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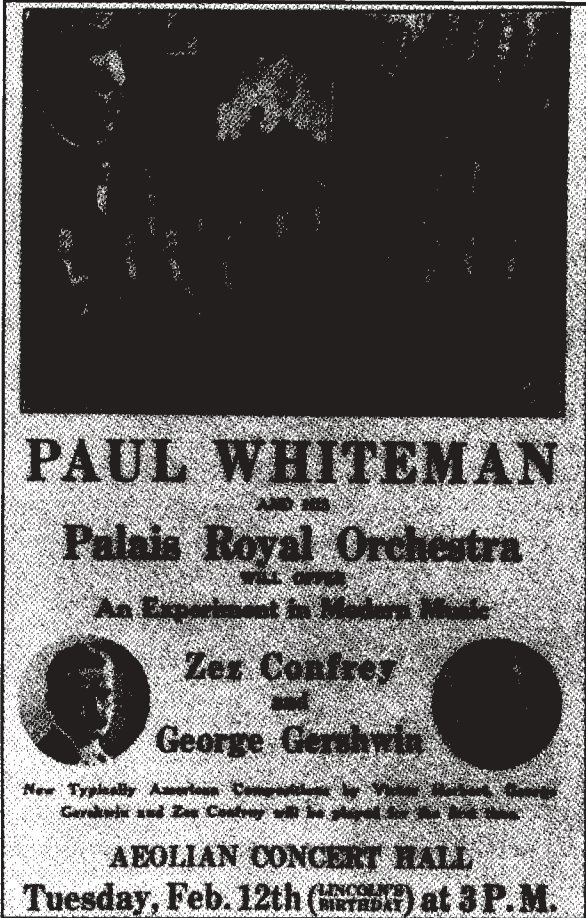
Rethinking the Rhapsody

by
Richard Crawford

In the late 1950s, when I decided to become a musicologist, Gershwin was a figure who didn't fit very easily into what we would have called the historical narratives of American music, if we had known that term. In 1964, I had my first chance to teach American music at the University of Michigan, and I used as my basis an outline prepared by H. Wiley Hitchcock for a course I myself had taken at Michigan in 1958. I don't remember Gershwin playing much of a role in Wiley's course, and I know he didn't in mine. I *do* remember, though, that by the early 1970s I had banned the *Rhapsody in Blue* as a term paper topic. By then, I had received enough shallow, unreflective papers on the subject to judge that a desire to write on the *Rhapsody* was a sign of an incurious mind—at least in that day and age.

Admittedly my own image of Gershwin was thoroughly unoriginal: Gershwin was a great songwriter who tried to cross over into the concert hall and wasn't quite up to it. I was still capable of getting goose bumps from the *Rhapsody* and the *Concerto in F*; but as a trained musicologist, I recognized them as the sign of a weakness that might still be outgrown. What inspired me to start thinking of Gershwin in a different light was reading *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967) by Harold Cruse. This powerful work argues for the need of black American artists and intellectuals to take control of the economic infrastructure in which they work. Well into the book, Cruse brings up *Porgy and Bess*, with its black subject and cast, and its white creative and economic ownership, as a symbol of his main complaint. And he calls for black performers to boycott the work. Up to this point, I had been persuaded by Cruse's argument. But the boycott idea seemed wrong, and it made me want to write about Gershwin's opera, which I eventually did.¹ Some thirty years later I find myself again pondering Gershwin, this time for *America's Musical Life: A History*, a survey I am writing for Norton, to be published in the year 2000.

A chapter of the survey will be called "Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and Its Context." This is the only chapter built around a discussion of one work. (It seems that those supposedly dumb students back in the 1960s knew something I didn't know.) During the last several decades, the *Rhapsody* has moved in my own view from the historiographical periphery to the center: a work that offers a unique perspective on the American musical scene in the early 1920s. Into the *Rhapsody in Blue* flow three separate currents. First is the folk tradition, in the form of the blues. If anyone has written a sentence that evokes more eloquently what



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Rethinking the Rhapsody (continued)

American music makers have achieved than the novelist Ralph Ellison's definition of the blues, I have yet to find it. The blues, says Ellison, is "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's . . . consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism."² Ellison's words reach right down to the basics of human life: the impact of pain, the refusal to shrink from that experience, the determination to poke around down there, the knowledge that some people, though formally untrained, have made enduring art from that poking around. Blues songs seek to locate the knife-edge between tragedy and comedy, and their performance can evoke the zone where crying and laughing are close kin. Gershwin was one of a number of American tunesmiths who mined blues materials for popular Tin Pan Alley and Broadway hits. But no other white American composer in those years was more successful at infusing orchestral music with genuine blues feeling.

The second current that flows into the *Rhapsody* is that of popular music, in the form of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley songs and jazz. Like blues, jazz is rooted in southern black folk traditions. During the 1910s, a new way of playing dance music that had apparently originated in New Orleans gradually found its way into the dance halls, clubs, and theaters of New York and Chicago—and, from 1917 on, was recorded. This energetic form of now popular music, at first called jazz only in the North, was taken as evidence that Victorian values were declining in the years after World War I, which the writer F. Scott Fitzgerald dubbed the Jazz Age. For many white Americans, the music called jazz in the early 1920s was linked less to black origins and improvisation than to current popular fashion and youthful identity, challenging older standards of personal and musical decorum. Thus Paul Whiteman's orchestra was considered a leading jazz ensemble when it premiered Gershwin's *Rhapsody* in 1924.

The third current flows from the classical sphere. The struggle to establish "modern music" in the concert hall was a two-pronged process: the introduction of such European modernists as Schoenberg and Stravinsky into the United States, and the emergence of modernist composers in this country, from Leo Ornstein and Edgard Varèse to the homegrown generation of the 1920s, led by Aaron Copland. As Carol J. Oja has argued, the issue of an

American modernism, as opposed to European modernism, was very much up for grabs in 1924, and Gershwin's *Rhapsody* figured prominently in that discussion.³ But Gershwin got cut out of the discussion in the latter 1920s, when critics like Paul Rosenfeld linked the modernist credentials of Copland's Piano Concerto of 1927 to art and Gershwin's concert music to the commercial marketplace. The prejudice against classifying Gershwin's music as art remained strong in the 1960s, when I recall reading in Copland's *Our New Music* (1941) his list of almost three dozen composers who made up the lively contemporary music scene of the 1920s. The "new generation" of Americans mentioned there includes George Antheil, Robert Russell Bennett, Nikolai Berezowsky, Marc Blitzstein, Theodore Chanler, Aaron Copland, Henry Cowell, Howard Hanson, Roy Harris, Colin McPhee, Douglas Moore, Walter Piston, Quincy Porter, Bernard Rogers, Roger Sessions, Leo Sowerby, William Grant Still, Randall Thompson, Virgil Thomson, and Bernard Wagenaar. But it does *not* include George Gershwin. Gershwin's omission, which today seems curious indeed, did not then strike me as strange. In those days, finding hierarchies and teaching them still seemed a key part of the musicological enterprise.

The *Rhapsody in Blue* is a piece of music that wears its checkered ancestry proudly, even to the point of flaunting it. The folk tradition leaves its mark especially in the realm of pitch, with blue notes fundamental to many of the themes, and perhaps also in call-and-response dialogue. The popular sphere's impact is felt from the jazz side especially in rhythm—syncopation and sections with dance-based beats—and in timbre, with such jazz sounds as the clarinet glissando, the use of muted trumpet for voice-like sounds, and the key melodic role of wind instruments. And the *Rhapsody*'s melodic impulse is grounded in popular song: especially the four-plus-four, and eight-bar section structure, and Gershwin's fondness for casting his tunes in the form of statement, restatement, and contrast. As for the classical sphere's influence, one may point to the title, the fourteen-minute length, the genre of jazz concerto, the cadenza-like passages, and the sweep of the last big theme, which breathes the spirit of nineteenth-century Romanticism.

