

The Cleveland Opera's *Porgy and Bess*: a conversation with conductor Darwin Aquino

by Daniel Hathaway



The Cleveland Opera (formerly Opera Circle) will conclude its season with a single performance of George and Ira Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* at the Ohio Theater in Playhouse Square on Saturday, June 1 at 7:30 pm.

Adapted from Dorothy and DuBose Heyward's 1925 novel and later play, *Porgy*, the piece debuted in Boston in September of 1935, then moved on to Broadway. The character of subsequent

productions veered back and forth between opera and musical theater until a 1976 Houston Grand Opera version solidly re-established the work as what the composer himself called a "folk opera."

The Cleveland performance, featuring Jonathan Stuckey as Porgy, and Karen Clark Green as Bess, will be conducted by Dominican-born conductor Darwin Aquino. He's now based in St. Louis, where he works with several opera companies, a symphony orchestra, and two university orchestras. I reached him by telephone in Cleveland to chat about the Gershwins' famous opera, which he'll be conducting for the first time.

"Although I've never led the entire opera, all conductors do concert versions of *Porgy and Bess*, because the tunes are so popular — 'Summertime,' 'I got plenty o' nuttin',' 'It ain't necessarily so.' And there are a couple of symphonic versions of the score that include the principal themes. But the opera is a monumental production

with a huge cast of 24 characters from the smallest roles — people who come in and say a few lines — up to Porgy and Bess themselves. We'll be doing it with chorus, set, costumes, and full orchestra, and the company has made a big, big effort. We're really proud of what we're going to present on Saturday."

Aquino went on to say that *Porgy and Bess* is special because of the way Gershwin involves the audience. "It's not a traditional opera where you only have three or four singers to follow during the entire piece. Besides the music, which is amazing and wonderful, there are two dozen characters coming in and out. He makes you feel like you're really inside the community of Catfish Row in Charleston."

Having that many people in the cast creates some challenges, Aquino said. "Gershwin, genius that he was, assigned special music to each character, and there are many changes of tempo because of their interactions. He also changes time signatures, keys, and sometimes the style of the music when they speak to each other."



Additionally, Aquino noted that Gershwin was equally influenced by jazz and modern classical music. "There are many places in the piece where the harmony is modern — dissonant with minor seconds and other sharp intervals to create certain effects that I think the audience will find quite interesting. And at one point, Gershwin creates all the sensation of being inside a storm through the orchestra. When you experience the whole opera, you're surprised by how amazing a composer he was."

The dialogue between characters is also clever and challenging. "In addition to sung passages and lines that are just spoken, others are spoken with pitches and rhythms," Aquino said. "It's challenging for the singers, but it keeps the colorful flavor of folk music."

Soon after moving to the U.S., Darwin Aquino studied with Polish conductor Grzegorz Nowak and served as his assistant at Florida International University, a connection that led to his guest gig with The Cleveland Opera.

Although he conducts a variety of musical forms, Aquino said that opera is a particular favorite. This season alone, he has led performances of Bellini's *Norma*, Rossini's *Italian in Algiers*, and Menotti's *The Medium*. "I enjoy it because it's a very social and human art form. When you conduct a symphony orchestra, you say what you're going to do, have three or four rehearsals, and go home. With opera, you're there for at least two weeks, interacting with people ten hours a day. And if you ask for something from a singer, you have to ask in a way that encourages them to do it for you. It requires social as well as musical talent, and at the end of the production, you've made friends in the orchestra and cast because of the time you've spent with them."

Saturday's production of *Porgy and Bess* should provide Aquino with several new friends. The cast will include Brian Keith Johnson as Crown, Matthew Jones (Sportin' Life), Governor Harris (Robbins), Lauren Harris (Serena), James Binion (Jake), Malika Turner (Maria), Michael Ward (Mingo), Ashlee Foreman (Jake's wife), Alex Frazier (Peter, the honeyman), Dry'ma L. Johnson (Lily, Peter's wife), Sierra McCorvey (Annie and Strawberry woman), Caleb Wright (Jim, a cotton picker and undertaker), Alex Frazier (Nelson), and Michael Hives (Crab man). Tickets are available [online](#).

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