

A GERSHWIN CELEBRATION PROGRAM

George Gershwin (1898-1937): *Rhapsody in Blue*

As a young boy, Gershwin loved to roller skate and roughhouse with the boys in his neighborhood. All that changed when his parents purchased a second-hand upright piano. His family was quite surprised to learn Gershwin had already taught himself to play, simply by fitting his fingers into the keys of a friend's player piano! With his remarkable natural talent Gershwin progressed rapidly, and in less than three years, at the age of 15, he abandoned school (much to the disapproval of his mother) to become a "piano-pounder" in New York's Tin Pan Alley for \$15 a week.

It was during this period that Gershwin developed much of the dazzling and characteristic piano style that was to become the hallmark of his performances. Rapidly tiring of playing rather mundane songs for the public, he devised arrangements and variations of the tunes with embellishments, counter-melodies, and enriched harmonies. Gershwin's first big break came when singer Al Jolson heard the composer's rendition of *Swanee* at a party in 1919 and agreed to record the song. *Swanee* sold over a million copies, and overnight Gershwin became a household name.

Four years later Paul Whiteman, a prominent New York bandleader, asked Gershwin to compose a large-scale work for a jazz concert. Gershwin accepted the offer but didn't take Whiteman's request seriously. The composer was quite stunned to read in the *New York Tribune* on January 4, 1924, that Whiteman's concert was scheduled for February 12, to coincide with President Lincoln's birthday, and that "George Gershwin is at work on a jazz concerto."

Gershwin needed to be in Boston immediately for the premiere of one of his musicals and was unable to begin

work on the concerto. However, it was on his mind. As he traveled to Boston, he found the "steely rhythms...[and] rattley-bang" of the train engine inspiring. According to him, "I suddenly heard—even saw on paper—the complete construction of the *Rhapsody*...I worked on the thematic material already in my mind, and tried to conceive the composition as a whole. I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America—of our vast melting-pot, of our incomparable national pep, our blues, our metropolitan madness. By the time I reached Boston, I had the definite plot of the piece."

Two of the most memorable parts—the opening glissando and the melodious middle section—emerged quite by accident. While warming up before one of the rehearsals, the clarinetist played a jazzy scale passage as a joke. Gershwin quickly realized that was the perfect ice breaker for his work and the now-familiar glissando is a trademark motif of *Rhapsody*. After completing the composition, Gershwin played it on the piano for his brother Ira, who suggested the addition of a slower, contrasting section. George took his brother's advice and inserted a ballad-like tune (one that he had composed earlier but never used) into the middle of the composition. Today many people recognize this lyrical segment.

In just three weeks Gershwin wrote a musical smorgasbord of Americana—everything from complex, lively rhythmic figures and jazzy syncopations inspired by the repetitive noises of a train engine to virtuosic Chopinesque figurations. Although *Rhapsody* adheres to the traditional tonal system, many of the melodies contain lowered notes, resulting in a blues effect and sometimes even sounds that are slightly reminiscent of synagogue chants, thus revealing Gershwin's Jewish heritage and his affinity for African-American sounds.

A GERSHWIN CELEBRATION PROGRAM *(continued)*

Gershwin composed so quickly that the final version of the solo part wasn't even ready at concert time, and he had to improvise in many places. Whiteman must have had his hands full, conducting a score that contained long blank spaces with the notation, "Wait for nod!"

Many notable classical musicians—Rachmaninoff, Stravinsky, Ravel—were present for the historic concert. There were 25 compositions on the program, with *Rhapsody* placed near the end. By the time Gershwin strolled onto the stage to take his place at the piano, the evening was late and the audience weary. But with the first opening wail of the clarinet—now an aural icon—the listeners were electrified by the fresh, new sounds that appealed directly to them. *Rhapsody in Blue* won an immediate place of honor in the concert realm. In his biography of Gershwin, Isaac Goldberg describes the concert not only as a celebration of Lincoln but also for American music—"even an Emancipation Proclamation, in which slavery to European formalism was signed away by the ascending glissando of the rhapsody." Gershwin had successfully blended jazz with classical music to form a new hybrid and a work that was destined for immortality.

Porgy and Bess

When Gershwin read DuBose Heyward's novel, *Porgy*, he immediately recognized the dramatic and musical possibilities for a theatrical production. Set in the early 20th century, *Porgy* takes place in Catfish Row, an African-American tenement section on the Charleston waterfront. Two men, Crown and Porgy, love the same woman, Bess, and in a fight, Porgy stabs Crown. While Porgy is temporarily taken to jail for questioning, Bess is persuaded to go to New York with Sportin' Life. When Porgy returns, he finds Bess gone and prepares to search for her.

In 1935 *Porgy and Bess* premiered on Broadway as a musical, since many of the songs are popular in nature and easy to sing. Gershwin described his work as a folk opera, but then he added that categories are not important. His purpose was to portray, through music, the difficulties that African-Americans face in society. Their story is about violence and poverty but also one of courage, optimism, and love.

In *Porgy and Bess*, Gershwin combines European harmonic practices with African-American traditions. The music is always tonal, but there are lowered notes and sliding pitches that create a blues sound. Many of the songs are in call-and-response format (soloist answered by the group), which originated from African work songs. Styles range from jazzy syncopation ("I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'") to slow, expressive spirituals ("My Man's Gone" and "Gone, Gone, Gone"). The poignant love duet, "Bess, You Is My Woman Now," provides an immensely dramatic moment, while the famous lullaby, "Summertime," is unmatched for its lyricism.

Porgy and Bess was revived in 1947, and since then has been performed many times with enormous success. It has proved its vitality as a work for the theater and its validity as a work of art. *Porgy and Bess* was finally presented at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1985.

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