

Introducing Opera through a Comparative Study of *Carmen* and *Porgy and Bess*

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INTRODUCTION

I have been exposed to music all of my life. My mother was a private piano teacher and a church musician. I began singing publicly at the age of four. When I started school, music was my favorite subject. I remember wanting to join the Glee Club. I was told that I had to be in third grade. Of course, I didn't understand why I had to wait. By being persistent and persuasive, I convinced the music teacher that I could learn the songs and sing in tune. I was the first second-grader to sing with the Glee Club. We performed for many occasions. Every spring, we did an operetta.

In junior high school, I continued to sing in the chorus. I learned my first classical solo and was given the opportunity to sing it at an assembly. To my amazement, the students enjoyed it! This was the beginning of my desire to sing various styles of music. My high school days were filled with musical experiences. We performed a few Broadway musicals. Among them was *My Fair Lady*. Also, we performed excerpts from *Porgy and Bess*. In *Porgy and Bess*, I played the role of Serena. After graduating from high school, I decided to go to college and major in music. In college, I auditioned to sing in the opera workshop and the concert choir. These organizations gave me the opportunity to travel and perform. One of these performances was *Porgy and Bess*, done with the Corpus Christi Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Maurice Perez. I remember Martha Flowers playing Bess, William Warfield playing Porgy, and Robert Guillaume playing Sportin' Life

Becoming a teacher was another dream: one that came true. In September 1973, I was hired by the Houston Independent School District to teach music at Gregory Elementary School in the fourth ward community. I had a wonderful principal who encouraged me. That inspiration still lives in me today. In the early 1980s, we moved to Lincoln High School. Our school became Gregory-Lincoln Education Center, teaching pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. A year later, we became a fine arts academy. I was assigned as the choral music teacher. I had the responsibility to expose my students to all kinds of music. For the first time, my students participated in University Interscholastic League (UIL) competitions. Many have gone to the High School for Performing and Visual Arts (HSPVA) as vocal students. Upon graduating from HSPVA, most have gone to various colleges to continue their study of music.

One of my goals as a music educator is to develop an interest in all musical styles. Most students come to me with limited knowledge about music. Many have gone to very few operas and very few symphonies. Some come from schools where they did not have

a music curriculum. Thus, it became my destiny to expose them to as much music as I could.

UNIT BACKGROUND

When I read about the seminars offered this spring, one particular seminar caught my interest. This seminar focused on three American composers: George Gershwin, Aaron Copland, and Samuel Barber. Of the three composers, this unit focuses on George Gershwin and on his influences and his contributions to music. In the early 1900s, America was experiencing many drastic changes, both culturally and politically. Just as American society changed, its music, art, dance, and literature were also transformed. This unit will show how an American composer, George Gershwin, created a serious folk opera based on the novel, *Porgy*, written by DuBose Heyward. We will study the components of an opera, with Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* as the focus. A comparison indicating parallels between Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* and Bizet's *Carmen* will be made. The love duet between *Porgy and Bess* will be compared with the duet for Carmen and Don José.

This unit will be used to generate interest in the study of the opera. When studying opera, the students will compare and contrast the elements of the classical opera and analyze the themes in *Carmen* and *Porgy and Bess*. By teaching this unit, students will hopefully develop an appreciation for various musical styles and a love for opera. This unit will show students how music and drama combine to make opera. Opera also includes dance and art. This unit will enable students to see how literature, music, and history overlap. By discussing the culture of the classical, romantic, and modern periods in Europe and America, the students will learn about the events experienced. They will learn about the culture, they will discover how people dressed, what literature they read, how they were entertained, and what influences each culture had upon the others. They will see the effect that early social changes in America had upon its music and how the music changed from a traditional European style to present-day trends. Students will learn that cultures are more alike than different. They will see how cultures are dependent upon each other. Not only do cultures have characteristics of their own, but also they possess a lot of characteristics that overlap – even in music. The students will design a general chart showing the similarities and differences of these time periods. A chart comparing the story line of both *Carmen* and *Porgy and Bess* will be created. They will notice that both opera and drama have a cast of characters, scenery, costumes, and props.

This unit will connect classical and contemporary music, showing how modern music evolved. In this course of study, the students will compare Gershwin's music with contemporary music, pointing out the similarities and differences between them. They will identify “blue” notes, dissonance, and other elements found in the music that they listen to today. Students will learn that many people come together to develop an opera just as many people come together to write a drama (lyricist, composer, director, and singers are to opera as playwright, director, and actors are to drama).

