

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
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J. Michael Allsen

Our 99th season closes with an all-Gershwin program. During the summer of 1932, George Gershwin took a vacation in Havana, where he fell in love with the vivacious dance music of the Cuban capital. His *Cuban Overture* uses a *rumba* rhythm throughout, as a background to his own irrepressible musical themes. Over the course of six previous performances in Madison, pianist Philippe Bianconi has forged a special relationship with Maestro DeMain and the orchestra. Works he has played here include the Fauré *Ballade* and Ravel *Concerto in G Major* (2001), Prokofiev *Concerto No. 3* (2003), Rachmaninoff *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* (2010), Beethoven *Concerto No. 4* (2012), Brahms *Concerto No. 2* (2013), and Rachmaninoff *Concerto No. 3* (2017). At this program he performs Gershwin's masterful *Concerto in F*. To close, we have a wonderful concert version of *Porgy and Bess*, with singers Michelle Johnson and Eric Greene and the Madison Symphony Chorus. (*Porgy and Bess* is, of course, something of a "signature piece" for John DeMain: he estimates that since 1976, he has conducted it on stage over 400 times!)

From Tin Pan Alley to the concert hall

George Gershwin was born in Brooklyn, New York, into a Russian-Jewish family. When the family bought a piano in 1910, young George was immediately smitten, and began to teach himself to play. By 1914, he quit school and went to work in Tin Pan Alley, New York's famous songwriting district. Gershwin worked as a pianist and a "song-plugger" for a successful publisher, recording player piano rolls of the latest hits. Before long, he was writing his own songs, and in 1919 scored a huge hit with *Swanee*, which was popularized by the ruling King of Broadway, Al Jolson. George began to make a name for himself as a Broadway composer, and beginning in 1921, collaborated frequently with his brother Ira, a successful lyricist. Gershwin loved celebrity, and would seek the center of attention in any group. There are many stories about how, at any party, he would sit at the piano as soon as he arrived, and play brilliant improvisations on his own songs for hours.

Though he was becoming famous as a musician, Gershwin also realized the limitations of his own largely self-taught musical background, and continued to seek out formal lessons on piano and composition. He was well aware of the gulf between Popular and Classical styles and wrote several early pieces that went

beyond the standardized popular song form. His first public attempt at what he referred to as “serious” music was *Blue Monday*, a short opera produced as part of George White’s *Scandals of 1922*. The *Scandals* shows were fairly typical 1920s Broadway revues—lots of feather-light music and even lighter-clad showgirls, and very little plot. *Blue Monday*, inspired in part by the literature of the burgeoning Harlem Renaissance (though it was presented in blackface), was a rather depressing little story about a gambler’s hard luck. It was presented at the opening performance of *Scandals*, to mixed reviews, and was promptly yanked from the show. Despite this early frustration, Gershwin continued a career that had two tracks. He was best known in his day for his popular work on Broadway, and later in Hollywood, but continued to write “serious” musical works throughout his career. The three works on our program are a cross-section of “classical” Gershwin, showing his development as a composer in the most productive decade of his life, 1925-1935.

The *Cuban Overture*, one of Gershwin’s finest orchestral pieces, dates from 1932, when he was at the peak of his fame.

George Gershwin

Born: September 26, 1898, Brooklyn, New York.

Died: July 11, 1937, Los Angeles, California.

Cuban Overture

- **Composed:** 1932;
- **Premiere:** It was performed for the first time at an all-Gershwin concert at Lewisohn Stadium in New York on August 16, 1932.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1963, 1993, 1996, and 2012.
- **Duration:** 10:00

Background

For much of the early 20th century, particularly during the years of Prohibition, Havana served as a playground for wealthy Americans. Gershwin’s *Cuban Overture* was inspired by his vacation there in 1932.

By 1932, Gershwin was at the pinnacle of his popularity. He and his brother Ira were among the most successful composer/lyricist teams on Broadway, and he had earned respect from classical musicians with concert works like *Rhapsody in Blue* and the *Concerto in F*. During the early summer of 1932, he took a vacation in Havana, staying for a few weeks of parties and good times. Gershwin was fascinated by the vivacious dance music of the Cuban capital, and came back to

New York with a suitcase full of Cuban percussion instruments—maracas, bongos, claves, and guiros. It was perfectly natural that he would absorb this Cuban influence in a concert work. In August, he completed a brief orchestral work titled *Rumba*, now universally known as the *Cuban Overture*. The *rumba* rhythm, or *clave*, the basis of most Afro-Cuban dance music, appears here in a simplified form, as the musical basis of this composition.

What You'll Hear

Underlying much of this work is the rumba, an African-derived rhythm that is the heartbeat of most Afro-Cuban music.

