

Program 1 Notes

by Jon Kochavi

True music must repeat the thought and inspirations of the people and the time. My people are Americans and my time is today.—George Gershwin

Born in Brooklyn to non-musical Russian immigrants, Gershwin could hardly have imagined early in his life that he would end up feeling equally at home at so many different venues across the bridge: Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and the great concert halls around the city. His parents originally believed that his brother Ira would be the musical one in the family, but after acquiring a piano for Ira, George took to it immediately and it soon became his focus. While he was still quite young, George Gershwin became a Tin Pan Alley “song-plugger”; coming in contact with thousands of songs, he soon began composing his own. His endless gift for melody served him throughout his career. After achieving great success on Broadway, Gershwin began setting his sights on the concert hall, fusing classical and jazz idioms in a wholly original fashion. Towards the end of his life, he pushed into the genre of opera with his masterpiece *Porgy and Bess*, and he also made an impact in Hollywood with a number of film scores. Though his life was cut short by illness, Gershwin remains among the most beloved of American composers. Tonight, we hear three of his orchestral works spanning the final dozen years of his life. 🎹

Cuban Overture (1932)

In late 1931, Gershwin began studying with composer and theorist Joseph Schillinger, honing skills that he would put to stunning effect during the remaining five years of his life. In February 1932, Gershwin went to Havana on vacation. The music there enthralled him, and he acquired a number of Cuban percussion instruments on the trip. Upon his return, Gershwin combined the techniques he was perfecting with Schillinger



George Gershwin
(1898 – 1937)

and the inspiration from Cuba to compose what was first called *Rhumba* and later became known as the *Cuban Overture*. He described the work as a “symphonic overture which embodies the essence of Cuban dance.” The featured Cuban percussion instruments—sticks, bongo, gourd, and maracas—are often placed in the front of the orchestra, making the piece especially festive.

Gershwin handles the large orchestra with a surprisingly light touch. The outer sections of the piece make prominent use of the Cuban percussion instruments, projecting lively rumba rhythms of 3+3+2 and 2+3+3 simultaneously. The revelry is halted briefly by a plaintive melody in the clarinet and then in the oboe. The texture thickens and sound becomes richer as the strings join in, and a gradual crescendo leads back into the care-free dance. 🎹

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Catfish Row (1935-36)

Catfish Row
Porgy Sings
Fugue
Hurricane
Good Mornin’ Sistuh!

Porgy and Bess was Gershwin’s crowning achievement. Boldly adapting DuBose Heyward’s novel and play *Porgy*, Gershwin produced what he called an American folk opera depicting a slice of life from Catfish Row, a down-and-out African American community in Charleston, South Carolina (based on the actual Cabbage Row in the same town). While undoubtedly an opera (premiering as such at Carnegie Hall in 1935), Gershwin pared down the work for a Broadway run in 1935-36, where it saw over 100 performances. Gershwin’s work with Schillinger prepared him well for adapting parts of *Porgy and Bess* for the concert hall as well, and *Catfish Row* is a symphonic suite he prepared based on his opera. After the initial performances of the suite in 1936, the work lay forgotten until being found and revived in 1958.

The opening section (“Catfish Row”) features the dramatic opening of the opera before moving on to the Jazzbo Brown Piano Blues (which Gershwin had removed from the Broadway production) and a luscious rendition of “Summertime” for solo violin. We hear two of *Porgy*’s famous songs in the “Porgy Sings” section: “I Got Plenty of Nuttin’,” with a rousing banjo part, and “Bess, You Is My Woman Now”. The “Fugue” section is a dissonant and dark portrayal of the struggle and death of the evil Crown. “Hurricane” opens with church bells peeling and a peaceful English horn melody that gives way to the depiction of a massive storm from Act II. The final section features more familiar tunes including “Good Mornin’ Sistuh” and “Oh Lawd, I’m On My Way”. 🎹

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Rhapsody in Blue (1924)

Gershwin attained widespread popularity early in his career with the Tin Pan Alley genre, but he always aspired to write “serious” music. Therefore, when Paul Whiteman approached him with the request to compose a new work, perhaps a “jazz concerto” for his concert hall program entitled “An Experiment in Modern Music,” Gershwin was intrigued by the idea. Gershwin was busy with a number of other projects at the time, and put the suggestion on the back burner. The composer was a bit shocked in early January 1924 when he read a newspaper announcement for the concert stating that Gershwin was at work on a new composition that would be featured at the performance in a month. Gershwin contacted Whiteman insisting that there was not enough time for him to complete the work, especially with his limited experience in orchestration. Whiteman offered the services of his own orchestrator Ferde Grofé and Gershwin agreed to give it a try.

