

## Concerto in F—George Gershwin

George Gershwin was arguably the most successful and talented of America's composers of popular music. His songs constitute the core of the "American Songbook," whether composed as part of his immensely successful Broadway shows, or as standalone popular tunes. Born of Russian Jewish immigrants, he didn't evince his formidable musical talents until about the age of ten, when a piano was purchased for his older brother and later collaborator, Ira. Much to the latter's relief, George soon commandeered the piano, and the rest is, as they say, history. His audiences rewarded him substantially—he is estimated to have become the wealthiest composer in modern times.

After the rousing success of *Rhapsody in Blue*, Gershwin's financial security was assured; he moved his family to a spacious apartment in a fashionable section of the Upper West Side, and began to not only collect art, but began to paint, himself. He established his place in the smart set of New York society—no party was complete without George at the piano surrounded by his admirers, as well as the usual social butterflies. Oh, to have been a "fly on the wall" for those affairs! He continued his work in musical theatre, but began in earnest serious composition lessons, as well—and with some distinguished composers, including Wallingford Riegger and Henry Cowell. In this regard, it is important to observe that Gershwin had long cultivated an interest in "serious" composition—notwithstanding his gigantic success in popular music. He had begun the study of music theory, orchestration and musical form with a teacher at the age of seventeen, and youthful compositions from that time include a string quartet and a modest opera. Before the *Rhapsody in Blue* première he accompanied a classical singer at a major recital of standard concert vocal repertoire. So, all in all, the old myth of Gershwin as a remarkable genius of popular music, who, after great commercial success, sought to "legitimize" himself by belatedly taking up composition in classical music must be laid to rest. In point of fact, he had always had a deep and committed interest in the serious study of so-called concert music.

The success of *Rhapsody in Blue* led Walter Damrosch, leader of the New York Symphony Orchestra, to commission the Concerto in F, and it was ready by the fall of 1925. The work was given its first performance in December that year, with Gershwin as the soloist. Its success was immediate—notwithstanding the usual bickering among the stodgy critics of the time about how to classify a concerto with "jazzy" elements—and it soon entered into the repertoire of "art music" along with *Rhapsody in Blue*, *An American in Paris*, and *Porgy and Bess*. But it must be said, that compared with the two other instrumental works, the concerto comes far closer to the sophistication and nuance of idealized concert works to which Gershwin evidently aspired. *Rhapsody in Blue* was written in about three weeks; Gershwin labored over the Concerto in F for months.

It has long been the received wisdom of musicians, music commentators, and Gershwin devotees to refer to "jazz" influences and characteristics in the concerto. Not so fast, I would suggest. Yes, it does employ the inflections of the third, fifth, and seventh scale steps basic to the jazz idiom; yes, one hears skillful and natural use of syncopation; and yes, the second movement is based on the familiar twelve-measure framework of the blues. However, most of those who speak so knowingly of jazz influences on this great work evidently have not heard

much “real” jazz from New York prevalent around 1924. Simply put, it was a world apart. Louis Armstrong had left New Orleans only two years previous, making his reputation largely in Chicago. Fletcher Henderson’s band was the toast of black audiences in New York, and “jass” style was a boisterous, vital, marvelous affair of small groups of talented soloists. There’s little of *Potato Head Blues* in Gershwin. If anything, the concerto was an outgrowth of Gershwin’s long experience and immersion in the music of Tin Pan Alley and New York musical theatre, but peppered here and there with some of the technical bits of jazz harmony and melody inflection, bolstered by the “blues” framework and atmosphere of the second movement. Perhaps a more unusual angle would be simply to say, rather than being influenced by jazz, the concerto really pointed to where some important aspects of jazz would end up by the 1950s.

Cast in the familiar three movements of a piano concerto, the work is a major step in sophistication beyond the recent *Rhapsody in Blue*, as well as *An American in Paris*—which was soon to follow. The latter works sail along on the composer’s melodic genius, with one charming tune following another, carried alone by Gershwin’s inimitable rhythmic élan. Structurally, compared with the rigors and nuances of the concert repertoire, the two earlier works are weak—one happy episode after another, until the composer has had his say. Obviously, audiences didn’t care then, and largely don’t now. But Gershwin was not a naïf and the concerto is every bit as structurally sound and urbane as legions of symphonies and concertos for symphony orchestra. Not only that, he utilized such heavy-duty means of symphonic unification as that of thematic transformation and cyclicism—shades of the masters!

The first movement opens with thumping timpani, accompanied by rips from the woodwinds, repeated and interspersed with a variety of familiar Gershwin-like syncopated ideas. The pianist finally enters, playing a rather melancholy theme, which you’ll hear alternating with typically Gershwin energetic “vamping” passages. A virtue of Gershwin’s style is that his foursquare ideas are easy to follow, and return frequently in ever-new guises, climaxed by the “big tune,” as in *Rhapsody in Blue*. The second movement is famous for its extensive, winsome “blues” muted trumpet solo, accompanied by woodwinds—the style and sound will later characterize *Porgy and Bess*. A vigorous section follows, but soon, the lyrical essence of the movement returns, and meditative fantasies build to a powerful climax. We end softly with the solo flute taking over the wistful rôle played by the trumpet at the beginning. The last movement is a scampering, toccata-like affair with the main idea carried by the driving, repeated notes that everyone trades off. Other rhythmic figures typical of the composer alternate, as we cascade along. With approach of the big climax, the full orchestra peals out the plaintive tune that opened the solo in the first movement. Then, the driving repeated notes take us to the end, punctuated, like the very opening of the work, by the hammering timpani.

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