

## FOREWORD

Marvin Hamlisch

Even with both my beloved parents deceased, I can still hear the voice of my father—looking down at me from some celestial plane, with the music of Mozart in the background—saying, “What’s the matter, Marvin? By the time Gershwin was your age, he was gone. And, he’d written a concerto.”

Gershwin died at the age of thirty-eight. But by then, he had a long list of hit songs, hit shows, Hollywood pictures, a concerto, a rhapsody, and the first great American opera. He was, it seems, in a very big hurry.

Did he think that he might die young, and therefore he set about to compose all of his music as fast as possible?

No, I think Gershwin was in a hurry because everyone was in a hurry. New, syncopated rhythms, “fascinating rhythms,” seemed to beckon him. Their pulse was his pulse.

The stock market may have died in the late 1920s, but the Jazz Age had not. Gershwin continued to fuse its optimistic point of view, its pulse, its charm, with his gift for melodies, some haunting, some humorous, some serious.

As a composer myself, I can just imagine the many musical sides of Gershwin doing battle. How could he reconcile his serious musical abilities with popular tastes? How could he sit down and write an opera if his songs were being performed at the *Scandals*? The answer was remarkably simple: he’d do it all!

And that’s probably why he was in such a rush.

Gershwin’s immigrant parents had great respect for European music and traditions. Brought up in this environment, Gershwin had a love for “serious” music that was intense, and his musical knowledge was extensive. He loved all kinds of music, and did not forsake his popular fare when creating his immortal works. Indeed, Gershwin was writing *Rhapsody in Blue* in the same month

his show *Sweet Little Devil* opened in New York; *An American in Paris* was completed in the same year that “The Man I Love” achieved its wide popularity.

I believe that Gershwin the songwriter fully realized his ambition of fusing his popular style with the classical compositional style. In other words, he took the European tradition bequeathed to all composers and poured his American, jazzy soul into it. This unique fusion is simply called: Gershwin.

My piano teacher once told me that talent is like a well-water pump. The more you use it, the colder



*Sweet Little Devil*, 1924, sheet music.

and fresher the water will be as it surfaces.

Gershwin went to the well every day. Every hour. Every minute. All he ever seemed to want to do was be at a piano.

Groucho Marx once threw an "A" party for the who's who of Hollywood. Everyone was invited. *Except* George Gershwin. The night before the party, George phoned Groucho.

"Groucho," George began, "you probably made a mistake. I was visiting Ira today, and he asked me if I was going to your party. I told him I hadn't received the invitation. So, what gives?"

Groucho, slowly, began his explanation. "Look, George, I didn't invite you."

George became furious. "Why not?" he yelled.

"Well, let's face it. Every time anyone invites you to a party, you come in, drop your coat, run to the piano, and play for four hours. Well, I'm not going to do that. I'm not gonna be one of those people who takes advantage of you. As far as I'm concerned, it's better if I just don't invite you."

The next day, Groucho's party began at 8:00 p.m. George crashed the party at 8:15, and played till around 1:00 a.m. This was exactly what Groucho had wanted all along.

Years ago, I was a guest on a television show. The host thought it would be nice to invite my mother on the show. Since she had never been on TV, he decided to ask her an easy question.

"So, Mrs. Hamlich, tell me, who's your favorite composer?"

Without any hesitation, my mother looked at me, smiled, turned to the host, and said, "George Gershwin."

From me, she gets no argument.

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*A Damsel in Distress, 1937,  
movie theater ad.*

# GERSHWIN AND MUSICAL SNOBBERY

*The Outlook*, February 2, 1927

CHARLES L. BUCHANAN

A vote of thanks should be tendered Mr. Walter Damrosch and the Symphony Society for their courage in having recently given us another chance to hear George Gershwin's piano concerto. This composition, written for the Symphony Society, and performed for the first time by Mr. Damrosch last season, shows an increasingly clear title to be ranked the one composition of indubitable vitality, and authentic progressiveness, that this country has produced.

Hearing this work the other day made me wish to abase myself and retract the nonsense I wrote about it last season. At that time it had seemed to me self-conscious, tongue-tied, partially sterile; although even at a first hearing, the unprecedented, queer beauty of the second movement made itself felt unmistakably. I am now inclined to assert that this work can hold its own with the finest examples of this form of composition that we have. Given a fair trial (which is precisely what one fears it will not be given), its second and third movements will go miles ahead of such outstanding and popular works as the Tchaikovsky B-flat Minor Concerto or the Rachmaninoff C Minor Concerto. The persistent hammer and thud of the last movement, with its fascinating thematic material, and the grotesque, devious beauty of the second movement make for a point of view and a kind of sound for which there is no exact parallel.

