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THEATER

## THEATER; On Hearing Her Sing, Gershwin Made 'Porgy' 'Porgy and Bess'

By BARRY SINGER

IN his tragically short life, George Gershwin knew only one Bess, and this bittersweet fact has framed Anne Wiggins Brown's life. She was that Bess in the original production of Gershwin's operatic masterwork based on Dorothy and DuBose Heyward's theatrical adaptation of Heyward's novel "Porgy."

More than 60 years have passed since Gershwin's death in 1937 from a brain tumor. Though singers of every race and nationality have by now assayed the role, Ms. Brown will always be the first, the Bess Gershwin himself chose in 1934.

"Bess is slender but sinewy; very black," wrote the Heywards. "She flaunts a typical but debased Negro beauty."

At 85, Ms. Brown still possesses the vibrancy and unaffected elegance that must have first inspired Gershwin. She is not, however, "very black." For Gershwin that was never a problem. "I don't see why my Bess shouldn't be cafe au lait," he told Ms. Brown before offering her the role.

Yet color has haunted Ms. Brown's career. In the segregated America of the 1930's and 40's, where could a classically trained African-American soprano hope to have a career? The only answer was abroad.

Ms. Brown was in New York recently for a brief visit after a Gershwin Centennial celebration and symposium at the Library of Congress in Washington; the composer, who died at 38, was born Sept. 26, 1898.

Sitting in the lobby of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, where she was staying, Ms. Brown looked effortlessly grand. "We tough girls tough it out," she said with a wry grin. "I've lived a strange kind of life -- half black, half white, half isolated, half in the spotlight. Many things that I wanted as a young person for my career were denied to me because of my color.

"On the other hand, many black folks have said, 'Well, she's not really black.' Except for Todd Duncan, our original Porgy, who died last month at the age of 95 and with whom I was very close, the 'Porgy' cast didn't associate with me very much, though it wasn't because I didn't want to. Only when I went

on a train or into a theater did I think about passing, and even then I didn't consider it passing. I figured if I simply asked for a ticket it was their problem. Onstage, though, if they couldn't take me as I was -- the hell with them."

She was born Annie Wiggins Brown in Baltimore in 1912. Her father, a doctor, was the grandson of a slave; her mother's parents were of Scottish-Irish, black and Cherokee Indian descent. At 23, Ms. Brown was introduced to the world as an opera singer and an African-American in "Porgy and Bess." Thirteen years later, in 1948, after more than a decade of concertizing and frustrated ambitions, she left America for Norway.

Her career there proved rich and varied. She toured the world as a recitalist, singing on at least three continents while becoming a celebrity in her adopted land. She married for a third time, brought up children, became a grandmother and then a great-grandmother. In 1953, chronic asthma put an end to her career as a singer, but she quickly became a highly regarded teacher and stage director. She herself has mounted "Porgy and Bess" many times, but she did not return to the United States until 1968.

"To put it bluntly, I was fed up with racial prejudice," she explained, her English accented with Scandinavian inflections. "Though there is no place on earth without prejudice. In fact, a French journalist wrote an article during one of my tours there asking: 'Why does she say she is colored? She's as white as any singer. It's just a trick to get people interested.' Can you imagine? Of course I was advertised as 'a Negro soprano.' What is 'a Negro soprano'?"

At 16, Ms. Brown was the first African-American vocalist admitted to the Juilliard School of Music. At 19, in a swipe at her domineering father, she secretly married a young medical student. The marriage didn't last. At 20, she won the Margaret McGill scholarship at Juilliard, presented to the school's finest female singer. Then, at 21, as a second-year graduate student in 1933, she read that George Gershwin was writing an opera "about Negroes in South Carolina."

"I just wrote him a letter," she said, smiling at the memory. "And perhaps two days later his secretary telephoned and said I should come down to his apartment and bring lots of music. I sang Brahms and Schubert and Massenet and even 'The Man I Love.' And then he said, 'Would you sing a Negro spiritual?' "

"I was very much on the defensive at that age. I resented the fact that most white people thought that black people should or only could sing spirituals. 'I am very sorry,' I said, 'but I haven't any of that music with me.' And then I broke out, 'Why is it that you people always expect black singers to sing spirituals?'

