

AMERICAN DREAMS

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George Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue, Preludes & Transcriptions

Viv McLean, piano



My people are American, my time is today...music must
repeat the thought and aspirations of the times





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George Gershwin (1898–1937)

1. Rhapsody in Blue – 15:40
2. Someone to Watch Over Me (arr. Maurice Whitney) – 5:49
3. The Man I Love (arr. Percy Grainger) – 4:16
4. I Got Rhythm – 1:10
5. Three Preludes: No 1 – 1:25
6. Three Preludes: No 2 – 4:34
7. Three Preludes: No 3 – 1:09
8. Summertime – 3:27
9. Who Cares – 1:00
10. My One And Only – 0:54
11. I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise – 0:37
12. Embraceable You (arr. Henry Levine) – 2:37
13. Somebody Loves Me – 1:31
14. That Certain Feeling – 1:25
15. Sweet and Lowdown – 1:06
16. S'wonderful – 0:59
17. An American in Paris (arr. Maurice Whitney – abridged version) – 6:11

Viv McLean, piano

3 bonus tracks from the Gershwin Songbook (arranged for piano and Orchestra by Hershy Kay)

18. Do Do Do/Lady Be Good – 3:45
19. Fascinatin' Rhythm – 2:15
20. I Got Rhythm – 3:30

Viv McLean, piano

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Simon Lee, conductor

(By kind permission of the RPO and RPO Records)

GERSHWIN'S GOT RHYTHM

The best composers show more than their souls through their music: they also capture the spirit of their heritage, their communities and their era. George Gershwin was no exception. Music, he suggested, “must repeat the thought and aspirations” of the times. “My people are American,” he declared. “My time is today.”

He was born Jacob Gershwine on 26 September 1898, the second child in a family of Russian-Jewish immigrants in Brooklyn – and went on to create a musical voice of a confidence, lyricism and irrepressible energy that virtually encapsulated the American Dream of the early 20th century. His was the voice of a generation embracing life in a new land that brimmed with opportunity.

Gershwin’s “unique selling point”, if you like, was his ability to blend the idiom of popular songs with classical technique. Like his peers – Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern and others – he wrote plenty of musical comedies, but he also penned an opera (*Porgy and Bess*), a piano concerto, a tone poem (*An American in Paris*) and two Rhapsodies for piano and orchestra, pushing further in the mingling of these musical worlds than any other composer had until then. His success was unprecedented and has arguably remained unmatched, unless possibly by Leonard Bernstein.

Gershwin’s interest in music was awakened only when he was ten years old and heard a friend performing on the violin. His parents had bought a piano for his elder brother, Ira, but George conscripted it, learned to play by ear and eventually found a teacher, Charles Hambitzer, who helped him catch up with the technique and musical hinterland he needed. “I have a new pupil who will make his mark if anybody will,” Hambitzer told his sister. “The boy is a genius.”

Aged 15, the “boy” left school and went to work as a song-plugger in Tin Pan Alley. At 17, he sold his first song, “When you want ’em, you can’t get ’em”, for 50 cents. Commercial success followed when Al Jolson took up and performed another song, “Swanee”, two years later. “Swanee” went on to sell a million copies as sheet music and around two million records.

In the early 1920s Gershwin collaborated on Broadway musicals with several different lyricists and songwriters, including Buddy DaSilva and William Daly. But in 1924 he found a lyricist soulmate closer to home: none other than his brother, Ira. Through the next decade the siblings worked together on a string of hit shows, including *Lady Be Good*, *Oh Kay!*, *Funny Face*, *Strike Up the Band*, *Show Girl*, *Girl Crazy* and in 1931 *Of Thee I Sing*, a razor-sharp political satire – most unusually for Broadway – which was the first musical to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. These were home to a host of songs that have

