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THE FUTURE OF GERSHWIN

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THE music of George Gershwin has, during his lifetime, suffered from inadequate critical appraisal. His admirers have lauded him fatuously, with little of that quiet detachment which should go into the written consideration of even those works which one loves best. Current Broadway productions frequently blaze out with a highlight from the criticism of some contemporary Ace: "Swellest Show I Have Ever Seen." This is not criticism. Similarly, the late Henry Finck did not really appraise the performances of ladies such as Geraldine Farrar and Mary Garden. He had obviously fallen for their charms and merely allowed the cup of his adolescent infatuation to spill over into his critical column.

And so it is with Gershwin; his music has that high attribute of making people fall in love with it. The overwhelming affection in which it is held by hundreds of thousands of Americans testifies to its glamor and the thousands are never entirely wrong. Yet the large public is indiscriminating and love is blind; Gershwin deserves more than the thoughtless fealty of the many who see no further than today. He also deserves more than has been accorded him by many in High Places. There a lack of suppleness has frequently prevailed and a lack of the realization that our muse may, and does, assume garbs of marvelous and infinite variety. Gershwin appeared as a novelty and he threw a certain amount of confusion into both camps.

Like his illustrious predecessors, Jacques Offenbach and Sir Arthur Sullivan, Gershwin wanted to burn the candle at both ends: to be both Sinner and Saint, a sort of Madonna of the Sleeping Cars. And, what is still more difficult—and here he found no precedent in the works of the author of the *Lost Chord* nor in those of the composer of the *Synagogical Service*—he wanted to be both at the same time. The effort is commendable but it rarely works! Different moods, different styles and different technics; and the man who is capable of the one can rarely also master the other. It is true that Rossini has written a *Stabat Mater* and that the style of the *Barber of Seville* is amazingly different from that of *William Tell;* that Verdi has composed not only a *Requiem* but also works as widely divergent in mood as *Il Trovatore* and *Falstaff;* that there is in many respects a far cry between the *Finale* of the *Ninth Symphony* and that of the *Sixth* and that *Götterdämmerung* and *Die Meistersinger* represent two different psychological worlds. These are cases of immense and breath-taking versatility but there is no lack of unity of purpose nor singleness of approach. And there was, in each case,—whether in church or in the theatre—but one type of similarly minded and similarly educated audience to be pleased. With Gershwin it was, perhaps, the reverse. He wanted to talk both to the Winter Garden and to Carnegie Hall—*Swanee* for the one and for the other the *Concerto in F*: different pieces, it is true, with different textures and different outward forms. But the message, jazzy and glowing, was to remain about the same. And it must be remembered that the Masters were men whose technic and whose intellectual approach were distinctly of another order: that it is considerably easier to unbend gracefully than to strain beyond one's reach.

For, though a master within his own small forms, Gershwin was completely beyond his depth in a phrase more than sixteen or thirty-two bars long, in one not regularly constructed on the *last* on which all such phrases are constructed. If Rachmaninoff had only come to his help in bringing "around the curve" the illustrious Second Theme in the *Rhapsody in Blue*! If he had only been able to extricate himself from the meshes of his own creation in the over-sweet and ill-formed *Bess, You Is My Woman*

Now! These are but fundamentals of phrase structure. For the longer intellectual effort required to sustain a symphonic movement Gershwin was wholly inadequate; nor is there any indication that he realized his shortcomings as an architect. And with his failing craftsmanship so also vanished his sense of style. How otherwise explain the laborious and old-fashioned recitatives in *Porgy and Bess* and the indiscriminate and ill-fused mixture which constitutes so large a part of the idiom of that work? Gershwin who, at his best, not only has his own individual style but who also possesses that supreme thing called: style! The effectiveness of those parts of *Porgy and Bess* which are effective is for the most part based on well-known theatrical and musical clichés. . . . *It Ain't Necessarily So!* How that small piece, lean and wiry, stands out in its place, like a black diamond in the fog! Here Gershwin is himself again with no lapses into the vulgar, no departures from his usual good taste. How strange that Gershwin should, in his larger and more pretentious works, lack precisely those qualities which are otherwise so much his own: style, shape and that indefinable thing called authenticity, that sense of something freshly felt rather than of something heavily reconstructed!

