



ABOUT THE MUSIC

Gershwin & Ellington

May 11, 12 & 13, 2024

Program notes by Elizabeth Schwartz

GEORGE GERSHWIN

Catfish Row: Symphonic Suite from *Porgy and Bess*



COMPOSER: born September 26, 1898, Brooklyn, NY; died July 11, 1937, Hollywood, CA

WORK COMPOSED: 1935-1936

WORLD PREMIERE: Alexander Smallens led the Philadelphia Orchestra at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia on January 21, 1936

INSTRUMENTATION: 2 flutes (1 doubling piccolo), 2 oboes (1 doubling English horn), 4 clarinets (1 doubling bass clarinet), 1 bassoon, 3 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, drum set, bass drum, chimes, cymbals, glockenspiel, side drum, suspended cymbal, tom-tom, triangle, woodblock, xylophone, piano, banjo and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 23 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

George Gershwin's self-described "folk opera," *Porgy and Bess*, based on DuBose Heyward's play featuring a Black love story set in the slums of Charleston, South Carolina, is a standard of operatic repertoire. Today, *Porgy* is considered a masterpiece, but it was both a critical and financial failure when it opened in 1935. *Porgy* was ahead of its time in its sympathetic portrayal of Black characters in all their adult complexity, but critics of the music, including Duke Ellington, deplored *Porgy's* "lampblack Negroisms," while the *New York Times* music critic Olin Downes complained of *Porgy's* indeterminate hybrid nature: "The style is at one moment of opera and another of operetta or sheer Broadway entertainment." After only 124 performances, *Porgy* closed its initial run in New York.

Gershwin created an orchestral suite of selections from the opera. To keep the music in the ears of the public, Gershwin included his suite in several concerts he conducted in 1936 and 1937. After Gershwin's sudden and unexpected death in the summer of 1937, his suite dropped out of the orchestral repertoire. Beginning in 1942, Gershwin's friend, composer, and arranger Robert Russell Bennett, created several arrangements of his own *Porgy and Bess* suite, which were regularly performed by orchestras. In 1958, the score to Gershwin's original symphonic suite was found in his brother Ira's house. When Ira published it, he added the title "Catfish Row."

The first section begins with "Jazzbo Brown's Piano Blues," a swingy uptempo fragment cut from *Porgy's* original score, followed by the classic "Summertime." Porgy Sings features Porgy's ebullient solo, "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'" and the duet "Bess, You Is My Woman Now." In the dense, complex Fugue, Gershwin depicts Crown's violent murder in Act III. The music of the Hurricane from Act II captures the storm's destructive fury. The final section, which Gershwin titled, "Good Mornin', Sistuh," includes more music cut from the original score, and ends with Porgy's final song, "Oh, Lawd, I'm On My Way," as he begins his long journey to New York.

GEORGE GERSHWIN

Rhapsody in Blue (original jazz band version *orch.* Ferde Grofé)



COMPOSER: born September 26, 1898, Brooklyn, NY; died July 11, 1937, Hollywood, CA

WORK COMPOSED: Gershwin wrote *Rhapsody in Blue* in the first three weeks of 1924

WORLD PREMIERE: Paul Whiteman led his orchestra with Gershwin at the piano on February 12, 1924, at Aeolian Hall in New York City

INSTRUMENTATION: solo piano, flute, oboe, clarinet in E-flat, clarinet in B-flat, alto clarinet in E-flat, bass clarinet in B-flat, heckelphone, soprano saxophone in E-flat, soprano saxophone in B-flat, alto saxophone in E-flat, tenor saxophone in B-flat, baritone saxophone in E-flat, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 flugelhorn, euphonium, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, drum kit, piano, celesta, accordion, banjo, violins and basses

ESTIMATED DURATION: 18 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Rhapsody in Blue is a pivotal work in the American musical canon because it introduced jazz to classical concert audiences, and simultaneously made an instant star of its composer. From its iconic opening clarinet glissando right through its brilliant finale, *Rhapsody in Blue* epitomizes the Gershwin sound and transformed a 25-year-old songwriter from Tin Pan Alley into a composer of “serious” music.

The story of how *Rhapsody in Blue* came about is as captivating as the music itself. On January 4, 1924, Ira Gershwin showed George a news report in the *New York Tribune* about a concert put together by jazz bandleader Paul Whiteman, grandiosely titled “An Experiment in Modern Music,” that would endeavor to trace the history of jazz.

The report concluded with a brief announcement: “George Gershwin is at work on a jazz concerto.” This was certainly news to Gershwin, who was then in rehearsals for a Broadway show, *Sweet Little Devil*. Gershwin contacted Whiteman to refute the Tribune article, but Whiteman eventually talked Gershwin into writing the concerto. Whiteman also sweetened the deal by offering to have the well-known arranger and composer Ferde Grofé do the orchestration. Gershwin agreed, completing the music in just three weeks.