Gershwin's *Rhapsody* does not try to fuse the classical, popular, and folk spheres of American music making; rather it plays on the boundaries that separate them. Constant rehearing has given the work a semblance of unity for many listeners. But formally speaking, the *Rhapsody in Blue* is a parade of references and unexpected contrasts. Even when you know what's coming, the impulse to ask "What is *that* doing in this piece?" never entirely disappears. Gershwin's references are not borrowed tune quotes but different musical styles. The *Rhapsody in Blue* has often been criticized for lacking a more organic form. But it is precisely in the way the stylistic references are juxtaposed—almost as if Gershwin were a film director, cutting from one scene to another—that the work's eclectic essence shines through: music of a composer who believed in the artistic worth of all three spheres of American music making, and who knew how to write convincingly in each.

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Tel: 718-951-5655 Fax: 718-951-4858

I.S.A.M. email: <rayallen@brooklyn.cuny.edu>

New Music Notes by Carol J. Oja

When opening a multiauthor book, I often cringe at the cacophony of voices—the unevenness of opinion, the piecemeal sense of it all. Not so with *The Whole World of Music: A Henry Cowell Symposium*, edited by David Nicholls (Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997; cloth \$59, paper \$24). A thoroughly coherent production, it delivers the first substantial survey of Cowell's work. There is an excellent introductory chapter by Nicholls, which outlines Cowell's achievements by way of posing the issues surrounding his legacy. Otherwise the book is not primarily biographical. Rather, it digs into Cowell's vision, as revealed in prose and music.

Steven Johnson covers Cowell's compositional output in seventy-seven pages, which essentially make up a monograph on their own. He divides the music into six categories, four of which focus on works before 1936 ("The 'Varian' Pieces," "The Virtuoso Pieces," "The 'Invention Mentality,'" and "Other Pieces of the 1920s and 1930s"). There is a section on the prison period, which was productive for Cowell, and a final one on works composed after 1940, especially the symphonies that emerged in the last decades of Cowell's life. Johnson's thoroughly readable overview is as suitable for the classroom as it is for the specialist, and it is musically probing. At the end, he turns to a theme that Nicholls raises independently in the introduction: that is, the incredible quantity of music produced by Cowell and the uneven quality that resulted. Calling many of Cowell's ideas "pathbreaking," Johnson judges "the actual music" as "often . . . undistinguished." This is the core point that scholars will continue to face: how do you evaluate a composer who composed no "masterpieces" and didn't give a hoot about doing so? Nicholls brings a different perspective to the same question: "No Artist creating works of Art here—just a musician, getting on with the job in hand as best he can." He poses Cowell as representing a "norm"—an all-around, practical musician taking on multiple roles. Two other chapters about Cowell's music broaden the perspective even further: "The Hymns and Fuguing Tunes," written with love and erudition by Wayne D. Shirley, and "Henry Cowell, Composer of Music" by William Lichtenwanger. Shirley brings scholarly rigor to the whole series of Hymn and Fuguing Tunes, begun in 1943, meaningfully connecting them to the old American tradition from which they sprang. Musing more generally, Lichtenwanger returns to the question of just how good Cowell was as a composer, casting an affirmative vote for his achievement.

Lou Harrison's "Learning from Henry" provides warm personal memories of studying with Cowell in the Bay Area during the 1930s. Following this, the book concludes with a rigorous assessment by Kyle Gann of Cowell's voluminous and influential writings. Gann begins by declaring that Cowell "is more important for his writings and ideas than for his music." Then he throws his weight behind *New Musical Resources*, especially its sections on rhythm, providing an exceptionally cogent and insightful explication of its innovations. He also surveys Cowell's journalistic output, intriguingly exploring how different it was before and after Cowell's time in prison. He dismisses the early journalism as "of no lasting importance"; but I wonder about that, given the large quantity of prose that Cowell produced during the 1920s

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THE HILLS ARE ALIVE

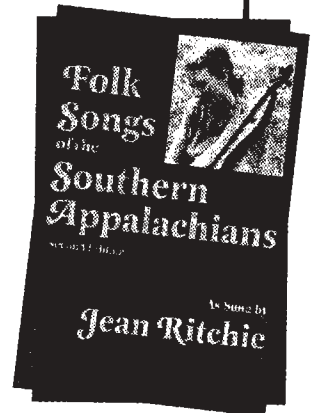
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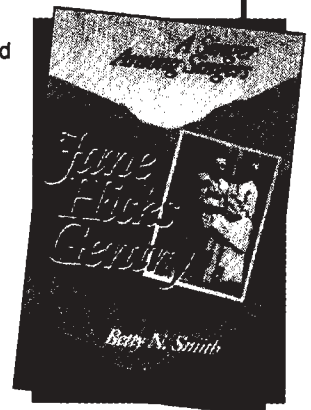
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A Centenary Moment?

As George Gershwin's centenary draws to a close, the demand for scholarly, comprehensive published resources remains an issue. Over the past decade material has certainly been building up, especially with the marvelous CD reconstructions of prominent shows and piano roll performances, and the reissuing of valuable historical recordings. Scores have appeared, including facsimiles, but as Wayne Schneider points out in his introduction to *The Gershwin Style: New Looks at the Music of George Gershwin* (Oxford University Press, 1999; \$35), still "much of Gershwin's music is simply not published." The list of Gershwin books has grown steadily, many feeding off each other and leaving Edward Jablonski's standard biography of 1987 unchallenged. Two musicological studies pushing the boat far out are Steven Gilbert's *The Music of Gershwin* (1995) and David Schiff's *Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue* (1997). But Schiff's study is in no position to extend its provocative probings and brilliant terms of reference to the whole output, while Gilbert, the Schenkerian, often masterly on the concert works and *Porgy and Bess*, makes little attempt to see what the other shows and songs amount to beyond the musical line of an individual number.

So we badly need a view of the man in his creative wholeness. Is Schneider's book, if a little late (in proof as I write), that centenary monument? While the compilation's title, "The Gershwin Style," suggests that it could be, its format and content preclude fulfillment. Given this premise, the following comments, rather than attempting fair coverage of all its diverse and discrete contributions, will briefly indicate the book's scope before focusing on the portions that seem closest to penetrating George Gershwin's musical mind.

Following Schneider's introduction and Charles Hamm's provocative challenge to demolish the old Gershwin myths, the work moves into Part I, "Analysis and Manuscript Studies." This section contains core chapters by Schneider on Gershwin's operetta overtures, by Gilbert on Gershwin's last songs, and by Larry Starr on form and harmony in Gershwin's concert music. In addition, two rather more microscopic studies are Wayne Shirley's Schillingeresque analysis of *Porgy and Bess* and John Andrew Johnson's study of *Blue Monday*. Part II, "Reception," contains Charlotte Greenspan's study of the 1945 Hollywood bio-pic *Rhapsody in Blue*, Susan Richardson's account of Gershwin and the pop world, titled "Gershwin on the Cover of Rolling Stone," and André



Barbera's exploration of George Gershwin and jazz. This last contribution is probably the best thing to read on an impossibly complex topic, but it has to do a number of jobs at once, a dissection of his style only one of them. Part III, "Performance Practice," opens with a fascinating chapter by Artis Wodehouse on the Gershwin piano rolls, followed by Michael Montgomery's annotated piano rollography. While informative, these two chapters leave us hungry for the definitive account of Gershwin the pianist. Edward Jablonski's concluding article, "What About Ira?," recounts his career after George's death. Jablonski does not offer a musicologist's study of how the incomplete tunes were fleshed out, which might further the book's task directly; but one would not want to be without his all too essential account of the Gershwin archives, buried though it is in an enormous footnote.