been popular jazz standards ever since: “Who Cares” is from *Of Thee I Sing*, “Embraceable You” and “I Got Rhythm” were included in *Girl Crazy*, and the list could continue. Gershwin arranged a number of them for piano himself. Many other arrangers have followed suit, including the American composer and theorist Maurice Whitney, Henry Levine and even the eccentric Australian composer-pianist Percy Grainger. As it turned out, 1924 was also crucial to Gershwin’s progress in the concert hall: it was then that he wrote *Rhapsody in Blue*, a one-movement jazz piano concerto. Originally orchestrated by Ferde Grofé, it was premiered by the composer with Paul Whiteman’s concert band in New York City. It builds up from its initial clarinet slide to include episodes of mercurial virtuosity, flexible cadenza-like passages and, later, a “big tune” à la Tchaikovsky in which Gershwin’s Russian roots seem to meld effortlessly with the jazz age. He went on to create versions for piano and full orchestra and the one for piano alone which Viv McLean has recorded here. The work created a sensation and sent the young composer’s reputation soaring to new international heights.

One of Gershwin’s most successful forays into smaller classical genres is his set of Three Preludes for piano solo, written in 1926. These irresistible pieces soak the classical concept of a prelude (simply a short, evocative piece) in the bluesy language of Gershwin’s songs. His tone poem *An American in Paris*, which followed two years later, is considerably, and deliberately, influenced by the colourful harmonic language of the French music of the day, notably Ravel – though when Gershwin met Ravel at a party for the latter’s 53rd birthday and asked him for lessons, Ravel answered: “Why be a second-rate Ravel when you are a first-rate Gershwin?” Ravel, conversely, seems to have learned a fair bit from spending time with Gershwin in New York 1928, frequenting the jazz clubs of Harlem with him and later incorporating hints of jazz and blues into his G major Piano Concerto.

Yet Gershwin, despite his celebrity status, seems to have maintained something of an inferiority complex. He often asked leading classical figures of the time to teach him – usually eliciting responses such as “Maybe I should be taking lessons from you” (Stravinsky, having asked how much Gershwin was earning); “He wants to study orchestration? He hasn’t the slightest knowledge of counterpoint” (Glazunov); and gentle advice to concentrate on the type of music at which he was best (Nadia Boulanger, whom Gershwin approached during an extended stay in Paris in the mid-1920s when he also wrote *An American in Paris*). Henry Cowell, the avant-garde American pioneer, agreed to take him on, only to find that Gershwin would gleefully splash “juicy ninth chords” through exercises in strict 16th-century species counterpoint.

His classical works reached their apogee in the opera *Porgy and Bess*, written in 1934–35 and based on a novel by DuBose Heyward. It is rarely staged, probably due to its creators' requirements that it must be performed by an all-black cast. Yet the score is among Gershwin's finest and features many show-stopping numbers including the much-loved "Summertime".

The opera, sadly, was not well received and it was after this disappointing experience that Gershwin moved to Hollywood. He and Ira created the score for the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movie *Shall We Dance*, as well as for *A Damsel in Distress* and *The Goldwyn Follies*; meanwhile he enjoyed the Californian lifestyle, playing tennis regularly with his neighbour Arnold Schoenberg. He sponsored a recording of Schoenberg's String Quartet No. 4 and even painted his friend's portrait.

All seemed idyllic, until in early 1937 Gershwin began to suffer blinding headaches and coordination issues while performing at the piano. He died that July after undergoing an operation for a malignant brain tumour, aged only 38. He was an immeasurable loss to 20th-century music. But his masterpieces in classical form and his galaxy of glorious songs have assured him an unshakeable place among the all-time greats.

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American Dreams

George Gershwin (1898–1937) — one of those Jews whom [Daniel Gregory] Mason found so insidious— began his career plugging hit tunes at the piano for Tin Pan Alley (as the popular music industry in New York City was called); by the end of his career he was a tennis partner of Arnold Schoenberg's and a respected composer of a concerto and an opera. Of all the Modernist composers, Gershwin had perhaps the most remarkable faculty for assimilating and fusing diverse styles: whereas Stravinsky uses many styles — Russian folk, ragtime, Baroque, twelve-tone — holding them all gingerly at arm's length, Gershwin synthesizes so enthusiastically that it is difficult (in his concert pieces) to tell where the world of Ravel stops and where the blues begin. Of course, this discrimination is sometimes troublesome in Ravel's own work, such as the Violin Sonata (1923–27), with its "Blues" second movement; but Gershwin may have done more than anyone else to show just how flimsy the division between high and low music can be.*

(Daniel Albright)

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The essay by Gershwin reproduced here is further proof of his eclectic compositional approach. Gershwin intended his music as an expression of his country, America, and many jazz musicians regarded jazz as the most natural prosecution of Romantic and late Romantic style. As Duke Ellington once stated, "jazz means simply freedom of musical speech".

