

## GEORGE GERSHWIN

VIRGIL THOMSON

**G**ERSHWIN, Cole Porter, and Kern are America's Big Three in the light musical theatre. Their qualities are evident and untroubling. Mr. Gershwin has, however, for some time been leading a double musical life. This is the story of his adventures among the high-brows.

His efforts in the symphonic field cover a period of about twelve years and include, so far as I am acquainted with them

*A Rhapsody in Blue*, for piano and orchestra

*Harlem Night*, a ballet

Two *Concertos* for piano and orchestra

*The American in Paris*, a symphonic poem

to which have now been added an opera on a tragi-comic subject, *Porgy and Bess*.

The *Rhapsody in Blue*, written about 1924 or 1925, was the first of these and is the most successful from every point of view. It is the most successful orchestral piece ever launched by any American composer. It is by now standard orchestral repertory all over the world, just like Rimsky's *Scheherazade* and Ravel's *Bolero*.

It is a thoroughly professional job executed by a man who knew how to put over a direct musical idea and who had a direct musical idea to put over.

I am not acquainted with *Harlem Night* or the second *Piano Concerto*. I am not even certain that a second one exists, although I have been told so. I can only speak, therefore, of the *Concerto in F* and of *The American in Paris*.

Both of these show a rather lesser mastery of their particular forms than the *Rhapsody* does. They did not, however, alter Mr. Gershwin's prestige. He remained through everything America's official White Hope, and he continued to be admired

in serious circles both for his real talent and for his obviously well-meant efforts at mastery of the larger forms. Talent, in fact, is rather easier to admire when the intentions of a composer are more noble than his execution is competent.

Just why the execution was not so competent as in the *Rhapsody* was never quite clear. I used to think that perhaps it was all voluntary. That he was cultivating a certain amateurishness because he had been promised that if he was a good little boy and didn't upset any apple-carts he might maybe when he grew up be president of American music, just like Daniel Gregory Mason or somebody. Either that, or else that the air of timid and respectable charm which those pieces played up was simply a blind to cover a period of apprenticeship and that one day he would burst out with some more pieces like the *Rhapsody in Blue*, only much more grand and powerful ones. It seemed that such a gift as his, with ten years of symphonic experience, couldn't but turn out eventually something pretty fine.

It has now turned out *Porgy and Bess*. Now when a man of Gershwin's gift, experience, and earning capacity devotes in the middle or late thirties three years of his expensive time to the composition of a continuous theatrical work on a serious subject, there is no reason for supposing that it represents anything but his mature musical thought and his trained musical powers at something near their peak. The music, however, is not in a way very different from his previous output of serious intent, except in so far as staging helps cover up the lack of musical construction. Hence it is no longer possible to take very seriously any alibi for his earlier works.

The *Rhapsody in Blue* remains a quite satisfactory piece. Rhapsodies, however, are not a very difficult formula, if one can think up enough tunes. The efforts at a more sustained symphonic development which the later pieces represent, appear now to be just as tenuous as they always sounded. One can see through *Porgy* that Gershwin has not and never did have any power of sustained musical development. His melodic invention is abundant and indefatigable, his melodic quality astonishingly fine, although inextricably tied up to an over-sophisticated background.



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*A caricature by*  
ALFRED FRUEH

That background is commonly known as Tin Pan Alley. By over-sophisticated I mean that the harmonic and orchestral ingenuity of Tin Pan Alley, its knowledge of the arts of presentation, is developed out of all proportion to what is justified by the expressive possibilities of its musical material. That material is straight from the melting-pot. At best it is a piquant but highly unsavory stirring-up-together of Israel, Africa and the Gaelic Isles. In Gershwin's music the predominance of charm in presentation over expressive substance makes the result always a sort of *vers de société*, or *musique de salon*; and his lack of understanding of all the major problems of form, of continuity, and of serious or direct musical expression is not surprising in view of the impurity of his musical sources and his frank acceptance of the same.

Such frankness is admirable. At twenty-five it was also charming. *Gaminerie* of any kind at thirty-five is more difficult to stomach. So that quite often *Porgy and Bess*, instead of being pretty, is a little hoydenish, like a sort of *musique de la pas très bonne société*. Leaving aside the slips even and counting him at his best, that best which is equally well exemplified by *Lady, Be Good* or *I've Got Rhythm* or the opening of the *Rhapsody in Blue*, he is still not a very serious composer.

I do not wish to indicate that it is in any way reprehensible of him not to be a serious composer. I only want to define something that we have all been wondering about for some years. It was always certain that he was a gifted composer, a charming composer, an exciting and sympathetic composer. His gift and his charm are greater than the gifts or the charms of almost any of the other American composers. And a great gift or great charm is an exciting thing. And a gifted and charming composer who sets himself seriously to learn his business is a sympathetic thing. I think, however, that it is clear by now that Gershwin hasn't learned his business. At least he hasn't learned the business of being a serious composer, which one has always gathered to be the business he wanted to learn.

*Porgy* is none the less an interesting example of what can be done by talent in spite of a bad set-up. With a libretto that should never have been accepted on a subject that should never have

been chosen, a man who should never have attempted it has written a work that is of some power and importance.

