

An interview with performer, educator and archivist of the Great American Songbook, Michael Feinstein

Barry Grey
23 December 2015

Michael Feinstein, a pianist, singer and educator, has for many years been a leading historian and interpreter of the rich body of music known as the Great American Songbook. The appellation refers to the trove of popular songs, also known as American “standards,” dating roughly from the early years of the twentieth century to the 1970s.

Feinstein is a multi-platinum-selling recording artist whose CDs feature the work of such composers as George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, Harry Warren, Burton Lane, Jerry Herman, Hugh Martin, Jimmy Webb and Andr  Previn.

He gives frequent shows across the country and has performed numerous times on Broadway. In 2010, the Public Broadcasting System aired a three-part television documentary entitled *Michael Feinstein’s American Songbook*. Since 2012, he has been the host of a weekly, one-hour radio program *Song Travels with Michael Feinstein*, which is distributed by National Public Radio. That same year, he was named principal pops conductor for the Pasadena POPS orchestra.

Feinstein devotes much of his time and energy to preserving and documenting the history of American popular and show music and bringing its legacy to younger generations. Since 2009, he has served as the artistic director of The Center for the Performing Arts in Carmel, Indiana. The Center is a performing venue, hosts an annual international arts festival, and houses The Great American Songbook Foundation founded by Feinstein.

Feinstein has a particular affinity, personal and professional, for the work of George Gershwin and his lyricist brother Ira Gershwin. In 1977, at the age of 20, he met Ira Gershwin, then in his early 80s. For the next six years, until Gershwin’s death in 1983, Feinstein worked closely with the brother and songwriting partner of composer George, who died tragically in 1937 at the age of 38, archiving Ira’s memorabilia, including unpublished sketches of songs and other compositions.

In 2012, Feinstein published a book, *The Gershwins and Me: A Personal History in Twelve Songs*, in which he interlaced remembrances of his collaboration and friendship with Ira with information and observations on American popular and concert music in the 20th Century and the unique contribution of the Gershwins.

This writer recently spoke to Feinstein.

Barry Grey: You have devoted your life to performing, archiving and popularizing the Great American Songbook. Why do you think the legacy of this body of music and its history are so important?

Michael Feinstein: For me, the Great American Songbook is one of the most unique and special creations to come from American culture. I feel that this body of work is timeless, because it has a level of craft, inspiration and quality that transcends the era in which it was created. It is extraordinarily significant that so much rich music was created in this

time.

And, of course, the lyrics are even in some ways more dazzling than the music, because I think it’s much more difficult to write a fresh lyric that has a unique approach to the oft expressed emotions that songs are about.

And so, when I look at the achievements of these writers collectively, I am continually astounded by the work that they did. The prodigious amount of work is really something, and, of course, it has to do with the era in which it was written, the backgrounds of these writers, many of whom were children of Russian Jewish immigrants. There’s something about that time that conspired to create the best of what we now look at as great American art.

BG: You have touched on my second question. What do you think accounts for the extraordinary flowering of popular music in America from the 1920s through the 1960s, including the American musical theater?

MF: It’s very much connected to the cultural times of New York and the great American dream—which seems to be shattering these days—of hope for a new and special life in this country. So many people came from other places to this country with dreams that were realized, sometimes through their children. It’s definitely a combination of cultures that were all mixed up in a place like New York.

And throughout the country too, there was something about America in that period that made people feel anything was possible. And this great confidence comes through in the songs. George Gershwin, of course, is the finest example, because as a kid he ran all over New York. He would go to Coney Island and the family lived in Harlem for a while. He was exposed to all different kinds of music and he assimilated all of it.

So it really is about assimilation of this jumble of cultures that comes through as a new American voice.

BG: Where do you think George and Ira Gershwin stand in the pantheon of American and world music?

MF: George Gershwin, of course, is unique in the context of his contemporaries because of his achievements writing concert music as well as popular songs. So he will always have the distinction of being the one American songwriter who also was the most successful writing larger-scale works that have come to epitomize the sound and the essence of America in the twentieth century. People all over the world listen to *Rhapsody in Blue* and get a sense of America in that time. So George Gershwin is extraordinary.

Richard Rodgers went into psychotherapy after George Gershwin wrote *Porgy and Bess* because he was so overwhelmed at the enormity of that creation. George was one of those people who had no gap between his ability to conceive something and realize it. Even if, in the case of *Porgy and Bess*, it took him several years.

In the years leading up to the actual composition of *Porgy and Bess*, he

would say, "I'm not ready yet. I need to do more studying, I need more preparation." So he knew what he was going to accomplish and he also knew that he needed to do more preparation in order to realize it. He was an artist largely without angst. He did have his issues here and there, but creatively, he had a clear channel, if you will.