What, then, of the more analytical readings? Schneider examines Gershwin's developing compositional technique and harmonic style through an unexpected prism of three overtures. This is authoritative and enlightening stuff, though I miss useful reference to octatonic, and thereby current or recent practice in other spheres, in Gershwin's increasing use of superimposed chordal and tonal layers. Starr knocks firmly on the head the persistent notion that Gershwin could only string together good tunes, partly by demonstrating that the tunes are not so good. But Starr should acknowledge Schiff's and Gilbert's differing perspectives on *Rhapsody in Blue* and *An American in Paris*. Starr needs less prose and more diagrams once he gets

going, and there really are some jobs that Schenker does best. Gilbert's relaxed chapter, partly duplicating and partly avoiding material from the last chapter of his book, is well focused, though it cries out, like all writing on the brothers, for really close consideration of the melopoetics of George's songwriting with Ira. What were they doing in those pictures of them side-by-side, Ira with his desk right by the piano keyboard? There are any number of places in which one might argue that a musical phrase was extended, an instrumental fill vocalized, because Ira had some words that would clinch the structural deal. Genesis cannot be proved, but effect can.

The Gershwin Style, then, is a mixed bag. Read it all; then try to connect up the strands yourself into a rounded understanding of perhaps the twentieth century's most famous composer.

—Stephen Banfield
University of Minnesota

Gershwin on Disc

On my first Internet search for Gershwin CDs, I came up with 531 hits. I concluded that the present survey could get by with a more modest sampling.

George Gershwin is a familiar presence to most of us. His collaborations with his brother Ira join the songs of Berlin, Porter, Kern, Arlen, Rodgers, and a few others in forming the core of what has been anointed "the American pop standards." Cabaret and pop singers touch us with Gershwin's playful insinuations of flirtation and love and delight us with his humor. Jazz musicians explore the twistings and surprises of Gershwin melodies and harmonies more than those of any other composer. His orchestral concert works are among the most frequently heard American compositions, his smaller piano pieces are gems that never pale, and *Porgy and Bess* remains the most performed of any American opera. George Gershwin embodies an important part of our national identity and spirit.

The magic of re-released vintage recordings gives us the opportunity to encounter Gershwin through his own recordings: commercial releases, informal recordings, and radio airchecks. Among CDs that contain this invaluable material are a two-disc set from Pearl, *George Gershwin Plays George Gershwin* (GEMM CDS 9483); a single disc on Jazz Heritage, *Gershwin Performs Gershwin: Rare Recordings 1931-1935* (512923A); and part of one disc in the Smithsonian four-disc set *I Got Rhythm—The Music of George Gershwin* (RD 107).

We read glowing accounts in biographical literature of how the party-going Gershwin presided at the piano. But the glimpses we receive from recordings do not live up to those reports. They reveal playing that could be sloppy and imprecise. Though his music was decidedly jazzy, he was not in the same league with such associates as James P. Johnson. But he played with spirit, excitement, and imagination. Hearing him recalls his comments favoring staccato and brittle renditions that snap and crackle. (He wrote this in the introduction to *George Gershwin's Song-Book*, his piano arrangements of eighteen songs.) Snap and crackle certainly characterize his sound. But should even his bluesy *Prelude II* crackle so? The published score specifies a metronome marking of 88 for a quarter-note. In a recording from 1928 (on the Pearl CD), he plays it at a brisk 100, and in a Rudy Vallée radio broadcast from 1932 (Jazz Heritage), he sprints through it at about 120. No pianist today could get away with such a performance. We listen to it only because it is Gershwin himself and because, even if we don't hear the magic, he may still have something to teach us.

We cannot get quite as close to Gershwin in his piano rolls, of which he made more than a hundred. These apparently reveal the notes he intended and usually reflect his style, but one can never be sure of the part played by roll editing. Gershwin might not have even made all the rolls attributed to him. On occasion, other pressing concerns may have led him to authorize one Robert Armbruster to fill in, using the Gershwin name.

Rolls, therefore, provide an inexact measure of Gershwin, but they remain intriguing artifacts of the era. Of the most interesting

samples on CD, I recommend the digitized realizations of Artis Wodehouse in *Gershwin Plays Gershwin—The Piano Rolls* (Vol. 1: Nonesuch 79287; Vol. 2: Nonesuch 79370). Volume one consists entirely of Gershwin compositions, including *Rhapsody in Blue*. All except the two-disklavier version of *An American in Paris* are ascribed to his playing. Volume two demonstrates another side of Gershwin: only two compositions are his, with the balance focusing on how he played and arranged other songwriters' music.

Modern pianists' performances cover a wide range of styles and rarely follow Gershwin's stated preferences. William Bolcom captures the Gershwin spirit in his renditions of the *Song-Book* arrangements and assorted short piano pieces on *George Gershwin Piano Music & Songs by George and Ira Gershwin* (Nonesuch 79151). Richard Glazier provides a decidedly romantic view with his beautifully and lushly played *Gershwin: Remembrance and Discovery* (Centaur CRC 2271). This CD includes the *Preludes*, several Earl Wild and Percy Grainger arrangements, and some marvelous Beryl Rubinstein arrangements of selected songs from *Porgy and Bess*, probably recorded for the first time. Is Glazier wrong to play in a style at such odds with the composer's stated intention? Room exists for alternate approaches, and Glazier's certainly works for our age. For a beguiling and richly luxurious interpretation of Gershwin, one could hardly do better.

Michael Tilson Thomas takes a few piano solos on *George Gershwin: Los Angeles Philharmonic* (CBS MK39699), and they are typical of what we have come to expect of this artist: expressive, daring, at times electrifying, and certainly controversial. A case in point is his version of the *Prelude II*, which he takes at a languid $1/4 = 60$, fully half the speed of Gershwin's 1932 recording. Yet, under Thomas's hands, the music is dramatic and effective.

* * *

A paradox of Gershwin's legacy is that he wrote his most beloved songs for Broadway shows that are, today, virtually forgotten. These shows were at the center of his artistic being and propelled his success. Often criticized as weak and dated, they have faded while the songs have grown stronger with the years, assuming independent lives.

Vintage recordings by the original stage artists singing these songs provide an education. Fred Astaire was already a consummate artist with his relaxed, natural singing style. Cliff "Ukulele Ike" Edwards also impresses with his laid-back, almost-jazzy rendition of "Fascinating Rhythm" in the 1924 show *Lady, Be Good!*

In contrast, the women stage performers, though widely praised in their day, sound surprisingly bad by today's standards. Fred's sister Adele, however adept she may have been as a dancing partner, was a weak, squeaky-voiced soprano. Irene Bordoni, extolled as "a top" in one of the versions of Cole Porter's classic song, was not much better. Even Gertrude Lawrence, celebrated as a great, charismatic actress of the musical comedy stage, comes across poorly on record. (The vintage sets mentioned above, and an additional collection—*S'Wonderful: The Music of George Gershwin*, on Pavilion CD 9777—include samples of these performances.)

Gershwin on Disc (continued)

As scholars of the period, we are curious about these forgotten shows, and Nonesuch has filled a need with several fascinating reconstructions. Each includes a substantial booklet providing synopsis, essays, and lyrics. *Lady, Be Good!* (1924), *Oh, Kay!* (1926), *Strike Up the Band* (1927, with additions from the 1930 production), and *Girl Crazy* (1930) (Nonesuch 79308, 79361, 79273, 79250 respectively) are marvelous. In *Lady, Be Good!*, Ann Morrison emulates the squeaky-voice flavor of the original, but with far greater singing quality. In contrast, the producer of *Oh, Kay!* does not try to recreate the questionable skills of the original, relying instead on the superb artistry of Dawn Upshaw. Both for the number of hit tunes and signs of the gradual stylistic slide toward a more modern aesthetic, my favorite is *Girl Crazy*, with Lorna Luft (sounding uncannily like her mother, Judy Garland) as a terrific female lead. The overriding impression of all four reconstructions is consistent with what I have already suggested: most of the familiar tunes, "Oh, Lady Be Good!," "Someone to Watch Over Me," "The Man I Love," etc., sound strangely unlike the classic songs we know. This is not a shortcoming of the recordings, for the performances generally look to the original styles for guidance. Rather, the recordings demonstrate how dramatically aesthetic standards have changed.

