Taking

Porgy
The role is musically difficult, physically grueling, and politically sensitive. Operatic bass Morris Robinson is all in.

BY SUSAN SELIGSON
Photograph by Dana Smith
MORRIS ROBINSON HAS LED many lives, but the destiny of the former NCAA offensive lineman and Citadel graduate who went on to train account executives for several major corporations has been determined in large part by his sonorous, limber, and soulful bass, for nearly three decades flexed only in church choirs. At the age of 30, what the devout Christian would call his God-given gift was nurtured, polished, and coaxed into singing Italian and German librettos after he won a full scholarship to the BU College of Fine Arts Opera Institute. That gift continues to mature even as Robinson commands the world’s great opera stages.

“The bass voice is a very rare instrument,” says Robinson, who, unlike a soprano, speaks in the same key he sings in. (Think Barry White.) “I’m a true bass, not a bass-baritone, and those don’t just grow on trees.” Robinson has been honing his gift rigorously since his first opera role, as the king in a 2001 CFA main stage production of Verdi’s Aida. It was the first live opera he’d ever seen.

Now, after years of reluctance, Robinson (CFA ’01) is poised to sing the part of Porgy in the George Gershwin opera Porgy and Bess, to be staged this November at Milan’s fabled La Scala theater. It is a carefully pondered career move. Although the musically rich role, written for a bass, is a perfect fit for his vocal range and theatricality, Porgy is a departure for Robinson. Remembered by most as the kneeling man on a cart portrayed (also reluctantly, it turns out) by Sidney Poitier in Otto Preminger’s 1959 film version of the condensed Broadway operetta, Porgy is a vulnerable role that could not be more unlike most of the villains, gods, and kings marking Robinson’s string of classical opera roles. With its memorable bluesy score and nearly all-black cast, Porgy and Bess is revived periodically. But the La Scala production, conducted by Alan Gilbert and directed by Philipp Harnoncourt, is likely to soar above them all.

Still, says Robinson, a virtuoso of Verdi’s choral works as well as a sometime performer at the Metropolitan Opera, it was a difficult decision. It isn’t just the physical demands of the role—Porgy’s legs are withered and Robinson is six-foot-three and 300 pounds. And it isn’t that the role is laden with nuance: Porgy is a robustly resilient yet tragic innocent willing to sacrifice everything for the world-weary, manipulative Bess. Robinson’s reluctance stems from the fact that the role was conceived at a time when leading parts for African Americans were few and stereotypical and did little to open stage doors largely padlocked to people of color.

What’s more, for many great African American basses since former CFA faculty member Simon Estes sang Porgy opposite Grace Bumbry (CFA ’55) at its Metropolitan Opera debut in 1985, the part came with a potential curse: once you sang Porgy, you could be seen as lacking the gravitas for Puccini or Wagner. For several talented basses who sang the part in the popular production truncated for Broadway, there was no Salome or Aida in their futures. Robinson felt he could not embrace the often-underestimated role with looming doubts about his ability to master any classical opera, anywhere.

At La Scala, where he began rehearsals in October, Robinson will sing opposite Kristin Lewis as Bess and Lester Lynch as Crown, the menacing, possessive laborer Porgy kills to protect his beloved Bess. Porgy and Bess premiered in 1935, with music

ONLINE:
Watch a video of Morris Robinson singing as the Grand Inquisitor in Don Carlo at bu.edu/bostonia.
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by Gershwin, libretto by DuBose Heyward and Ira Gershwin, and lyrics by Ira Gershwin and Heyward. With bone-chilling songs like the lullaby “Summertime” and the ballad “Bess, You Is My Woman Now,” it portrays African American life in the fictitious Catfish Row. Conceived by Gershwin as an “American folk opera,” Porgy and Bess featured a cast of classically trained African American singers, a bold move in those times, and Gershwin considered it his finest work. But in America it was not considered a legitimate opera until 1976, when a Houston Grand Opera production of the complete three-hour score established the work as important as well as powerful. Its Met premiere came nine years later.

