

RECONSIDERING GEORGE GERSHWIN AND *AN AMERICAN IN PARIS* AS AN
EXTENSION OF THE ROMANTIC TRADITION

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Andrea Lynn Fowler

B.S., Missouri Western State University, 2000
M.A., Truman State University, 2003

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Andrea Lynn Fowler, Candidate for the Master of Music Degree

University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2014

ABSTRACT

George Gershwin's legacy as an American composer is fraught with contradictions. He is classified primarily as a composer of popular music by many despite his relatively successful attempts to enter the classical world. Gershwin's distinctive compositional language that characterizes his Tin Pan Alley songs and Broadway shows pervades his large scale works: instrumental characterizations (the "lonely" trumpet or "nightclub" saxophone); a blending of international influences to create a cosmopolitan sound; clear programmatic schemes in the classical compositions; modified formal structures; frequent use of hemiola and triplet patterns; the combination of melodic simplicity with sophisticated and at times virtuosic orchestration; and the synthesis of "highbrow" and "lowbrow" idioms to create a musical middle ground. Consequently, that which is easily identifiable as the "Gershwin style" is one of the factors contributing to his lack of recognition as a "serious" composer.

Further contributing to this lack of recognition was his rejection by iconic composition teachers of his day. In an attempt to answer his critics, including Nadia Boulanger, he composed *An American in Paris*, and labeled it an “American tone poem.”

Jazz and classical music scholars alike appear reticent and slow to bring Gershwin into the fold. This idea is problematic due to the fact that much of the early research on Gershwin was based on popular, journalistic literature, and much of his life and work was left unexplored. These factors combine to create a musicological identity crisis in which Gershwin struggled with his own professional commitments – in order to have the time to compose music for the classical concert hall he must continue to compose for the stage and screen and short-term profits.

Arnold Schoenberg’s description of the developing variations method of composition as used by Johannes Brahms provides an effective method with which to examine Gershwin’s *An American in Paris*. This analysis will justify the composition’s place within the symphonic poem repertoire and reaffirm Gershwin’s place in the canons of American classical music and the Western classical tradition.

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the Conservatory of Music and Dance have examined a thesis titled “Reconsidering George Gershwin and An American in Paris as an Extension of the Romantic Tradition,” presented by Andrea L. Fowler, candidate for the Master of Music degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

Supervisory Committee

Sarah M. Tyrrell, Ph.D., Committee Chair
Division of Composition, Music Theory, and Musicology

S. Andrew Granade, Ph.D.
Chair, Division of Composition, Music Theory, and Musicology

William A. Everett, Ph.D.
Division of Composition, Music Theory, and Musicology

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CHAPTER 1

GEORGE GERSHWIN: STATE OF THE RESEARCH

The premiere performance of George Gershwin's *An American in Paris* was conducted by Walter Damrosch on December 13, 1928. The work was well received by audiences, but critics were divided. Those who were already supporters of Gershwin applauded *An American in Paris* as a major contribution to American classical music while those who opposed Gershwin's intrusion into the concert hall claimed the work was full of gimmicks and too repetitive to be terribly interesting. Detractors claimed that Gershwin lacked the capability to complete his own orchestrations and that he was too reliant on the Broadway and popular music song forms that had built his reputation. Still, *An American in Paris* is one of Gershwin's most successful and enduring classical compositions, and along with *Rhapsody in Blue*, the Piano Concerto, and *Porgy and Bess*, is arguably one of his most recognizable works. However, comparatively little scholarly discussion has been dedicated to *An American in Paris*, and that is the intended niche for this thesis.

For a composer who lived less than half a century, an astonishing amount of scholarship exists regarding George Gershwin's life and works. Although analyses and examinations of Gershwin's works and compositional style exist in several musicological journals and numerous dissertations and theses have been dedicated to his piano works, primarily *Rhapsody in Blue*, the main body of Gershwin scholarship is contained within the dozens of biographies, books on Gershwin's style, and modern music anthologies that were published throughout the last century.

Biographies appeared as early as 1930 and as recently as 2011, and have been published or translated in twenty languages (See Table 1.1). Together with stylistic inventories, the biographical accounts make up a majority of published work. These volumes date from as early as the final decade of Gershwin's life and are classifiable into three main categories: posthumous adulation; mid- to late-century works that benefitted from the discovery of archival materials; and more rigorous scholarship, including musical criticism, that reflects modern musicological trends and a reevaluation of Gershwin's legacy.

These categories described above tend toward alignment with the chronological divisions. Works by David Ewen, Merle Armitage, and Isaac Goldberg are representative of the posthumous adulation that dominated Gershwin scholarship in the decades immediately following his death. Biographies by Edward Jablonski and Gregory Suriano begin to demonstrate the benefit of time and the systematic accumulation of Gershwin's manuscripts and papers by the Ira and Leonore Gershwin Trust as well as the Gershwin Archive at the Library of Congress. Howard Pollack, Larry Starr, and Walter Rimler best represent those contemporary scholars who seek to synthesize previous biographical accounts in an attempt to recognize how Gershwin muddied the water between classical and popular music. Additionally, Rimler describes the process of the Gershwin family to accumulate the composer's manuscripts and documents.

Table 1.1 Chronological List of Gershwin Biographies

Author	Year of Publication
Isaac Goldberg	1930, revised 1958
Merle Armitage	1938
David Ewen	1943, 1956, 1970
Robert Payne	1960
Robert Rushmore	1966
Robert Kimball & Alfred Simon	1973
Charles Schwartz	1973, 1974
Florence De Santis	1987
Edward Jablonski	1987, 1992
Alan Kendall	1987
Paul Kresh	1988
Hollis Alpert	1991
Jack Foley	1991
Deena Rosenberg	1991
Joan Peyser	1993
Steven Gilbert	1995
Roland Vernon	1995
Ean Wood	1996
David Schiff	1997
Rodney Greenberg	1998
Gregory Suriano	1998
Wayne Schneider	1999
Norbert Carnovale	2000
Caroline Reef	2000
William Hyland	2003
Ruth Leon	2003, 2004
Howard Pollack	2006
Walter Rimler	2009
Larry Starr	2011

Style analyses such as *The Music of Gershwin* by Steven Gilbert and *The Gershwin Style* edited by Wayne Schneider also fall into this synthesis category. The complete catalog of Gershwin publications is extensive, and a full description of each is beyond the scope of this thesis. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to a representative sample from each of the major areas of Gershwin studies.

David Ewen was one of the most prolific musicologists of the mid-twentieth century. After immigrating to the United States from Austria as a child, Ewen later contributed to the musicological field as an author on both popular and classical music of the twentieth century, including biographies of Gershwin, Serge Koussevitsky, Cole Porter, Leonard Bernstein, and Irving Berlin. Ewen also founded the publishing firm Allen, Towne, and Heath, for the purpose of publishing books about music.

Ewen's *The Story of George Gershwin* (1943) is immediately striking due to the narrative format of the opening chapter. His account of Gershwin's life does not begin with genealogy or even the composer's birth but with the arrival of the piano in the Gershwin house. The biographical story is punctuated with several personal vignettes that read as though excerpted from a novel rather than a biographical narrative. This kind of biography was extremely popular in the mid-twentieth century, intended for the casual reader rather than academic investigation or documentation. Written less than a decade after Gershwin's death, the book is littered with a handful of musical examples that are quickly overshadowed by the musical iconography and illustrations on the first page of each chapter that are common to books from the 1940s. It is difficult to regard Ewen's work as wholly academic. The benefit of hindsight and the prevalence of sensational journalism parading as scholarly work in the form of the "tell-all" book so popular in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries shed a harsh light on several Gershwin biographies that appeared shortly after his death.¹

¹ The biographies by Isaac Goldberg and Merle Armitage are especially called into question. Goldberg had originally intended to publish prior to Gershwin's death. Although these authors had direct access to Gershwin and his family, there is an informal tone to their writing that creates an air of academic skepticism. Joan Peyser's biography from 1993 also falls within this group.

In the resurgence of Gershwin scholarship in the late 1980s, Jablonski made the biggest impact. He authored two biographies, *Gershwin* in 1987, and *Gershwin Remembered* in 1992. Jablonski's other notable contributions include his biographical work on Irving Berlin, Harold Arlen, and Alan Jay Lerner in addition to his work in the field of aviation history. *Gershwin* (1987) was the first new biographical study of Gershwin in over ten years at the time it was published. Jablonski reaches a level of detail matched only by Howard Pollack in 2006. In describing Gershwin's study of orchestration with Edward Kilenyi, Jablonski states:

Kilenyi coached Gershwin in orchestration also and for him Gershwin prepared his small and charming study piece *Lullaby* for string quartet (c. 1919), which became a favorite among his string-playing friends, though he had no plans for its publication or public performance. (A later *Piece for Four Strings* has come to light, though little is known about its genesis.) For Kilenyi's class Gershwin arranged a Bach work, *Figured Chorale*, for clarinet, two horns, two bassoons, cello and bass which Ira Gershwin deposited in Gershwin Archive at the Library of Congress.²

Jablonski, intentionally or not, does much to dispel discrepancies and long held opinions set forth by previous biographers. For example, in a discussion of Gershwin's show *The Rainbow*, Jablonski notes "Gershwin biographers, following in the trail of Isaac Goldberg, tend to dismiss the Rainbow songs as 'insignificant' (Goldberg's word), intimating that it closed 'shortly after opening' (in truth it ran for more than a hundred performances)."³ Similar statements appear throughout, demonstrating the dubious nature of some earlier biographical accounts.

² Edward Jablonski, *Gershwin* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 42.

³ Ibid., 55.

One drawback to Jablonski's biography is that he did not cite sources in a traditional scholarly style. Brief notes on sources are provided in an appendix, but Jablonski did not include any bibliographic entries or citations, which would prove tremendously helpful for those wishing to review the archival materials that the author accessed. Again, the intended audience was not academic. The lack of source citation does little to take away from the scholarly tone or depth of information provided by Jablonski, however, and his work still represents a significant contribution to field of Gershwin research.

Jablonski also authored *The Gershwin Years: George and Ira* with Lawrence D. Stewart in 1996. Stewart and Jablonski piece together the brothers' collaboration in a biographical format that is generously augmented by photos, correspondence, and manuscripts. Although much information is provided regarding the biographical accounts of George and Ira respectively, this volume targets the development of their working and familial relationships. The impact of various personal projects on these relationships is covered at length as well.

Gregory Suriano's *Gershwin in His Time: A Biographical Scrapbook, 1919-1937*, is a singular volume in Gershwin scholarship. He assembled a collection of articles, reviews, photographs, sheet music covers, and other images in the manner that Gershwin himself might have kept.⁴ One of Suriano's aims was to document from varying angles the conflicting views regarding Gershwin's success and talents: "The essays in this book show that there was both an appreciation of what Gershwin represented and a critical division about whether he was succeeding in doing the seemingly impossible – marrying high and low

⁴ Gregory Suriano, *Gershwin in His Time: A Biographical Scrapbook, 1919-1937* (New York: Gramercy, 1998), xi.

art.”⁵ Critics in the first three decades of the twentieth century considered Gershwin through their personal views regarding whether or not the worlds of high and low art should or could be combined; Suriano’s collection of reviews and commentary reveal that public war of opinion for modern readers. The author’s lengthy preface explains the selection of essays in addition to providing a brief chronology of works and events included in the twenty-eight years reviewed in the book.

Each chapter of Suriano’s book is comprised of an essay, article, or review by some of the best known critics and musicians of their generation, many of whom had a personal connection to Gershwin, such as Deems Taylor, Isaac Goldberg, and Olin Downes. Each chapter is accompanied by posters, play bills, sheet music covers, or similar images that are connected to the concert or stage work. Of particular note are Taylor’s contributions which include the narrative guide for *An American in Paris* as it first appeared in the Carnegie Hall concert program on December 13, 1928, and DuBose Heyward’s documentation of the creation of *Porgy and Bess*.

The most comprehensive volume to date is Howard Pollack’s *George Gershwin: His Life and Work*. Of the more than 700 pages, approximately one third is allotted to biography while the remainder is an in-depth examination of Gershwin’s compositions and the circumstances surrounding their creation. This type of study and contextual information were unprecedented at the time of publication and have yet to be matched on such a scale.

George Gershwin: An Intimate Portrait by Walter Rimler provides scholars with a strictly biographical narrative. Although Rimler’s presentation of events is entertaining, the book reads as a series of connected anecdotes rather than scholarly narrative. Rimler points

⁵ Ibid.

out that his intention with the biography was to provide a more dramatic context for Gershwin's life rather than to document the daily struggles of a working musician. In the concluding Author's Note, Rimler states, "The contrast between his élan and these struggles, ending in the horror of his final days, gives a dramatic arc to his biography and gives it the shape of a story. This book has emphasized that story."⁶ The work contains appropriate notes and source citations but, from a musicological standpoint, the critical portion of this biography is the epilogue. Rimler discusses how the Gershwin family, Ira particularly, began the grieving process by focusing on George's estate. George died intestate in 1937, and both Ira and their sister filed for control in the days immediately following George's death. In reference to Ira, Rimler states that "He would live another forty-six years, and throughout that time, his own career would always be less important to him than his role as caretaker of his brother's artifacts and reputation."⁷ After Ira died, his wife, Leonore, dedicated most of her remaining years to establishing the Ira and Leonore Gershwin Trusts. Her final efforts witnessed the donation of several manuscripts and papers to the Library of Congress to create the Gershwin Collection and the purchase of many rare and lost items to add to the collection. These efforts and donations have also made possible the Gershwin Initiative at the University of Michigan that has recently begun the process of creating the collected works.⁸

⁶ Walter Rimler, *George Gershwin: An Intimate Portrait* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 175.

⁷ Ibid., 165.

⁸ As of May 2014, the Gershwin Initiative is still in the early stages, and projected publication dates are yet to be determined. More information can be found at <http://www.music.umich.edu/ami/gershwin/>.

Larry Starr began to debunk Leonard Bernstein's infamous "Gershwin tune" in an essay for Schneider's *The Gershwin Style* (1999).⁹ Starr continues to expand the definition of "a nice Gershwin tune" and the melodies created for the concert works in his most recent biography, *George Gershwin*.¹⁰ Starr provides fresh criticism of Gershwin's works with special attention to *Lady, Be Good!*, *Oh, Kay!* and *Of Thee I Sing*, with additional consideration of *Porgy and Bess*. As Geoffrey Block states in the foreword, "Starr's careful but bold reevaluations fundamentally revise our understanding and appreciation of Gershwin's popular music for the stage (and of the works as a whole). Given the limelight Gershwin now justly, if posthumously, draws as a doyen of twentieth-century concert music and opera, this book is as timely as it is important."¹¹

In the preface to *George Gershwin*, Starr elaborates on his "desire, as a teacher and a scholar, to play a role in challenging the erroneous and uninformed attitudes and impressions that still prevailed among academics and other intellectuals."¹² Starr goes on to explain his methodology:

My discovery, embodied in the present volume, is that returning Gershwin to Broadway, far from proving anachronistic from a twenty-first-century

⁹ Leonard Bernstein, "Why Don't You Run Upstairs and Write a Nice Gershwin Tune?" *The George Gershwin Reader*, ed. by Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (New York: Oxford, 2002), 295-297. Larry Starr's chapter, "Musings on 'Nice Gershwin Tunes,' Form and Harmony in the Concert Music of Gershwin," can be found in *The Gershwin Style: New Looks at the Music of George Gershwin*, edited by Wayne Schneider.