* * *

A vaudeville (or dance band) singer like Aileen Stanley amply demonstrates that the stage singing style we hear on record was not due solely to the period's recording technology. Her 1924 recording of "Somebody Loves Me" embodies the 1920s style, but her singing nevertheless more closely approaches a modern view of Gershwin than that of her musical comedy contemporaries. This recording is on the Popular Song disc in the Smithsonian set that surveys Gershwin in non-dramatic song performances. It brings the chronology as far as Linda Ronstadt in 1982, and includes in the journey through decades such favorite artists as Ethel Waters, Helen Forrest, Lena Horne, Jo Stafford, Bing Crosby, Judy Garland, Vaughan Monroe, and Sarah Vaughan. It virtually summarizes, as far as one can on a single CD, ways of presenting Gershwin songs.

One can find innumerable Gershwin recordings by other outstanding and popular artists. Joan Morris, included on the Smithsonian disc with her husband William Bolcom and ragtime legend Max Morath, tops off her husband's CD of Gershwin piano music (above) with ten songs. This is cabaret singing with

style, singing that draws one into the music. Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong, two of the supreme stylists of popular song, teamed up for a *Porgy and Bess* set (Verve 827 475-2) that makes no pretence at operatic or dramatic presentation, but offers a great selection of songs. These recordings are all examples of the performance tradition that has made Gershwin part of the American psyche.

* * *

Rhapsody in Blue was only the first of Gershwin's orchestral works, but it remains the best known and, in some ways, the most controversial. Gershwin recorded the work twice (cf. vintage recordings on Smithsonian and Pearl), but these recorded performances were greatly shortened and thereby fail to show us how the music was performed in concert. The present controversies center on theories of what Gershwin "really" intended. While most agree that the full symphony orchestra treatment is a corruption, they disagree on numerous details. Alicia Zizzo, in *Gershwin Rediscovered II* (Carlton Classics 30366 00312), restores every manuscript note she can find to the piano part; she reportedly comes up with a total of eighty-eight new measures. Her performance indeed contains unfamiliar passages, but its heavy-handed, studied manner fails to make the case that these measures are either needed or desired. The CD may interest specialists or those who wish to make comparisons, but it fails to stand on purely musical merits.

Maurice Peress recreates the entire Aeolian Hall concert of 1924 in *The Birth of the Rhapsody in Blue* (Music Masters 01612-65144-2), including the Original Dixieland Jazz

Band's "Livery Stable Blues" and Zez Confrey's novelty piano solos. Peress uses the precise instrumentation of the original *Rhapsody* and restores some piano cadenza passages. His treatment stands out for the style of playing he gets from prominent instruments—the clarinet, the trombone, the muted trumpet, saxophones, and banjo. Containing many interesting details, the recording merits consideration.

Michael Tilson Thomas's electrifying version of *Rhapsody in Blue* on the CBS *Los Angeles Philharmonic* disc also presents reduced forces and focuses attention on special instrumental colors. Its brisk tempos, bright sound, and overall brilliance combine to make it a thrilling performance.

(continued on page 14)



Fred and Adele Astaire

Country and Gospel Notes by Charles Wolfe

The high water mark of southern gospel music's influence on mainstream pop culture probably came in the early 1950s. It was a time when Eisenhower's America was full of the revival spirit of young Billy Graham, when the smooth quartet vocal style of classic gospel was not far removed from pre-rock-and-roll pop music, and when gospel music was not ghettoized. The Blackwood Brothers appeared on Arthur Godfrey's national television show, and other quartets were signed to major record labels. Songs like "How Great Thou Art" and "I Believe," pop gospel tunes labeled by *Billboard* as "religioso" songs, were reaching the charts. Mahalia Jackson was signed to Columbia and then paired with Mitch Miller to create slick singles. Things were so good for the two premier southern gospel quartets, the Statesmen and the Blackwood Brothers, that they started their own record labels and bought out several of the old shape-note publishers like James D. Vaughan.

During the turbulent 1960s, southern gospel slipped back into a niche music and its high profile slowly receded. Assailed by "Contemporary Christian" music from California—the pop styles of singers like Cynthia Clawson, the folk-flavored introspection of singers like Amy Grant, and even gospel rock bands like Petra—the classic southern styles and repertoires languished. Then, starting in 1991, a fascinating revival occurred. Its leader was an unlikely, middle-aged songwriter and promoter named Bill Gaither, who came not from Mississippi or Georgia but Anderson, Indiana. In the last decade, he has stimulated a renewed interest in the older styles and singers, and has shown the entire industry new ways to market and promote the music.

Bill Gaither (not to be confused with the blues singer of the same name) grew up listening to the 1950s gospel quartets that were as popular in the Midwest as in the South. He married in 1963, began performing locally on keyboards with his own trio, and started writing songs with his wife Gloria. Here he found his greatest early success. His "I, John" was recorded by Elvis Presley in 1966, and other songs, including "He Touched Me," "Because He Lives," and "The King is Coming," quickly became church standards. He formed his own singing group, the Bill Gaither Trio, which enjoyed hit recordings of its own. The Trio's label, the venerable Nashville firm of Benson, learned how to market his albums through the flourishing Christian book stores, and sold 250,000 copies in 1968—an astounding figure in a field in which LP sales of 5,000 were considered successful. During the next two decades Bill and Gloria Gaither made dozens of additional LPs and became leaders in the gospel industry. In 1968 Bill Gaither encouraged the Gospel Mu-

sic Organization to sponsor an annual awards ceremony that eventually became The Dove Awards—gospel's own in-house version of the Country Music Foundation or Blues Foundation award.

Gaither's career took a new direction on 19 February 1991, at a Nashville studio. Following a trend in country music, he asked guest artists to join his new group, the Gaither Vocal Band, in recording the familiar standard "Where Could I Go." These guests included James Blackwood, of the legendary Blackwood Brothers; Jake Hess, formerly of the Statesmen and Imperials and the model for much of Elvis's style; members of the Speer Family; Howard and Vestal Goodman of the Happy Goodman Family, the most popular gospel group of the 1960s; and Elvis's favorite backup group, J.D. Sumner and the Stamps. A gospel version of a jam session evolved, with a wide variety of informal singing, storytelling, and reminiscing. It was all videotaped, and later issued as *Homecoming Video Album* (Star Song SSV8726).

The video was a major commercial success. Fans from around the country jumped at the chance to see in a new setting the southern gospel heroes they had known since childhood. It was followed by two more nostalgia-tinged home videos, *Reunion* and *Turn Your Radio On*, and sales continued to surge. Cable television helped promote them, and the Christian bookstore network began to stock them. Finding the market could absorb even more, from 1991 to the present Gaither issued as many as four videos a year. The twenty-seven released titles, ranging from *All Day Singin'* to *Homecoming Texas Style*, include almost every major southern gospel singer and composer. The Homecoming series was a revolutionary format, and re-energized southern gospel.



The Bill Gaither Trio
Photo courtesy of the Center for Popular Music

Gaither and his colleagues wasted no time in further developing this new video market. He leased a number of old television shows from the 1960s, including the well-known syndicated "Gospel Jubilee," and created anthologies of clips by individual artists such as The Statesmen, The Rambos, and the Blackwood Brothers. Songbooks of "Homecoming Favorites" and background music tracks for the same songs are in the new catalogue, as well as a new CD series that reissues vintage RCA 1950s recordings by the Speer Family, the Blackwood Brothers, and the Statesmen.

