The Composer and His Music

George Gershwin was born Jacob Gershvin in Brooklyn, New York, on September 26, 1898, the second of four children. Apparently, none of the Gershwins had been musical and in his early boyhood George gave little indication of being an exception. When the Gershwin family acquired a piano in 1910, George started lessons at once. In 1912 George began studies with Charles Hambitzer. Hambitzer, a splendid musician, had a profound influence on the boy’s musical development. He introduced him to not only the classics but also to different modern styles and taught him harmony, theory, and instrumentation. Popular music became a passion for the young Gershwin. In 1913 he wrote his first piece of real music, a song called “Since I Found You.” He began to study the music of Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern and soon found a job in Tin Pan Alley, as staff pianist and song plugger for Remick at fifteen dollars a week. He was only fifteen at the time, the youngest employee in the Alley. He was serious about his music, and in 1915 became a pupil of Edward Kilenyi in harmony, theory, and orchestration. By 1916 he had entered the professional ranks as a songwriter. His talent was beginning to attract notice. After two years at Remick’s Gershwin became rehearsal pianist for a Jerome Kern musical. Gershwin’s remarkable piano playing and improvisations made Kern sit up and take notice. “This young man,” Kern said, “is going places.”

The year 1919 brought Gershwin his first successes. The song, “Swanee,” became a big hit. It was a best seller as sheet music with lyrics by Irving Caesar. Al Jolson’s performance sent record sales through the roof. Gershwin also saw his first musical comedy, La, La, Lucille, appear on Broadway. Between 1920 and 1924 Gershwin wrote the complete scores for five annual editions of the George White Scandals. Among
the songs he wrote were “I’ll Build a Stairway to Paradise,” and “Somebody Loves Me.” The orchestra leader, Paul Whiteman, heard Gershwin’s music and approached him to write an extended serious work for orchestra in a jazz idiom. The composition Gershwin finally produced for Whiteman was the *Rhapsody in Blue*, which was premiered in New York’s Aeolian Hall on February 12, 1924 (Lincoln’s Birthday). It became an overwhelming success. The next day several critics called it one of the most significant works in twentieth century music. It also made Gershwin a wealthy man, as well as a composer who had won the admiration of the entire world.

He maintained his position as one of America’s most significant musical figures with a succession of serious compositions in which popular American styles and idioms were skillfully combined with the forms, techniques, and resources of serious music. On December 3, 1925 he introduced his *Piano Concerto in F* at Carnegie Hall. This was followed by his tone poem, *An American in Paris* (1928), first performed by the New York Philharmonic. The *Second Rhapsody* (1932) was premiered by the Boston Symphony. He then wrote the *Cuban Overture* (1932), *Variations on I Got Rhythm* (1934), and the opera, *Porgy and Bess*, which had its world premiere in Boston on September 30, 1935. As a popular composer, Gershwin continued writing scores for the Broadway stage and the Hollywood screen. In 1924 he wrote the music for *Lady Be Good*, starring Fred and Adele Astaire. In *Lady Be Good*, Gershwin also found a distinguished and permanent collaborator in his brother, Ira, who, from that time on, provided brilliant lyrics for Gershwin’s music. A string of successful Broadway productions followed, including *Funny Face* (1927), *Strike Up the Band* (1930), *Girl Crazy* (1930), *Of Thee I Sing* (1931), *Let ‘Em Eat Cake* (1933), and *Pardon My English* (1933). After 1935 Gershwin wrote exclusively for motion pictures. He and Ira moved to Hollywood in 1936. In 1937 came *Damsel in Distress* and *Shall We Dance*, both starring Fred Astaire; and in 1938, the *Goldwyn Follies*. While working on the *Goldwyn Follies*, Gershwin suffered a physical collapse. On July 9, 1937, he was taken to the Cedars of Lebanon Hospital for brain surgery. The operation revealed a cystic degeneration of a tumor on a part of the brain that could not be touched. He died in the hospital on the morning of July 11, 1937.
After Gershwin’s death a screen biography was produced, *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945), with Robert Alda playing the composer. And six years later, *An American in Paris*, starring Gene Kelly, was filmed with several Gershwin favorites and the tone poem that gave the film its title and was used as the background music for an elaborate dance sequence. *An American in Paris* received the Academy Award in 1951 as the best motion picture of the year.

