

Prelude

“Inside Masterworks”



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JUNE 2016

Masterworks #9: *Gershwin: Pop artist or classical composer?*



On April 21, 2016, the New York Times report on the death of Prince featured the headline, “Prince, an Artist Who Defied Genre.” The article described Prince, musical icon and seven-time Grammy winner, as “... a wildly prolific songwriter, a virtuoso on guitars, keyboards and drums and a master architect of funk, rock, R&B and pop, even as his music defied genres.” The article concluded: “His music was a cornucopia of ideas: triumphantly, brilliantly kaleidoscopic.”



music for the Jerome Remick music-publishing company.⁴ In 1918, at age 20, his apparent talent was noticed by Harms, Inc., who hired him as a songwriter for a fixed weekly salary.⁵ By 1924, *Rhapsody in Blue* brought him recognition as a major figure in American music,⁶ and “popularized emerging concepts of the jazz-meets-classical crossover work.”⁷ His subsequent compositions, *Concerto in E*, *Porgy and Bess* and *An American In Paris* fully absorbed jazz into the classical repertoire.⁸

In popular music, the extraordinary artists and composers who cross the “boundaries” of designated musical art forms are celebrated and revered. The inability to “pigeonhole” their musical artistry is respected and lauded. Within the classical music world, however, such genius is not always welcomed with open arms by an eager public. The classical world often views “crossover artists” as an attempt to “dumb down” the music, fearing it will “dilute the purity” of the classical art form. Even George Gershwin, recognized as one of the world’s first “crossover artists,” was not embraced by American classical music critics.¹

But unlike Prince, whose wide range of musical styles defy categorization and enhanced every genre in which he experimented, Gershwin was not widely accepted in the world of classical music. The American view of Gershwin as “talented but lacking the credentials of a classical composer” damaged his reputation, and evidence suggests he took the criticism personally.⁹



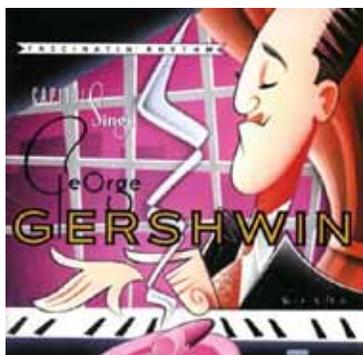
Gershwin first came to the public’s attention as a master of the three-minute popular song, a “Tin Pan Alley” tunesmith.² In 1914, by the age of 16, having dropped out of school at 15,

Gershwin was earning \$15 a week, making piano rolls for player pianos and playing in New York nightclubs.³ Undoubtedly the youngest “song plugger” on Tin Pan Alley, Gershwin’s primary job was to demonstrate sheet

Certainly, Gershwin was not the only classical composer to expand his reach into other musical forms. In the 1930’s, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, a wunderkind from Vienna whose operas and concert music were highly respected and widely performed, was welcomed into the world of Hollywood, composing 16 film scores. He won the Academy Award for Best Original Film score for *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (starring Errol

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Flynn), but remains highly regarded as a classical composer. Indeed, Korngold's Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 35, is one of the enduring works for the instrument. Sergei Prokofiev composed for several films in the 1930's. Aaron Copland, composer of *Appalachian Spring*, *Rodeo*, *El Salon Mexico* and *Billy the Kid*, among others, composed the score for the 1938 movie "Of Mice And Men" starring Burgess Meredith; his music was again used in the movie "Raging Bull" with Robert DiNiro. Composer Philip Glass wrote the soundtrack for "The Truman Show" featuring Jim Carrey. Perhaps the most prolific classical composer who wrote for cinema was Dmitri Shostakovich, who scored 34 films.¹⁰



While each of the above composers retained great respect and admiration within the classical world, Gershwin struggled for recognition, especially during his lifetime. Author David Schiff theorizes that in America, there existed a persistent myth that true classical artists had to be

young men of means and leisure,¹¹ a myth less common in Europe, where a career as a serious composer was open to talent and not limited by class. European composers such as Haydn, Dvorak, Mahler and Schoenberg came from humble origins.¹² Moreover, for many years in Europe, the line between serious and popular music had been blurred. Brahms, for example, achieved fame and wealth with "dressed-up café music – waltzes and Hungarian dances."¹³