GEORGE GERSHWIN
"The Composer and the Machine Age" (1933)

Unquestionably modern musical American has been influenced by modern musical Europe. But it seems to me that modern European composers, in turn, have very largely received their stimulus, their rhythms and impulses from Machine Age America. They have a much older tradition of musical technique which has helped them put into musical terms a little more clearly the thoughts that originated there. They can express themselves more glibly.

The Machine Age has influenced practically everything. I do not mean only music but everything from the arts to finance. The machine has not affected our age in form as much as in tempo, speed and sound. It has affected us in sound whenever composers utilize new instruments to imitate its aspects. In my *American in Paris* I used four taxi horns for musical effect. George Antheil has used everything, including aeroplane propellers, door bells, typewriter keys and so forth. By the use of the old instruments, too, we are able to obtain modern effects. Take a composition like Honegger's *Pacific No. 231*, written and dedicated to a steam engine. It reproduces the whole effect of a train stopping and starting and it is all done with familiar instruments.

There is only one important thing in music and that is ideas and feeling. The various tonalities and sounds mean nothing unless they grow out of ideas. Not many composers have ideas. Whoever has inspired ideas will write the great music of the period. We are plowing the ground for that genius who may be alive or may be born today or tomorrow. If he is alive, he is recognised to a certain degree, although it is impossible for the public at large to assimilate real greatness quickly. Take a composer like Bach. In his lifetime, he was recognised as one of the greatest organists in the world, but he was not acclaimed as one of the greatest composers of his time or of all time until generations after his death.

I do not think there is any such thing as mechanized musical composition without feeling, without emotion. Music is one of the arts which appeals directly through the emotions. Mechanism and feeling have to go hand in hand, in the same way that a skyscraper is at the same time a triumph of the machine and a tremendous emotional experience, almost breath-taking. Not merely its height but its mass and proportions are the result of an emotion, as well as a calculation.

Any discussion of the distinction between presentation and representation in music resolves itself into an attempt to determine the relative values of abstract music and

program music. It is very difficult for anyone to tell where abstract music starts and program music finishes. There must have been a picture or something in the composer's mind. What it was nobody knows, often not even the composer. But music has a marvellous faculty of recording a picture in somebody else's mind. In my own case, everybody who has ever listened to Rhapsody in Blue – and that embraces thousands of people – has a story for it but myself. An American in Paris is obviously a program piece, although I would say half of it or more is abstract music tied together by a few representative themes. Imitation never gets anyone anywhere. Originality is the only thing that counts. But the originator uses material and ideas that occur around him and pass through him. And out of his experience comes this original creation or work of art, unquestionably influenced by his surroundings which include largely what we call the Machine Age.

It is difficult to determine what enduring values, aesthetically, jazz has contributed, because jazz is a word which has been used for at least five or six different types of music. It is really a conglomeration of many things. It has a little bit of ragtime, the blues, classicism and spirituals. Basically, it is a matter of rhythm. After rhythm in importance comes intervals, music intervals which are peculiar to the rhythm. After all, there is nothing new in music. I maintained years ago that there is very little difference in the music of different nations. There is just that little individual touch. One country may prefer a peculiar rhythm or a note like the seventh. This it stresses, and it becomes identified with that notion. In America this performed rhythm is called jazz. Jazz is music; it used the same notes Bach used. When jazz is played in another nation, it is called American. When it is played in another country, it sounds false. Jazz is the result of an energy stored up in America. It is a very energetic kind of music, noisy, boisterous and even vulgar. One thing is certain. Jazz has contributed an enduring value to America in the sense that it has expressed ourselves. It is an original American achievement which will endure, not as jazz, perhaps, but which will leave its mark on the future music in one form or another. The only kinds of music which endure are those which possess form in the universal sense and folk music. All else dies. But unquestionably folk songs are being written and have been written which contain certain elements of jazz. To be sure, that is only an element; it is not the whole. An entire composition written in jazz could not live.

