

Ohio.com / Entertainment /

## 'Porgy and Bess'

Published: April 10, 2011 - 3:00 AM

**By Kerry Clawson**

The final pieces of the Akron Symphony Orchestra's production of *Porgy and Bess* are coming into place this weekend, as the opera's out-of-town leads join local cast and chorus members for the final week of rehearsals.

The semistaged production, supported by a \$150,000 grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, will be mounted at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday at E.J. Thomas Hall. It's been seven months in the making, with auditions beginning in September for some principal roles and a local chorus of 36 ranging from age 15 to 81.

Many of the show's local singers were drawn from those who have participated in Gospel Meets Symphony over the last 18 years, including the opera's 150-member balcony choir. Alto Ashlee Foreman of Akron has the distinction of being the youngest cast member, while tenor Allen Maxwell of Akron is the oldest.

Stars are Alvy Powell and Marquita Lister, internationally recognized as two of the best performers in the demanding title roles. They performed under Music Director Christopher Wilkins' baton in last year's Orlando Philharmonic production of *Porgy and Bess* and are returning to work with him in Akron this year, along with director Frank McClain, who staged the Orlando production.

Bass-baritone Powell, also known as the star of the U.S. Army Chorus for decades, has performed the role of Porgy more than 1,200 times, including in a *Live at Lincoln Center* broadcast with Lister. Joining them in Akron will be Lester Lynch as Crown, a Cleveland native whom Wilkins called "one of the reigning Verdi baritones in the world."

Angela Simpson, known as today's leading Serena, will fill that role and Candice Hoyes of New York will play Clara.

Local singers in lead roles include Emmanuel LeGrair as drug peddler Sportin' Life, Brian Keith Johnson as hardworking fisherman Jake and Carla Davis as matriarch Maria. Wilkins said one of the wonders of *Porgy and Bess* is its broad array of characters, including church ladies, fishermen, drug dealers and gamblers. "I think one of the goals of grand opera is to give us a deep drink of life," Wilkins said at a recent talk at the Northwest Branch of the Akron-Summit County Public Library.

The 1935 George Gershwin opera, an American masterpiece, runs four hours, but the Akron Symphony has judiciously trimmed it down to about three hours. The score includes not only Gershwin's New York jazz roots, but also elements of Broadway music, burlesque, Tin Pan Alley, the blues, plus Charleston street cries, work songs and spirituals, all blended with opera arias and recitatives.

"There's parts of it that are like Stravinsky and Schoenberg," Wilkins said of the opera, which requires a black onstage cast.

When the opera premiered in New York, Gershwin was a "rock star" of his time, with 37 Broadway musicals already under his belt.

*Porgy and Bess* tells the story of crippled beggar Porgy in the slums of Charleston, S.C., and his attempts to rescue fallen woman Bess from the clutches of violent lover Crown and drug dealer Sportin' Life. It's based on the 1926 book *Porgy* by DuBose Heyward.

The opera's setting is Catfish Row, based on the real-life Cabbage Row tenement in Charleston. Heyward moved the location closer to the waterfront to tell the story of fishermen caught in a devastating hurricane.

Gershwin, who spent time in Charleston to get the pulse of the city before composing much of the score, strived for authenticity in everything from the street cries of vendors at Cabbage Row to the bells of St. Michael's ringing nearby. The Jewish composer also wrote "spirituals" in the style of slave spirituals.

The dense score has its characters communicating solely through song. A minor exception is community defender Maria, whom Wilkins said "kinda sings in rap." The opera also allows singers some improvisation, specifically in *Oh Doctor Jesus*, where various singers pick up a solo line as they are so moved.

The opera's history has some interesting Northeast Ohio connections: In 1942,

Akron native Cheryl Crawford refashioned the show in musical theater style and drastically cut the material, changing a number of recitatives into dialogue. At the other end of the spectrum, in 1976, the Cleveland Orchestra made the first complete recording of the opera based on Gershwin's original score, restoring material cut by Gershwin for the 1935 production.

To learn more about *Porgy's* history, hear Wilkins speak in a podcast at <http://www.akronsymphony.org>.  
</>

## **120 hours of rehearsal**

At a recent rehearsal at First Apostolic Faith Church, the chorus sang *Oh There's Somebody Knocking at the Door*, where the Catfish Row residents fear Death has come during a hurricane.

"No smiling! You're scared!" chorus master Levi Hammer reminded them.  
"Chorus, you must consciously, consciously remember that you're gonna die."

Later, as the fishermen sang the work song *It Take a Long Pull to Get There*, Hammer joked to the men, "You're stevedores, you're stinky, but you still sing the C's, the D's and the B flats well."

The onstage chorus will have rehearsed 120 hours to mount *Porgy*, which Hammer said has one of the most difficult choral parts in the entire operatic repertoire.

The show's a favorite for Akron baritone and music educator Johnson, who has performed the role of Crown 30 times. In this production, he'll play fisherman Jake, a role that's new to him.

"It's such a beautiful love story, and it talks about almost every aspect of life, from love to reconciliation to forgiveness to passion," Johnson said of the opera.

He said chorus members have been helping each other outside of rehearsals to learn their parts: "It's wonderful because you have a really good mix of ages and different musical backgrounds and experience."

Most people know the hits *Summertime*, a blues lullaby, as well as *I Got Plenty O' Nuttin* and *It Ain't Necessarily So*. But the richness of all the other music makes the work of Gershwin — a sophisticated classical musician — remarkable, chorus master Hammer said.

"It's the in-between music that people don't know that's really beautiful," Hammer stressed.

Only in this uniquely American folk opera could the hero be a crippled beggar and the heroine one step above a prostitute, Hammer said: "They're real people, and there's such a dignity to them. . . . It is a deeply beautiful human story — period."

---

Arts writer Kerry Clawson may be reached at 330-996-3527 or [kclawson@thebeaconjournal.com](mailto:kclawson@thebeaconjournal.com).

# Local journalism. More essential than ever.

Subscribe to the Akron Beacon Journal



[Terms Of Use & Service](#) • [Copyright](#)

© 2017 The Akron Beacon Journal • Ohio.com • 44 E. Exchange Street, Akron, Ohio 44308







