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George Gershwin (1898-1937) *Lullaby for String Quartet* (1919); *Summertime* (1934)

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.

Lullaby was composed around this time as a student exercise and was popular both at private musicales with his friends and more widely as a reused melody in his opera *Blue Monday*. The original string quartet however was subsequently neglected until the Juilliard Quartet performed it in 1967. It has both Gershwin's characteristic melodic genius and his winning combination of jazz and classical styles.

His classical training was eclectic ranging from the traditional to the avant garde. In 1928, four years after writing *Rhapsody in Blue*, he met Ravel in New York, taking him to hear Duke Ellington. He 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, Gershwin went to Paris. Although Nadia Boulanger also declined to teach Gershwin, his composing prospered with *An American in Paris*.

Porgy & Bess followed in 1934 as a folk opera. Gershwin chose to compose his own 'folk' songs rather than use existing ones, although links to existing folk melodies have been pointed out. The folk atmosphere in *Summertime* comes partly from his use of the pentatonic scale (black notes on the piano) and a slow-moving bluesy harmonic progression. *Summertime* has been spectacularly successful in all sorts of versions. Guinness World Records declares it to be the world's most recorded song at around 70,000 recordings.