Now a printed chronicle of all this has emerged: *Homecoming: The Story of Southern Gospel Music Through the Eyes of Its Best-Loved Performers* (Zondervan Publishing, 1997; \$29.99), by Bill Gaither with Jerry Jenkins. It is not really a history of the

(continued on page 15)

Time to Remember Zez Confrey

In the introduction to his 1932 *Song-Book*, George Gershwin gives faintly patronizing, somewhat bemused credit to his pianistic predecessors—in fact, his colleagues—for their contributions to the ragtime, stride, and novelty piano styles upon which his own approach was based:

The evolution of our popular pianistic style really began with the introduction of ragtime, just before the Spanish-American War, and came to its culminating point in the jazz era that followed upon the Great War. A number of names come crowding into my memory: Mike Bernard, Les Copeland, Melville Ellis, Luckey Roberts, Zez Confrey, Arden and Ohman. . . . Each of these was responsible for the popularization of a new technique, or a new wrinkle in playing. Some of my readers will recall various of these procedures, of which a number were really but stunts. . . . Confrey's contribution has been of a more permanent nature, as some of his piano figures found their way into serious American composition.

Gershwin's veiled attempt to consign these artists to the dustbin of history glosses over the fact that, in 1932, nearly all remained musically active.

The most accomplished was the gentle genius Edward Elzear "Zez" Confrey (1898-1971), Gershwin's exact contemporary. True, by 1932 Confrey's great early novelty piano solos had already been published, but a host of his more contemplative compositions were yet in the offing. In addition, Confrey would maintain a performing career throughout the 1930s. Perhaps most important, Confrey's influence as an innovator in the player-piano roll idiom would continue to be felt, despite the general demise of the roll industry itself. The unprecedented musical potential inherent in the player piano had required a new sort of artist, one willing to explore and exploit the divide between the piano as a hand-played instrument and the piano as a mechanical music-making device. Confrey and a select group of other arranger/pianists cultivated that no-man's land. Due to their artistry this terrain bloomed forth with unexpectedly inspired and profoundly witty man/machine musical double entendres.

Gershwin's silence in his *Song-Book* introduction regarding the significance of the piano roll idiom seems peculiar. But by 1932, Gershwin had severed his relationship to the roll industry, fleeing to vastly more remunerative radio work. Meanwhile, to the larger public, player pianos had become technological has-beens. Yet, in a new reading of the historical record, Confrey's roll work emerges as a potent influence on the performance and compositional styles of Gershwin and his contemporaries. In addition, Confrey's novelty innovations and his unique slant on the solo piano salon piece can now be seen as a by-product of his creative activities as a roll arranger.

An Irish-American product of the Midwest, Confrey attended the Chicago Music College while playing side gigs with a pop band formed with his brother. Thus Confrey, like Gershwin, straddled the classical/vernacular divide. After a Navy stint during WWI, Confrey began work as an arranger for the QRS Piano Roll Company. Between 1918 and 1924 he made over 120 rolls

for QRS (over his lifetime he was to make over 170 rolls for various companies). During this time, Confrey published his most famous piano solo, *Kitten On The Keys*, which sold over a million copies. This quintessential novelty piece, along with a half-dozen other piano solos published between 1921 and 1923, established Confrey's world-wide reputation. On the basis of the popularity of his unique keyboard idiom—called "Jazz" during the 1920s—Confrey was asked to perform on the 1924 Whiteman program that included the premiere of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. This was as close as Confrey and Gershwin would get professionally. After that, their paths diverged. While Confrey tried his hand at songwriting with modest success, his greatest gift was in the realm of small-scale, solo piano composition. Unlike Gershwin, who stopped making piano rolls after 1925, Confrey remained active in the industry until its demise around 1930.

A pop roll arrangement aimed to deliver a memorable rendition of the tune, thereby encouraging listeners to purchase the sheet music as well. But in order to ignite additional interest in the rolls, skilled arrangers added notes, interpolating within and around the tune piquantly contrasting styles and riffs. Knowing what we do about the young Gershwin's fascination with a wealth of musical idioms and techniques, it is easy to see why making roll arrangements provided an important secondary activity during his apprentice years. For Confrey, in contrast, roll arranging was at the heart of his music making. The music he created for this newly-founded idiom was a shining light of the era.

Confrey's genius as a roll arranger had roughly four facets: first, his ability to develop and expand the scintillating novelty devices of which he appears to have been the primary innovator; second, his judicious deployment of a wide range of styles—including novelty—that resonated with the public and served as the basis for many of his published piano solos; third, his infectious musical wit; and fourth, his understanding of how the player piano's expanded potential for note density and previously unimaginable rhythmic motifs opened new possibilities beyond the limitations of human performance.

An example of Confrey's mastery of the piano roll is his arrangement of Thurlow Lieurance's so-called Indian melody, *By the Waters of Minnetonka* (1915). Around the turn of the twentieth century, in America's quest for musical definition, some influential commentators and composers seized upon Native American music as a possible basis for serious composition. "Indian" music became a minor fad, and Lieurance's sentimental melody emerged as among the most popular of the genre. Stripped of its original faux-Lisztian accompaniment, the tune is the theme for Confrey's four-variation roll arrangement.

Confrey's command of player piano scoring results in a tour-de-force arrangement where one piano suggests two pianists at two pianos. A two-piano transcription can readily be made of the introduction and first two variations. However, by variation three, executing the two piano parts is not so simple. The intense syncopations of the *secondo* melody, accompanied in the *primo* treble with highly syncopated and articulated chord/octave alternations (suggesting dappled light reflected from water) push the arrangement

to a level of difficulty challenging even for professional pianists:



The final variation begins innocuously enough with a call and response pattern featuring a readily playable stock Confrey novelty lick:



But as the variation moves to its rapturous conclusion, Confrey carries this figure to a nearly unplayable extreme, freeing it to cavort at dizzying speed all over the treble, while the *secondo* part romps about the lower half of the keyboard in ways no human performer, strictly speaking, can execute:



Through the new musical possibilities of the player piano, Confrey creates witty incongruities. The listener both sees and hears ideas plausible for human hands to execute, but not by a single pianist. Confrey then develops these musical figures beyond what even *two* humans could possibly play. The machine finally takes flight into a musical dimension beyond the strictly physical.

—*Artis Wodehouse*

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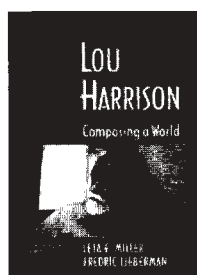
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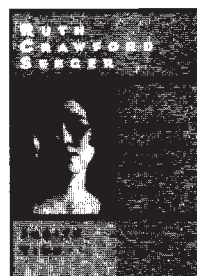
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Behind the Beat with Mark Tucker

Much of the recent news from Washington, D.C. has been grim. One item that didn't get extensive coverage on CNN was the Smithsonian's decision to shut down its recordings program. Apparently a hefty budget deficit prompted the action. This announcement, I admit, hit me harder than any revelation in the Starr report. Ever since 1973, when Martin Williams got the Smithsonian into the record-producing business with *The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*, the nation's museum has released a distinguished series of discs devoted to American musical traditions, including lavish compilations (blues, country, popular song), historic musical theater reconstructions, and single-artist retrospectives. These recordings have become invaluable for teachers of American music. Williams's *Classic Jazz* set, for example, remains the most widely used anthology in jazz history courses today. This fall I assigned students in a Gershwin seminar selections from *Lady, Be Good!* and *Oh, Kay!*, both issued in the late 1970s as part of the Smithsonian American Musical Theater series. Apparently *Classic Jazz* will stay in print (though for several years I've experienced problems ordering it for my courses), and there are hopeful rumors that the old Division of Recordings will be resurrected within Smithsonian Folkways. For now, though, it's dead as a dinosaur.

