



GEORGE GERSHWIN (1898-1937)

Rhapsody in Blue • Concerto in F
Variations on 'I Got Rhythm'

Mark Bebbington *piano*

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Leon Botstein *conductor*

SOMMCD 260-2

CD1

Concerto in F (37:29)

1 I Allegro 14:47

2 II Adagio - Andante con moto 15:21

3 III Allegro agitato 7:21

4 **Rhapsody in Blue** 19:25

5 **Variations on 'I Got Rhythm'** 10:34

CD1 total duration: 67:47

CD2

Eight Preludes for Solo Piano

1 No 1 in E flat major: 'Nolette in fourths' (c.1919) 2:50

2 No 2 in G major: 'Rubato' (1923) 1:15

3 No 3 in G minor: 'Fragment' (1925) 0:26

4 No 4 in F minor: 'Melody' (1925-26) 2:58

5 No 5 - No 1 of Three Preludes (1927) - Allegro ben ritmato e deciso 1:42

6 No 6 - No 2 of Three Preludes (1927): 'Blue Lullaby' - Andante con moto 3:57

7 No 7 - No 3 of Three Preludes (1927): 'Spanish Prelude' - Agitato 1:23

8 No 8 - in A flat major: 'Sleepless Night' (reconstructed by Kay Swift, 1946) 2:56

CD2 total duration: 17:30

Recorded at St John's, Smith Square, London on 2nd & 3rd October 2015

Recording Producer: Siva Oke

Recording Engineers: Ben Connellan (CD1), Paul Arden-Taylor (CD2)

Front Cover: *New York City, Midtown Manhattan with Chrysler Building at Night*
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Design & Layout: Andrew Giles

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GERSHWIN

Rhapsody in Blue

Concerto in F

Variations on 'I Got Rhythm'

PLUS BONUS CD:

Eight Preludes for Solo Piano

first integral recording

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GERSHWIN

Rhapsody in Blue
Concerto in F
Variations on 'I Got Rhythm'
Eight Preludes for Solo Piano

The Great War of 1914-18 had seen the USA become a world power for the first time, flexing its new-found political muscle at the negotiations leading to the Versailles Treaty in 1920. The immediate post-war advent of radio, motion pictures, international recordings and the dawn of air travel, led to mass-communication becoming a reality. The rise of Communism and the collapse of Empires – such new forces, alongside other social changes -- led to reappraisals of almost every facet of life, including perceptions of what music could or should be.

In the United States, younger composers provided this new music, and – owing to those newer mass-communications – their music travelled throughout the western world more quickly than it could have done any time before. In 1923, the 24-year-old New York-born George Gershwin visited Europe for the first time, already an established composer of popular music in America on the back of his first major 'hit' song – 'Swanee' – taken up, recorded and promoted by the black-face singer Al Jolson: one of the first million-selling records. Gershwin, also a brilliant – largely self-taught – pianist, was in demand, having (to his brother Ira's lyrics) composed several

other successful songs. He had also flexed his creative muscles with a one-act opera, 'Blue Monday', which – somewhat incongruously – had opened a new show on Broadway, George White's 'Scandals of 1922', though it was withdrawn after one performance.

On his European trip George arrived first in England, having written music for a new show, the Rainbow Revue. Although the show proved unsuccessful, his arrival could not have been more pleasing for him. The Southampton immigration officer, on seeing the name on his passport, asked "George Gershwin? Are you the man who wrote 'Swanee'?"

It was not the style of Gershwin's music which made it popular – it was its quality. This quality may be more apparent today, but in the early 1920s, when jazz was regarded with suspicion by many 'serious' musicians, it seems remarkable to consider those classical musicians who – very early – identified Gershwin as a composer of significance. Late in 1923, the Canadian soprano Eva Gautier included several Gershwin songs in a recital at New York's Aeolian Hall; Beryl Rubinstein, the American pianist-composer, described Gershwin as 'a great composer' in 1922.

The conductor of George White's 'Scandals of 1922' was Paul Whiteman. Although 'Blue Monday' was withdrawn after the opening night, Whiteman had seen Gershwin at rehearsals and appreciated his worth. Whiteman's dance band had become very popular following the release of their recording of 'Whispering', which became Whiteman's signature-tune, selling over a million copies within a year, emulating 'Swanee'. The arranger for 'Whispering' was Ferde Grofé.