The more conventionally educated composers have been writing operas and getting them produced at the Metropolitan for twenty or thirty years. Some of them, Deems Taylor in particular, know quite well how to write in the larger theatrical forms. Year after year they write them, perfectly real operas on perfectly good subjects. And yet nothing ever really happens in them. No significant musical misdemeanor ever seems to have been perpetrated. Gershwin does not even know what an opera is; and yet *Porgy and Bess* is an opera and it has power and vigor. Hence it is a more important event in America's artistic life than anything American the Met has ever done.

But before I finally get around to saying all the nice things I have to say about it, let me be a little more specific about its faults and get all the resentments I have off my chest. Because I do resent Gershwin's shortcomings. I don't mind his being a light composer and I don't mind his trying to be a serious one. But I do mind his falling between two stools. I mind any major fault he commits, because he is to me an exciting and sympathetic composer.

First of all, the opera is vitiated from the beginning by a confusion as to how much fake it is desirable or even possible to get away with in a work of that weight. The play, for instance, and the libretto derived from it, are certainly not without a good part hokum. That can be excused if necessary. *La Traviata* and *La Tosca* are not free of hokum either. Hokum is just theatrical technic got a little out of hand, tear-jerking for its own sake, an error of proportion rather than any lack of true sentiment. The artificiality of its folk-lore is graver. I must hasten to add that Mr. Gershwin is here a greater sinner than Mr. Heyward, because his work was executed later. Folk-lore subjects recounted by an outsider are only valid as long as the folk in question is unable to speak for itself, which is certainly not true of the American Negro in 1935.

Let me be clear about folk-opera. *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Madama Butterfly* are not Scotch or Japanese folk-operas; they are simply Italian operas on an exotic subject. *Carmen* comes

nearer because of its systematic use of Spanish musical style. It is none the less a complete, though highly successful, fake. Smetana's *Bartered Bride* is a folk-opera and it is not a fake, because it is Bohemian music written by a Bohemian. It is not so fine a work as *Carmen*, which manages to speak convincingly in a Franco-Spanish or international language; but it is good folk-lore. Hall Johnson's music for *Green Pastures* and the last act of his *Run, Little Chillun* are real folk-lore and also folk-opera of quite high quality. *Porgy and Bess*, on the other hand, has about the same relation to Negro life as it is really lived and sung as have *Swanee River* and *Mighty lak' a rose*.

The most authentic thing about it all, about a work that is otherwise the purest Tecla, is George Gershwin's sincere desire to write an opera, a real opera that somebody might remember. I rather fancy he has succeeded in that, which is pretty incredible of him too, seeing how little he knew of how to go about it. His efforts at *recitativo* are as ineffective as anything I have heard since Antheil's *Helen Retires*, where a not dissimilar effect was got by first translating the text into German, then composing music for the German words, and finally translating it all back into English. The separate numbers which have rhymed or jingled lyrics are slick enough in the Gershwin Broadway manner. But his prose declamation is all exaggerated leaps and unimportant accents. It is vocally uneasy and dramatically cumbersome. Whenever he has to get on with the play he uses spoken dialogue. It would have been better if he had stuck to that all the time.

As for the development, or musical build-up, there simply isn't any. When he gets hold of a good number he plugs it. The rest of the time he just makes up what music he needs as he goes along. Nothing of much interest, little exercises in the jazzo-modernistic style, quite cute for the most part, but leading nowhere. The scoring is heavy, over-rich and vulgar. It is nervous, too, like the whole musical texture. Throughout the opera there is, however, a constant stream of lyrical invention and a wealth of harmonic ingenuity.

There is little drama in the orchestra and little conviction in the melodies, prettily negroid though they be. The real drama

of the piece is the spectacle of Gershwin wrestling with his medium, and the exciting thing is that after all those years the writing of music is still not a routine thing to him. Such freshness is the hall-mark of *les grandes natures*. Every measure of music has to be wrought as a separate thing. The stream of music must be channelized, molded, twisted, formed, ornamented, all while it is pouring out molten hot from that fount and volcano of musical activity, Mr. Gershwin's brain. Never is the flow inadequate. Never does his vigilance fail to leave its print on the shape of every detail. *Porgy* is falsely conceived and rather clumsily executed, but it is an important work because it is abundantly conceived and entirely executed by hand.

There are many things about it that are not to my personal taste. I don't like fake folk-lore, nor fidgety accompaniments nor bitter-sweet harmony, nor six-part choruses, nor plum-pudding orchestration. I do, however, like being able to listen to a work for three hours and to be fascinated at every moment. I also like its lack of respectability, the way it can be popular and vulgar and go its way as a real professional piece does without bothering much about the taste-boys. I like to think of Gershwin as having presented his astonished and somewhat perturbed public with a real live baby, all warm and dripping and friendly.

In a way, he has justified himself as a White Hope. He has written a work than can be performed quite a number of times, than can be listened to with pleasure by quite different kinds of people, and that can be remembered by quite a few of them. If its eminence, as Shaw once said of John Stuart Mill, is due largely to the flatness of the surrounding country, it is none the less a real and visible eminence. *Green Pastures*, the last act of *Run, Little Chillun*, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, and *Porgy* are all little eminences on the flat horizon of American opera. But four operas that can be listened to and remembered is not very many.

Two of these are straight folk-lore. The third is straight opera. *Porgy and Bess* is the least interesting of the four, because it is not straight anything. It is crooked folk-lore and half-way opera, a strong but crippled work. Like its hero, who didn't have a leg to stand on but who had some radiance in his face and a good deal of love in his heart.