

Programme Note by Chris Darwin: please use freely for non-commercial purposes

George Gershwin (1898-1937 An American in Paris (1928))

Music only started to impact on George Gershwin's life when he was 12 and the family bought a piano for his elder brother Ira. Ira (the future lyricist) wasn't interested, but George was. His piano teacher took him to concerts and at 15 he dropped out of school and worked as a song plugger for a firm on Tin Pan Alley, playing and singing their songs to prospective clients. He composed in his spare time. He moved to being a Broadway rehearsal pianist, was retained as a composer by Harms publishers and in 1918 composed his first musical *La La Lucille*. Two years later Al Jolson recorded *Swanee*, bringing Gershwin \$10,000 in royalties in the first year.

On the classical side, he studied harmony, counterpoint and orchestration with a number of teachers including the avant garde Henry Cowell, wrote a string quartet as an exercise, and in 1924, commissioned by band leader Paul Whiteman and inspired by riding the train from New York to Boston, he wrote *Rhapsody in Blue* for two pianos. It was orchestrated by Ferde Grofé, but its famous glissando was a whim of the clarinettist at the first rehearsal.

In early 1928 Gershwin met Ravel in New York, taking him to hear Duke Ellington, and asked Ravel to teach him. Ravel declined, allegedly saying 'Why become a second-rate Ravel when you're already a first-rate Gershwin?'. On hearing how much money Gershwin earned Ravel produced a counter-proposal: that he study with Gershwin. Ravel suggested that Gershwin try Nadia Boulanger in Paris. So, with lessons from Boulanger as an incentive and also with a new symphonic tone poem already sketched out in his mind Gershwin went to Paris. Although Nadia Boulanger also declined to teach Gershwin, his composing prospered. 'An American in Paris' was premiered by Walter Damrosch soon after Gershwin's return to New York. Included in the performance were four Parisian taxi horns that Gershwin had brought with him.

Here is Gershwin's description of the piece:

'The opening gay section is followed by a rich 'blues' with a strong rhythmic undercurrent. Our American friend, perhaps after strolling into a café and having a few drinks, has suddenly succumbed to a spasm of homesickness. The harmony here is both more intense and simpler than in the preceding pages. This 'blues' rises to a climax followed by a coda in which the spirit of the music returns to the vivacity and bubbling exuberance of the opening part with its impressions of Paris. Apparently the homesick American, having left the café and reached the open air, has drowned his spell of blues and once again is an alert spectator of Parisian life. At the conclusion, the street noises and French atmosphere are triumphant.'