Although he is not as well known today, in his time, Ferde Grofé was a sought-after musician and arranger. He created arrangements for Whiteman and other conductors, and also composed music in his own right, including several film scores, and music for radio and television. Grofé’s 1942 arrangement of *Rhapsody in Blue* for full orchestra is the version most often performed today, and it is Grofé’s innate feel for timbres (instrument colors) that delivers many of *Rhapsody in Blue*’s most iconic sounds.

In 1931, Gershwin described to biographer Isaac Goldberg how the ideas for *Rhapsody in Blue* came to him during a train trip to Boston: “It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattle-ty bang, that is so often so stimulating to a composer – I frequently hear music in the very heart of the noise ... And there I suddenly heard, and even saw on paper – the complete construction of the *Rhapsody*, from beginning to end ... I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our metropolitan madness. By the time I reached Boston, I had a definite plot of the piece, as distinguished from its actual substance.”

At the premiere, Gershwin’s unique realization of this “musical kaleidoscope of America,” coupled with his phenomenal abilities at the keyboard wowed the audience as much as the novelty of hearing jazz idioms in a “classical” work.

The original opening clarinet solo, written by Gershwin, got its trademark jazzy glissando from Whiteman’s clarinetist Ross Gorman. This opening unleashes a floodgate of colorful ideas that blend seamlessly, and feature the tinny metallic sound of muted trumpet, the wah-wah speech-like quality of muted trombones, and sliding glissandos from strings and winds bending notes up, down, and sideways. The syncopated rhythms and extroverted music later give way to a warm, expansive melody that sounds like it was lifted from a Rachmaninoff piano concerto.

CONRAD TAO

Flung Out for Piano and Jazz Band (World Premiere)



COMPOSER: born June 11, 1994, Urbana, IL

WORK COMPOSED: 2022-2023

WORLD PREMIERE: Santa Rosa CA, May 11, 2024, Santa Rosa Symphony at Weill Hall, Green Music Center

INSTRUMENTATION: solo piano, oboe, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, soprano sax, alto sax, tenor sax, baritone sax, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, brake drum, crash cymbal, drum set, snare drum, triangle, vibraphone, celesta, banjo, 8 violins, bass

ESTIMATED DURATION: 15 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Composer/pianist Conrad Tao has been dubbed “the kind of musician who is shaping the future of classical music” by *New York Magazine*, and an artist of “probing intellect and open-hearted vision” by *The New York Times*. Tao has performed as a soloist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, and Boston Symphony. As a composer his work has been presented by orchestras throughout the world; his first large-scale orchestral work, *Everything Must Go*, received its world premiere with the New York Philharmonic, and its European premiere with the Antwerp Symphony. Tao is also the recipient of the prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant and was named a Gilmore Young Artist – an honor awarded every two years highlighting the most promising American pianists of the new generation.

When Tao was asked to write a concerto for piano and jazz band, in honor of the 100th anniversary of George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, using the same jazz/classical hybrid ensemble, he was intrigued. Paul Whiteman’s 1924 jazz band, which premiered *Rhapsody in Blue*, included several saxophones and a banjo, among other nontraditional orchestra instruments. “I’m really excited to have a baritone saxophone and a banjo in the mix,” said Tao in a recent interview. “The basic starting premise of this work is using the same instruments Gershwin had for *Rhapsody in Blue*.”

Although Tao wrote for a period jazz band, his concerto does not reference the sound or style of early jazz specifically. “I think American jazz is in my musical consciousness in general, but in terms of how I’m relating to Gershwin, I’m not thinking of it as the “jazz meets classical” idea that I think is often the narrative around *Rhapsody*. I’m more interested in the relationships between the piano and ensemble, the way the form of *Rhapsody* alternates these episodes of wild thrilling dance music, played by an ensemble with piano in the mix, and then these extended solo quasi-improvisation-type sections. They’re kind of like notated cadenzas. I’m also thinking about the frame of dance and theater music a little more than I am thinking about jazz per se.”

“The very first thing you’ll hear is a big impact across the whole ensemble, followed by rapid sixteenth notes in the snare drum,” Tao continues. “And that sixteenth note rhythm is a motif running throughout the piece. It’s a tight groove where the whole ensemble is in lockstep. I was really excited to write this piece because I’ve been writing quite a lot of slow music lately, so I welcomed the chance to write fast and highly rhythmic music. I chose a tempo at which this sixteenth note motif can register both as something kind of in your face and very fast, but also something that we can zoom out and perceive as a kind of sustained note, in a way.”

