

## 41. George Gershwin

### Summertime from Porgy and Bess

#### Background information and Performance Circumstances

- This song was written by the American composer, George Gershwin, in 1934.
- Gershwin (1898-1937) is known for musicals, songs, film scores and classical works. His early career mixed formal musical training with work as a Tin-Pan Alley song plugger and writing Broadway shows. He later studied with Nadia Boulanger in Paris before moving to Hollywood to work on film scores. Stylistically his work shows influences as varied as American popular song, jazz, blues and early twentieth century art music styles, such as Impressionism.
- It forms part of the opening scene of his 'Folk Opera', Porgy and Bess, first produced in 1935. 'Porgy and Bess' evokes African-American life on Catfish Row, and centres on the doomed relationship between disabled Porgy and his girlfriend, Bess. Gershwin had long been influenced by and interested in African-American musical styles, such as the Spiritual and Blues, and spent several weeks in South Carolina in the summer of 1934, where he did much of the composition. However, it was on the piano of the wealthy socialite and writer, Kay Halle, that he wrote 'Summertime'. When he played her the song, late one night, she famously predicted it would be 'beloved by the world'.
- Summertime is a lullaby, first sung by a mother, Clara, to her baby. Later, after the mother and father are killed, another character sings the lullaby again, to the orphaned child.
- Summertime has become one of the most successful popular songs of all time, being recorded many times by artists ranging from the Jazz singer Billie Holiday to British artists Fun Boy three and Annie Lennox.

#### Performing forces and their handling

- Gershwin wrote Summertime with orchestral accompaniment, but the score of NAM 41 is a piano reduction, with only a few instrumental /vocal cues notated, beyond the main vocal line and 2-stave orchestral reduction. Listen to the recording carefully to note the main features of the accompaniment.
- The notated Soprano line is almost entirely syllabic, covering a fairly limited range (for Opera) of an octave (f#-f#). However, note how on the recording the soloist deviates from the written score at times, most obviously towards the end with a portamento octave slide to and from a high 'B'.
- Other notated vocal decorations include glissandi and acciaccaturas, and there is now a tradition of adapting the vocal line freely, particularly with respect to unwritten syncopations.
- Lush string textures form the main part of the accompaniment, but there are splashes of highly effective instrumental colour, for example from the Clarinet from bar 3 and from the bells in bar 6. Other important instrumental lines feature Oboe, Cor Anglais and Flute.
- From bar 26 a wordless female chorus sing a vocalise, doubling the string harmonies at a higher pitch. At the same time Gershwin adds a Violin obbligato (but this is barely audible on the NAM recording.)

## Texture

- The texture is mainly homophonic, with attention firmly focussed on the vocal melody.
- In verse 1 (7-24) the melody is supported by block chords, with contrasting melodic movement in the accompaniment being lines used to fill in underneath long notes in the vocal part, in bars 14-15, 19-20 and 22-23. There is a limited form of imitation between orchestral parts in bars 14-15 and in 22-23.
- There is a thicker texture for Verse 2 (25-44), although the female chorus vocalise simply doubles the orchestral parts and the violin obbligato line is not really distinctive enough to be classed as a true countermelody.
- There is a brief monophonic (octaves) passage at the beginning of the extract.
- There are pedals in bars 3-7 (dominant bass pedal) and in bars 40-44 (inverted tonic pedal in vocal part).

## Structure

	Bars	Notes
Intro	1-7 <sup>2</sup>	Octaves opening, leading to passage on dominant pedal
Verse 1	7 <sup>3</sup> -25 <sup>2</sup>	16 bar verse: basically 4X4 bar phrases, with last phrase extended
Verse 2	25 <sup>3</sup> -40	varied repeat of verse 1
Coda	41-46	Cycle of fifths with inverted tonic pedal

- Song is strophic with 2 verses, the second only slightly varied
- Each verse has 4 four-bar phrases, in the pattern ABAC.

## Tonality

- The piece is in B minor, enlivened by
  - Rich chromatic harmonies
  - 'rocking' parallel harmonies
  - Non-cadential progressions
  - Use of pentatonic and natural minor scale shapes
  - Use of 'blue' notes
- There is no use of key contrast or modulation.

