

PROGRAM NOTE: by Eric Bromberger

An American in Paris

GEORGE GERSHWIN

Born September 28, 1898, Brooklyn

Died July 11, 1937, Beverly Hills

The acclaim that greeted *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924) and the *Concerto in F* (1925) made Gershwin more anxious to be taken seriously as the composer of “concert” music, and he resolved to write a work for orchestra alone, without the starring role for piano that had helped make the earlier two works so popular. The composition of this music took place in the spring of 1928, when Gershwin, his sister Frances, his brother Ira, and Ira’s wife Leonore took an extended family vacation to Paris. Happily ensconced in the Hotel Majestic, Gershwin composed what he called a “Tone Poem for Orchestra”—a musical portrait of an American visitor to the City of Light—between March and June 1928, and it was first performed by Walter Damrosch and the New York Philharmonic on December 13 of that year.

This is *fun* music, and from the moment of that premiere it has always been one of Gershwin’s most popular scores, winning audiences over with its great tunes, breezy charm, and Gershwin’s obvious affection for Paris. Musically, *An American in Paris* is a series of impressions strung together with great skill. Gershwin—anxious to insist on his abilities as a classical composer—tried to argue that the piece was in sonata-form, and he pointed to such general areas as exposition, development, and recapitulation. But such arguments protest too much. It is far better to take *An American in Paris* as a set of polished episodes—a collection of sunny postcards from Paris—than to search too rigorously for resemblances to classical forms.

For the New York premiere, Gershwin and Deems Taylor prepared elaborate program notes, explaining what was “happening” at each moment in the music. These were probably written with tongue slightly in cheek (in fact, Gershwin had made sketches for this piece several years before going to Paris), and they should not be taken too seriously. But it is worth noting that Gershwin structured the music around the idea of an American walking through the streets of Paris, and he included three of what he called “walking themes.” That program note describes the very beginning: “You are to imagine, then, an American visiting Paris, swinging down the Champs-Élysées on a mild, sunny morning in May or June. Being what he is, he starts without preliminaries and is off at full speed at once to the tune of The First Walking Theme, a straightforward diatonic air designed to convey an impression of Gallic freedom and gaiety.”

Along his way come piquant moments: a snatch of a Parisian popular song in the trombones and the strident squawk of Paris taxi horns—Gershwin had four of these imported for the premiere in New York. One moment—Gershwin called it “an unhallowed episode”—is rarely mentioned: the American is approached by a streetwalker, who bats her eyes at him seductively in a violin solo marked *espressivo*. Our hero wavers briefly, then makes his escape on one of the walking tunes. At about the mid-point comes the famous “blues” section, introduced by solo trumpet: the American is feeling homesick, and his nostalgia takes the form of this distinctively American music. Matters are rescued by the sudden intrusion of a pair of trumpets that come sailing in with a snappy Charleston tune. The cheerful final section reprises the various “walking” themes, and *An American in Paris* dances to its close on a great rush of happy energy.

Concertino for Two Pianos and Orchestra

ASHER TOBIN CHODOS

The following note has been supplied by the composer.

Like a semi-formal family dinner, this piece offers an environment for free interaction that is both structurally rigid and weirdly volatile. In this piece, the three principal actors -- two solo pianos and a symphony orchestra -- behave like relatives. We get along, we shout over each other, we stand at a respectful distance, and we shock each other into bemused and resentful silence. This is a work that calls for trust, sympathy and humor; I couldn't have written it unless I felt for the people involved a musical kinship verging on the familial.

Mood Indigo and Solitude

DUKE ELLINGTON

Born April 29, 1899, Washington D.C.

Died May 24, 1974, New York City

Arr. by Asher Tobin Chodos

The following note has been supplied by the arranger.

In a way, the familiarity of Ellington's music today makes it hard to appreciate fully his gifts as an orchestrator. It is important to see Ellington as part of a broader tendency in 20th century composition to treat sound and timbre – traditionally the province of the orchestrator – as essential elements in the composition of music. The intimacy and creativity with which

Ellington wrote for the players in his group combined with his artistic integrity to produce a sonic texture so arresting that contemporary audiences already had a name for it; the “Ellington Sound,” or the “Ellington Effect,” as it was termed by his close collaborator Billy Strayhorn, is as much part of his artistic legacy as his enormous catalogue of unforgettable melodies.

The fact that Ellington’s contributions cannot be parsed neatly into composition and orchestration makes it hard to approach his work as a traditional orchestration project. How can you arrange for orchestra something whose essence is so anchored to its original instrumentation, indeed to the very individuals for whom it was written? There is so much character in the Ellington sound that simply to arrange his pitches and durations, even remaining faithful to his idiosyncratic sense of balance and texture, feels inadequate.

A focus on Ellington the Orchestrator points to another feature of his oeuvre that is too often overlooked: its connections to the pianist Thelonious Sphere Monk. Both artists pushed the limits of consonance in the jazz idiom; both were masters at rendering beautiful the strange and uncanny (what Monk called “ugly beauty”); both did something profound by elevating personality over technical rectitude. It is no coincidence that Monk’s classic 1955 Riverside recording, *Thelonious Monk Plays Duke Ellington*, is one of his best. It was this recording – and perhaps more importantly, the interpretive mode that it exemplifies – that guided me in my orchestral arrangements of Duke Ellington.