¹⁰ Starr's volume is in keeping with the established conventions of the Yale Broadway Masters series. This series of biographies is intended to introduce major Broadway figures to both the academic and general reader. Each volume is brief, full of illustrations, and written in an easily accessible manner. More information on the series can be found at <http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/SeriesPage.asp?series=95>.

¹¹ Larry Starr, *George Gershwin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), xii.

¹² Ibid., xiv.

standpoint, actually opens new avenues of approach to his entire output. Rather than simply ignoring the obvious elements of Broadway style clearly present in works such as *Rhapsody in Blue* or *An American in Paris* – or worse, feeling that these elements should occasion excuses or embarrassment – the Broadway perspective encourages us to celebrate the remarkable way in which Gershwin brought the American vernacular to the concert hall.¹³

Starr's approach creates an environment for the concert works to be viewed as products of a master showman whose sophistication and skillful blend of stage and concert hall idioms captured audiences.

Starr's intention was to appeal to a wide range of audiences. His writing is clear enough for the non-musician yet provides sufficient context for the scholar to appreciate. This is a singular effort within Gershwin studies due to fact that early publications were written for the general reader whereas later publications tend to be targeted toward those with deeper interests in the composer. Jablonski represents the midpoint between these extremes. There are recent writings that provide a biographical account without the academic tone, such as those by Jablonski and Rimler.

Starr's volume opens with a biographical sketch, touching on the important or transformative concepts, trends, and events in Gershwin's short life. Starr assumes the reader has some knowledge of Gershwin's life, allowing him to devote more attention to key events, thus providing the most appropriate context for the musical discussions. By using the musicals as case studies, Starr provides an opportunity to gain technical knowledge of those particular shows. He also establishes the timeline and context for each show's creation and production which offers a wealth of information for scholars. These case studies then provide the parameters for a concise discussion of the concert works and Hollywood experiences.

¹³ Ibid., xiv-xv.

The two style analyses of note are *The Music of Gershwin* by Steven Gilbert and *The Gershwin Style: New Looks at the Music of George Gershwin* edited by Wayne Schneider.

Although these two volumes differ greatly in content and the method of the analyses offered, both are important tools in understanding Gershwin's place in the canon of American music. Gilbert's *The Music of Gershwin* is a straightforward style analysis. Given Gilbert's history and deep understanding of Schenkerian analysis, the analyses naturally have the look and feel of Schenkerian graphs.¹⁴ Gilbert prepares his readers well by using the first chapter to provide a brief description of Gershwin's studies in composition, and the second and third chapters to explain the methodology. The second chapter, "An Analytical Approach," goes into detail regarding how Gilbert adapted the concepts and graphs of Schenker to music for which the approach was clearly not intended. In order to aid his case, Gilbert first provides a partial sample graph for Beethoven's Sonata in F Minor, Opus 57, to explain the notation and connection between notes. This illustration provides the basis from which Gilbert expands his descriptions of Gershwin's works within the chapter. This brief discussion is the foundation for the remainder of the book.

Gilbert explains in the first chapter how he organized the book around his identification of stylistic periods:

Yet, although it is difficult to pinpoint any sharp breaks, one can discern four main periods. The first produced the songs and concert pieces before 1924, prior to *Rhapsody in Blue*. The second, 1924-30, covers the span from *Rhapsody in Blue* through *Girl Crazy*. It also includes the *Preludes for Piano*, which were premiered at the Hotel Roosevelt on December 24, 1926, by the composer. The third period, 1931-35, begins with *Of Thee I Sing* and *Second Rhapsody* and culminates with *Porgy and Bess*. The fourth, resembling an epilogue, comprises the late songs of 1936-37. These four

¹⁴ Steven Gilbert was a student of Allen Forte, and together they wrote *Introduction to Schenkerian Analysis*.

periods, which will be called “early,” “developing,” “mature,” and “final,” respectively, are discussed in detail beginning with chapter 4.¹⁵

Based on these parameters, Gilbert proceeds with the analytical discussion. The third chapter provides insightful commentary on the rhythmic aspects of Gershwin’s compositions. The remaining eight chapters are dedicated to either broader discussion of stylistic periods with score examples or detailed analyses of specific works such as *Rhapsody in Blue*, *Concerto in F*, *An American in Paris*, and *Porgy and Bess*. Gilbert provides thorough analyses of Gershwin’s major concert works in a single volume. Earlier analytical writings appear primarily in dissertations and journal articles.

Schneider’s *The Gershwin Style: New Looks at the Music of George Gershwin* stands in contrast to Gilbert’s strictly analytical presentation of Gershwin’s compositional style. Schneider compiled a dozen analytical essays and musicological commentaries that fall into three categories: analysis and manuscript studies, reception, and performance practice. Topics range from *Porgy and Bess* (Wayne Shirley) to *Blue Monday* (John Andrew Johnson) and even Gershwin’s piano rolls (Artis Wodehouse). Other scholars who contributed to this volume are Charles Hamm, Steven Gilbert, Larry Starr, Charlotte Greenspan, Susan Richardson, C. André Barbera, Michael Montgomery, and Edward Jablonski, in addition to Schneider himself.

The essays by Shirley, Schneider, Gilbert, Starr, and Johnson are primarily analytical discussions, full of score examples and descriptions of form. The remaining essays are not strictly theoretical discussions rooted in score study but are prose-based analytical discussions. In the preface, Schneider notes the lack of such analytical contributions to

¹⁵ Steven Gilbert, *The Music of Gershwin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 6.

Gershwin scholarship: “Problematic in this literature, especially in the biographies, is the omission of frank, rigorous discussion of the thing that makes Gershwin matter: his music.”¹⁶ In assembling these essays, Schneider sought to investigate the music and examine Gershwin’s legacy as an American artist.

The other area crucial to understanding Gershwin’s legacy is his inclusion in numerous books and collections of modern classical music. He is frequently examined alongside the masters of the early twentieth century. While these collections typically date from the mid-twentieth century, Gershwin’s place in American classical music is an ongoing discussion (See Table 1.2).

The New Grove Twentieth-Century American Masters is essentially a collection of concise entries from the 1980s edition of *The Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Each composer profile includes a basic biography, a brief discussion of major compositions and contributions, and a list of works. Composers designated as “Masters” for this volume are Charles Ives, Virgil Thomson, Roger Sessions, Henry Cowell, George Gershwin, Aaron Copland, Elliott Carter, Samuel Barber, John Cage, and Leonard Bernstein. Each entry is written by a well-known scholar in the field. The Gershwin chapter is by Richard Crawford and the works list by Wayne Schneider. Despite Crawford’s brevity, the Gershwin chapter is the longest in the book, second only to Ives.

¹⁶ Wayne Schneider, ed., *The Gershwin Style: New Looks at the Music of George Gershwin* (New York: Oxford, 1999), xiii.

Table 1.2 Gershwin's Inclusion in Modern Music Collections

Full Chapters or Entries	Brief Sections or Limited Discussion
<i>Music in a New Found Land</i> , Mellers, 1964, 1987	<i>The Concert Companion</i> , Bagar and Biancolli, 1947
<i>American Composers of Our Time</i> , Machlis, 1963	<i>Great Composers Through the Eyes of Their Contemporaries</i> , Zoff, 1951
<i>The American Composer Speaks: A Historical Anthology, 1770-1965</i> , Chase, 1966	<i>The Lighter Classics in Music</i> , Ewen, 1961
<i>The New Grove Twentieth-Century American Masters</i> , 1988	<i>The New Book of Modern Composers</i> , Third edition, Ewen, 1961
<i>Making Music Modern</i> , Oja, 2000	<i>Music of Our Time: An Anthology of Works of Selected Contemporary Composers of the 20th Century</i> , Rossi and Choate, 1969
<i>Modernism and Popular Music</i> , Schleifer, 2011	<i>Writing Jazz: Race, Nationalism, and Modern Culture in the 1920s</i> , Evans, 2000
<i>The Grove Dictionary of American Music</i> , Second edition, Crawford, 2013	<i>Modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources</i> , Albright, 2004

Crawford devotes more attention to Gershwin in the second edition of *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*. Crawford wrote the text and bibliographic portions of the entry, and the list of works was compiled by Wayne Schneider. Gershwin is given a thorough treatment, and again, this entry is one of the longer entries, including score examples and a complete list of works. The biographical listing is also extensive and serves as a great point of departure for Gershwin study.

Today, musicologists do consider Gershwin on equal terms with his contemporaries who focused solely on “serious” music, but this is a relatively recent phenomenon. Prevailing opinions were heavily skewed against Gershwin in the eyes of the critics and by those who took the performance reviews to heart in the decades following his death. Detractors such as Virgil Thomson maintained a particularly strong influence, but it is difficult to know whether his criticism came from genuine musicological thinking, or from a place of professional

jealousy, or even some combination of both. However, other upper-echelon critics of the era lauded Gershwin – notably Carl Van Vechten, Deems Taylor, and Carl Engel.

It is intriguing to consider Gershwin a modernist. This idea is presented by Carol Oja in *Making Music Modern*. Gershwin earns his own chapter alongside Leo Ornstein, Edgard Varèse, George Antheil, Carl Ruggles, Henry Cowell, Ruth Crawford, Aaron Copland, and Virgil Thomson. Oja examines the 1920s and how that decade gave rise to an unprecedented generation of artists. Oja explains her methodology in the introduction:

I have linked my discussion of composers and compositions to a series of issues that agitated artists and writers of the day, ranging from the rise of technology and hyperspace theory to the long reach of European neoclassicism and its implications for postcolonial culture. The intersections of jazz and concert music emerge with greater clarity when considered together with changing American demographics and race relations.¹⁷

Oja also considers the intersection of modernism with anti-Semitism and the growing prominence of young Jewish American composers, increasing fascination with Latin America, and the impact of the women's suffrage movement.

A review of the many dissertations and theses regarding Gershwin and his works would be beyond the scope of this investigation. In lieu of such a lengthy discussion, three such works have been chosen for their relevance to *An American in Paris* and Gershwin's legacy as a classical composer.

One of the first scholars to give Gershwin academic attention was Charles Schwartz. In his 1969 dissertation, “The Life and Works of George Gershwin,” Schwartz provides one

¹⁷ Carol J. Oja, *Making Music Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

of the deepest examinations of Gershwin's orchestral works. Schwartz's detailed analyses are divided into two sections: the first contains the major works – *Rhapsody in Blue*, Concerto in F, and *An American in Paris* – and the second section contains the rest of Gershwin's orchestral works – *Second Rhapsody*, *Cuban Overture*, and “I Got Rhythm” Variations. Schwartz prefaces his discussion with the following statement regarding the publications on Gershwin up to 1969:

The emphasis on a journalistic rather than a scholarly approach in nearly all of the literature comprising Gershwiniana can probably be explained by the fact that most of those who have written about the composer and his work are not musicians or musicologists. Most essays on Gershwin, furthermore, have been written for the general reader, who would find detailed analyses of the composer's music beyond his comprehension.¹⁸

Schwartz makes an excellent point that falls well within the categorical divisions already in place within the present discussion. His dissertation begins to fill the lacuna that existed in Gershwin scholarship at that point in the twentieth century. Schwartz was fortunate to access Gershwin's manuscripts at the Library of Congress, as the collection had begun to grow through a bequest from Rose Gershwin's estate in 1952 and with the efforts of Ira and Leonore Gershwin. Schwartz immediately addresses the aspects of these works that are not made evident by the scores held in the archive: questions of influence by arrangers and orchestrators and Gershwin's own revisions at various points in the history of each work. These points are addressed in detail throughout Schwartz's discussion of each work in addition to his “observations concerning the roles played in shaping the Gershwin musical

¹⁸ Charles M. Schwartz, “The Life and Orchestral Works of George Gershwin” (PhD diss, New York University, 1969), 250.

profile by national, ethnic, and pedagogical influences; influences that frequently are most subtle and difficult to diagnose.”¹⁹

Susan Neimoyer represents the latest generation of scholars who benefitted directly from the work of figures such as Pollack and Starr, studying with the latter at the University of Washington. Her dissertation, “*Rhapsody in Blue: A Culmination of George Gershwin’s Early Musical Education*,” provides a critical look at Gershwin’s musical training and how his actual experiences work against common public beliefs. Early in his career, Gershwin was content to let his critics and admirers alike believe that his talent was raw and unrefined, when in reality he was more like a musical sponge and an incredibly attentive listener, due in part to being an autodidact. Neimoyer’s particular examination of Gershwin’s studies with Edward Kilenyi, Sr. demonstrates that Gershwin indeed took his studies quite seriously and was constantly looking for ways to allow his voice to be heard through traditional forms.

Neimoyer’s initial chapter addresses misconceptions regarding Gershwin and his music: that he had little formal training; that his music was somehow lacking; and that Gershwin’s music must be viewed only as it exists in either the classical or popular music canons. The main purpose of her dissertation is to further clarify on which side of that musical divide *Rhapsody in Blue* falls and to answer that question by refuting each of the stated misconceptions.²⁰

Neimoyer’s review of Gershwin’s early training, both in jazz and traditional theory, demonstrates the genius of this composer. His exposure to the great jazz musicians of the era

¹⁹ Ibid., 256.

²⁰ Susan E. Neimoyer, “*Rhapsody in Blue: A Culmination of George Gershwin’s Early Musical Education*” (PhD diss, University of Washington, 2003), 13.

would have been at his own discretion – Gershwin deliberately sought out these performers in order to learn from their aural tradition. In stark contrast to this experience was his period of study with Kilenyi who taught Gershwin theory and harmony but not composition.²¹ These studies are documented in notebooks full of part-writing exercises that Neimoyer references throughout this chapter of her dissertation. Her analysis of *Rhapsody in Blue* is then viewed through both the jazz and classical filters as she answers the questions posed in the initial chapter.

Rachel Padilla’s thesis, “From Concert to Film: The Transformation of George Gershwin’s Music in the Film ‘An American in Paris,’” also falls within the third category of objective scholarship. Written in 2010 while a Master’s student at the University of Arizona, Padilla’s thesis is the only scholarly writing on *An American in Paris* in all its forms since 1973.²² She provides brief biographical information as well as a review of Gershwin literature. Padilla comments on the major scholars in the field and a few of lesser distinction. The analysis of the music used in the film, *An American in Paris*, includes each of the Gershwin songs featured onscreen in addition to the ballet adaption of Gershwin’s orchestral work that concludes the film. A brief chapter following this analysis provides the comparison between the filmed version and the original tone poem. Greater detail in describing the original score would have been helpful; this could provide the opportunity for a theme-by-

²¹ Neimoyer’s review of the Gershwin-Kilenyi relationship can also be found in the accompanying article “George Gershwin and Edward Kilenyi, Sr: A Reevaluation of Gershwin’s Early Musical Education,” *Musical Quarterly* 94:1-2 (Spring-Summer 2011), 9-62.

