

GERSHWIN

BY ROBERT POLLAK

WITH THE death of George Gershwin the cause of our native music has been dealt a crushing blow. To thousands of us he was the White Hope of American composition, not because we viewed him with a blind and uncritical admiration, but because we were instinctively certain that the most important part of his career had just begun. The evidence for our belief lay in the record of his accomplishments. When he died at the age of thirty-eight he had already won a unique place for himself in the brief and curious musical history of a nation.

Gershwin was, first of all, an American institution, like Babe Ruth or Amelia Earhart. His saga reads like the tales of Horatio Alger. Born and brought up on the lower East Side in New York, he was lucky enough as a child to find a piano teacher, one Charles Hambitzer, who recognized his latent talent and introduced him to Chopin, Debussy, and Scriabin. Of formal education he had little. After grammar school and two years wrestling with debits and credits in the High School of Commerce, he chucked it all for a job as a song-plugger for the house of Remick.

The Gershwin invasion of Tin Pan Alley came at a time when history was being made. The Broadway-Negro tradition that stemmed from Stephen Foster and the anonymous tune-smiths who wrote the old minstrel shows, was being carried on by bards like Paul Dresser, Harry von Tilzer, and the amazing Witmark family. Jerome Kern and Irving Berlin labored in the Alley cubicles. Something called ragtime was in the air, and jazz was about to be born.

Gershwin looked around him and found the atmosphere more than congenial. He knew that the tunes of the Alley lived but a brief span and he sensed dimly that their primitive harmonizations did nothing to add to their longevity. Fortunately his formal musical education was never neglected for long. He was insatiably curious with respect to harmony and counterpoint and from text-books and teachers he learned a primitive compositional technique. He understood long before most of his colleagues the importance that the arranger was to assume in the design and direction of the popular song, so that when Gershwin musical comedy and revue scores began to appear they set a new standard in the field for musical literacy.

This is evident as far back as 1922 when songs like "Do It Again" and "I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise" revealed, besides an extraordinary melodic and rhythmic inventiveness, a desire to free the "production number" from its shabby harmonic vestments. From 1922 through 1924 Gershwin was court composer for George White and the Scandals, and during that period the man in the street began to whistle Gershwin tunes as he went to work. It was through White that Gershwin met Paul Whiteman, the bandmaster who gave a new direction to the young composer. For Whiteman commissioned the "Rhapsody in Blue" and played it to a new kind of Gershwin audience at Aeolian Hall on Lincoln's Birthday, 1924.

GERSHWIN



GEORGE GERSHWIN: 1899-1937

No one could have been more surprised than Gershwin at the furor the Rhapsody caused in highbrow circles. He had dashed it off in three weeks as an experiment in a form that he only vaguely understood. In no sense had he deliberately set out to make an honest woman out of jazz. But the glittering theme of its middle section carried around the world. The piece sobered him because of the implied obligations of his victory. Happily he remained as always keenly self-critical. Like all men of talent he carried himself with confidence and was pleased at his own success. But he knew that he had yet to discover the secrets of the orchestra by listening well and by studying and analyzing the scores of the masters.

It is to his eternal credit that increasing fame and riches did not swerve him from his course. He was more conscious of his technical shortcomings than his most violent detractors. He had an enormous faculty for self-instruction and an almost instinctive understanding of the trends in contemporary music. One example will serve to illustrate his astounding powers of assimilation.

While writing the piano score of "Porgy and Bess" he decided that the orchestral interlude during the death-struggle between Porgy and Crown should be cast as a fugue with a short, sinister and dissonant subject. He had actually never written a fugue before. He studied the form in the text-books for a week or so, then solved his problem in a manner that would have done credit to a craftsman like Hindemith. The fugue emerges as a perfect device for the scene and one of the most exciting incidents in the finished score.

GERSHWIN

This very facility plus his hold on two contrasting musical communities did not endear Gershwin to the conservatory pedants. He was always a little too rich for their blood. Their praise was usually tentative and slightly patronizing. The notion is still at large in America that the native composer must go to school in Germany, France, or Italy to win the right to starve in the United States. Because he delighted huge masses of people both as a pianist and as a composer, Gershwin was considered a touch too earthy in academic circles. So were Smetana and Moussorgsky.

But by now the Gershwin record speaks for itself. At the time of his death he had put behind him a formidable array of miscellaneous works. Songs like "The Man I Love," with its graceful Schubertian line, cling to the popular imagination long after the shows they were composed for are forgotten. In "Of Thee I Sing," written in collaboration with his brother Ira to the book of Kaufman and Ryskind, Gershwin produced a score that marked him as a kind of Times Square Arthur Sullivan and gave this country its first important satire with music. Add the serious works for the concert hall: the two Rhapsodies, the ingenious Piano Concerto in F, the piano Preludes and certainly "An American in Paris," a piece that should stick in the concert repertoire for a long time.

All these works, including by all means the popular songs, belong to the feverish post-war period. They reflect the gaiety and the nostalgia of Broadway at a time when we were all riding high and on our way to the debacle. Jazz became fashionable in Europe and was sent back to us warmed over by alert composers like Tansman, Ravel, and Stravinsky. But it took the Gershwins to use its idiom naturally and distinctively.

With "Porgy and Bess" the composer leaves the roaring twenties forever. In its magnificent pages we discover the beginning of a second career. The grasp upon the orchestra is surer and firmer than it has ever been before. Music and text are welded with an understanding that comes only after maturity. The orchestral delineation of characters like Porgy, Crown, and Sporting Life is conceived with uncanny sympathy. In the choral episodes Gershwin begins to reveal the kind of genius that informs all truly nationalist composers. He seems to be able to write original folk-music. The accents of Broadway are still present, but the music springs up from the rich loam of the Negro inheritance. This opera was the Gershwin *tour de force* and there is sad significance in the fact that it presaged a steady and abundant fruition.

The sum of his production does not entitle him to stand in the company of the immortals. A spontaneous melodist with huge talents, he was nevertheless no American Mozart. But when he died he was our most important composer. And while he wrote no great music, I choose to believe that he would have written it.

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~p. 531~