Like all great successes, the success of Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* was unpredictable. The *Rhapsody* was one of many pieces on Paul Whiteman’s concert program in New York on the afternoon of February 12, 1924. The concert was announced as “an experiment in modern music.” Paul Whiteman asked the twenty-five-year-old Gershwin to write a piece for this concert, but Gershwin was busy with his current revue, *Sweet Little Devil*, and hesitated to accept, until he read in the *New York Herald-Tribune* that he, Gershwin, was at work on a symphony! This garbled report made Gershwin think of writing something more ambitious than just a short jazz piece. Gershwin told the story of the *Rhapsody* to his friend and biographer, Isaac Goldberg: “Suddenly an idea occurred to me. There had been so much chatter about the limitations of jazz... Jazz, they said, had to be in strict time. It had to cling to dance rhythms. I resolved, if possible, to kill that misconception with one sturdy blow. Inspired by this aim, I set to work composing with unwonted rapidity. No set plan was in my mind — no structure to which my music would conform. The *Rhapsody*, as you see, began as a purpose, not a plan... At this stage of the piece, I was summoned to Boston for the premiere of *Sweet Little Devil*. I had already done some work on the *Rhapsody*. It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattle-ty-bang that is often so stimulating to a composer... I frequently hear music in the very heart of noise. And there I suddenly heard — and even saw on paper — the complete construction of the *Rhapsody*, from beginning to end... as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America.” The date of completion of the score is marked on the manuscript: January 7, 1924. And as the saying goes, the rest is history. The *Rhapsody in Blue* is still today, Gershwin’s most performed work, recognized and loved world wide as one of the great masterpieces of the 20th century.
In the spring of 1932, George Gershwin published some piano arrangements of his own songs, reminding us in the preface that “sheet music, as ordinarily printed for mass sales, is arranged with an eye to simplicity.” One could hardly call these arrangements “simple” — they were written for Gershwin’s own enjoyment and definitely required enough technique to do something more than play the sheet music. In transcribing seven of Gershwin’s best known songs, Earl Wild created dazzling concert etudes from these songs. These are not mere showpieces, but musical fantasias in the tradition of Franz Liszt. The first of these is *The Man I Love*. The song was originally dropped from *Lady Be Good* (1924) and inserted into *Strike Up the Band* (1927). It then made phantom appearances in *Rosalie* (1928), eventually becoming one of Gershwin’s most famous songs in performances at dance halls, clubs and hotels. *I Got Rhythm* was composed for the 1930 show *Girl Crazy* (where it was introduced by Ethel Merman, making her Broadway debut). In 1934 it was used as the theme in his *Variations on “I Got Rhythm”* for piano and orchestra. *Embraceable You* is also from *Girl Crazy*. *Fascinatin’ Rhythm* was one of the sensations of the 1924 Broadway production of *Lady Be Good*. *Somebody Loves Me* is one of Gershwin’s songs with words by Buddy De Sylva (before Gershwin teamed up with his brother Ira). It was the hit of George White’s Scandals of 1924. *Liza* was a minstrel pastiche danced by Ruby Keeler in *Show Girl* (1929). *Lady, Be Good* was the title song of a 1924 musical which first established the team of the Gershwin brothers.