²² *An American in Paris* exists primarily as an orchestral work. It was transcribed for piano and arranged for the 1951 film score and closing ballet sequence. Previous discussions of *An American in Paris* are often restricted to the circumstances surrounding its creation or the adaptation of the work for the MGM film.

theme breakdown of the two scores in addition to documenting the changes to the original score and addition of new material.²³

One additional volume that straddles the boundaries of scholarly research and journalistic treatment is *The George Gershwin Reader* edited by Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson. This is a compilation of essays, newspaper and journal articles, and assorted published commentary on Gershwin's body of work, reception as a composer, his biography, and his own thoughts on music and composition. Wyatt and Johnson provide the publication information and present each selection in its entirety. *The George Gershwin Reader* is valuable for those interested in academic source material and for those who desire to read about Gershwin in his own words and those of his contemporaries. *The George Gershwin Reader* is particularly helpful as an accumulation of numerous primary sources that might otherwise be difficult to locate.

The published scholarship on George Gershwin is vast and covers a wide range of related topics. One area that seems to be lacking, however, is the treatment of his individual compositions. A fair amount of research has been completed in relation to Gershwin's musicals; several authors have documented Gershwin's biography and his collaboration with Ira; and much attention and analysis have been devoted to *Rhapsody in Blue*, the piano

²³ It is difficult to determine just how much of the film's score is truly Gershwin's original work. Gershwin's unhappy experiences with film studios in his last years are well documented by biographers. While the primary themes are clearly taken from the orchestral work, without an examination of the studio archival materials, the origin of the smaller cues may be in doubt. These cues could be exact score excerpts or arrangements of the themes by MGM staff. Saul Chaplin, Johnny Green, and Conrad Salinger receive screen credits for music direction and orchestration while George and Ira Gershwin are credited for music and lyrics. The more accurate statement would be that *An American in Paris* is one of a small number of films with a score based entirely on Gershwin's music to be produced after the composer's death.

concerto, and *Porgy and Bess*. The deficient area of scholarship surrounds *An American in Paris* and the smaller concert works and their connection to Gershwin's legacy and reception history. Perhaps the creation of Gershwin's collected works through The Gershwin Initiative at the University of Michigan will inspire new scholarship in this arena.

CHAPTER 2

ESTABLISHING AN AMERICAN IN PARIS AS PART OF THE SYMPHONIC POEM REPERTOIRE THROUGH SCORE ANALYSIS

There are three elements that are essential to the analysis of *An American in Paris*: establishing an applicable definition of the symphonic poem genre, defining Arnold Schoenberg's principles of developing variation, and applying those principles to *An American in Paris*. Gershwin's own classification of the composition as a tone poem demonstrates a desire to be included as part of classical canon. This analysis, through the application of Schoenberg's principles of developing variation, demonstrates how Gershwin's composition is an extension of the German romantic composition tradition, confirming Gershwin's place in the canon and the German romantic tradition.

Classification and Definition of Form

When Franz Liszt first composed a symphonic poem, few comparable compositions existed. Hugh Macdonald, author of the "symphonic poem" entry for *Grove Music Online*, credits Liszt with popularizing the genre, but states that Beethoven's *Egmont* and *Leonore* overtures can be considered the first of the species.¹ Multiple definitions exist, and a review is necessary in order to assess where *An American in Paris* fits within the genre. Descriptions

¹ Hugh Macdonald, "Symphonic Poem," in *Grove Music Online* in *Oxford Music Online*, accessed February 10, 2014.

of the symphonic poem and associated nomenclature that date from Gershwin's lifetime are of particular significance.²

In 1932, "The Art of the Symphonic Poem" by R.W.S. Mendl was published in *The Musical Quarterly*.³ Mendl explores the defining elements of the genre by tracing the lineage of the symphonic poem beginning with Beethoven into the twentieth century with Scriabin and Sibelius. According to Mendl, a symphonic poem is defined as:

An orchestral composition inspired by a literary, historical, or pictorial subject – or indeed by anything which exists also outside music (a natural scene, for instance) – and deriving its structure rather from the events or incidents or objects which it seeks to portray than from the inherited forms of the art of music itself. Whereas the motions and adventures of the themes in a symphony or a sonata are governed largely by the traditional structure, it is the order of events in the story that mainly prescribes the way in which the music of a symphonic poem is to go.⁴

Mendl admits that this is a wide definition, stating that "It is easier to describe its nature than to define it in a few words."⁵ However, Mendl's parameters do aid in marking potential subcategories within the genre. Beethoven's *Egmont* Overture would not be classified as similar to Scriabin's *Le poème de l'extase* due to the type of extra-musical meaning assigned to the music. Since *Egmont* represents a struggle against the oppression felt under Bonaparte,

² For the purposes of this discussion, tone poem, orchestral poem, and symphonic poem are synonymous, but only the term symphonic poem will be used.

³ Mendl's article was printed only a few years after the premiere of *An American in Paris*. Although it is unclear whether Gershwin and Mendl might have been aware of each other, it is probable that Mendl would have known of *An American in Paris* due to Gershwin's celebrity.

⁴ R.W.S. Mendl, "The Art of the Symphonic Poem," *The Musical Quarterly* 18:3 (July 1932): 443.

⁵ Ibid., 443.

there is clear external meaning assigned to the music, whereas *Le poème de l'extase* represents subjects of tremendous emotion, that while similar for all listeners, will vary slightly according to individual interpretation. Historical events anchor the narrative structure of Beethoven's score and allow for a direct presentation of the subject whereas Scriabin provides a musical atmosphere representative of turbulent emotion.

This juxtaposition of Beethoven and Scriabin presents a binary that existed through Gershwin's time and is still present today: straightforward presentation of musical material versus the suggestion of an idea or an emotion. This dichotomy reflects the primary division in programmatic music: music with an explicit program versus music with an implied program. The painting *The Ambassadors* (1533) by Hans Holbein the Younger (c. 1497-1543) presents this same dichotomy in visual terms. The main image in the painting is of two learned men – Jean de Dinteville, the French ambassador to England, and Georges de Selve, the bishop of Lavaur and ambassador to the Emperor, the Venetian Republic and the Holy See. They are surrounded by images related to their education (globes, books, instruments, and a sundial). In the foreground is what appears to be the distorted image of a skull. When the eye is focused on the two men, the skull image fades into the background, but when the painting is viewed from the right, the skull image moves to a position of prominence while the image of the men becomes the background. The educated ambassadors are analogous to Beethoven and the skull to Scriabin. If Beethoven and Scriabin represent the two extremes on the spectrum from explicit to implied programmatic musical elements respectively, then Gershwin lurks somewhere to the Beethoven side of center. *An American in Paris* is a relatively straightforward composition, but imposition of an external narrative changes how the music is understood.

Given that Deems Taylor's narrative, included in the program at the premiere of *An American in Paris*, was written after the music was composed, it seems that *An American in Paris* fits within Mendl's definition: when the events in Taylor's narrative are superimposed over the events in Gershwin's score, the timelines coincide to tell a complete story. Taylor's narrative aids in relating a story to the listener but is not essential to understanding the work as representative of life in Paris. In Gershwin's case, the music is able to stand alone as a symphonic poem. As Mendl works through his exemplars, he eventually arrives at Stravinsky. Mendl excludes balletic works that are performed in the concert hall. To consider these works as ballets without the dance element would allow them to be classified under the term "symphonic poem," but the original compositions were intended for ballet so Mendl classified them outside of the symphonic poem genre. *An American in Paris* has its own ballet connection: Gershwin considered adapting the piece for a ballet company, but the performance never occurred. The creation of the ballet sequence that comprises the final twenty minutes of the 1951 MGM film *An American in Paris*, choreographed by Gene Kelly, is the dance adaptation in the history of the work. Taking this dance connection into account, Gershwin's composition could also fall outside Mendl's original definition along with Stravinsky. Mendl states:

This would seem to be one more illustration of a class of work which is on the border-line of the world of the symphonic poem, seeing that it is purely orchestral music, the shape and contours of which are dictated by a story external to music itself and not by any traditional musical structure: its association with a theatrical mise-en-scène is the only feature – admittedly an important one – which prevents it from being recognized as belonging completely to the sphere of the symphonic poem.⁶

⁶ Ibid., 461.

Mendl's qualification discourages the labeling of *An American in Paris* a symphonic poem. This distinction is applicable to all of Stravinsky's ballets as well as those of contemporaries Copland and Ravel.

The question then arises as to where to classify *An American in Paris* – as a symphonic poem, as suggested by the composer, or as a single-movement symphony. The motivic analysis to follow will examine the structure of *An American in Paris* in an attempt to answer the question of classification, and by extension, connect Gershwin to his concert hall contemporaries.

Prior to Mendl, in 1911, Herbert Antcliffe presented a paper entitled “Musical Form and the Symphonic Poem.” Antcliffe refined his definition of symphonic poem in several stages, beginning with

Any programmatic work, from one written in a form approximating to that of the classical symphony to one constructed in a loose rhapsodical manner in one movement only. It may and does include works of the slightest suggestiveness, and choral works in which the orchestral parts merely support and enforce those of the voices, as well as obviously descriptive pieces.⁷

This, too, is a broad definition, and would allow for inclusion of a variety of works that Mendl would not have considered. Despite the generalities of his definition, Antcliffe seems to be looking specifically for a framework on which to hang a majority of the compositions classified as symphonic poems.

⁷ Herbert Antcliffe, “Musical Form and the Symphonic Poem” (paper presented at the Fourth Congress of the International Musical Society, London, May 29-June 3, 1911).

Antcliffe later referenced a more limited definition of symphonic poem based on the works of Liszt: “a symphonic poem is a piece of music in one or more movements written for orchestra (with or without the addition of voices), based upon ideas not in themselves essentially musical and constructed on the principles of theme-transformation developed and first definitely put into practice by Franz Liszt.”⁸ It is within this more limited definition that Gershwin’s *An American in Paris* fits most comfortably. This composition aligns loosely with the traditional definition of the theme and variation form with one distinction: Gershwin transforms more than one theme. A more traditional theme and variation form is focused on the sectional variation and ornamentation of a limited melodic statement whereas Gershwin spun vast amounts of material out of the continuous fragmentation and transformation of three themes.

Score Analysis – Introduction

An American in Paris features three distinct themes. Throughout the work, each theme maintains its individual character – jaunty, soulful, or raucous – and all are instantly recognizable as products of Gershwin. Several of Gershwin’s contemporaries accused him of creating beautiful melodies while lacking the creative capability to develop them over the course of a longer composition. According to Walter Rimler, “It was during his (Gershwin’s) stay in Paris that the Concerto in F had its European premiere there, whence Prokofiev described it as a succession of ‘32-bar choruses ineptly bridged together’ and as a ‘drunken concerto.’ Not until *Porgy and Bess*, seven years later, would Prokofiev change his mind

⁸ Ibid.

about Gershwin's abilities."⁹ In fact, many of Gershwin's European contemporaries were ardent fans of his music: William Walton, John Ireland, Francis Poulenc, and Alban Berg were just a few who expressed to Gershwin himself how much they enjoyed his music.

Several elements of Gershwin's style appealed to his contemporaries and audiences alike. In a single word, Gershwin's compositional language can be characterized as cosmopolitan. He incorporated elements and influences from his travels and from musics heard in New York, including aspects of impressionism, jazz, Latin American music, and his own popular songs. Initially borne out of Paul Whiteman's "Experiment in Modern Music," Gershwin sought to blend aspects of jazz – blue notes, strong accents and syncopation, and extended tertian harmonies – into his concert works.¹⁰ Much like a Rossini crescendo, a "Gershwin finale" is present in the large orchestral works. The "Gershwin finale" is characterized by a loud and colorful unison statement of the primary theme at a slower tempo that finishes with a sustained chord while a solo instrument (or section) makes the final statement of the leading motive that crescendos into the final flourish. These elements are easily identifiable on the final page of the *An American in Paris* score. The "Gershwin finale" is directly related to the conventions used in the finales of musical numbers in Broadway shows and the classic style of Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s whose composers took their cues from the concert hall.

⁹ Walter Rimler, *George Gershwin: An Intimate Portrait* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 31.

¹⁰ Paul Whiteman's "An Experiment in Modern Music" was presented on February 12, 1924. This concert was created to promote the music of American composers. Although the audience was expecting much more modern fare, the highlight of the program was the premiere of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* with the composer at the piano.

As the label “symphonic jazz” became more commonly used, Gershwin’s music emerged as the epitome of the new style. In these symphonic jazz concert works, such as Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* and Aaron Copland’s *Music for the Theater* and Piano Concerto, the orchestra frequently imitates key characteristics of Gershwin’s most popular songs: phrase repetition in a pseudo verse-refrain format, motoric rhythmic drive accompanying faster tempos, strongly accented beats that give an illusion of syncopation while staying true to the meter, a combination of syncopation and quick rhythms reminiscent of ragtime, and the melodic quality that is distinctively Gershwin’s. This personal style extended to Gershwin’s use of form. His concert works are based on traditional frameworks such as the sonata cycle, but are freely adapted to suit the individual composition. Regarding the form of *An American in Paris*, Larry Starr states:

In *An American in Paris*, the “blues” and “Charleston” sections may be interpreted as filling the roles of “slow movement” and “dance movement” (scherzo), respectively, within the multipartite whole. This reading of the work’s form – which could easily coexist with others, given the richness and complexity of *An American in Paris* – would view the piece along Romantic lines as essentially a four-movement structure compressed into a single uninterrupted span, with a large-scale opening fast “movement” and a cumulative “finale” surrounding the central slow and dance “movements.” The ordering and proportions of these four “movements” correspond readily to those found in a traditional symphony.¹¹

Depending on the analyst’s interpretation, *An American in Paris* can be considered a variation of sonata form, a modified rondo, a rhapsody, or a single-movement symphony. In creating an American’s impression of Parisian life, Gershwin also created a unique formal design that is essentially an amalgamation of those particular structures.

¹¹ Larry Starr, *George Gershwin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 79-80.

Score Analysis – Developing Variation

An intimate knowledge of the score reveals *An American in Paris* to be an extension of the method of music generation that Arnold Schoenberg and others have referred to as developing variations. In much the same way that Johannes Brahms generated the opening of his fourth symphony from a pattern of descending thirds, Gershwin created and united the thematic material in *An American in Paris* from the pitches and intervallic relationships expressed in the first measure of his composition. It is through these themes that the score is most effectively examined. Prior to the analytical dissection of the score, a brief review of Schoenberg's concept of developing variation is necessary in order to define the parameters for analysis. Once the variations of the original motive are clearly understood, further analysis then firmly supports the argument for elevating Gershwin's place not only within the canon of American classical music but also within the full canon of the Western classical tradition as well.

