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SUPER AUDIO CD

Rhapsody in Blue

Arthur Fiedler
Boston Pops
Orchestra
Earl Wild, piano



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GEORGE GERSHWIN (1898–1937)

- 1 **Rhapsody in Blue** 16:17
Pasquale Cardillo, clarinet
(Recorded May 13, 1959)

Concerto in F*

- 2 Allegro 12:05
3 Adagio; Andante con moto 10:31
4 Allegro agitato 6:16
(Recorded May 17, 1961)

- 5 **An American in Paris** 16:37
(Recorded May 14, 1959)

- 6 **Variations on "I Got Rhythm"*** 7:59

- 7 **Cuban Overture*** 9:20
(Recorded May 18, 1961)



Earl Wild, piano
Boston Pops Orchestra
Arthur Fiedler, conductor
(Recorded Symphony Hall, Boston)

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In the spring of 1923 Paul Whiteman, returning with his orchestra from a successful invasion of London, settled down to becoming the stellar attraction of New York's dinner-dance Palais Royal. But Whiteman, who was a restless soul, conceived the idea of presenting a concert of good popular music in various styles, played in a regular concert hall, and to be called "An Experiment in Modern Music." One feature of the proposed concert was to be a work of concert dimensions, something more ambitious than the run-of-the-mill jazz offerings. This he invited George Gershwin to write.

While young Gershwin (he was twenty-six) was well known as the composer of the scores of eleven musicals, he had never written anything remotely resembling a work of symphonic dimensions. So he took Whiteman's invitation casually, absentmindedly said "yes," and thought no more about it. But an item on the music page of the New York *Tribune*

informed him that he was at work on a "symphony" for Whiteman.

That set him off. He began to write, not a symphony, but a rhapsodic piece for piano and orchestra called, at the suggestion of his brother Ira, *A Rhapsody in Blue*. Working day and night, he managed to finish the new work by February 7, 1924.

Five days later, on Lincoln's birthday, Aeolian Hall was fairly bursting at the seams. Practically every musician and critic in town had been invited to inspect this musical experiment, and practically all of them came. The concert began auspiciously, with an audience inclined to be friendly; but despite the presence on the program of such illustrious names as Herbert, Kern and Berlin, there was a sameness about the material and its treatment that began to pall. The general impression was one of monotony. There was boredom in the air.

Then came what a vaudevillian would call the "next-to-closing" number: *A Rhapsody in Blue* for piano and orchestra, by George Gershwin, with the composer as soloist. That now familiar chromatic "smear" by the clarinet that opens the piece was enough to make the customers sit up. And as the work proceeded they stayed up, and at the end they rose up. Those of us who heard that ovation will never forget it. Gershwin and his *Rhapsody* were a hit. As one critic wrote:

"He is a link between the jazz camp and the intellectuals ... His Rhapsody ... revealed a genuine melodic gift and a piquant and individual harmonic sense. Moreover, it was genuine jazz music ... It was crude, but it hinted at something new, something that has not hitherto been said in music. Mr. Gershwin will bear watching; he may yet bring jazz out of the kitchen."

History was made that February afternoon, as George Gershwin estab-

lished his right to be taken seriously as a composer. Today, more than thirty-five years after its inception, the *Rhapsody* is still one of the most popular works of its kind in the world.

In the summer of 1923 George Gershwin paid his first visit to Paris. It was love at first sight. "Why," he remarked excitedly, "this is a city you can write about"—and toyed with the idea of being the one to do the writing. But other matters intervened, including the *Rhapsody in Blue*, the Concerto in F and eight musical comedy scores, so that it was not until the summer of 1928 that he returned from another visit (by no means his second), bearing under his arm the manuscript of *An American in Paris*. It was first heard on December 13, 1928, played by the New York Philharmonic, with Walter Damrosch conducting, and soon became another international favorite.

It is very soothing to one's vanity to be able to tell a composer what his

music means. It is even more soothing when the composer asks to be told what it means. Which is what Gershwin did, requesting me to provide a program note to be used at the first performance of the new piece. Needless to say, the request was enthusiastically granted. What follows was the result.

You are to imagine an American swinging down the Champs Élysées on a mild, sunny morning. Dispensing with preliminaries, he is off at full speed at once, to the tune of the straightforward First Walking Theme. He notes with pleasure the sounds of the city, passes the open door of a café where, if one is to believe the trombones, *La sorella* is still popular, then continues his stroll through the medium of the Second Walking Theme, announced by a French clarinet with a strong American accent. The two themes discuss topics of the day with considerable gusto, after which our American's itinerary becomes somewhat obscured.

