

AMERICAN CLASSICS



**GERSHWIN**

**Rhapsody in Blue**

**Strike Up the Band  
Overture**

**Promenade**

**Catfish Row**

**Orion Weiss, Piano**

**John Fullam, Clarinet**

**Buffalo Philharmonic  
Orchestra**

**JoAnn Falletta**

**NAXOS**

## George Gershwin (1898-1937)

**Strike Up the Band – Overture • Rhapsody in Blue • Promenade • Catfish Row**

### Strike Up the Band – Overture

During the early 1920s in New York City, as jazz and pizzazz topped the charts and filled nightclubs and theaters from Broadway to Harlem, a song-plugger from Brooklyn was poised to fire up The Great White Way like never before. His name was George Gershwin, a wunderkind with a talent Big as the Apple. His signature style was marked by a mélange of alluring tunes and the heartbeats of blues and ragtime, just right for the Zeitgeist of New York. In sum, in a lifetime far too short, the creative wealth which emerged from his pen was peerless for his time, and remains so yet today.

After its revision in 1929, with reworked lyrics by his brother Ira, George Gershwin's *Strike Up the Band* became a flashy hit on Broadway. Based on a storyline by George S. Kaufman, the musical was a spoof on international politics and big business as the United States went to war against Switzerland about who made the best chocolate. In addition to the title song, the other big hit from the show was the all-time favorite, *I've Got a Crush On You*. The current *Overture* was thoroughly rescored for full orchestra by American arranger Don Rose in the early 1970s, with lime-light instrumental colors and march-time rhythms to the fore.

### Rhapsody in Blue

A little conspiracy lies behind the genesis of *Rhapsody in Blue*. The piece was requested by the popular New York cabaret bandsman and impresario Paul Whiteman, who wanted a snappy showpiece for a concert at Broadway's Aeolian Hall on February 12, 1924. A bit



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like Diaghilev, Whiteman had a wizard's instinct for an exceptional star on the rise, and he was certain that 25-year-old George Gershwin was a man on the ascent. Moreover, Whiteman was spot-on to guess the world was ready for a jazz- inspired concert piece for piano. And when Gershwin demurred and replied that he knew little about writing for orchestra, Whiteman was ready: American composer Ferde Grofé was standing by to score the orchestration.

Gershwin was reticent mostly because his full energy was focused on the première of his new musical titled *Sweet Little Devil*, scheduled for a trial opening in Boston. Aside from a few passing sketches, he had no time to devote to the new *Rhapsody*. Fortunately, the trip to Boston put his Muse on track. Gershwin noted:

“It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattely-bang that is often so stimulating to a composer – I frequently hear music in the very heart of noise – and there I suddenly heard – and even saw on paper – the complete construction of the *Rhapsody*, from beginning to end. I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America – of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our blues, of our metropolitan madness. By the time I reached Boston I had a definite plot for the piece, as distinguished from its actual substance.”

Although *Rhapsody in Blue* broke away from the formality of the great showcase concertos for piano and orchestra, the departure was not at the expense of rich themes and keyboard panache. It all boils down to the issue of style, simple as that. From the familiar deep trill of the clarinet to the punchy B-flat chord at the end, the jazzy motif is tart and true, with lyricism and virtuosity served up in full measure. (About the famous upward glissando played by the clarinet at the beginning of the piece, Gershwin carefully



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rehearsed the effect with Whiteman's lead clarinetist, Ross Gorman, who was well-known for his jazz and dixieland improvisations.)

Beyond the charmed esprit of the music, we should note that the keyboard role requires keen facility from the soloist, who must blend the soul of jazz with fleet technical prowess. (As an aside, we are fortunate to have Gershwin's own recording of the *Rhapsody*, made on punched-paper piano rolls in 1925, just before the dawn of electronic recording. The rolls reveal that Gershwin tossed off the piece in 'record time,' brighter in tempo than most of the up-beat interpretations we hear today.)

Finally, we have this ultimate compliment to the upstart from Tin Pan Alley: with Gershwin at the piano for the première of *Rhapsody in Blue*, the audience that evening included composers Sergey Rachmaninov, Igor Stravinsky and John Philip Sousa, violinists Fritz Kreisler, Jascha Heifetz and Mischa Elman, and the conductors Leopold Stokowski and Willem Mengelberg – a gallery par excellence!

