

The Cambridge Companion to Gershwin

George Gershwin is often described as a quintessentially American composer. This *Cambridge Companion* explains why, engaging with the ways in which his music was shaped by American political, intellectual, cultural, and business interests. As a composer and performer, Gershwin embraced technological advances and broke new ground in music business practices. In the decades preceding World War II, he captured the mechanistic pulse of modern life with his concert works and lay the groundwork for the Great American Songbook with his Broadway shows and film music. With his brother Ira, and his cousins Henry and B. A. Botkin, Gershwin explored various ethnic and cultural identities and contemplated their roles in US culture. His music confronted race during the Jim Crow era and continues to engage with issues of race today. This interdisciplinary exploration of Gershwin's life and music describes his avowed pursuit of an "American" musical identity and its ongoing legacy.

ANNA HARWELL CELENZA is the Thomas E. Caestecker Professor of Music at Georgetown University, where she also serves as core faculty in the American Studies Program. She is the author/editor of many scholarly books, including the award-winning *Jazz Italian Style: From Its Origins in New Orleans to Fascist Italy and Sinatra* (Cambridge, 2017). She has published numerous articles on a range of composers, from Franz Liszt and Gustav Mahler to Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, and Louis Armstrong.

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EDITED BY

Anna Harwell Celenza
Georgetown University, Washington DC



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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	page xi
<i>List of Tables</i>	xii
<i>List of Music Examples</i>	xiii
<i>List of Contributors</i>	xiv
<i>Preface</i>	xvii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xx
Part I Historical Context	1
1 The Unlikely Patriarch <i>Michael Owen</i>	3
2 Hearing Gershwin's New York <i>Ellen Noonan</i>	16
3 Gershwin's Musical Education <i>Susan Neimoyer</i>	29
4 Gershwin in Hollywood <i>Jessica Getman</i>	43
Part II Profiles of the Music	57
5 <i>Blue Monday</i> and New York Theatrical Aesthetics <i>Kristen M. Turner</i>	59
6 Broadway in Blue: Gershwin's Musical Theater Scores and Songs <i>Todd Decker</i>	80
7 The Works for Piano and Orchestra <i>Timothy Freeze</i>	102
8 Harmonizing Music and Money: Gershwin's Economic Strategies from "Swanee" to <i>An American in Paris</i> <i>Mark Clague</i>	130
9 Exploring New Worlds: <i>An American in Paris</i> , <i>Cuban Overture</i> , and <i>Porgy and Bess</i> <i>Anna Harwell Celenza</i>	153
10 Complexities in Gershwin's <i>Porgy and Bess</i> : Historical and Performing Contexts <i>Naomi André</i>	182
11 Writing for the Big Screen: <i>Shall We Dance</i> and <i>A Damsel in Distress</i> <i>Nathan Platte</i>	197

x Contents

Part III Influence and Reception	219
12 The Coverage of Gershwin in Music History Texts <i>Howard Pollack</i>	221
13 When Ella Fitzgerald Sang Gershwin: A Chapter from the Great American Songbook <i>Will Friedwald</i>	235
14 The Afterlife of <i>Rhapsody in Blue</i> <i>Ryan Raul Bañagale</i>	246
15 Broadway's "New" Gershwin Musicals: Romance, Jazz, and the Ghost of Fred Astaire <i>Todd Decker</i>	261
16 Gershwin and Instrumental Jazz <i>Nate Sloan</i>	275
Epilogue: The Gershwin I Knew, and the Gershwin I Know <i>Michael Feinstein</i>	289
<i>Guide to Further Reading</i>	298
<i>Index</i>	301

Figures

- | | | |
|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| 1.1 | Ira Gershwin, Frances Gershwin, George Gershwin, Arthur Gershwin, Westchester Hills Cemetery, Hastings-on-Hudson, New York (1933). Courtesy of the Ira and Leonore Gershwin Trusts | <i>page 4</i> |
| 1.2 | George Gershwin, Rose Gershwin, Ira Gershwin, Westchester Hills Cemetery, Hastings-on-Hudson, New York (1933). Courtesy of the Ira and Leonore Gershwin Trusts | 5 |
| 4.1 | Music composer George Gershwin painting the portrait of fellow composer Arnold Schoenberg, 1936. Photo by Gabriel Hackett/Archive Photos/Getty Images | 50 |
| 9.1 | George Gershwin works on a score at the piano in his 72nd Street apartment, New York, New York, 1934. Photo by PhotoQuest/Getty Images | 175 |
| 10.1 | The cast of George Gershwin's <i>Porgy and Bess</i> performing on stage, 1935. Photo by Pictorial Parade/Archive Photos/Getty Images | 183 |