PORGY AND BESS

Porgy and Bess is a three-act opera in English. The story is taken from the play, *Porgy*, written by DuBose and Dorothy Heyward. DuBose Heyward, with some help from George's brother, Ira, wrote the libretto (defined by *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* as "the text of a work (as an opera) for the musical theater"). The principal characters and a brief description of the opera follow:

- Porgy, a cripple (baritone)
- Crown, a stevedore (bass)
- Bess, Crown's girlfriend (soprano)
- Jake, a fisherman (baritone)
- Clara, Jake's wife (soprano)
- Sportin' Life, a drug dealer (tenor)
- Robbins, a neighbor (tenor)
- Serena, Robbins' wife (soprano)
- Peter, the honeyman (tenor)

Setting

Catfish Row, Charleston, USA; the recent past. (The description of the setting was relevant to the time that it was written. If the setting were re-written today, the author would most likely refer to the setting as being a long time ago.)

Plot Summary

Act One takes place in Catfish Row. When Bess and Crown arrive, Crown, too drunk to play properly, attempts to join a crap game. The others tease him, and Crown loses control and kills Robbins. Bess gives him money and tells him to run away. After he does so, she takes shelter with Porgy. A saucer is placed on Robbin's chest to collect money for his burial. At that instant, in spite of the mourners' protest, a detective arrests Peter.

Act Two takes place in Catfish Row. Life has returned to normal. The fishermen mend their nets, Sportin' Life distributes drugs, and Porgy and Bess are a couple and seem to be content with each other. On a picnic to Kittiwah Island, Crown appears and seduces Bess. Two days later, Bess is back with Porgy, but in a highly emotional state. The hurricane bells warn the people of an approaching storm. As the residents of Catfish Row take shelter, Crown bursts in violently and throws Porgy to the ground. After Clara sees her husband's boat floating upside down in the river, she rushes out, followed by Crown, who promises to return for Bess.

As Act Three opens, the people of Catfish Row believe that Clara, Jake and Crown have been killed in the storm. Suddenly, Crown appears. As he passes Porgy's window,

Porgy stabs and strangles him. The Catfish Row residents refuse to cooperate with the police investigation. Porgy is arrested for contempt of court, but is released a week later. When he returns to Catfish Row, he learns that Bess has gone to New York with Sportin' Life. Porgy vows that he will follow her and bring her back.

All About the Lyricists: DuBose Heyward, Dorothy Hartzell (Kuhns) Heyward, and Ira Gershwin

DuBose Heyward

Born in Charleston, South Carolina, DuBose Heyward, an insurance salesman and poet, decided to become a writer. The inspiration for his novella, *Porgy*, came from a story that he read about a crippled beggar named Sammy Smalls. The people in the business district of Charleston were familiar with Sammy Smalls because his choice of transportation made him very distinct – a handmade cart pulled by a goat. Because Heyward was a “born and bred” member of Charleston’s “somewhat faded aristocracy,” he was not thought of as the ideal person to tell a story of Negro life (Alpert 11).

In early 1924, Heyward made the decision to leave his insurance business to become a full-time writer. He realized that poetry would not make a living for a newly married man, so he decided to write fiction. From a newspaper item about the Negro cripple Sammy Smalls, he created *Porgy*. Heyward, fascinated with black music, “attempted to suggest rhythms similar to those of jazz and its form known as blues in some of his poems” (Alpert 16). Heyward had a deep interest in the Negroes of Charleston. Not only did he study their language and customs, but he also worked as a cotton checker with the Gullah stevedores on the waterfront. Near his home on Church Street in downtown Charleston, Negroes lived in a pair of decaying buildings. An inner court existed behind these overcrowded and noisy buildings. Trouble often drew the police to settle disputes. The place became known as Cabbage Row because shopkeepers put vegetable stands on the streets. Heyward passed Cabbage Row every morning on his way to his insurance business. With his wife away in New York, he stopped at his sister’s house for breakfast. There he read the newspaper article about the beggar, Samuel Smalls. He clipped out the article and placed it in his pocket (Alpert 17).

“Heyward’s most intense interest in the black world of Charleston also parallels the post-World War I disillusionment with civilization and turn from Puritan restraint to the primitive qualities found in African art and the uninhibited night world of Harlem” (Kramer and Russ 98). By studying the life of Catfish Row, Heyward saw in simple folk, not an escape into “primitive exoticism” (Kramer and Russ 98), but the possibility of life. Although the Negro had been freed from slavery and was experiencing a newfound freedom, a new culture was beginning to take form. However, this new life did not erase its African heritage. Instead, its simplicity in lifestyle intermingled with complex experiences that were imposed upon them from their past, made their new life both fascinating and beautiful:

For Heyward, this simple life was observed and was a reality rather than a part of his imagination. Finally, Heyward recognized that the essential rhythm of Negro life was the black man's faith. He had a deep appreciation of the black man's strength, his love for his community, and his pride in his race. (Kramer and Russ 100)

"Heyward's novel is important in the Harlem Renaissance. The novel offers a fully realized black world and a fully realized black hero of unmistakable humanity" (Kramer and Russ 107). The play that Heyward adapted from the novel with his wife Dorothy was among the few plays that gave black actors an opportunity to perform a serious drama on a Broadway stage.

