PROGRAM NOTES by Daniel Maki

Cuban Overture

Duration: Approximately 10 minutes
First Performance: August 16, 1932 in New York
Last ESO Performance: October, 2012; Matthew Kraemer, conductor

The gap separating popular music from so-called serious music seems to have become a yawning abyss in recent times, but for George Gershwin it barely existed. His natural bent was, of course, for popular music: at the age of fifteen, the earliest legally permissible age at the time, he dropped out of high school to become a song -plugger in Tin Pan Alley. By the time he was in his early twenties he was an established composer with several wildly successful hit tunes and a number of Broadway shows to his credit. Nevertheless, throughout his tragically short life, he never lost his burning ambition to be taken seriously as a serious composer and he worked tirelessly to improve his craft and to learn from the most erudite musicians of his time. That his unique genius was up to the task of succeeding in both fields and in actually bringing them together is demonstrated by every work on today's program.

The *Cuban Overture* had its genesis in a trip to Havana which Gershwin took in February of 1932 with several friends including Bennet Cerf, he of Random house publishing fame, and the financier Emil Mosbacher. Havana was of course famous for its night life and, as this was to be a bachelor's trip, George's brother Ira, a respectably married man, stayed at home. Among the many delights that Gershwin savored on the trip were the fascinating irregular rhythms and exotic harmonies of Cuban popular music, which he found intoxicating. Always learning and absorbing new musical ideas, Gershwin went so far as to buy some native percussion instruments, including maracas, bongos, claves, and a gourd.

Safely back home in New York, he set about capturing this sound in a work called *Rumba,* which was premiered in the first ever all-Gershwin concert , presented in August by the New York Philharmonic in Lewisohn Stadium before a crowd of more than 17,000. It was the first time the Philharmonic had ever devoted an entire program to the music of a living composer providing Gershwin with what he called " the most exciting night I have ever had."

During this period of his career, Gershwin was studying music theory with a highly learned Russian born musician named Joseph Schillinger, who had devised a kind of mathematical system designed to help composers create rhythms and thematic ideas. Among his other students were such other icons of popular music as Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, and Benny Goodman. Gershwin eagerly used some of Schillinger's techniques in his Cuban work as part of his continuing effort at improving his technique as he strove for respectability as a serious composer. For a concert three months after the outdoor Lewisohn program at the Metropolitan Opera he renamed the work *Cuban Overture* , certainly a more "respectable " title and one which, as he himself put it, gave "a more just idea of the character and intent of the music. "

The overture is in what musicians call three-part or ABA form. The outer fast sections feature exhilarating dance rhythms, hints of actual Latin popular tunes and brilliant use of the percussion section, including the native instruments that Gershwin bought himself and which, according to an indication in the score, should be prominently displayed on stage. The slower middle section offers striking contrast with its hauntingly melancholy mood. As immediately moving and accessible as this section is, it is interesting to read Gershwin's own highly technical description of it as " a gradually developing canon in a polytonal manner … with a climax based on an ostinato of the theme in the canon." (!) In addition to proving that he could hold his own with the most high-falutin' writers of program notes, Gershwin proves that he is the master of some of the most difficult and intellectual of musical techniques. The entire overture is a remarkable tribute to Gershwin's ability to write music that is both immediately accessible and yet skillfully and beautifully crafted.

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Lullaby for String Orchestra

Duration: Approximately 8 minutes
First Performance: October 28, 1967 in Washington, D.C.
Last ESO Performance: These are the first ESO performances of the work

In 1919 at the age of twenty George Gershwin wrote *Swanee*, the best selling song of his career and one which made him a wealthy man at an early age. As the title of one of his later classic hits states it, that was nice work if you could get it , but Gershwin was never one to be satisfied with easy commercial success. At that time he was studying with Edward Kilenyi, a Hungarian born composer who was steeped in the best European traditions. It was probably as a harmony exercise for Kilenyi that Gershwin wrote the gentle *Lullaby*, scored for string quartet, that is really the first work that might be called "classical" in his output. Over the next few years the work would be played by various quartets at private parties held by people in Gershwin's social circle and it took on a new life as an aria in Gershwin's next classical attempt, the opera *Blue Monday*. After that, however, in its instrumental form it disappeared until well after Gershwin's death. In the early 1960's Ira Gershwin invited the harmonica virtuoso Larry Adler to play an arrangement for harmonica and strings, and the original string quartet version finally received its first public performance at the Library of Congress when the Juilliard Quartet played it there in 1967. It appears in other arrangements as well, including one for piano as well as the string orchestra version heard today.

The work is again in a three part, ABA form, with the middle part moving to a new key. The harmonies owe much to the French Impressionist composers but the principle theme alludes in a very subtle way to American popular music. The syncopations here are a very gentle imitation of the much snappier rhythms of ragtime. For those accustomed to

the often brash, urban side of Gershwin's musical personality, the *Lullaby* offers a refreshingly gentle, bucolic alternative.