Schoenberg's concept of developing variation as identified in the works of Brahms provides an effective method with which to describe Gershwin's treatment of motives in this composition. Brahms' use of this compositional method was originally recognized by his contemporaries in the 1860s and 1870s, and later addressed by Schoenberg as part of a radio talk in 1931.¹² Schoenberg continued his examination of Brahms in his essay "Brahms the Progressive," igniting a twentieth-century trend and inadvertently establishing the Brahms-Schoenberg critical tradition. Although Brahms is not the only composer whose work

¹² Schoenberg first addressed developing variation in his writings in 1917 in *Coherence, Counterpoint, Instrumentation, Instruction in Form*, ed. Severine Neff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

demonstrates the principles of developing variation, Schoenberg's recognition of Brahms has strongly encouraged later scholars to focus primarily on Brahms.¹³ Examples of developing variation in Brahms' music have since been broadly covered by multiple scholars.¹⁴ In his essay on Bach, Schoenberg described developing variation as:

Music of the homophonic melodic style of composition, that is, music with a main theme accompanied by and based on harmony, produces its material by, as I call, *developing variation*. This means that variation of the features of a basic unit produces all the thematic formulations which provide fluency, contrasts, variety, logic and unity on the one hand, and character, mood, expression, and every needed differentiation, on the other hand – thus elaborating the *idea* of the piece.¹⁵

What is revealed within the music of Brahms is the generation of material from within a very small unit, often the pitch content or pattern from a single measure or even less. Schoenberg argued that the use of a very small amount of material to generate an entire composition was at the heart of the Germanic composition tradition. For some composers, the act of composing with such a small amount of material provides the freedom of generating a potentially endless amount of music without the distraction of pitches that fall outside of these parameters. Within this flexibility, the *Grundgestalt*, or the basic shape or idea, and its component parts are successively modified. This modification is achieved in any

¹³ Scholarly publications are also devoted to the application of the principles of developing variation in the music of Beethoven and Schoenberg. Some scholars have even moved beyond the discussion of the individual motives to the application of developing variation to entire symphonies.

¹⁴ Walter Frisch, Carl Dahlhaus, Rudolph Reti, Arno Mitschka, Hans Keller, Theodor Adorno, Patricia Carpenter, and Klaus Velten are just a few of the scholars who have covered the branch of Brahms scholarship known as the Schoenberg critical tradition.

¹⁵ Arnold Schoenberg, "Bach," *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1975), 397.

manner of variations in any component of the score: harmony, fragmented motivic statements, or rhythmic manipulation. This method allowed for organic composition. As Nicole Grimes asserts, “the nineteenth-century preoccupation with organicism which is pervasive in German art and literature is equally pervasive in musical compositions of the time.”¹⁶

At the start of the twentieth century, the American classical music tradition was deeply rooted in German romanticism and remained so for many more years. Critics and audiences alike were entrenched in that aesthetic, and it was against this standard that American composers were judged, even as late as Gershwin who referred to himself as a modern romantic.¹⁷ In spite of the strong French influence in early twentieth-century American classical music, Gershwin was, fairly or unfairly, judged against the German model.

In “Brahms the Progressive,” Schoenberg posited that Brahms was not the “classicism” as he was so often labeled, but rather “a great innovator in the realm of musical language.”¹⁸ Schoenberg was attempting to draw a line of progressive composers, beginning with Bach, through Brahms, and leading to himself. Schoenberg delineated several criteria by which he considered a composer to be progressive, and those most applicable to Gershwin are:

¹⁶ Nicole Grimes, “The Schoenberg/Brahms Critical Tradition Reconsidered,” *Music Analysis* 31:2 (2012): 129.

¹⁷ Vivian Perlis and Libby Van Cleeve, *Composers’ Voices from Ives to Ellington: An Oral History of American Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 189.

¹⁸ Schoenberg, “Brahms the Progressive,” *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1975), 401.

harmony, form, irregularity of phrase or period structure, and musical prose (that is, a direct and straightforward presentation of musical ideas).¹⁹ These criteria will be addressed through the following analysis.

Score Analysis – Themes and Motives

Before proceeding with the score study, some parameters must be established for the usage of “motive” and “theme.” Schoenberg emphasized that motives had to be short – two or three pitches – sufficient to generate a melodic and/or rhythmic profile but incapable of standing alone. Gershwin’s variation of the Original Motive into its most recognizable Motives and Themes is demonstrated briefly in the following table and are later explained in greater detail (See Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Recognizable Motives and Themes in *An American in Paris*

Original Motive	
Base Motive	
Walking Motive	
Running Motive	
Taxi Motive	
Blues Theme	

¹⁹ Ibid.

Table 2.1 Continued

Charleston Theme

For *An American in Paris*, this Original Motive is found in the first downbeat of the score (See Example 2.1).

Example 2.1 Original Motive



This ascending half step is immediately varied as the intervallic relationship between the two pitches is expanded from a minor second to a major second and then inverted to a minor seventh. The variation continues to ascend with the addition of the next major second (See Example 2.2). This set of pitches establishes the Base Motive from which Gershwin developed much of the score. Within *An American in Paris*, Gershwin employed variations of this Base Motive to create the component blocks of a theme, and these variations are typically one to four measures in length. Theme implies a longer melodic structure and contributes more to the overall structure of the composition.

The Paris Theme is comprised of three separate motives that are developed individually or in tandem: the Walking Motive, the Running Motive, and the Taxi Motive. The Walking and Running Motives are present throughout the composition, singularly and together, and are developed more thoroughly than the Taxi Motive. The other two themes – the Blues Theme and the Charleston Theme – are typically presented in a more complete statement than the Paris Theme although the Blues Theme is often divided in the build up to the final cadence.

The Paris Theme is directly derived from the set of pitches presented in the first measure [11, 0, 2, 4], which comprises the interval of a fourth when all pitches are relocated to the same octave. The [11, 0, 2, 4] set will hereafter be referred to as the Base Motive.

Example 2.2 Base Motive. George Gershwin, *An American in Paris*, m. 1²⁰



This set of pitches is shared between the primary melodic statement in the oboes and violins – the Paris Theme – and the flutes and bassoons – the Paris Counter-Motive. The Walking Motive component of the Paris Theme is instantly recognizable by its rhythmic profile (eighth-eighth-quarter) and pitch repetition patterns. In the Base Motive of the Paris Theme, the pitches are arranged in pairs an octave apart, imitating the rise and fall motion of walking

²⁰ George Gershwin, *An American in Paris* (New York: New World Music, 1930), 1.

down a city street.²¹ The melodic element is gradually filled in as additional pitches within the set are added at both ends of the octave. Each additional pitch represents a new rhythmic event as well (See Example 2.3), usually a subdivision of the pre-existing rhythmic statement (four eighth notes or eighth-two sixteenths-quarter). As the melodic and rhythmic profiles are altered, no new pitches are introduced until m. 7.

The Base Motive can also be recognized by its interval set class [0, 1, 3, 5]. These numbers represent the number of half steps between the first pitch and each of the subsequent pitches in the set, expressed here as a minor second, a minor third, and a perfect fourth. All of these intervals are available to the composer as the composition is generated in addition to the inversion of each: the octave, a major seventh, a major sixth, and a perfect fifth. In order to incorporate the intervals not expressed within this set class, Gershwin had to vary the intervallic relationship through expansion or contraction. As this analysis will demonstrate, Gershwin's use of a single interval class was quite sophisticated, the properties of which he exploited to the fullest in order to maintain the organic quality of the Paris and Blues Themes and their supporting elements.

²¹ Scholars such as Howard Pollack, Steven E. Gilbert, Larry Starr, and Isaac Goldberg have all referred to this motive as the Walking Motive.

Example 2.3 Walking Motive Component of the Paris Theme, George Gershwin,
An American in Paris, mm. 1-4.²²



While the oboes and violins are walking through the opening measures, the flutes and bassoons carry the counter-motive (See Example 2.4), again comprised of the same pitch material [11, 0, 2, 4].

Example 2.4 Paris Counter-Motive, George Gershwin, *An American in Paris*, mm. 1-3.²³



This time the pitch pattern is built on the idea of upward expansion. In the first statement of this counter-motive, the melodic contour is stepwise from C up to E and back again. In the second statement, the stepwise motion is expanded to include a minor third up to F as a substitute for the E. Likewise, the third statement includes the fourth up to G. As the counter-motive expands to this, its widest interval, the walking idea is augmented with new pitch and rhythmic material. As the Walking Motive begins its quick ascent to the upper octave, it connects via stepwise motion to its neighboring E, still within the original pitch set. This E

²² Ibid., 1.

²³ Ibid.

represents the first instance of repetition within the measure in the same octave, and the melodic profile is expanded further with the ascending leap of a fourth which is connected to the Base Motive intervallic profile. The harmonic support provided by the viola and cello that is not related directly to the Base Motive in terms of pitch material – G and F do not appear in the original pitch set. This harmonic pattern is based on an oscillation between G and F where the tonic occurs on the upbeat. The major second is pulled from the Base Motive and the descending motion that initiates the oscillation is an inversion of the general ascending motion found in the Base Motive.

The Paris Counter-Motive is not present with every statement of the Paris Theme, but it also does not stand on its own. This partnership significantly limits the opportunity for the development of the Paris Counter-Motive. For example, in m. 592, both the Walking Motive and the Paris Counter-Motive are present, but in this instance, only the first third of the counter-motive is played by the French horn as the lower woodwinds carry the Walking Motive. When the Walking Motive repeats a few measures later, the counter-motive is no longer present. The Walking motive frequently appears without its counter-motive because in its solitary form the Walking Motive is more easily varied.

In one of the more distinct variations of the Walking Motive, Gershwin exposed the motive in the upper register of the English horn (see mm. 204-211) and then echoed that with a restatement in the oboe in mm. 212-220. The harmonic oscillation continues beneath these thematic variations. The strings and low woodwinds present the oscillation, now in E-flat major. As the oboe takes over the theme and begins the second phrase within the Walking Motive, the harmonic support becomes more active, moving out of the simple oscillation but still working within the tonal center and always in parallel triads. This rhythmic variation of

the Walking Motive is one of a handful of instances where the Running motive directly follows the Walking Motive. Although the two motives are frequently stated in tandem, many of those statements are briefly interrupted by part of a variation or by additional connecting or transitional material in another section.

The Running Motive is first introduced in m. 7 with the repeated E ascending up a fourth to the A and then descending in stepwise motion (See Example 2.5). The fourth originates in the span of the pitches contained in the Base Motive. This sixteenth-note repetition with its attached leap in pitch is heard frequently throughout the composition. Again, this motive can be represented by the same interval set class as the Walking Motive [0, 1, 3, 5].

Example 2.5 Running Motive Component of the Paris Theme, George Gershwin,

An American in Paris, mm. 7-8.²⁴



The Running Motive even begins its own small set of variations before the Taxi Motive is first introduced in mm. 28-31. The Taxi Motive is easily identifiable by the repeated eighth-note pattern which is doubled by the taxi horns in the percussion (See example 2.6). The Taxi motive is the least developed of the component motives. It is strongly connected to the Base Motive in its interval relationships (both neighbor pitches and the leap of a fourth) and in its simpler rhythmic profile (four eighth notes followed by two quarter notes). Aside from brief

²⁴ Ibid., 1-2.

passages in mm. 270-82 and mm. 629-34, the Taxi motive in its unvaried form essentially disappears after m. 165.

Example 2.6 Taxi Motive Component of the Paris Theme, George Gershwin,
An American in Paris, mm. 28-31.²⁵



According to Schoenberg, modes of variation include: rhythmic changes (including tempo), intervallic changes (direction, size), harmonic changes, phrase changes, changes in instrumentation, and dynamic changes.²⁶ These concepts are frequently demonstrated in *An American in Paris*. Table 2.1 demonstrates how these variations appear within each statement of the component motives of the Paris theme. The combination of these three motives and their variations provides the melodic and supporting materials for more than half of the composition. Additionally, Gershwin punctuates the transitions between larger sections with brief references to these motives. The Walking Motive is often heard in its four-measure incarnation while the Running motive is usually varied in pitch and is frequently repeated. Table 2.1 also demonstrates the frequency with which these motivic statements occur. The key below the table represents those variations described by Schoenberg that are most often present in the score.

²⁵ Ibid., 4.

²⁶ Schoenberg, *Coherence, Counterpoint, Instrumentation, Instruction in Form*, 39.

Table 2.2 Frequency and Variation of the Paris Theme Component Motives

Walking Motive	Running Motive	Taxi Motive
mm. 1-6, oboe, violin I and II - !	mm. 7-8, oboe, violin I and II - !	mm. 28-31, oboe, English horn, clarinet, violin I and II - !
mm. 11-15, English horn, violin I - !	mm. 18-27, trumpet, trombone, French horn, bass clarinet, bassoon, strings - *	mm. 32-36, violin I and II, viola - *
mm. 20-23, flute, oboe, violin I and II - !	mm. 24-27, bass clarinet, bassoon, French horn, strings - *#	mm. 36-39, oboe, English horn, clarinet, violin I and II - !
mm. 79-84, oboe, violin I; add flute, piccolo, French horn, viola at 83 - #	mm. 73-78, oboe, flute, violin II, bassoon, cello - *	mm. 40-43, oboe, English horn, violin I and II - #
mm. 106-109, French horn, viola - !	mm. 85-86, flute, piccolo, violin I and II - !	mm. 44-47, oboe, English horn, clarinet, violin I and II - !
mm. 112-118, bass clarinet, bassoon, English horn, viola, cello, bass - ^	mm. 95-96, trumpet	mm. 48-52, violin I and II - #
mm. 166-173, flute - *+^	mm. 119-131, clarinet, add violin at 126 - *#+	mm. 52-55, oboe, English horn, clarinet, violin I and II - !
mm. 186-190, oboe, violin I and II, add bassoon and tuba at 188 - ^	mm. 132-135, flute, piccolo, violin I and II - *#+	mm. 56-59, oboe, English horn, violin I and II - #
mm. 195-201, bassoon, tuba, cello, bass - *#+	mm. 136-147, French horn, trombone, tuba, viola; continued by bass clarinet, bassoon, tuba at 142 - *#	mm. 60-63, trumpet, trombone - *#
mm. 204-211, English horn - *#+^	mm. 152-161, oboe, English horn, clarinet, violin I and II; only violin I and II, trumpet at 158; add cello, bass at 159 - *#	mm. 132-135, trombone, viola, cello - *+
mm. 212-220, oboe - *#+^	mm. 178-186, flute, oboe, trumpet, violin I and II, xylophone = *#	mm. 162-165, French horn - *+
mm. 312-321, French horn - *#+^	mm. 191-194, flute, oboe, trumpet, violin I and II, xylophone - *#	mm. 270-282, trumpet, violin I and II - *#+
mm. 344-349, bassoon, tuba, cello, bass - *#	mm. 201-203, French horn - *#	mm. 629-634, trombone - *#+
mm. 354-357, flute, violin I - !	mm. 221-225, piccolo, oboe - *#	
mm. 365-369, English horn - *#+^	mm. 234-238, French horn, trumpet, violin I and II, viola - *#	
mm. 376-378, viola - *+^	mm. 265-268, oboe, clarinet - *#	
mm. 592-595, English horn, clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon - *+^	mm. 285-300, French horn - *#	

Table 2.2 Continued

Walking Motive	Running Motive	Taxi Motive
mm. 597-598, flute, oboe, violin I and II - !	mm. 322-330, French horn, trumpet, trombone - *#	
mm. 627-628, trombone - *#+^	mm. 346-349, oboe, English, horn, French horn - *#	
mm. 635-640, tuba - *#+^	mm. 378-381, French horn - *+	
mm. 645-648, English horn, trumpet, violin II - !	mm. 389-391, trombone - *+	
	mm. 583-589, clarinet, oboe, flute - *	
	mm. 599-603, flute, oboe, violin I and II - *	
	mm. 612-634, violin I and II - *#+	
	mm. 649-654, oboe, French horn - *#+	
	mm. 655-661, flute, violin I and I, viola, xylophone- *#+	
	mm. 669-673, flute, oboe, English horn, clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon - *#+	

pitch variation*
 harmonic variation+
 rhythmic variation#
 shortened statement^
 full statement!

