

[On Gershwin joining the mainstream repertoire]

An Upstart Named Gershwin Gets His Shot

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By Joseph Horowitz

This week's performances of George Gershwin's Concerto in F by the Boston Symphony Orchestra are symbolic: never before in the orchestra's 124-year history has Gershwin's popular piano concerto shown up on a regular season subscription program at Symphony Hall. And the orchestra is taking the same program – led by Music Director James Levine with Jean-Yves Thibaudet as soloist – to Carnegie Hall on Monday, October 10.

Mr. Levine, who in 1985 brought Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess" to the Metropolitan Opera for the first time, last season led Boston's first subscription performances of the same composer's "An American in Paris." The Boston Symphony first gave "Rhapsody in Blue" for its regular subscribers as recently as 1997, with Andre Previn doubling as pianist and conductor.

That Gershwin is no longer relegated to "pops" status in Boston – his compositions have long been offered by the Boston Pops for casual summer listeners – correlates with a national trend. That in Boston, especially, Gershwin was previously marginalized is a legacy of the orchestra's seminal post-World War I music director, Serge Koussevitzky. Koussevitzky championed American music; he predicted that "the next Beethoven will come from Colorado." But although he commissioned Gershwin's Second Rhapsody, Koussevitzky did not consider Gershwin a potential Beethoven. The heroic Third Symphonies of Roy Harris and Aaron Copland, both of which Koussevitzky introduced, were the kind of "serious" Americana he had in mind.

Gershwin, by comparison, was not taken seriously – and not only in Boston. Though in retrospect "An American in Paris" may plausibly be considered a more consummated and infectious symphonic opus than any of the American symphonies Koussevitzky sampled, it was long dismissed by American highbrows as a lower musical species. Gershwin's first appearance with the New York Symphony in 1925 – the premiere of the Concerto in F – is an extreme example of the same antipathy. The musicians "hated Gershwin with instinctive loathing," testified the violinist Winthrop Sargeant (later a music critic of consequence). They "pretended to regard Gershwin's music humorously, made funny noises, and played it, in general, with a complete lack of understanding of the American idiom."

Other orchestras were more respectful, but some writers were not. Paul Rosenfeld, who influentially championed Copland in intellectual circles, detected in Gershwin the Russian Jew a "weakness of spirit, possibly as a consequence of the circumstance that the new world attracted the less stable types." This observation appeared in "The New Republic" in 1933.

Rosenfeld's point was that Gershwin was talented but vulgar, "a gifted composer of the lower, unpretentious order." More politely, Copland was similarly disposed. He omitted Gershwin from his various surveys of important or promising American composers.

When in 1937 he was asked to compare his music with “Mr. Gershwin’s jazz,” he opined, “Gershwin is serious up to a point. My idea was to intensify it. Not what you get in the dance hall but to use it cubistically – to make it more exciting than ordinary jazz.”

On another occasion, Copland complained that the cowboy songs he appropriated in “Billy the Kid” (at Lincoln Kirstein’s suggestion) were not especially beautiful. These objections should not be interpreted as mere snobbery. A conscious modernist, trained in Europe, Copland preferred to expand, compress, surperimpose, or rhythmically distort the popular tunes he used in “Billy” or “El Salon Mexico.” He considered it a “formal problem” that otherwise there was little to be done “with such material except repeat it.” The song-forms blithely employed by Gershwin seemed banal to American composers seeking an up-to-date high-culture idiom.

The performance history of the Concerto in F documents Gershwin’s vexed reputation in American classical-music circles. His own renditions of the concerto attracted exceptionally large and enthusiastic audiences. But the critical response swirled with confusion and controversy over the work’s pedigree. Many of these local premieres were engulfed in short “pops” numbers by Rimsky-Korsakov, Smetana, Chabrier, and the like. Others, however, took Gershwin “seriously.” Damrosch, at Carnegie Hall, premiered the concerto alongside a symphony by Glazunov and a suite by Henri Rabaud. In St. Louis, Vladimir Golschmann (who in Paris had already conducted the concerto to resounding popular and critical acclaim) positioned it after Tchaikovsky’s “Pathetique” Symphony. Fritz Reiner, in Cincinnati, coupled it with Beethoven’s Seventh, Strauss’s “Til Eulenspiegel,” and “Rhapsody in Blue.”