As for future aesthetic developments in musical composition, American composers may in time use quarter notes, but then so will Europe use quarter notes. Eventually our ears

will become sensitive to a much finer degree than they were a hundred, fifty or twenty-five years ago. Music deemed ugly then is accepted without question today. It stands to reason, therefore, that composers will continue to alter their language. That might lead to anything. They have been writing already in two keys. There is no reason why they will not go further and ask us to recognise quarter or sixteenth notes. Such notes, whether written or not, are used all the time, only we are not conscious of them. In India they use quarter notes and, I believe, consciously. Music is a phenomenon that to me has a very marked effect on the emotions. It can have various effects. It has the power of moving people to all the various moods. Through the emotions, it can have a cleansing effect on the mind, a disturbing effect, a drowsy effect, an exciting effect. I do not know to what extent it can finally become a part of the people. I do not think music as we know it now is indispensable although we have music all around us in one form or other. There is music in the wind. People can live more or less satisfactorily without orchestral music, for instance. And who can tell that we would not be better off if we weren't as civilized as we are, if we lacked many of our emotions? But we have them and we are more or less egoistic about them. We think that they are important and they make us what we are. We think that we are an improvement over people of other ages who didn't have them. Music has become a very important part of civilization, and one of the main reasons is that one does not need a formal education to appreciate it. Music can be appreciated by a person who can neither read nor write and it can also be appreciated by people who have the highest form of intelligence. For example, Einstein plays the violin and listens to music. People in the underworld, dope-fiends and gunmen, invariably are music lovers and, if not, they are affected by it. Music is entering into medicine. Music sets up a certain vibration which unquestionably results in a physical reaction. Eventually the proper vibration for every person will be found and utilized. I like to think of music as an emotional science.

Almost every great composer profoundly influences the age in which he lives. Bach, Beethoven, Wagner, Brahms, Debussy, Stravinsky. They have all recreated something of their time so that millions of people could feel it more forcefully and better understand their time.

The composer, in my estimation, has been helped a great deal by the mechanical reproduction of music. Music is written to be heard, and any instrument that tends to help it to be heard more frequently and by greater numbers is advantageous to the person who writes it. Aside from the royalties or anything like that, I should think

that the theory that music is written to be heard is a good one. To enable millions of people to listen to music on the radio or phonograph is useful to the composer. The composer who writes music for himself and doesn't want it to be heard is generally a bad composer. The first incursion of mechanised reproduction was a stimulus to the composer and the second wave has merely intensified that stimulus. In the past, composers have starved because of lack of performance, lack of being heard. That is impossible today. Schubert could not make any money because he did not have an opportunity through the means of distribution of his day to reach the public. He died at the age of thirty-one and had a certain reputation. If he had lived to be fifty and sixty, unquestionably he would have obtained recognition in his own day. If he were living today, he would be well-off and comfortable.

The radio and the phonograph are harmful to the extent that they bastardize music and give currency to a lot of cheap things. They are not harmful to the composer. The more people listen to music, the more they will be able to criticize it and know when it is good. When we speak of machine-made music, however, we are not speaking of music in the highest sense, because, no matter how much the world becomes a Machine Age, music will have to be created in the same old way. The Machine Age can affect music only in its distribution. Composers must compose in the same way old composers did. No one has found a new method in which to write music. We still use the old signatures, the old symbols. The composer has to do every bit of his work himself. Hand work can never be replaced in the composition of music. If music ever became machine-made in that sense, it would cease to be an art.

From Gershwin, ed. Merle Armitage, Longmans, Green, London, 1938, pp. 225–30

Viv McLean, piano

Winner of the First Prize at the 2002 Maria Canals International Piano Competition in Barcelona, Viv McLean has performed at all the major venues in the UK as well as throughout Europe, Japan, Australia and the USA.

Viv's concerto work includes appearances with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Philharmonia Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra, Hallé Orchestra, English Chamber Orchestra, BBC Concert Orchestra, Sinfonia Viva, Orchestra of the Swan, London Concert Orchestra, Scottish Concert Orchestra, Northern Chamber Orchestra and the National Symphony Orchestra.

