

GEORGE GERSHWIN AND ALL THAT JAZZ

David C F Wright DMus

I have very real difficulties with this composer. I hasten to add that my assessment of Gershwin will not be understood or appreciated by everybody.

Gershwin was born in Brooklyn on 26 September 1898 to a Ukrainian father of Jewish descent and a Russian mother.

He benefited from studies with some very fine serious composers such as Henry Cowell as well as one of the finest pianists of the day, Charles Hambitzer. It is a great pity that he did not pursue a career based on such excellent tutelage that he received.

Instead he was drawn to jazz, among other things. There was more money in it and it was also associated with establishments with sexy and naughty women!

Jazz is not classical or serious music. It is a musical style that emerged from the early 20th century by black people living in the south of the USA.

Its characteristics are improvisations, polyrhythms, syncopation, swing music and the blues. It has also embraced gypsy music, the blues, avant-garde jazz, Latin jazz, punk music, acid music, pop music and ragtime.

The word eclectic has more than one meaning as does many words which causes utter confusion. In serious music, it means to select from all classical and serious forms. For example, Stravinsky wrote in a rich Romantic style as in his Symphony in E flat Op 1, the neo-classical style as in Dumbarton Oaks Concerto and serial music. He also wrote in a baroque style and a jazz work called the Ebony Concerto. In doing this, he was eclectic within the serious music styles with one deviation. And he was very skilful in so doing. The man was a genius!

As for Gershwin he was eclectic in that he selected styles which were not confined to the styles in serious music. He wrote about fifteen Broadway musicals and one London musical. He is well known for many of the songs from these Broadway shows none of which are classical in any sense of the word.

He is certainly not a serious or classical composer but a composer of popular light music, jazz and shows. He did try his hand at opera with Blue Monday and Porgy and Bess. The latter eventually became a popular success with the libretto by DuBose Hayward and lyrics by Ira Gershwin, George's brother. It seems to be an attack on the veracity of traditional values with such songs as 'It ain't necessarily so'. There are songs that are offensive to many such as, 'A woman is a sometimes thing'. ...a thing? There is "I got plenty of nuttin', 'O Lawd, I'm on my way' and 'Doctor Jesus'. However, the song Summertime has become very popular and is available in very many versions, some are so obtuse that it is hardly recognisable.

Porgy and Bess was originally a failure and claimed to be deliberately racist. It certainly was not a real opera as it was based on American jazz and the folk song tradition.



That his serious works were all failures determined him even more to take on light music and jazz in his mercenary desire to make money.

His brother, Ira Gershwin was born on 6 December 1896 and died on 17 August 1983. He is said to be a lyricist, a 'posh' word for someone who writes the words of songs.

Of course, there is nothing wrong in composing light music and music that is instantly popular and jazz. But to label it serious or classical music is totally wrong and an insult to great composer such as Haydn, Beethoven and Brahms, for example.

We live in a society where if music is not pop it is classical. The awful tenor, Andreas Bocelli, makes what are called classical albums where there is no classical music on them. One CD is devoted exclusively to Neapolitan songs and is called a classical album. Many singers have classical albums with no classical or serious items included.

When she was young, Charlotte Church was a lovely singer and she made albums called classical albums but they were not. She sang Panis Angelicus and a few short excerpts from what could be called serious music but the rest of her items were folk songs and traditional songs at which she was good.

If it is not pop, it must be classical, it is asserted.

We even have silly expressions like a Beatles classic. How can you compare a classic work such as Beethoven's Symphony no 7 with a song by the Beatles?

Modern society seems to merges all styles of music and so we have, for example, Kiri de Kanawa singing in South Pacific. Incidentally, I have heard opera singers sing musicals and they sing them far better than Broadway stars!

But can you imagine a Broadway star taking the lead in Verdi's Il Trovatore or singing the gorgeous Four Last Songs by Richard Strauss. Does this not indicate that opera singers are better and more skilful than Broadway singers?

Let me not be deemed or accused of being prejudiced. There are singers who do, or did not sing classical or serious music but who were great in their own way. Jane Froman singing 'With a song in my heart' or 'I'll walk alone' is magnificent. Alice Faye singing 'You'll never know how much I miss you' is very beautiful. 'It happened in Sun Valley' is a splendid piece. Leontyne Price singing Negro spirituals is so good it is beyond praise and I am deeply moved by the great Mahalia Jackson singing in the end of the film Imitation of Life.... unforgettable and tear jerking in the nicest way!

But to return to George Gershwin. He is not a serious or classical composer and it is wrong to give him this accolade. When Porgy and Bess is reviewed it is usually called a classical album. It is not! Technically it is a type of folk music! It has been called a folk opera!

If Gershwin is a classical or serious composer it more than suggests that he is on the same level as Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms and he is not !

Gershwin tried to write serious music but he failed. The Rhapsody in Blue is a fine piece if played well but it is not classical or serious. It is a jazz piece and Gershwin did not orchestrate the piece. Grofe did!

Again, lest I be labelled unfairly, there is jazz that I enjoy. I admire greatly King Oliver's band of the late 1920s. Where jazz leaves my aesthetic zone is when you cannot recognise the tune on which is based. And I am not enamoured with jazz that 'messes up' the original music.

