

Tampa Bay Times Masterworks

A Child of Our Time

Nov 9 – 11

George Gershwin (1898-1937)

Selections from *Porgy and Bess*

Duration: ca. 20 minutes

Had Gershwin lived into his 40s and beyond, who knows what more he might have infused into America's nascent classical music scene, which was struggling to find an identity removed from European tradition. Gershwin's demise began slowly, but during a performance of his *Concerto in F* with the San Francisco Symphony, people noticed something wasn't right. As he sat at the piano, he lost his focus and balance. Then he blacked out.

A similar incident followed at a barber shop, but Gershwin believed the headaches would pass, and his doctors found no signs of what was a crippling brain tumor. Soon, the 38-year-old composer, now famous for *Rhapsody in Blue*, began dropping forks and spilling glasses of water at dinner. By the summer of 1937, a day after a neurosurgeon conducted a spinal tap, Gershwin was dead.

Such an ignoble end stands in contrast to Gershwin's luminous career. Here was a man whose life and work sparkled, who captured the infectious gaiety of his time, and whose creative sense bridged the gap between the popular and serious worlds of music.

His first hit, *Swanee*, made him an overnight sensation -- and wealthy -- at age 21. From that point, he composed as if possessed. His deep reservoir of melody helped give rise to the golden age of song in the 1920s, and his skill as a composer for theater landed him lucrative contracts in New York and London, resulting in such musicals as *Strike up the Band*, *Girl Crazy*, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Of Thee I Sing*.

Rhapsody may have been his masterstroke, but his lone opera – *Porgy and Bess* – takes pride of place in the annals of American musical theater. Its subject, a poor black community in South Carolina, offered Gershwin a wealth of musical ideas that together formed a natural link among jazz, folk, blues and classical idioms. "If I am successful," he once said of his opera, "it will resemble the drama and romance of *Carmen* and the beauty of *Meistersinger*."

In the opera world, America wasn't even on the map until Gershwin and his brother Ira set music and lyrics to DuBose Heyward's 1925 novel about the residents of Charleston's Catfish Row tenement. But Gershwin, a wealthy Jewish man from New York, went deeper than writing catchy tunes. He spent five weeks in South Carolina, absorbing speech inflections of the area's Gullah dialect, a Creole blend of English and African languages.

He also insisted in the opera copyright that all black characters be played by blacks. *Porgy* was Gershwin's first attempt to write for classically trained voices, and the score makes demands on the most skilled operatic singers. Unlike Broadway and musical theater, *Porgy* is operatic in that it requires singing from the chest, rather than the head, isn't amplified and pushes the limit on vocal range.

Porgy and Bess, as we now know, remains quintessentially American musical theater, although opera companies almost always trim 90 minutes from the original four hours. Many of its tunes can stand by themselves in recitals: *Summertime*; *I Got Plenty of Nuttin'*; *It Ain't Necessarily So*; and *Bess, You Is My Woman*. These are what many call the Gershwin gems – rich in melody, inventive syncopations and an early feel for swing.

Michael Tippett (1905-1998)

A Child of Our Time

In partnership with Florida Holocaust Museum to honor the 80th anniversary of *Kristallnacht*)

Duration: ca. 75 minutes

On a cold day in November 1938, a 17-year-old Polish Jew walked into the German embassy in Paris and shot a diplomat named Ernst vom Rath, who later died from his wounds. The Nazis responded immediately, seizing the incident as a way to ramp up anti-Semitic propaganda with the “heaviest consequences” for Germany’s Jewish population.

Shortly after the arrest of Herschel Grynszpan, Hitler ordered the destruction of synagogues, shops, and even cemeteries across the country. By the next day, *Kristallnacht*, or the *Night of Broken Glass*, was over. But formal pogroms, and the displacement and mass murder of European Jewry, had begun.

The reports had a profound impact on Michael Tippett, a young English composer and pacifist who began crafting a new work only two days after the outbreak of World War II. *Kristallnacht* would fuel his creativity over the two years he spent writing the oratorio *A Child of Our Time*, although the piece is less a literal depiction than a musical commentary on inhumanity and the forces of oppression. He called it an impassioned protest against the conditions that make persecution possible – and its message is as relevant today as it was 80 years ago.

Tippett turned to the poet T.S. Eliot to write the libretto, but Eliot felt that Tippett could make it more personal through his own selection of texts, if he kept them simple. So Tippett designed an arc in three parts – and 30 sections – based loosely on the most famous oratorio of all, Handel’s *Messiah*. Tippett went a step further by molding the music and text in the style of Bach’s *Passions*, with soloists and chorus commenting on the action, and then he quotes five African-American spirituals at critical junctures. His imagery moves back and forth from shadow to light, and to create a timeless statement he avoids using proper names.

“*A Child of Our Time* is indeed a Passion,” the composer wrote in describing his most famous composition, “not of a god-man, but of a man whose god has left the light of the heavens for the dark of the unconscious. The work asks the question: What happens to this man as the confusion deepens and the forces become more indiscriminating and unjust?”

Tippett describes the three main sections as beginning with the “general state of affairs in the world today as it affects all individuals, minorities, classes or races who are felt to be outside the ruling conventions, Man at odds with his shadow. Part II appears the *Child of Our Time*, enmeshed in the drama of his personal fate and the elemental social forces of our day. Part III is concerned with the significance of this drama and the possible healing that would come from Man’s acceptance of his shadow in relation to his light.”

The oratorio opens with the chorus singing *The world turns on its dark side*, with the alto soloist asking if evil is good and reason untrue. “We are lost,” the chorus responds, “we are as seed before the wind, we are carried to a great slaughter.” Part II includes the spiritual *Nobody knows the trouble I see*, and Tippett’s treatment of *Deep river, my home is over Jordan* closes this tragic and illuminating work.

Pairing Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* with the Tippett gives listeners a chance to hear the power of spirituals in different settings, said TFO Music Director Michael Francis. "The oratorio is a very powerful piece of music, and *Porgy* is too. When you listen to *Porgy* first, it gets your ear ready for the spirituals in the Tippett, and they begin to connect in a deeper way. They become far more profound in their depiction of injustice."

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.