Musical Compositions

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Program Notes - Rhapsody in Blue

By Edward Downes

George Gershwin *was born in Brooklyn, New York, on September 28, 1898, and died in Beverly Hills, California, on July 11, 1937. He composed* Rhapsody in Blue *in early 1924, and it was premiered on February 12 of that year at New York's Aeolian Hall, with Paul Whiteman conducting his orchestra and with the composer as pianist. The work calls for solo piano and orchestra of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two alto saxophones and tenor saxophone, two bassoons, three horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, banjo, and strings.*

Gershwin almost failed to write his most famous work, *Rhapsody in Blue*, because he didn't quite have the courage. It took a lot of persuasion by Paul Whiteman, who had invited Gershwin to compose a serious "jazz concerto," to convince the young man that he was not merely capable of producing such a work but that he could do it in less than a month—in time to rehearse and perform it himself at a concert already announced for February 12, 1924. When Gershwin objected that he didn't even know how to orchestrate, Whiteman told him that all he needed to do was to sketch the orchestral part and Ferde Grofé would do the instrumentation for him.

Gershwin was busy with the final stages of preparing his songs for a musical comedy, *Sweet Little Devil*, which was about to begin its Boston try-out. But he liked the idea of a "jazz concerto," for he had always had an ambition to write serious music that would incorporate jazz elements. Themes for the concerto began to run through his head, and he seems to have put them together for the first time during the train trip to Boston for the premiere of *Sweet Little Devil*. He recounted:

> It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattlety-bang that is often so stimulating to a composer. . . . I frequently hear music in the very heart of noise. And there 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 sort of musical Kaleidoscope of America—of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated 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 recalled that he completed the *Rhapsody in Blue* a week after his return from Boston,

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except for a few of the solo piano figurations, which he simply left out. "I was so pressed for time," he wrote, "that I left them to be improvised at the first concert. I could do that as I was to be the pianist." Ferde Grofé completed the orchestration on February 4, and eight days later the concert took place as planned. Aeolian Hall was jammed with famous performers, including Rachmaninoff and Heifetz, with managers, critics from New York and out of town, and composers from Tin Pan Alley and the world of "serious" music. The *Rhapsody* was an overwhelming success and was just controversial enough to generate a tidal wave of publicity.

—Edward Downes

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Notes on the Program – Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in F major (Gershwin)

GEORGE GERSHWIN

Born September 28, 1898, Brooklyn, New York; died July 11 1937, Beverly Hills, California

George Gershwin flared a meteor across the horizon of American popular *and* serious music. But he did more than dazzle: he beguiled, he touched, he [enamored] with his personality as well as his music.

It is said that after signing the commission to compose his Piano Concerto for Walter Damrosch and the New York Symphony Society, Gershwin went out and bought a book to learn exactly what a concerto was! The picture of the young American genius out to storm Parnassus with a do-it-yourself book of directions in hand has its humorous side. For Gershwin was already a famous composer with a whole string of musical comedies from *La La Lucille* of 1919, to *Lady Be Good* of 1924 and *Oh Kay* of 1925 behind him, as well as the *Rhapsody in Blue.* It was the overwhelming success of this last which suggested to Walter Damrosch the idea of commissioning a concerto.

According to George's brother, Ira Gershwin, a number of the themes had been in George's mind for several months and he had first intended using them in another work. He began to put the Concerto on paper by June, or at the latest, by July, 1925 and completed it on November 10. The first performance was given in Carnegie Hall, by the New York Symphony Society, with Walter Damrosch conducting and Gershwin himself as soloist on December 3, 1925.

Its style was Gershwin through and through. As to its form, Gershwin was quoted as saying that the first movement was in a "sonata-form . . . but."

> Many persons had thought [Gershwin said] that the *Rhapsody* was only a happy accident. Well, I went out, for one thing, to show them that there was plenty more where that had come from. I made up my mind to do a piece of absolute music. The *Rhapsody,* as its title implied, was a blues impression. The Concerto would be unrelated to any program. And that is exactly how I wrote it. I learned a great deal from that experience. Particularly in the handling of instruments in

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combination.

At the time of the première, Gershwin wrote the following short description:

> [I. *Allegro.*] The first movement employs a Charleston rhythm. It is quick and pulsating, representing the young, enthusiastic spirit of American Life. It begins with a rhythmic motif given out by the kettledrums, supported by other percussion instruments, and with a Charleston motif introduced by bassoon, horns, clarinets and violas. The principal theme is announced by the bassoon. Later, a second theme is introduced by the piano.
>
> [II. *Adagio; Andante con moto.*] The second movement has a poetic nocturnal atmosphere which has come to be referred to as the American blues, but in a purer form than that in which they are usually treated.
>
> {III. *Allegro agitato.*] The final movement reverts to the style of the first. It is an orgy of rhythms, starting violently and keeping the same pace throughout.