Tao is also inspired by his experiences clubbing – going out to nightclubs to dance and socialize. “I was reflecting on the experience of being in a group of people all locked into the same pulse in the same kind of rhythmic space; that’s one of the ecstatic joys of that musical environment,” he explains. “In a nice club context, you can also separate. You can kind of go off into your own reverie and have this very individuated experience that can fling you out pretty far into space sometimes. Club music in that context is built to create that effect and to facilitate that experience. So I think, in the same way, that my snare drum sixteenth note pattern is something that you can experience close up and at a rapid pulse, it’s also something that you can hear from a distance, so it becomes more continuous.

“I am also writing it at the keyboard (for multiple possible instrumentations), and I am also thinking about the sounds of NYC as I write (albeit perhaps in a noisier way). This is kind of a part of the clubbing layer of inspiration, the urban ambiance of outdoor NYC.

“The piece will probably have a title other than Concerto for Piano and Jazz Band but unfortunately, I still don’t know

what it will be. If it comes down to announcing it from the stage, I'll do that!"

EDWARD KENNEDY "DUKE" ELLINGTON

Black, Brown and Beige Suite for Orchestra (orch. Maurice Peress)



COMPOSER: born April 29, 1899, Washington, D.C.; died May 24, 1974, New York City

WORK COMPOSED: December 1942 – January 1943

WORLD PREMIERE: Duke Ellington led his band on January 24, 1943, at Carnegie Hall in New York City

INSTRUMENTATION: 3 flutes (1 doubling piccolo and alto flute), 3 oboes (1 doubling English horn), 3 clarinets (1 doubling bass clarinet), 3 bassoons (1 doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, alto saxophone, baritone saxophone, jazz bass, timpani, bass drum, chimes, crash cymbals, drum set, glockenspiel, marimba, ratchet, snare drum, sock cymbal, suspended cymbal, tam-tam, tom-toms, wind chimes, harp and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 21 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

"There are simply two kinds of music: good music and the other kind." – Duke Ellington

Throughout his long career, Duke Ellington's highest compliment to a fellow musician or composer was to declare them "beyond category." The same could be said of his own music; Ellington consistently refused to limit his work to the moniker of "jazz," instead calling it simply "American." He was America's most famous big band composer, a formidable pianist, and the creator of an elegant style of jazz and swing that became an indelible part of the American sound.

In January 1943, Duke Ellington brought his band and his music to Carnegie Hall for the first time. His appearance in the city's most venerated space dedicated to music signaled to the public Ellington's artistic arrival and was meant to confer legitimacy on a composer whose music was too often dismissed by "serious" music lovers and critics.

Ellington composed *Black, Brown and Beige* specifically for his Carnegie Hall debut. At the performance, by way of introducing the work to his star-studded mixed-race audience (attendees included Eleanor Roosevelt, Langston Hughes, Count Basie, Marian Anderson, and Leopold Stokowski, among others), Ellington said, "We would like to say that this is a parallel to the history of the American Negro. And of course, it tells a long story." In "Black," after mighty tom toms set the scene (the tom-toms recur periodically throughout the music, as a unifying device), we hear "A Work Song," which expresses enslaved people's never-ending burdens as they toiled at backbreaking labor; this is paired with "Come Sunday," a meditative melody for violin and alto saxophone that evokes both tranquility and sorrow. Ellington later arranged "Come Sunday" for voice, and it became a hit for gospel singer Mahalia Jackson.

The uptempo "Brown" salutes the experiences of Black soldiers in the Revolutionary, Civil, and Spanish-American Wars, and captures the hopes of younger Blacks that Emancipation would bring both freedom and opportunity. "Brown" ends with "The Blues," a somber interlude that expresses the disappointment at the lack of progress and crushing obstacles Black people continue to face.

In "Beige," Ellington evokes the economic and artistic blossoming of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 30s. In the section "Sugar Hill Penthouse," Ellington features his signature woodwind textures and sophisticated harmonies. However, Ellington also recognized this period as merely a "veneer of progress:" with some people prospering, while most "still don't have enough to eat and a place to sleep."

Nothing like *Black, Brown and Beige* had ever been heard before that cold January night in 1943. Critics were baffled by the fusion of jazz and classical idioms and gave the work mixed or negative reviews. Writing for the New York Herald Tribune, Paul Bowles opined, "The whole attempt to fuse jazz as a form with art music should be discouraged. The two exist at such different distances from the listener's faculties of comprehension that he cannot get them both

clearly into focus at the same time." In his typical understated fashion, Ellington responded to naysayers with the comment, "Well, I guess they just didn't dig it." As with all innovators, Ellington and his music were ahead of their time, and far ahead of listeners' ability to take in this new music that was, true to the values of its composer, beyond category. Today, *Black, Brown and Beige* is recognized by musicians, and music lovers everywhere for its bold vision, well-crafted harmonies, and fundamental importance to the American canon.

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Elizabeth Schwartz is a writer and music historian based in the Portland area. She has been a program annotator for more than 20 years and works with music festivals and ensembles around the country. Schwartz has also contributed to NPR's "Performance Today," (now heard on American Public Media).