100 years of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*: An interview with performer and archivist of the "Great American Songbook" Michael Feinstein

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One hundred years ago today, on Lincoln's Birthday, February 12, 1924, 25-year-old George Gershwin strode onto the stage of Manhattan's Aeolian Hall, sat down at the piano, and, accompanied by Paul Whiteman's jazz orchestra, gave the world premiere of his *Rhapsody in Blue*. From the opening clarinet glissando, performed by Whiteman's reedman Ross Gorman, to the closing tutti crescendo of piano and orchestra chords, the packed hall listened with rapt attention.

The blues-infused melodies, the jazzy, syncopated rhythms, interpolated into the rhapsodic forms of late Romantic concert music, generated an electric atmosphere. Here was something new! Something at once infectious and daring! Something that combined the concert hall, the jazz cabaret, the Broadway stage and Tin Pan Alley! At the conclusion of the piece, some 15 minutes in length, the audience members erupted in a standing ovation.

That audience included lovers of concert music, fans of the new jazz craze, patrons of the New York musical comedy stage and prominent figures in the field of music and cultural criticism. The latter included composers Victor Herbert, Igor Stravinsky and John Phillip Sousa; the famed English contralto Marguerite d'Alvarez; the American jazz and stride pianist Willie "the Lion" Smith; the violin maestro and composer Fritz Kreisler; symphony conductors Leopold Stokowski and Walter Damrosch; and writer and artistic-photographer Carl Van Vechten.

The featured entry in the program of 26 pieces titled "An Experiment in Modern Music," produced by self-proclaimed "King of Jazz" Whiteman, was the *Suite of Serenades* by Herbert, widely considered at the time the dean of American composers. By 1924, Gershwin was making a name for himself as a composer of popular songs and Broadway show tunes, his biggest hit being the 1919 Al Jolson smash "Swanee."

But by the time Gershwin's turn came—he was the next-to-last on the program—the audience, packed into the hot, stuffy hall, was getting bored and restless. The program, which began with the raucous "Livery Stable Blues," had settled into a fairly tame progression of tunes and pleasant compositions. Part of the crowd had already left before the young Gershwin took the stage.

Today, 100 years after Whiteman's concert, few remember Herbert's suite or the other pieces that were performed. Aeolian Hall itself closed its doors forever in 1927. But the *Rhapsody*, which struck like a lightning bolt on that snowy afternoon, has remained immensely popular, beloved and influential to the present day.

From day one, the *Rhapsody* and Gershwin's concert and opera opus more generally have been the focus of critical controversy, despite—or perhaps because of—the undiminished popularity, not only in the US, but globally, of such masterpieces as *Rhapsody in Blue*, the *Concerto in F*, *An American in Paris*, *Cuban Overture* and his crowning achievement, the great American opera, *Porgy and Bess*. Even more intolerable to his professional detractors is Gershwin's simultaneous popularity as the composer of dozens of lovely and moving show tunes and popular songs.

Gershwin has had and continues to have his boosters in academia and the world of music and cultural criticism. But from the beginning, he has been attacked for committing the unforgivable sin of producing great art that is at the same time popular and democratic. Early on he was the target of partisans of "Yankee" American art as opposed to that of "Negroid" and "Oriental-Jewish" interlopers.

The anti-Marxist Frankfurt School, led by Theodor Adorno, denigrated Gershwin as a representative of "mid-cult," exemplified by tonal music that is accessible to and beloved by the masses. Popularity and accessibility, according to this elitist theory, brand works of music as the modern equivalent of the Roman Empire's "Bread and Circuses." For modern music to be true art, according to these prophets of despair, it must be atonal and, preferably, indecipherable to the broader public.

More recently, the *Rhapsody* and Gershwin have come under attack by the postmodernist purveyors of identity and racial politics. Gershwin, you see, was white, and therefore had no business incorporating jazz and the blues into his music. In so doing, he was, the claim goes, depriving and even stealing from black performers and composers such as Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, William Grant Still, etc.

Last month, the *New York Times*, always eager and ready to promote racialist falsifications of history, e.g., *The 1619 Project*, published an ignorant op-ed piece titled "The Worst Masterpiece: 'Rhapsody in Blue' at 100." Calling the piece "Caucasian" and "corny," the author scratched his head over the fact that "the 'Rhapsody' went straight into the language of the most powerful and innovative Black jazz musicians," noting that "Art Blakey, Tadd Dameron, Billy Strayhorn and Herbie Nichols praised the work."

