

# 'S WONDERFUL:

## A TRIBUTE TO GEORGE GERSHWIN

**Daniel Hege**

*Music Director & Conductor*

**Lisa Vroman**

*Soprano*

**Clayton Stephenson**

*Piano*

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2023 | 7:30 PM

**CENTURY II CONCERT HALL**

**PROGRAM NOTES**



# GEORGE GERSHWIN

Born September 26, 1898 in Brooklyn, New York

Died July 11, 1937 in Hollywood, California

George Gershwin yearned to be a serious composer. Growing up in Brooklyn and the Lower East Side tenements, the opportunities presented to Aaron Copland, another Brooklyn-born composer just two years younger, were not forthcoming for Gershwin. He grew up, as Leonard Bernstein described it, “on the wrong side of the tracks.”

Musically, Gershwin was a late starter. His first piano lessons began when he was 12. His second teacher, Charles Hambitzer, instilled in Gershwin an appreciation and interest in the music of Chopin, Liszt, and Debussy. At 15, Gershwin dropped out of school to become a “song plugger” at Remick’s on Tin Pan Alley. From then on, he gained most of his musical education on the streets.

The popular music publishing business revolved around W. 28th Street between Broadway and 6th Avenue. Tin Pan Alley derived its nickname from the tinkling sound of the many upright pianos coming from the windows of the music houses along the street.

The life of a “song plugger” was low-paying but vital in the bustling world of popular music. Enconced in small rooms at music publishers by day and in bars at night, pianists toiled, playing and singing songs for anyone dropping by to listen. The goal was to generate “buzz” about a piece and promote sheet music sales. The ultimate score was to land a song in one of the many theater revues and shows playing up and down Broadway. Publishers and composers could make thousands of dollars on the royalties earned from performances and sales.

Lacking a background in music theory and barely able to read music, Gershwin began plying his trade at Remicks, relying on his ear, experimentation, and natural intuition. He began writing his songs with an ear to Broadway’s demands and popular trends. His first success came in 1916 when a Sigmund Romberg show at the Winter Garden Theater<sup>1</sup> accepted one of Gershwin’s songs. After a stint as a \$35-a-week rehearsal pianist for a Victor Herbert-Jerome Kern production entitled *Miss 1917*, Gershwin met Max Dreyfus, head of the T.B. Harms Publishing Company, the leading firm on Tin Pan Alley. Gershwin began writing for Harms in 1918.

The first show with music entirely by Gershwin, *La La Lucille*, appeared on Broadway at the Henry Miller Theater on May 26, 1919. His first big hit came the following year when Al Jolson picked up the song *Swanee* from the failed Gershwin musical *Dere Mable*, used it in his revues, and recorded it in January 1920. From then on, Gershwin was a known quantity and in demand, gaining renown, particularly for his songs heard in the annual *Scandals* produced by George White.

During the production of the 1922 *Scandals*, Gershwin met Paul Whiteman, whose jazz orchestra performed in the show. Whiteman’s band performed “slickly and skillfully orchestrated” jazz arrangements. The music bore little resemblance to the jazz performed in clubs. However, Whiteman, the darling of the Hollywood crowd, was the principal exponent of jazz that the white middle class accepted. Whiteman invited Gershwin to write a work for his group, and the result was *Rhapsody in Blue* premiered on February 12, 1924, with Gershwin at the piano. The work was essentially an amalgam of well-written segments, some of which could be cut without impacting the effect of the work. Whiteman’s pianist and arranger, Ferde Grofé, orchestrated *Rhapsody* since Gershwin lacked the skills at the time to do his orchestration. The work’s success raised jazz to

1. Many readers may have familiarity with the Winter Garden Theater because it hosted only two shows – *Cats* (1982 – 2001) and *Mamma Mia* (2001 and 2014) during the thirty-two year period.

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respectability in a concert venue. With the acclaim a few months later of *Lady, Be Good*, his first smash hit, Gershwin was suddenly a hot commodity.

## An American in Paris (19')

Last performed by the Wichita Symphony on January 26 and 27, 2008 with Andrew Sewell conducting.

The work that opens this evening's concert, *An American in Paris*, began to take shape in Gershwin's mind during a 1926 trip to Paris. During a second trip in 1928, Gershwin sketched the entire work.

