fifths
 - N.B. bass notes: B-E-A-D-G-C-F(sharp)-B