

PROGRAM NOTES: PORGY & BESS

World Premiere: *August 20, 1882*

Most Recent HSO Performance: *July 4, 2014*

Instrumentation: *2 flutes, 1 piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 cornets, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, side drum, cymbals, bass drum, bells, cannon, SATB chorus, and strings: violin I, violin II, viola, violoncello, double bass*

Duration: *16'*

PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

(Born May 7, 1840 in Votkinsk, Russia; died November 6, 1893 in St. Petersburg)

1812, Overture Solennelle, Op. 49 (1880)

The Russian penchant for myth-making extends, of course, to her warfare. It is therefore not surprising that Napoleon's strategic withdrawal from Moscow in 1812 came to be regarded in Russia as a great military victory achieved through cunning and resourcefulness, conveniently ignoring the French General Ney's report that "general famine and general winter, rather than Russian bullets, conquered the Grand Army."

Nearly seventy years later, the Cathedral of Christ the Redeemer was erected in Moscow to commemorate the events of 1812. For the Cathedral's consecration, Nikolai Rubinstein, head of the Moscow Conservatory and director of the Russian Musical Society, planned a celebratory festival of music, and in 1880 he asked Tchaikovsky to write a work for the occasion. Tchaikovsky was never enthusiastic about composing to commission. On October 10th, however, he wrote to Mme. von Meck, "Nothing is more unpleasant to me than the manufacturing of music for such occasions.... But — I have not the courage to refuse [Rubinstein's proposal]."

The original plans for the work included a grand outdoor performance in Kremlin Square by a large orchestra augmented by brass band, bells and cannon. The cannon shots were notated precisely in the score, and were to be triggered by electrical relay from the conductor's desk.

The 5,000 bells of Moscow's steeples — whose thunderous combined tintinnabulation was said to make conversation impossible — were to chime in at the work's climax. There is no record, however, that this grandiose performance ever happened. Seemingly never having heard the work, Tchaikovsky wrote to the conductor Eduard Nápravník in 1881, "Last winter, at Nikolai Rubinstein's request, I composed a Festival Overture for the concerts of the exhibition, entitled *1812*. Could you possibly arrange to have this played? It is not of great value, and I shall not be at all surprised or hurt if you consider the style of the music unsuitable to a symphony concert." Nápravník gave the apparent premiere on August 20, 1882 in Moscow.

The Overture represents the conflict — militarily and musically — of Russia and France, and the eventual Russian "victory" over the invaders. It opens with a dark, brooding setting of the Russian hymn *God, Preserve Thy People* for violas and cellos. The full orchestra is gradually collected up as the section progresses to make a splendid climax. The French forces appear to the sound of thumping drums and the martial strains of the *Marseillaise*. The battle is joined with ingenious orchestral interplay, through which are heard fragments of the French marching song. Two Slavic melodies ensue. One Tchaikovsky rescued from his first opera, *The Voyevoda*; the other is a Novgorod folksong that he first set for piano duet in 1868-1869 as one of his *Fifty Russian Folk Songs*. The sequence of battle-opera theme-folk song is reiterated. Following a huge *rallentando* (slowing-down) passage that occupies three full pages in the score, the opening hymn returns in a grand setting for wind and brass choir reinforced with bells. The *Marseillaise* reappears, but is vanquished by the artillery fusillade and the triumphant rendition of the Russian national hymn, *God, Save the Czar*, by trombones, horns and low strings. (It is a curious historical footnote that neither the French nor Russian melodies Tchaikovsky used in this Overture could have been heard in *1812*. The Russian hymn was composed by Alexis Lvov in 1833, and the revolutionary French

anthem was banned when Napoleon proclaimed himself emperor in 1804.) The 1812 is one of music's most invigorating experiences — it never fails to rouse the spirits and stir the blood.