The accompaniment shifts dramatically in the four measures prior to the entrance of the “lonely trumpet” that presents the Blues Theme. This is the first instance of a presentation of any theme that is firmly supported by the bass motion in the accompaniment. All thematic statements up to this point have been the components of the Paris Theme that are supported by an oscillation of chords in the bass. This oscillation is usually between G and F since a majority of the first section is in F major. The appearance of G on the downbeat only slightly destabilizes the tonal center. This destabilization cannot be construed as enough to imply a new tonal center but is prominent enough to reinforce the motion of the Walking Motive. The strongest statement of the Walking Motive occurs in m. 645 where the tonic is heard on the

downbeat. This is also the last complete statement of the Walking Motive before the end of the composition, less than fifty measures later. This harmonic treatment might be considered progressive since the most stable tonic support occurs so close to the end of the score.

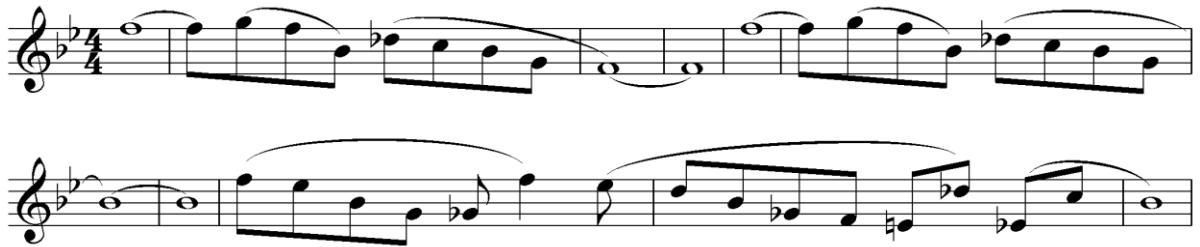
Gershwin did not push the bounds of tonality here, but instead used the gentle destabilization of the tonic to reinforce the programmatic element of the Walking Motive.

Of the two additional themes that occur in *An American in Paris*, the Blues Theme takes on a larger role than the Charleston Theme. The initial occurrence of the Blues Theme is in m. 396, coming just past the composition's midpoint. The eleven measures of the Blues Theme present an irregular number (See Example 2.7). As a composer whose reputation was built on writing songs and shows that frequently employed evenly divisible phrases, this is quite a departure for Gershwin. Even though the Blues Theme itself contains an odd number of measures, Gershwin often inserted enough additional measures at the end of the thematic statement to create a passage with an even number of measures. The two complete statements of the Blues Theme are separated by several measures. In between these statements by the trumpet and violins, a variation of the eighth-note patterns in the Blues Theme is passed around the orchestra. This variation is both stylistically appropriate and an excellent example of thematically based embellishment. In spite of these additions, this irregularity of phrase structure does align with another of Schoenberg's progressive elements.

An additional irregularity of phrase occurs in mm. 424-26. As the first violin comes to the final note of the Blues Theme, the lower winds and lower strings pick up an extension of this theme in the same jazz-inflected chromaticism present in the original Blues Theme. This extension is passed around for just three measures before the first violins begin a new four-measure variation of the Blues as the tonality shifts from B-flat major to G major.

Underneath this extension is a descending ground bass pattern that is an inverted variation of the bass line that supports the Blues Theme in its original form.

Example 2.7 Blues Theme, George Gershwin, *An American in Paris*, mm. 396-406.²⁷



The introduction of the Blues Theme is also the first occurrence of a firm metric shift from 2 into 4. The instrumentation is now predominantly brass, saxophones, and strings, augmented by the wire brushes and wood block in the percussion, marking the shift into the nightclub atmosphere of the blues. Where the Paris theme is lively and quick, the Blues Theme is sultry and played with ample rubato. Two full statements of the Blues Theme are presented by the trumpet and violins, respectively, before the variations begin. The pitches present in the Blues Theme do not demonstrate a direct connection to the Base Motive. Upon closer examination, the relationship between these pitches and those of the Base Motive becomes more apparent: the interval of a fourth has been inverted for the Blues Theme and is emphasized through Gershwin's frequent use of the fifth scale degree, and the pervasive use

²⁷ Ibid., 51-53.

of stepwise motion in each of the Paris Theme components is present again in the Blues Theme.

The Blues Theme represents a slight departure from the developing variations, as it is not developed to the same degree as is the Paris Theme. Even though the Blues Theme is split in half, the components are not developed individually to the same extent as the components of the Paris Theme. Instead, Gershwin set a memorable segment of the Blues Theme mm. 425-470 and produced a set of harmonic variations which serve to build tension before the introduction of the Charleston Theme.

The section of the score that contains the Blues Theme is also where one of Gershwin's trademark rhythmic features is introduced. Beginning in m. 399, the flutes present a new rhythmic profile that drives through the blues without obscuring the overall emotional tone of the section (See Example 2.8). A variation of this rhythm is presented a few measures later as the trumpet plays the sustained B-flat at the midpoint of the Blues Theme. The initial presence of this rhythmic pattern is more subdued than the later statements in the woodwinds in m. 434 and mm. 438-40. Several variations of this rhythm exist throughout this section, but they are not always connected in regards to pitch content. This figure and its variations are present throughout the most tumultuous passage in the score as the tonality shifts from B-flat major into G major, D major, F major, and even B major before the orchestra erupts an extended chromatic descent in mm. 431-470. The rhythm remains in the solo violin that begins the transition into the Charleston Theme in mm. 471-475.

Example 2.8 Rhythmic Pattern Supporting the Blues Theme, George Gershwin,
An American in Paris, mm. 438-40.²⁸



The Walking Motive component of the Paris theme is centered around C, the dominant of F major. Likewise, the Blues Theme continually emphasizes the dominant-tonic relationship in B-flat major: the sustained pitches of the theme are F (dominant) and B-flat (tonic) when stated in the original key. The Blues Theme is primarily a descending line. This stepwise motion, in addition to the neighboring motion that adds interest to the scalar descent, is also closely related to the Base Motive. The primary difference between the variations of the Base Motive is that the pitches are most often in an ascending arrangement in the component motives of the Paris Theme and in a descending arrangement in the Blues Theme.

The Charleston Theme is not directly related to the other themes by the same kind of organic development, although the intervallic relationships expressed by the clarinet in mm. 479-80 are directly and inversely present in the Charleston melody. The intervallic profile of this theme is primarily made up of thirds and sixths while the other themes are dependent on fourths and fifths (See Example 2.9). The Charleston is one of several musical trends that developed out of ragtime, and as an offshoot of that tradition, Charleston tunes are often based on a standard ragtime chord progression of I-VI7-II7-V7-I. Gershwin set the Charleston theme in D major, creating a progression of D-B7-E7-A7-D. Gershwin set up this

²⁸ Ibid., 58.

transition into D major well in advance. There are brief modulations through D major in the second half of the blues section as the Blues Theme is developed.

Example 2.9 Charleston Theme, George Gershwin, *An American in Paris*, mm. 481-90.²⁹

The pitch material that makes up the Charleston Theme is directly connected to the ragtime chord progression that is present in the accompaniment. As the theme begins over the D major and B7 chords, the melody outlines the common pitches between those chords. The progression shifts to E7 and A7, again utilizing the pitches common to the two chords.

Perhaps it is an indirect signal from Gershwin that the Charleston Theme is so isolated since it is not organically related in any musical way to the other two themes. In *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation*, Frisch references Brahms' own words in regards to the natural connection between musical materials: "If he *does* want a relationship

²⁹ Ibid., 67-68.

to be heard, he will ensure it.”³⁰ The other two themes are so intimately and obviously connected that the Charleston Theme offers two layers of contrast: that of a new theme, bearing new melodic character and a new set of accompanying harmonies, and that of a disconnected passage that grabs the ear and prepares the listener for the return to more familiar and more fully developed themes in a pseudo-recapitulation.

Throughout the entire score, Gershwin presents these themes in straightforward musical prose. His variations, of the Base Motive and of the themes and their component motives, are omnipresent in the structure. The clarity of the orchestration reinforces Gershwin’s straightforward manner of presentation. This primary material is always in the foreground, requiring no unique analytical skill to decipher. The variations that are developed throughout *An American in Paris* do not outline any traditional musical structure, such as a rondo or theme and variations form. Gershwin juxtaposes the Paris and Blues themes at the end of the composition to build dramatic tension moving into the final statement of the Blues theme at the very end of the score. This lack of adherence to a predetermined form falls within Schoenberg’s progressive criteria, and also aligns with both Mendl’s and Antcliffe’s definitions of symphonic poem. Gershwin created a single-movement symphonic work that depicts the activities and emotions of a homesick American living in Paris. This is an excellent example of the symphonic poem genre.

³⁰ Walter Frisch, *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 31.

CHAPTER 3

RECEPTION HISTORY: SITUATING GERSHWIN IN THE CANON

Gershwin was one of the most popular personalities in the American press during his lifetime. His desire to compose in a wide variety of genres and to take on new projects, such as radio programs and concert tours, made him a familiar name across the country. As a result, the premiere of a Gershwin show or concert work was national news. Reviews by New York critics ran in papers throughout the country, and music critics across America had the opportunity to weigh in on Gershwin's success and popularity. The variety of opinions regarding Gershwin and his music that existed among the New York critics was disseminated around the nation, and this variety provides the platforms for consideration in this chapter: Gershwin as a classical composer, Gershwin and Copland and their identities as Jewish composers within the world of jazz, Gershwin as a modernist, and Gershwin as an American composer.

An American in Paris Reception

As demonstrated in the analysis of *An American in Paris*, Gershwin was capable of creating a solidly structured, cohesive work for the concert hall, an ability that earns Gershwin his rightful place alongside other great symphonists. The use of developing variations firmly places Gershwin within the lineage Schoenberg traced back through Brahms, Beethoven, and Bach. Yet modern audiences typically hear Gershwin on “pops”

programs that feature lighter fare, programs featuring film music or Americana themes, rather than the heavier orchestral works that require of players the same level of technical proficiency.¹ For all of the endorsement of Gershwin's achievement as a composer, his music is still less likely to be programmed on classical series when compared to that of his contemporaries.

There is a practical element that contributes to the infrequency of performances of Gershwin's music: the logistics of a modern orchestra tend to require programming of works with similar orchestration on the same program. If *An American in Paris* needs three saxophonists, then at least one of the other compositions on the program should include at least one of those players. Possible companion compositions might include Ravel's orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, *Bolero*, Vaughan Williams' Sixth and Ninth Symphonies, Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances*, Berg's Violin Concerto, Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky* and suite from *Lieutenant Kijé*, Bernstein's Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*, and Copland's Piano Concerto and First Symphony. *Bolero* and Copland's Piano Concerto are the most likely to be featured alongside Gershwin on a concert program during a standard orchestral performance season.

¹ Although the light-heavy dichotomy in music is a continuous discussion, audiences of the mid- and late-twentieth century would have heard Gershwin's music on programs with compositions by Gershwin's contemporaries that demonstrated a similar depth of extra-musical meaning or intensity. Compositions from the masters of the German romantic tradition – from both the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – were considered as “heavier” music, including works by Richard Strauss, Gustav Mahler, Franz Liszt, and Johannes Brahms. Compositions that embodied the French-American tradition fell into the “lighter” category such as those by Gershwin, Ferde Grofé, William Grant Still, and George Antheil, as well as some works by Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, and Aaron Copland.

Compositions requiring similar performing forces enable orchestra managers to make the most of the expense of hiring specialty personnel for a single weekend's performance(s). This pragmatic solution does limit the number of performances for any composition requiring performers beyond an orchestra's standard roster. Compositions that require extensive percussion, guitar, or banjo also fall into this predicament although exceptions are frequently made for modern orchestral standards like *Le Sacre du Printemps* or Strauss' larger symphonic poems.

A common element to Gershwin's concert works is a connection to his own spontaneous experiences. Gershwin's ability to create musical manifestations of personal experiences was a significant contributor to his mass appeal. This personal expression may also have been a point of contention with some of his critics. But Gershwin continued to look for ways to express his own point of view. *An American in Paris* includes a part for a set of taxi horns that Gershwin purchased while in Paris. His melodies for *Porgy and Bess* were inspired by immersing himself in the Gullah dialect. While many composers demonstrate a detachment from their subject matter, Gershwin presents an immediacy of expression in his works that may draw directly from years spent primarily in the popular music business. His musical representation of Parisian life correlates with his definition of American music:

For American music means to me something very specific, something very tangible. It is something indigenous, something autochthonous, something deeply rooted in our soil. It is music which must express the feverish tempo of American life. It must express the unique life we lead here – a life of weary activity – and our gropings and vain ideals. It must be a voice of the masses, a voice expressing our masses and at the same time immortalizing their strivings. In our music we must be able to catch a glimpse of our skyscrapers, to feel that overwhelming burst of energy which is bottled in

our life, to hear that chaos of noises which suffuses the air of our modern American city. This, I feel, must be in every American music.²

According to Gershwin, for a music to exist as part of a nation's culture, it must be a representation of that culture. *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Porgy and Bess* are excellent examples of this philosophy. *An American in Paris* is an expression of Parisian life through the eyes and ears of an American, and so it too must be expressed in Gershwin's American musical language. Since Gershwin's definition of American music was not universal, any critic who disagreed with this definition would be predisposed to regard *An American in Paris* unfavorably. In his 1937 eulogy of Gershwin in the *New York Times*, Olin Downes recognized some elements of Gershwin's style that simultaneously endeared him to the masses and disenchanted the critics:

He displayed the immense virtues of his defects as a craftsman, his lack of musical background, his youthful ignorance of symphonic usage and tradition, and the environments which fortunately was not that of a standardized institution of musical learning, following with comfortable routine the century-old traditions of other lands and peoples than ours. Gershwin was free of that. He talked, musically speaking, the language that his countrymen and generation knew.³

For Gershwin, this American sound primarily manifested itself in the rhythmic drive of his compositions: the perpetual motion of his orchestral music, the high energy dance and comedy numbers in his Broadway shows, and the infectious syncopation of his Tin Pan Alley

² George Gershwin, "Fifty Years of American Music... Younger Composers, Freed from European Influences, Labor Toward Achieving a Distinctive American Musical Idiom," *The George Gershwin Reader*, ed. by Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (New York: Oxford, 2002), 115.