Following Gautier's recital, Whiteman decided to promote an orchestral counterpart at the same Aeolian Hall on February 12 1924. No jazz or dance orchestra had ever appeared there. As with Gautier's programme, Whiteman planned to represent aspects of the fusion between serious music and jazz. He intended to include new pieces by Gershwin and Victor Herbert and mentioned his plans to George – who was preoccupied with writing the music for a new show, 'Sweet Little Devil'.

George was brought up short when he read a newspaper report that he was writing a 'jazz symphony' for the concert – less than six weeks away. The newspaper announcement now concentrating his mind, Gershwin decided on a work for piano and band – he would play the solo part. From the start, the scoring of the work was entrusted to Grofé: he knew the band's players' characteristics; it would not have been practicable for anyone else, not even Gershwin, to do the orchestration.

Grofé's arrangement of the band parts of the Rhapsody in Blue – as the work was called, thanks to a flash of inspiration in naming it by his brother Ira – did not indicate shortcomings on Gershwin's part; it was the clarinetist Ross Gorman who demonstrated to George the glissando with which the work begins.

And so, before a large audience which included such as Amelita Galli-Curci, Mary Garden, Alma Gluck, Walter Damrosch, Mischa Elman, Leopold Godowsky, Jascha Heifetz, Fritz Kreisler, John McCormack, Moritz Rosenthal, Joseph Stransky, Leopold Stokowski, Igor Stravinsky and Serge Rachmaninoff, the Rhapsody in Blue received its premiere as the penultimate work in a lengthy programme entitled 'An Experiment in Modern Music'. Many of

the great classical musicians who were present were, like George's parents, Russian émigrés.

The Rhapsody in Blue was the sensation of the evening. Virgil Thomson, the composer and critic, was present at the first performance and also at a 60th anniversary re-creation of the concert in 1984; he recalled that his most vivid memories of George's playing were of his "beautiful hands with their lightly fleet fingers, also his singing piano tone."

The structure of the Rhapsody in Blue is unique. Its familiarity stems from the unprecedented outpouring of melody which suffuses the work from first bar to last. Whatever its provenance, the resultant Rhapsody – as 'Swanee' had done – took Gershwin's name again around the world to an even wider public.

1925 proved to be a particularly important year for Gershwin. With shows on Broadway and in London's West End, at the beginning of the year he bought a five-story house on 103rd Street, near the junction with Riverside Drive in north-west Manhattan. The top floor was George's, where he had his study and his own rooms, and where – soon after moving in – he completed his largest concert work, a full-scale three-movement Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, commissioned by Walter Damrosch, music director of the New York Symphony Orchestra who had attended the Rhapsody's premiere.

Gershwin's Concerto in F shows distinct advances in technique over the Rhapsody. The structure is more secure but not academic. Dispensing with a customary cadenza, the Concerto hangs together well, and another

important aspect is its distinctive orchestration – Gershwin’s approach succeeding brilliantly, at once declaring his individual creative personality. His orchestration is lean, and clearly the work of a composer who hears what he writes. There may be passages seemingly unconvincing on paper, but which work brilliantly in performance; Gershwin’s Concerto in F marks an individual contribution to twentieth-century orchestral sound.

The mode is deliberately indeterminate. Whilst being ‘in F major’, Gershwin merely writes ‘Concerto in F’ on his score. The melodic content is as inspired as in the Rhapsody; with Gershwin recalling material from the first movement in his fleet finale – a structural procedure he may have taken from Rachmaninoff (as in the latter’s Third Concerto). The Concerto’s solo part is more brilliant and virtuosic than in the Rhapsody. Gershwin was, naturally, the soloist in the first performance on December 3, 1925 at Carnegie Hall, his Concerto sharing the programme with Gluck’s *Iphigenia in Aulis* Overture, Henri Rabaud’s *Suite Anglaise* and Glazunov’s Fifth Symphony.

However, Gershwin’s Concerto remained little-known for years; unpublished during his lifetime, the only recording issued in Gershwin’s lifetime was of Grofé’s abridgement and reorchestration for the Whiteman band. Since long before 1962, the 25th anniversary of Gershwin’s death, the Concerto has justifiably entered the repertoire. It received its Russian premiere in 1962 played by Lazar Berman.