Which is why reviewing *The Jazz Singers* (The Smithsonian Collection of Recordings, RD113R, 1-800-863-9943), selected and annotated by Robert G. O'Meally, is a bittersweet assignment. It's hard to imagine any commercial outfit investing in a project like this, licensing over 100 performances owned by twenty-two record companies and giving a scholar like O'Meally (a professor of literature at Columbia University) free rein to assemble such a boldly imaginative set. O'Meally even refers to his anthology as a "museum without walls," comparing the process of grouping and juxtaposing recorded selections to the way museum curators "hang" exhibits. The show is broadly inclusive, ranging beyond familiar icons (Fitzgerald, Holiday, Armstrong, Vaughan) to spotlight lesser knowns (Lorez Alexandria, Gloria Lynne, George Tunnell) as well as artists not usually associated with jazz (Aretha Franklin, Blind Willie Johnson, Mahalia Jackson, Al Green, and Marvin Gaye). To justify the presence of these latter figures, O'Meally cites common roots (i.e., the blues, gospel) and shared stylistic traits that make them just as much "jazz singers" as those usually tagged with the label. While provocative, the argument is not fully convincing; I can hear jazz-like phrasing and tone colors in Gaye's "What's

Going On," but not the "swinging, conversing, and rocking in the rhythm of a jazz beat" that O'Meally claims is fundamental to jazz singing. Even so, it's instructive when anyone poses challenges to conventional wisdom and refreshing to find a critic more interested in dissolving borders around jazz than in policing them.

Instead of adopting a standard chronological overview, O'Meally divides the music into eight sections with descriptive captions: "Steeped in the Blues," "Straight Out of Church," "Let's Have a Party," "Swinging the Songbook," "After Hours," "Jazz Compositions," "Scat and Vocalese," "Novelties and Take-offs." The categories are porous and overlapping, with some artists re-appearing in several throughout the set. A few pieces are covered by different singers; a luscious, heartfelt "Until the Real Thing

Comes Along" by Ella Fitzgerald is followed by Fats Waller's comic assault on the banal lyrics: "I'll always love you, darling, come what may/ My heart is yours, what more can I say—you want me to rob a bank? Well, I won't do it." Surprising choices abound. Who would have thought to represent Joe "Every Day I Have the Blues" Williams with a suave, lightly swinging version of Rodgers and Hart's "There's a Small Hotel"? Or to feature "Saturday Night Fish Fry" not by its creator Louis Jordan but by the duo of Pearl Bailey and comedienne Jackie "Moms" Mabley? Listening through the set is like spending a few hours with a passionate jazz fan and knowledgeable record collector who keeps pulling discs off the shelf and saying, "Have you heard . . . ?" There's Betty Carter's shimmering moon-glow tone on "This Is Always," Slim Gaillard's surreal jive on "Babalu (Orooney)," Ella Fitzgerald's peerless scat on "Them There Eyes," and Hot Lips Page's harrowing blues sermonette on "I Won't Be Here Long." Truly aston-

ishing is a rehearsal excerpt in which saxophonist Ben Webster sings instrumental parts to his arrangement "Did You Call Her Today?," trying to get members of a big band to swing with feeling. It's a powerful reminder that the voice has always been central to jazz expression—from trumpeter Buddy Bolden calling his children home to pianist Keith Jarrett reinforcing his solo lines in an eerie falsetto.

Instructive and entertaining, *The Jazz Singers* attests to the Smithsonian's able leadership in curating this nation's musical heritage. Now the institution needs to reinstate and rebuild a recordings program that will continue to play a vital role in its overarching cultural mission.



Ella Fitzgerald
Photo courtesy of Verve Records

Widening the Lens II

Coltrane Time

What are musical scores for “The Sweetheart of Sigma Chi” and “O Sole Mio” doing in a book about jazz visionary John Coltrane? No, these aren’t unissued outtakes from his album *Interstellar Space*. “Sweetheart,” it turns out, was his father’s favorite song, while the other was a tune Coltrane liked to sing in the car on his way to gigs. Trivial on the face of it, these facts are colorful dabs of paint on the immense canvas covered by biographer and jazz scholar Lewis Porter in *John Coltrane: His Life and Music* (University of Michigan Press, 1998; \$29.95). For nearly two decades Porter has been researching and writing about Coltrane and his music, in the process accumulating a wealth of information about the innovative and influential saxophonist. Much of it appears for the first time in the present study, including extensive genealogical work on Coltrane’s family in North Carolina (the book begins in the mid-1700s with Daniel Boone!), fascinating accounts of Coltrane’s musical apprenticeship and practice techniques, recollections of the man by friends and family members, and detailed style analysis. The volume includes many solo transcriptions, facsimiles of musical examples in Coltrane’s hand, and a chronology documenting every known Coltrane performance, from a 1942 high school band concert in High Point, North Carolina to a 1967 appearance at the Olatunji Center for African Culture in New York.

Porter’s biography is partly a triumphant labor of scholarship, partly an act of loving tribute to a great artist. The same may be said about *John Coltrane: A Discography and Musical Biography* (Scarecrow Press/Institute of Jazz Studies, 1995; \$66), a massive work completed by Japanese businessman Yasuhiro Fujioka with the assistance of Porter and Yoh-Ichi Hamada. Valuable chiefly for its exhaustive discography, the volume lists all Coltrane releases in all formats up to 1993. It also offers a chronology of performances (superceded by Porter’s more recent findings) and reproduces hundreds of photographs, many of them showing the saxophonist in mid-performance, leaning back with eyes closed and possessed by the intensity of the moment. Coltrane clearly regarded music as a spiritual calling. The discipline and passion he brought to his art are audible in his recordings and now manifest in the painstakingly crafted scholarship of his latter-day devotees.

Recent CDs

On *Sol Na Cara* (Gramavision GCD 79518), Brazilian singer-songwriter **Vinicius Cantuaria** fuses the whispering vocals of bossa nova and urbane pop sensibility of “Tropicalia” with the edgy electronics of composer-arranger Ryuichi Sakamoto. Produced by downtown music hero Arto Lindsay, the disc suggests that intimacy and spiritual serenity are still possible in a world of microchips, fiber optics, and multi-national mergers. . . . Just in time for the centennial party comes **Herbie Hancock** with *Gershwin’s World* (Verve VERCD37), one of those increasingly common tribute discs with the obligatory all-star cast (Kathleen

(continued on page 15)

The editors of the ISAM Newsletter have suggested to me that “there is room for a more sustained dialogue on changing conceptions of the American musical landscape.” In response, I welcome their invitation to further this dialogue spurred by Mark Slobin’s lead article in the Spring 1998 Newsletter. Slobin, in my opinion, fails to give full appreciation to the function and place of a general survey on American music. I therefore propose an alternate view and hope that others will take the opportunity to continue the discussion.

“Widening the lens,” to quote from the title of Slobin’s article, is something nearly all serious thinkers, writers, and lecturers on American music have been doing for quite some time now. While (nearly) everyone’s approach to American music becomes more inclusive, and as specialists continue their indispensable explorations, the search for a viable, up-to-date taxonomy of American music goes on. But it will never be finished, and we can be assured that we will never arrive at a set of categories that will satisfy everyone. How do we get on with it, and how do we get on with each other as we each do our work?

One thing we can avoid at the start is confusing a work that is by nature specialist (dealing with specific subcultures, or “micromusics”) with one that is generalist, the aim of which is to make some sort of sense out of the whole picture. We cannot have the same expectations for both. A work that is inherently specialist cannot be expected to concern itself very much with the “big picture.” On the other hand, it is all too easy for the specialist to criticize a general work for failing to give adequate space to one of the specialist’s favorite subjects.