In these arrangements, I try to situate my own work as part of the long chain of musical re-signification on which Monk and Ellington are nodes, and which itself constitutes the heart and soul of the jazz tradition. My source materials are Ellington’s originals (drawn freely from various, often discrepant, recordings) and Monk’s 1955 re-imaginings of them – but in many ways what I have done here has more in common with the performance practice of any jazz musician than it does with the arranger in the Euro-American tradition. I steal liberally from both musicians, I read the one through the lens of the other, I make original contributions where useful, and I truncate or extend to accommodate the present performance environment. The conceit of Chodos-on-Monk-on-Ellington may seem novel from the perspective of the symphony orchestra, but it is really nothing more than the everyday labor of jazz musicians all over the world.

It is not, then, only my notional source materials that inform these arrangements. These songs are indicators, pointers to musical agglomerations to which new meaning constantly

accrues. “Mood Indigo” was, originally, “Dreamy Blues,” until Ellington’s manager, Irving Mills, re-titled it and, eventually, gave it lyrics – lyrics that Ella Fitzgerald would later imbue with a somber depth Mills may never had imagined. “(In My) Solitude” began as filler material, something Ellington supposedly composed in 20 minutes, “leaning against the studio’s glass enclosure.” Again, the title and the lyrics came later, and not from Ellington himself. Yet nobody who has heard Billie Holiday’s haunting rendition –

With gloom everywhere

I sit and I stare

I know that I’ll soon go mad

In my solitude

– could deny that it forms a fundamental part of the meaning of this song. In these arrangements I have taken Ellington and Monk as my points of entry, but I also make use of the broader set of meanings and associations indexed by the titles *Solitude* and *Mood Indigo*. This is another way of saying that I approached these songs as a jazz musician, as Monk did in 1955, and as Ellington himself did in many revisions over the course of his career.

Quiet City

AARON COPLAND

Born November 14, 1900, Brooklyn

Died December 2, 1990, Westchester, New York

In 1939 Aaron Copland was asked by his longtime friend Harold Clurman to provide incidental music for a production at the Group Theater in New York of Irwin Shaw’s experimental play *Quiet City*. Shaw (1913-1984) was then a struggling young playwright who later abandoned the stage and achieved his greatest success as a writer of fiction; among his works are a novel about World War II, *The Young Lions*, and a wonderful short story, “The Eighty-Yard Run.” *Quiet City*, however, was a failure. A combination of realism and fantasy, it tells of a young trumpeter, David Melnikoff, who (in Copland’s words) “imagined the night thoughts of many different people in a great city and played trumpet to express his emotions and to arouse the consciences of the other characters and of the audience.” After two dress rehearsals before unenthusiastic audiences, the play was dropped.

For that production, Copland wrote a brief work for clarinet, saxophone, trumpet, and piano, first performed at the initial presentation of the play on April 16, 1939. Copland liked the

music enough that the following year he arranged it for trumpet, English horn, and string orchestra. This version, premiered in New York on January 28, 1941, by the Saitenberg Little Symphony, has remained one of his most frequently performed works.

Quiet City may be thought of as an urban nocturne, similar in its lonely mood to Edward Hopper's famous painting *Nighthawks*. It is built on two themes: an evocative trumpet call, vaguely reminiscent of jazz trumpet music, and a dotted figure for strings, said by the composer to represent "the slogging gait of a dispossessed man." To give the trumpet player a chance to rest, Copland included interludes for English horn, and that instrument's haunting sound beautifully catches the lonely atmosphere of this little mood-piece.

Rhapsody in Blue

GEORGE GERSHWIN

If—as Dvořák suggested—American classical music would have to come from uniquely American roots, then *Rhapsody in Blue* is probably *the* piece of American classical music. In it, Gershwin combined the European idea of the piano concerto with American jazz and in the process created a piece of music that has become famous throughout the world—in addition to its many recordings by American orchestras, *Rhapsody in Blue* has been recorded by orchestras in England, Germany, Australia, and Russia. Gershwin was in fact aware that *Rhapsody in Blue* might become a kind of national piece; he said that during its composition he "heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America—of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our blues, our metropolitan madness."

Classical purists argue that this is not a true piano concerto, and jazz purists argue that it is not true jazz. Of course both are right, but none of that matters—*Rhapsody in Blue* is a smashing success on its own terms. Gershwin was right to call this one-movement work a *rhapsody*, with that term's suggestion of a form freer than the concerto. Soloist and orchestra are not so tightly integrated as in a concerto, and the *Rhapsody* tends to be episodic: the piano plays alone much of the time and then gives way to orchestral interludes; only rarely does Gershwin combine all his forces.

Gershwin wrote the *Rhapsody* in the space of less than a month early in 1924, when he was only 25. Because he was uncertain about his ability to orchestrate, that job was given to Ferde Grofé, who would later compose the *Grand Canyon Suite*. At the premiere on February

12, 1924, Gershwin was soloist with a small jazz ensemble, but performances today almost always use Grofé's version for full orchestra.

The *Rhapsody* has one of the most famous beginnings in all of music: the clarinet trill that suddenly spirals upward in a seductive, sleazy glissando leads directly into the main theme, which will recur throughout. The various episodes are easy to follow, though one should note Gershwin's ability to move so smoothly from episode to episode—these changes in tempo and mood seem almost effortless. Also noteworthy is the big E-major string tune marked *Andantino moderato con espressione*; near the end Gershwin gives this to the brass and transforms its easy flow into a jazzy romp that ends in one of the most ear-splitting chords ever written.