Ira, on the other hand, was someone who labored over his lyrics. He worked so hard on them and was always envious of Buddy De Sylva, who could create a brilliant, polished lyric in an hour, while Ira would work weeks and weeks on it.

I think the combination, getting back to your question, of Ira's lyrics and George's music is a perfect commingling of two different geniuses, and one spurred the other, one inspired the other, even though George most often wrote the tune first.

I think that they are both incredibly significant. Because Stephen Sondheim cruelly criticized Ira in his most recent book, referring to him as rhyming poison, I think that has made some people for whom Mr. Sondheim's words are like the Sermon on the Mount believe that it's true. But anyone who really looks at Ira's work will see that there is a tremendous talent, genius and craft in his words, and they will, I believe, always be as highly regarded as George's music and will last not only for capturing the vernacular of the times, but, again, creating songs that have transcended their time.

BG: You explain in your book, *The Gershwins and Me*, that "Gershwin achieved an unusual perhaps even unique merging of popular and high art." You write further, "Blurring the distinction between high art and entertainment, between classical music and the jazz and pop styles was at the heart of his vision for the unifying power of music and its ability to bring different kinds of people together."

Gershwin himself was insistent that he was writing for a mass audience and wanted to connect with as well as uplift it. Again, when you are writing about *Rhapsody in Blue*, you say: "There is a beauty there but also nervy jazz rhythms that offer hints of our great achievements and our great promise. This was new, young, fresh, hopeful music, quintessentially American music."

My question is, do you see a democratic content to his work? And, if so, what role does this play in his achievement, his greatness?

MF: I think the upbringing of George, being a kid who liked to play on the streets and was a rough and tumble youth who did not show scholastic promise, was one of the things that gave him a sense of community and real everyday life that imbued his work. I think that his sense of justice is expressed through his music, in that he wanted to reach all people without prejudice. It was very important to him to create something that would resonate with the masses. It pained him later when people were saying that he had gone highbrow, or that he was becoming a little too complex for the average guy after he studied with [composer, music theorist and composition teacher Joseph] Schillinger and such.

His musical palette was shifting, and yet he was always mindful of communicating democratically with his work. And so it's interesting to wonder what would have happened, if he would have ever reached a place where his musical palette had become so sophisticated that it didn't appeal to the average listener. But that was his goal, to always be accessible no matter how sophisticated his palette had become. I think that he was always mindful of that, and perhaps that created a little struggle later in his life, where he was being pegged as someone who no longer wished to write music for the people.

BG: There was nothing elitist about his work, nor was there anything condescending or patronizing.

MF: Yes, that's true. When he would have a party at his house with all the literati of the time and the most famous personalities on the scene, his father was a guest at the house and he very proudly introduced his father, who mixed with the guests and charmed the people. And that's because George never tried to be something that he wasn't. People always

commented on his pride in his parents, his pride in who he was, without apology. And I think it's the same thing in his music.

BG: This was a time, the 1920s, the whole period of his early life, born in 1898—there were such immense world events, the Spanish American War. There was also a growing socialist movement in America, which must have influenced Gershwin. Many of the people with whom he associated, some of his closest friends, were people of the left politically, although I believe he himself was a liberal Democrat.

MF: The family of Leonore Gershwin, Ira's wife, lived in Greenwich Village. Her father owned a restaurant and they were always connected to the socialist movement because all of the writers and painters and composers were part of the artistic, cultural life that was also part of the socialist movement. They were clearly connected.

George did not consider himself political, but he certainly was well aware of inequality in his time. That is one of the reasons he wanted to create *Porgy and Bess*, even though there are problems with *Porgy and Bess* and many African Americans consider it to be such a terrible racist stereotype. Yet in some ways it's no different from the stereotypes in *Carmen* or in other operas. There are stereotypes in opera.

But that was one of his reasons for writing *Porgy and Bess*, to create a coming together culturally, but it was also rooted in his connection to socialist ideals or values. It's very clear. There was that and the other part of it was that he had this whole spiritual approach to the music. He believed it was something that came through divinely. That's why he called his publishing companies New Dawn, New World Music, all of that.

It is that connection to our inalienable rights, what is instilled in us as human beings. It is connected to that as well.

BG: There was a television documentary on the 50th anniversary of Gershwin's death in 1987 that partly dealt with the controversy over *Porgy and Bess*. Personally, I don't agree with those who attack it as "white" patronizing. One of the people interviewed was Anne Brown, the original Bess, who spoke very eloquently in defense of the opera and in defense of Gershwin.

MF: Well, she eventually left America because of not being able to work enough and found a happier life in Norway, so she was uniquely equipped to speak about that.

