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Hi friends, and welcome back to Busy Kids Love Music, your podcast to learn all about different kinds of music and the people who make it! I'm your host, Carly Seifert, the creator of Busy Kids Do Piano, and I'm so glad you're here with me today. This is Episode 143, and it's the final episode in our three-part series about the brilliant composer George Gershwin.

In our first episode, we explored Gershwin's life and how his love for jazz and classical music shaped his unique style. Last time, we focused on his groundbreaking piece Rhapsody in Blue. If you missed either of those episodes, I'll be sure to link to them in the show notes at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/143. Today, we're diving into Gershwin's opera masterpiece, Porgy and Bess – a work that's both iconic and controversial. Let's begin!

George Gershwin premiered Porgy and Bess in 1935. He collaborated with his brother Ira, who wrote the lyrics, and with DuBose Heyward, who adapted the opera from his novel Porgy. Gershwin called it a "folk opera," combining classical music, jazz, blues, and spirituals to tell the story of a small African American community in Charleston, South Carolina.

So what's the story? Porgy and Bess centers on Porgy, a disabled beggar, and Bess, a woman trying to escape her troubled past. The opera takes place in Catfish Row, a tight-knit but struggling community. Bess faces challenges from her violent partner, Crown, and the tempting influence of Sportin' Life, a drug dealer. Porgy's love for Bess gives her a chance at a new life, but their relationship is tested by tragedy, social pressures, and the challenges of the world they live in.

One of the reasons Porgy and Bess is so famous is its unforgettable music. The song "Summertime" is a famous aria from the opera that you're listening to now. This beautiful lullaby opens the opera

and has become one of the most performed and recorded songs of all time.

Gershwin's music captures the soul and struggles of the characters through pieces like "It Ain't Necessarily So," sung by Sportin' Life, and "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'," sung by Porgy. Each song tells part of the story and blends Gershwin's signature jazz and classical styles seamlessly.

One of the most touching moments in the opera comes with "Bess, You Is My Woman Now." This heartfelt duet between Porgy and Bess expresses their love and commitment. It's filled with emotion and again showcases Gershwin's mastery of blending classical and jazz.

When Porgy and Bess premiered, its reception was mixed. Gershwin insisted on hiring African American singers for the lead roles at a time when opportunities for Black performers were very limited. This decision was groundbreaking and aimed to keep the role from being performed in blackface, but it also sparked controversy. Some criticized the opera for its portrayal of African American life, claiming it reinforced stereotypes, while others praised it for bringing attention to the struggles of marginalized communities.

In 1959, a film adaptation of Porgy and Bess was released. It starred famous Black actors Sidney Poitier as Porgy, Dorothy Dandridge as Bess, and Sammy Davis Jr. as Sportin' Life. While the film introduced Gershwin's work to a wider audience, it also faced criticism. Writer James Baldwin, for instance, felt that both the opera and the film perpetuated harmful stereotypes about African Americans. He argued that Porgy and Bess reflected a white perspective on Black experiences, rather than authentically portraying the complexities of Black life.

Even today, Porgy and Bess is both celebrated and debated. Its themes of love, poverty, addiction, and community resilience remain relevant. Many productions have reexamined the opera's portrayal of race and culture, striving to honor Gershwin's intentions while being sensitive to

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modern audiences.

So, why is *Porgy and Bess* considered a masterpiece? Gershwin's ability to blend musical styles, his dedication to authenticity, and the emotional depth of the story make it a cornerstone of American music. Whether you're singing along to "Summertime" or reflecting on the opera's themes, *Porgy and Bess* continues to resonate nearly 90 years later.

If you head to this episode's show notes at

busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/143, you'll find a link to a playlist that I've put together for you on YouTube that has performances of some of the pieces from *Porgy and Bess* performed as standalone performances, and also excerpts from the opera itself. Again, you can find that playlist linked in the show notes at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/143

That's it for today's episode of *Busy Kids Love Music*. Thank you for joining me on this journey through George Gershwin's life, his groundbreaking *Rhapsody in Blue*, and his unforgettable opera *Porgy and Bess*. If you missed the first two episodes in this series, be sure to check those out in the show notes as well!

I'll be back in two weeks with another episode exploring the wonderful world of music. Until then, keep listening and discovering new sounds. I'm Carly, and this is *Busy Kids Love Music*. Bye for now!