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Notes on the Programs – Portrait for Orchestra: Mark Twain

By Jerome Kern

JEROME KERN

(Born, New York, 1885; died there 1945)

A native New Yorker, Jerome Kern was educated in the local public schools and first studied music with his mother. After more advanced professional training he went to London where he had theatrical experience and to Germany where he studied composition. Returning to New York in 1907 he became a pianist and salesman for a publishing firm. His fame had already been established in 1905 by his first published song, entitled "How'd You Like to Spoon With Me?" The most famous of his long list of Broadway musical comedy successes was *Show Boat,* first produced in 1927. Kern wrote only one symphonic work, *Portrait for Orchestra: Mark Twain*, which was commissioned by Andre Kostelanetz in 1914 and is dedicated to him. (Aaron Copland's *A Lincoln Portrait* and Virgil Thomson's musical portrait of *Fiorello H. LaGuardia* were also commissioned by Mr. Kostelanetz.)

The Mark Twain portrait tries, according to Kern, "to describe Twain and his career in four episodes.

"In the first movement—Hannibal Days—you just think of Tom Sawyer's home town drowsing on a summer morning, sleeping in the sun by the great river. The majestic, magnificent Mississippi, rolling along, shining in the sun. A steamboat comes in sight up the river; and at the cry 'Steamboat comin'! the town awakes. Minutes later the boat is on its way again, and the town goes back to sleep.

"Episode Two is called Gorgeous Pilot House. It describes the fulfillment of Mark's boyhood dream of becoming a river pilot, a fulfillment shattered by the coming of war in 1861.

"Then . . . Wanderings Westward, Twain's life as a prospector, a miner and journalist in the raw, new West. And finally, Mark in Eruption, the triumphant career of an honored, beloved, great American man of letters."

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Notes on the Program - A Lincoln Portrait

By Robert Bagar and Louis Biancolli

"A Lincoln Portrait" AARON COPLAND

(Born in Brooklyn, N.Y., November 14, 1900; now living in New York)

This composition grew out of a suggestion made by the conductor Andre Kostelanetz shortly after America entered the war. What Mr. Kostelanetz had in mind was the use of music as a medium for conveying the "magnificent spirit of our country." He discussed the idea with three American composers. From that discussion resulted a panel of three portraits—"A Lincoln Portrait" by Aaron Copland, a "Portrait for Orchestra" of Mark Twain by Jerome Kern, and a Portrait of Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia, by Virgil Thomson.

> "The greatness of a nation is expressed through its people and those people who have achieved greatness are the logical subjects for a series of musical portraits," Mr. Kostelanetz explained. "The qualities of courage, dignity, strength, simplicity and humor which are so characteristic of the American people are well represented in these three outstanding Americans."

Mr. Kostelanetz, to whom the score is dedicated, conducted the premiere of "A Lincoln Portrait" at a Pension Fund Concert of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra in Cincinnati on May 14, 1942. The work was first performed in Boston by the Boston Symphony on March 26, 1943, and in New York by the same orchestra the following April 1. Since then "A Lincoln Portrait" has been played by most of the major American orchestras. There have been fifty performances of this work to date, including performances in London, Zurich, and Buenos Aires. Mr. Copland was informed that the work, rendered with a Spanish translation of Lincoln's fervid utterances, caused a "political demonstration" at its Buenos Aires premiere.

For the Boston premiere Mr. Copland informed the annotator John N. Burk that his first impulse had been to do a portrait of Walt Whitman, "the patron-poet of all American composers." Mr. Kostelanetz, however, convinced him a political figure of world stature would be a wiser choice. "From that moment," Mr. Copland wrote, "the choice of Lincoln as my subject seemed inevitable.

"In discussing my choice with Virgil Thomson, he amiably pointed out that no composer

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could possible [sic] hope to match in musical terms the stature of so eminent a figure as that of Lincoln. Of course, he was quite right. But secretly I was hoping to avoid the difficulty by doing a portrait in which the sitter himself might speak. With the voice of Lincoln to help me I was ready to risk the impossible.

"The letters and speeches of Lincoln supplied the text. It was comparatively a simple matter to choose a few excerpts that seemed particularly apposite to our own situation today. I avoided the temptation to use only well-known passages, permitting myself the luxury of quoting only once from a world-famous speech. The order and arrangement of the selections are my own.

"The first sketches were made in February and the portrait finished on April 16th. The orchestration was completed a few weeks later. I worked with musical materials of my own, with the exception of two songs of the period: the famous 'Camptown Races' and a ballad that was first published in 1840 under the title 'The Pesky Sarpent' but is better known today as 'Springfield Mountain.' In neither case is the treatment a literal one. The tunes are used freely, in the manner of my use of cowboy songs in 'Billy the Kid.'

"The composition is roughly divided into three main sections. In the opening section I wanted to suggest something of the mysterious sense of fatality that surrounds Lincoln's personality. Also, near the end of that section, something of his gentleness and simplicity of spirit. The quick middle section briefly sketches in the background of the times he lived. This merges into the concluding section where my sole purpose was to draw a simple but impressive frame about the words of Lincoln himself."

