Composer Profiles

George Gershwin
Born: Brooklyn, New York - 1898
Died: Hollywood, California - 1937

Biography
Born Jacob Gershvin to parents of Russian descent, George Gershwin changed his name after becoming a professional musician. The second of four children, George began his musical studies by playing on the family piano originally intended for his older brother Ira. After taking several years of piano lessons, George studied composition with Rubin Goldmark and Henry Cowell. When he was fifteen, Gershwin began working for a publishing company in New York’s “Tin Pan Alley”, where he would play piano in stores to advertise new music, known as “song plugging”. After publishing several of his own songs, Gershwin became well known as a composer and arranger of popular tunes. In later years he would collaborate with his brother Ira, a talented lyricist, on several stage and Broadway musicals. In 1924, Gershwin entered the orchestral repertoire with Rhapsody in Blue, which gave him instant popularity. Though the work brought him commercial success, Gershwin decided to travel to Paris and apply to study with Nadia Boulanger, who had trained influential American composers including Virgil Thompson and Aaron Copland. While in Paris, however, he found his application had been denied by Boulanger, who exclaimed that classical oriented study would ruin his established jazz style. During his time abroad, Gershwin finished another orchestral work, An American in Paris, in 1928. Gershwin returned to America the same year and began work on his first opera, Porgy and Bess, which was completed in 1935. Though the opera is now considered one of the great American stage works, its premiere was a box-office failure due to the strong use of Black themes and characters, and confusion over whether the work was meant to be an opera or a stage musical. Gershwin moved to Hollywood, California soon afterward and worked composing music for stage works and movie musicals, including Shall We Dance, starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in 1936. In 1937, Gershwin’s health took a severe downturn when a brain tumor was discovered after he began complaining of blinding headaches. While working on the score to another musical, Gershwin collapsed at the piano and was rushed to the hospital. He died two days later at the age of thirty eight following surgery. In 1985, the Congressional Gold Medal was awarded to Gershwin posthumously, and the George and Ira Gershwin Lifetime Musical Achievement Award was established by UCLA in 1988. On Broadway, the Urst Theatre was renamed the Gershwin Theatre at the 1983 Tony Awards, and is home to the American Theatre Hall of Fame. In 2007, the Library of Congress named their annual Prize for Popular Song after George and Ira Gershwin. Its recipients include Paul Simon, Stevie Wonder, Paul McCartney, and Burt Bacharach.
Works
In addition to his affinity with jazz and popular song forms, Gershwin was highly influenced by French composers of the early twentieth century. When applying to study with Nadia Boulanger, Gershwin also hoped to study composition with Maurice Ravel. When Ravel heard how much money Gershwin made from publishing his popular songs, Ravel replied: “You should be giving me lessons”. This influence is reflected in Gershwin's Piano Concerto in F and An American in Paris, which was criticized for being too close in sound to Debussy and Les Six than to his own jazz style. Gershwin would continue to seek out new avenues to learn and be influenced by different styles of composition. When he moved to California, he requested lessons from Arnold Schoenberg, who, in a manner similar to Ravel, told him: “I would only make you a bad Schoenberg, and you’re such a good Gershwin already”. From 1932 to 1936 Gershwin studied with Joseph Schillinger, who was a musical advisor to many American jazz musicians including Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, and Tommy Dorsey. Gershwin’s style has always been defined by reconciling jazz with the concert hall, though he was not the first composer to experiment with joining together these two traditions. However, he was the first major composer to become commercially successful producing both works for the concert hall and musical theatre. His orchestral works are equally popular with his Broadway and movie songs, each with a unique and personal voice that characterized Gershwin’s philosophy that “true music must reflect the thought and aspirations of the people and time. My people are Americans. My time is today”.

Suggested Listening
Rhapsody in Blue (1924); Piano Concerto in F (1925); Three Preludes for Piano (1926); Strike Up the Band (1927); An American in Paris (1928); Cuban Overture (1932); Porgy and Bess (1935); Shall We Dance (1936)