There is grave reason for assuming, however, that this work will fail to obtain the high measure of praise and encouragement it deserves. Mr. Gershwin, as most people know, is a highly successful writer of "popular" music. He is implicated in that monstrous thing, jazz. He has supplied tunes for those adroit and entertaining shows *Lady, Be Good!*, *Tip-Toes*, *Oh, Kay!* As a result, he is already "placed," "labeled," "tagged," so to speak. In other words, the chances are that if Mr. Gershwin gave this country a superlatively fine piece of music (and, for my part, I think he has

already done so in this concerto), he would nevertheless remain unfavorably associated in the average consciousness with the dubious activities of the White Light district.

It is for the purpose of directing attention to the absurd fallaciousness of this very general attitude of mind that this article is written. There is a comfortable and convenient notion, old as the hills, that, in the last analysis, intrinsic merit will obtain recognition. "Water finds its level" and "You can't keep a good man down" are popular crystallizations of this easygoing philosophy. This erroneous assumption is a part of that superficial and slovenly sort of optimism which is more often than not a smokescreen thrown out to cloak inertia and indifference. Preeminence is possibly eight times out of ten a question of circumstance, precedent, propinquity. The work of art, for instance, is usually accepted insofar as it approximates a standard upon which consensus of respectable opinion has set its seal of approval. If it deviates from this standard, it is usually viewed with suspicion. Professional critical opinion, even, does not venture far from the rules of artistic deportment sanctioned by the "best people." Your average critic knows that it is safer to go with the tide of conventional opinion than it is to take up the cudgels for anything outside the beaten path of standpattism.

We see this tendency already at work in the case of Gershwin. Looking over the next morning's reviews of his performance, we note an evasiveness on the part of our critics. Mr. Lawrence Gilman took the curiously negative attitude of dismissing the affair with a more or less perfunctory gesture, delicately and tactfully witty, and then proceeded to a lengthy discussion of a Sibelius tone poem which followed, and which appealed to him as disappointingly boring and negligible. Mr. Olin Downes went a little farther, and conceded that we may have "underestimated" the work; but he, too, perpetrated the absurd inconsistency of giving

Gershwin one paragraph to the three paragraphs given the Sibelius tone poem. Mr. Henderson refused to commit himself, and Mr. Peyser shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. Many of the members of the orchestra were frankly antagonistic to the composition, even to the point of reviling it.

Why, one asks, must this perverse attitude of resistance to the new persist in human nature? For years we have been striving to encourage, develop, produce an American music. When someone gives us a music which may or may not be American (whatever that is or ought to be), but which is beyond the shadow of a doubt a new, vital, propulsive kind of sound, musical snobbery is up in arms against it, and the old deadly steamroller of classical routine goes over the achievement and extinguishes it. In one breath our intelligentsia are deploring the fact that our art is a mere sterile replica of European standards, and then when we produce something that is individually spicy and racy and partially indigenous, the same intelligentsia throw up their hands in holy horror because the affair does not approximate European standards. "This is all right insofar as it goes," they say, "but keep it in its proper environment. Segregate jazz; it belongs to the cabaret; how dare it knock at the doors of the sacred temples of sound!"

It is time someone had the courage to call emphatic attention to the counterfeit quality of this attitude. It is not genuine. It is bogus. It is the attitude of artistic social climbers, not sure of themselves. The blueblood, to-the-manner-born musical aristocrat should be able to enjoy jazz in its proper proportion as he enjoys the third act of *Tristan* in its proper proportion. Unfortunately, most persons are incapable of independent reactions. They cannot estimate a thing for whatever degree of particular intrinsic merit the thing may possess. They are dependent on signposts and preconceived ideas. Their opinions are formed

through a sort of social register, so to speak, of the artistic proprieties. When Chabrier's *España* is played at Carnegie Hall, it is "good" music. If the tunes upon which it is based were heard at the Biltmore, they would be "popular" music. When Stravinsky adroitly exploits a number of ordinary Russian tunes in his *Petrushka*, the affair is hailed as an outstanding event in the history of music. When Gershwin is alleged to have done the same thing in his piano concerto, something is said about Tin Pan Alley, and the matter is dismissed as of negligible importance.

As a matter of fact, the Gershwin Concerto [in F] has no more to do with jazz than the Grieg Concerto has to do with Norwegian folk music. It is not to be viewed condescendingly, as an interesting experiment or a freak exhibition; it is an assured accomplishment; and, as Mr. Walter Damrosch pointed out in conversation with the present writer, it can hold its own with universal competition. Emphasis should be laid upon this point. Let us forget jazz and Tin Pan Alley (wherever

precisely that is), and the fact that Mr. Gershwin wrote *Oh, Kay!*, and judge this composition as we would judge a composition of Honegger's or Stravinsky's or someone else's. It may then become clear that Gershwin has given us one of the few gestures of vivid, enticing sound that music has had to offer since Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps*.