Slobin illustrates this latter tendency by restricting his approval almost entirely to specialist essays. The work of the specialist is extremely important to the growth of our knowledge of American music. But it is not the same as the task of the generalist, who must organize, summarize, and perforce arrange the subject into categories. Categories are a vexing necessity in a survey, whereas in a specialist work they can be ignored. All that is really necessary for the latter is for the writer to supply a limiting definition to the particular subculture or “micromusic” being dealt with, without necessarily having to fit it into the larger picture. Subtitles such as *Mexican American Music in Los Angeles* or *Caribbean Popular Music in New York* give promise of interesting, in-depth studies, without in themselves promising any contribution to what Slobin calls “an overall perspective on American music’s fascinating propensity for interchange.”

Categories are of course arbitrary abstractions with but limited capacity for conveying the “whole truth” of any subject. Inventive and original thinkers can work cross-wise through “given” categories and come up with new insights into a subject (often resulting in its arrangement into *different* categories!). Indeed, it is the very challenging of categories—working *against* them, as it were—that leads to fresh views. This can be manifested as an *interchange* between cultures (or between categories), as Slobin has pointed out, and he gives a few examples. It would be useful to

(continued on page 15)

Porgy and Bess—The Film

One of the highlights of ISAM's November 1998 *Gershwin Centennial Festival* was a screening of the 1959 film adaptation of *Porgy and Bess*. Directed by Otto Preminger, produced by Samuel Goldwyn, and starring Sidney Poitier (*Porgy*), Dorothy Dandridge (*Bess*), and Sammy Davis, Jr. (*Sportin' Life*), the film was highly controversial when released in the early days of the civil rights movement. Following a short theater run, the picture was removed from circulation for various legal, political, and artistic reasons and had not been publicly screened in nearly forty years. Thanks to the cooperation of the Gershwin and Heyward estates and Goldwyn Entertainment, and the UCLA Film archive for providing a print, ISAM was able "break the ban" and screen the film in Brooklyn College's Whitman Auditorium. Prior to the screening a group of scholars, whose interests ranged from musicology and film to American and cultural studies, gathered to reflect on Preminger's film and Gershwin's opera. Highlights of the session are presented below.

The Brooklyn College screening of Otto Preminger's adaptation of George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* offers a rare occasion to ponder the complex terrain of genius and creativity in American culture. Preminger's film from the 1950s, like Gershwin's "folk opera" from the 1930s and DuBose Heyward's novel *Porgy* from the 1920s, stepped squarely into the paradoxes of race that rifle through American society and culture. These paradoxes were there from the beginning as Thomas Jefferson, the second largest slave holder in his county, eloquently defined through the Declaration of Independence the essential formula of American freedom. Mark Twain created the compellingly disruptive voice of Huckleberry Finn only to tell his story of joining with Jim, a runaway slave, to flee south to freedom.

Like Huck and Jim on their make-shift raft, these American geniuses wed the fortune of their place in American culture to real or imagined black characters—Jefferson to the slaves of Monticello, particularly Sally Hemmings; Twain to "Nigger Jim"; and Gershwin to *Porgy*. In so doing, they draw us back to a uniquely American question: can Whites and Blacks make their journey to freedom together by trading in the cultural coin and tender of *e pluribus unum*?

Despite their flaws, we are trapped in these unique expressions of American genius, and that is the strength of *Porgy and*

Bess and one of the reasons the work endures. As much as we wish its complexity would go away, we cannot do without it. Even as a slaveholder, Jefferson's vision of freedom provided generations of African Americans with the language of struggle, and Huckleberry Finn's voice creates the possibility in American literature for Richard Wright's *Bigger Thomas*, James Baldwin's *John Grimes*, and the nameless protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* allied itself with the contradictory African American ambitions of elevating the vernacular to the level of American high art and giving classically trained black singers a venue to demonstrate their skills. Generations of black and white musicians have reinvented

Gershwin's music so that it is now hard to tell where the white leaves off and the black begins. As we watch a film like *Porgy and Bess*, we should remember that even where it fails, it does not evade. In any of its versions, a part of Gershwin's genius is to bring Blacks and Whites back to the raft to try to sort things out.

—George Cunningham
Professor of Africana Studies
and American Studies,
Brooklyn College

* * *

It is unlikely that any single production of *Porgy and Bess* can satisfy everyone, and the fiercely independent film director Otto Preminger clearly hasn't tried. What he has done is to transform Gershwin's magnificent folk opera into a stately, elegant film with daringly long takes, an avoidance of close-ups, intricately composed deep focus shots, and sedate, objective camera movement. The costumes, sets, and rich, autumnal color design are appropriately stylized. Preminger's *Porgy and Bess* unfolds in a world apart.

Preminger's direction is intensely cinematic, his approach far more sophisticated than that of a filmed play. Replacing passages of recitative with dialogue, he has made no attempt to present the material as an opera. Music purists can certainly object to the fact that the singing voices of Sidney Poitier and Dorothy Dandridge are dubbed, that in supporting roles Pearl Bailey and a reptilian Sammy Davis, Jr. are pure musical comedy, and that André Previn's often-majestic orchestrations sound more like 1959 than 1935. With his august presence and speaking voice, Poitier is a remote, dignified *Porgy*, a survivor. In effective contrast, Dandridge is an anguished *Bess* victimized by her beauty as well as her race and gender.



Sidney Poitier as Porgy

Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive

Quite contrary to its tarnished reputation, Preminger's film is a magisterial pageant, a ceremonial work deeply respectful both to the intentions of Gershwin and his collaborators and to its black subjects. Far from a demeaning portrait of a segregated, impoverished black community, the film emphasizes group solidarity among the inhabitants of Catfish Row. Like the original work, it is a stylized presentation of a culture based on the truthful but inevitably detached observations of white outsiders.

Let's hope that the triumphant Brooklyn showing will point the way toward the redemption of a superb work with an unwarranted reputation. This "forbidden" text demands to be shown exactly as it is here, on a large screen and with a sound system that can do justice to what may well be the most glorious theatrical work by an American composer.

—Foster Hirsch
Professor of Film Studies,
Brooklyn College

The 1959 *Porgy and Bess* movie, based on George Gershwin's legendary opera, pleased few Americans except the admirers of Sammy Davis, Jr., who plays Sportin' Life. Because it closely follows the opera, because the Gershwin influence is omnipresent, and because author DuBose Heyward had nothing to do with Richard Nash's screenplay, one should probably distinguish the movie from Heyward's earlier novel and play. Mercifully, the original minstrel elements are trimmed in both the opera and the movie. However, the stereotypical aspects of the work are magnified on the wide screen and resound throughout with what most African Americans feel: that most White Americans, past and present, assume this is how most African Americans act, think and feel.

In spite of the contradictory magnificence of the opera and the film, three facts reveal the troubling aspects of *Porgy and Bess* with regard to racial representation. 1) It traveled the same tortured path along which African American culture too often gets to the public: via Whites and third parties who give it their own interpretation. 2) It perpetuates a perception of black communities as God-fearing, combative, extremely erotic, drug addicted, uncritically superstitious, and happy with "plenty o' nuttin'." 3) Its contemporary relevance has been ensured by the crescendoing crisis of African Americans in the United States.

Because of America's racial climate, past and present, this film is seen as a representation of pernicious political and racial

exploitation. As audiences become increasingly aware of the sensibilities of people of color, the undeniably stereotypical features of the opera and the film have become even more problematic.

—James Standifer
Professor of Music, University of Michigan

There is no one *Porgy and Bess*. It changes according to our perceptions—most obviously about race, but also about working class versus middle class Negro life (Negro was the word we still used when the film was made); about gender representations; and about Eros, addiction, and religion.

Most importantly, *Porgy and Bess* has changed because history has made it change, and has made us change too. When the film version was released in 1959, it was burdened by many expectations, presumptions and resentments. How pitifully few works of serious art featuring black characters and performers had entered mainstream American art or entertainment! What would this movie mean, artistically and politically, for "The Race"? Here we were, at the beginning of the Civil Rights movement, with its images of dignified uplifting struggle, and here were the beggars, drug pushers and whores of Catfish Row singing words like "I got plenty o' nuttin' / an' nuttin's plenty fo' me."