Dorothy Hartzell (Kuhns) Heyward

Dorothy Hartzell Kuhns, an aspiring playwright, attracted the attention of DuBose Heyward. She was born in Wooster, Ohio, to a businessman father and an amateur musician mother. After growing up in Canton, Ohio, she went to New York and studied drama at Columbia University. She was told that the way to get into the theatre was to get any kind of job in it. She was chosen as a chorus girl in a show that went on the road. However, Dorothy had to leave the show when she developed a crippling arthritic condition (Alpert 32).

George Pierce Baker, a playwright, ran a workshop at Harvard University that produced many who became famous on Broadway (Alpert 32). "Dorothy Kuhns submitted one of her plays to him and was awarded a fellowship established in the name of Edward MacDowell. From that play, she was invited to do summer work at the colony" (Alpert 32). The colony was a retreat in Peterborough, New Hampshire, established by Marian MacDowell the widow of Edward MacDowell (Alpert 30). Edward MacDowell built a cabin in the woods outside of Peterborough for the purpose of composing music. After his death, his widow used the place for recitals and lectures in order to raise money to establish "a colony of twenty-five studios" (Alpert 32). Each studio was designed differently and provided the ideal surroundings for artists to come and create their works:

The studios for artists and sculptors had high ceilings while the studios for musicians had pianos (these studios were deep enough in the woods so that the sound would not disturb the writers). Mutual respect was given among the artists. No artist visited another's studio without an invitation. Lunches were delivered in wicker baskets and left quietly on the studio steps or porches. DuBose and Dorothy shared their lunches meeting halfway between their studios to sit under trees and discuss literature and life. (Alpert 32)

Colony Hall was the main dining room where the colonists met. Not only was it the place for breakfast and dinner, it was the place where the musicians would sometimes

play their music and the writers would sometimes read their work in progress. This gathering allowed newcomers to the arts to meet and mingle with celebrity figures (Alpert 33).

What follows is an account of Dorothy and DuBose's experiences in 1923:

Dorothy and DuBose were invited back to the colony for the summer of 1923. Because Dorothy had taken a job as a dramatic counselor at a summer camp, she did not arrive in Peterborough until early September. By this time, DuBose had marriage on his mind. He was sort of reluctant because of his low income. He had given up much of his share of the insurance firm to his partner. Also, his mother had undergone seven costly operations and his health was so poor that he was unable to get life insurance. Finally, he had enough courage to ask her. Happily, Dorothy accepted. When they reached Marian MacDowell's house to announce their engagement, a telegram was waiting for Dorothy. The telegram came from Harvard and notified her that she had won that year's Harvard Prize for Drama, based on *Nancy Ann*, the play she had written in Baker's workshop. The prize guaranteed that the play would become a Broadway production. She left at once to New York to confer with the producer. DuBose followed her a week later. They were married on March 22, 1923. After the wedding, DuBose left to get back to Charleston while Dorothy remained in New York. Her play folded after a few performances. As a remedy for her subsequent depression, DuBose suggested that she give up writing plays for a while and read mystery stories for relaxation. Both retreated to the cottage near Hendersonville. The view was magnificent but the accommodations were minimal. (Alpert 33-34)

After Dorothy's play, *Nancy Ann*, failed, she and DuBose returned to the MacDowell Colony in June 1923. They shared a bedroom in the lodge reserved for married couples (Alpert 34). It was there that DuBose shared his writings about a beggar named Porgy. Before he had finished writing the first draft, Dorothy suggested that he allow her to adapt it into a play. Because there was no audience for serious plays about black life, DuBose didn't think that a play would be a good idea (Alpert 35). Although Dorothy spent the summer writing a mystery novel, her desire was to take her husband's novel and adapt it to a play (Alpert 39). "When the reviews came in, one, by the brilliant Southern critic Frances Newman, seemed to echo Dorothy's feelings about the inherent dramatic value in the book" (Alpert 39). His review of the book strongly supported the suggestion that "DuBose Heyward was born for theatre" (Alpert 39). The book became a success, surprising both DuBose and Dorothy. "Cecil B. DeMille had left Paramount and joined a New York group called the Producers Distributing Corporation" (Alpert 40). He had given the job of finding "new materials for movies" (Alpert 40) to a young man he hired as story editor. Charles Beahan received Heyward's novel from John Farrar and made an offer to buy it. Heyward accepted the offer. "Beahan was asked to scout black actors for the leading roles. His choice for Porgy was Paul Robeson" (Alpert 41). Because the person in charge of promotions and sales for the Producers Distributing Corporation felt

that the movie would not be allowed to play in the South, the filming was stopped. Secretly, Dorothy was writing a play out of the novel (Alpert 41).