## Harmony

- The harmony is basically tonal, but with much chromatic colour and many features which may have been influenced by the non-functional harmony of composers such as Debussy.
- Parallel movement of minor sixth chords (I<sup>6</sup> and II<sup>6</sup>) a tone apart opens the verse: this progression is key to the sound of the piece, and makes up nearly half of the verse.
- Use of seventh chords and frequent chromatic colourations.
- Use of secondary dominant chords to colour basically simple progressions. For example, the passage from 12-15 moves from IV to V over four bars, but in bar

14/15 uses a  $Ib -V^7 -I$  progression in  $F\#$ , involving a secondary dominant ( $V$  of  $V$ ) at  $14^3$ . (This chord is also inflected by a 'blue'  $E$  natural, in the moving instrumental line, which further weakens the diatonic feel of the passage.)

- Avoidance of conventional perfect cadences. In bar 15, beat 4, the top three notes form part of a  $V^7$  chord, but instead of an  $F\#$  in the bass, Gershwin slips chromatically down through  $C$  natural. In bars 21-22 a progression from  $E- G/A$  leads not to the expected  $D$  major, but to  $Bm$  with prominent seventh in counter-melody.
- Progressions based around strong root movements are found, for example in the Coda, where a cycle of fifths progression is used to lead to the final  $V^{13}-I$  perfect cadence which rounds off the whole piece.
- To balance all of this chromatic detail, the underlying progression of the song is very simple, being basically a 16 bar blues sequence in  $B$ :

Bars 8-11	$Bm$	12-13	$Em$	14-15	$F\#$	16-19	$Bm$	20	$D$	21	$E$	22-23	$Bm$
	$I$		$IV$		$V$		$I$		$III-I$		$IV$		$I$

- Pedal points open and close the piece (see Texture, above.)
- Melodic lines sometimes add to the complex nature of the harmony, for example in the passages from 26 onwards, where the Solo Violin line often begins the bar on a non-harmony note, usually quitted by downward leap. Another example of this is found near the opening of the extract, from bar 3-4, where the Clarinet creates a sound like a broken thirteenth chord descending in thirds (and also using every note of the natural minor scale. More conventional examples of this include the  $F\#-E$  appoggiatura in bar 21, which creates a ninth chord.

## Melody

- Main vocal melody is constructed of four phrases in the pattern ABAC
- The melody (and its constituent phrases) begins with an anacrusis figure – two crotchets for verse 1, varied to three triplet crotchets (to fit the text) in verse 2
- Phrases 1, 2, and 3 start on the upper dominant and descend to the lower dominant (1 and 3) or the supertonic (2)
- Phrase 4 reverses the pattern, working up from the lower dominant to climax an octave higher, before falling gently back to the tonic
- All notes of the melody except the  $C\#$  in bars 14-15 are part of the minor pentatonic scale, and all are part of the natural  $B$  minor scale. This avoidance of the sharpened seventh ( $A\#$ ) weakens the diatonic feel (the sixth note ( $G-G\#$ ) is also omitted), but the sense of  $B$  minor is very clear in other aspects, such as the outlining of the tonic triad in phrases 1 and 3
- Phrases 1, 2 and 3 share the same basic rhythm, and very similar pitch contours
- The interval of a third is central to the shape of the melody right from the beginning of the extract, with its 'bluesy' minor third, through the Clarinet entry based wholly on descending thirds, and culminating in the thirds which pepper and dominate the vocal verse melody
- The linking instrumental lines underneath this melody are more chromatic and complex, featuring parallel chromatic movement (12), a mixture of leaps and chromatic movement (14-15) and even part of a whole-tone scale in 19

- The melodic figures passed from Flute to Cello in bars 22-23 are based on a vocal shape found in bar 9 (to the words 'an' the livin' is '...') – this figure also appears in 40 and 44, in the lower parts.

### **Rhythm and metre**

- Notated as Alla Breve time (2/2) but mostly feeling more like a conventional 4/4 metre. The minim movement does however aptly match the gentle rocking motion of the lullaby
  - The harmonic rhythm is quite slow, often moving in minims or slower
  - Gershwin notates some aspects of contemporary Jazz/popular song rhythmic style by indicating dotted quaver-semiquaver rhythms at times; at others he notates 'straight' quavers, leaving the performers to decide on exact interpretation. Most are performed as 'swung' quavers, with a 'triplet' feel. The rhythmic flexibility of jazz and blues styles is central to this song.
  - Syncopations are used and also cross-rhythms involving triplet quavers and crotchets, all helping to support the gentle momentum of the lullaby.
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