Gershwin’s folk opera, *Porgy and Bess* is set in the waterfront district of Charleston, South Carolina. It deals with people chiefly engaged in fishing, cotton picking, peddling and just plain honest living. Catfish Row is the name given to the squalid, brawling, congested quarter they call home. According to Sydney Beck (the annotator for the original New York production) writes: “Catfish Row responds to a deep and irresistible stream of movement, color and sound, out of which the story flows as spontaneously and as powerfully as life itself... The tale centers around the crippled, sex-starved Porgy, the two-timin’ trollop, Bess, the brutal stevedore, Crown — proud of his brawn and physical prowess — and wily, high-steppin’ Sporting’ Life, visitor from New York’s Harlem, selling dope and liquor...
to Catfish Row.” In his extended 1976 fantasy on themes from the opera, Earl Wild basically follows the action of the opera, scrupulously leaving Gershwin’s rhythmic settings intact. The work opens with a large segment of “Jasbo Brown Blues,” a piano solo in the opera which is the pianistic echo of the actual opening. Following the story, as printed for the first New York production, “The curtain rises on a summer evening in the court. The young folks dance as a mother sings a lullaby (“Summertime”) to her baby. A crap game is in progress. Porgy bereft of the use of his legs, arrives in his little goat cart. Crown and his mistress, Bess, come in and the two men join the game. Crown is drunk and quarrels with one of the players. In the ensuing fight, Crown kills him with his “cotton hook” and then makes his escape. Bess, alone, seeks refuge but nobody will take her in. Only Porgy finds a soft spot in his heart for her. Never before has he had a mistress and now Bess comes to live with him. He falls deeply in love with her.”

“In the next scene, the mourners sing spirituals while a collection is taken up for burial expenses. Serena, wife of the slain Robbins, sings a moving song of bereavement, “My man’s gone now.” A lighter mood returns. Porgy, finding that living with Bess has made his life full, sings to her of his contentment, “Oh, I got plenty o’ nuttin’.” Frazier, the lawyer, lends a touch of comedy when he succeeds in selling Bess a “divorce” from Crown. The evil bulk of a buzzard in flight suddenly appears on the scene. It is a bad omen and Porgy exhorts it not to interfere with his happiness (“Look out, dat’s a buzzard!” (Buzzard Song)). Sporting Life tries to make love to Bess and is promptly put in his place. A picnic is announced. Porgy cannot go but insists that Bess go along without him while both sing of their love (“I loves you, Porgy” and “Bess, you is my woman now”). Led by a band, Catfish Row departs for the picnic grounds on Kittiwah Island (“Oh, I can’t sit down”). Bess is in the party. Sporting Life dances and amuses the crowd with his humorous song about “da t’ings yo’ li’ble to read in de Bible, It ain’t necessarily so.” All indulge in forbidden secular dances for which they are admonished and sent home. On the way back, Crown suddenly steps out of hiding and compels Bess to stay with him on the island. When he hears that she is in love with Porgy now, he roars with laughter. Porgy, that cripple? Crown is a man. She cannot resist
him. After several days, she returns to Catfish Row in a
delirium and when she recovers she begs Porgy’s for-
giveness, telling him that she fears Crown and wants his
protection. Porgy vows to avenge her. The ominous
sound of the hurricane bell is heard. The fishermen,
headed by Jake, have already left. With great flashes of
lightning and howling of the wind the storm comes up
in all its fury and everyone is paralyzed with fear. They
huddle together in little groups to pray, casting gigantic
tossing and swaying shadows on the bare walls of
Serena’s room. The pounding rhythm of several simul-
taneous prayers chanted to a confusion of words pro-
duces an invocation to God that is almost terrifying in
its primitive intensity. In the midst of this frantic scene,
Crown makes his appearance. He has come to claim his
Bess. Porgy tries to stop him but is no match for Crown,
who horrifies the already frightened people with his
blasphemies. Someone at the window shouts that Jake’s boat has capsized and Jake’s wife rushes out into
the storm. No one dares to go after her but Crown. Arrogantly defying the elements and boasting that
he will be back for Bess he disappears in a blinding flash. As all the Row are singing spirituals in mourn-
ing for the victims of the storm, Crown, thought lost, steals under Porgy’s window to get Bess. But the
cripple has been waiting for him. Porgy throws open his shutters, reaches out and strangles Crown, hiss-
ing in his ears, “I’m a man, a man!” Porgy is arrested on suspicion. Sporting Life, seeing his opportuni-
ty, tells Bess they will keep her lover in jail and of the good times they could have together in New York
(“There’s a boat dat’s leavin’ for New York”). He leaves a little package of dope on her doorstep to tempt
her. Five days later Porgy returns in high spirits bringing presents for all. He shouts for his Bess but to
no avail. “Bess, O where’s my Bess, won’t somebody tell me where?” he pleads. Learning the truth, he
calls for his goat cart and drives away, to find his woman singing, “O Lord, I’m on my way” as the cur-
tain drops on the opera.