Ira (and George) Gershwin

Ira Gershwin, the older brother of George, has been referred to as one of the “golden age” American songwriters (Furia ۷). Unlike Irving Berlin and Cole Porter, who wrote both words and music for their songs, Ira Gershwin was devoted totally to the art of the lyricist. That art is “a poetic art, but unlike poetry in those words must intimately wed to music”(Furia ۷). Because of that connection, it is impossible to discuss the art of the lyricist apart from that of the composer, particularly in the songs that Ira Gershwin wrote with his brother George Gershwin. The Gershwin brothers lived as well as worked together. Usually, the songs started with George’s musical ideas.

The two brothers were very different in personality: Ira was quiet, very studious – a perfectionist; and George, Ira’s younger brother, was aggressive, impulsive, and flamboyant (Furia 4). Their contrasting personalities were “perfectly suited for the art of songwriting” (Furia 4). Because Ira was a perfectionist, he would work long hours, sometimes on one word. Ira’s slow pace in writing not only reflected his personality, but also indicated how difficult it was to find syllables, words, and phrases to match George’s music (Furia 5). George’s style of writing did not suggest long and flowing verse. His goal was to develop melodies that were staccato in style. Just as George Gershwin successfully merged “European classical traditions with the African-American strains of blues and jazz, Ira Gershwin was attuned to the tradition of English lyric poetry but also sought to capture the way Americans spoke” (Furia 6). As a lyricist, Ira Gershwin had a difficult time finding a title phrase. Once he got his title, he would usually move to the last line of the melody and bring the title in again (Furia 9).

Ira had a great love for poetry. He especially loved the poetic form known as light verse. During those years, light verse was everywhere. The daily newspaper carried regular columns devoted to light verse. Beginning in 1908, Ira would cut out his favorite poems and paste them in scrapbooks. In that same year, he published his own weekly, *The Leaf*. With a high school friend, Yip Harburg, he circulated poems and cartoons around the classroom. Soon, they had a more official column, “Much Ado,” in the school newspaper, where they satirized their classmates and teachers (Furia 10). When they went to City College in New York, they continued the column in the campus newspaper. Ira began collecting anthologies in high school. He purchased them with his weekly allowance of 40 cents. From these anthologies, Ira learned his poetic craft, just as George learned his skills by studying scores (Furia 11).

The Production of *Porgy and Bess*

On October 10, 1935, *Porgy and Bess* premiered at the Alvin Theater in New York. There were many celebrities from the world of theatre, music, film, and business in

attendance. The Theatre Guild, who produced the opera, had received requests for tickets for many weeks prior to its premiere.

The story of *Porgy* changed very little from novel to play to opera. However, the crippled beggar, Porgy, and the woman he loves, Bess, changed in terms of looks, age, and interpretation according to those cast to play them (Alpert 37). In creating a dramatic and suspenseful story, Heyward added a dice game in which one of the players is killed, a buzzard that flies over Catfish Row, and a vicious hurricane that terrifies the people who live in Catfish Row (Alpert 38). In spite of Heyward's graceful style of writing, his novel received "serious objections to and confrontations about the kind of black life it portrayed" (Alpert 38).

In staging the play, a strong and talented director was needed. Theresa Helburn of the Theatre Guild recommended Rouben Mamoulian for the job. Many directors had been contacted but had refused to accept the job because the play required a large, all-Negro cast. Helburn, with the help of Lawrence Langner, convinced Mamoulian to accept the position as director. Helburn assured the Heywards that Mamoulian was highly qualified and very capable of directing the play. Although he had emigrated from Russia, he had lived in America long enough "to speak the language and understand the American temperament. He attended many of the performances in Harlem and made plans to go to Charleston to become familiar with the culture and the locale" (Alpert 55).

Mamoulian had many ideas about the script. He felt that *Porgy* should show "an earlier interest in Bess to heighten the conflict between he and Crown" (Alpert 55). It was his suggestion to rearrange the play so that there would be four acts instead of three. When he returned to New York, he started looking for actors. "In Harlem, he searched the black theatre groups, vaudeville houses, and cabarets. Agencies representing black performers had little to offer. Mostly, they represented dancers and singers" (Alpert 56). He cast Frank Wilson as Porgy, Rose McClendon as Serena, Evelyn Ellis as Bess, and Percy Vervaine as Sportin' Life (Alpert 56). The play was a success and received outstanding reviews from critics. It was praised as a progressive move in Broadway's treatment of Negro characters. The Guild received compliments for its avoidance of the temptation of using "black face" on white actors. James Weldon Johnson, an important black spokesman and a leader in the NAACP, praised the show for using more than 60 black performers (Alpert 67). Even though the NAACP in 1927 applauded the play and voiced the need for more positive images of black Americans in theatre and literature, black attitudes about the play and its characters changed in later years (67). Because of the play, new organizations sprang up in Harlem, notably the Negro Art Theatre and the Harlem Experimental Theatre (67).

