

Peoria Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
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This family-friendly event celebrates the life of George Gershwin – a great American composer whose career spanned both popular and classical music. Our first half is a theatrical production, *Gershwin's Magic Key*, that incorporates dozens of his pieces from popular songs to works written for the concert hall. We end with two of Gershwin's great concert works. The jazz-inspired *Rhapsody in Blue* – featuring pianist Will Martin – and his jaunty *An American in Paris*.

From Tin Pan Alley to the Concert Hall

George Gershwin (1898-1937) was born in Brooklyn, New York, into a Russian-Jewish family. When the family bought a piano in 1910, young George was immediately smitten, and began to teach himself to play. By 1914, he quit school and went to work in Tin Pan Alley, New York's famous songwriting district. Gershwin worked as a pianist and a "song-plugger" for a successful publisher, recording player piano rolls of the latest hits. Before long, he was writing his own songs, and in 1919 scored a huge hit with *Swanee*, which was popularized by the ruling King of Broadway, Al Jolson. He began to make a name for himself as a Broadway composer, and beginning in 1921, collaborated frequently with his brother Ira, a successful lyricist. Gershwin loved celebrity, and would seek the center of attention in any group. There are many stories about how, at any party, he would sit at the piano as soon as he arrived, and play brilliant improvisations on his own songs for hours.

Though he was becoming famous as a pop star, Gershwin also realized the limitations of his own largely self-taught musical background, and continued to seek out formal lessons on piano and composition. He was well aware of the gulf between popular and classical styles and wrote several early pieces that went beyond the standardized popular song form. His first public attempt at what he referred to as "serious" music was *Blue Monday*, a short opera produced as part of George White's *Scandals of 1922*. The *Scandals* shows were fairly typical 1920s Broadway revues - lots of lighthearted music and scantily-clad showgirls, and very little plot. *Blue Monday*, inspired in part by the literature of the burgeoning Harlem Renaissance, (though it was presented in blackface) was a rather depressing little story about a gambler's hard luck. It was presented at the opening performance of *Scandals*, to mixed reviews, and was promptly yanked from the show. Despite this early frustration, Gershwin continued a career that had two tracks. He was best known in his day for his popular work on Broadway, and later in Hollywood, but continued to write "serious" musical works throughout his career.

Gershwin's Magic Key

Gershwin's Magic Key has been endorsed by the Gershwin Family Interests, supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, and was premiered by the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Classical Kids LIVE! presents

this theatrical production with the Peoria Symphony Orchestra. The music is woven into the drama as two actors share their anecdotes and observations based on true incidents from the composer's life.

The story tells of a chance meeting on the streets of New York City between a poor newspaper boy and the great American composer, George Gershwin. The orchestra weaves Gershwin's greatest hits into the drama as the master composer shares historical anecdotes about his life and musical passion. A bonding friendship develops as they explore the vast melting pot of American music and discover the key to unlocking the boy's own musical potential. Woven into the story twenty of Gershwin's most popular compositions from classical compositions including *Porgy & Bess*, *An American in Paris*, *Cuban Overture*, *Concerto in F* and *Rhapsody in Blue* to popular hits from the American Songbook including *I Got Rhythm*, *Swanee*, *Stairway to Paradise*, *Someone to Watch Over Me*, and *Fascinating Rhythm*.

Rhapsody in Blue

Gershwin composed his Rhapsody in Blue in early 1924. The first performance, with Gershwin at the piano and the Paul Whiteman Orchestra, took place in February of 1924, at Aeolian Hall in New York City.

By 1924, Gershwin was a success on Broadway, and well-regarded as a pianist. He had a full plate of musical theater commitments for that year, beginning with *Sweet Little Devil*, and the 1924 edition of White's *Scandals*. It was at this time that Paul Whiteman, whose band had provided the background to Gershwin's *Blue Monday*, conceived one of the most ambitious concerts of the Roaring '20s. Whiteman, the self-styled "King of Jazz" lead the Palais Royal Orchestra, one of New York's best big bands, known for their sophisticated "society" arrangements of danceable jazz. He announced an "Experiment in Modern Music" for February 12, 1924, to be held at the venerable Aeolian Hall, a concert that would supposedly answer the question "What is American Music?" Whiteman planned to bring together Jazz of all styles with European Classical music, and newly-composed works by American composers such as Irving Berlin and Victor Herbert. Whiteman and Gershwin had earlier talked about a large-scale jazz-style orchestral work for the Whiteman Orchestra, and Whiteman expressed his hope that Gershwin would write one. This casual commitment became a *fait accompli* when Gershwin read in the *New York Herald's* January 3 announcement that he would be composing a "Jazz concerto" for Whiteman's grand concert!

Composing a concerto in just over a month was a daunting task for a composer who had never written a work of this scale. Gershwin was also heavily involved with the production of *Sweet Little Devil*, set to open in Boston on January 25. At the time, he was insecure about his qualifications to write a piece of "serious" music - he once joked that, in the early 1920s, everything he knew about harmony could be put on a three-cent stamp - and he had very little experience in orchestration. Rather than attempting a traditionally-conceived concerto, Gershwin settled on a "rhapsody" - a much less rigorous form that would allow him to develop musical ideas freely. According to a letter

by Gershwin, the final inspiration for the score came during a train trip to Boston for the premiere of *Sweet Little Devil*:

“It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattley-bang that is often stimulating to a composer - I frequently hear music in the heart of noise - I suddenly heard - and even saw on paper - the complete construction of the rhapsody from beginning to end. No new themes came to me, but I worked on the thematic material already in my mind, and tried to conceive the composition as a whole. I heard it as a musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our national pep, of our blues, our metropolitan madness. By the time I reached Boston, I had a definite *plot* of the piece, as distinguished from its actual substance.”