Since what ensues is technically known as a bridge passage, one is reasonably justified in assuming that when the Third Walking Theme—somewhat sedentary in character and a little blurred—makes its appearance, the American has crossed the river and is seated on the *terrasse* of a Left Bank café, exploring the mysteries of a *Chambéry fraise*.

Now the orchestra introduces an unhallowed episode. Suffice it to say that a solo violin (in the soprano register) approaches our hero and begins a one-sided conversation in charming fractured English.

What follows is hard to believe. Our American becomes homesick. He has the blues—and take it from the orchestra, he has them thoroughly. He does not belong in this place. However, nostalgia is not a fatal disease, and the compassionate orchestra rushes a new theme to the rescue, two trumpets performing the

ceremony of introduction. It is apparent that our American has met a compatriot, for this last theme is a noisy, cheerful, brash Charleston without a drop of Gallic blood in its veins. Walking Theme Number Two enters, enthusiastically abetted by Number Three. The blues return—a happy reminiscence rather than a homesick longing, and a voluble, gutsy, wise-cracking orchestra decides to make a night of it. It will be great to be home. But meanwhile, this is Paris!

A few months after the triumphant premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue* in 1924, Gershwin was commissioned by Walter Damrosch, eminent conductor of the New York Symphony, to write a work for orchestra. He decided upon a piano concerto and signed a contract to make seven appearances with the orchestra as soloist. But before he could start on the project, Gershwin had to go to England to supervise the production of his latest musical, "Tell Me More!" During his stay in London he began to sketch the concerto, for which he planned to do his own orchestration. Sensitive to criticism that he had not orchestrated the *Rhapsody*, Gershwin later commented about his decision to handle the concerto orchestration himself. "Many persons had thought," he said, "that the *Rhapsody* was only a happy accident. Well, I went out, for one thing, to show them that there was plenty more where that

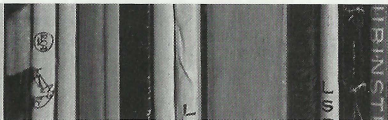
had come from. I made up my mind to do a piece of absolute music. The *Rhapsody*, as its title implied, was a blues impression. The concerto would be unrelated to any program. And that is exactly how I wrote it!" The composer returned to New York in early June of 1925 and by July he was devoting himself fully to what he called his "New York Concerto."

But in the busy, always crowded, Gershwin apartment the work went very slowly. George longed for quiet and privacy and eventually help came from his friend Ernest Hutcheson, who invited him to Chautauqua, New York, where he would be able to compose in peace. Hutcheson was giving master classes in piano at Chautauqua and instructed his students not to invade Gershwin's privacy until four in the afternoon. But precisely at that hour, the enthusiastic young people would storm into George's studio to hear him sing and play his songs. That marked the

end of George's work day, and the concerto was not completed until September. Even then the orchestration still remained to be done. Back in New York, he worked on the scoring while at the same time he collaborated with his brother Ira on the music for "Tip-Toes," and with Oscar Hammerstein, Herbert Stothart and Otto Harbach on "Song of the Flame." Finally, desperate to have working periods free of interruption, Gershwin rented rooms at a hotel away from the demands of the theatrical world. The Concerto in F, as he finally titled it, was completed on November 10, 1925. Uncertain how the work would sound and anxious about the first impression it would make on Dr. Damrosch, Gershwin decided on a preliminary hearing. He hired the Globe Theatre and an orchestra of sixty musicians, called upon his friend William Daly to conduct and seated himself at the piano. The men of the orchestra were enthusiastic, some

cuts and revisions were made, George played, listened and learned, and Dr. Damrosch was thoroughly impressed. "Lady Jazz, adorned with her intriguing rhythms, has danced her way around the world," he wrote later, ... "But for all her travels and her sweeping popularity, she had encountered no knight who could lift her to a level that would enable her to be received as a respectable member in musical circles. George Gershwin seems to have accomplished this miracle. He has done it boldly by dressing this independent young lady in the classic garb of a concerto..."

On December 3, 1925, the much-heralded jazz concerto was introduced to the world, and as the vast final trill of the massed orchestral forces signaled the work's end, George was greeted with a tremendous outburst of cheering and applause. The critics were divided, as they had been after the premiere of the *Rhapsody*. But Samuel Chotzinoff of



the *World*, aware that Gershwin was a rare intuitive spirit searching his way, best summed up the case for the pros and for most Americans in general when he wrote: "His shortcomings are nothing in face of the one thing he alone of all those writing the music of today possesses. He alone actually expresses us. He is the present, with all its audacity, impertinence, its feverish delight in its motion, its lapses into rhythmically exotic melancholy."