But during his subsequent reign as music director in Chicago (1953-62), Reiner conducted not a note of Gershwin – not even Robert Russell Bennett’s ever-popular “Porgy and Bess” synthesis, which Reiner himself had introduced in 1943. Not until 2000 did Daniel Barenboim become the first Chicago Symphony music director to have led all three of Gershwin’s choice symphonic productions – the concerto, the “Rhapsody,” and “An American in Paris” – on regular-season subscription concerts.

In fact, music directors of American orchestras are increasingly likely to embrace Gershwin as a mainstream master. Lorin Maazel conducted both “American in Paris” and the Concerto in F in Pittsburgh in the 1980s. Andrew Litton, in Dallas, and Michael Tilson Thomas, in San Francisco, conspicuously advocate Gershwin. So will Robert Spano in Atlanta, and Jeffrey Kahane with his Colorado Symphony. Of the most prestigious American orchestras, only Philadelphia and Cleveland continue to marginalize the big Gershwin scores. The New York Philharmonic, singularly, has never done so: Artur Rodzinski, Dimitri Mitropoulos, Leonard Bernstein, Zubin Mehta, Kurt Masur, and now Mr. Maazel have all conducted Gershwin for regular-season subscribers.

The experience of Benjamin Pasternack, who regularly played piano parts for the Boston Symphony in the 1980s, testifies to the aspersions once cast upon “Rhapsody in Blue.” As a regular season soloist with the orchestra, Mr. Pasternack played Bartok, Bernstein, Mozart, and Rachmaninoff. But his Boston performances of the Gershwin “Rhapsody” were always Boston Pops events. Following the advice of his New York manager, he omitted “Rhapsody in Blue” from his repertoire list.

The pianist Alexander Toradze reports a similar experience. After defecting to the United States from the Soviet Union in 1983, he thought to acquire the Concerto in F. Two American managers told him that to do so would harm his professional standing. “In Russia, if you could improvise and play Gershwin, your reputation went up, not down,” Mr. Toradze comments. It bears mentioning that when Dmitiri Shostakovich heard “Porgy and Bess” in Moscow in 1945, he called it “magnificent” and compared Gershwin to Borodin and Mussorgsky. In the United States, the composer/critic Virgil Thomson, reviewing the premiere of “Porgy” in 1935, found it “crooked folklore and halfway opera.”

For that matter, eminent European-born musicians for decades admired Gershwin without the qualms typically expressed by eminent Americans. Reiner and Arnold Schoenberg befriended Gershwin. Otto Klemperer and Sergie Rachmaninoff admired him from a distance. Jascha Heifetz, who transcribed tunes from “Porgy,” hoped for a Gershwin Violin Concerto. Upon hearing the Concerto in F, the important Paris-born musicologist Carl Engel sent Gershwin a note reading, “You must whisper softly still when you dare suggest that at last American has a music all its own.” Alluding to the Americans Copland and George Antheil, the important German-born Boston composer Charles Martin Loeffler wrote to Gershwin in 1927: “It is needless to say that I have pinned my faith on your delightful genius and on your future. You alone seem to express charm, race, and invention amongst the composers of our time. When the Anthlands and Coptheils et tutti quanti will be forgotten . . . you, my dear friend, will be recorded in the Anthologies of coming ages.”