World Premiere: 1985

Most Recent HSO Performance: *This is the HSO's premiere performance of this work.*

Instrumentation: *Solo Koto, 1 flute, 1 oboe, 1 clarinet, 1 bassoon, 3 horns, timpani, 2 percussion, & strings: violin I, violin I, viola, violoncello, double bass*

Duration: 10'

TADAO SAWAI

(Born December 16, 1937 in Aichi Prefecture, Japan; died April 1, 1997 in Tokyo)

Tori No Yoni (“*Flying Like a Bird*”) for Koto and Orchestra (1985)

Tadao Sawai, Japan's preeminent 20th-century *koto* composer and performer, was born in 1937 into a family of musicians in Aichi Prefecture, 200 miles west of Tokyo on the main island of Honshu. He began studying *koto* at age ten, was performing publicly within a year and composing soon thereafter, and graduated from the Traditional Music Department of Tokyo University of Fine Arts in 1959; he received the “Annual Best Hope for the Future of Contemporary Music” award from Japan's national broadcasting system that same year. Sawai performed across Japan and in Europe and North America throughout his career, organized international *koto* festivals, recorded prolifically, composed nearly a hundred works for his instrument, and in 1974 established the Sawai Koto Academy, which now has branches throughout Japan and in Australia and Hawaii, and fosters the study of the instrument on university campuses in the United States and Asia. Tadao Sawai was widely regarded at the time of his death, in 1997, as the person who had revitalized one of Japan's most characteristic musical treasures.

The traditional Japanese *koto* is a zither-like instrument with a long, slender wooden body across which thirteen strings in various pentatonic tunings are stretched on a series of bridges. The sound is made by plucking the strings with a plectrum in the right hand while altering the pitches by sliding the left hand along them. American *koto* master Elizabeth Falconer, a student of the Sawai Koto Academy, wrote that Sawai's compositions, which often take their inspiration from the natural world of flora, fauna, wind and water, are “dramatic and intense, yet with an element of lightness intertwined, leaving the listener spiritually refreshed.” Sawai himself wrote of *Tori Mo Yoni* (1985, “*Flying Like a Bird*”), “How would it feel, to fly free in the sky, as a bird flies? Humans have invented airplanes, but we are not free to feel the clouds as we pass through them.”

World Premiere: *October 10, 1935*

Most Recent HSO Performance: *October 17, 2008*

Instrumentation: *2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, glockenspiel, xylophone, woodblock, cymbals, triangle, snare drum, suspended cymbal, bass drum, piano, celeste, banjo, SATB chorus, solo soprano voice, solo bass-baritone voice, & strings: violin I, violin I, viola, violoncello, double bass*

Duration: 40'

GEORGE GERSHWIN

(Born September 26, 1898 in Brooklyn; died July 11, 1937 in Hollywood)

Arranged by Robert Russell Bennett

(Born June 15, 1894 in Kansas City, Kansas; died August 18, 1981 in New York City) (1934-1935, arranged in 1956)

Porgy and Bess: A Concert in Songs for Soprano, Baritone and Chorus

The *Rhapsody in Blue* of 1924 marked George Gershwin's debut as a serious composer. A year

later, DuBose Heyward, a poet and writer from Charleston, South Carolina, published a novel titled *Porgy* loosely based on a local character called “Goat Sammy,” a Negro cripple who got about town in a goat cart. Goat Sammy was known to many as a beggar on the city's streets, but Heyward was struck by a news article in 1924 reporting that the man had been arrested on a charge of aggravated assault in a crime of passion. Heyward thought it extraordinary that “the object of public charity by day, had a private life of his own by night. It was a tempestuous life, and in it were the seeds of human struggle that make for drama.” *Porgy* became a best-seller. Gershwin read the book in September 1926, and he was so excited by its potential for the musical stage that he immediately dashed off a letter to Heyward suggesting that they collaborate on turning it into an opera. The writer responded eagerly and positively to Gershwin's suggestion, but told him that he and his wife, Dorothy, were just then working the novel into a play, and that any operatic adaptation would have to wait until their drama had been staged. A delay was inevitable on Gershwin's side anyway because he was just then reaching the pinnacle of his success as a Broadway and concert composer, and the demand for his music and shows was continuous — *Oh, Kay!*, both versions of *Strike Up the Band*, *Funny Face*, *Rosalie*, *Treasure Girl*, *Show Girl*, *Girl Crazy* and *Of Thee I Sing*, as well as the *Piano Preludes*, *An American in Paris*, the *Second Rhapsody* and the *Cuban Overture* all appeared within the next five years. The Heywards' *Porgy* was produced by the Theatre Guild in 1927, and became one of the dramatic hits of the Broadway season.