The *World Socialist Web Site* is presenting here an interview conducted last month on the significance of the centenary of the *Rhapsody in Blue* with Michael Feinstein—pianist, singer, educator and archivist of the rich body of music known as the "Great American Songbook."

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

He 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, Feinstein met Ira Gershwin, then in his early 80s. For the next six years, until Gershwin's death in 1983, he 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.

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Barry Grey: My basic question, and it's a big one, is: How do you assess the musical, cultural and historical significance of the centenary of the premiere of the *Rhapsody in Blue*?

Michael Feinstein: It's quite remarkable to consider that this piece is 100 years old, because the cultural impact, the musical influence is as strong as ever, if not stronger.

Because there's something imbued in the creation by George Gershwin that crystallizes a certain sound and energy and inspirational moment in time that continues to resonate with people. It's clear to me that this piece is otherworldly in its DNA, because there's something about it that transcends its technical or musical limitations. It speaks to the heart, and I believe that it will continue to do so for hundreds of years hence, because it has a timeless appeal.

BG: Yes, and it also has an international appeal, doesn't it?

MF: Yes, and it was internationally that Gershwin became recognized for his greatness before it happened in the United States. His music was regarded in other countries as legitimate concert music, to be performed by symphonies. At the same time, in his lifetime, in America the music of George Gershwin was considered lesser than, and pandering to public taste.

Even Irving Caesar, who was George Gershwin's early collaborator and with whom he wrote "Swanee" and other songs, once said to me: "I can sum up George Gershwin in one sentence: You cannot please the muses and the masses." And I thought, well, but that's exactly what Gershwin did. Irving shared an opinion that many had at that time, that Gershwin was too popular and his concert music was not equal to that of other creators.

BG: Yes, I've seen that quote. I think it's in *The Gershwins and Me*, if I'm not mistaken. I'm going to quote something to you now, and it may have a familiar ring. I'd like you to comment on it if you can.

> But the breadth of what he was trying to achieve—and what he did achieve—was extraordinary. It was, essentially, the invention of a new type of American music, one that melded the old and the new, the street and the concert hall, the classical, the popular, and the jazz-infused…
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> With *Rhapsody in Blue*, George Gershwin made a quantum leap in American music. Before *Rhapsody in Blue*, American concert music was stolid and largely devoid of personality and copied from European traditions. People were looking for the true American voice and Gershwin had a clear vision of what that voice should be. He wanted to extend jazz beyond the limits of the three-minute song. In an article published in *Theatre Magazine* in 1926, he said his best works were the *Rhapsody* and *Concerto in F*. The *Rhapsody*, he said, "succeeded in showing that jazz is not merely a dance; it comprises bigger themes and purposes. It may have the quality of an epic. I wrote it [the *Rhapsody*] in ten days; it has lived for three years, and is healthy and growing." [*The Gershwins and Me: A Personal History in Twelve Songs*, Michael Feinstein, with Ian Jackman, 2012, Simon & Schuster, p. 147, p. 148]

I think that's a pretty good summary, and I think its author should be commended. Do you have anything you would add to that, particularly from the standpoint of the development of modern music, American, in particular?

MF: Just that George was certainly clear about his desire to write concert works and to meld or include jazz in his concert music. But even he did not have the sense of what he was creating at the time he created *Rhapsody in Blue*. It was something that is mysterious, in that there were others who were incorporating jazz pre- and post-Gershwin. But he channeled something that was greater than the sum of its parts.

BG: I've been reading David Schiff's book [*Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue*, 1997, Cambridge University Press] and I found this interesting. Almost as an aside, he calls the *Rhapsody*–I guess he is talking specifically about the slow section—"the most famous melody in 20th century concert music." That is quite a statement, and I imagine it's probably true.

MF: Yeah, maybe so. The funny thing is that George had composed the melody of the andante section two years before the *Rhapsody*, and it was Ira who suggested including it in the piece after hearing George play a run-through of what he had composed. George's first reaction was, "You want me to include that corny thing?" He actually used that word—corny.

