

George Gershwin: A Sketch for *Porgy and Bess*

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George Gershwin's sketches for *Porgy and Bess* come in many varieties. Most important--less a "sketch" than a step in the creation of the work--is the manuscript short score, four large oblong volumes, bound by Gershwin and containing the entire score (save for the prelude) in its unorchestrated form. This is the score from which the published vocal score was prepared; one suspects that Gershwin thought of it as "the score of *Porgy and Bess*" and that he thought of the score the Library of Congress now exhibits as "the orchestration."

Other sketches range from those which present the fully established (unorchestrated) text of a spot in *Porgy and Bess* as we know it (the sketch of the prelude, essentially part of the sketch-score but not bound with it, probably because it was written after Act I, scene 1 was bound), through preliminary sketches for music now in the score, to jottings of material not used and schematic diagrams of ways to use material. Some sketches are on the typescript libretto; some are in sketchbooks (the melody line of "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'" in nearly final form appears in one of the notebooks containing Gershwin's studies with Schillinger); many are on individual sheets of music paper. Gershwin was neither a destroyer of sketches (as was Brahms) nor a hoarder of sketches (as was Beethoven); he was a "giver-away" of sketches--to friends, to performers in his shows, to acquaintances. Thus we know only a fraction of the *Porgy* sketches which may be extant.

Of those we do know, the "Robbinspage 3" sketch in the Moldenhauer Archives is unique in being a detailed, performable sketch for a rejected setting of an identifiable spot in the current score. The spot occurs early in Act 1, scene 1--cue numbers 40-42 in the vocal score. It contains the first words we hear from Robbins--and almost the last, since by the end of the scene he will lie on the stones of Catfish Row, brutally slain by Crown in an argument stemming from the crap game he was so eager to

Robbins Page 3

I been sweatin' all day, night time is a
 man's time, he got a right to be - got his trouble,
 he got a right to play

allegro

play. The final version of this spot is identical as to words and completely different as to music--key (F Major in the score), time signature (mixed 3/4 and 2/4 in the score), and thematic material (the score uses the "Robbins motive" which we will hear again briefly at cue numbers 123-124, as Robbins makes his fatal crap shoot). This is a page from a Porgy that "isn't": but unlike other such pages among the Gershwin sketches, it is complete enough for us to know both where it would have gone and how it would have sounded.

Some details of the sketch can be explained by reference to other manuscripts. "Page 3," for example, should not cause wonder about what is on the missing pages one and two: this is a setting of material from page three of the typescript libretto. In fact, the words--both of the sketch and of the final version--are from a separate typed revision at the top of the original page three in the libretto, which read:

ROBBINS

(Comes down to the floor--turns and looks back at her)

Now, for Gawd's sake, don't start that again. I goin' to play-Get that!

SERENA

If you didn't have licker in you right now, you wouldn't talk like that. You know what you done promised me last week.

ROBBINS

All right then, I wouldn't shoot more than fifty cent.

The text of the revised version runs as follows:

JAKE

(Seeing Robbins at head of stairs)

Come on down Robbins, We're waitin' for you.

SERENA

(to Robbins)

Honey, don't play tonight. Do like I say.

ROBBINS

(descending several steps and turning back to her)

I been sweatin' all day. Night time is a man's time. He got a right to forget his trouble. He got a right to play.

SERENA

If you hadn't been drinkin' you wouldn't talk to me dat way. You ain't nebber hear Lord Jesus say nuttin' 'bout got to play.

ROBBINS

(He has descended the steps and turns back from the court speaking over his shoulder to her)

Dere you go again. Lissen what I say. I work all de week; Sunday got to pray.

But Saturday night a man's got a right to play.

(He saunters over to the crap circle and continues)

That ole lady of mine [etc.]

("That ole lady..." marks the return to the original text of page three of the libretto.)

This change in the libretto seems to have been made to give Robbins a slightly larger part and to make him a more sympathetic figure. (For all that, Robbins remains the least rewarding male role in *Porgy and Bess*: twenty-five measures of singing, a strenuous onstage fight, and thirty minutes of lying still as an onstage corpse.)

As the new version of the libretto gives Robbins a slightly longer and more sympathetic part, so the music for Robbins in the score as we know it gives us a picture of Robbins more vivid than we get in thi sketch. The sketch starts well enough--indeed it flows rom the preceding material more naturally than the present music. But the F-Minor chord in the fifth measure seems abrupt and unmotivated, and the bluesy declamation of the last two lines suggests a man who is merely weary, not one who is looking forward to a night of excitement. In the final version of the opera those lines dance and crackle: Robbins may be the smallest named adult role in *Porgy and Bess*, but in the score as we now know it he leaps immediately to musical life.