In January 1925, Gershwin composed six piano preludes. Five of these he first performed in
December 1926, eventually selecting three for publication in 1927. These three: a slow meditative piece
(which Gershwin liked to call “blue lullaby”) was framed by two lively and melodically memorable pre-
ludes, which quickly became very popular concert pieces.
Earl Wild on Gershwin

My first performance of the *Rhapsody in Blue* was a live radio broadcast in studio 8H with Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony on November 1, 1942. Then in 1945, I was asked by Paul Whiteman to record the *Rhapsody* in its first full length (uncut) version on 78s (which a few years later was also made available as an LP). Fourteen years later, in 1959, Arthur Fiedler asked me to record it (along with the *Concerto in F* and the *I Got Rhythm Variations*) with the Boston Symphony for RCA. Of the three versions, I prefer the recording I made with Whiteman. I feel it has the true American flavor — the brashness, the vitality and the faster tempi of the period. It’s much closer to Gershwin’s own realization of the piece.

Whiteman, who was often called the “King of Jazz,” commissioned Gershwin to write the *Rhapsody* and Gershwin in turn dedicated the piece to Whiteman. Since the 1940’s, performances of the *Rhapsody* have become much slower and dreadfully sentimentalized. It lost its wonderful American flavor.

The period surrounding the “Jazz Era” was filled with gangsters, bootleggers, flappers, deposed royals, philanthropists, floozies, movie vamps and escapees of all kinds. Everyone was pleasure bent, possibly as a reaction to the horrors of World War I. I was in my teens when the famous Gilda Grey shimmied for President Calvin Coolidge who — in his usual manner — said nothing!

Gershwin’s music was a turning point in the history of jazz — his rhythmic patterns captured the essence of these unusual times.

In this Ivory Classics™ historic reissue, we are very fortunate to have the great clarinetist, Al Gallodoro (who also doubled on the bass clarinet) in the Whiteman orchestra. Gershwin’s opening glissando caused a great disturbance among the symphony clarinetists at that time — they considered it a sacrilege. During those early years, when I performed the *Rhapsody* with numerous symphony orchestras, invariably the first

*Whiteman and Wild being led onstage, Montreal, 1945*
clarinetist would be mysteriously absent and the second clarinetist would be called upon to perform the opening slide.

I was thirty years old when we made this 1945 recording of the *Rhapsody* in a studio on 57th Street in New York City. I considered it a privilege to have heard Gershwin play both in private and in concert numerous times. The recent CD issues of his piano rolls have been so computerized that they in no way resemble George’s true sound.

Whiteman had once mentioned to Gershwin that he would like to add a small chorus of voices in certain sections of the *Rhapsody* and Gershwin was delighted with the idea. Glenn Osser, one of the greatest musical arrangers in the radio and television industry, was responsible for this re-orchestration of the *Rhapsody* and for judiciously adding the color of 16 voices at Mr. Whiteman’s request. This remarkable innovation treats the voices as extra instruments — the vocal background accentuates the movement. Among the great instrumentalists who were in the orchestra on this recording, and who were also members of the American Broadcasting Orchestra at the time, included: Felix Giobbi, bass; Irving Horowitz, winds; George Ricci, cellist; George Whetling, jazz drummer; and violin soloist Arnold Eidus, who had just won the coveted Queen Elisabeth Competition in Belgium.

Whiteman was the vice-president of ABC in the late 40’s and 50’s when I was a staff member. In fact, Whiteman adopted the *Rhapsody* as his theme song on all of his programs. During this time, I traveled extensively with him throughout the States and Canada performing both the *Rhapsody* and the *Concerto in F*. He told me in great detail about the first performance of the *Rhapsody* with its many difficulties. Like Al Gallodoro, many of the great jazz men of the period were equally at home in the symphonic literature. Whiteman had a keen ear for good instrumentalists and always used the best musicians available.