Even though *Porgy* was a successful play and novel, Heyward did not give up the idea of making it into an opera:

In New York Gershwin was also thinking opera, but it wasn't Porgy. His mind was on making an opera from a play by the Polish-Jewish Shloyme Rappaport. He was encouraged to compose an opera of his choice for the Metropolitan. Gershwin began to sketch so musical ideas, assuming the rights were clear and free, soon he discovered that the rights belonged to an Italian composer and that a performance had already been given in Italy. (Alpert 70)

Gershwin's dream was to write an opera about New York City. This project would combine the music styles of the many cultures that had migrated to New York, "catching the rhythm of the interfusing people, to blend the humor of it and the tragedy" (Alpert 70).

Like many Americans during that time, the Heywards experienced much prosperity. However, the Great Depression affected their finances as it did the entire American economy. Most of their savings was lost with the collapse of the stock market. It was during that time that George Gershwin sent a letter to the Heywards expressing his interest in composing an opera from *Porgy*.

CARMEN

Georges Bizet (1838 – 1875), who composed *Carmen*, died at the young age of 30. He never saw the great success of *Carmen*. While studying in Paris with Halévy and Gounod, he became interested in opera. Besides *Carmen*, only one other of Bizet's opera survived: *The Pearl Fisher*. The characters and a brief description of the opera follow:

- Carmen, a gypsy girl (soprano)
- Don José, a corporal (tenor)
- Micaëla, a country girl (soprano)
- Zuniga, Don José's lieutenant (bass)
- Escamillo, a toreador (baritone)

Setting: Seville, Spain; about 1820

Plot Summary

Act One takes place in the square, where a cigarette factory is located. Micaëla arrives, looking for her sweetheart soldier, Don José, who is on guard duty. They tell her to come back later. As Don José and Zuniga march in with the relief guard, girls from the factory come for a break. Immediately, admirers surround Carmen. She looks at Don José, warning him of the danger in loving her. She tosses a rose at him. After everyone leaves, he picks up the rose and hides it in his uniform. Micaëla returns and gives José disturbing news that his mother is ill. José learns that Carmen attacked another girl and that he must arrest and guard her. Carmen seduces him into allowing her to escape.

Act Two takes place at the local inn. Here, Carmen is being admired by Escamillo, the toreador, and Zuniga, Don José's lieutenant. Carmen is told that José has been demoted and imprisoned for helping her, but is about to be released. She warns both of them to go away and not return. Don José arrives and is very delighted to be reunited with Carmen. She tries to persuade him to unite with some smugglers with whom she is working. José refuses, but when Zuniga returns and is attacked by Carmen's new friends, his only option is to leave with them.

In Act Three, Carmen and José become disappointed with each other. When Escamillo looks for Carmen, he is forced to fight José. Micaëla, having found José, begs him to come with her to see his dying mother. He warns Carmen that the affair is not yet over and leaves to see his mother.

In Act Four, Carmen, escorted by Escamillo, enters the place where the grand bullfight is going to take place. Escamillo is given a warning that José is in the crowd, but chooses to ignore it. Don José approaches Carmen. After being confronted by her rejected lover, she refuses to return to him and throws his ring in his face. José fatally stabs her in a jealous rage and then turns himself in to the authorities.

About the Opera

In 1872, Camille Du Locle and Adolphe de Leuven, co-directors of the Opéra-Comique, approached Georges Bizet and proposed that he write an opera in collaboration with librettists Ludovic Halévy and Henri Meilhac (McClary 15). Bizet rejected the suggestions that de Leuven offered him in favor of using his own idea. In spite of severe opposition from his collaborators, he insisted that the new work be based on Mérimée's *Carmen*. This decision resulted in de Leuven's resignation, caused the performers to rebel, and made the music critics very angry (McClary 15).

“During this period, France had two subsidized opera houses: the Opéra and the Opéra-Comique, which differed with respect to both target audience and musical genre” (McClary 15). The Opéra addressed upper-class audience, and the Opéra-Comique addressed “family-oriented bourgeoisie . . . Gradually, the Opéra-Comique changed. A century earlier, the genre of opéra-comique had been a vehicle for social satire, aimed in part at puncturing the study conventions of elite operatic procedures” (McClary 15). Instead of having performers sing every line, opéra-comique allowed composers to combine spoken and sung dialogue. Under the guidance of de Leuven, composers developed and narrative and musical formulas designed to satisfy and increasingly conservative audience (McClary 15). Operettas were introduced as a musical genre in Paris at that time. “In the operetta theaters, Offenbach exploited the social satire that the Opéra-Comique had begun. Under the direction of Léon Carvalho, the Théâtre-Lyrique commissioned works of the opéra-comique genre that took greater risks than those produced by the Opéra-Comique (McClary 16). Gounod's *Faust* (1859) and two of

Bizet's operas opened at the Théâtre-Lyrique. "Carvalho's company folded because his poor administrative talents failed to match his artistic abilities" (McClary 16).

