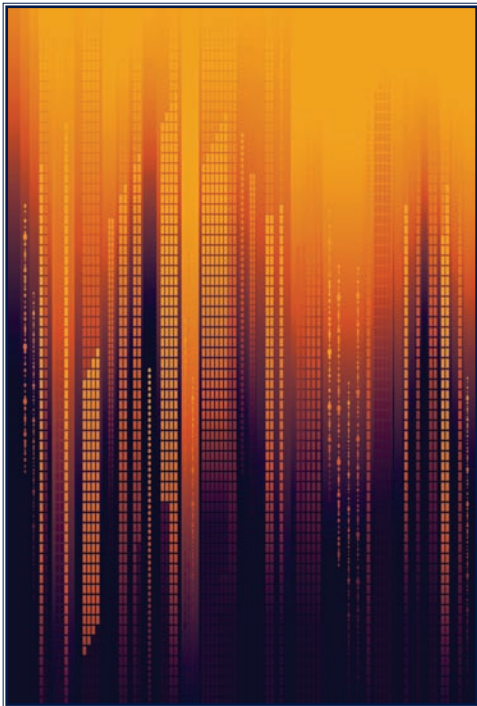




AMERICAN CLASSICS



GERSHWIN

Concerto in F
Rhapsody No. 2
I Got Rhythm
Variations

Orion Weiss,
Piano

Buffalo
Philharmonic
Orchestra

JoAnn Falletta

George Gershwin (1898-1937)

Concerto in F • Rhapsody No. 2 • I Got Rhythm Variations

From the universe of twentieth-century music, the names of three Americans are iconic: Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein and George Gershwin. While their individual styles differed widely, all three held reverence for European traditions in serious music, all three were outstanding pianists, and all three were devoted to American motifs, with an eye and ear on popular forms.

For his part, Gershwin loved Bach, adored Chopin, could not get enough of Debussy and was a big fan of the music of his tennis partner Arnold Schoenberg. And of this American trio, it was Gershwin who was truly the lead bird, exerting a formative influence on Bernstein and Copland. The point is made to correct early critics who claimed that dear George was merely a clever Broadway song writer who managed to 'moonlight' as a composer for *Rhapsody in Blue*, *An American in Paris* and *Cuban Overture*. In fact, by his premature passing at age 39, Gershwin had managed to score just six orchestral titles, including the three works presented on this recording. With sadness we can only ponder the wealth that would have followed had Gershwin survived to his senior years.

For reference, it was the easy appeal of Gershwin's music that made critics uneasy. His creations for the Great White Way were replete with lyrics, tunes and rhythms that were simply too catchy to be trusted. The same attitude prevailed over his few but brilliant instrumental scores, and even his opera *Porgy and Bess*. For example, the Metropolitan Opera waited fifty years before presenting *Porgy* for the first time in 1985.

Concerto in F

On the heels of Gershwin's spectacular success with *Rhapsody in Blue* in 1924 came a storm of requests from high places. Among them was a commission by the New York Symphony under Walter Damrosch to compose a 'proper concerto' for the piano – which was both a compliment to Gershwin's creative gift but also a sly reference to the *Rhapsody* as a kind of 'pops' showpiece.

George was well aware of those perceptions. He noted:

"Many persons had thought that the *Rhapsody* was only a happy accident. Well, I wanted to show that there was plenty more where that had come from. I made up my mind to do a piece of 'absolute' music. The *Rhapsody*, as its title implied, was a blues impression. The *Concerto* would be unrelated to any program. And that is exactly how I wrote it. I learned a great deal from that experience, particularly in the handling of instruments in combination.

"The first movement of the *Concerto in F* is quick and pulsating, representing the young, enthusiastic spirit of American life with a Charleston motif. Later, a second theme is introduced by the piano. The second movement has a poetic nocturnal atmosphere which has come to be referred to as the American blues, but in a purer form than that in which they are usually treated. The final movement reverts to the style of the first. It is an orgy of rhythms, starting violently and keeping the same pace throughout."

Completed in 1925, the *Concerto in F* begins with 'wake-up' timpani strokes like those which so often opened the curtains in Manhattan's theater district (in fact Gershwin once thought to title the piece *A New York Concerto*). From that point on we are in for an urbane feast of marvelous tunes, sassy tempos and mad-cap colors – teasing and tempting, replete with optimism and nostalgia. The second movement begins with an extended blues reverie, heard in the solo trumpet over a sustained clarinet choir. The entrance of the piano adds a piquant lilt to the Impressionist tableau, with an intimate soliloquy mid-way. Lyrical, evocative timbres offer Hollywood allure before a brief souvenir at the close. Gershwin's description of the final movement barely hints at the virtuoso caprice to come for soloist and orchestra alike – a flourish of jazz and pizzazz to the Nth degree. Recalling the opening bars of the concerto, big strokes from the timpani signal the closing curtain with a resounding final chord.

Rhapsody No. 2 for Piano and Orchestra

In 1931, barely four years after movies began to talk and sing (*The Jazz Singer* with Al Jolson), Gershwin was engaged by Fox Studios to provide a six-minute interlude for a new film titled *Delicious*, starring Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell. The intended scene was a city-scape showing the hustle-bustle of Manhattan under construction. While scoring the music, Gershwin decided to let inspiration lead the way, expanding the effort into a new, full-voiced work for piano and orchestra. We are amused to learn the composer had more trouble naming the piece than composing it. The particular movie sequence captured a few frames of rivets as they were tossed and hammered to join the steel girders. On that cue, Gershwin wrote a coy and accented 'rivet theme' heard at once in the opening bars. With this in mind he initially titled the piece "*Rhapsody in Rivets*," then changed it to "*New York Rhapsody*," then "*Manhattan Rhapsody*" before deciding on the current title.