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Rhapsody in Blue

Duration: Approximately 16 minutes
First Performance: February 12, 1924 in New York
Last ESO Performance: April, 2011; Jodie DeSalvo, piano; Stephen Squires, conductor

These days, the word "crossover" is reverently used by music biz moguls to refer to music that appeals to listeners inhabiting more than one of the highly segregated categories of musical taste, e.g., rock, jazz, classical, etc. It can be argued that one of the first and most important examples of the crossover phenomenon ever written made its first appearance at a concert held in New York's Aeolian Hall on 12 February 1924. That concert, often described in music history books, was in its own way a typically American event, part blatantly commercial publicity stunt and part earnest cultural activity.

On 3 January 1924, George Gershwin was shooting pool in a billiard parlor on 52nd and Broadway, when his brother Ira noticed a newspaper article announcing that George Gershwin was writing a "jazz concerto" that would be performed by Paul Whiteman and his Orchestra in February. That was news to George Gershwin.

As it turned out, Whiteman had the grand idea of a concert that would bring the new jazz style into the respectable confines of the concert hall. In addition to presenting various types of jazz, he wanted to invite several composers such as Gershwin to write concert pieces that would have a jazz flavor. Furthermore, to place the imprimatur of respectability on the whole affair as well as to drum up more business, he had the brilliant idea of inviting a panel of distinguished figures from classical music who would answer the question, "What is American music?" (The panel included such heavyweights as Rachmaninoff and Heifetz.) When Gershwin asked Whiteman why he had gone ahead with the plan without asking him, Whiteman replied that a rival bandleader had stolen his idea and he had to move quickly to beat him. Carnegie Hall, incidentally, was unavailable, so Whiteman had to book the much smaller Aeolian Hall.

Although he was busy with commitments on Broadway, Gershwin began the daunting task of preparing a concert piece in roughly a month. Luckily, Whiteman had already broached the subject to Gershwin some time earlier and there is evidence that Gershwin had already done some work on the score. Nevertheless, once jolted by the newspaper article, he had to move quickly to produce a piano score that was then given to Ferde Grofé, Whiteman's staff arranger, for orchestration. Changes were still being made in rehearsal.

Due to advance publicity and the panel of experts ploy, the concert attracted many of the country's cultural glitterati, including the composers Ernest Bloch and John Philip Sousa, the violinist/composer Fritz Kreisler, and the actress Gertrude Lawrence . On the

long program it was the penultimate work, *Rhapsody in Blue*, which was the hit of the afternoon. Gershwin's virtuosity and the freshness of his musical ideas won him a number of curtain calls.

Although some of the press reaction to the *Rhapsody* was negative, registering especially the complaint that it was formless and simply a string of melodies (that would be a constant complaint about Gershwin's concert music), much was favorable. The *Rhapsody* may not have defined definitively what American music was, but many critics seemed to recognize that the brash opening clarinet *glissando* was ushering in a new era in American concert music. With repeat performances in New York as well as a tour and then two 78 rpm recordings with Gershwin himself as soloist, the work was well on its way to becoming an American classic and probably the most popular American concert piece of the century. Although critics may continue to comment on its structural looseness and the amount of padding in its transitions, the *Rhapsody's* virtues of rhythmic vitality and melodic and harmonic inventiveness far outweigh its defects. Though influenced by such European giants of the Romantic piano concerto as Liszt and Tchaikovsky, Gershwin managed to create a work that sounds fresh, spontaneous, and , yes, American.

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Second Rhapsody for Piano and Orchestra

Duration: Approximately 15 minutes
First Performance: January 29, 1932 in Boston
Last ESO Performance: October, 2013; Terrence Wilson, piano; Andrew Grams, conductor

The promise of fame and fortune in the movie business has over the years lured composers of all stripes to Hollywood. As one of the leading lights of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley, George Gershwin may have had all the fame that he needed, but when Fox Studios offered him and his brother Ira the lordly sum of $100,000 to write a movie musical, it proved to be an offer he couldn't refuse. Despite some reservations about the new-fangled medium of talking pictures, in late 1930 Gershwin settled in for what would be a stay of about three and a half months in a bungalow at Fox's Movietone City.

The musical in question would be called *Delicious*, starring "America's favorite sweethearts," Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell. As Hollywood musicals go, *Delicious* was quite a modest attempt: the new medium needed to be mastered before the lavish productions of the 1940's and 50's were possible. The script was of topical interest in 1930 and, ironically, is of topical interest today. *Delicious* is essentially a statement of sympathy for the problems of immigrants caused by the National Origins Act of 1924, which had severely limited immigration. The leading character, Heather Gordon, played by Janet Gaynor, is an illegal Scottish immigrant who falls in with a family of Russian immigrant musicians which includes Sascha, a pianist/composer , Mischa, a violinist , and Toscha, a cellist. The musical demands on Gershwin were relatively modest, calling

on him to write "realistic" music that easily fit into the flow of the drama and which emphasized the ethnic personalities of the various characters.

