

# GEORGE GERSHWIN

(1898-1937)

## Complete Music for Piano & Orchestra

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|--|----------------|
| <b>1 Rhapsody in Blue (1924)</b>               | <b>(17:20)</b> |
| <b>2 Second Rhapsody (1931)</b>                | <b>(14:01)</b> |
| <b>3 <i>I Got Rhythm</i> Variations (1934)</b> | <b>(8:29)</b>  |
| <b>Piano Concerto in F (1925)</b>              | <b>(32:30)</b> |
| <b>4 I. Allegro</b>                            | <b>(12:47)</b> |
| <b>5 II. Adagio – Andante con moto</b>         | <b>(12:33)</b> |
| <b>6 III. Allegro agitato</b>                  | <b>(6:53)</b>  |

**Anne-Marie McDermott, piano**  
**Dallas Symphony Orchestra**  
**Justin Brown, conductor**

George Gershwin's claim to fame will always hinge on his popular songs, which have entered the American canon as firmly as those of any composer since Stephen Foster. "Summertime," "Embraceable You," "Someone to Watch Over Me," "Strike up the Band," "S'wonderful," "I Got Rhythm" -- the list is long, and many of these songs have transcended boundaries of race and class, finding performers and audiences in genres as different as jazz and elevator music.

Along the way, however, there have been quite a few crossover steps into the concert hall. And that is entirely appropriate. "Summertime" came from *Porgy and Bess*, a full-fledged opera that has only in recent decades begun to achieve the place it deserves in major opera houses' repertory. Most of Gershwin's popular songs originated in Broadway shows during an era when standards and quality of productions were extraordinarily high. Indeed, many of his shows have as much in common with popular operas as they do with traditional Broadway. In recent years, the tuneful, wittily scored overtures to *Funny Face*, *Girl Crazy*, and *Of Thee I Sing* have begun to crop up on the occasional symphonic program as well as pops concerts.

Ironically, Gershwin craved acceptance from the "art music" establishment at the same time that he was lionized by the Broadway and Hollywood publics. The compositions on which his reputation as a serious composer principally rests -- *Rhapsody in Blue*, the Piano Concerto in F, and *An American in Paris* -- all arose through commissions in the 1920s. They did much to help Gershwin achieve some measure of legitimacy in the so-called serious music world.

This CD unites four Gershwin masterpieces for piano and orchestra. *Rhapsody in Blue* and the *Piano Concerto in F* are popular standards. The other two are less familiar, providing context for the better known works and peppered through with references to his inimitable songs. Collectively they are vintage Gershwin: a microcosm of his style. These stylish performances are at once elegant and capricious, balancing sass with class. Ms. McDermott, Maestro Brown and the Dallas Symphony maintain the intimacy and energy of the Gershwin/Whiteman big band performances, despite a substantially larger ensemble.



George Gershwin became an overnight sensation when he premiered *Rhapsody in Blue* in 1924 with the Paul Whiteman band. The 26-year-old composer was already well known on Tin Pan Alley and on Broadway. *Rhapsody in Blue* expanded his musical territory to the concert hall. Soon it was his signature work.

Ten years later, Gershwin's managers arranged an ambitious tour, ostensibly to celebrate the *Rhapsody's* tenth anniversary, but also to raise money to finance Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess*. The touring show his managers promoted, "A Program of Gershwin Successes," also included tenor James Melton singing cowboy songs and the Leo Reisman Orchestra. The conductor was Charles Previn, who had been the pit conductor for two of Gershwin's Broadway hits: *La La Lucille* and *Of Thee I Sing*. In an era

before commercial air travel was the norm, this mismatched cowboy-cum-Broadway ensemble covered 12,000 miles in four weeks.

For his part, Gershwin was eager to promote some fresh material. His friend Kay Swift later said, "George wrote [the *I Got Rhythm* Variations] partly because he had become rather sick of playing the *Rhapsody* or the *Concerto* [in F]." The result was a set of flashy variations on one of his best-loved songs. Ten years' additional composing experience had rendered him a better orchestrator. The score shows skill, wit, and confidence that were not present in his earlier orchestral forays. Gershwin described the piece on a subsequent radio broadcast.