Prior to composing the *Cuban Overture*, Gershwin spent a few months studying composition and musical form with Joseph Schillinger. His studies with Schillinger—a precise, mathematically-minded music theorist—may explain the rather dry, academic tone Gershwin adopts in the program note he wrote for the first performance:

“The first part (*Moderato e Molto Ritornato*) is preceded by a (*forte*) introduction featuring some of the thematic material. Then comes a three part contrapuntal episode leading to a second theme. The first part finishes with a recurrence of the first theme combined with fragments of the second. A solo clarinet cadenza leads to a middle part, which is in a plaintive mood. It is a gradually developing canon in a polytonal manner. This part concludes with a climax based upon an ostinato of the theme in the canon, after which a sudden change in tempo brings us back to the rumba dance rhythms. The finale is a development of the preceding material in a stretto-like manner. This leads us back again to the main theme. The conclusion of the work is a Coda featuring the Cuban instruments of percussion.”

Despite the tone of Gershwin's description, there is nothing dry or academic about the music. The introduction and first main section are dominated by the trumpets and even more prominently by the percussion. In a note to the score, Gershwin directs that the “Cuban instruments of percussion” are, quite literally, to take center stage—right in front of the conductor. Gershwin's quieter and “more plaintive” middle section has sensuous woodwind and string lines. At the conclusion, Gershwin turns up the heat and volume a bit further, returning to the opening theme, and bringing the percussion even more to the fore.

Writing this work on the heels of his tremendously successful rhapsody *Rhapsody in Blue*, Gershwin clearly had something to prove: that he was to be taken seriously as a classical composer.

Concerto in F

- **Composed:** 1925.
- **Premiere:** Gershwin was the soloist first one was the soloist at the premiere in New York City's Carnegie Hall on December 3, 1925.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1951 (with pianist Gerald Borsuk), 1980 (Lorin Hollander) and 2007 (Christopher Taylor).
- **Duration:** 31:00

Background

There were sour notes from critics and others, but as always, the best answer to critics is success: the *Concerto in F* has become one of the most popular of all American piano concertos.

The premiere of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* in February 1924 was a career-making event for the young composer. Gershwin was successful as a songwriter, and he and his lyricist brother Ira were already recognized as a great Broadway team. The *Rhapsody* was played on part of a lengthy concert staged by bandleader Paul Whiteman, and was clearly the hit of the concert. Among the musical notables present was Walter Damrosch, conductor of the New York Symphony Orchestra. Damrosch almost immediately approached Gershwin with a commission for a new work to be titled *New York Concerto*. Gershwin accepted of course, but the prospect of writing a concerto was daunting. In particular, he was inexperienced in orchestration—this was something that he nearly always delegated in his Broadway scores, and Whiteman's staff arranger Ferde Grofé had done nearly all of the orchestration for *Rhapsody in Blue*. But Gershwin, who worked all his life for respectability in the world of what he termed "serious" music, had something to prove, later writing: "Many persons had thought that the *Rhapsody* was only a happy accident. Well, I went out, for one thing, to show them that there was more where that came from." Gershwin worked on the concerto through the summer and fall of 1925, spending as much time on it as he could afford. (He was also writing two different Broadway shows at the same time.) Among other things, he was determined to orchestrate the piece himself.

Gershwin was the soloist at the premiere performance on December 3, 1925, in Carnegie Hall. A name change—from *New York Concerto* to the more academic *Concerto in F*—was Gershwin's idea, and seems to have reflected his desire for

acceptance as a Classical composer. Reviews ranged from enthusiastic to condescending to hostile, and Gershwin suffered a brutal post-concert snub by Russian composer Alexander Glazunov, whose fifth symphony was on the same program. They met backstage and Gershwin enthusiastically expressed a desire to study orchestration with Glazunov. Glazunov frostily replied (through a translator) that Gershwin hadn't even mastered the basics of counterpoint. However, Damrosch was delighted with the piece and so were audiences. The *Concerto in F*, a far more ambitious work than the *Rhapsody*, has become the most successful of all American piano concertos.

What You'll Hear

The concerto is laid out in three movements:

- An opening movement set in sonata form.
- A bluesy slow movement.
- A fierce finale, which brings back reminiscences of the previous two moments

Many critics immediately placed the label “jazz concerto” on the work, but Gershwin resisted this, arguing that the work used “...certain jazz rhythms which are worked out in a more or less symphonic manner.” There are certainly moments that refer to 1920s jazz—the muted trumpet in the second movement or the dance rhythms of the first—but the concerto’s musical form owes more to the classical concerto than to jazz. The opening movement (*Allegro*) is in a rigorously classical sonata form, beginning with an exposition that carefully lays out the main thematic material. The themes themselves are clearly influenced by jazz, however: a syncopated melody that uses the rhythm of the “Charleston”—the most popular dance of the day—and a lighter, highly syncopated theme. In the development section, strings introduce a lush new idea that is given a broad treatment by the piano and orchestra. The main themes of the opening return, now with flashy piano ornamentation, and the movement ends with a brilliant coda.