Inspiration hit during a train ride from Boston back to New York. Gershwin later explained how the piece came to him:

It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattlety-bang that is often so stimulating to a composer . . . And there I suddenly heard—and even saw on paper—the complete construction of the Rhapsody, from beginning to end . . . 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.

Gershwin rushed through the sketch for Grofé, leaving gaps in the solo piano part that he would improvise at the premiere. On February 12, the concert went off without a hitch, launching Gershwin's concert hall career.

The musical content of the piece is so familiar today that it hardly needs comment. The inspired clarinet bending glissando that opens the piece was the inspired choice of Whiteman's clarinetist Ross Gorman, and it stuck. The bluesy melodies and jazz rhythms are downright infectious, but we can also hear the 25 year-old Gershwin beginning to find ways of interweaving these elements with the conceptions of thematic development and formal construction characteristic of a classical score. 🎹

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***An American in Paris* (1928)**

Rhapsody in Blue was a such a tremendous success that it quickly led to a New York

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Symphony commission, for which Gershwin wrote his *Concerto in F* in 1925. These two pieces paved the way for his *An American in Paris*, written (and self-orchestrated) in 1928 during a visit to the French city with which he had fallen in love on his first visit in 1923. Gershwin describes the work as follows:

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. The opening gay section is followed by a rich blues with a strong rhythmic undercurrent. Our American friend, perhaps after strolling to a café and having a few drinks, has suddenly succumbed to a spasm of homesickness. The harmony here is both more intense and simple than in the preceding pages. The 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 downed 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.

The piece was premiered in December 1928 at Carnegie Hall to an exceptionally enthusiastic audience. 🎹

A native of Japan, Keisuke began his piano studies at age 10. At 18, he came to the U.S. and studied both piano and composition at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music where he earned his Bachelor of Music in Composition and his Masters in chamber music. He won the Conservatory's Concerto Competition and performed Prokofiev Piano Concerto No. 3 with the Conservatory Orchestra conducted by Alasdair Neale.

In 2007, he participated in a professional training workshop with Emanuel Ax and then performed in Carnegie Hall. He also became principal pianist for conductor George Daugherty's award-winning "Bugs Bunny on Broadway," touring and performing with orchestras of major U.S. cities. With Conductor Daugherty, Keisuke also participated in "Animals and the Arts," a concert and art show benefiting the San Francisco pet shelter and animal hospital Pets Unlimited.

The concert featured Saint-Saëns' classic "Carnival of the Animals, George Gershwin's "Walking the Dog," the famed "Cat Duet" by Rossini and "La Rondine" ("The Swallow") by Puccini.



Keisuke Nakagoshi,
piano

In His Words . . .

“Rhapsody in Blue” is a really well-known piece of music. Everybody—even people who don't listen to classical music—has heard parts of it somewhere. I think Gershwin was a melodic genius. Once I hear his melody, it's very hard to get it out of my head. Performing a piece that is so familiar to the audience is often challenging, but “Rhapsody in Blue” is different because, with the jazz influence, many pianists play this piece in different ways. I'm really into it. It's different from some typical classical music with strict rules. It's very American. I'm not American myself; I grew up in Japan. American sound is pop and jazz. That's very attractive. It's like going to New York for the first time. You feel excited and fascinated with all the stuff in New York. It has that feeling. It's exciting. It's very urban. I'm looking forward to performing it.

The complete biography of Keisuke Nakagoshi on our website: www.marinsymphony.org 🎹

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