The reasons for his Paris trips were to absorb and learn from Europe's leading composers and teachers. He met Prokofiev, Stravinsky, Ravel, and Kurt Weill. He visited Alban Berg in Vienna and acquired a score of Berg's *Lyric Suite* to study.

Gershwin, who always felt he had more to learn, applied to study with Maurice Ravel and the noted teacher Nadia Boulanger, who attracted many Americans, including Aaron Copland, to her studio. Boulanger declined to take Gershwin in, saying that she thought studies with her would ruin Gershwin's jazz-infused style. In his rejection letter, Ravel wrote, "Why become a second-rate Ravel when you're already a first-rate Gershwin?" The story also goes that Ravel asked Gershwin how much money he made, and when hearing the answer replied, "Maybe I should study with you."

Gershwin completed *An American in Paris* with a commission from Walter Damrosch and the Philharmonic Society of New York. The new work premiered at Carnegie Hall on December 13, 1928, with Damrosch leading the New York Philharmonic. Gershwin's work shared a program with Wagner's *Magic Fire Music* and Franck's *Symphony in D minor*. Even one hundred years ago, conductors would program new music alongside standard repertoire works to attract new and curious audiences.

Describing his work as a "rhapsodic ballet," [there were no dancers], Gershwin wrote, "My purpose here is to portray the impressions of an American visitor in Paris as he strolls about the city, listens to the various street noises, and absorbs the French atmosphere." Gershwin purchased and introduced four taxi horns to portray authentic Parisian street noises in the music.

When the work was published, the title page indicated "An American in Paris: A Tone Poem for Orchestra Composed and Orchestrated by George Gershwin." Sensitive to accusations from the musical establishment in New York that he hired others to do his orchestrations, Gershwin took pains to inform musicians that he orchestrated the work. It indicates how far Gershwin's musical education had come just a few years after Ferde Grofé orchestrated *Rhapsody in Blue*.

Gershwin collaborated with composer and music critic Deems Taylor for a lengthy program note quoted and edited here for brevity.

*Imagine an American visiting Paris, swinging down the Champ-Élysées on a mild sunny morning to the tune of the First Walking Theme designed to convey an impression of Gallic freedom and gaiety.*

*Our American ears, being open, note with pleasure the sounds of the city. French taxicabs seem to amuse him particularly.*

*Having safely eluded the taxis, our American passes the open door of a café, where "La Sorella" is still*

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popular if one is to believe the trombones. Exhilarated by the reminder of the gay 1890s, he resumes his stroll to the tune of the Second Walking Theme announced by the clarinets in French with a strong American accent.

The instruments discuss both themes until our tourist passes by a church or the Grand Palais. An English horn reveals a respectful slackening of his pace.

A Third Walking Theme suggests that our American has crossed the Seine to the Left Bank. The music becomes increasingly sedentary, implying that our American has stopped on a terrace for an Anise de Lozo.

And now the orchestra introduces an unhallowed [use your imagination!] episode. A violin approaches our hero and addresses him in a one-sided conversation in the most charming, broken English.

Our hero becomes homesick. He has the blues. He realizes he is just a foreigner and will never feel at home in Paris.

In the nick of time, the orchestra rushes in with a compassionate theme. Two trumpets suggest our hero has met a compatriot, for this last theme is a noisy, cheerful, self-confident Charleston without a drop of Gallic blood in its vein.

For the moment, Paris is no more. A gusty, wise-cracking orchestra demonstrates that it's always fair weather when two Americans get together. Walking Theme number two enters, enthusiastically abetted by Walking Theme Three [forming a kind of recapitulation]. Paris isn't such a bad place, after all. In fact, it's a grand place! The blues return briefly but are mitigated by the Second Walking Theme – a happy reminiscence rather than a homesick yearning. The orchestra, in a riotous finale, decides to make a night of it. It will be great to get home, but in the meantime, this is Paris!

The Academy-Award-nominated movie *An American in Paris* (1951) adapted Gershwin's music, including several songs heard tonight. MGM executive Arthur Freed bought the rights to Gershwin's catalog from Ira Gershwin in the late 1940s. The film, starring Gene Kelly, Leslie Caron, and Oscar Levant, won six Awards, including Best Picture. It included a seventeen-minute, dialogue-free ballet of Gershwin's original music, costing over half a million dollars to produce the segment.

To listen to a recording of *An American in Paris* before the concert, try this video on YouTube of Leonard Bernstein conducting the New York Philharmonic in London's Royal Albert Hall.