{The Text}

"*Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history.*"

That is what he said,

That is what Abraham Lincoln said:

"*Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance or insignificance can spare one or another of us.*

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The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation. We —even we here—hold the power and bear the responsibility."

He was born in Kentucky, raised in Indiana, and lived in Illinois.

And this is what he said:

"*The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country."*

When standing erect he was six feet four inches tall.

And this is what he said:

He said:

"*It is the eternal struggle between two principles—right and wrong throughout the world . . . It is the same spirit that says, 'You toil and work and earn bread and I'll eat it.' No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle."*

Lincoln was a quiet man.

Abe Lincoln was a quiet and melancholy man.

But when he spoke of democracy,

This is what he said:

He said:

"As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy."

Abraham Lincoln, sixteenth President of these United States, is everlasting in the memory of his countrymen,

For on the battleground at Gettysburg, this is what he said:

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This is what Abe Lincoln said:

"... that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion: that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under god, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

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Concert Notes – George Gershwin

George Gershwin was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1899 [*sic*]. He was educated in the public and high schools of New York City.

During his lifetime, Gershwin achieved great success in every field of music which he essayed. He won much acclaim playing his own compositions with the leading symphony orchestras of the United States. Gershwin captured and expressed in music the color and rhythm of American life, the spirit of the American people and even the mental slant of this country.

The work of Gershwin is as unmistakably stamped American as a Currier & Ives print or a story by O. Henry. With his *Rhapsody in Blue* in 1924, he dispelled prejudice against the use of jazz in the more serious type of music. He paved the way for a whole new group of American composers, some of whom have attained notable success.

Gershwin's last and perhaps greatest work was *Porgy and Bess*, a folk opera adapted from the play *Porgy* by DuBose Heyward. The music of this production is broad, dramatic, and powerfully conceived. *Porgy and Bess* contains music that may truly be called great. It may serve as a fitting [monument] for a great creative musical genius. When we hear the music of *Porgy and Bess*, one can only guess to what heights Gershwin would have risen if his career had not been cut short in 1937.

This concert tonight is an attempt by Victory Lodge of B'nai B'rith to perpetuate the name of George Gershwin in a manner which we think most fitting. It was Gershwin who inspired young America to compose[;] therefore, this concert features a composition by a young composer, Peter Mennin, who is the winner of the 1945 B'nai B'rith Victory Lodge American Composers' Contest and will receive the $1000 first prize to help him achieve the success which we hope will be his in the days.

Victory Lodge has chosen to honor the name of Gershwin not only because he was a great composer, but because he was a great son of the Jewish people. Some of the pathos, grandeur and wide horizon which are manifest in his music can be attributed to his sense of fellowship with his people. He was proud of his religious heritage and we are proud to claim him as our own. The synthesis between his love for his country and love for his faith was expressed in the music he wrote.

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We plan to make this concert an annual event to honor Gershwin's name, and we hope that it will be the beginning of many successful musical careers for talented American composers irrespective of race, color or creed.

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Notes on the Program – "Canons for Dorothy Thompson" and the "Mayor LaGuardia Waltzes"

By Virgil Thomson

(Born in Kansas City, November 25, 1896; [lived] in New York)

{Thursday, July 23[, 1942]}

Mr. Thomson has written the following explanation of these two compositions:

"The delineation of character by means of music is an ancient preoccupation of composers. Forqueray the Elder and the great Francois Couperin practiced it assiduously. Anton Rubinstein made a set of twelve likenesses under the general title *Kammenoi Ostrow,* the well-known Prelude being a picture of an island where the persons depicted were gathered together. Sir Edward Elgar's *Enigma* Variations are also likenesses of friends.

"I first started making musical portraits in 1928. The gallery of them now includes over a hundred. They are scored for various instruments and combinations of instruments; for piano, for violin, for piano and violin, for string quartet, for organ, for quartet of clarinets, for large chamber groups and for full orchestra. Excepting for the first eight, which are portraits of close friends, I have always made them from life. The subject poses for me as he would for a painter, and I write the music in front of him, usually in one sitting.

"Miss Thompson's portrait was made in her library one morning while she was reading and meditating. Mayor LaGuardia's was done in his office at the City Hall while he was receiving callers and otherwise administering the business of New York City. They were orchestrated with very little altering of the original sketches.

"The [m]usical style of my portraits varies with the character of the sitters. Sometimes it is dissonant, sometimes harmonious, sometimes straight-forwardly tuneful, sometimes thematic and contrapuntal. In all of them I have tried to catch the true likeness that others may recognize.

"The *Canons for Dorothy Thompson* is scored for two flutes (1 doubling piccolo), oboe, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, snare drum, triangle, cymbal, bass drum and strings.

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"The *Mayor LaGuardia Waltzes* is scored for 2 flutes (both doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, tympani, snare (side) drum, field drum, bells, triangle, cymbals, bass drum and strings.["]

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