Tables

3.1	Composers most frequently represented in Gershwin's concert program collection (arranged in order from most to least heard)	<i>page</i> 35
3.2	Better-known composers with only one work in Gershwin's concert program collection	36
3.3	Representative major works listed in Gershwin concert programs	37
6.1	"Production" numbers and published "hits" in five Gershwin scores (musical comedies staged between 1924 and 1930 included among reconstruction recordings)	86
7.1	George Gershwin, Concerto in F, Mvt. 1: formal overview	107
7.2	George Gershwin, <i>Second Rhapsody</i> : formal overview	115
7.3	Extant recordings of concerti with George Gershwin as soloist	122
8.1	Performances of <i>An American in Paris</i> 1928–1929	144

Music Examples

7.1a) C. Conrad and J. R. Robinson, “Singin’ the Blues”	<i>page</i> 104
b) Transcription of Gershwin’s roll recording	104
7.2a) George Gershwin, Concerto in F, Mvt. 1, R13-1–R14	110
b) Anton Rubinstein, Piano Concerto No. 4, Mvt. 1, mm. 130–36	111
7.3 George Gershwin, Concerto in F, Mvt. 1: Gradual Synthesis of P and S	112
7.4 George Gershwin, “ <i>I Got Rhythm</i> ” Variations, Piano Solo, R28 ⁺¹⁰ –R28 ⁺¹³	121
7.5 <i>Rhapsody in Blue</i> , m. 302: voicing of final chord	126
16.1 “Fascinating Rhythm,” chorus, mm. 1–4	277
16.2 “I Got Rhythm,” chorus, mm. 1–4	278
16.3 Transcription of Lester Young’s solo on “I Got Rhythm,” 1944, Take 2, 00:20–00:25	279
16.4 “Rhythm-a-ning,” B section, mm. 17–24	281
16.5a) Gershwin chord changes, “But Not for Me,” chorus, mm. 1–4	282
b) Coltrane reharmonization, “But Not for Me,” chorus, mm. 1–4	282

Contributors

Naomi André is Professor in Afroamerican and African Studies, Women's Studies, and the Residential College at the University of Michigan. Her research focuses on opera and issues surrounding gender, voice, and race. Her work focuses on opera from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries and explores constructions of gender, race, and identity. Her books include: *Voicing Gender: Castrati, Travesti, and the Second Woman in Early Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera* (Indiana University Press, 2006); *Blackness in Opera*, coedited with Karen M. Bryan and Eric Saylor (University of Illinois Press, 2012); and *Black Opera: History, Empowerment, Engagement* (University of Illinois Press, 2018).

Ryan Raul Bañagale is an Associate Professor of Music at Colorado College. His first book, *Arranging Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue and the Creation of an American Icon*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2014. He also sits on the editorial board of the *George and Ira Gershwin Critical Edition* and has edited the original jazz-band arrangements of *Rhapsody in Blue*.

Anna Harwell Celenza is the Thomas E. Caestecker Professor of Music at Georgetown University, where she also serves as a core member of the American Studies Program. She is the author of several scholarly books, the most recent being the award-winning *Jazz Italian Style, from Its Origins in New Orleans to Fascist Italy and Sinatra*. In addition to her scholarly work, she has served as a writer/commentator for National Public Radio and published eight award-winning children's books. She is also an active curator, and her most recent exhibition catalogue, *Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes: A Musical Friendship*, won a 2018 Leab Exhibition Award by the American Library Association.

Mark Clague is an Associate Professor of Musicology at the University of Michigan and the General Editor of the *George and Ira Gershwin Critical Edition*, for which he has edited the composer's *An American in Paris*. He is currently at work on a book for W. W. Norton on the "Star-Spangled Banner."

Todd Decker is a Professor of Musicology and Film & Media Studies at Washington University in St. Louis. He has published four books on commercial popular music in the United States from the 1920s to the present: *Music Makes Me: Fred Astaire and Jazz* (University of California Press, 2011), *Show Boat: Performing Race in an American Musical* (Oxford University Press, 2013), *Who Should Sing "Ol' Man River"?: The Lives of an American Song* (Oxford University Press, 2015), and *Hymns for the Fallen: Combat Movie Music and Sound after Vietnam* (University of California Press, 2017).