In March 1932, Gershwin wrote to Heyward expressing his interest in reviving the plans for a *Porgy* opera. Heyward, who hoped that a collaboration with America's most popular composer would afford some relief from the financial difficulties he was experiencing in those early Depression years, was eager to move ahead with the project, but he was disappointed to learn that Gershwin could not begin work until at least January of the next year. A further difficulty arose in September 1932 when Al

Jolson told Heyward that he wanted to play *Porgy* in blackface in a musical version created for him by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II. Kern and Hammerstein were soon engaged on other projects, however, and Jolson's plan fell through. Finally, on October 26, 1933, seven years after he had first proposed the idea to Heyward, Gershwin signed a contract with the Theatre Guild to compose the music for an opera based on *Porgy*.

Heyward had already been working for some time on ideas for the libretto of *Porgy and Bess*. (The expanded title was used to distinguish the opera from the stage play.) From his home in Charleston, where he preferred to write, he started sending scenes to Gershwin in New York in November 1933. Gershwin, however, who had just committed to do a grueling 28-day/28-concert/28-city tour in January and February celebrating the tenth anniversary of the premiere of his *Rhapsody in Blue*, had little time for composition just then, and he told Heyward he could not begin serious work until February, though he did sketch the melody for *Summertime* during a visit with friends in Palm Beach in December. Heyward invited the composer to come to Charleston after the tour, but Gershwin had contracted to do a twice-weekly radio broadcast, and the composer convinced the librettist to visit him in New York in April instead. Heyward worked with George and his brother, Ira, who had agreed to help with the lyrics, for about a month before returning home.

When his radio series finished in June, Gershwin was at last able to travel to Charleston to see the people and scenes which were the subjects of *Porgy and Bess*. He rented a ramshackle cottage on Folly Island, a small barrier island ten miles from Charleston, and was joined a few days later by the Heywards. Gershwin was thoroughly immersed in the project by that time, and DuBose later wrote, “James Island with its large population of Gullah Negroes lay adjacent, and furnished us with ... an inexhaustible source of folk material. But the most interesting discovery to me, as we sat listening to their spirituals, or

watched a group shuffling before a cabin or country store, was that to George it was more like a homecoming than an exploration.” At a local prayer meeting, Gershwin was fascinated by an energetic kind of unaccompanied vocal music known as “shouting,” which Heyward described as being based on “a complicated rhythmic pattern beaten out by feet and hands ... indubitably an African survival.” Gershwin joined the “shout” and “stole the show from their champion ‘shouter,’” much to the amusement of the congregation. Though the visit was important for establishing the venue and some aspects of the opera’s musical style, Gershwin, occupied in that vacation season with swimming, sunning and socializing, actually got little work done on Folly Island.

Gershwin returned to New York on July 22nd, and he worked for the next year on *Porgy* — the orchestration, entirely his own, was not completed until September 2, 1935, just four weeks before the opening in Boston. The Theatre Guild had begun preparations for the premiere by late 1934, when Rouben Mamoulian, who directed the stage version of *Porgy*, was engaged as producer and Todd Duncan, a voice teacher at Howard University in Washington, D.C., accepted the title role. Anne Brown, a 20-year-old student at Juilliard, was cast as Bess, Warren Coleman as Crown and John W. Bubbles as Sportin’ Life. *Porgy and Bess* was a great critical and public success in its out-of-town tryout at Boston’s Colonial Theatre beginning on September 30, 1935, but its running length of three hours and the difficulty of Porgy’s part necessitated extensive cuts and reworkings. By the New York premiere on October 10th, tremendous expectation had accumulated around Gershwin’s adventurous work (the major dailies sent both their drama and music critics to the Alvin Theatre that evening), but, despite an enthusiastic reception from the audience, the reviews were mixed. Ticket sales declined, and *Porgy and Bess* closed in New York after just 124 performances. However, its great songs — *Summertime*, *It Ain’t Necessarily So*, *I Got Plenty o’ Nothing*, *Bess, You Is My Woman Now*, *There’s a*

