

Notes on the Program – *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in F major* (Gershwin)

This text is provided courtesy of the New York Philharmonic.

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in F major

GEORGE GERSHWIN

Born September 28, 1898, Brooklyn, New York; died July 11 1937, Beverly Hills, California

GEORGE GERSHWIN flared like a meteor across the horizon of American popular *and* serious music. But he did more than dazzle: he beguiled, he touched, he enamoured with his personality as well as his music.

It is said that after signing the commission to compose his Piano Concerto for Walter Damrosch and the New York Symphony Society, Gershwin went out and bought a book to learn exactly what a concerto was! The picture of the young American genius out to storm Parnassus with a do-it-yourself book of directions in hand has its humorous side. For Gershwin was already a famous composer with a whole string of musical comedies from *La La Lucille* in 1919, to *Lady Be Good* of 1924 and *Oh Kay* of 1925 behind him, as well as the *Rhapsody in Blue*. It was the overwhelming success of this last which suggested to Walter Damrosch the idea of commissioning a concerto.

According to George's brother, Ira Gershwin, a number of the themes had been in George's mind of several months and he had first intended using them in another work. He began to put the concerto on paper by June, or at the latest, by July, 1925 and completed it on November 10. The first performance was given in Carnegie Hall, by the New York Symphony Society, with Walter Damrosch conducting and Gershwin himself as soloist on December 3, 1925.

Its style was Gershwin through and through. As to its form, Gershwin was quoted saying that the first movement was in a "sonata-form . . . but."

Many persons had thought [Gershwin 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. I learned a great deal from that experience. Particularly in the handling of instruments in combination.



At the time of the premiere, Gershwin wrote the following short description:

[I. *Allegro.*] The first movement employs a Charleston rhythm. It is quick and pulsating, representing the young, enthusiastic spirit of American Life. It begins with a rhythmic motif given out by the kettledrums, supported by other percussion instruments, and with a Charleston motif introduced by bassoon, horns, clarinets and violas. The principal theme is announced by the bassoon. Later, a second theme is introduced by the piano.

[II. *Adagio; Andante con moto.*] The second movement has a poetic nocturnal atmosphere which has come to be referred to as the American blues, but in a purer form than that in which they are usually treated.

{III. *Allegro agitato.*} The final movement reverts to the style of the first. It is an orgy of rhythms, starting violently and keeping the same pace throughout.