In order to attract larger audiences, changes were necessary. Du Locle was appointed co-director with de Leuven in 1889:

When Du Locle invited Bizet to write the opera that became *Carmen*, Bizet was ready for the task. This gave him the opportunity to work with Meilhac and Halévy who were among the most successful men in the Parisian theater. Together, Meilhac and Halévy had produced libretti for some of Offenbach's celebrated operettas. When *Carmen* opened, they had four shows running simultaneously in Paris. Thus, they, in collaboration with Bizet, brought both name recognition and theatrical experience combined with vaudeville (rather than opera). In their collaborations, Meilhac wrote the prose dialogue, while Halévy provided the verse. (McClary 18)

Because of *Carmen*, many scholars took an interest in Bizet's earlier works. *Carmen* demonstrated and showed "traces of his genius and treasures that may have been unjustly neglected" (McClary 17). The thorough music training he received from the Paris Conservatoire is evident in all of his compositions, especially *Carmen*. His experience in musical theater as accompanist, apprentice, arranger, coach, and composer of incidental music, gave him knowledge concerning stage production, performers, and audience expectations (McClary 17). Bizet was fascinated by many different styles of music. It was because of this attraction that he was able to create *Carmen*.

Unlike the case with *Porgy and Bess*, only a few documents from this collaboration survive:

This is true for two reasons: first, the artists were in close daily contact, and they transacted few of their deliberations in writing; and, second, letters and diaries of Bizet and his family were mutilated or suppressed. For information regarding *Carmen*, rehearsal logbooks and recollections from participants in the original production are used. (McClary 19)

The Production of *Carmen*

In producing *Carmen*, Bizet restructured the novel for the purposes of the opera. This restructuring takes place within the music itself. It is Bizet who created Carmen as we generally know her today (McClary 19). However, before his concept of that character and the opera itself came to fruition, he spent much time working towards other goals:

Bizet did not devote the years between the commission and the premiere solely to *Carmen*. He thought that the rehearsals for *Carmen* would start in the autumn of 1873. The first act was written with that date in mind. When the Opéra-Comique

postponed the production, he engaged himself in other projects. He contributed incidental music for a mélodrame by Alphonse Daudet, *L'Arlésienne* (1872), a box-office disaster from which Bizet extracted his music and developed his well-known suite. During 1873, he started, but never completed, *Don Rodrigue*, an opera on the subject of El Cid, featuring Spain with a character much like Don José. Also, he composed *Patrie*, an overture performed in 1874 which received excellent reviews. At that time, Bizet was planning an oratorio on the subject of Geneviève de Paris. When the opera *Don Rodrigue* failed, Bizet became depressed and doubted his ability to write for the stage. Finally, he survived his depression and returned to the *Carmen* project. In 1874, *Carmen* was completed and orchestrated. Music rehearsals began in October of that year. (McClary 22-23)

Bizet's collaborators urged him to change some of his ideas about the Carmen character; however, they did not succeed. Du Locle made a useless attempt in demanding that Bizet change the ending. He gave up only after the lead singers threatened to quit. "But he [broadcast] his opinion that Bizet's music was incomprehensible by publishing the disclaimer in the newspaper on the day of the opening. Just before the opening, Halévy tried to distance himself from the project" (McClary 23).

Bizet had to deal with resistance from performers. The role of Carmen was very difficult to cast. When Zulma Bouffeur refused the role, gossipers said that Meilhac didn't want her to do it because the character of Carmen was stabbed. Marie Roze, the second choice, refused the part for the same reason after meeting with Bizet. Finally, Galli-Marié accepted the part and became Bizet's strongest ally in the production. To the role, she brought fine musicianship, powerful acting abilities, and a high degree of professionalism. She did not agree with the librettists' attempts at taming Bizet's vision of *Carmen*. She even collaborated with him in the composition of the "Habañera." She was very influential in persuading Paul Lhérie to play the part of Don José. Galli-Marié and Lhérie preserved the integrity of the original narrative by blocking Du Locle's attempts at changing the ending (McClary 24).