BG: Here's something you quote in your book from Gershwin. You might, perhaps, want to comment on it. This is from his article in 1927. "But to be true music, it must repeat the thoughts and aspirations of the people and the time. My people are Americans. My time is today." I always thought that was very powerful.

MF: Yes. That's interesting. It's 1927. He had written *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Concerto in F* at that point, and had *Funny Face* on Broadway. So it was before *American in Paris*, before *Porgy and Bess*. He had the same vision from his earliest days. He just looked at the world and felt this tremendous desire to express what he saw and felt musically in a way that hadn't been otherwise communicated. He was fascinated by jazz and ragtime and was always looking at ways to incorporate that. And also, he looked at the music of American Indians and other cultures, trying to figure out if these are part of American popular song. What was it that made up the American sound?

I always find it interesting and ironic that *Rhapsody in Blue* was premiered at a concert that also featured a new piece by Victor Herbert, who was certainly the most famous composer in America and who died the following May. So it was sort of the passing of the baton, if you will.

BG: Gershwin's untimely death seems, at least to me, to have marked something of a turning point in the development of American concert music. The path he was forging in works such as the *Rhapsody*, his *Concerto in F*, *An American in Paris* and *Porgy and Bess* seems largely to have been cut off. Do you see a connection between this, if you agree with my premise, and the broader development of American society and culture

in the post-World War II years?

MF: At the time of his death, he had finished a string quartet that he hadn't notated and was starting work on a symphony, and was speaking to Lynn Riggs about creating an opera based on a book by Riggs called *The Lights of Lamie*. It's such a shame that he departed so young, because he would have continued to forge a musical path that didn't quite develop in our country without his unique genius.

And it would have affected us culturally. It would have affected us on every level, because of the enormity of the influence of his music in that time. It's impossible to recreate the sense of how powerful it was. Ira always said that, take any name you wish—Leonard Bernstein, Marvin Hamlisch, Aaron Copland—he said that all would have paled in comparison to what he felt George was about to accomplish. Ira felt so fervently about that, and that's one of the things that depressed him so deeply, aside from the fact that George was simply not there.

We would talk about what George was going to achieve, what he was going to write. Then, of course, we would wonder—was George supposed to die then? Was it fate? Why? I mean, the unanswerable question. But the world would have been a very different place, because, as we know, art affects life in ways that change the course of history.

Even with his death, the ripple effects of his works still changed the course of music. Really, it wasn't until the 1940s that his concert works were legitimately accepted into concert halls, and even in the '50s and '60s there was snobbism about Gershwin—that it was low-brow, pops concert stuff and such. It is only fairly recently that his work has been integrated.

So, in some ways he didn't come into his own as far as a broader acceptance until the 1940s—that is, acceptance of the whole of his music. I'm not talking about the songs and the cultural effect, but just the acceptance of his work on levels that did not happen in his own life.

BG: Do you have any thoughts on the future prospects for popular music in the US and around the world?

MF: Well, one of the things that fascinates and sometimes depresses me is the lack of variety and musicality in so much popular song today. Thousands and thousands of songs, and this is not an exaggeration, thousands and thousands of popular songs all use the same four or five chords. The sameness of music today, I think, reflects our society.

The lack of creative imagination in our world today, and, of course, in our country it's because of the lack of arts education. It's been decimated and replaced by technology and a military machine—educating young people in other things that deprive their souls and their hearts of music and culture that are essential for the growth of a human being.

Music always reflects the times, and I dream of an experience one day of people moving back to a broader artistic expression in music. And I think that might only come with some sort of apocalypse in our world. I don't want that to happen, of course, but it feels like we are all being moved closer and closer to some apocalyptic event that seems almost like it's inevitable, in that if we don't change our ways, something like that might happen.

I think that new voices are so important, now more than ever. Having said that, there are talented people that I listen to that are writing in the Broadway community. There are talented people out there, but they're in such a minority in regards to popular music, which is what you asked about, that they aren't being given the opportunity to be heard. And that, combined with technology fragmenting society so much, everything is segmented in a way that there isn't one broad forum in which we experience music as we used to.

It is that separation that also makes it more difficult for a communal experience musically to happen, unless it's someone like Adele who comes along and reaches a lot of people, still not in the way music would reach everybody in the 1940s, but she's reaching a lot of people. I listen to this woman who has a mighty voice and listen to the bland and pathetic

chord structures of these songs and it's just shocking to me that people actually think this is good music, because it's so bereft of character to me. Yet there are literally millions and millions of people who would say that I'm an idiot for saying that. That's the way it is.

BG: Well, people are hungry. There's an impasse in society, there's an impasse in politics, there's an impasse in the arts. People are looking for a new way.

MF: Yes, that's a good way of putting it. More succinct and eloquent than I could have done.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact