

program notes

BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

***An American in Paris* (1928)**

GEORGE GERSHWIN ■ 1898-1937

In 1928, George Gershwin was not only the toast of Broadway, but of all America, Britain and many spots in Europe, as well: he had produced a string of successful shows (*Rosalie* and *Funny Face* were both running on Broadway that spring), composed two of the most popular concert pieces in recent memory (*Rhapsody in Blue* and the Piano Concerto in F), and was leading a life that would have made the most glamorous socialite jealous. The pace-setting *Rhapsody in Blue* of 1924 had shown a way to bridge the worlds of jazz and serious music, a direction Gershwin followed in the exuberant yet haunting Piano Concerto in F the following year. He was eager to move further into the concert world, and during a side trip in March 1926 to Paris from London, where he was preparing the English premiere of *Lady Be Good*, he hit upon an idea, a “walking theme” he called it, that seemed to capture the impression of an American visitor to the city “as he strolls about, listens to the various street noises, and absorbs the French atmosphere.” He worried that “this melody is so complete in itself, I don’t know where to go next,” but the purchase of four Parisian taxi horns on the Avenue de la Grande Armée inspired a second theme for the piece. Late in 1927, a commission for a new orchestral composition from Walter Damrosch, music director of the New York Symphony and conductor of the sensational premiere of the Concerto

in F, caused Gershwin to gather up his Parisian sketches, and by January 1928, he was at work on the score: *An American in Paris*. When he returned to New York in late June, he discovered that the New York Symphony had announced the premiere for the upcoming season, so he worked on the piece throughout the autumn and finished the orchestration only a month before the premiere, on December 13, 1928. *An American in Paris*, though it met with a mixed critical reception, proved to be a great success with the public, and it quickly became clear that Gershwin had scored yet another hit.

For the premiere, Deems Taylor collaborated with the composer to produce the following insouciant description of *An American in Paris*: “You are to imagine an American visiting Paris, swinging down the Champs-Élysées. He starts off to the tune of The First Walking Theme. French taxicabs seem to amuse him particularly, a fact that the orchestra points out in brief episodes introducing four real Paris taxi horns. Our American strolls on through the medium of The Second Walking Theme, which is announced by the clarinet in French with a strong American accent.

“It may be that he continues down the Champs-Élysées, and that when The Third Walking Theme makes its eventual appearance our American has crossed the Seine and is somewhere on the Left Bank. The end of this section is couched in terms so pleasantly blurred as to suggest that the American is in a café exploring the mysteries of Anise de Lozo.

“And now the orchestra introduces an unhallowed episode. Suffice it to say that a solo violin approaches our hero (in the soprano register) and addresses him in the most charming broken English. Of course, it is possible the whole episode is simply a musical transition. This may well be true, for otherwise it is difficult to believe what ensues: our hero becomes homesick. He has the blues; and if the behavior of the solo trumpet be any criterion, he has them very thoroughly.

“However, just in the nick of time the orchestra rushes another theme to the rescue, a noisy, cheerful, self-confident Charleston without a drop of Gallic blood in its veins. Walking Theme Number Two enters soon thereafter, enthusiastically abetted by Number Three. The blues return but mitigated by the Second Walking Theme — a happy reminiscence rather than a homesick yearning — and the orchestra, in a riotous finale, decides to make a night of it. It will be great to get home; but meanwhile, this is Paris!”

Variations on *I Got Rhythm* for Piano and Orchestra

GEORGE GERSHWIN

Gershwin loved to improvise on his songs for friends and it was for a concert tour in early 1934 with the Leo Reisman Orchestra, conducted by Charles Previn (great-uncle of André and later director of music at Universal Studios), that he immortalized some of his extemporizations as the *Variations on “I Got Rhythm,”* the hit song from his 1930 Broadway show, *Girl Crazy*. The tour was a series of one-night stands that began in Boston on January 14, wound through two-dozen cities, and ended, after 12,000 miles, at Brooklyn’s Academy of Music on February 10.

On each concert, Gershwin conducted

An American in Paris, was soloist in the Concerto in F and *Rhapsody in Blue*, and accompanied tenor James Melton in a selection of his songs. The “*I Got Rhythm*” *Variations*, written for the tour, gives some indication of the breadth and imagination that Gershwin must have displayed in his improvisations — hot jazz, mock Orientalism, coy waltz, virtuoso bravura and grand symphonism all find a place here. Most of the composition was written in December 1933 in Palm Beach; the orchestration (which Gershwin bragged to his friends that he did himself) was completed on January 6, 1934 in New York. The “*I Got Rhythm*” *Variations* was his last concert work.

***Appalachian Spring* (1943-1944)**

AARON COPLAND ■ 1900-1990

In 1942, dancer and choreographer Martha Graham commissioned a new ballet from Aaron Copland set to a scenario titled *Appalachian Spring*, based on her memories of her grandmother’s farm in turn-of-the-20th-century Pennsylvania. Edwin Denby’s description of the ballet’s action from his review of the New York premiere in May 1945 was reprinted in the published score: “[The ballet concerns] a pioneer celebration in spring around a newly built farmhouse in the Pennsylvania hills in the early part of the 19th century. The bride-to-be and the young farmer-husband enact the emotions, joyful and apprehensive, their new domestic partnership invites. An older neighbor suggests now and then the rocky confidence of experience. A revivalist and his followers remind the new householders of the strange and terrible aspects of human fate. At the end, the couple are left quiet and strong in their new house.”

***Rhapsody in Blue* for Piano and Orchestra**

GEORGE GERSHWIN

ORCHESTRATED BY

FERDE GROFÉ ■ 1892-1972

For George White's *Scandals of 1922*, the 24-year-old George Gershwin provided something a little bit different — an opera, a brief, somber one-acter called *Blue Monday* (later retitled 135th Street) incorporating some jazz elements that White cut after only one performance on the grounds that it was too gloomy. *Blue Monday*, however, impressed the show's conductor, Paul Whiteman, then gaining a national reputation as the self-styled "King of Jazz" for his adventurous explorations of the new popular music styles with his Palais Royal Orchestra. A year later, Whiteman told Gershwin about his plans for a special program the following February in which he hoped to show some of the ways traditional concert music could be enriched by jazz, and convinced Gershwin to undertake a work for piano solo (to be played by the composer) and Whiteman's 22-piece orchestra — and then told him that it had to be finished in less than a month.

The premiere of the *Rhapsody in Blue* — New York City, Aeolian Hall, February 12, 1924 — was one of the greatest nights in American music. Many of the era's most illustrious musicians attended, critics from far and near assembled to pass judgment, and the glitterati of society, arts and culture graced the memorable event. Gershwin fought down his apprehension over his joint debuts as serious composer and concert pianist, and he and his *Rhapsody in Blue* had a brilliant success.

ALLENTOWN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

FEBRUARY 9 AND 10, 2019
8:00 P.M., SYMPHONY HALL

P R O G R A M

DIANE M. WITTRY MUSIC DIRECTOR/CONDUCTOR

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for Piano and Orchestra
Piano Soloist: Simon Mulligan

I N T E R M I S S I O N

Appalachian Spring AARON COPLAND
Ballet Guild of the Lehigh Valley
Karen Kroninger Knerr, Artistic Director

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