

Piano Concerto in F **GEORGE GERSHWIN**

George Gershwin (Jacob Gershwin) was born in Brooklyn NY in 1898 to Russian Jewish immigrant parents, the second eldest of four children. Luckily for the music world, his parents bought a piano for the eldest child, Ira, to play in 1910 and Gershwin, who had previously been fooling around on the piano of a friend, soon took sole possession. After astounding his parents with his ability to play popular songs by ear, George was given private lessons with Charles Hambitzer, a teacher who, while emphasizing the classics and accompanying him to formal concerts, did nothing to impede his pupil's interest in popular rags, jazz, and Tin Pan Alley songs. Hambitzer refused fees for his services. George was a fine athlete and rough-and-tumble participant in neighborhood activities—some speculate that the broadness of his nose was a remnant of boyhood pugilistic encounters—but he was a poor student. After graduating from public school, attempts to go into accounting or the fur business went nowhere, and Gershwin convinced his mother to let him take a job as a “song plugger” at a publishing house at the age of 15. Gershwin was not only the youngest at his job, but soon the best in terms of pianistic prowess.

A song plugger essentially was a sheet-music salesman who hawked the publisher's offerings by playing them to potential purchasers/performers who visited his cubical. This made for almost non-stop piano playing, and Gershwin was expert in gussying up the offerings with rhythms and harmonizations. He had to be able to modulate on a dime since many of the singers who were trying out the songs were restricted in their comfortable singing ranges. Another way, remember no radio, to get songs out to the public was via piano rolls, which were recordings that could reproduce the songs on player pianos. Gershwin made about 100 of these. All the while he composed without much encouragement.

Then, as now, the popular music world was a high-stakes, dog-eat-dog world, but Gershwin was full of talent, self-confidence and competitiveness as well as possessing an unmatched charisma and sociability. Gershwin hit the big time at age 19 with his song, “Swanee” which became a signature work of Al Jolson. It sold over a million copies of the sheet music, and Jolson sold 2,250,000 phonograph records of it. Gershwin was rich and soon composing for Broadway shows in a rapid succession that reminds the classical music historian of the production of oratorios by Handel in the 18th century or Italian operas by Rossini and Donizetti in the early 19th. Perhaps because of the early influence of Hambitzer, Gershwin also wanted to impress the classical music world, too.

As is well known, Gershwin shocked and awed the “upper crust” with his *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924) for piano and jazz orchestra which had a Swanee-like success. It was a veritable cash machine for the composer through out his life. But while Gershwin didn't orchestrate the *Rhapsody*, he was determined to orchestrate the “New York Concerto” that was commissioned by the New York Symphony Orchestra for its 1925-26 season. Gershwin quickly composed the work over a matter of months in the summer of 1925 in a version for two pianos and even had a try-out of the first two movements in that arrangement.

Broadway composer, Vernon Duke, famous for “April in Paris” (unlike Gershwin, he kept his “classical” persona separate, writing concertos, etc. as Vladimir Dukelsky) was a confidant of Gershwin’s and describes his usual composing procedures:

When not playing ping-pong on the ground floor with brothers Ira or Arthur, George could be found at his piano playing tirelessly for hours, never practicing in the Czerny sense, just racing through new tunes, adding new tricks, harmonies, “first and second endings” and changing keys after each chorus. He was a born *improvisatore* yet never changed tempo, nor played rubato, the relentless 4/4 beat carrying him along—it was physically difficult for him to stop.

Gershwin, always aware of his lack of conservatory training in various aspects of musical composition, sought lessons from many prominent composers, usually while meeting them at social events. These included Ravel in Paris as well as Stravinsky and Schoenberg who were his fellow California residents much later in Gershwin’s life. Nevertheless, these contacts did not result in any lessons. Ravel reportedly said, “Why compose second-rate Ravel when you’re already writing first-rate Gershwin?” (Another version of this has Schoenberg in the Ravel role.) A second reason for deferral also made the rounds. As Norman Lebrecht tells this tale:

Soon, the story circulated that Ravel had asked Gershwin, “How much money do you earn a year from your compositions?” “Around \$100, 000,” replied Gershwin. “In that case,” said Ravel, “you give me lessons.” A similar tale was told about Gershwin and Stravinsky. “A nice story,” said Stravinsky, “but I heard it about myself from Ravel a year before I met Gershwin.”

The origin of these vignettes is almost certainly the Gershwins, themselves, who never lacked wit or self-promotional skills.

Due to, perhaps, the Broadway mentality of tuning things up before the big premiere, Gershwin hired an orchestra to try out the piece, now simply called *Concerto in F*. He stated in 1928 that playing and hearing the *Concerto* in this manner in his own orchestration was his “greatest musical thrill.” There were considerable cuts in all three movements and some reassignment of music between the ensemble and the solo piano made on the basis of this preliminary performance.

The premiere was in December of 1925 at Carnegie Hall with the composer at the piano and Walter Damrosch conducting. It was a great success with the public, but the critics were not fully won over. The *Concerto* did not ricochet around the world immediately the way the *Rhapsody in Blue* did, but after a slow start became a great popular favorite world wide. With the corrections provided by biographer Charles Schwartz, here are Gershwin’s original notes on the piece:

The first movement employs the 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

...horns, clarinet[s]...[and] violas [plus cellos and trombones]. The principal theme is announced by the bassoon. Later, a second theme is introduced by the piano.

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.

The final movement reverts to the style of the first. It is an orgy of rhythms, starting violently and keeping to the same pace throughout.

One further note. Gershwin asks that the trumpeter for the prominent second-movement solo to use “felt” to act as a mute. However, it seems that trumpeters almost universally have hit upon the velvet cover of a bottle of Crown Royal Canadian whisky as the ideal mute. It’s not certain if this works better if the velvet has been removed from a recently consumed bottle, but assuming the brass section is willing to share, this may contribute to the happy demeanor of the performers always noted in this piece.

- *IPO Board Member Charles Amenta M.D.*