## Blue Promenade

Gershwin was a master tunesmith whose celebrity extended across the nation, and Hollywood took note straightaway with a commission to write music for the film *Delicious*, released in 1931. The composer later blended the score into his *Rhapsody No. 2* (Naxos American Classics: Gershwin, 8.559705).

Returning to California in 1936, Gershwin wrote sound-track music for two films starring Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire: *Damsel in Distress* and *Shall We Dance*. The latter was released in 1937 by RKO Radio Pictures and features a delightful screen sequence known as "Walk the Dog." The scene was filmed over one of Gershwin's savvy 'trip-along' tunes. Sadly, the music turned out to be the composer's final instrumental piece.

Shortly after his death, Ira Gershwin retrieved the music from the film archives and had it reconstructed as a stand-alone concert piece titled *Promenade*. One of the several



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settings of this now-popular tune is the current version for clarinet and orchestra, a quaint mix of orchestral timbres and licorice-stick jazz.

For reference, as a dashing and dapper New Yorker, George Gershwin fit the creative milieu of Los Angeles like a honeybee on a sunflower. Most notable was his friendship with Arnold Schönberg, with whom he shared tennis in the morning and painting in the afternoon. (They were both aficionados of the brush and easel, and each produced self-portraits. For extra measure, George painted a new portrait of Arnold).

## Catfish Row: Suite from Porgy and Bess

Early critics were very uneasy about the appeal of Gershwin's first (and only) opera, *Porgy and Bess*, which had its première at Broadway's Alvin Theater on October 10, 1935. Anticipating the controversy, Gershwin had described his effort as a *Folk Opera*. But high-brow critics were determined to resist. The opera's marvelous tunes were just too catchy to be trusted, especially since the sassy/jazzy settings came from an iconoclast New Yorker who was simply too empathic with common folks.

Gershwin offered a defense:

“It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattely-bang that is often so stimulating to a composer – I frequently hear music in the very heart of noise – and there I suddenly heard – and even saw on paper – the complete construction of the *Rhapsody*, from beginning to end. I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America – of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our blues, of our metropolitan madness. By the time I reached Boston I had a definite plot for the piece, as distinguished from its actual substance.”<sup>1</sup>



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Dear George had no need to worry: *Ars longa, vita brevis* – Art is long, life is short. In three acts, *Porgy and Bess* is based on a play by DuBose Heyward, who produced the libretto in collaboration with Ira Gershwin.

During the last two years of his life, Gershwin was much in demand to perform as a soloist in his own *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Concerto in F*. At the same time, word traveled fast about the wonderful tunes in *Porgy*, and rather than performing them as solo encores, he decided to offer a concert suite derived from the opera. The suite has been restored by composer Steven D. Bowen who writes:

“Between January 21, 1936 and January 20, 1937 Gershwin conducted his new suite exactly ten times. After his passing the score found its way into storage at the Beverly Hills home of Ira, where it remained unseen for over twenty years. In 1958 Ira re-titled the score as *Catfish Row* to distinguish it from another well-known concert suite from *Porgy* by arranger Robert Russell Bennett.”<sup>2</sup>

Gershwin devised the suite in five orchestral tableaux with an ear for contrasting moods. The first movement, *Catfish Row*, sets the scene on the waterfront ghetto of former slaves in Charleston, South Carolina. The curtain opens with madcap, fiery strings from the downbeat of the original Overture, and continues to the bluesy, honkytonk piano scene with Jasbo (Jazbo) Brown, followed by America’s favorite lullaby, *Summertime*, in a lovely rendering for solo violin.

*Porgy Sings* offers a lush souvenir of two well-known tunes from Act II, *I got plenty of nothin’* and *Bess, You is my Woman Now*. The middle movement, *Fugue*, is a snapshot from Act III, depicting the angst after Porgy kills Crown. The urgent music may remind listeners of a similar moment in Bernstein’s *West Side Story*. The fourth movement,



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*Hurricane*, is a reprise of the tonal tempest from Act II, which Gershwin conjured with the whirlwind dash of a seascape artist. The Finale, *Good Mornin' Sistuh!*, is taken from the opera's closing scene, and includes tuneful recaps before the curtain closes with Porgy's *Oh Lawd, I'm on My Way* – S'Wonderful!

**Edward Yadzinski**



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<sup>1</sup> Gershwin wrote for *The New York Times*; p.329 in *George Gershwin: A Study in American Music* by Isaac Goldberg, 1958 by Frederick Ungar Publishing.

