Suite from *Porgy and Bess*

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, saxophones, strings

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**THE COMPOSER** – GEORGE GERSHWIN (1898-1937) – Gershwin read DuBose Heyward’s novel *Porgy* in 1926 and immediately recognized its potential for musical stage drama. His previous bid to blend the idiomatic worlds of serious and popular music in an opera setting had not been successful, but *Blue Monday*’s lack of public traction did not dissuade him for long. It would be another nine years, however, before Gershwin would get the chance to make the new dream a reality.

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**THE HISTORY** – Gershwin and Heyward visited the author’s home city of Charleston, South Carolina in 1934 so the composer could soak up some southern culture and experience the life rhythms that influenced the novel. He got to work on the score for his ‘folk opera’ right away. Heyward adapted the libretto himself and Gershwin’s brother Ira contributed invaluable lyrical brilliance. Between the three of them, they created an American landmark. The 1935 premiere in Boston featured an all-black cast, an audacious choice for the time that forced the country to confront some its long-held prejudices. The issue of cultural appropriation is constant companion for *Porgy and Bess*, and it should be, but it is also worth considering how slow the ivory towers of American society were to allow that tough question to face our full scrutiny. The Metropolitan Opera, the tallest of those towers, did not present a black artist until 1955 and Gershwin’s masterpiece would not grace that venerable stage until 1985! European houses, perhaps not surprisingly, were more eager to embrace the project in the intervening years, but those productions were often riddled with racially egregious practices and did little to confirm the work’s relevance. A (mostly) more enlightened world greets this wonderful music today. *Porgy and Bess* is among the most frequently performed operas annually and, perhaps more importantly, is easily the most regularly excerpted. Gershwin’s bespoke ‘folk’ songs are as timeless as they were timely and have become essential listening for anyone interested in exploring the American vernacular.

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**THE WORLD** – Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in 1935. That same year, the Nuremburg Laws went into effect in Germany, T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) died in England and the Vuelta a España bike race was held for the first time.