After the introduction by the orchestra, the piano plays the theme rather simply. The first variation is a very complicated rhythmic pattern played by the piano while the orchestra takes the theme. The next variation is in waltz time. The third is a Chinese variation in which I imitate Chinese flutes played out of tune, as they always are. . . . Next the piano plays the rhythmic variation in which the left hand plays the melody upside down and the right plays it straight, on the theory that you shouldn't let one hand know what the other is doing. Then comes the finale.

He completed the *I Got Rhythm* Variations on 6 January 1934, dedicating the score to his brother Ira. The first performance took place eight days later in Boston's Symphony Hall. This recording presents William Schoenfeld's 1953 re-orchestration, which employs clarinets as well as

saxophones and increases the other woodwinds. Maestro Brown favors this version.

The German conductor Walter Damrosch had heard the 1924 premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue* and was most impressed. Damrosch had conducted the New York Symphony Society since 1903. He approached its president, Harry Harkness Flagler, about commissioning Gershwin to compose an orchestral work, convincing Flagler that the timing was right to take full advantage of Gershwin's surging popularity. Shrewd and farsighted, Damrosch perceived that Gershwin would be a powerful draw at the box office.

Gershwin accepted the commission, despite the fact that, at the time, he lacked any experience writing for symphony orchestra. He decided to cast himself as piano soloist, as he had in the *Rhapsody*. He signed a contract with the New York Symphony in April 1925, agreeing to deliver the score and parts one week before rehearsals started in December and to perform seven concerts with Damrosch's orchestra.

In his first sketches, the work bore the title *New York Concerto*, but Gershwin had changed to the more sedate 'Concerto in F' by mid-July. The music was shaping up to be anything but sedate. Gershwin's basic layout conformed with a traditional concerto: three movements in the order fast, slow, and faster. The atmosphere, however, was not at all traditional. Gershwin's initial thoughts ran along the lines of : Part one, rhythm. Part two, blues. Part three, more rhythm. With his instinctive flair for jazz and his thorough understanding of popular culture, he caught the energy and optimism of the era, incorporating Charleston dance rhythms and the

blues of muted trumpet. He finished composing by September and worked on the orchestration — always a more difficult task for him— throughout October, completing it on November 10, 1925. The premiere took place on December 3, 1925 at New York's venerable Carnegie Hall.

The week before the first performance, Gershwin published an article about his new concerto in the *New York Herald - New York Tribune*. He described it thus:

The first movement employs the Charleston rhythm. It is quick and pulsating, representing the young enthusiastic spirit of American life. It begins with a rhythmic motif given out by the kettledrums, supported by other percussion instruments, and with a Charleston motif introduced by horns, clarinets, and violas. The principal theme is announced by the bassoon. Later, a second theme is introduced by the piano.

The second movement has a poetic nocturnal atmosphere which has come to be referred to as the American blues, but in a purer form than that in which they are usually treated.

The final movement reverts to the style of the first. It is an orgy of rhythms, starting violently and keeping to the same pace throughout.

Walter Damrosch liked to claim that Gershwin had "made a lady

out of jazz" with this work. With its syncopated rhythms and sensual melodies colored by blue notes, the concerto has clear links to jazz; however, Gershwin bristled when it was labeled a 'jazz concerto.' He was proud of his orchestration, a newly-acquired skill, and of the links he made among the three movements. The Concerto has remained an audience favorite for more than 80 years. With one foot in the classical arena and the other in Harlem's jazz halls, this Gershwin masterpiece is unique in the literature.



The *Second Rhapsody* has a complicated history. Its origins were in a film score. George and Ira Gershwin were already a Broadway success by 1929, when Fox signed them for Hollywood. They left for California in November 1930, and set to work on their first project, a film called *Delicious* starring Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell.

The score required four songs plus a dream sequence for voice and orchestra and a six minute rhapsody. The rhapsody was to accompany the heroine, a lonely Scottish immigrant girl running about lost on the streets of Manhattan. Much of the score was recycled from earlier projects, but Gershwin caught fire with the rhapsody, peppering it with street noise, including the hammering of rivets (which gave it an early title of *Rhapsody in Rivets*, later abandoned). When he returned to New York in February 1931, he carried sketches for a full-scale concert piece, 15 minutes in length.