Michael Feinstein, founder of the Great American Songbook Foundation in 2007, has built a career over the last three decades as a performer and writer as evidenced from recordings that have earned him five Grammy Award nominations to his Emmy nominated PBS-TV specials and NPR series. He is the

xv *List of Contributors*

Principal Conductor of the Pasadena Pops and Kravis Center Pops Orchestras. He is also author of the award-winning book *The Gershwin's and Me: A Personal History in Twelve Songs*.

Timothy Freeze currently holds the Pocock Family Distinguished Visiting Professorship at The College of Wooster. He has published research on Gustav Mahler, Viennese operetta, and Aaron Copland and is currently working on critical editions of Gershwin's Concerto in F and "I Got Rhythm" Variations for the *George and Ira Gershwin Critical Edition*.

Will Friedwald is a freelance critic and author with a special interest in the Great American Songbook. He writes about music and popular culture for *The Wall Street Journal* and *Vanity Fair*. He also is the author of eight books including the award-winning *A Biographical Guide to the Great Jazz and Pop Singers; Sinatra: The Song Is You; Stardust Melodies; Tony Bennett: The Good Life; Looney Tunes & Merrie Melodies; Jazz Singing: America's Great Voices from Bessie Smith to Bebop and Beyond*; and *The Great Jazz and Pop Vocal Albums*. He has written over 600 liner notes for compact discs, received ten Grammy nominations, and appears frequently on television and other documentaries. He is also a consultant and curator for Apple Music.

Jessica Getman is the Managing Editor of the *George and Ira Gershwin Critical Edition*. Before joining the staff of the University of Michigan, she worked as an editorial assistant for *Music of the United States of America*, a scholarly series of music editions published for the American Musicological Society by A-R Editions. Her research on music and film has been published in the *Journal of the Society of American Music*.

Susan Neimoyer is Visiting Professor of Music Composition and History at Brigham Young University – Idaho. A specialist in twentieth-century American music, her dissertation focused on Gershwin's musical education. Her research in the areas of Gershwin and Canadian singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell has been published in *The Musical Quarterly*, *Journal of Musicology*, *American Music*, and the Canadian journal *Intersections*. She is currently preparing an edition of Gershwin's *Lullaby for String Quartet* for the *George and Ira Gershwin Critical Edition*.

Ellen Noonan is Clinical Associate Professor of History and Director of the Archives and Public History Program at New York University. Her award-winning book, *The Strange Career of Porgy and Bess* (University of North Carolina, 2012), examines the opera's long history of invention and reinvention as a barometer of twentieth-century American expectations about race, culture, and the struggle for equality.

Michael Owen is the Historian and Archivist for the Ira and Leonore Gershwin Trusts, where he also curates www.gershwin.com, the official George and Ira Gershwin website. He is the author of *Go Slow: The Life of Julie London* (Chicago Review Press, 2017). He is currently preparing *The Gershwins Abroad*, an annotated version of Ira Gershwin's 1928 travel journal, as a volume for the *George and Ira Gershwin Critical Edition*, for which he is a member of the editorial board, and is at work on a full-length biography of the lyricist.

xvi *List of Contributors*

Nathan Platte is an Associate Professor of Music at the University of Iowa. His publications explore film music of Hollywood's studio era and the collaborative process of film scoring. His books include *The Routledge Film Music Sourcebook* (coedited with James Wierzbicki and Colin Roust), *Franz Waxman's "Rebecca": A Film Score Guide* (co-authored with David Neumeier) and *Making Music in Selznick's Hollywood*. He is currently completing a critical edition of the film score to *Damsel in Distress* for the *George and Ira Gershwin Critical Edition*.

Howard Pollack is the John and Rebecca Moores Professor of Music at the University of Houston. He has published widely in the field of American music, including the award-winning books *Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man*, *George Gershwin: His Life and Work*, *Marc Blitzstein: His Life, His Work, His World*, and *The Ballad of John Latouche: An American Lyricist's Life and Work*.

Nate Sloan is an Assistant Professor of Musicology at the University of Southern California. He is the author of articles on Harold Arlen and Cab Calloway and co-author of *Switched on Pop: How Popular Music Works, and Why It Matters* (Oxford University Press, 2019). He hosts the podcast *Switched on Pop* and is currently preparing a book on the history of the Cotton Club.

Kristen M. Turner is a lecturer at North Carolina State University. Her research centers on staged musical entertainment in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. Her publications on American operatic culture have appeared in the *Journal of Musicological Research* and the *Journal of the Society for American Music*. The National Endowment for the Humanities and the Society for American Music have supported the research for her forthcoming book on the role of opera in American popular entertainment.

