

Review

Akron Symphony: *Porgy and Bess* at E. J. Thomas Hall (April 16)

by Daniel Hathaway



Filling a 2,900 seat theater for an opera — that's the capacity of E.J. Thomas Hall in Akron with its upper balcony deployed — is no mean feat, but the Akron Symphony did exactly that for its performance of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* on Saturday evening, April 16. And the ASO sold out the house so early on that it added a preview performance on Friday (that one also sold out).

EJT is not an opera house, so staging a production there requires some imaginative finagling. For *Porgy*, the Akron Symphony was elevated on an upstage platform and backlit with colorful hues (where it looked something like the Philadelphia Orchestra in Disney's *Fantasia*). The action took place downstage on the floor and on a series of platforms with different elevations. Some cutouts suggesting the rooftops of Catfish Row were flown in over the orchestra, and that was all there was for a set.

But opera is about singing, and this *Porgy* was a production that was already destined to succeed on the strength of its lead singers alone. Marquita Lister (Bess), Alvy Powell (Porgy), Lester Lynch (Crown), and Angela Renee Simpson (Serena) have logged a

remarkable collective history with these roles among their many other operatic credits. Add to this the considerable local and imported talents of Emmanuel LeGrail (Sportin' Life), Brian Keith Johnson (Jake), Candice Hoyes (Clara, who began the show with a lovely and rhythmically supple *Summertime*), Carla J. Davis (Maria) and a dozen other supporting characters, and you've got a splendid show on your hands.

But then there's the chorus, which is onstage more or less continuously for the duration. If there's ever been a finer *Porgy and Bess* ensemble than the Akron Symphony auditioned and trained, we'd like to hear it. Already full of strong individual personalities, which made for a richness of texture on the stage, the nearly 40-member ensemble coalesced into a powerful vocal force. Finely trained by assistant conductor Levi Hammer, who acted as chorus master for *Porgy*, the chorus tuned up complex chords with precision and contributed to hair-raising climaxes. Something like a hundred additional voices, the combined forces of YEPAW and the Gospel Meets Symphony Chorus added wraparound sound from the high balcony at strategic points.

Stage Director Frank McClain did creative things with the staging restraints he had to deal with. Just moving a chorus around is a challenge, but in addition to providing space and context for the principals, McClain also managed to bring out the personalities of a number of secondary characters who contributed much to the production. Making her debut in opera, Carla Davis was an outstanding character actresses as Maria, a singer able to switch back and forth between an operatic voice and something entirely different as she castigated Bess, kept a close watch on Sportin' Life and interacted with the other denizens of Catfish Row.



All vocally vibrant, the four leads invested their somewhat cardboard characters with real personality. As Bess, Marquita Lister was an imposing physical and vocal presence (especially in her red dress). Alvy Lister convincingly dragged a useless leg around for nearly two hours while singing with power and resonance. Crown became the embodiment of evil in the hands of Lester Lynch, but he sang magnificently in the role of the principal cad. Angela Renee Simpson was in splendid voice, contributing astral high notes of compelling beauty

that sailed over the whole ensemble, while creating a sympathetic and pious Serena. And it's difficult to believe that Akron native Emmanuel LeGrail was making his mainstage

debut: in a masterful performance, he made his character, the drug-dealing Sportin' Life, into a likeable sleazebag, and sounded wonderful in *It ain't necessarily so*.

The veteran local baritone Brian Keith Johnson (who must have cloned himself: he seems to appear everywhere!) was predictably fine as Jake. Singers in the three small roles of Nelson aka Honey Man (Brian Tartar), the Crab Man (Jaron LeGrair) and the Strawberry Woman (Brenda Justice) made something really special out of their joint scene. Other chorus members who stepped out in minor roles included Jaron LeGrair (Mingo), Jason Davis (Robbins, who gets killed in Scene 1), Jim (Ernest Jackson), Peter (Allen Maxwell), Annie (Julissa Faw), Lily (Angeleine Valentina) and the incidental soloists in the Wake and Hurricane Scenes, Samantha Garner and Merissa Coleman. Frederick Reeder of Gilbert & Sullivan fame crossed over to take the speaking role of the detective.

All those singers plus a nearly full symphony orchestra added up to a whole lot of people to try to keep together. Maestro Christopher Wilkins, who also conceived of this production in the first place, was totally in charge. Necessarily having to face the orchestra with his back to the stage, he communicated with the cast via three large monitors mounted on the side walls and on the Grand Tier light rail. So attentive were the principals and the chorus that only for a few, fleeting moments did singers and orchestra get slightly apart, even though Mr. Wilkins' tempos were on the brisk side. The Akron Symphony sounded tight and disciplined. Had this been a more agreeable hall acoustically, I'm sure Mr. Wilkins would have asked for — and achieved — more subtlety and a wider range of dynamics. Kristina Belisle Jones was outstanding in her jazzy clarinet licks, as was keyboardist Bob Mollard in his first scene cadenza. The brass section sizzled.

Not only did the Akron Symphony create a highly polished, professional production of *Porgy and Bess*, it also managed to create a whole new organism in the show's excellent chorus. Let's hope the ASO finds a way to keep this group together for future projects.

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