



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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> (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

Em<sup>7</sup>      dim<sup>7</sup>    F<sup>#</sup>/A<sup>#</sup>    C<sup>#7</sup>    F<sup>#</sup>

Bm: IV      VII<sup>7</sup> of V<sub>b</sub>      V<sup>7</sup> 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 E<sup>7</sup> in 19<sup>3</sup> 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