Up-beat and dashing in every measure, the music is conjured from spry fragments of impromptu jazz and blues. The assignment for the solo piano is immensely challenging, swinging to and fro with the orchestra from brash and sizzle to lush and lovely on the wing. The *Second Rhapsody* was given its premiere on 29th January, 1932 by the Boston Symphony under the baton of Sergey Koussevitzky with Gershwin at the keyboard.

I Got Rhythm Variations for Piano and Orchestra

Early in 1934 Gershwin needed a new concert piece for a four-week concert tour on which he would be the piano soloist with the renowned Leo Reisman Orchestra. The tour began in mid-January at Boston's Symphony Hall, went as far west as Nebraska, then worked its way back home to a final concert at the Brooklyn Academy. As for the music, Gershwin based his new concert piece on the melody from *I Got Rhythm*, one of the big hit songs from his 1930 musical *Girl Crazy*.

In two acts, the storyline of *Girl Crazy* concerns a Manhattan playboy who rides a taxi all the way to

Arizona, where he falls in love with a small town post mistress. Like a modern TV comedy, the stage scenes were chock full of droll confusions, leading to a happy ending. Other well-known songs from the musical include *Embraceable You* and *But Not for Me*.

During a recorded radio broadcast after the tour, Gershwin remarked (with his Brooklyn syntax intact):

"Good evening. This is George Gershwin speaking. The orchestra just played my song *Mine*. And now I'm going to play you my latest composition which I wrote a few months ago down in Palm Beach, Florida. This is a composition in a form of variations on a tune, and the tune is *I Got Rhythm*."

"I think you might be interested to hear about a few of the variations we are going to play. After an introduction by the orchestra the piano plays a theme rather simply. The first variation is a very complicated rhythmic pattern played by the piano while the orchestra fits in the tune.

"The next variation is in waltz time, and the third is a Chinese variation in which I imitate Chinese flutes that play out of tune as they always are. Next the piano plays a rhythmic variation in which the left hand plays the melody upside down, while the right plays it first on the theory that we shouldn't let one hand know what the other is doing. Then comes the finale. Now, after all this information about *Variations on I Got Rhythm*, how about hearing it."

Gershwin was keen to scribe his own orchestration for the *Variations* (the last full score from his desk), penned with one ear on advanced harmony, another on the rich sonorities of modern theater. The opening phrases from the solo clarinet and piano are at first atonal – perhaps a wink towards Schoenberg. In turn, the tune is presented as an up-beat arabesque with savvy accents. The waltz variation offers a slow diversion in triple time, again with progressions closer to the avant-garde than to Broadway. After the quaint caricature of oriental flutes, further harmonic mischief is conjured by the soloist. In evolving steps, the *Variations* blend into big-screen effects at the final curtain in F major. 'S Wonderful...!

Edward Yadzinski

Orion Weiss



Photo: Leslie van Stelten

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

Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra



Photo: Enid Bloch Photography

Europe, including concerts at Lincoln Center, Kennedy Center, Boston's Symphony Hall, San Francisco's Davies Hall and 22 appearances in Carnegie Hall. The orchestra's European tour included two sold-out performances in Vienna's Musikverein, and concerts in Milan, Geneva, Zurich and Frankfurt, among other venues. The BPO performs 120 concerts annually and is heard by millions on radio broadcasts across the United States and beyond on American Public Media's *Performance Today*.

For more information, please visit www.bpo.org

JoAnn Falletta



Photo: Mark Dellas

JoAnn Falletta serves as Music Director of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra 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 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, and Respighi. For more information, please visit www.joannfalletta.com

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George
GERSHWIN
(1898-1937)

Piano Concerto

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|----------|---|--------------|
| | Concerto in F (1925) | 33:53 |
| 1 | Allegro | 13:48 |
| 2 | Adagio | 12:46 |
| 3 | Allegro agitato | 7:19 |
| 4 | Rhapsody No. 2 (1931) | 15:54 |
| 5 | I Got Rhythm
Variations (1934) | 8:53 |

Orion Weiss, Piano
**Buffalo Philharmonic
Orchestra**

JoAnn Falletta

Recorded at Kleinhans Concert Hall, Buffalo, New York, USA,
from 17th to 20th November, 2010

Produced and engineered by Tim Handley

Booklet notes: Edward Yadzinski

Cover image: *City Sunset* by R. Guest (iStockphoto.com)



AMERICAN CLASSICS

George Gershwin's *Concerto in F* was a response to demands for a 'proper concerto' after the success of *Rhapsody in Blue*, avoiding programmatic content while providing a feast of tunes both uplifting and nostalgic. Originally intended as music for a film, his up-beat *Rhapsody No. 2* describes the bustling Manhattan cityscape while under construction. Sourced from his hit musical *Girl Crazy*, *I Got Rhythm Variations* was Gershwin's last full score. Pianist Orion Weiss is one of the most sought-after soloists and collaborators of his generation of young American musicians.

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