[https://youtu.be/9HI62\\_udgEI?si=9wk1vxONq45Bf8P9](https://youtu.be/9HI62_udgEI?si=9wk1vxONq45Bf8P9)

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## The Songs of George Gershwin

Last performed by the Wichita Symphony on January 29, 2016.

Lisa Vroman and Rick Faugno, vocalists; Daniel Hege conducted.

The songs heard on this evening's program come from shows composed by Gershwin between 1926 and 1938. It was the Golden Age of American Musical Comedy. A typical Broadway show of the period might include a dozen musical numbers, some reprised in various ways throughout the evening. The musical style was rooted in the Tin Pan Alley songs of the early 20th century, which evolved from the American popular songs and European operetta pieces of the late-19th century. Most of the music that emerged on Broadway (to distinguish it from the styles coming out of Harlem, which Broadway often imitated) was shaped by the émigré first and second-generation Jewish songwriters and lyricists. Composers and writers like Gershwin and his lyricist brother Ira, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, the team of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, and the lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II dominated the era.

A typical song would utilize the verse-refrain (sometimes called the "chorus") format of Tin Pan Alley. The verse would set up the dramatic narrative, and the refrain would follow with the emotional reaction or punchline. By the 1920s, lyricists often reduced songs to two verses followed by the refrain, which often became the song's best-known part. By the 1930s, writers dispensed with verses and went straight to the money-making and familiar refrain. (Modern-day singers often do the same with the classic songs from the 1920s. For an example, check out Diana Krall's cover of "'S Wonderful" on YouTube:

[https://youtu.be/f\\_I6Ps53peQ?si=XfjTW\\_YwNchGyUWD](https://youtu.be/f_I6Ps53peQ?si=XfjTW_YwNchGyUWD))

Lisa Vroman begins her set with one of the most popular songs Gershwin wrote, '**S Wonderful**. Composed by Gershwin with lyrics by his brother, Ira, the song has become a standard of the so-called Great American Songbook. The song appeared in the 1927 musical *Funny Face*. It has been sung by singers like Bing Crosby, Ella Fitzgerald, Michael Feinstein, Tony Bennett, and many others. Jazz instrumentalists like Dave Grusin, Lionel Hampton, Oscar Peterson, and others have turned the piece into a standard jazz instrumental.

**Someone to Watch Over Me**, another Gershwin standard, comes from the 1926 musical *Oh, Kay!* The song was initially composed in a "fast and jazzy" style but became memorable as a slower ballad sung as a sentimental "torch" song.

**Just Another Rhumba** was probably one of Gershwin's last songs, composed in 1937. Gershwin may have intended it for the film *A Damsel in Distress*, based on the P. G. Wodehouse 1919 novel, and for which he provided several songs. For whatever reason, the song did not make it into the film. It next appeared in rehearsal for the 1938 film *The Goldwyn Follies* after Gershwin's death, but again, the song didn't survive rehearsals. It remains a wonderful example of a Gershwin song influenced by Latin music. In this case, he has fun with it as he parodies the popular dance craze of the 1930s. His brother Ira obliged with the silliness of creating artificial rhymes in the lyrics. Here's how the chorus begins:

*It's just another rhumba  
But it certainly has my numbah  
So much so, that I can't eat or slumbah  
Can you imagine anything dumbah?*

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**My Cousin in Milwaukee** comes from a 1932 musical, *Pardon My English*. It was one of the Gershwin Brothers' less successful efforts. The lyrics have fun with rhyming plays on the word "Milwaukee" as it tells about a singer who is a "squawky cousin from Milwaukee."

**By Strauss** is a tongue-in-cheek homage to Johann Strauss Sr. and his son, the "Waltz King" Johann Strauss, Jr. The lyrics include a humorous put-down of Broadway's leading composers, including Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, and even Gershwin himself. Producer and Director Vincente Minnelli used the song in his 1936 revue "The Show is On" and again in his acclaimed 1951 movie *An American in Paris*, based on Gershwin's orchestral work that begins this evening's program and freely adopted well-known Gershwin songs.

**Strike Up the Band**, which begins the second half of the concert, orchestrates the title song from the musical *Strike Up the Band*. The first version of the show opened in Philadelphia in 1927. The Gershwins styled it more like a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, and the show failed. The book was re-written and the music revised to reflect the popular "swing" style of the 1920s for the successful 1930 Broadway production. Of particular note was the "who's who" list of future luminaries playing in the Red Nichols pit orchestra of the show – Jimmy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, Gene Krupa, Glenn Miller, and Jack Teagarden.