Gershwin, who was occasionally a bit pedantic in writing about his more “classical” works described the mood of the second movement (*Andante*) as “...a poetic nocturnal atmosphere which has come to be referred to as the American blues.” The opening of this “night music” is given over to a muted trumpet, which lays out a long bluesy melody, before the piano plays a more animated version of the same theme. The rest of the movement develops rather freely, with a passionate string theme acting as a kind of refrain. In the end, there is a grand climax before the opening theme returns, now in the flute.

Gershwin called the finale (*Molto agitato*) an “orgy of rhythm.” It follows directly on the heels of the second movement with a cymbal crash and an aggressive rhythmic burst from the orchestra. This highly percussive music is quickly picked up and developed by the piano. There are reminiscences of the first two movements worked into the texture, but they now have a more heavily rhythmic character. The climax of the movement is signaled by an enormous gong crash and a grand reprise of the first movement’s string theme. It ends with a final statement of the aggressive music of the opening.

Porgy and Bess is arguably Gershwin’s masterpiece: not only was it a skillful blend of opera, Broadway, and several Black styles, and it also treated its Black characters as fully-fleshed individuals, one of the first sympathetic portrayals of African Americans on the American stage.

***Porgy and Bess* (Concert Version - arr. Robert Russell Bennett)**

- **Composed:** The score for *Porgy and Bess* was completed in September of 1935. The “concert version” heard here was prepared in 1956
- **Premiere:** The stage premiere took place in Boston, on September 30, 1935. The version heard here was first performed in New Haven, CT, on June 26, 1956.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 2002 and 2012.
- **Duration:** 40:00

Background

Gershwin collaborated closely with author DuBose Heyward, and ultimately with his brother Ira to create the opera.

The beginnings of *Porgy and Bess* date to 1926, when Gershwin read DuBose Heyward’s *Porgy*—a novel inspired by characters and situations Heyward observed in the Black community of his home town, Charleston, SC. The title character was based directly on Goat Sammy, a disabled Black man who got around on a goat-drawn cart. The setting for the novel, Catfish Row, was a fictionalized version of Cabbage Row, a cluster of shabby tenements in Charleston. Gershwin—who had already tried to create an opera with Black characters in his unsuccessful *Blue Monday*—quickly wrote to Heyward proposing a collaboration. Heyward was politely interested, but it would be nearly six years before Gershwin would return to the work. In the meantime, in 1927, Heyward and his wife Dorothy produced a successful stage version of *Porgy* that ran for some 369 performances

in New York. Their play included several spirituals and other musical material, but Gershwin had something much more elaborate in mind.

Gershwin and Heyward renewed their correspondence in 1932, but work did not begin until the end of 1933. Heyward was uncomfortable in New York, and Gershwin was too busy to leave, so much of their collaboration was carried on by mail and telegram. Eventually Ira Gershwin was brought into the project. Ira was responsible for the majority of the song lyrics, though Heyward was solely responsible for one of the show's finest songs, *Summertime*. Eventually, George did make a trip to Charleston in the summer of 1934 to try to get the local flavor right and to hear the Gullah dialect that is so much a part of Heyward's novel and libretto. Gershwin and the Heywards spent a few weeks together on Folly Island, one of the Barrier Islands outside Charleston. He had to return to New York in the fall, but their long-distance collaboration continued, and Gershwin began to create a score for Heyward's libretto.

By the end of 1934, Gershwin was looking for a producer and beginning to cast the production. Both Gershwin and Heyward agreed that *Porgy and Bess* was to be a serious work, produced with an all-Black cast, dealing in a sympathetic and realistic way with its characters. At the time, African American singers were excluded from the operatic stage: Marian Anderson, possibly the finest alto of the day, had not appeared on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera. African American characters were also largely absent from Broadway, and when they were there, it was still routine for these characters to be played in blackface, the ugly legacy of the old minstrel show tradition. Broadway star Al Jolson—who made Gershwin a star years earlier singing *Swanee* in blackface—at one point tried to leverage Heyward's *Porgy* as a star vehicle for himself. All-Black shows like *In Dahomey* and *Shuffle Along* had occasionally made it on to Broadway, but these were far from the mainstream. Kern & Hammerstein's *Show Boat* of 1927 was one of the only hit musicals to feature an integrated cast...and realistic Black characters.