“Some African Americans still see Porgy as perpetuating a stereotype, but I’ve moved away from that,” says Robinson. “I had the same issue with Joe in Show Boat,” referring to his role as the Mississippi stevedore in a critically acclaimed 2015 revival of the Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein (Hon.’57) musical, which premiered in 1927. The iconic Paul Robeson inaugurated that role, in stage and a later film version. But Robinson put his stamp on the part, and he intends to do the same with Porgy. “When I studied Joe, I saw that he was dignified in his stance,” he says. “And the only thing wrong with Porgy is his legs don’t work. He has strength and character. I’ve never been the underdog. He’s a strong character who turns Bess’ life around and shows her what a real man is.”

Mozart Doesn’t Need Your Help
Former Opera Institute director Sharon Daniels, a CFA associate professor of music, discovered Robinson at a 1998 concert in Salem, Mass. Robinson was singing in the rarely produced Halloween operetta Satanella, by the Victorian composer Michael William Balfe. “Morris’ voice literally shook the rafters of the tiny town hall when he approached the stage from the back of the audience,” Daniels recalls. “Friends talked about getting chills from the sheer power of it.”

After the concert she encouraged Robinson to apply to BU. She recalls his work ethic and his understanding that as a diamond in the rough, “he needed to work much harder than his classmates, who, even though the work is grueling for everyone, entered the program with classical music training.” Robinson still works perhaps twice as hard as other singers to nail a role. His high-stakes supervisory positions at firms such as Exxon and Monsanto, where he was an accounts manager overseeing distributors and their sales representatives, groomed him for long hours, and his football background endowed him with the team skills a professional cast demands, Daniels says.

Robinson has become one of opera’s most sought-after basses. He has what singers call “a really good top,” with a range from a seismic low F to an F two octaves above it. “My range is your typical basso (up to the E above middle C), but I sing baritone F-sharps all the time,” says Robinson. “I also sang a low C in a performance of The Magic Flute at Houston Grand Opera. The audience started clapping in the middle of the scene. I shouldn’t have done it; it’s not written and doesn’t make any sense musically. But I was showing off. Even the conductor had a chuckle, but was like, ‘Morris…from now on, just sing what Mozart wrote. He doesn’t need your help.'”

Anyone who wants to hear exactly what that true basso range means can find the YouTube video of Robinson singing the Show Boat classic “Old Man River.” In that gospel anthem a single word—jail (“You gets a little drunk and you lands in jail”)—is a musical journey unto itself, plummeting to a low G and
then climbing slowly to middle E. Robinson belts out the notes as written, and adds some range for good measure. The result: you feel the word, with all its undertones of pain and defeat, in your gut.

In fact, the whole of Robinson’s “Old Man River” is a revelation. His delivery, more full-bodied than Robeson’s both physically (he was nicknamed “Massive” during his run as a two-time All-American linebacker at the Citadel) and musically, pays tribute to Robeson’s style in its elegiac opening verses. Then Robinson bursts into “tote that barge, lift that bale,” his boundless chest thrust forward with a pride that the “white man boss” can hurt but never destroy. In Robinson’s hands the song inhabits his entire body with simmering rage and tragic frustration.

Football, Sales, but Always, Singing

Like Estes, Robinson is the son of a Baptist minister. “I’m back home at church, praising the Lord like I’ve done since I was nine,” Robinson tweeted in June. As a child, he sang with the Atlanta Boy Choir, but at 10 he persuaded his parents to let him give up his music lessons to play football. He earned a BA at the Citadel in 1991, where he was twice a Kodak All-American, and after graduation took a job in sales at 3M Technologies. But always, he sang. In between interstate business trips, Robinson took voice lessons at the New England Conservatory of Music. At BU in 1999, having hung up helmet and briefcase, his rise was meteoric.

Daniels remembers that when Robinson arrived at the University, his was “the most exciting instrument that we had heard. He was innately musical and his intonation was always great, even if he didn’t have the right diction. He was always prepared, and sometimes stayed up all night. He understood professionalism immediately and he didn’t have attitude.” And he was an original.

Some singers prefer to spend the hours before going on stage in quiet meditation, but Allison Voth, a CFA associate professor of music and Opera Institute principal coach, recalls Robinson prepping by running up and down the stairs.