Out of respect for Gershwin’s original notation, I have not changed one rhythmic value of the melodies in my transcriptions of the *Seven Virtuoso Etudes* nor in the *Grande Fantasy on Porgy and Bess*. The *Rhapsody* and the *Three Preludes* are performed as written.

Earl Wild, ©1997
Earl Wild Biography

Earl Wild is considered throughout the world as one of the last in a long line of great virtuoso pianist/composers. Born on November 26, 1915, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Wild began piano studies at the age of three. Before his twelfth birthday, he was accepted as a pupil of Selmar Janson, whose teachers were Xaver Scharwenka and Eugen d’Albert (who was a student of Franz Liszt). Mr. Wild went on to study with the great Dutch pianist, Egon Petri. While still in his teens, Wild played piano and celeste in the Pittsburgh Symphony under the baton of Otto Klemperer and Fritz Reiner. With his immense hands, absolute pitch, graceful stage presence, and an uncanny facility as a sight-reader and improviser, Earl Wild was well equipped for his lifelong career in music.

In 1937, he joined the NBC network as staff pianist and performed in the NBC Symphony under Arturo Toscanini. Two years later, when NBC began to transmit telecasts, Wild was the first artist to perform a piano recital on U.S. television. In 1942, Toscanini made Earl Wild a household name when he invited him to be the soloist in Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*. While serving in the Navy during World War II, Wild performed at the White House and frequently played the National Anthem as a prelude to the speeches by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Wild has had the unequaled honor of having performed for six consecutive Presidents of the United States, beginning with Herbert Hoover.

In addition to his distinguished concert career, which encompasses performances with conductors such as Stokowski, Reiner, Maazel, Solti and Mitropoulos, and artists like Callas, Tourel, Pons, Melchior, Peerce and Bumbry, Wild successfully shines as both a conductor and composer. His Easter oratorio, *Revelations*, was broadcast by the ABC network in 1962 and again in 1964, with Mr. Wild as conductor. Wild’s most recent composition, *Variations on a Theme of Stephen Foster* for piano and orchestra (“Doo-Dah” Variations), premiered with Wild as soloist with the Des Moines Symphony Orchestra in 1992. His recording, *Earl Wild — The Romantic Master — 13 Virtuoso Piano Transcriptions* (released on the SONY Classical label), received the 1996 Grammy® Award as “Best Instrumental Performance (without Orchestra).”
Credits

*Rhapsody in Blue*
was recorded in New York City in 1945

*Seven Virtuosos Etudes*
were recorded in New York City, October 20, 1976

*Porgy and Bess Fantasy*
was recorded in New York City, October 18-19, 1976

*Three Preludes*
were recorded in New York City, October 14, 1964

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George Gershwin • Earl Wild, Pianist

Rhapsody in Blue • Seven Virtuoso Etudes
Grande Fantasy on Porgy and Bess • Three Preludes

1. **Rhapsody in Blue** (1924) (WB Music Corp.) 15:20
   - Earl Wild, Pianist • Paul Whiteman and his Orchestra • 16 voice Chorus

2. **Seven Virtuoso Etudes** (Gershwin-Earl Wild, 1976)
   - The Man I Love 2:44
   - I Got Rhythm 2:05
   - Embraceable You 2:33
   - Fascinatin’ Rhythm 1:25
   - Somebody Loves Me 2:39
   - Liza 2:51
   - Lady Be Good 3:44

3. **Grande Fantasy on Porgy and Bess** (Gershwin-Earl Wild, 1976) 27:35

4. **Three Preludes for Piano** (1927) (WB Music Corp.)
   - Prelude I: Allegro ben ritmato e deciso 1:16
   - Prelude II: Andante con moto e poco rubato 3:10
   - Prelude III: Allegro ben ritmato e deciso 1:06
   - Total Playing Time: 1:06:55

Remastering Producer: Michael Rolland Davis
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