PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

George Gershwin
Born September 26, 1898, Brooklyn, New York.

Concerto in F for Piano and Orchestra

Gershwin composed his piano concerto between July 22 and November 10, 1925, and played the solo at the premiere on December 3 of that year, in New York City. The orchestra consists of two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, slapstick, xylophone, and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty-two minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra first performed Gershwin's Concerto in F on a special concert in conjunction with the Century of Progress International Exposition at the Auditorium Theatre on June 14, 1933, with the composer as soloist and William Daly conducting. The Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of this concerto were given at Orchestra Hall on March 15 and 16, 1945, with Oscar Levant as soloist and Désiré Defauw conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on January 23, 24, 25, and 28, 1997, with William Eddins as soloist and Daniel Barenboim conducting. The Orchestra first performed this concerto at the Ravinia Festival on July 25, 1936, with the composer as soloist and William Daly conducting, and most recently on July 4, 2004, with Kevin Cole as soloist and David Alan Miller conducting.

For the record
A 1976 performance of Gershwin's Concerto in F given by the Chicago Symphony, with Lorin Hollander, pianist, and James Levine, conductor, is included in From the Archives, vol. 18.

In 1919, when George Gershwin scored his first big hit with the song “Swanee,” and the arch-modernist Arnold Schoenberg was developing the twelve-tone system, it seemed unlikely that these two men would ever cross paths; but, in fact, they actually became friends. Each recognized that the other had made an indelible impact on twentieth-century music. In 1937, when Gershwin died of a brain tumor at the age of thirty-eight, Schoenberg wrote:

Music to him was the air he breathed, the food which nourished him, the drink that refreshed him. Music was what made him feel, and music the feeling he expressed. Directness of this kind is given only to great men, and there is no doubt that he was a great composer.

Gershwin's true greatness was in the natural way he closed the gap between commercial and serious music, and he was talented enough to succeed brilliantly in both worlds. As Schoenberg once noted, surely with a touch of envy, Gershwin was the rare composer “whose feelings actually coincide with those of the 'average man in the street.' ”

After the success of “Swanee,” Gershwin had a steady stream of hits (and made the kind of money that is unheard of in the classical music business), but he was determined to write serious music that was equally popular. He even asked Ravel and Stravinsky for lessons. Ravel declined; when Stravinsky learned that Gershwin earned $100,000 a year, he allegedly suggested that Gershwin give him lessons instead.

For all their jazzy rhythms, bluesy harmonies, and big Broadway melodies, Gershwin's most important—and beloved—works are written in the traditional European forms. An American in Paris is really a tone poem for orchestra (Gershwin gives it that subtitle on the first page of the orchestral manuscript), and Porgy and Bess is an opera. The most classical of all Gershwin's works is the Concerto in F for piano and
orchestra, written in the form established by Mozart and Beethoven. It was commissioned by the conductor Walter Damrosch, who, astonished by the originality and brilliance of Rhapsody in Blue, immediately asked Gershwin for a concerto “proper.”

Gershwin’s first biographer, Isaac Goldberg, claimed that after accepting Damrosch’s commission, Gershwin went out to buy a book on musical form, to see how a concerto was constructed. (Gershwin may have wanted a refresher course, but he was far from untrained; for several years he had studied harmony, orchestration, and musical form with Edward Kilenyi.) But Gershwin had talents no other American composer at the time could touch: he possessed a phenomenal gift for melody and a natural feeling for dramatic pacing that no textbook could ever teach him, and he seemed to know innately what audiences would like, remember, and want to hear again.

In the first movement, Gershwin’s lively, abundant ideas and classical sonata form are sometimes an uneasy fit (the development section, in particular, is mostly variation and vampiğini). But the material is inspired throughout, and Gershwin, like a great actor or comedian, has an uncanny knack for timing. The slow central movement combines song form with the classically defined rondo. It is really a big blues number for piano, with a wonderfully sultry solo for the muted trumpet. The third movement is a brief rondo that reprises themes from the earlier movements and ends, in the best Broadway fashion, with a “grandioso” return of the main theme of the opening movement.

The Concerto in F stands as one of the high points in the merger of European sensibilities with the freedom, rhythmic excitement, and bravado of jazz and American musical theater—a new tradition fostered alike by the Europeans Stravinsky and Milhaud (both of whom scooped Gershwin in their efforts, but could not match his success) and the Americans Copland and Bernstein. The true significance of Gershwin’s achievement was too little appreciated at the time. Only a week before his death, Gershwin complained to a friend about the indifference he encountered in Hollywood: “I had to live for this?” he asked. “That Sam Goldwyn should say to me: ‘Why don’t you write hits like Irving Berlin?’” But few composers were as widely loved during their lifetime as Gershwin. His premature death came as a shock to the American public—the novelist John O’Hara said, “I don’t have to believe it if I don’t want to”—and it was recognized, even then, as an incalculable loss to American music.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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