

**WEST VALLEY SYMPHONY**  
**APRIL 7, 2024**  
**PROGRAM NOTES**  
**ALL GERSHWIN – BY GEORGE!**

On September 26, 1898, Jacob Gershwine was born in Brooklyn, NY. He would later change his name to George Jacob Gershwin. At the age of 10 he was smitten with music and decided that's where his future lay. He studied piano with various teachers and left school at the age of 15 when he became a song-plugger for the Jerome H. Remick music publishing company. Soon, he was writing his own music. 1916 saw his first published song, "When You Want 'Em, You Can't Get 'Em, When You've Got 'Em, You Don't Want 'Em". Within a couple of years more hits came from his pen: *Swanee* and *Rialto Ripples* among them. At this time Gershwin turned his attention to Broadway. Success there caught the attention of the influential band leader, Paul Whiteman.

On Jan. 4, 1924, an article appeared in the New York *Tribune*, reading in part: "Among the members of the committee of judges who will pass on 'What is American Music?' at the Paul Whiteman concert to be given at Aeolean Hall, Tuesday afternoon, February 12, will be Sergei Rachmaninoff, Jascha Heifetz, Efrem Zimbalist and Alma Gluck... This question of just what is American music has aroused tremendous interest in musical circles and Mr. Whiteman is receiving every phase of manuscript, from blues to symphonies. George Gershwin is at work on a jazz concerto..." This was news to Gershwin, but he nonetheless took on the challenge with less than five weeks before the concert. Time being short, Whiteman agreed to have Gershwin write a piano score which would be orchestrated by Ferde Grofé. Gershwin wrote, "It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattley-bang...that I suddenly heard – even saw on paper – the complete construction of the *Rhapsody* from beginning to end." The *Rhapsody in Blue* was the next-to-last number on the Whiteman concert. Gershwin himself played the piano solo, improvising some of the work on the spot. At the age of 25 George Gershwin had burst upon the serious music scene. A critic wrote to the composer, "Quite as a matter of course the concert was a riot; you crowned it with what I am forced to regard as the foremost serious effort by an American composer."

Shortly after *Rhapsody* was performed, Gershwin realized that to become a "real" composer he should do what many other American composers did in those days: go to Paris and study with the famous pedagogue, Nadia Boulanger. She turned him down, as did Maurice Ravel – both realized that they would ruin his unique jazz-influenced style. In 1928, while in Paris, he began working on a commission by Walter Damrosch and the Symphony Society of New York. The work would be titled *An American in Paris*.

In an interview in *Musical America*, the composer wrote, "This new piece, really a rhapsodic ballet, is written very freely and is the most modern music I've yet attempted...My purpose here is to portray the impression of an American visitor in Paris, as he strolls about the city, listens to the various street noises, and absorbs the French atmosphere...As in my other orchestral compositions I've not endeavored to represent any definite scenes in this music. The rhapsody is programmatic only in a

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general impressionistic way, so that the listener can read into the music such episodes as his imagination pictures for him.” The first performance of *An American in Paris* was given by the New York Symphony Society at Carnegie Hall on December 13, 1928.

Originally titled *Rumba*, Gershwin’s *A Cuban Overture* was the result of a short vacation to Cuba in February, 1932. His exposure to a different, Latin-influenced musical vocabulary made a deep impression on him and he eagerly incorporated them into this new work. The overture made its debut at one of the New York Philharmonic’s Stadium Concerts at the long gone Lewisohn Stadium on August 16, 1932 as part of an all-Gershwin concert conducted by Albert Coates. After the hugely successful concert, Gershwin wrote “It was, I really believe, the most exciting night I have ever had...17,845 people paid to get in and just about 5,000 were at the closed gates trying to fight their way in – unsuccessfully.”

*Porgy and Bess* was Gershwin’s last major work. It is based on the play *Porgy* by DuBose and Dorothy Heyward which Gershwin had read in 1926. He proposed writing the opera with his brother Ira writing the lyrics. Gershwin called *Porgy and Bess* a folk opera.

“Porgy and Bess is a folk tale. Its people naturally would sing folk music. When I first began work in the music I decided against the use of original folk material because I wanted the music to be all of one piece. Therefore I wrote my own spirituals and folksongs. But they are still folk music – and therefore, being in operatic form, *Porgy and Bess* becomes a folk opera.”

The opera was produced by the New York Theater Guild and premiered on October 10, 1935, running for 124 performances. Conductor Fritz Reiner, who would later lead the Chicago Symphony in a legendary era, commissioned arranger and composer Robert Russell Bennett to make a symphonic arrangement of the opera. Bennett said “Dr. Reiner selected the portions of the opera that he wanted to play and also the sequence of the excerpts. He expressed his ideas as to instrumentation, wishing to make generous use of saxophones and banjo, and to dispense with Gershwin’s pet instrument, the piano. I proceeded not only to follow Dr. Reiner’s ideas faithfully, but also to remain completely loyal to George’s harmonic and orchestral intentions...I have been careful to do what I knew – after many years of association with Gershwin – Gershwin would like as a symphonic version of his music.”

After the success of *Porgy and Bess*, in 1936 Gershwin moved to Hollywood where he wrote several film scores. Unfortunately, a brain tumor took his life in 1937. He was only 38 years old and is buried at Westchester Hills Cemetery in New York.

~Marty Haub