The elitist rise of modernism contributed to – or even created – the myth. As modernism took hold in 20th Century America, attitudes of prestige and high culture were embraced, teaching audiences to approach the music with a serious purpose and feeling of reverence.¹⁴ The belief that classical music is exclusively a "high" art form perpetuates its separation from "new" or more popular music.¹⁵

Untainted by the skepticism of American critics, European composers Maurice Ravel and Kurt Weill paid Gershwin the ultimate compliment with large-scale imitation of his music: *Rhapsody in Blue* is quoted in Ravel's *Piano Concerto in G*, and Weill modeled his opera *Street Scene* after *Porgy and Bess*.¹⁶ But in America, Gershwin's legacy as a great classical composer remained open to question and debate, as summarized by David Schiff:



"We Americans... have yet to make up our minds about Gershwin. Even though he is the one twentieth-century American composer whose music is played all the time and everywhere, Gershwin is an isolated and inimitable figure – the only popular composer of this century whose works have made a lasting dent in the granitic façade of the classical canon."¹⁷

Today, cross-over composers such as Mark O'Connor and Edgar Meyers are becoming more popular. Their music combines 'classical' with the "American sounds" of jazz, bluegrass and "fiddling", music with which broader American audiences can more readily identify,¹⁸ arguably creating a more textured sound with widespread appeal.

HSO's final Masterworks of the 2015-2016 season, **An American In Paris: World Winds, June 9 – 12, 2016**, showcases the iconic music of Gershwin and Osvaldo Golijov, a living 21st Century composer who utilizes unique sounds and non-traditional instrumentation. The program embraces a richness of sound and, to quote from Prince's obituary, results in a "cornucopia of ideas, brilliantly kaleidoscopic", boldly celebrating *all* music. *We invite all to join us!*



For extra fun, click the following link to listen to a Gershwin favorite, *Rhapsody In Blue*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFHdRkeEnpM>

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The return of Casey's Classics *Recommended recordings for your listening pleasure!*

Curious about what you will be hearing on the concert program, or want to hear more? Coleman Casey, HSO's dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers the following recommendations for recordings of selections featured on our upcoming Masterworks Concert:

George Gershwin's *An American in Paris* is memorably performed by Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic (SONY), a sixty year old recording (in stereo) that sounds like it was recorded yesterday, with a verve and energy to match.

Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances* have all the Russian darkness and glitter one could hope for in Vladimir Ashkenazy's recording with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam in a magnificent digital recording from DECCA.

[Golijov's *Rose of the Wind* has not been recorded.]

- ¹ Classicfm.com/composers/Gershwin/guides. Artist In The Dock – Gershwin. Web 21 March 2016
- ² Keller, Hans. "Gershwin's Genius." *The Musical Times* 103.1437 (1962): 763-64. JSTOR, Web. 04 Aug 2015
- ³ "George Gershwin." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 2004. Web. 5 Aug. 2015
- ⁴ "George Gershwin, American composer." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2015, Web. 1 March 2016.
- ⁵ "George Gershwin." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 2004. Web. 5 Aug. 2015
- ⁶ Freed, Richard. "An American in Paris: About the Work." *The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts., n.d.* Web. 05 Aug. 2015.
- ⁷ Classicfm.com/composers/Gershwin/guides. Artist In The Dock – Gershwin. Web 21 March 2016
- ⁸ *Supra.*
- ⁹ Schiff, David. "Misunderstanding Gershwin (Part two)", *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1998. Volume 282, No. 4
- ¹⁰ Chihara, Paul, "From Scene to Shining Screen: A short History of Film Music", American Composers Orchestra, Web, 4 January 2016
- ¹¹ Schiff, David. "Misunderstanding Gershwin (Part one)", *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1998. Volume 282, No. 4
- ¹² *Supra.*
- ¹³ *Supra.*
- ¹⁴ Iannaccone, Louanne Marie. "Crossing Over in the 21st Century: New Perspectives On Classical Music Through The Work of Mark O'Connor, Edgar Meyer and Bela Fleck." Masters Thesis, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, August 2005.
- ¹⁵ *Supra.*
- ¹⁶ Schiff, David. "Misunderstanding Gershwin (Part one)", *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1998. Volume 282, No. 4
- ¹⁷ *Supra.*
- ¹⁸ Iannaccone, Louanne Marie. "Crossing Over in the 21st Century: New Perspectives On Classical Music Through The Work of Mark O'Connor, Edgar Meyer and Bela Fleck." Masters Thesis, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, August 2005.