The second Rhapsody has never caught on.

An American in Paris is said to be a classical work. It is not. It is popular music and I have to say that some of the orchestration is first class.

The Piano Concerto in F of 1925 is, to my mind, a dreadful piece. Here Gershwin tries to enter the grand style of the concerto and he tackles something that is too big for him thus revealing again his limitations!

There is no way that Gershwin's Piano Concerto can be put on a par with the piano concertos of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Rachmaninov, Bartok and many others.

The concerto is both jazz and Broadway material. It often sounds decidedly cynical. There is a drum kit in the orchestra as you would find in a pop group. The music is sleazy and vulgar and the tunes are Broadway-style melodies. One sounds very much like 'I've got rhythm'. The slow movement opens with a trumpet solo which seems to indicate a New Orleans brothel. If you listen to and watch videos of brothels in the jazz age, the bands are usually playing 'common' music like this. Gershwin's music is decadent as was the jazz age generally. It is music of sexual impurity and indecency!

There is a lot of pizzicato bass reminding us Gershwin's song 'Slap that bass'. The double bass is a fine instrument and should not be slapped.

I asked twenty concert pianists about this concerto. Nineteen detested it and said that if they played it, it would damage their reputation and they did not wish to be associated with such awful music. In contrast, a truly fine composer Iain Hamilton, was honest when he wrote a Concerto for jazz trumpet and orchestra. Gershwin may have received some respect had his piano Concerto been called Jazz Concerto!

I watched the great Marc-Andre Hamelin play it, but why? It was beneath him. That does not take away from Hamelin being a brilliant pianist. He is first class in Alkan and in other works and his recent recordings of Haydn sonatas is unbeatable. He should be criticised for playing one work which is rubbish. We should dwell on his superb performances of great works. However, in his repertoire he has more jazz works.

A television company played this concerto to scenes of a boxing match. I did not understand why there was the use of a boxing match until one of my pianists explained that the combatants represent good music and poor music; that it was a fight between serious classical music and, in the opposite corner, music of far lesser worth, if of any worth at all.

Of his songs, many have become popular and called classics. How absurd is that! I list some of his popular songs below

Shall we dance?
Slap that bass
Bidin' my time
Embracable you
Let's call the whole thing off
'Swonderful
Swanee
They can't take that away from me
Someone to watch over me
They all laughed
I've got a crush on you.

The BBC Proms have declined. They have comedy programmes and have had two Dr Who concerts. What has this to do with serious and classical music? They have had concerts by comedians, not musicians, in which vulgar language was used. We have had concerts of music from the shows, which have been well produced, but what has this to do with the festival of serious music? It is all part of the dumbing down process and the BBC telling us what music is worthy for us to hear!

People have said that I am unfair to Gershwin and why don't I complain about Leonard Bernstein who also composed Broadway shows as well as concert music?

The reasons are obvious. West Side Story is the most successful musical show of all time. On the Town was magnificent and Bernstein's concert music is exemplary and does not drag itself in the dust of pop music or jazz. The symphonies are fine; the Chichester Psalms is a work that gives tremendous satisfaction; the Mass is stunningly original and profound. His concert works do not succumb to jazz and pop.

Nikolai Kapustin was born in Russia in the 1930s and made his reputation as a jazz pianist although he seems to deny this. He has written over twenty piano sonatas, six piano concertos and music for the big band. His piano works are very difficult and full of jazz. However, it not improvisatory but fully notated and that is to be commended. This does not make him a classical or serious composer. And, incidentally, Hamelin has recorded some of his works.

Now it seems very clear that the title, whether said or not, jazz sonata is a misnomer. Kapustin gets away with this, by using baroque models in his jazz compositions as if to make his works respectable. The merger of baroque and jazz does not work.

People will say that these observations do not matter and say, "Well, I like Gershwin and this type of music and that is all that matters! So, shut up!"

Other will say, "Titles do not matter. If a work is a jazz work we can call it a sonata! The composer can call it what he likes!"

That is yet another shallow and inane reply.

Take the book Murder at Hill House. There is no murder in it; in fact, no one dies. And there is no Hill House. Titles do matter.

There seems to be a lot of attention by which some classical music is being highlighted if it contains jazz or the blues. The finale of Ravel's G major Piano Concerto is said to be jazzy and the Violin Sonata contains a blues.

How people arrive at jazz in the concerto, I do not know. Syncopation and strong rhythms appeared in classical music long before the advent of jazz.

Lewis Foreman writes a lot of nonsense. He says that Alun Hoddinott's Clarinet Concerto no 1 Op 3 is jazzy. It is not. Hoddinott told me that he never wrote a jazz piece nor would he lower himself to do so.

The jazz pianist, Dave Brubeck said that he invented five time. He obviously did not know Tchaikovsky or the music of Reicha, born 1770. Consider his Overture in D.



George Gershwin was plagued with illness for most of his life. He had chronic gastric problems, temporal lobe epilepsy and was a notorious hypochondriac. He had a brain tumour and died on 11 July 1937.

If people like his music, let them like it. That is both their choice and right, but they cannot call it classical or serious music and it must not be equated with great composers, of which Gershwin is not one!

I cannot accept that a symphony concert could have Beethoven Brahms and Gershwin in the same programme.

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