³ Olin Downes, "Hail and Farewell," *The George Gershwin Reader*, ed. by Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (New York: Oxford, 2002), 276.

tunes. When combined with an easily singable “Gershwin” melody, jazz-inflected harmonies, and Ira’s lyrics (where appropriate), the mass appeal is undeniable. However, where the masses approved, the critics did not. Accusations that Gershwin did not orchestrate his own compositions often accompanied the commentary that appeared in newspapers and other musical publications of the day.

Critics began questioning Gershwin’s abilities as an orchestrator just after the premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue*, and these accusations plagued Gershwin for the remainder of his life. In fact, he did not complete the orchestrations for the original score for *Rhapsody in Blue*; Paul Whiteman retained a regular orchestrator, Ferde Grofé, who was skilled at producing the distinctive sounds that Whiteman relied on to pack his audiences. It was common practice for Broadway and film composers to send their manuscripts to an orchestrator; even Aaron Copland used orchestrators to complete his film scores. This practice provided ample opportunity for critics to question Gershwin’s orchestrations with every new composition. In fact, Gershwin orchestrated every measure of each new concert work, beginning with his Piano Concerto. The critics’ opinion that Gershwin lacked the skill to orchestrate his own compositions was a sensitive subject, and was one of the few public criticisms that Gershwin took to heart. These accusations were widely disseminated in the press, and Gershwin relied on his friends to come to his defense.

In the December 1932 issue of *American Spectator*, Allan Lincoln Langley accused William Daly of orchestrating *An American in Paris*.⁴ In order to reach the widest possible

⁴ Allan Lincoln Langley, “The Gershwin Myth,” *The George Gershwin Reader*, ed. by Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (New York: Oxford, 2002), 172.

audience, Daly wrote a scathing response that was printed one month later in the *New York Times*, praising Gershwin's skill and denying his own contribution as anything beyond that of sympathetic listener:

Mr. Langley's asseverations are of importance only through the fact that they are now published and are sent abroad in the world to influence those who have no means of checking up on the facts, and to give comfort to those who want to think that Gershwin is a myth. I suppose I should really resent the fact that Langley attributes Gershwin's work to me, since Langley finds all of it so bad. But fortunately for my amour propre, I have heard some of Langley's compositions. He really should stay away from ink and stick to his viola.⁵

The reception of *An American in Paris* is representative of reception history in general regarding Gershwin. While his Broadway shows did not necessarily enjoy long runs in modern terms, he was widely successful. The translation of that success into the concert hall was where Gershwin struggled. It is through this struggle that the remainder of Gershwin's reception will be examined.

General Gershwin Reception – Gershwin as Classical Composer

Coming out of World War I, American audiences were slow to embrace the aesthetics adopted by modernist composers; they wanted to be entertained, and few composers fit that bill better than George Gershwin. It was the rapid success with Broadway audiences and praise from theater critics that built Gershwin's reputation. This same success created an air of skepticism with audiences in the concert hall, despite the general appeal of works like

⁵ William Daly, "George Gershwin as Orchestrator," *The George Gershwin Reader*, ed. by Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (New York: Oxford, 2002), 176.

Rhapsody in Blue and *An American in Paris*. Following the premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue*, classical music critics viewed him as an interloper, capable of writing nothing more than novelty pieces for the concert hall while taking a break between writing Broadway shows.⁶ The critics were either for or against Gershwin. There was little in the way of middle ground, creating the problematic duality of Gershwin reception. Contemporary classical composers were equally likely to shun Gershwin. Perlis and Van Cleve state that

Because Gershwin was impossible to categorize (he called himself a “modern romantic”), it was easier for the concert world to ignore him than to explain him. Songwriters were puzzled at his turn to the concert stage; composers and critics were intolerant of his Tin Pan Alley connections.⁷

This idea of intolerance was not limited to New York. Gershwin was a celebrity wherever he traveled, and composers who struggled to maintain financial stability, or even gain recognition, were envious. Despite his enduring success with Broadway audiences, many still viewed Gershwin as the face of the workaday Tin Pan Alley composer – eager to please the masses with contrived tunes, saccharine lyrics, and predictable harmonic schemes. Walter Rimler relates a similar response in his Gershwin biography:

Meanwhile, the community of expatriate American composers was taking it as something of an affront that Gershwin would settle in Paris for a few weeks, stay at the best hotel, and attempt to capture the city with one of his crowd-pleasing compositions. Virgil Thomson, for instance, had been in

⁶ Gershwin earned a substantial income from his Broadway successes that ensured financial stability while he spent time away from the stage to devote himself to composing classical music.

⁷ Vivian Perlis and Libby Van Cleeve, *Composers' Voices from Ives to Ellington: An Oral History of American Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 189.

Paris a lot longer than most of the others, knew every Parisian alleyway, and was still, at thirty-two, a long way from solvency, much less fame and fortune.⁸

Despite his lack of formal training, Gershwin was sharing the stage, and sharing it with those who would hold that lacking of training against him. Gershwin attempted to dispel this popular albeit false impression regarding his formal training through his prowess in the concert hall. This was not an outwardly expressed mission for Gershwin, but it was implied through the war that was fought between his critics and supporters in the press.

Gershwin's studies in piano, theory, harmony, composition, and orchestration were hit and miss despite the fact these studies spanned more than half his life. He seldom remained with a single teacher for more than a few years, and his longest commitment to a given teacher never lasted more than four years. It is the stop-and-start of Gershwin's studies and the fact that they were all undertaken independently rather than as part of a musical institution that fueled his detractors. In 1945, Ira responded to the continuing attacks on his brother's training:

With these critics there is an utter disregard of the facts that George from the age of 13 or 14 never let up in his studies of so-called classical foundations and that by the time he was 30 or so could be considered a musicologist (dreadful word) of the first degree besides being a composer. When, in 1928, he went to see Nadia Boulanger in Paris about studying with her she turned him down on the grounds that there was nothing she could teach him. And she wasn't kidding because she was quoted in *Time* on the matter four or five years ago.⁹

⁸ Walter Rimler, *George Gershwin: An Intimate Portrait* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 31.

⁹ Edward Jablonski, *Gershwin* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 158.

Ira's posthumous defense of his brother was not taken seriously by musicologists until Gershwin scholarship changed in the 1980s. Half a century after Gershwin's death, musicologists finally seemed to be able to consider him with the objectivity that only the passage of such a length of time can afford. One of the questions that arose from this era of Gershwin studies is expressed by Starr:

While nobody has ever questioned his abilities as a pianist, nor the success of his self-education in the rough-and-tumble “school” of popular songwriting, it has often been wondered how – or even whether – a “great” composer for the concert hall or operatic stage could emerge, in the absence of formal academic training, from a background like Gershwin's.¹⁰

Larry Starr is part of the generation of musicologists that is answering that question with a resounding “yes” through the assertion that Gershwin's compositional skill and ability to create music that was accessible to any audience. This accessibility was somewhat elusive to Gershwin's contemporaries who were also attempting to create a new language for the concert hall. Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg had great respect for Gershwin's ability to communicate effectively with his audience without sacrificing the artistic intentions of his work. Schoenberg dedicated an essay to Gershwin in *Style and Idea*.¹¹ Walter Rimler describes how Berg and Gershwin met in Paris: “When Berg asked him to play some of music, Gershwin was embarrassed. Berg put him at ease, stating ‘Mr. Gershwin, music is music.’ When George returned to America, he brought the music of the [Berg's] *Lyric Suite* with him, as well as a signed photo of Berg, which he framed and displayed prominently in

¹⁰ Larry Starr, *George Gershwin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 7.

¹¹ Arnold Schoenberg, “George Gershwin,” *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg* (New York: St. Martins Press: 1975), 476.

his apartment.”¹² The endorsement of two members of the Second Viennese School provided Gershwin an international stamp of approval.

As the critical reception war raged on in the press, musicologists began their own struggle with classifying Gershwin, perhaps because his concert hall output is relatively small compared with his Tin Pan Alley songs and compositions for stage and screen. Whether this is because Gershwin was among the first composers to significantly contribute to both classical and popular forms is unclear. The concept of jazz influence and Gershwin’s lack of traditional compositional study cloud the issue. Aaron Copland composed across several classical and popular genres but he is classified as a classical composer who also wrote film music. Erich Korngold is a classical composer who moved to Hollywood at the behest of studio head Jack Warner. Leonard Bernstein is a composer of both classical and theatrical music and a well respected conductor who is credited with making classical music accessible to the populace through his use of radio and television, and he is equally considered among the classical and Broadway canons. Bernstein and Gershwin effectively suffer from the same kind of identity crisis: they do not fall so easily into these ready-made categories. As Charles Hamm states:

At a time when Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Bartók, and others were seen to be creating a radically new twentieth-century harmonic, formal, tonal, and instrumental language, Gershwin was writing tonal, triadic music, and shaping his pieces according to nineteenth-century formal structures.... Thus Gershwin’s compositions fit uneasily into the conceptual framework adopted by so many Western music historians and critics. Since all empirical evidence suggests that his music has been more central to the cultural life of the twentieth century than is revealed by this sort of analysis, one is forced to

¹² Rimler, 32.

question this way of thinking about music history, in connection with Gershwin and also in general.¹³

Hamm's point is that Gershwin cannot be pushed through the same sieve that musicologists use to organize composers prior to the twentieth century. With the rise of American popular music and the creation of new technology, a new breed of composer was created for which Gershwin was the prototype: a composer capable of creating music that is easily understood and appealing to the masses yet imbued with the formality and sense of tradition that the critics seemed more likely to praise. And the composer must do all of this while forming an individual style and a unique compositional language. *An American in Paris* sets the standard for the type of compositions expected from this new breed of composers through Gershwin's use of developing variations in a widely accessible tonal musical language.

Gershwin was also quick to point out when he thought a composer might be too reliant on tradition:

I might be asked why it is that such consummate musicians as Ernest Bloch, Leo Ornstein, and Aaron Copland have failed in their attempts at American music. It can be easily explained. All of these musicians were trained by Europeans; they were rigidly raised in European musical traditions. Once trained in such a tradition it is not the easiest thing in the world to shake it off. One becomes perpetually enslaved to it. Men like Bloch and Ornstein have been taught to think in terms of idioms employed by Brahms and Richard Strauss; Copland has been trained to think along the lines of Stravinsky and Schoenberg. The result, when they attempt to compose American music, is that their training sticks to them and their American music becomes diluted with their European traditions. Fortunately, neither Irving Berlin nor I were taught by European masters – and so we were the free men whereas all others were slaves. We could plunge wholeheartedly into this new culture that is America, we could absorb the spirit and tempo of American life and, at last,

¹³ Charles Hamm, *Putting Popular Music in Its Place* (New York: Cambridge University Press: 1995), 309.

we could express it, more or less, in our music because our music was as yet virgin and uninfluenced.¹⁴

Although Gershwin was influenced by Brahms and Schoenberg, even indirectly, this influence does not have a dogmatic impact on his music. He could adopt the ideas of master composers with less anxiety of being compared alongside them, despite the critics' best efforts. Gershwin was free to compose largely tonal music in an era when the bounds of tonality were not only routinely tested but entirely broken. He occasionally included some passages that featured polytonality, but overall his compositions, large and small, are almost entirely tonal.

Gershwin, Copland, Jazz, and Jewishness

The jazz community was equally ambivalent regarding Gershwin's excursions into the concert hall. The world had embraced jazz with open arms following the war. The swift rise in the genre's popularity provided opportunity for composers to disseminate the rhythmic and harmonic gestures indicative of jazz across the entire musical world. Consequently, this access created many applications of the term "jazz;" any composition that displayed a significant use of syncopated rhythms or blue notes could easily be labeled as "jazz influenced." American popular music was disseminated along with jazz and was equally influential. Elements of ragtime are present in Stravinsky's compositions. Charles Ives, Darius Milhaud, and Erik Satie directly quoted and manipulated popular tunes. Since Gershwin came of age in Tin Pan Alley, he would have had a deeper knowledge of popular

¹⁴ George Gershwin, "Fifty Years of American Music," *The George Gershwin Reader*, ed. by Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (New York: Oxford, 2002), 118-19.

music than jazz, and there exists a stronger connection to his Tin Pan Alley roots in his classical compositions. All of these elements appear in *An American in Paris*.

In fact, Gershwin and Ellington agreed on the idea that the term “jazz” was too broad and used too flippantly to be meaningful. The idea of the influence of jazz was even harder to define, as Gershwin pointed out:

It is difficult to determine what enduring values, esthetically, 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...In America this preferred rhythm is called jazz. Jazz is music; it uses the same notes that 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 the 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 future music in one form or another.¹⁵

Ellington and Gershwin also agreed that jazz was a distinctly American musical language that could be shared with the world, although neither composer could have foreseen the enduring appeal of their music. Publishers and concert promoters were also eager to capitalize on the popularity of jazz and so declared even the most superficial connections between concert music and jazz as a way to boost sales. In turn, the flippant application of the jazz label diluted the impact of jazz in the concert hall while simultaneously attracting a new audience. This influx would also have had an impact on the classical connoisseur and his or her acceptance of jazz along with its connotations and social implications. This acceptance

¹⁵ George Gershwin, “The Composer in the Machine Age,” *The George Gershwin Reader*, ed. by Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (New York: Oxford, 2002), 120-21.

or rejection of jazz influence is reflected directly in the critics' reception of *An American in Paris*.

The jazz that white audiences in the 1920s knew was a diluted form, almost unfamiliar to the African American artists who created it. This style of jazz was performed by bands like Paul Whiteman's. As Mary Herron Dupree points out, "While all writers acknowledged black roots for jazz, most were familiar only with jazz elements as performed by white musicians."¹⁶ In *The History of American Classical Music*, John Warthen Struble states that "as Gershwin began to collect critical accolades during the early 1920s, accolades written by white music critics who praised his innovative treatments of 'jazz,' it was entirely in the context of jazz as the term was understood by those critics."¹⁷ This watered down style was palatable to concert audiences and critics. Gershwin, though, had an unusual acquaintance with jazz. Charles Hamm explains,

Gershwin, more than any other composer (or critic, or historian) of his time, constantly sought out black musicians and listened to the widest possible range of black music. He knew Will Vodery, Lucky Roberts, Duke Ellington; he heard New York 'stride' pianists [such as Waller] play downtown, and often visited the Cotton Club and other spots in Harlem to hear the bands of Ellington and Cab Calloway; through his friendship with Carl Van Vechten, he heard Bessie Smith and other black singers perform at social gatherings; and while in South Carolina to work on *Porgy and Bess*, he heard and even participated in rural black church singing.¹⁸

¹⁶ Mary Herron Dupree, "'Jazz,' Critics, American Art Music in the 1920s," *The George Gershwin Reader*, ed. by Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (New York: Oxford, 2002), 124.

¹⁷ John Warthen Struble, *The History of American Classical Music: MacDowell Through Minimalism* (New York: Facts On File, 1995), 104.

¹⁸ Hamm, 311.

It is plausible that Gershwin's autodidactic capabilities allowed him to take in what he was hearing in these performances and catalog it to be used in his compositions. Genuine references are more often present in his songs and Broadway scores while the weakened references are heard in the concert works.