Plain speaking of this sort may be looked upon as evidence of a critical instability on the part of the writer. But someone has got to come out in the open, wholeheartedly and fearlessly, if music in this country is to be saved from the deadening influences of class distinction, of conventionality, of academic snobbery and hair-splittings. It is a fallacy to believe that a genuine musical beauty will survive on its merits alone. Grieg, one of the most penetratingly beautiful harmonists of all time, is seldom, if ever, played by the professional musician. Grainger, one of the most fervent, potential, natural musical talents we have today, is still teth-



*A caricature of Gershwin by William Auerbach-Levy appeared with the composer's article in the July 1926 Singing magazine.*

ered to his reputation as the composer of "Country Gardens" or "Irish Tune." Shall we allow this inequitable kind of fate to impede Gershwin?

Unfortunately, there is every reason to predict that Gershwin will not receive sufficient encouragement to "carry on," as we say. We shall probably continue our fulsome habit of overlooking a genius in the hand while we are searching for problematic geniuses in the bush. It is a way we have. Only a short time ago I read in one of our prominent magazines an article consisting of elaborate surmises as to the inception and growth of some problematic future American music; and a little later on Mr. Henderson quoted the article with eulogistic comment. What the writer of the article was driving at is more than I know; for I could find nothing but a series of highly theoretical and philosophic speculations, without a single concrete and specific reference or recommendation. I move that we let the future take care of itself and give our attention to the present. Then we may come to appreciate the vivid aptness of a cinema score such as that supplied *The Big Parade*, for example, or the kind of raw, harsh beauty that we hear in Gershwin at his top-notch.

In conclusion, it is hardly necessary to point out that no one in his sober senses suggests that the Gershwin Concerto should be placed on a par with Bach or Brahms or Beethoven. The claim is made, however, that if you were to hear Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* or this Concerto with an absolutely unprejudiced pair of ears, you would concede that this music is rattling good fun, to begin with, and fascinating, at times exquisite music, to end with. It is not going too far to say that, even including the Rachmaninoffian melody in the strings, there is nothing in all music quite like the second movement of this Concerto. Not beautiful in the classic or romantic sense, it yet possesses a peculiarly hoarse, tart, stunted charm that touches at least the exclusive fingertips of an alien loveliness. One may not soon forget its far-off stuttering trumpet, and the spruce, jaunty piano passage that follows.

Here is a piece of music generated, if you will, by jazz, but valuable intrinsically as a thing in itself. Its virtues are threefold: it has charm, it is techni-

cally expert, and it has used jazz merely as a springboard from which to project itself into the mystical areas of a distinct individuality. It is not essentially American in the sense that Thanksgiving Day or [the] Fourth of July are essentially American. It is not American in the sense that a song of Stephen Foster's is American. It is music of the pavement rather than of the soil. . . . But it is, in company with the collective popular music of our time, the one unmistakably live impulse in contemporary music. And there is grave reason to believe that such an impulse, from whatever source it comes, is indispensable to the present well-being of music.

Scan the entire musical horizon today, and no single vital, dominating figure is in sight. Ravel, in France, appears to have touched the summit of his talent in his exquisite and entrancing, if somewhat sophisticated *La Valse*. Stravinsky has done nothing of significance since his memorable *Sacre du Printemps*, which work, incidentally, appears more and more to have been the outcome of a fortuitous experimentation rather than the inevitable expression of a consistently unfolding genius. I cannot agree with those persons who look hopefully towards Bloch; his *Israel* Symphony seemed to me to be merely in line with music's tiresome modern tendency in the direction of extreme and illegitimate inarticulateness.

Music, I believe, is going to seed. Preoccupation with tonal and harmonic complexity has rendered it an alien and artificial thing. It must be taken out of the sacrosanct confines and superrefinements of philosophic theory, of technical hair-splittings, and given an airing. It is in need of revitalization. Never a believer in the national music idea to the fallacious extent to which some persons carry it, I yet suggest the advisability of a blood transfusion, so to speak, and recommend for this purpose a recognition of the merits and importance of so-called popular music. In the case of Gershwin, I do not know whether he has the cultural inheritance, the artistic morale, to grow largely and finely. But by all means let us give him his chance. It is to be hoped that progressive musicians like Mr. Stokowski, Mr. Sakoloff, Mr. Reiner, and so on will interest themselves in this work.