Recent concerto highlights include Mozart K. 467 with the English Chamber Orchestra at the Royal Festival Hall, Grieg with the London Philharmonic Orchestra at the Barbican, a tour of the USA with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra performing Gershwin, Rachmaninov's Third Concerto with the RPO in Cambridge, Gershwin, Bernstein, Falla and Ravel with the Hallé at the Bridgewater Hall, The Sage Gateshead and other venues in the North of England, and Beethoven's Fifth Concerto with the Philharmonia at the Royal Festival Hall.

Viv has performed chamber music with such leading groups as the Adderbury Ensemble, Ysaÿe String Quartet, the Sacconi String Quartet, Callino String Quartet, Ensemble 360, the Galliard Wind Ensemble, the Bristol Ensemble and the Leopold String Trio and has collaborated with such musicians as David Charles Abell, Owain Arwell Hughes, Natalie Clein, Carl Davis Richard Dubugnon, Sarah Gabriel, Christopher George, Kate Gould, Marvin Hamlisch Philip Hesketh, Daniel Hope, Guy Johnston, Wayne Marshall, David Le Page, Alena Lugovkina, Lawrence Power, Matthew Sharp, Marianne Thorsen and Christopher Warren-Green and.

The festivals at which he has performed include the Cheltenham International Festival, Buxton Festival and Harrogate Festival in the UK, the International Beethoven Festival, Mecklenburg Festival and the Kultur Kreis Festival in Germany, the Festival International de Musique Classique d'Aigues-Mortes, the Melle Festival and Festival de Saintes in France, the Vinterfestspill i Bergstaden in Norway and the Musik vid Kattegatt Festival in Sweden. Since 2013 he has been pianist-in-residence at the Glossop Music Festival.

Viv studied from an early age with Ruth Nye and after attending Chetham's School of Music he went on to study at the Royal Academy of Music with Hamish Milne. At the Academy he held the Hodgson Fellowship and was made an Associate of the Royal Academy in 2005. He made his Wigmore Hall recital debut through winning the Friends of the Royal Academy Wigmore Award. While still a student at the Academy, he was the piano winner at the Royal Overseas-League Music Competition and was selected as one of three winners of the National Federation of Music Societies' Young Artists Competition, leading to various recitals and concerto appearances throughout Great Britain.

Viv has recorded frequently for BBC Radio 3 since making his recital debut through the BBC Radio 3 Young Artists Forum scheme and has also recorded for Classic FM, WDR in Germany, Radio France, ABC Radio in Australia, NRK in Norway and for the Sky Arts television channel. His commercial releases include recordings for such labels as Sony Classical Japan, Naxos, Nimbus, RPO Records and ICSM Records.

*The pianist Viv McLean seemed exceptional to me; he astonished us with his musical maturity and extraordinary sonority. **Le Monde (Paris)***

At the Festival de Melle, Viv McLean revealed extraordinary originality, superb simplicity, and fingers of steel hidden behind muscles of velvet. He is an otherworldly young man - he plays with the genius one finds in those who know how to forget themselves, naturally placing themselves at the right point to meet the music, this mystery of the moment.

Le Monde

*The pianist Viv McLean never faltered, spewing molten lava. **The Times (London)***

*The fluent technique and brilliance of the interpreter were impressive, he played with insight and the greatest sensitivity. **General Anzelger (Bonn)***

*The listener was struck by the sustained level of technical mastery. Viv McLean performed with his mind as well as his hands. **Malta Sunday Times***

Recorded: **St John the Evangelist, Oxford** (tracks 1–17)

Date: **6 January 2016**

Producer and Engineer: **Tony Faulkner**

Piano: **Steinway**

Recording Equipment: **Neumann M 250c valve microphones, David Peach tube preamps, DCS904 a/d converters, SADIE LRX recording workstation.**

Monitoring: **dCS954 d/a converters, EAR power amplifiers, Quad electrostatics.**

Piano technician: **Joseph Taylor**

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Producer: **Anna Barry**

Engineer: **Rupert Coulson**

Piano: **Steinway**

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