Gershwin was a *very* fast composer, but not quite fast enough. He had the accompaniment finished in time for Whiteman’s staff arranger, Ferde Grofé, to orchestrate it, but left large chunks of the piano part to be improvised or played from memory at the concert.

Whiteman’s pretentious “Experiment” was a qualified success. All of the most influential New York critics were in attendance, as were many of the most important Classical musicians on the day: Fritz Kreisler, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Igor Stravinsky, Walter Damrosch, Leopold Stokowski, and many others. The concert was an extremely long affair, and by the third hour, the audience’s attention was beginning to flag. However, Gershwin’s *Rhapsody* - the 24th work on a program of 25 pieces - stole the show. Olin Downes, reviewer for the *New York Times*, described the scene:

“It was late in the evening when the hero of the occasion appeared. Then stepped upon the stage, sheepishly, a lank and dark young man - George Gershwin. He was to play the piano part in the first public performance of his *Rhapsody in Blue* for piano and orchestra. This composition shows extraordinary talent, just as it also shows a young composer with aims to go far beyond those of his ilk, struggling with a form of which he far from being master. His first theme alone, with its caprice, humor, and exotic outline, would show a talent to be reckoned with.”

The *Rhapsody* opens with a famous clarinet *glissando*, the trademark lick of Ross Gorman, Whiteman’s lead clarinetist, which Gershwin adopted as the perfect lead-in to the first theme. The piece develops freely, with one theme flowing naturally into the next, and with increasing intensity, until the piano takes a long solo and slows the tempo. The central section is based upon a Romantic melody that sounds like a nod to Tchaikovsky with a bit of Jazz punctuation. There is a recapitulation, and the piece ends aggressively, with the piano playing its loudest.

An American in Paris

An American in Paris was composed in 1928 and received its premiere at Carnegie Hall in New York City, on December 13, 1928.

The premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue* was a career-making event for Gershwin. Within a year he was approached by Walter Damrosch, conductor of the New York Symphony Society (later merged with Stokowski's New York Philharmonic). Damrosch, who had been at Whiteman's "Experiment in Modern Music," gave Gershwin a commission for a "New York Concerto." The result, the *Concerto in F*, is a more ambitious piece than the *Rhapsody*, and has become the most successful of all American piano concertos. In 1928, Damrosch offered a second commission, this time for an orchestral work.

In March, George and Ira Gershwin, together with their sister Frances and Ira's wife Leonore, left for a European tour, spent mostly in Paris. Paris of the 1920s could still boast of its place at the center of the artistic universe: the city was host to a dazzling array of composers, sculptors, painters, Jazz musicians, dancers, writers, and poets - both French and foreign. Gershwin, who was still a bit self-conscious about his reputation as a "serious" composer, took every opportunity to *schmooze* the composers he admired most: Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Poulenc, Ravel, and Milhaud. There is a well-known (though possibly apocryphal) story about a meeting with Stravinsky, with whom Gershwin hoped to study. Stravinsky abruptly asked Gershwin how much money he made, and Gershwin, put off guard, answered. "About a \$100,000 a year." "In that case," replied Stravinsky, "I should study with you."

Gershwin brought the unfinished score for the new orchestral piece with him to Europe, and sketched out much of the score in Paris that spring. In fact, several of his themes seem to have been conceived during an earlier, 1926 trip to Paris, long before there were any hints of a commission. He completed the full score and orchestration by November 1928. Reviews of the first performance were decidedly mixed, but once again the best answer to the critics was success: *An American in Paris* became a standard of the orchestral repertoire almost as soon as it was premiered. Gershwin provided the following outline of the work:

"This new piece, really a rhapsodic ballet, is written very freely, and is the most modern music I've yet attempted. The opening part will be developed in a typical French style, in the manner of Debussy and the Six, though the themes are all original. My purpose here is to portray the impression of an American visitor in Paris, as he strolls around the city, and listens to various street-noises and absorbs the French atmosphere.

"As in my other orchestral compositions, I've not endeavored to represent any definite scenes in this music. The rhapsody is programmatic only in a general impressionistic way, so that the individual listener can read into the music such as his imagination pictures for him.

“The opening gay section is followed by a rich blues with a strong rhythmic undercurrent. Our American friend, perhaps after strolling into a café and having a couple of drinks, has succumbed to a spasm of homesickness. His harmony here is both more intense and simple than in the preceding pages. This blues rises to a climax, followed by a coda in which the spirit of the music returns to the vivacity and bubbling exuberance of the opening part, with its impressions of Paris. Apparently the homesick American, having left the café and reached the open air, has disowned his spell of the blues, and once again is an alert spectator of Parisian life. At the conclusion, the street noises and French atmosphere are triumphant.”

Gershwin's use of the orchestra in this work is much more confident than in either the *Rhapsody* (which, after all was arranged almost entirely by Grofé) or the *Concerto*. There were some later rumors that Gershwin had had help with the orchestration of *An American in Paris*, but it appears that virtually every bit of this score is his. He felt no need in the completed score to include a piano part for himself, though the original score does have a piano part at several points which he later crossed out. The influence of Jazz is clearly audible, but the most prominent element is the variety of orchestral moods he projects and the ingenious ways he achieves them. The standard orchestra is augmented by saxophones, a huge array of percussion, and - one of Gershwin's most prized souvenirs from his 1928 trip to Paris - a set of four French taxi-horns.

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