**I Got Rhythm** is one of Gershwin's best-known songs for its jazzy rhythms and chord progressions that became a jazz standard. The song originated as a slow song in Gershwin's 1928 musical *Treasure Girl*. Gershwin then applied a faster tempo and reused his material in the 1930 hit *Girl Crazy*, where Ethel Merman created a hit with the song in the original production. Gershwin subsequently used the tune for his last work for piano and orchestra, the *I Got Rhythm Variations*, in 1934. Gershwin's piece is not without controversy. The melodic fragment based on the pentatonic scale sung to the words "I Got Rhythm" also appears in the third movement of William Grant Still's *Symphony No. 1*, the "Afro-American Symphony." Years later, Still's daughter wrote that the jazz artist Eubie Blake claimed Gershwin "stole" the tune from Still. Still's *Symphony* didn't premiere until 1931 in Rochester. The basis for the claim was that Gershwin frequented shows in Harlem and heard Still, a violinist, improvising in the pit and caught the idea – and others – from shows he attended.

## Concerto in F (33')

1. Allegro (14')

2. Adagio - Andante con moto (12')

3. Allegro agitato (7')

Last performed by the Wichita Symphony on January 14 and 15, 2012.

Terrence Wilson, piano; Eckart Preu conducted.

The success of *Rhapsody in Blue* led to a new commission by the Symphony Society of New York in April 1925. They requested a piano concerto that would feature Gershwin as the soloist. Walter Damrosch, conductor of the New York Symphony Orchestra and accused by some critics of wanting to capitalize on Paul Whiteman's success, scheduled the performance for December. There would be seven performances with Gershwin as the soloist in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. To Gershwin, this promised to be the ticket to the status level he so much desired.

With the clock ticking on a deadline, Gershwin had work to do. First, he reportedly asked friends to describe what a concerto was. Secondly, he purchased a book on orchestration by Cecil Forsyth. Relying on his

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confidence to be a quick study, he next turned to the work remaining on his latest stage production, "Tell Me More." The show wasn't a great success on Broadway, but a London production in May, which Gershwin supervised, proved to be a bigger hit.

Further distractions occurred at the start of summer. Gershwin moved himself, his parents, and his siblings into a five-story townhome at 316 W. 103rd Street. His social life took an up-turn during his courtship of Pauline Heifetz, younger sister of the violinist Jascha. Her social status introduced Gershwin to people like Helen Hayes, Alfred Knopf, Lynn Fontane, and Gloria Swanson. On July 20, Gershwin appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. It was the "Roaring Twenties," and Gershwin helped to define it.

The commotion of the family's move and the constant stream of visitors made work difficult even in the privacy of George's fifth-floor studio on 103rd Street. He took up additional accommodations a few blocks away at the Whitehall Hotel at 100th and Broadway. Here, on July 22, he finally began work on the concerto.

At the invitation of pianist and teacher Ernest Hutcheson, Gershwin spent most of August at Chautauqua, where he could concentrate on composing the concerto. Writing to Pauline Heifetz, Gershwin reported, "You will find me diligently writing notes, playing piano or praying (you've got to pray in Chautauqua) to the God of Melody to please be kind to me and send me some hair-raising 'blues' for my second movement." The original title, *New York Concerto*, eventually became Concerto in F.

Working from a sketch that outlined the succession of movements as "rhythm, melody (Blues), and more rhythm," Gershwin completed his two-piano score by October and the orchestration himself on November 10, 1925. His accomplishment is nothing short of remarkable for a composer with limited orchestration skills. With the ambition of a serious "classical" composer, Gershwin scored the concerto for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, and strings. The percussion section demonstrates Gershwin's sensitivity to color. Percussion instruments used are timpani, bass drum, snare drum, cymbals, woodblock, slap-stick, triangle, gong, bells, and xylophone.

Rumors existed that Gershwin had someone else orchestrate the concerto, but the rumors were never substantiated. The finished score is in Gershwin's handwriting. Unquestionably, he received guidance, probably from his close friend Bill Daly and conductor Walter Damrosch. Both suggested revisions and cuts after a run-through of the concerto before the actual premiere.