In MacDonald Smith Moore's *Yankee Blues: Musical Culture and American Identity*, additional cultural context is offered, based on the moral standards and style of living in New England at the dawn of the twentieth century. Moore observes that the

Native-born composers of emerging prominence in the twenties, born during the years 1895-1900, were diverse in every respect. Too many of them failed to pass through Columbia, Harvard, or Yale to become disciples of the centennial Yankees; some missed the beneficent touch of college altogether. They were ethnically, geographically, and aesthetically a motley crew.”¹⁹

In this diverse group, Moore includes William Grant Still, Roger Sessions, Howard Hanson, Virgil Thomson, Henry Cowell, Roy Harris, George Antheil, Aaron Copland, and Gershwin. The choice of lifestyle, education and training, and seeming lack of deference to the New England musical model was cause for great skepticism. Moore states, “Their lack of adherence to Victorian standard in life and art marked most of them as unfit to inherit the mantle of the Yankee musical mission.”²⁰ These composers embodied the idea that ethnic diversity and divergence from the late Romantic musical model were inextricably linked. The fact that these composers were collectively in search of a new and distinctly American sound

¹⁹ MacDonald Smith Moore, *Yankee Blues: Musical Culture and American Identity* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990), 129.

²⁰ Ibid., 130.

increased the disregard held by composers of the old guard, yet it was this search that led many composers to experiment within the musical language of jazz.

Carol Oja discusses the influence of jazz in conjunction with Gershwin, Copland, Still, and Antheil. Each of these composers premiered works that demonstrated elements of jazz in the late 1920s. Still and Antheil, however, are programmed less frequently than Gershwin, even while their works are considered exemplars of jazz-influenced concert music, and also modernism in the case of Antheil with works like *Ballet Mécanique* (1923-25). Oja explains that Gershwin was “kept in his place” as Copland and others shaped the American classical music landscape through the inspired guidance of Nadia Boulanger.²¹ The critical argument that eventually set Gershwin and Copland in opposition to one another was a matter of exclusivity. Gershwin was censured by classical music critics for incorporating elements of jazz while Copland was praised for elevating jazz out of the nightclub and into the concert hall.

Jazz was also defined in terms of the social characterizations rather than in strictly musical terms. Jazz was connected to African American and Jewish, specifically Russian-Jewish, ethnicities, both of which carried their own sociological baggage in the 1920s. A new connection to jazz was thus unavoidably created, most prominently by Gershwin and Copland – the appropriation of jazz gestures by Jewish composers. As Moore states, “Their critical and popular success attracted attention to their Jewishness, much of it adverse, almost all of it stereotypical.”²² Cultural stereotypes and connotations had an impact on Jewish

²¹ Carol Oja, *Making Music Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 356.

²² Moore, 131.

composers and how they were received by audiences. As an ethnic group that was grasping for a cultural foothold in America, many Jewish musicians were attracted to jazz, ragtime, and Tin Pan Alley because those genres were uniquely American. To compose in the fashion of the popular American trends or to perform the latest hits signified a point of arrival or inclusion in the American melting pot. Conversely, the white establishment associated these Jewish musicians with the cultural group from which they were borrowing – the African Americans, primarily those living and working in Harlem. This association combined the Jewish and African American communities into a single socioeconomic “other” that was separate from the majority in almost every facet of American life.

Whether Gershwin perceived this association as problematic is not clear. He was not an active participant in Jewish religious traditions. His social and professional circles frequently overlapped and tended to represent a broad cross-section of the artistic population in New York City and later Hollywood. The fact that black and white audiences maintained largely separate musical traditions created an American musical binary which was not dissimilar from that of the concert music-folk tradition binary that Europeans had continued to foster. Although jazz and popular music were evolving forms, the concert hall establishment largely considered them part of the American folk tradition rather than demonstrating the potential for contributing to the founding of the American musical tradition.

Critics Carl Van Vechten and Gilbert Seldes strongly championed the integration of jazz into the art music tradition as the embodiment of American culture. It is possible, however, that their motivation may have arisen from a pro-Jewish stance. For his own part, Van Vechten’s assertion that jazz should be treated in a folk nationalistic way was similar to

Antonín Dvořák's suggestions for the incorporation of the traditional music of the Native Americans. According to Nicholas Evans, "If jazz, a hybrid musical form, is distinctly American, and if Jews are jazz's most prominent creators, then Jews should be viewed as integral to – even most representative of – American identity."²³ Gershwin's music, particularly *Rhapsody in Blue*, was the epitome of this identity. Evans goes on to state:

Since racial discourses of the day closely associated Jews with blackness (a perception reinforced by Jews' performance of jazz), the Jewish figures' discourse resembles an attempt to turn blackness to Jews' advantage. In transforming jazz into fine art, these performers often sought to transform their racial status, making it more "proximate" to American whiteness than "distant" blackness.²⁴

Evans is demonstrating that in trying to make jazz more mainstream in American culture, musicians were attempting to disassociate jazz with race. Perhaps with *An American in Paris*, Gershwin was trying to shift jazz and its relative blues into the mainstream. It is also possible that Gershwin was looking to exploit the French connection. America's overall impression of France was still favorable, held over from the Great War. Although the French had not fully adopted a more progressive attitude toward the racial segregation that dominated the lives of black Americans, black musicians and their musical language was at the height of its popularity in Parisian nightlife. Those who opposed the idea of European influence in American music might have viewed this Parisian connection for composers like Gershwin and Copland as detrimental to the establishment of a formal American musical language separate from, but still similar to, the French and German traditions.

²³ Nicholas M. Evans, *Writing Jazz: Race, Nationalism, and Modern Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Garland, 2000), 96.

²⁴ Ibid., 97.

The major difference was in the approach each composer took in adapting jazz elements to suit their own needs: Gershwin came primarily from the Tin Pan Alley and Broadway traditions and Copland from the classical. While it was only for predominantly white audiences that the distinction was even necessary, the distinction between each composer's appropriations of jazz seemed to take on a life of its own. This distinction existed primarily in the press and opinions of the critics but was perpetuated by the programming choices and commissioning efforts of major orchestras for decades.

Regardless of their divergent paths, Copland and Gershwin had a great deal in common. Gershwin was born only two years prior to Copland. They were part of the next generation of composers seeking to assert American musical independence, along with Roger Sessions, Henry Cowell, and Virgil Thomson. Both Gershwin and Copland spent time in France and Latin America, and these sojourns are represented significantly in their compositions. Operas based on distinctly American themes and set in recognizable American towns were composed by both men, and each composed a single piano concerto.

It is not a simple matter of common influences that forces the pairing of Gershwin and Copland. In addition to Moore and Oja, scholars such as Larry Starr, Terry Teachout, Mary Herron DuPree, and Howard Pollack frequently discuss Copland and Gershwin in tandem or use one composer as a point of reference for the other. Pollack, author of biographies on both composers, outlines several striking similarities:

The very trajectory of their careers – from their urban landscapes of the mid-1920s, to a pull towards Yiddish culture in the late 1920s, to political satire in the early 1930s, to an interest in Latin and African-American folk music in the later 1930s – were remarkably parallel, so much so that we can

even guess at the shape of Gershwin's career had he lived, one of the most tantalizing questions in American music.²⁵

As Pollack aptly suggests, the parallels are strong, even reflecting a shared “intention to reflect in music the life around them, including, naturally, that of contemporary New York.”²⁶ For Gershwin, this musical depiction of life is developed rhythmically and is a vital element of any of his compositions. Regarding *An American in Paris* specifically, Gershwin’s use of the taxi horns was vital to this depiction, and in fact he scoured Paris for horns with appropriate pitch levels. For this inclusion of nontraditional instruments, Gershwin can also be considered a modernist. Like many within the modernist and ultra-modernist movements, Gershwin wanted to recreate a nonmusical environment through musical means. He succeeded in recreating the bustle of Paris with his orchestration, but then augmented that success through the use of the taxi horns.

Gershwin as Modernist

For modern audiences, Copland and Gershwin signify completely different aspects of American culture. Gershwin’s status today as a “pops” composer can represent a sense of nostalgia and sentimentality for older audiences. Copland is a nostalgic figure as well, but as a representation of the settlement of America and the ideals of the open West. This type of nostalgic connection is fraught with the complication that is the oversimplification of the emotions and actions of that era, effectively allowing Americans to whitewash what were realistically some of the most savage and brutal years in American history. Copland is

²⁵ Howard Pollack, “Copland, Gershwin, and the American Landscape,” *Copland Connotations: Studies and Interviews* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2002), 69.

²⁶ Ibid.

allowed to be universalized to the American experience because the wide open spacing of his music is analogous to the wide open spaces of a largely invented America, reinforcing the nostalgia for a “simpler time.” Gershwin, on the other hand, is not so easily universalized. His music immediately signifies a specific, and possibly singular, time and place in the American experience.

Instead, Gershwin can be universalized as an “urbanist,” and this falls in line with Gershwin’s ideas of what American music must represent. The rural-urban dichotomy as part of American life was most significant following the premiere of *An American in Paris*, at the beginning of the 1930s. As America struggled through the crash of the stock market and the beginning of the Great Depression, the division between urban and rural societies and opportunities was strong. The 1920s was a decade of urban expansion and was accompanied by the scandalous nightlife found in the dance halls and nightclubs in larger cities, especially in New York, whereas the 1930s represented a forced return to a simple life as a result of economic insecurity and a renewed westward American migration in search of greater employment opportunities.

The evolution of popular culture and popular opinion regarding Gershwin often implies his compositions are “sentimental favorites.” This implication holds true for his inclusion in The Great American Songbook along with Cole Porter, Jerome Kern, and Irving Berlin. This does not hold true for Gershwin’s concert works. The imposition of the “sentimental” label by the audience is problematic for an accurate reception history of Gershwin. Friedrich Schiller’s use of the word “sentimental” as applied to poetry represented a hyper-awareness of the poetic traditions and a poet’s understanding of his or her place

within a chosen tradition.²⁷ When this definition of sentimental is extended to music, this label can be applied to Schoenberg for his acute sensitivity to the tonal tradition and the resulting motivation to create the twelve-tone method which would secure his place within Western music. “Naïve,” in Schiller’s application, represents not a lack of awareness of tradition but rather a disregard for that tradition or a need to ignore it entirely. Schiller might consider Gershwin naïve not for his lack of knowledge or traditional training but for his willingness to compose his own music in a modern romantic style (Gershwin’s own description) without feeling beholden to its boundaries.²⁸

Following the premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue*, Gershwin was also considered a modernist for his infusion of jazz elements into his scores. The opening clarinet glissando signaled the modern sound of jazz that Whiteman wanted his audience to hear. Gershwin was thrust into the American modernist movement whether or not he wanted to be. *Rhapsody in Blue* was first performed two weeks following the New York premiere of *Le Sacre du printemps* on January 31, 1924. According to Oja,

Not only was *Rhapsody in Blue* the first American concert work by a member of the younger generation to make a substantial impact, but its premiere occurred almost simultaneously with a major event in the transmission of European modernism to New York. Not surprisingly, *Le Sacre du printemps* defined the framework for *Rhapsody in Blue*’s reception, causing it to be seen as an example of both symphonic modernism and symphonic jazz.²⁹

²⁷ Friedrich Schiller, “On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry,” trans. by William F. Wertz, Jr., The Schiller Institute, http://www.schillerinstitute.org/transl/schiller_essays/naive_sentimental-1.html (accessed March 25, 2014).

²⁸ Perlis and Van Cleeve, 189.

²⁹ Carol Oja, “Gershwin and the Modernists of the 1920s,” *Musical Quarterly* 78:4 (Winter 1994): 652.

This statement frames the argument whether Gershwin can be considered a modernist. A desire to be considered as such does not appear among the many biographical accounts. Critics of the era engaged in a twentieth-century version of the *Querelle des Bouffons* regarding Gershwin: some were impressed by the vitality and wit of his music and heralded the composer as America's answer to Stravinsky, while others derided his reliance on the modern elements of jazz and popular music. If Ives' music had been more well known at the time *An American in Paris* was first performed, perhaps together he and Gershwin might have made a stronger statement in support of their inclusion of popular music.

Skepticism about Gershwin's ability as a composer was reinforced by his lack of traditional training as a composer and pianist. His ability to retain information as an autodidact allowed for some elements of his compositional studies to be abbreviated or even deemed unnecessary. Gershwin did in fact study composition with several teachers. Early instruction began with Charles Hambitzer in theory and perhaps some harmony and composition. At Hambitzer's encouragement, Gershwin began composition studies with Edward Kilenyi, Sr. This training continued off and on between 1915 and 1923.³⁰ Susan Neimoyer's research and documentation of these studies provides indisputable evidence for the traditional approach Kilenyi used in his instruction. Gershwin kept notebooks full of his part-writing exercises, harmonic studies, and notes on orchestration. These notebooks are now housed in the Gershwin collection at the Library of Congress. In 1921, Gershwin also took two summer music courses at Columbia University with Rossetter G. Cole: Elementary

³⁰ The exact dates of Gershwin's time with Kilenyi vary among scholars. Susan Neimoyer offers a thorough investigation into this matter in her dissertation as does Howard Pollack in *George Gershwin: His Life and Work*.

Orchestration and Nineteenth-Century Romanticism in Music. He then began his studies with Rubin Goldmark, also an early teacher of Copland. Gershwin was not enamored with Goldmark's demeanor, and left his studies after approximately a year.

During his extended trip to Paris in the 1920s, Gershwin approached Maurice Ravel and Nadia Boulanger in an attempt to secure a place with either composer as a composition student. Ravel politely refused Gershwin's application, claiming that the commercial success that Gershwin enjoyed was proof that Ravel should be studying with the American rather than the other way around. Boulanger believed that any impact her teachings might have had on Gershwin's musical style could have a detrimental effect on his compositions. She claimed his popularity and success were the hallmarks of a fully formed musical identity that did not need further instruction. Gershwin was thus excluded from his contemporaries in Paris: Copland, Virgil Thomson, Harris, and Antheil. A future appeal to Schoenberg yielded a similar response but the two became close friends and remained so until Gershwin's death. Although there is no direct reference to the creation of *An American in Paris* as Gershwin's response to this rejection, that is a possible motivation for its creation. Likewise, it is also possible that *An American in Paris* reflect Gershwin's emotional state at the time he arrived in Paris, in anticipation of securing his reputation as a classical composer by studying with an internationally renowned teacher. Gershwin's rejections by Ravel and Boulanger may be represented in the Blues section of *An American in Paris*. His return to a more optimistic outlook and desire to move forward, although still tainted with disappointment, may be reflected in the final section of *An American in Paris* where the Paris and Blues Themes are frequently juxtaposed.

Gershwin fully acknowledged his lack of traditional musical training, both to his benefit and detriment with the critics. Ironically, the success of *Rhapsody in Blue* and his popular stage shows had provided him an international reputation that now prevented him from making progress toward accomplishing his personal goals of writing serious music for the concert hall. Gershwin was disappointed, but chose to view these rejections as a confirmation that he was indeed on the appropriate path toward success with every audience that heard his music.