He won admirers among instructors and fellow students. The critics, too, have consistent affection for this burly, unaffected child of Atlanta, who was hailed by the New York Times as having a “big, sonorous” voice with a “strong, slightly steely top and a sepulchral bottom,” and impeccable Italian and German. But Robinson has a core of artistic humility that makes him “work his buns off,” as Voth puts it.

After graduating, he went on to the Metropolitan Opera’s Lindemann Young Artist Development Program, where he continued full immersion in all facets of his craft: the singing, the acting, the physical presence, and of course, the languages. He now speaks and sings fluently in Italian, German, and French.

Just three years after CFA’s Aida, Robinson made his Metropolitan Opera debut in Beethoven’s Fidelio. His Carnegie Hall debut was with the MET Chamber Ensemble in Stravinsky’s Renard in 2002, and his first album, Going Home, was released on the Decca label in 2007. He appears as Joe in the new DVD of the San Francisco Opera production of Show Boat.

The first few generations of African American opera singers did not have an easy time of it, as barrier-toppling veterans from Leontyne Price to Shirley Verrett to Bumbry to Estes have attested in interviews and memoirs. When Estes agreed to play Porgy at the Met, he did so on the condition that his fellow African Amer-
ican singers be given future roles in the Met’s classical productions. And although his directors found his insistence irksome, they agreed. Estes says that both technically and musically, Porgy deserves equal status with the great classical roles. “I sang the whole Ring Cycle, I’d sung some bass roles and some baritone roles in Verdi operas,” he says. “Porgy is one of the most difficult to sing. I was on my knees, and it’s a very demanding, long opera. But Gershwin captured the real essence of the way people lived in those days. It’s very entertaining, with lots of moral stories.”

Still, like Robinson decades later, Estes had serious reservations about the role. From the days when African American actors could find paying work only as domestics or Pullman porters, the debate continues today—whether on television, movies, or the Broadway stage, African American roles often play into racist stereotypes about poverty and violence.

“I always mentioned to my colleagues that maybe you should think twice about doing Porgy,” says Estes. “They want to get a chance to sing, but some did get stereotyped. I think it is a tragedy.” He points to the great bass William Warfield, whose only two roles were Joe and Porgy. “He should’ve been singing on the stage of the Met.”

Unconventional Career Trajectory
Except for an English version of Mozart’s The Magic Flute, pre-Porgy and Joe, Robinson had been singing German and Italian operas exclusively. “I didn’t know if it was time for me to do a black role,” he says. “Every time I sang an Italian aria people said, ‘You should sing “Old Man River.”’ It was expected.” The day came when Robinson decided he was firmly established enough to do it. He had sung the song in concert, he says, but “I never really had that context until I studied

say, this guy’s the real deal.”

The real deal, indeed; after Fidelio, Robinson appeared at the Met as Sarastro in Die Zauberflöte, Ferrando in Il Trovatore, the king in Aida, and in roles in Nabucco, Tannhäuser, and the new productions of Les Troyens and Salome. His many opera and concert appearances around the United States and beyond include stints at the San Francisco Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Dallas Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Boston Lyric Opera, and Opera Australia, and the Tanglewood Music Festival and Aix-en-Provence Festivals. Among his roles: Osmin in Die Entführung aus dem Serail, Ramfis in Aida, Zaccaria in Nabucco, and the Grand Inquisitor in Don Carlo.

A board member of his church, Robinson is the father of a 10-year-old son, who has joined him on the opera stage as an extra. In his rare downtime, Robinson likes to golf or just chill at home, “but I haven’t had a real break since I started singing,” he says. With his burgeoning success, his voice requires constant tending. “I used to be the guy that never worried about my voice. I didn’t have to warm up, and I never freaked out,” he says. “But as I became more aware of what good singing is, I became more anal about how I presented myself. I have to take my antacids—reflux has cost many singers their careers. And I’m nerdy—no caffeine, no spicy food.”

Robinson began preparing for his run as Porgy several months before he received the official score. He offers a fleeting sneak preview of the opera’s closing song, one that could have at one point doubled as an anthem for Robinson himself: “Lord, I’m on my way.”