There were other problems as well:

The chorus rebelled because Bizet wanted the singers to move while singing instead of standing still and facing the conductor. Instead of changing his concept, Bizet ordered ten more women to be hired for the chorus. He made the request to DuLocle assuring that the choruses would be ready to perform in three days. After Halévy investigated and agreed that the singers were necessary, DuLocle reluctantly approved the additional expense. Later, Halévy reported that the orchestra complained about unplayable sections in the score. However, after many extensive extra rehearsals, they succeeded in performing the music. (McClary 25)

In addition, during the rehearsal period (October 2, 1874 through March 3, 1875), sessions for *Carmen* had to compete for space and time with more than 20 other

productions. Only two weeks prior to the opening night did fully staged rehearsals with scenery become possible (McClary 25). The lead singer, Galli-Marié, rejected Bizet's first version of "Habañera" as unacceptable for her initial entrance. After going through 13 drafts, they finally arrived at the final version (McClary 26).

The first production of *Carmen* was not well received. With the exception of one by Théodore de Banville, all of the reviews were very negative. The initial production of *Carmen* ran for 48 performances to small audiences. For financial reasons, Du Locle considered cutting the run short, but Galli-Marié and Choudens, Bizet's publisher, persuaded him to allow it to complete the original schedule of performances (McClary 28). He reacted poorly to the entire experience:

Bizet's health began to fail. He suffered throat abscesses and muscular rheumatism. In late May, he went to his country home to recuperate. At first, he seemed to improve considerably. A few days later, he was struck with a high fever and then a heart attack. In the morning of June 3, 1875, he had a second heart attack and died. The production closed at the Opéra-Comique on February 15, 1876. By this time, *Carmen* was a huge success. (McClary 28)

"Bizet's *Carmen* has often been understood as a story of ill-fated love between two equal parties whose destinies happen to clash, but it was one of a large number of fantasies involving race, class and gender that circulated in nineteenth-century French culture" (McClary 29). It was written at a time when France was experiencing particular humiliation with respect to its position as a world power (McClary 32). "Some scholars parallel the defeat of the French army in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, during which the Emperor Napoleon III and his armed forces were taken prisoner at Sedan to Don José's seduction by an enticing foreigner" (McClary 32). The opera involved an encounter between a soldier and a gypsy. The boundaries of race, ethnicity, class and sexuality were threatened. During the early 1800's, France experienced many popular rebellions. "The struggle between the working class and the bourgeoisie became increasingly apparent. Since the middle class living standards required a large labor force, they were reluctant to extend parity to workers" (McClary 35).

"Just like the issues of race and class, the earlier nineteenth century had dealt with women through narratives of benign co-existence, possible so long as an unchallenged hierarchy prevailed" (McClary 36). The role of women was limited to the home as wives and mothers. *Carmen* broke the barriers restricting women to that role. The female characters were both working and very exotic.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

This unit is intended for use as a part of music history study in my classroom. The lessons will focus on the following TEKS strands of middle school choral music (cultural and historical), as developed in Project CLEAR by the Houston Independent School District:

- MUSC.CH.MS.2.b. (TEKS: 117.33.b.6.5., 117.36.b.7.5., 117.39.b.8.5.)
Historical/Cultural Heritage. The student relates music to history, to society, and to culture (*Project CLEAR 5*).
- MUSC.CH.MS.2.c. (TEKS: 117.33.b.6.5., 117.36.b.7.5., 117.39.b.8.5.)
Historical/Cultural Heritage. The student relates music to history, to society, and to culture (5).

By comparing the similarities and differences of the operas, *Carmen* and *Porgy and Bess*, the students will learn about the customs of France in the late 19th century and the customs of America in the early 20th century. They will chart the likenesses and differences between these two cultures. By studying the life of the composers Bizet and Gershwin, they will learn about their musical works, including the time and place in which they created them.

Throughout the course of the unit, videos and recordings of these works will be made available so that the students can see and hear excerpts from each opera. They will have the opportunity to research the customs Americans and French during the time that these operas were written and performed.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan One: A Travel Back In Time

Objective

Students will relate music to history, to society, and to culture (TEKS 117.33.b.6.5., 117.36.b.7.5., 117.39.b.8.5).

Procedure

French and American societies faced similar struggles during the late-19th and 20th centuries. At the end of the 19th century, France was experiencing a feud between the upper and lower classes. In America during the early 20th century, Negro slaves had won their freedom from enslavement and were resistant to being treated as second-class citizens. The demand for equality and justice was being heard in all of France and America.

The first session will begin with a classroom discussion in order to assess the student's prior knowledge of the French and American Revolutions. They will be given the assignment to study France during the late 19th century and America during the early 20th century. Students will research the French and American cultures of these time periods. They will learn about people's jobs, their language, their government, their customs, and their traditions. After they have gathered information, they will be divided into groups. Each group will present its findings in a creative way:

- Group 1 will make a representation of the clothing of those periods. They will make puppets and create other ways to display the clothing.
- Group 2 will write a play or story using fictional characters to tell about the customs and traditions.
- Group 3 will create a way to tell about the history of each country and about the different types of government.
- Group 4 will compare today's culture with those cultures in France and America respectively during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

All groups will be encouraged to use their imagination and creativity when sharing the information.