<sup>2</sup> From Gershwin's 'seminal account'; p.297 in *George Gershwin: His Life and Work* by Howard Pollack, 2006 by University of California Press.

## Orion Weiss

Pianist Orion Weiss holds a leading position among American musicians of his generation. His impressive list of awards includes the Classical Recording Foundation's Young Artist of the Year Award, the Gilmore Young Artist Award, an Avery Fisher Career Grant, the Gina Bachauer Scholarship at The Juilliard School and the Mieczysław Munz Scholarship.

He has performed with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra at Tanglewood, Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, and in summer concerts with the New York Philharmonic. As a recitalist and chamber musician, he has appeared across the United States at venues and festivals including Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center, the Ravinia Festival, the Bard Music Festival, and Spivey Hall. A native of Lyndhurst, OH, Orion Weiss attended the Cleveland Institute of Music, where he studied with Paul Schenly. He graduated from The Juilliard School, where he studied with Emanuel Ax.

**For more information, please visit [www.orionweiss.com](http://www.orionweiss.com)**



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## John Fullam

John Fullam, Principal Clarinetist of the Buffalo Philharmonic, holds Bachelor and Master of Music degrees from The Juilliard School, where he was a scholarship student of Joseph Allard, and a Diploma from the Mozarteum Akademie in Salzburg, Austria. He has appeared at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center, the Marlboro Festival, the Amalfi Coast Festival, the Tanglewood Festival, Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, and has collaborated with Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Eugene Ormandy, Pablo Casals, Frederica von Stade, Rudolf Serkin, Franco Ferrara, and the London Festival Ballet. John Fullam has appeared on National Public Radio and Television in the United States, South America, and the Far East. He can also be heard on the Marlboro Recording Society Series, the Pro Arte, Beau Fleuve, Mode, and the MarkMasters labels. He has been Professor of Clarinet for the Eastman School of Music and the Boston Conservatory.



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## Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra

Founded in 1935, the GRAMMY® Award-winning Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, under the direction of Music Director JoAnn Falletta, is Buffalo's leading cultural ambassador and presents more than 120 Classics, Pops and Youth Concerts each year. Since 1940, the orchestra's permanent home has been Kleinhans Music Hall, a National Historic Landmark, designed by Eliel and Eero Saarinen, and



one of the finest concert halls in the United States. The BPO has toured widely across the United States, Canada and Europe, including the Florida Friends Tour with JoAnn Falletta in March 2010. The BPO performed at Carnegie Hall as a participant in the *Spring For Music* festival in 2013, as one of five orchestras selected from a national field. This was the orchestra's 24th appearance at Carnegie Hall and its first since its performance there under JoAnn Falletta in June 2004. Over the decades, the BPO has matured in stature under some leading conductors, including William Steinberg, Josef Krips, Lukas Foss, Michael Tilson Thomas, Maximiano Valdés, Semyon Bychkov and Julius Rudel. During the tenure of JoAnn Falletta the BPO has rekindled its distinguished history of radio broadcasts and recordings, including the release of 24 new CDs of a highly diverse repertoire on the Naxos and Beau Fleuve labels. The Philharmonic's Naxos recording of composer John Corigliano's *Mr. Tambourine Man: Seven Poems of Bob Dylan* (8.559331), featuring soprano Hila Plitmann, won GRAMMYS® in two categories of the three for which it was nominated: Classical Vocal Performance and Classical Contemporary Composition.

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## JoAnn Falletta

JoAnn Falletta serves as Music Director of the Buffalo Philharmonic and Virginia Symphony in the United States and Principal Conductor of the Ulster Orchestra in Northern Ireland. She has guest conducted over a hundred orchestras in North America, and many of the most prominent orchestras in Europe, Asia, South America and Africa and is the Principal Guest Conductor of the Phoenix Symphony and Brevard Music Center of North Carolina. Recipient of the Seaver/National Endowment for the Arts Conductors Award, winner of the Stokowski Competition, and the Toscanini, Ditson and Bruno Walter conducting awards, Falletta has also received eleven ASCAP awards and serves on the U.S. National Council on the Arts. A champion of American music, she has presented nearly five hundred works by American composers including over one hundred world premières. Her Naxos recordings include the double GRAMMY® Award-winning disc of works by John Corigliano and GRAMMY® nominated discs of works of Tyberg, Dohnányi, Fuchs, Schubert, Respighi, Gershwin, Hailstork and Holst.



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