But in each of Gershwin's works there is some genius. Who has not been rocketed aloft into some jazzy sky on the wings of the opening phrase of the *Rhapsody?* Whose feet have not twitched to the initial strains of the *American in Paris*: each of us a Bill Robinson in his own mind and floating down an imaginary Champs Elysées to the sound of celestial taxicabs? What is this and who are you, George, to have done this thing to us: to have changed our world, to have made our ordinary comings and goings to become things unreal, light and sweet, and ourselves disembodied and carefree as a kite in air? . . .

The *Preludes for Piano* show Gershwin in his less favorable light. As in most of his serious efforts, the ideas are essentially short of breath; he lacks the ability to draw them out, to make them unfold, so to speak, from within themselves. Such a thing as a long, consecutive thought is scarcely known to Gershwin and on such long, consecutive thoughts great music is built. Whether it be in science, philosophy or art, human beings lose interest in

even the most attractive fragments and are ultimately held only by those ideas which, clearly conceived, are followed through to a well-formed, and logical conclusion. This was not for Gershwin. In the *Concerto in F* the themes are fresher and he does best with those, like the second theme in the first movement, which are rounded, closed-off and complete entities in themselves. Otherwise he is helpless in his attempts to carry along—to spin out—his ideas. Repetition, foreshortening (stretto) and climax; then a new idea or the return to an old one; that is his usual formula and it finally becomes wearisome almost to the point of exasperation. The piano writing is adroit and rather personal: "stencilled . . . snappy . . . and cackling," to quote from his own excellently written little foreword to the Alajalov-Schuster-and-Simon *Song Book.* And the *Concerto,* as a whole, has an obvious, Russian effectiveness. But its charming material is marred, for some of us at least, by the lack of skill, the lack of modesty with which it is presented. I believe that the *American in Paris* will live longer than either the *Rhapsody* or the *Concerto* and that, of the more pretentious works, *Porgy and Bess* will be the first to go.

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It is not in his "larger" works that George will live. It is in the great number of his songs, almost every one of which is a gem in its own way. Within the confines of his small structure he was able to mold phrases of considerable variety and in the best of these there is the perfection of an expert craftsman. They are supple, balanced and expressive. His harmony here is equally perfect: the sensitive choice of his simple chords gives perhaps even more pleasure than his excursions into the realm of those more elaborately "barbered." His rhythms are lively and amusing and in this field he was undoubtedly a real innovator. In all of these things he never once oversteps the boundary of the best taste and each of his songs has "character:" George's and its own. His melody, though perhaps more instrumental than vocal, is warm and lithe and all the qualities are so fused as to make a really perfect whole. Who can forget the insinuating melodic line of the *You Don't Know the Half of It Dearie, Blues?* The perfection of harmony and form which is in *The Man I Love?* The subtle

irony of that masterpiece: *Mine* from *Let 'Em Eat Cake?* The bawdy and really marvelous little climax in *Sam and Delilah?* The dry, pulsating surge of *Fascinating Rhythm, Clap Yo' Hands* and *High Hat*—off-center and fantastically poised, as a moment in a dance by Fred Astaire? *Lisa! Lady Be Good! Who Cares!* Who of us has not felt their glow and the exhilarating sense of careless, high enjoyment with which they are suffused?

Most of these songs are no longer young, as songs of this kind go. But they are still fresh and their undimmed vitality augurs well for the future. George was undoubtedly very fortunate in having in his brother, Ira, a marvelous collaborator. The most perfect wedding of their talents was, perhaps, in *Of Thee I Sing* which, as a whole, is unique in the annals of the Gershwins and of the American stage. One need not underestimate the importance of Ira in bringing to fruition the talents of George. But the music of George is something in itself and in his tragic and premature passing America has lost one of its brightest stars. He shone during his day and was not, God knows, unacclaimed. And I believe that his future is equally assured. He belongs in the company of those blissful demi-gods, Sullivan, Offenbach and Johann Strauss; men who have evoked immediate response in the hearts of their contemporaries, men who have been the articulate expression of their age and who have, to an extent granted to few, molded their age and become a symbol of what it was. Their vein has been rich and complete.

And so it has been with George. If my criticism has been more detailed than my praise the intention has in no sense been to belittle him as a composer: rather to define his scope and to place him firmly in a category where, among our contemporaries in any event, he unquestionably stands supreme. His memory must be guarded and cherished, his music frequently performed so that the unique and brilliant flame with which he illuminated our scene may carry on for many years to come.