

'Porgy and Bess' – America's Opera Returns

National Philharmonic, Ellington Choir Join Forces at Strathmore

WI Staff Report

The National Philharmonic will celebrate the conclusion of Black History Month at The Music Center at Strathmore with George Gershwin's groundbreaking opera, "Porgy and Bess."

Conducted by Philharmonic Chorale Artistic Director Stan Engebretson, the show features an all-African-American cast in the major singing roles – something demanded

by Gershwin's estate so that his work could never be performed by white singers in blackface.

The opera tells the poignant story of Porgy, a crippled street beggar in Charleston, who longs for the love of Bess. Baritone Kevin Deas (Porgy) and soprano Marlissa Hudson (Bess), lead the ensemble, accompanied by the 180-member National Philharmonic Chorale and members of the Duke Ellington School of the Arts Concert Choir.

Few of the Broadway musicals Gershwin contributed to are as popular and revered to this day as "Porgy and Bess," which premiered on Broadway in 1935 to mixed reviews. It closed after a four-month run but went on to become a beloved fixture in American theatre.

The opera is based on American author DuBose Heyward's novel, "Porgy" (1925), which gave a groundbreaking perspective in its portrayal of African-American characters as emotionally and psychologically complex, paving the way for a Southern Renaissance of writers that included William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe.

For his "American Folk Opera," Gershwin spent time studying African-American music and culture in the rural South. The opera was originally criticized for having a work based on "lowly" pop music. Conversely, Black audiences criticized the work for its stereotyped characters. However, the composition became a cornerstone of quintessentially American music, and was even selected by the U.S. State Department in 1952 to represent the country on an international tour.

The compositional history of "Porgy and Bess," Gershwin's most ambitious work, represents the fulfillment of his long-nurtured desire to compose a new kind of opera, one



▲ Marlissa Hudson /Photo courtesy Duke Ellington School of the Arts



▲ Kevin Deas /Photo courtesy Duke Ellington School of the Arts

that would blend the classical operatic genre with the elements of jazz, popular music and folk music that were so much a part of his career as a Broadway composer.

From the very beginning, Gershwin took care to draw attention to the special nature of the work. In an often-quoted article published in 1935 in *The New York Times*, he described his conception: "Porgy and Bess is a folk tale. Its people naturally would sing folk music. When I first began work in the music I decided against the use of original folk material because I wanted the music to be all of one piece. Therefore, I wrote my own spirituals and folksongs. But they are still folk music, and therefore being in operatic form, Porgy and Bess becomes a folk opera."

Michael J. Bobbitt will serve as the performance's stage director. Samuel Bonds, director of the Duke Ellington School of the Arts, will conduct the school's performance. Bonds has been with the Duke Ellington School for more than 30 years.

Kevin Deas has gained international renown as one of America's leading bass-baritones. He is most acclaimed for his riveting portrayal of the title role in "Porgy and Bess" with the New York Philharmonic, National Symphony, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and scores of others.

American soprano Marlissa Hudson, described as a "superb lyric col-

oratura," made her professional debut with the Boston Pops Orchestra. Recognized as an international concert performer, she has performed in concerts in Bulgaria, Paraguay, Brazil, and the United States.

Other performers include Michael Redding as Crown, Chauncey Packer as Sportin' Life, Aundi Moore as Serena, Edward Pleasant as Jake, NaGuanda Nobles as Carla and Maria and Colin Eaton as Mingo and Peter Robbins.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Longtime Washingtonians may recall that there's a fascinating history behind the National Philharmonic's production of "Porgy and Bess" in concert with the Duke Ellington School of the Arts Concert Choir with one name that continues to arise: Todd Duncan.

Look for interviews on our website with Samuel Bonds, Aundi Moore, Victoria Gau and Stan Engebretson as they recall the longstanding history of this celebrated production and the significance that Duncan has had on the lives and careers of so many local singers.

The performance is sponsored by Patricia Haywood Moore and Roscoe M. Moore, Jr. The opera is performed on Saturday, Feb. 24, at 8 p.m. in Strathmore's Concert Hall. Admission is free for young people ages 7-17. For more information or to purchase tickets, visit www.nationalphilharmonic.org or call 301-581-5100. **WI**

GERSHWIN'S PORGY & BESS

A Concert Opera

Sat Feb 24, 8pm

Kevin Deas, Porgy
Marlissa Hudson, Bess
Stan Engebretson, conductor

Bass-baritone Kevin Deas has garnered international acclaim for his portrayal of Porgy.

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students just by the quality of their writings over the past two years," particularly in the politically-themed compilation, "Breakthrough," Dodds said. "Last year was big time in politics, and we focused on how policies and politics affect students. A lot of our students were concerned, and they were experiencing different feelings, so we wanted to give them an outlet to express that."

While Ta'Shaun Hunt, 10, who

simply likes learning new things, said writing taught her a lot about segregation, Black History Month and a lot of famous Black people, fifth-grader Jeremiah Walker paused momentarily before pensively stating his love of writing.

He also said it helps him to be more outgoing.

"I really like to write and being in the club helps with my [social] strategies," he said with a wide smile. "I can see lot of improvement."

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