And the influential European admirers of American jazz were legion: Hindemith, Milhaud, Weill, Honegger, Poulenc, Ravel. That such visitors as Stravinsky and Bartok gravitated to Harlem’s bands, not to the Koussevitzky-sanctioned symphonists, made Gershwin and jazz the more threatening to the nascent American symphonic enterprise. And so it is both ironic and appropriate that this week’s Gershwin soloist in Boston and New York is a Frenchman. Speaking from the West Coast the other day, Jean-Yves Thibaudet, a product of the Paris Conservatory, said that as far as he was concerned, Gershwin was “always part of the mainstream repertoire.” “I learned the Concerto in F and ‘Rhapsody in Blue’ when I was 13 or 14 years old,” he recalled. “These pieces are very well-known in France.” (Among eminent French pianists, Philippe Entremont, Pascal Roge, and Helene Grimaux are also Gershwin players.) If anything, Mr. Thibaudet continued, Europeans take Gershwin “more ‘seriously’” than Americans do. “I think he’s respected as much as any of the classical composers. In Europe he’s an icon.”

Mr. Thibaudet, who has recorded “Rhapsody in Blue” (with a British orchestra), rarely plays that work or the Gershwin concerto on “pops” programs. The Cincinnati Symphony, the Monte Carlo Philharmonic, the Munich Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the National Symphony, and the Pittsburgh Symphony are some of the orchestras with which he has performed the Gershwin concerto. He has also recently acquired Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm” Variations (“it’s my new favorite piece”). He was incredulous when informed that his upcoming Gershwin performances would be a Boston landmark. “I was also told that in San Francisco I will be giving the first Concerto in F on subscription in 56 years. I thought they were joking.” As for criticism of the concerto’s structure: “How many people think about that when they’re listening? And who cares? Look at how Ravel was impressed – he was completely crazy about Gershwin.

I think that's a symptom of his intelligence, really. I think others composers were simply jealous."

In 1931, Ravel composed a singular homage: his Piano Concerto in G, music inconceivable without Gershwin's example. He had earlier penned one of the most eloquent tributes ever expressed by one composer about another. Writing to Nadia Boulanger, from whom Gershwin had asked for composition lessons, Ravel declared: "There is a musician here endowed with the most brilliant, most enchanting, and perhaps the most profound talent: George Gershwin. His world-wide success no longer satisfies him, for he is aiming higher. He knows that he lacks the technical means to achieve his goal. In teaching him those means, one might ruin his talent. Would you have the courage, which I wouldn't dare have, to undertake this awesome responsibility?" (Boulanger declined Gershwin's request.)

One moral of this tangled Gershwin tale is that America's classical music culture – with a late start vis-a-vis the parent culture in Europe – long overstressed its elite pedigree. Now that everyone has relaxed about that – even classical music is not immune to easy postmodern excursions across onetime cultural boundaries -- it becomes easy, as well, to acknowledge the genius of a favorite native composer on the outskirts of high-cultural respectability.

Roy Harris, who conspicuously eschewed jazz, was once called "the great white hope" of American music. With the wisdom of hindsight, we can today appreciate that the great interwar hope for American classical music was an interloper who could seamlessly connected the world of Beethoven with the popular genres that made American music world-famous – with Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood; with Paul Whiteman and Duke Ellington.

George Gershwin's early death – in 1937 at the age of 38 – robbed us of the string quartet he had begun, of the concerto he might have given his friend Heifetz, of an American opera to build upon "Porgy." These are losses that cannot be recouped. But "An American in Paris," "Rhapsody in Blue," and the Concerto in F can be properly reclaimed.

"Of course Gershwin called it a 'concerto,' and some people think that the word 'concerto' dictates a certain European form," comments Benjamin Pasternack. "But those criticisms are simply not germane. You know, the person who first recommended this music to me was my teacher Rudolf Serkin. 'Maybe you'd like Gershwin's concerto,' he said, 'it's a wonderful piece.' As for 'Rhapsody in Blue,' audiences are simply thrilled and happy when they hear it, from beginning to end. It always has that effect. I think it's probably the best-loved music in the entire concert repertoire."