

Gershwin centennial concert at University of Michigan highlights composer's extraordinary range

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On January 26, the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre and Dance and the UM Gershwin Initiative presented a centennial concert of works by George Gershwin and his lyricist brother Ira Gershwin.

The concert centered on works by the Gershwins from 1925. It included show tunes, wonderfully performed by four students at the UM School of Music, Theater and Dance, a rare performance of the overture to the 1925 operetta *Song of the Flame*, co-composed by Gershwin, then 27 years old, and Herbert Stothart (1885-1949), and a dazzling performance of Gershwin's 1925 masterpiece, the *Piano Concerto in F*, with soloist Tzu-Yin Huang and the University of Michigan Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of conductor Jayce Ogren.

Prior to the *Concerto in F* finale, four songs were performed featuring the lyrics of Ira Gershwin, including three written with other composers after the tragic death of George at the age of 38 in July 1937: "My Ship" from 1941's *Lady in the Dark*, music composed by Kurt Weill (1900-1950), and "It's a New World" and "The Man That Got Away" from the 1954 film *A Star is Born*, music by Harold Arlen (1905-1986).

The various songs were introduced by Andrew S. Kohler, managing editor of the Gershwin Initiative, and Michael Owen, a member of the Gershwin Initiative editorial board and author of a new biography of Ira Gershwin titled *Ira Gershwin: A Life in Words*.

The concert as a whole demonstrated the astonishing range of George Gershwin's music—from the Broadway musical stage to the concert hall to the opera house (*Porgy and Bess*)—fusing blues and jazz rhythms with popular melodies and the late romantic classical

tradition. It was music at once popular and uplifting, and profoundly democratic in its impulses and intentions.

Gershwin aspired to create a genuine American idiom. In a 1926 *Theatre Magazine* article titled "Jazz is the Voice of the American Soul," he described his own development. He wrote:

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.

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...

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...

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.

The centennial program opened with five songs from Gershwin productions that debuted in 1925. "These

Charming People” and “Sweet and Low-Down” came from the George and Ira collaboration *Tip-Toes*, which featured the brother and sister song and dance act of Adele and Fred Astaire. “Mr. and Mrs. Sipkin” represented the show *Tell Me More*, for which Buddy DeSylva (1895-1950) served as co-lyricist with Ira Gershwin. These were followed by two songs from *Song of the Flame*, “Midnight Bells” and “Vodka.”

The singers—Aquila Sol, Nicholas Alexander Wilkinson II, Oliver Boomer and Elle Michaels—were all excellent, with particularly spirited and effective performances given by Wilkinson of the jazzy “Sweet and Low-Down” and Sol of the comedic “Vodka.” Jacob Kerzner, associate editor for *The George and Ira Gershwin Critical Edition* at UM, accompanied them on the piano.

There followed three duets from Gershwin musicals, including George’s first Broadway show, *La, La, Lucille* (1919) and 1925’s *Tell Me More* and *Tip-Toes*. The first half of the program concluded with songs featuring lyrics by Ira Gershwin set to tunes written by composers other than his brother, including the above-noted songs from *Lady in the Dark* and *A Star is Born*.

Biographer Michael Owen commented on Ira’s informal and uncredited collaboration with composers and lyricists among his circle of friends after the death of his younger brother. He cited as a memorable example the coda to “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” Judy Garland’s featured song in the 1939 MGM film *The Wizard of Oz*, which Ira suggested to composer Harold Arlen and lyricist Yip Harburg (1896-1981):

“If happy little bluebirds fly, beyond the rainbow, why, oh, why can’t I?”

The second half of the program began with a performance of the pulsating, exuberant *Overture to Song of the Flame*. This was likely the first performance of the piece since 1947.

The operetta’s place in Gershwin’s oeuvre is intriguing. It is set in Russia during the revolutionary year of 1917 and its heroine Aniuta (the “Flame”) is a symbol of the revolutionary peasantry. (Interestingly, Gershwin’s parents emigrated to New York from St. Petersburg, Russia in the early 1890s). The film version, from 1930, has evidently disappeared, but its plot, typical of Broadway confections of the period, centers on the romance between Aniuta and the counterrevolutionary Cossack commander Prince

Volodya.

The concert closed with a rousing performance of Gershwin’s longest concert work, his *Concerto in F*. The piece was commissioned by New York Symphony Society conductor Walter Damrosch in July 1925 and premiered at Carnegie Hall in December of that year. Following Gershwin’s spectacular entry onto the concert stage with his *Rhapsody in Blue* in February 1924, the piece evinces an astonishing development of the 27-year-old composer’s technique with no lessening of his melodic gift. And unlike the *Rhapsody*, which was orchestrated by Ferde Grofe, the concerto was orchestrated by Gershwin himself.

Soloist Tzu-Yin Huang admirably captured both the jazzy, syncopated rhythms of the piece and the heart-rending longing of its blues-infused themes. Here was music at once serious and elevated, and oriented to the masses and reflective of their experiences!

Gershwin has been the target of continuous attacks from post-modernist academics spawned by the pseudo-Marxist Theodor Adorno, and their racist, identity politics offspring, who denounce the great American opera *Porgy and Bess* as a racist caricature of black people. His great sins include being white and writing melodic and popular music.

But this has not lessened the popularity and stature of Gershwin nationally and, even more significantly, internationally. His untimely death was a serious blow to the strides he embodied toward a music and art of the future, fructified by the liberation of man from the chains of capitalist exploitation and oppression.

In this writer’s view, the University of Michigan centennial celebration confirmed George Gershwin’s stature as the greatest American composer of the 20th century and one of the century’s greatest the world over.



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