Rehearsals went well, though there were some troubles with John W. Bubbles, the vaudeville dancer chosen for the shady Sporting Life—Bubbles seems to have more or less typecast for the role. According to the usual practice for musicals, *Porgy and Bess* was given a tryout performance in Boston before settling in on Broadway, though the cast did give an unstaged run-through at Carnegie Hall first. Reaction to these preliminary performances was everything they could have hoped for. One Boston reviewer wrote that Gershwin: "...has travelled a long way from Tin Pan Alley. He must now be accepted as a serious composer." There had been some rumors of a place for *Porgy and Bess* at the Metropolitan Opera, but when it

was produced in New York it was on Broadway, at the Alvin Theater, where it opened on October 10. The New York audience was just as enthusiastic as the Boston audience had been, but the reviews ran from lukewarm to savage: the Kiss of Death for a Broadway production. *Porgy and Bess* closed after a respectable, but hardly profitable run of 124 performances. Though several of the individual songs quickly became well-known, Gershwin did not live long enough to see his proudest creation universally acclaimed as one of the masterworks of American music.

Gershwin seems to have been a bit uncomfortable about *Porgy and Bess*'s "operatic" nature: he described it as "folk opera." Several critics charged that Gershwin had simply created a somewhat dressed-up and pretentious Broadway show, grouped around a series of popular-style songs. Gershwin answered by stating: "It is true that I have written songs [as opposed to arias] for *Porgy and Bess*. I am not ashamed of writing songs at any time so long as they are good songs." His use of recitative and his sophisticated use of the orchestra were certainly closer to the operatic world than anything else on Broadway at the time. Like Bernstein's *West Side Story* some twenty years later, *Porgy and Bess* was a sophisticated blend of both traditions.

What You'll Hear

Bennett's "concert version" of *Porgy and Bess* heard here closely follows the original story and the music.

The great Broadway/Hollywood orchestrator—and frequent Gershwin collaborator—Robert Russell Bennett prepared the standard "concert version" heard here. By 1956, Bennett had already created a frequently-programmed orchestral "Symphonic Picture" on the opera, but here he leaves Gershwin's score largely intact, bringing together the best-known moments of *Porgy and Bess* with a few connective passages and edits. In this concert version, the main female roles (Clara, Serena, and Bess) will be sung by Ms. Johnson and the male roles (Porgy, Jake, and Sporting Life) will be sung by Mr. Greene.

Synopsis

After a brief introduction, a young mother named Clara sings a lullaby, *Summertime*, to her baby boy. Her husband, Jake, is nearby shooting craps, and he takes the baby and sings his own sarcastic lullaby, *A woman is a sometime thing*. Tempers flare at the game, and a fight between Crown and Robbins ends in Robbins's death. Crown and his girlfriend Bess go into hiding. The only person on Catfish Row who will take in Bess is Porgy, who secretly loves her. The next scene is in the home of Serena, Robbins's widow, where mourners are paying their

respects (*Gone, gone, gone*). There is a conflict between Serena and Bess, who shows up with Porgy. When Porgy urges everyone to help the widow, the mourners sing *Overflow, overflow*, trying to drum up more money for the collection plate. After a detective arrives to investigate the murder, Serena sings a heartfelt lament about her husband's death, *My man's gone now*. The act closes as Bess leads the community in a spiritual, *The Promise' Land*.

Act II begins with preparations for a church picnic, and Porgy cheerfully singing *I got plenty o' nuttin'* at his window. Sporting Life, a pimp and cocaine dealer shows up, and tries to convince Bess to come to New York with him. Porgy overhears and chases Sporting Life away, and then he and Bess sing the opera's great love duet, *Bess, you is my woman now*. Everyone on Catfish Row except for Porgy boats to Kittiwah Island for the picnic, and the community sings and dances to a couple of spirituals, *O I can't sit down* and *Ain't got no shame*. Sporting Life then puts a damper on the party when he makes fun of their beliefs in the brilliantly sarcastic *It ain't necessarily so*. As everyone leaves for home that evening, Crown, who has been hiding out on the island, comes out of the bushes, and forces Bess to stay with him. She makes it back to Catfish Row a few days later, and begs for Porgy's help. The act ends with a disastrous hurricane. At the height of the storm, Crown appears. He beats Porgy and boasts about his hold over women before leaving.

The final act begins with a devastated community cleaning up in the aftermath of a hurricane and trying to soothe Clara, whose husband was one of several fishermen killed in the storm. Crown appears once more, and sneaks towards Porgy's house, intending to murder him, but Porgy reaches out of the window and strangles Crown. A day later, the detective arrives to investigate, and takes Porgy away. While Porgy is gone, Sporting Life again tries to talk Bess into coming to New York (*There's a boat dat's leavin'*). While she is insulted by Sporting Life's insinuations, she eventually follows him. Porgy returns a week later, having beaten the charge, to find that Bess is gone. He gets into his goat cart, and resolves to head north to rescue Bess and bring her home. The opera closes as he and the entire community sing *Lawd, I'm on my way*