Johnny Green, the songwriter who wrote "Body and Soul" and "I Cover the Waterfront," was present at the premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue*. He was either 14 or 15, and he told me that when he heard the andante theme, which was the first time anybody had heard it, he started crying. He got so choked up. And it had the same effect for all the people who were there. So it's fascinating that it has that power and retained fervor through the ages.

BG: Also, by the way, Schiff says, and I found this very interesting, that Whiteman, after the concert at Aeolian Hall, did a national tour of the program and came back to New York in June of '24. He recorded the *Rhapsody* and sold a million copies.

MF: I never heard that it sold a million copies and I'd like proof of that. I know that it sold well, mind you, but a million copies, in what period of time? Because the *Rhapsody* was recorded in June of 1924 in Camden, New Jersey with Whiteman, and then in 1927 they rerecorded it electronically, with the microphone having come into common usage in 1925. At that time Gershwin had an argument with Whiteman, and it was Nathaniel Shilkret who actually finished the recording, because George and Whiteman couldn't agree on it. A million … eventually, but it would be interesting to know how many it sold in its infancy.

BG: That's all Schiff says about it.

MF: Also, success of music in that time was measured in sales of sheet music and piano rolls equally with recordings. Recordings were in their infancy, and the larger measure of success at that time was sheet music and piano rolls. So it was shifting, but in '24 the balance was still very much for the other mediums.

BG: What do you think accounts for Gershwin's musical genius? Especially coming from his background? As far as I know, there's no clear musical tradition in his family. It seems almost miraculous.

MF: I agree with you. When I talk about Gershwin, I always go back to the fact that it was channeled through him. He was, for whatever reason, a chosen vessel to bring this sound through. Because there are numerous instances where George would play something at the piano extemporaneously, and when he finished he would say, "Isn't that great, isn't that wonderful?"

And it wasn't ego. He was as amazed by what came through him as anybody else. And it was mistaken for a great ego. But he understood that it was—that he was a vessel.

It's not that he didn't work hard when he was given the inspiration, because he did. He bristled at the fact that some people talked about how easy it was for him. And it was easy on one level, but he knew that it was

channeled. And he was very interested in the spiritual world, having had two readings with Edgar Cayce and naming his music company "New World New Dawn Music." He felt that it was something other-worldly coming through him.

BG: One thing that has always struck me about Gershwin and his music is its democratic, multi-cultural aspect. And I think he was very conscious of that.

Gershwin aspired to create a genuine American idiom. In the 1926 *Theatre Magazine* article you cite in your book, titled "Jazz is the Voice of the American Soul," he describes his own development. He writes:

> Old music and new music, forgotten melodies and the craze of the moment, bits of opera, Russian folk songs, Spanish ballads, chansons, ragtime ditties combined in a mighty chorus in my inner ear. And through and over it all I heard, faint at first, loud at last, the soul of this great America of ours.
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> And what is the voice of the American soul? It is jazz developed out of ragtime, jazz that is the plantation song improved and transformed into finer, bigger harmonies. …
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> I do not assert that the American soul is Negroid. But it is a combination that includes the wail, the whine, and the exultant note of the old "mammy" songs of the South. It is black and white. It is all colors and all souls unified in the great melting pot of the world. …
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> 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.

He really, it seems to me, did fuse all sorts of different cultural trends—jazz, classical, Debussy, black music. It did sync, I think, with the best of the optimistic, booming period in the United States that was taking place.

MF: I think that's accurate. He was influenced by all the sounds that he heard, and he did assimilate them, being a kid who grew up in New York and experienced different ethnicities and different types of music. And that's why you can read an analysis that someone has written about the critical influence that Yiddish musical theater had on him, or an article I read that talked about how he was heavily influenced by Grieg. And Abram Chasins, the pianist and critic, said that George stole from Rachmaninoff. And they all very deftly prove their points, pointing out musical examples and such. But it's because he was affected by all of that, and it was his distillation of it through his own being that made it fresh and new.

BG: Last question. What do you think about the way in which the centenary is being marked or celebrated so far? How pronounced is it? How international?

MF: I just put together a podcast that I'll post at some point, talking about the history of the *Rhapsody* and playing archival interviews and such. I did an interview for "BBC Radio Two." They're doing a radio documentary on the *Rhapsody*. So I'm aware of that. So, as usual, in Europe and England they'll probably be doing a much greater celebration of Gershwin than there will be over here.