Gershwin's final composition teacher was Joseph Schillinger, whom he may have been introduced to by Henry Cowell. Gershwin worked with Schillinger between 1932 and 1936, and it was during this period that he composed *Porgy and Bess*. Gershwin felt he needed a new approach to freshen up his songs. Schillinger's mathematically based method of composition provided Gershwin a different way to assess how he put music together. Several jazz musicians also studied with Schillinger, including Eubie Blake, Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, John Lewis, Glenn Miller, and Gerry Mulligan.³¹ The degree of influence that Schillinger ultimately had on Gershwin is unclear and accounts vary greatly. During this time with Schillinger, Gershwin studied all the aspects of music theory, harmony, and form that would typically be presented in a college freshman-level music theory course. But Schillinger also exposed Gershwin to polytonality, polymodality, and pandiatonicism. Whether or not Schillinger had a direct impact on any specific composition, Gershwin gained a great deal from his instruction. In sharing some insights into the Gershwin-Schillinger

³¹ Howard Pollack, *George Gershwin: His Life and Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 129.

relationship, fellow student Vernon Duke remembered the following conversation during a rehearsal for *Porgy and Bess*:

I went to Boston with George for the tryout. At the orchestra rehearsal he beamed with delight at the well-organized sounds that emerged from the pit. I was sitting quietly in a seat in the last row of the orchestra when George startled me by suddenly appearing from the back and grabbing me by the shoulder. “Get this!” he whispered fiercely. “Just listen to those overtones!” The overtones were there all right, but what was infinitely more important, clear orchestral writing was there too. The tunes we all listened to around George’s piano...were now clothed in appropriate orchestral garb and shone with a new and dazzling brilliance. The “Schillinger slavery” brought an unexpected freshness to George’s musical utterances.³²

With Schillinger’s method, Gershwin found a way to create with a speed and efficiency that he had not yet experienced. This renewed confidence is immediately heard in the opera.

The analysis of *An American in Paris* demonstrates that Gershwin’s music can proudly stand alongside the compositions of great symphonists like Brahms and Beethoven. Schoenberg considered the tradition of composers utilizing developing variation as a “continuous and open-ended” trend that dates as far back as Bach even though his published discussions were primarily based on Brahms and Beethoven.³³ If a critic had observed that Gershwin was part of that tradition, he would likely have been considered as reliant on the past or looking backward rather than attempting to capture something new in his music. But, if a musicologist had made this observation during his lifetime, would perceptions of Gershwin have been changed?

³² Vernon Duke, “Gershwin, Schillinger, and Dukelesky,” *The Musical Quarterly* 75:4 (Winter 1994), 123-24.

³³ Nicole Grimes, “The Schoenberg/Brahms Critical Tradition Reconsidered,” *Music Analysis* 31:2 (2012): 130.

Schoenberg was certainly aware of the weight of the German tradition. While he was waging his own battle with the state of tonal music, Schoenberg was delving into the methods of the previous generation. Through his essays and radio addresses, Schoenberg lifted the historical veil of secrecy on the genius of master composers like Brahms and Beethoven. This exposure inspired other scholars, like Theodor Adorno, to find new applications for developing variation. As Walter Frisch explains:

One of the first and most forceful commentators to claim a role for developing variation in the larger dimension was Theodor Adorno, whose intimate acquaintance with Schoenberg and his music extended over many years, both in Europe and the United States. In a long essay written in 1940-41 and later incorporated in *Philosophy of New Music*, Adorno elevates Schoenberg's technical observations to a more abstract level. His principal goal is to show how Schoenberg was the first twentieth-century composer to grasp and carry out the "historical tendencies" of Western art music. One of those tendencies is the continuous transformation or reshaping of musical material (an activity equated with the "autonomous aesthetic subjectivity" of the composer), which begins to dominate the external form (equated with objectivity).³⁴

If Adorno viewed Schoenberg as having obtained a full grasp of the continuity of Western art music, then Schoenberg should also be ideally placed to endorse Gershwin's position within the tradition. Gershwin is responding to Adorno's "historical tendency" to continuously transform musical material with *An American in Paris*.

In fact, Schoenberg did make this type of observation regarding Gershwin. During his time in Hollywood, Gershwin developed a strong friendship with Schoenberg. In 1938, the year after Gershwin's death, Schoenberg wrote, "Many musicians do not consider George Gershwin a serious composer. But they should understand that, serious or not, he is a

³⁴ Walter Frisch, *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1984), 19.

composer – that is, a man who lives in music and expresses everything, serious or not, sound or superficial, by means of music, because it is his native language.”³⁵ Schoenberg’s point was that the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow music was largely superficial, meant to classify composers and their music for the ease of determining acceptability and environment. Schoenberg continues:

It seems to me beyond doubt that Gershwin was an innovator. What he has done with rhythm, harmony and melody is not merely style. It is fundamentally different from the mannerism of many a serious composer... His melodies are not products of a combination, nor of a mechanical union, but they are units and could therefore not be taken to pieces... I do not speak here as a musical theorist, nor am I a critic, and hence I am not forced to say whether history will consider Gershwin a kind of Johann Strauss or Debussy, Offenbach or Brahms, Lehár or Puccini. But I know he is an artist and a composer; he expressed musical ideas; and they were new – as is the way in which he expressed them.³⁶

Schoenberg is comparing Gershwin to those composers whose work is based on formulaic creation. The irony here is that Gershwin had been accused of the same in regards to his concert works. These accusations were borne out of his creative output from his Tin Pan Alley days as well as his studies with Schillinger.

Schoenberg was not alone in his posthumous assessment of Gershwin. Hans Keller firmly believed that Gershwin was undervalued as a composer because of his talent for songwriting. In 1962, Keller wrote:

In a way, he [Gershwin] is, unintentionally, more exclusive than the atonal Schoenberg, who is rarely first whistled and then discarded. In other words, where Schoenberg has to face incomprehension, Gershwin has to suffer

³⁵ Arnold Schoenberg, “George Gershwin,” *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. by Leonard Stein, trans. by Leo Black (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1975), 476.

³⁶ Ibid., 476-77.

misunderstanding. ... Preoccupation with style at the expense of substance is the curse of the age on both sides of the contemporary cleft. ... I would go further and say that while I consider Webern a genius and a minor master, I feel that Gershwin is more of a genius and more of a minor master. My reasons are simple. Webern is more primitive compositionally and more restricted emotionally. ... Gershwin's so-called simple-mindedness is an illusion created by his popular style. But if you get down to substance, to emotional experience as it expresses itself in musically rational structure, if you analyse one of the more complex Gershwin tunes and, alongside, a Webern piece of comparable length and proportions, you will find, using the same terms of analytic reference, that you need about twice as music space for the Gershwin as for the Webern. ... When teaching composition, it is, in fact, useful concretely to compare Webern's complicated simplicity with Gershwin's simple complexity.³⁷

Keller clearly valued Gershwin's ability to express the nonmusical through music and was less concerned with the more academic or objective approach that Webern clearly favored. Keller's assessment conveniently dovetails with Gershwin's desire to express his own experiences through his music rather than be beholden to a specific movement or aesthetic. What Keller valued in Gershwin's style is derived directly from Gershwin's definition of American music, and the directness of expression that is characteristic of all Gershwin's compositions, especially *An American in Paris*.

Gershwin as American

In his article for *The Musical Quarterly* in 1932, Randall Thompson labeled Gershwin and Copland as nationalists for proving "once and for all that jazz and larger forms are not incompatible."³⁸ Thompson would have been well acquainted with Gershwin's major

³⁷ Hans Keller, "Gershwin's Genius," *The Musical Times* 103:1437 (November 1962): 763-64.

³⁸ Randall Thompson, "The Contemporary Scene in American Music," *Musical Quarterly* 18:1 (January 1932), 11.

concert works throughout the 1920s, and well positioned to offer his assessment. This is a rare comment on Gershwin's musical legacy. The application of the "nationalist" label is surprisingly rare given Gershwin's strong adherence to his own definition of American music. Thompson's labeling of Copland falls directly in line with the composer's reception since before World War II. The inclusion of Gershwin under the nationalist umbrella is less common although not unacceptable. Musicologists discuss frequently Gershwin in terms of his ability to bridge the gap between highbrow and lowbrow audiences, consideration of *Porgy and Bess* as a folk opera or even as an American grand opera, and regarding his contributions to American musical theater. All of these topics have nationalist undertones but the label "nationalist" is seldom applied. If nationalism in music is defined as a shared sonic experience, a common musical language containing specific melodic or rhythmic characteristics, then jazz is an American musical language and those compositions that reflect influence of jazz are considered nationalist compositions. In this sense, Gershwin is both a nationalist and a modernist regardless of the harmonic or structural schemes employed within his compositions. By extension, *An American in Paris* can be labeled as both a nationalist and modernist composition.

Starr firmly believes that Gershwin's status as a master of the Broadway musical should more fully inform analysis and understanding of his concert works. When viewed through this Broadway-based filter, Gershwin's concert compositions fully reflect his gift for melody and energetic rhythms as well as Gershwin's efforts to infuse the concert hall with American vernacular music. Starr states:

A Broadway perspective invites recognition of the composer's telling and virtuosic fusion of American popular idioms with the forms and stylistic elements of European art music. Rather than simply ignoring the obvious

elements of Broadway style clearly present in works such as *Rhapsody in Blue* or *An American in Paris* – or worse, feeling that these elements should occasion excuses or embarrassment – the Broadway perspective encourages us to celebrate the remarkable was in which Gershwin brought the American vernacular into the concert hall. Viewed in this light, the concert works become themselves the productions of a masterful showman, who was developing through his Broadway musicals an increasingly sophisticated sense of how to hold an audience's attention successfully over an extended time span.³⁹

Starr's belief is that Gershwin's musical legacy represents a composer who chose to ignore the concert hall-Broadway schism rather than reinforce the duality, something that Leonard Bernstein struggled with during his own career.

Hamm and Starr set an important challenge to musicologists: whether or not to classify composers who did not or do not classify themselves? Twenty-first century composers who write within multiple genres are often more sought after because of the degree of flexibility and wide variety of experience they can bring to any project. This admiration was not freely offered to Gershwin in quite the same way as Copland or Bernstein, but Gershwin may have benefitted more from this compositional flexibility had he lived past the age of thirty-nine.

³⁹ Starr, xv.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Gershwin's *An American in Paris* fits comfortably under Antcliffe's definition of a symphonic poem, which asserts that "a symphonic poem is a piece of music in one or more movements written for orchestra [...] based upon ideas not in themselves essentially musical and constructed on the principles of theme-transformation. *An American in Paris* is a symphonic piece in a single movement, based on a musical representation of life in Paris, constructed on the principles of developing variation. Gershwin's genius lies within his ability to transform multiple themes across the span of a single movement while his music remains accessible to a wide variety of audiences.

The general deviation within the symphonic poem genre is the degree to which each composer allows the programmatic elements to control the structure of the composition. With *An American in Paris*, Gershwin did have a loose narrative framework in mind as he composed, but it was really Deems Taylor who developed that narrative and brought it to the forefront of the composition's early reception. While other composers might create the narrative first and the music later, Gershwin's approach was exactly the reverse; in fact, much of Gershwin's music was instead created as an immediate extension of his personal experiences. He may have wandered the streets of Paris in the late 1920s, jumping between taxis and watching young couples in the street cafes. Since Gershwin never married, it is

possible that the “boy meets girl” storyline that he and Taylor discussed was more personal than originally thought.¹

Gershwin joined his fellow composers as part of the tradition of developing variation, a tradition that Schoenberg claimed can be traced back as far as Bach.² As part of this long tradition, Gershwin aligns with more tonally conservative composers despite the modern influences of jazz and popular music clearly evident in his compositions. It is the melodic genius and rhythmic vitality on display in his compositions, large and small, that support the elevation of Gershwin from the darker corners of the Western musical canon. Schoenberg identified Gershwin as the innovator he was for uniting the “highbrow” and “lowbrow” idioms into a unique and modern musical language.

The analysis of *An American in Paris* bears out Gershwin’s innovations. What Schoenberg considered progressive in Gershwin’s music was almost immediately considered passé by his critics. Even though the composition is rooted in triadic harmonies, Schoenberg considered Gershwin an innovator because of his ability to cast together melody, rhythm, and harmony as a unified whole rather than weld these individual elements together as other composers must do. The music meanders through several keys, but never wanders too far from the tonal center present at the beginning and end of the score. From F major, the furthest Gershwin traveled was B major, and that was only a brief passage of three measures as part of his variations of the Blues theme. Despite the traditional approach to harmony, the

¹ The idea of “boy meets girl” could stem from Gershwin’s long affair with Kay Swift. Although the two never married, their relationship carried on for several years.

² Nicole Grimes, “The Schoenberg/Brahms Critical Tradition Reconsidered,” *Music Analysis* 31:2 (2012): 130.

music is hardly uninteresting. Gershwin's gift for uniting a well-crafted melody with energetic rhythms is demonstrated throughout this composition, even in the rubato of the Blues section.

During his lifetime Gershwin was simultaneously identified as a modernist, a nationalist, a songwriter, a jazz symphonist, and a Broadway composer. The problem musicologists have had in classifying Gershwin over the last eighty years seems obvious. Gershwin scholars since Edward Jablonski have been less concerned with classifying Gershwin and more proactive about portraying him in general terms. In spite of his tragically short lifespan, Gershwin produced an astonishing amount of music. A recent trend among scholars has been to divide his output into categories and treat each academically. This seems to be the best solution, for in this process, musicologists are not limited strictly to the aspects of the genre at hand, but are free to examine how one Gershwin composition may have influenced another.³ In order to obtain the best understanding of Gershwin's place in the canon, he must be considered with a new approach. As musicologists find new methods of investigation into Gershwin's life and works, he will continue to gain the respect from scholars that the audiences of his day gave so freely.

³ Larry Starr's book provides an excellent example of this approach. See pp. 8-9 of Chapter 1.

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VITA

Andrea Lynn Fowler was born on December 30, 1977, in St. Paul, Minnesota. She attended public school in Urbandale, Iowa, and graduated from Urbandale High School in 1996. She received music and academic scholarships to Missouri Western State University in St. Joseph, Missouri. Andrea graduated cum laude in 2000 with a Bachelor of Science in Music Education.

After teaching high school choir for a year, Andrea attended Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri as a graduate teaching assistant in voice. She was awarded the Master of Arts degree in Vocal Performance in 2003. Following graduation, Andrea married her husband, Brad, and relocated to Liberty, Missouri where their daughter, Aislinn, was born in 2009. She served as the vocal music accompanist for the junior high and high school choral program in Kearney, Missouri from 2005 until 2011. During this time, she maintained a private voice studio and her students consistently earned Superior “I” ratings at district and state contests.

In 2011, Andrea began attending the University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory of Music and Dance. Since 2011, she has served as a Features intern with the Kansas City *Star*, the graduate assistant of programming at the Women’s Center, graduate teaching assistant for the Conservatory, and is the graduate student representative on the Chancellor’s Advisory Board to the Women’s Center. She also serves as the program annotator for the Bach Aria Soloists.

Andrea is a member of College Music Society and the Society for American Music. She presented a paper on Amy Beach for the 2012 College Music Society Great Plains Regional Conference, and participated in a poster presentation on Paul Creston at the 2013 Society for American Music National Conference. Andrea plans to complete work toward her Ph.D. in Musicology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.