The most challenging task for the composer was a "New York Rhapsody" which would be played on screen by the composer Sascha as an example of his own work and which serves as the climactic scene of the entire film. As a native New Yorker and himself the son of Russian immigrants , it perhaps comes as no surprise that Gershwin threw himself into the task of writing music that evokes the vitality and fascination of the great city which had become Sascha's adopted home. Gershwin spent seven weeks on the piece, as long as he had spent on the rest of the entire score.

Although the Rhapsody was drastically cut in the final film version and Gershwin was disappointed in the overall artistic quality of the film, he was able to salvage the piece as a separate concert work. In January of 1932 he premiered the work as soloist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and he went on to use it as a concert vehicle for himself as often as possible, using various titles including *New York Rhapsody, Manhattan Rhapsody,* and *Rhapsody in Rivets* (the main theme is a bluesy melody with sharply hammered notes imitating the sound of riveting), before settling on its final title.

Despite Gershwin's vigorous advocacy, the Second Rhapsody never caught on with the public and was not published in an orchestral version until 1953, well after the composer's death. It has been only in recent decades that the work has entered the standard repertoire, due to the efforts of performers such as conductor/ pianist Michael Tilson Thomas, who has recorded it both with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the San Francisco Symphony. Although it lacks the immediate catchiness of *Rhapsody in Blue,* the Second Rhapsody shows us a sophisticated Gershwin who has enlarged his musical vocabulary with increased dissonance and imaginative orchestration. Gershwin's rhythms are infectious as usual , in this case often occurring with a Latin feeling. His unsurpassed melodic gift finds particular expression in the beautiful theme of the slower middle section, a melody which composer Robert Russell Bennett called the best tune Gershwin ever wrote. Gershwin himself revealed his lofty intentions with this work when he said that this melody was "almost religious in effect" and that he wanted "merely to write a broad, flowing melody, the same as Bach, Brahms, or Wagner have done."

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An American in Paris

Duration: Approximately 16 minutes
First Performance: December 13, 1928 in New York
Last ESO Performance: May, 2008; Robert Hanson, conductor

In 1928 Gershwin made what would be his last trip to Europe. As usual, he lived the high life, stopping to catch the final performance of the London run of his musical *Oh, Kay!* and then moving on to Paris, Berlin, and Vienna , where he cruised furiously among *le beau monde.* Among the many important musical figures that he met were Kurt Weill in Berlin, Alban Berg in Vienna, and Ravel , Prokofiev, and Stravinsky in Paris. It

may have been at this time that one of the most famous stories in modern musical folklore occurred. According to legend, when Gershwin asked Stravinsky for composition lessons, Stravinsky replied, "How much money do you make?" When Gershwin replied, "A hundred thousand a year- maybe two hundred thousand", Stravinsky reportedly answered, "Well, then, perhaps I should study with you!"

Europe was not all play, however, for Gershwin made considerable progress on an orchestral work that he had brought with him from New York. Conceived two years before on an earlier trip to Paris, the work was called *An American in Paris* and was the first piece of "serious" music that Gershwin started without a commission. An opportunity to perform the work was not long in coming, however, for soon after Gershwin's return to New York, the newspapers announced that the New York Philharmonic would perform it the next season. The premiere took place on 13 December 1928 with Walter Damrosch conducting. Despite the usual mixed press reviews that Gershwin's concert works tended to receive, audience reaction was enthusiastic and the new work quickly found its way into the standard orchestral repertoire. It has remained a staple ever since.

In Gershwin's own words, *An American in Paris* is an attempt "to portray the impressions of an American visitor to Paris as he strolls about the city, listens to the various street noises, and absorbs the French atmosphere." It is certainly not far-fetched to assume that the visitor in question is the composer himself. As biographer Howard Pollack has put it, "the piece can even be read as a kind of self-portrait, its personality – variously debonair , energetic, melancholy and ironic – strongly reminiscent of the composer's own. No other piece by Gershwin seems so strongly confessional."

The work opens with saucy strolling music depicting the bustle of the boulevards. Adding authenticity are a brief quote of a Parisian popular song (*La Mattchiche)* and, of course, the famous taxi horns that Gershwin himself carefully picked out in Paris and then brought back to New York for use in the premiere. The mood becomes reflective for a moment with an English horn solo- Gershwin suggested that our visitor was passing an important architectural landmark. As the American proceeds to the Left Bank the bustle returns, eventually to be interrupted by a violin solo, which, as the original program notes stated with utmost delicacy, represents a lady of the night. Through all this activity our visitor has been drinking in not only the sights, but as Gershwin put it , "other things as well. " French wine has induced a fit of homesickness for America, represented by the soulful blues section. (Incidentally, the delicate sensibilities of some Prohibition era Philharmonic subscribers seem to have been offended by these references to prostitution and inebriation.)

Nostalgia for America continues through the next section, but here spirits seem to be lifting as the tempo picks up and the brass section swings irresistibly. Finally, the homesickness vanishes and, as Gershwin describes it, "the street noises and French atmosphere are triumphant." Our protagonist seems to have decided that home is fine, but when in Paris he will do as the Parisians do.

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