A sold-out Carnegie Hall greeted the work on December 3, 1925. After patiently sitting through a relatively mundane Glazunov Symphony, the new concerto sparked the audience in the second half. Audience members loved it. Critics were more reserved in their judgment. Some found it less successful than the *Rhapsody*. One even called it "conventional, trite...a little dull," which seems unusual since no one else had written anything quite like this for the concert hall.

On the other hand, Samuel Chotzinoff, writing for the *World*, summed up the feelings of a younger generation: "Of all those writing music today...[Gershwin] alone actually expresses us." Walter Damrosch recognized the work's importance when he wrote: "Various composers have been walking around jazz like a cat around a plate of hot soup, waiting for it to cool off so that they could enjoy it without burning their tongues." To Damrosch, Gershwin surpassed the "tepid liquid distilled by cooks of the classical school" and successfully brought "Lady Jazz" into the respectability of the concert world, like "Prince Charming taking Cinderella to the Ball."



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In Damrosch's mind, Gershwin surpassed others, notably Europeans like Stravinsky and Milhaud, who had experimented with jazz elements in their music. In America, John Alden Carpenter incorporated some jazz into his scores. It was Gershwin who firmly established the trend to use more jazz. The French critic Emile Vuillermoz recognized this when he reviewed the Paris premiere of the Concerto in 1928. "Gershwin's concerto will greatly help to dissipate the last prejudices attaching to the new technique that has emerged from the novelties of jazz." Within a few years of 1925, works by composers as diverse as Aaron Copland, Paul Hindemith, Ernst Krenek, Maurice Ravel, and Kurt Weill appeared with jazz elements as important stylistic traits.

In an article published by the *Herald Tribune* a few days before the premiere, Gershwin described the concerto's first movement as "a kind of sonata form...but." He went on to say that it "employs a Charleston rhythm. It is quick and pulsating, representing American life's young, enthusiastic spirit." Of the second movement, Gershwin called it "a poetic nocturnal atmosphere which has come to be described as the American blues, but in a purer form than that in which they are usually treated." In the third movement, Gershwin "reverts to the style of the first," in which we have "an orgy of rhythms, starting violently and keeping to the same pace throughout."

The jazz elements are pretty self-evident to the most casual listener. The "blue" notes, enriched harmonies, and syncopated rhythms are reminiscent of the 1920's era. The trumpet solo using a felt-crown mute will sound familiar to anyone who listens to jazz. What is more surprising is the level of sophistication. Gershwin's giant strides from *Rhapsody in Blue* in just over a year reflect his genius and natural ability to assimilate traditional concert forms.

The first movement is somewhat loosely constructed in sonata form and tends to start and stop in the structure. Yet, each section seems to flow from the one before due to the intervallic relationships that help unify the piece. The third movement almost functions as a recapitulation. It returns to the rhythmic drive of the first movement, as Gershwin points out, and it also brings back themes from the second and first movements. The Finale climaxes in a Rachmaninoff-style apotheosis, restating the principal theme from the first movement. A return of the opening timpani motive in the final measures brings closure to the work.

Much as Shostakovich's music personifies a period of Russian history, Gershwin is also a product of his time. Charles Schwartz, a Gershwin biographer, writes, "The Concerto evokes the spirit of the Jazz Age, with its speakeasies, raccoon coats, Stutz roadsters, the Charleston, whiskey flasks, and other razzle-dazzle features of the 1920s." Today, we recognize Gershwin as a genius and an American Original for a handful of classical-style works, namely the *Rhapsody in Blue*, the *Concerto in F*, and his sole opera, *Porgy and Bess*, and for the many songs that have survived the passing of the actual Broadway theater productions.

As for the *Concerto in F*, it gradually gained great popularity. Paul Whiteman re-orchestrated the work for his jazz orchestra and recorded it with pianist Roy Bargy. Gershwin performed the work with the Cincinnati Symphony, Fritz Reiner conducting, in 1927. In Europe, pianist Dimitri Tiomkin, who would eventually gain fame as a Hollywood composer, introduced the concerto in Paris on May 29, 1928. Today, *Concerto in F* is one of the most frequently performed and recorded concertos of the 20th century. As the saying goes, "You've come a long way, baby!"



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Here's a recording on YouTube of Clayton Stephenson performing the Concerto with Marin Alsop and the Forth Worth Symphony at the 2022 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition Finals.

<https://youtu.be/dYrctWr9zv0?si=izLgxFm2y5V0GYX>