By 1932, Gershwin had added the orchestral tone-poem *An American in Paris*, a Second Rhapsody for piano and orchestra and a Cuban Overture to his list of serious works, but the last two failed to impress the public as his

earlier works had done, yet Gershwin must have known that with them he had achieved three of his finest scores. On Broadway, however, the success that attended ‘Of Thee I Sing’ in 1931, reassured him of his ability in the musical theatre, but the relative lack of success of the Second Rhapsody and Cuban Overture prompted his decision to take lessons in composition with Joseph Schillinger – another expatriate Russian.

Gershwin’s lessons with Schillinger, an interesting if controversial figure, began in 1932. Schillinger was 37, three years Gershwin’s senior, and relatively unknown. A noted theoretician who only took private pupils in New York, he arrived in the United States from Russia in 1928. Exceptional in many ways and thoroughly trained, Schillinger developed personal theories of composition. However, the first show Gershwin wrote after beginning with Schillinger was a failure, the 1933 successor to ‘Of Thee I Sing’.

That Pulitzer prize-winning musical prompted a sequel, ‘Let ‘Em Eat Cake’, wherein a left-wing revolution in the USA emerges triumphant before being overthrown. This was a risky proposition for a musical at any time, let alone 1933; it opened in New York on October 21, 1933 and ran for barely three months. Gershwin must have been disappointed by another failure, yet he planned a new concert piece towards the end of 1933, his fourth work for piano and orchestra – and also his shortest – being completed on January 6 1934, and composed for a concert tour with the Leo Reisman Orchestra conducted by Charles Previn.

The new work was *Variations on ‘I Got Rhythm’*, based on a song from the 1930 show ‘Girl Crazy’. The Variations received its first performance on the

afternoon of January 14 1934 at Symphony Hall, Boston. A repeat performance took place that evening. In all, Gershwin and the Orchestra played in twenty-eight cities on the tour, some more than once. Gershwin played three works in each programme – Rhapsody in Blue, Concerto in F and 'I Got Rhythm' Variations – testimony to his (and the Orchestra's) stamina, to say nothing of his mental stability.

For years, Gershwin planned a series of 24 Preludes for solo piano, which was never fully realized. As part of a recital by the contralto Marguerite d'Alvarez in December 1926, at which Gershwin was her accompanist, he played five preludes; on repeating the programme the following February in Boston, Gershwin added a sixth.

Only three Preludes were published in 1927; perhaps he was unconvinced as to the suitability of the others, which remained in manuscript. We know six Preludes were played in 1927, one being familiar through being expanded in the finale of the Concerto dates from January 1925 (before the Concerto was composed). Nonetheless, we have eight authentic solo piano Preludes by Gershwin. The first, in E flat major, dates from c.1919; the remaining seven, in broad chronological order, are: Prelude in G major, 1923; Prelude in G minor, 1925; Prelude in F minor 1925-26; Three Preludes 1927. The eighth, 'Sleepless Night', is based on the F minor Prelude and was written out fully after Gershwin's death by Kay Swift.

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Mark Bebbington

Mark Bebbington is fast gaining a reputation as one of today's most strikingly individual British pianists. His discs of British Music for SOMM have met with unanimous critical acclaim and notably, his recent cycles of Frank Bridge, John Ireland and Arthur Bliss have attracted seven consecutive sets of 5***** in BBC Music Magazine.

Over recent seasons Mark has toured extensively throughout Central and Northern Europe, the Far East and North Africa and has performed at major UK venues with the London Philharmonic, Philharmonia, Royal Philharmonic and London Mozart Players. As a recitalist, he makes regular appearances at major UK and International Festivals.



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Recently, Mark made a highly successful Carnegie Hall debut with Leon Botstein and the American Symphony Orchestra in the US premiere of Richard Strauss's Parergon and he returns to New York for his recital debut at Alice Tully Hall. Dates during 2016/17 include London performances with the Royal Philharmonic and London Philharmonic Orchestras, with the Flanders, Buffalo and San Antonio Symphony Orchestras and tours with the Czech National Orchestra and Israel Camerata.

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Leon Botstein

Leon Botstein brings a renowned career as both a conductor and educator to his role as Music Director of The Orchestra Now. He has been Music Director of the American Symphony Orchestra since 1992, co-Artistic Director of Bard SummerScape and the Bard Music Festival since 1990, and President of Bard College since 1975. He was the Music Director of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra from 2003–2011, and is now Conductor Laureate. Mr Botstein also has an active career as a guest conductor with orchestras around the globe, and has made numerous recordings, as well as being a prolific author and music historian. He has received numerous honours for his contributions to the music industry.



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More information online at
LeonBotsteinMusicRoom.com