

Notes on the Program – *Cuban Overture*

This text is provided courtesy of the New York Philharmonic.

Cuban Overture

GEORGE GERSHWIN

- BORN:** September 26, 1898, in Brooklyn, New York
DIED: July 11, 1937, in Hollywood, California
WORK COMPOSED: July and early August 1932
WORLD PREMIERE: August 16, 1932, under the title Rumba, with Albert Coates conducting the New York Philharmonic at Lewisohn Stadium

The island nation of Cuba was a hot destination for Americans of the smart set in the early 1930s, and had been for a decade. Cuba was closely connected to the United States back then, before the dictatorships Fulgencio Batista and Fidel Castro. During World War I it had its troops to the side of the Allies (as it would again in World War II), and it allowed the United States to dominate its economy, industry, and finances during the 1920s.

Americans were enthralled by Cuba as a travel destination, and not just because of the tropical breezes and beckoning palms. Between 1920 and 1933, Cuba offered something the United States did not: booze. Prohibition certainly didn't keep Americans from imbibing, but the allure of doing so in the open proved a boon to the travel industry. Already in 1920—practically before the ink on the Volstead Act was dry—Irving Berlin let loose with a prescient commentary in his song "I'll See You in C-U-B-A":

Not so far from here
 There's a very lively atmosphere
 Ev'rybody's going there this year
 And there's a reason.
 The season opened last July
 Ever since the U.S.A. went dry



George Gershwin at the piano



Ev'rybody's going there and I'm going. . .
Cuba where win is flowing
And where dark-eyed stellas
Light their fellers' panatelas. . .

In February 1932 George Gershwin was among a bunch of “fellers” who went south for two or three weeks of playing golf, betting at the racetracks, and partying with “dark-eyed Stellas”. It was a formidable crowd that included the financier Everett Jacobs (whose checks helped underwrite a number of Broadway musicals), Adam Gimbel (of the department-store Gibmels), the stockbroker Emil Mosbacher, and the publisher Bennett Cerf. “In Havana,” Cerf recalled about Gershwin,

a 16-piece rhumba band serenaded him en masse at four in the morning outside his room at the old Almendares Hotel. Several outraged patrons left the hotel the next morning. George was so flattered that he promised to write a rhumba of his own.

When Gershwin returned to the States he included among his souvenirs several authentic Cuban percussion instruments: a bongo drum, claves, maracas, and a gourd shaker. Within a few months, he made good on his promise to recapture the sounds that he had entranced him in Havana, and in July (mostly at Mosbacher’s home in Westchester) he produced his *Rumba* for piano four-hands. He began orchestrating his new piece on August 1 and finished the symphonic version on August 9—just in time to include it on an all-Gershwin program the New York Philharmonic was scheduled to play at New York’s Lewisohn eight nights later. It was a greatly anticipated event: the stadium’s 18,000 seats were sold out and several thousand more hopeful listeners were reportedly turned away. Gershwin added to the visual effect by having the four percussionists play his Cuban instruments at the front of the orchestra—rather than at the percussion section’s usual location at the back—so the audience could see their exotic instruments. Three months later the piece got its second airing, which the composer himself conducted at a benefit concert in The New Metropolitan opera House, now under the new titled *Cuban Overture*.

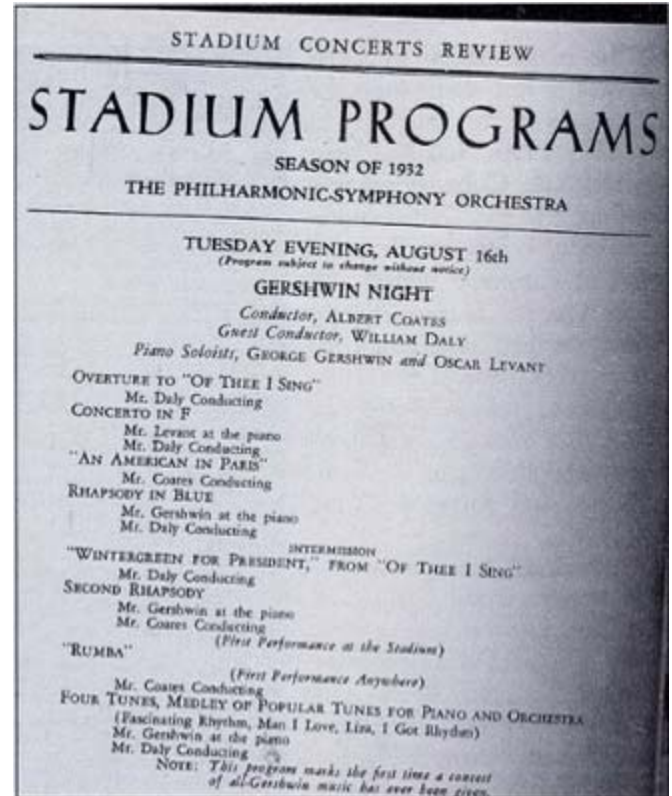
When George Gershwin composed his *Cuban Overture* he had just embarked on a course of study with the composer and music theorist Joseph Schillinger. Gershwin was an immensely successful composer by that time, but he felt trapped in the small structures of Broadway tunes and hoped to stretch his technique through Schillinger’s coaching. Gershwin’s work with Schillinger is surely reflected in some of the more sophisticated features of the



Cuban Overture, such as the prevalence of five-measure phrases (as opposed to the four-measure blocks of most popular tunes), a generally polytonal flavor, and what the composer proudly pointed out, in a brief program note, as a “three-part contrapuntal episode,” a “developing canon in a contrapuntal manner, and a climax based on an ostinato.” Such hifalutin learnedness notwithstanding, the *Cuban Overture* does not come across as a pretentious work. Instead, it seems the perfect evocation of a vacation in Cuba—or, as Gershwin put it, it is “a symphonic overture which embodies the essence of Cuban dance.”

INSTRUMENTATION: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, bongo, claves, maracas, gourd, timpani, and strings.

—James M. Keller, Program Annotator



The program for the world premiere of Gershwin’s *Rumba* by the New York Philharmonic on an all-Gershwin concert; *An American in Paris* was also on the program.