"He just looked at me. He didn't say anything or do anything at all; he didn't appear angry or disturbed. But I saw that he understood my reaction. And as soon as I saw that, my whole attitude just melted away and I wanted more than anything else to sing a spiritual for this man. I said, 'I can sing one spiritual without an accompaniment, if that's O.K.' He told me it was. And I sang 'City Called Heaven.' It's a very plaintive, very melancholy spiritual. And I knew when I finished that I'd never sung it better in my life, because I was so emotionally involved at that moment.

"He was very quiet for some time. Finally he spoke: 'Wherever you go, you must sing that spiritual without accompaniment. It's the most beautiful spiritual I've ever heard.' And we hugged one another."

The relationship forged that day proved central to the creation of "Porgy and Bess." Ms. Brown continued: "He would telephone and say, 'I've finished up to page 33 or so. Come down. I want you to sing it. When can you come down?' 'When I get out of school today,' I would say.

"I'd always start off singing 'Summertime.' I loved it so. Then I would sing whatever he had written since the last time I'd been there, whatever the roles might be -- sometimes I even sang Sportin' Life, sometimes we sang duets together. I knew that opera before I went onstage. Not only the songs. I wound up playing about 500 performances in the original and then the 1942 revival. I can tell you what every instrument played."

Inspired by Ms. Brown, Gershwin composed more and more music for the character of Bess who, in the novel and the stage play, had been something of a subsidiary figure.

"Finally, in our last days of rehearsals in New York before heading up to Boston for previews, George took me to lunch," Ms. Brown remembered. "'Come on,' he said, 'I'm going to buy you an orange juice.' Then, when we were seated, he made this announcement. I remember his words exactly because they thrilled me so. 'I want you to know, Miss Brown,' he said, 'that henceforth and forever after, George Gershwin's opera will be known as "Porgy and Bess." "'

THE production opened in New York on Oct. 10, 1935, at the Alvin Theater, with lyrics by DuBose Heyward and Ira Gershwin, directed by Rouben Mamoulian. Critical opinion was muted and often conflicting. "Gershwin does not even know what an opera is," wrote Virgil Thomson in a particularly vituperative review that nevertheless concluded, "yet 'Porgy and Bess' is an opera and it has power and it has vigor."

Many blacks were profoundly unhappy. "My father was very displeased," Ms. Brown said. "He thought that those were the old cliches of black people -- dope peddlers, near-prostitutes; he especially didn't like his daughter showing her legs and all that. I thought that DuBose Heyward and Gershwin had simply taken a part of life in Catfish Row, South Carolina, and rendered it superbly."

When the show's closing notice was posted after 124 performances, the producers announced a tour with stints in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Chicago, to be followed by a week at the National Theater in Washington. Ms. Brown was livid. The National Theater, she knew, was a segregated house.

"I told them: 'I will not sing at the National. If my mother, my father, my friends, if black people cannot come hear me sing, then count me out.' I remember Gershwin saying to me, 'You're not going to sing?' And I said to him, 'I can't sing!'"

After protracted negotiations, the National, for one week only, became an integrated house. When the curtain came down on the final performance of "Porgy and Bess," segregation was reinstated.

According to the musical theater historian Robert Kimball, Ms. Brown "was a pioneer who basically had to go it alone." Mr. Kimball, artistic adviser to the Gershwin family, helped put together the recent symposium at the Library of Congress and was instrumental in insuring Ms. Brown's attendance.

"She was so young," he said. "The maturity it took. The strength of character. I think she's ready now to return in some way, not simply to come back to America but to be involved again, to be re-involved."

Ms. Brown doesn't hesitate when she says, "I was born 30 years too soon." For now, she will return to Norway to polish an English translation of her autobiography, "Songs From a Frozen Branch," which was briefly a best seller there.

"If I had been born even 20 years later I might have sung at the Metropolitan Opera," she mused. "I might have marched for civil rights. I would have been here for that. I would certainly not have lived in Norway and my life would have been very different."

"Of course," she conceded, her eyes bright, "I would not have met Mr. Gershwin and that would have been a shame."

Photos: ORIGINALS -- John W. Bubbles, left, as Sportin' Life and Todd Duncan and Anne Wiggins Brown in the title roles of George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess" in 1935, the year of the opera's world premiere (Culver Pictures); A FIRST IN MANY WAYS -- Anne Wiggins Brown at the Waldorf (Angel Franco/The New York Times)