In a letter to Isaac Goldberg, who was working on a Gershwin biography, the composer wrote:

I wrote it mainly because I wanted to write a serious composition and found the opportunity in California to do it. Nearly everybody comes back from California with a western tan and a pocket full of moving-picture money. I decided to come back with both, . . . and a serious composition -- if the climate would let me. I was under no obligation to the Fox Company to write this. But, you know, the old artistic soul must be appeased every so often.

Gershwin played the *Second Rhapsody* at its premiere in January 1932 under the direction of Serge Koussevitzky, as part of the Boston Symphony's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. Boston critics found the piece less spontaneous than its famous predecessor, though they acknowledged Gershwin's advances in form and orchestration. Today, *Rhapsody in Blue* is so overplayed by radio stations that this Rhapsody sounds individual and innovative: a refreshing surprise.

George Gershwin knew Harlem well; in fact, the area figured in the titles of at least two of his own compositions. "Harlem River Chanty" was a choral number in the original version of the show *Tip Toes* (1925), and "Harlem Serenade" was a Ruby Keeler number in *Show Girl* (1929). Like Ellington, Gershwin was intimately bound to the musical life of New York City's most vibrant area for jazz. From childhood, he gravitated to Harlem from his family's various residences in Brooklyn and Manhattan to hear street

music. He practiced what he learned by listening, honing his keyboard technique as a Tin Pan Alley "piano pounder," and informal study with the great stomp and rag pianist Luckey Roberts. Once he was old enough, he was a frequent visitor uptown to Harlem's legendary jazz clubs: Connie's Inn, Small's Paradise, The Cotton Club, and the Saratoga Club, all of which catered to diverse audiences from outside Harlem. Inevitably, Gershwin's exposure to Harlem jazz left its imprint on his developing musical style. The "blue notes" that are a signature feature of jazz vocabulary figure prominently in both his popular and concert music.

Gershwin left his job in Tin Pan Alley in 1917 for Broadway, where he secured a job as a rehearsal pianist. Soon he was contributing songs to new Broadway shows, and in 1919 his first original show, *La La Lucille* opened. A series of other songs and full scores followed, and his reputation grew.

When Gershwin composed *Rhapsody in Blue*, he was 25, ambitious, talented, and still largely unschooled in formal music theory and composition. But he knew jazz, and instinctively understood that jazz deserved a far broader audience than could fit in Harlem clubs. *Rhapsody* was a collaboration with the band leader Paul Whiteman for an event celebrating the future of American music. The piece was to be large scale, free in form, with a prominent, concerto-like solo piano part. Gershwin sketched the score in a two-piano version that initially bore the title 'American Rhapsody;' by the time of the premiere on 12 February, 1924, it had acquired its present title. One important idea that connected the piece to big band jazz was the fabulous opening clarinet riff. It soars upward at the start, then teases its way downward, setting the whole sultry tone of the work.

Whiteman suggested that Ferde Grofé (1892-1972) orchestrate the

*Rhapsody*. Today, Grofé's reputation rests primarily on his splendid and colorful *Grand Canyon Suite* (1931). In 1924, he was highly respected as a band composer and arranger, and he had already worked closely with Whiteman. Grofé's accomplishment was masterly, and contributed greatly to *Rhapsody in Blue*'s success.

Gershwin later told his biographer Isaac Goldberg:

I heard it as a musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our national pep, of our blues, our metropolitan madness.

That description helps to explain the vivid snapshots in Gershwin's music. The *Rhapsody* consists of two large sections that are peppered with improvisatory solo piano sections. Major rhythmic ideas dominate the first half, with extensive, non-traditional development. The slow E-major section that contains the *Rhapsody*'s most famous melody is the emotional heart of the work, but gives way to a showy and virtuosic close.

*Rhapsody in Blue* has had an extraordinary impact on the history of American music and culture. Although some critics objected to Gershwin's lack of traditional formal discipline, the audience loved the piece. Everyone -- even the most disdainful critics -- acknowledged the freshness of the musical ideas. Today, it is widely recognized as a pivotal work that brought jazz into the concert hall. *Rhapsody in Blue* positioned Gershwin as the great hope of American music and has become a representative symbol of its era.