In the second session, the class will be divided into two groups. One group will be assigned the French Revolution and the other group will be assigned the American Revolution. Each group will make a Venn diagram that will compare the French Revolution with the American Revolution.

In the third session, students will compare the French Revolution to the Civil War in America. They will choose one hero from both wars and compare their biographical backgrounds.

Lesson Plan Two: Meet the Stars

Objectives

- Students will learn about the elements of opera.
- Students will compare and contrast the characters in *Carmen* with those in *Porgy and Bess*.

Procedure

The lesson begins with a discussion about opera. Students will first discuss opera's components (story, plot, setting, characters, etc.). Next, they will apply this knowledge to two operas: *Porgy and Bess*, written by the American composer, George Gershwin; and *Carmen*, written by the French composer, Georges Bizet.

The class will be divided into four groups – two groups will be assigned to *Porgy and Bess* and two groups to *Carmen*. Each group will go to the library and research the operas and its characters. One of the groups for each opera will research the male characters and the other will research the female characters. They will chart a description of each character that describes their personalities, attitudes, strengths, and weaknesses.

In the next class session, the students will learn about each composer. The students will learn about the life of each composer including his music training, education, and

experiences. By studying the composers, the students will discover what motivated the composers to create the music for these operas.

They will view excerpts from videos about the operas. They will write an essay showing how the culture influenced the music of these operas. After a class discussion about the meaning of the lyrics and its message, students will return to the four groups in which they had been assigned to modernize either *Porgy and Bess* or *Carmen* by substituting its music with today's music. They will explain and define their choices.

The students will be asked to analyze the music of each opera by discussing the relevance of the music with the scenes. They will also discuss the characters' singing voices and tell if they feel that that voice was appropriate for that music. They must support their opinions.

Lesson Plan Three: Sound Waves

Objectives

- Students will listen to recordings of both operas and discuss the similarities and differences in the style of music.
- Students will bring in modern music that they feel resembles the music written during those two periods.

Procedure

This lesson begins with the class listening to recordings from both operas in order to get a feel of the French and American music of those periods. They will compare the instrumentation of the orchestras, the structure of the melodies, and classify the vocal ranges of the principal singers.

In the next lesson, they will identify similar structures in the music of today by comparing the rhythms, phrasing, chordal structures, and repeated patterns in that with the theme songs of *Porgy and Bess* and *Carmen*. As the recordings play, they will be asked to draw on a graph the melodies that they hear. They will notice differences and likenesses in patterns. From the results of their findings, they will be asked to find a modern piece of their own choosing for comparison. Their chosen piece can be jazz, rhythm and blues, or pop. With their selection, they must identify the chordal structure, the repeated patterns, etc.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Traces the development of Ira Gershwin as a prominent writer for Broadway musical theater.

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A major work on the life and musical accomplishments of one of America's most prominent composers.

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This book contains the lyrics of all Ira Gershwin's songs in one volume.

Kramer, Victor A. and Robert A. Russ. *Harlem Renaissance Re-Examined*. Troy, NY: Whitson Publishers, 1997.

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A site showing how libretto is defined. Through <<http://www.m-w.com/dictionary>>, one can easily access definitions to numerous musical terms and other words.

McClary, Susan. *Georges Bizet Carmen*. Cambridge UP, 1992.

Traces the opera through its beginning; examines the social tensions in 19th-century France; offers new interpretive possibilities for this opera; and concludes with discussions of four films based on the opera.

Sadie, Stanley. *History of Opera*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989.

Essays discuss opera through the baroque, classical, romantic, and modern periods by various authors.

White, Michael and Elaine Henderson. *Opera & Operetta*. Harper Collins Publishers, 1997.

Presents essential information on over 180 major operas and operettas. The entry for each opera includes the composer, the librettist, first performance; principal

characters and plot synopsis; musical approach and highlights; and recommended recordings.

Supplemental Resources

Resource Books

Hamilton, David. *The Metropolitan Opera Encyclopedia: A Comprehensive Guide to the World of Opera*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1987.

Covers the international spectrum of opera from an American point of view.

Filmography/Discography

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Carmen. Dir. Peter Hall. British Broadcasting Corporation/National Video Corporation, 1985.

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The Gershwin's Porgy and Bess. Dir. Trevor Nunn. Videocassette. Emd/Capitol, 1993. (184 minutes)

Porgy and Bess, recorded with the London Philharmonic, conducted by Simon Rattle.