Dorothy Dandridge as Bess and Sammy Davis, Jr. as Sportin' Life
Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive

How I worried back then (actually my parents worried more than I). For I did love and I still do love this big, musically ravishing, dramatically and racially tangled opera. And it is now possible for all of us to love it, question it, resent this passage, ponder that one, pity a simplification here, acknowledge accuracy there. We are all capable, if we bring everything we know and are to works like *Porgy and Bess*, of responding in all kinds of rich, unpredictable ways, ways that our race, class, and gender might not predict. The film, like the opera and novel, belongs to the American culture in which we live, and to the personal culture each of us invents for ourselves.

—Margo Jefferson
Cultural Critic, New York Times

Correction: In Mark Slobin's article in our Spring 1998 issue, the author of *American Music: A Panorama* is incorrectly identified as David Kingman. The author's correct name is Daniel Kingman. The editors apologize for this error.

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Gershwin on Disc (continued)

All of the vintage recordings mentioned include excerpts from *Porgy and Bess*, and one, the Jazz Heritage, includes a rehearsal with comments by Gershwin. We listen in awe to Todd Duncan and Ann Brown, who made history by creating the title roles. We also experience disappointment in realizing that they lacked the extraordinary talent of some of their successors. (Compare, for example, the 1963 recordings on the Smithsonian set of William Warfield and Leontyne Price.) Nevertheless, they were the pioneers; they went on despite initial reservations about appearing in the work of a mere songwriter, reservations quickly dispelled by Gershwin's music. We willingly grant them the honor they so richly deserve.

Today, we are fortunate in having a choice between two exceptional performances of *Porgy and Bess*: that of the Houston Grand Opera (RCA RCD3-2109) conducted by John DeMain, and the more recent Glyndebourne Festival Opera performance (EMI 56220) conducted by Simon Rattle. I give an edge to the Glyndebourne production, but they both thrillingly demonstrate that this is, indeed, an opera with substance.

Five hundred and ten CDs discovered on my original Internet search remain unreviewed. However, even this surface scratch demonstrates the abundance and variety of Gershwin performances on CD. Clearly, riches abound to fill any need or taste.

—Edward A. Berlin
Brooklyn College

The Maple Leaf Rag at 100

The town of Sedalia, MO took little note in 1899 when music store owner John Stark published Scott Joplin's masterpiece. Things have changed. The town, now the home of the annual **Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival**, is preparing for a week-long celebration beginning on **31 May** to commemorate that signal event. Featuring such headliners as Max Morath, Butch Thompson, John Arpin, and Morten Gunnar Larsen, the festival will have some 100 performers in nine formal concerts, innumerable free outdoor events, a ragtime ball, cabarets, silent movies with live piano accompaniments, and, as always, nightly "afterhours" music making until dawn. A special feature will be a full performance of Joplin's ballet *The Ragtime Dance* (also celebrating its centennial), with dancers, singer, and orchestra. Symposium topics will focus on the two centennial pieces, but will include also newly discovered music of Joseph Lamb, interactions between ragtime and Native American music, a history of musical washboard playing, the tango in the ragtime era, European syncopated music, and the like.

For further information, see <http://www.scottjoplin.org/> or call 660-826-2271.

Rethinking the Rhapsody (continued)

In "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain," Wallace Stevens writes about a text that showed the protagonist where to locate himself to see what he needed to see. The poem reminded him:

*How he had recomposed the pines,
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,
For the outlook that would be right,
Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:
The exact rock where his inexactnesses
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they
had edged . . .*

Encountering this poem several years ago, I took it as a metaphor for the kind of observing historians do. Since our observations are of the past, we do our present-day research, and quite a bit of groping around too, to find the best vantage point—"the outlook that would be right"—for seeing the past more clearly.

For me, Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* turns out to be "the exact rock" on the mountain from which my own inexactnesses as an observer of the 1920s managed to locate "the view toward which they had edged." The *Rhapsody* is an emblem of its time and a work with an enduring presence; a composition that has never gone out of style. It brings together elements from all three American musical spheres. And in line with the historiographical position taken in the forthcoming *America's Musical Life* it questions a hierarchical view that assigns the classical sphere (and composers' control) higher value, and the popular and folk spheres (and performers' control) lower value.

—University of Michigan

Notes

¹Richard Crawford, "It Ain't Necessarily Soul: Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* as a Symbol," *Yearbook for Inter-American Musical Research* 8 (1972), 17-38, is the first of several articles.

²Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 78.

³Carol J. Oja, "Gershwin and American Modernists of the 1920s," *The Musical Quarterly* 78 (1994), 646-68.

Widening the Lens II (continued)

hear additional examples of interchange from others in a variety of fields, together with their ideas about how knowledge of these interchanges could lead to significant renovations of our perceptions of the larger American musical panorama. Moreover, it would be interesting to invite as many scholars as would accept the challenge to assume the role of the generalist, and present their ideal organization of the *entire panorama*, even into—well, yes, even into chapters. As we approach the millennium, how would a broad cross-section of the best scholars present the *whole* teeming, complex picture of American music making? Mark Slobin got the subject off to a good start.

—Daniel Kingman
California State University, Sacramento

New Music Notes (continued)

and the broad audience it reached. He concludes with a look at "The Nature of Melody," written while Cowell was at San Quentin, which remains unpublished.

By the end, readers have been guided over complex terrain, and they benefit from the diverse range of perspectives. They have also encountered over and over the figure who worked so hard after the composer's death to circumscribe that vista—that is, his wife Sidney Robertson Cowell. Her influence on Cowell's musical thinking pops up repeatedly, and her words surface in excerpts from an unpublished collection of her writings. (A final tip: it's not easy to obtain this book in the United States. Contact the publisher directly through its web site: <<http://www.gbhap.com/abi/art/nicholls.htm>>.)

Country and Gospel Notes (continued)

genre, though it does sport fine vintage photos and interesting anecdotes. It is probably more valuable as a documentation of Gaither and the Homecoming phenomenon, and of the complex interaction between generations and groups on the contemporary gospel scene. Along with the current "Gaither Collection" catalogue, the book brings to today's multi-faceted gospel scene a sense of scope and direction.

Behind the Beat (continued)

Battle, Chick Corea, Joni Mitchell, et al.). Not to complain, though—Hancock has come up with inspired arrangements for Gershwin warhorses and everyone involved with the disc sounds happily engaged. Singing and playing harmonica, Stevie Wonder nearly steals the show on "St. Louis Blues," while on Duke Ellington's "Cotton Tail," Hancock and saxophonist Wayne Shorter take "I Got Rhythm" changes to the outer limits of jazz harmonic practice and back again. . . . **Astral Project** is an earthy progressive jazz ensemble based in New Orleans. **Elevado** (Compass Records 7 4249 2) features catchy tunes, bluesy open vamps, and crisp Crescent City rhythms supplied by drummer Johnny Vidacovich (check out the percolating funk on "Gator Bait"). I only wish someone had given pianist David Torkanowsky a better instrument to play. . . . Adventurous saxophonist-composer, student of ancient civilizations, and prolific recording artist **Steve Coleman** unveils two extended suites on **Genesis and The Opening of the Way** (RCA Victor 74321-52934-2). Both feature churning ostinatos, bracing dissonance, layered textures, and impassioned improvisation. In his trenchant liner notes for the 2-CD set, poet and essayist Nathaniel Mackey sums up the total effect: "Epiphany rides rhythm and pitch in an often densely woven music of great propulsive beauty, multiple resonance and reach."

For more information on Coleman and the musicians' collective M-Base ("Macro-Basic Array of Structured Extemporization"), see <<http://www.m-base.com>>.

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