The exuberant song "I Got Rhythm" first sounded its joyful message in the musical "Girl Crazy," which opened at the Alvin Theater on October 14, 1930. In the orchestra, headed by Red Nichols, an incredible array of talent held forth—Benny Goodman, Gene Krupa, Glenn Miller, Jimmy Dorsey and Jack Teagarden. The female lead was played by a nineteen-year-old dancer named Ginger Rogers, who sang the romantic ballads like "Embraceable You" and "But Not

for Me." But the actress who won the greatest acclaim was an unknown named Ethel Merman. It was she who belted "I Got Rhythm" into one of the greatest hits of all time.

In 1933 Gershwin made plans for an extensive tour of one-night stands with the Leo Reisman Orchestra, with tenor James Melton as a soloist. The program was to consist largely of Gershwin music—*An American in Paris*, the *Rhapsody in Blue* and a large selection of songs. George felt the need of another orchestral work, and it occurred to him that a set of variations on "I Got Rhythm" might be the perfect answer. It was one of his favorite pieces, and he often entertained friends by improvising on it. He undertook the task while vacationing in Palm Beach in December 1933, and by the time the tour got underway in January the "I Got Rhythm" Variations were ready to go.

CUBAN OVERTURE

Cuban Overture was inspired by a short visit George Gershwin made to Havana in February 1932. While there, he heard much indigenous music (with special attention to the complex rhythms) and was captivated by Cuban percussion instruments. When he returned to New York his luggage contained a set of Cuban sticks, a bongo, a gourd and maracas, and he had ideas for a new piece. August 16 was to be Gershwin night at New York's Lewisohn Stadium, and the composer worked up his Cuban themes into *Rumba* for that concert. The orchestra was the New York Philharmonic and Albert Coates the conductor. On the score's title page Gershwin added a "Conductor's note," in which he indicated where the percussionists should be positioned and played it safe by drawing in little sketches of the Cuban instruments since

few of the Philharmonic's members would have been familiar with them. Later, when the work was published, he retitled it *Cuban Overture*, lest it be confused with the popular dance.

Arthur Fiedler, the best-selling conductor in history and director of the Boston Pops for 50 years, was born in Boston in 1894 and started to study both the violin and the piano when he was five; after high school he continued his musical training—composition and conducting as well as violin and piano—in Berlin. He began his illustrious career in 1915 as a violinist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. During his years with the BSO, he organized and conducted the Boston Sinfonietta. In 1929 he founded the famous Esplanade Concerts and began his lifelong commitment to bring “light” classical music to the public. A year later he was appointed music director of the Boston Pops, a post he held until his death in 1979.

In his 50 seasons with the Pops, Arthur Fiedler forged a musical legacy that, through concerts, television and radio broadcasts, and recordings

brought the joy of classical music to millions of Americans. His record albums, featuring classical favorites, orchestral settings of Broadway show tunes, pop songs, jazz standards and patriotic music, sold almost 50 million copies during his career, a level of popular acclaim that may never be challenged. His interest in all musical styles, his voracious appetite for new orchestral works—he “discovered” and recorded many, including Jacob Gade’s *Jalousie*, RCA’s first classical recording to sell one million copies—and his remarkable ability to communicate the universality of the musical language were legendary. Arthur Fiedler’s love for music and commitment to his audience remain a model for any musician, and every American who loves classical music owes him an incalculable debt.

Earl Wild was born in Pittsburgh in 1915 and could read music and play the piano by age 6. He studied in Pittsburgh and while still a teenager played on the radio there and in the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. He moved to New York, continued his training, and in 1937 became staff pianist of Toscanini’s NBC Symphony Orchestra. Wild made his New York recital debut at Town Hall in 1944, and went on to years of concertizing throughout the world. The eminent pianist built an extensive repertoire, which included both the standard and modern literature and won renown in particular for his brilliant performances of the virtuoso Romantic works. Long a leading exponent of Gershwin’s piano music, notably the Concerto in F and *Rhapsody in Blue*, Earl Wild got his first real break when Paul Whiteman engaged him as a soloist for a lengthy tour, in the

course of which the young pianist played the *Rhapsody* more than 50 times in as many cities. His subsequent performances of it—hundreds of them—include a memorable concert with the NBC Symphony in 1942, the only time that Toscanini ever conducted the work, and one with the Pasdeloup Orchestra in Paris that was a triumph. Over the years, Earl Wild’s career has also encompassed teaching and composing.