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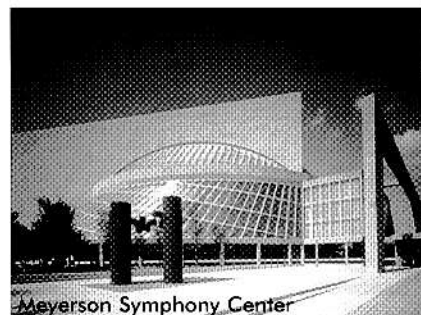
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A luminous, boldly emotive pianist, **Anne-Marie McDermott** is widely celebrated for her performances on the world's most illustrious stages. Ms. McDermott made her debut with the New York Philharmonic in 1997 under Christian Thielemann and has since appeared with the orchestras of Atlanta, Baltimore, Dallas, Hong Kong, Houston, Minnesota, Pittsburgh, Seattle, St. Louis, Tucson, the LA Chamber Orchestra, the Mostly Mozart Orchestra, and the National Symphony, and has toured extensively with the Australian Chamber Orchestra and the Moscow Virtuosi. Recital engagements have included New York's 92nd Street Y, Town Hall and Alice Tully Hall, the Kennedy Center and San Francisco's Herbst Theatre and the Schubert Club. She has participated in such festivals as

Mostly Mozart, Ravinia, Aspen, Bravo Vail Valley, Santa Fe, Spoleto, Chamber Music Northwest, Newport, the Dubrovnik Festival, and the Festival Casals in Puerto Rico. A passionate champion of the music of Prokofiev, Anne-Marie McDermott has performed the complete cycle of sonatas to great acclaim at the Lincoln Center Festival, the University of Arizona, Chamber Music Northwest in Portland, and at UCLA's Schoenberg Hall. She has also recorded the complete cycle of Prokofiev sonatas and chamber works for Arabesque Recordings. Since 1998, Ms. McDermott and violinist Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg have performed together as a duo, and in the same year, Ms. McDermott, Ida Kavafian, Steven Tenenbom and Peter Wiley formed the piano quartet, Opus One. Ms. McDermott is the Artistic Director of the Ocean Reef Chamber Music Festival in Key Largo, Florida, and the Festival Curacao@Avila Beach.

Anne-Marie McDermott was the winner of the Young Concert Artists Auditions, and has been the recipient of the Avery Fisher Career Development Award, the Andrew Wolf Memorial Chamber Music Award, the Joseph Kalichstein Piano Prize, the Paul A. Fish Memorial Prize, the Bruce Hungerford Memorial Prize, and the Mortimer Levitt Career Development Award for Women Artists. Ms. McDermott began playing the piano at age 5. By 12 she had performed the Mendelssohn Concerto in G minor with the National Orchestral Association at Carnegie Hall. She studied at the Manhattan School of Music as a scholarship student with Dalmo Carra, Constance Keene and John Browning, and participated in master classes with Leon Fleisher, Menahem Pressler, Abbey Simon, Rosalyn Tureck, Michael Tilson Thomas and Mstislav Rostropovich.





The British conductor **Justin Brown** is the Music Director of the Alabama Symphony Orchestra, a position he has held since 2006. Critic Alex Ross of the *New Yorker* recently wrote that "in less than a year, Brown has established the Alabama as one of the country's most adventurous regional orchestras." In September 2008 he will additionally become General Music Director of the Badisches Staatstheater, Karlsruhe. He has conducted most of the UK's leading orchestras, including the BBC Symphony, the Royal Philharmonic and the London Symphony Orchestra, as well as many of the most prestigious orchestras throughout the world, including the Oslo and St. Petersburg Philharmonic

Orchestras, the Finnish and Luxembourg Radio Orchestras, the Dallas and Indianapolis Symphonies, the Tokyo and Malaysian Philharmonics and the Sydney and Melbourne Symphony Orchestras. He has conducted in opera houses on two continents, including the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, the Santa Fe Opera, the Frankfurt and Stuttgart State Operas and the English National Opera. His recordings for Bridge Records include the *Gramophone* Award-winning and Grammy-nominated *Music of Peter Lieberson* (BRIDGE 9178), *Music of Elliott Carter, Vol. 6* (BRIDGE 9177), and *Music of Poul Ruders, Vol. 5* (BRIDGE 9237). He has also recorded in the UK with both the Royal Philharmonic and City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestras.

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