Boat Dat’s Leavin’ Soon for New York and a half-dozen others — immediately became standards of the pop repertory, and maintained the show’s reputation until 1942, when a new Broadway production had a longer run than had any other revival to that time. An American company toured with the show throughout Western and Eastern Europe, the Near East, Mexico and South America continuously from 1952 to 1956; in February 1955, the troupe appeared at La Scala in Milan, making *Porgy and Bess* the first opera by a native American composer heard in that hallowed auditorium. In 1975, Gershwin’s original score, with its recitatives and cuts completely restored, was given in a concert performance and recorded by Lorin Maazel and the Cleveland Orchestra; this complete version was staged a year later by the Houston Grand Opera Company, taken on tour and brought successfully to New York. In 1985, a full half-century after it was premiered, *Porgy and Bess* was finally given the ultimate establishment imprimatur when it was first staged at the Metropolitan Opera House.

Porgy and Bess is set in the 1930s in Catfish Row, a Negro tenement in Charleston. The curtain rises on Clara singing a lullaby (*Summertime*) to her child. Crown quarrels with Robbins during a crap game, kills him and escapes. Robbins is mourned by his wife, Serena (*My Man’s Gone Now*). Crown’s girl, Bess, finds refuge with the cripple, Porgy, who loves her devotedly. They sing of their happiness (*I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin’* and *Bess, You Is My Woman Now*). During a picnic on Kittiwah Island, Sportin’ Life, the local dope peddler, describes his cynical attitude toward religion (*It Ain’t Necessarily So*). Crown, who has been hiding on the island, confronts Bess and persuades her to stay with him. Having fallen sick, she returns to Porgy, who nurses her back to health. They reassure each other of their love (*I Loves You, Porgy*). During a storm, Crown returns to Catfish Row. Porgy strangles his rival. The police suspect Porgy, and arrest him. Sportin’ Life tempts Bess to accompany him to New York with a package of his “happy dust.” Released from jail a few days later, Porgy finds

Bess gone. Undaunted, he sets off in his goat cart to follow her (*Oh, Lawd, I’m On My Way*).

Gershwin’s music drama about the crippled Negro, Porgy, and his determined love for Bess is among the most popular and widely performed of all American operas. “This, Gershwin’s last serious work,” wrote David Ewen, “possesses that richness, vitality and variety of melody, that vigor of rhythm, that spontaneity and freshness we associate with Gershwin’s best music. Of all Gershwin’s serious works, it is the only one to reveal compassion, humanity and a profound dramatic instinct. Its roots are in the soil of the Negro people, whom it interprets with humor, tragedy, penetrating characterizations, dramatic power and sympathy.” Beside its musical significance, *Porgy and Bess* also occupies an important place in the social evolution of our land — its premieres in Charleston, South Carolina, where the story is set, and

Washington, D.C. were desegregated both on the stage and in the audience for the first time in the histories of those cities. Gershwin, who spent an entire summer in a Negro community near Charleston collecting material and ideas for his work, would have been proud to know that *Porgy and Bess* was the cause for such a significant step in our national life.

In 1941, Fritz Reiner, Music Director of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, requested that Robert Russell Bennett, the dean of American Broadway arrangers, prepare an orchestral synopsis of *Porgy and Bess*. Bennett’s *A Symphonic Picture* became the most popular orchestral version of the music from Gershwin’s opera, and in 1956 he expanded his arrangement as “A Concert in Songs” to include soprano and baritone soloists and chorus performing many of the score’s most memorable selections.

©2014 Dr. Richard E. Rodda