Preface

George Gershwin (1898–1937) is frequently defined as one of the most emblematically American composers of the twentieth century. An intuitive and inquisitive artist, he tapped into the pulse of the 1920s Jazz Age and created a range of works that straddled the supposed boundary between “high brow” and “low brow” cultures. In the decades preceding World War II, Gershwin became an international sensation with his concert works *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), *Concerto in F* (1925), and *An American in Paris* (1928). To many listeners at the time, these compositions seemed to capture the mechanistic pulse of modern life, with its soaring skyscrapers, roaring automobiles, and pulsating rhythms. Similarly, his *Cuban Overture* (1932) tapped into the public’s growing interest in Latin America. Gershwin’s work for Broadway and Hollywood, with collaborators such as his brother Ira and Fred and Adele Astaire, produced a series of sensational revues, light-hearted musical comedies, and satirical political operettas that reflected urban American popular culture of the 1920s and 1930s. In the realm of opera, Gershwin offered two works based on African American characters. The first, *Blue Monday* (1922), was a one-act, black-face “Afro-American Opera” that was roundly rejected by audiences and critics alike. The second, *Porgy and Bess* (1935), marked the acme of Gershwin’s compositional career. It is a work that is equally powerful and controversial and since its premiere has garnered both praise and criticism.

Gershwin also dominated the realm of popular music during the 1920s and 1930s, and his numerous tunes for stage and screen became standards in the canon of American popular song. His lyricist for nearly all of these works was his older brother, Ira. A few of their most memorable collaborations include: “I Got Rhythm,” “S Wonderful,” “Strike Up the Band,” “Oh, Lady Be Good,” “Fascinating Rhythm,” “Someone to Watch Over Me,” “Embraceable You,” “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off,” and “They Can’t Take That Away from Me.”

Gershwin’s interest and success in both “serious” and “popular” music often led to a muddled reception of his work among contemporary critics, which in turn impeded serious study of his music by scholars for several decades after his death. Consequently, his music is often referred to as quintessentially American without any in-depth exploration of what such a

xviii Preface

classification actually means and how it has come into existence. For example, how did his music interact with the racial terrain of American culture during the Jim Crow era? And does it continue to engage with issues of race today? How has Gershwin's legacy been shaped by American intellectual, political, and business interests? Did technology play a role in the shaping of an "American" sound? If yes, then how did this influence Gershwin's creative identity? In pursuit of answers to questions such as these, the *Cambridge Companion to Gershwin* offers an interdisciplinary study of Gershwin's life and music that explores, in various ways, his avowed pursuit of an "American" musical identity.

The son of Jewish immigrants from Russia, Gershwin was a product of multicultural New York. Eager to imbibe as wide an array of music influences as possible, he familiarized himself with the various traditions New York had to offer, from the European classics of the concert hall to the Yiddish Theater songs and Klezmer tunes of the Lower East Side, the music of Tin Pan Alley and Broadway, and the African American jazz of Harlem. Over the course of his career, Gershwin was praised and criticized in equal measure for his willingness to borrow and fuse musical elements from various cultural and ethnic realms: classical and jazz, white and black, Jewish and gentile, urban and rural. As the chapters in this volume collectively explain, this "melting pot" mentality affected not only the content of Gershwin's music, but also its reception over the past century. Gershwin regularly tapped into the aesthetic values and popular tastes of his surroundings in an attempt to compose works that would connect with as broad and diverse a public as possible. This approach to composition produced mixed results. Although contemporary audiences embraced most of his works when they first appeared, and many of these compositions (most notably *Rhapsody in Blue*) have stood the test of time, other pieces (such as the blackface hit "Swanee") have understandably received a cooler reception by twenty-first-century audiences. Still, all these works are important if we are to understand fully Gershwin's place in the musical canon; collectively, all of these works contributed to his identity as a composer.

Ever since the premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue*, Gershwin's compositions have been at the center of key developments in the history of jazz, although certain aspects of his style and legacy still sit uncomfortably within it. The question of whether Gershwin's work deserves the appellation of "jazz" at all has occupied musicians and critics since the debut of *Rhapsody in Blue*. Consequently, the contributors to this volume explore Gershwin's fluid status as a composer linked to jazz, popular music, and concert music and in so doing highlight disciplinary tensions that have developed in American scholarship over music, commerce, and race.

xix Preface

Gershwin came of age during the watershed years of recorded sound, and the differing technical innovations and limitations of gramophones, radio, and film noticeably influenced the structure, distribution, and preservation of his music. *The Cambridge Companion to Gershwin* engages with various extra-musical phenomena (i.e. technology, ethnicity, race, religion, politics, and the burgeoning music industry) in its discussions of the composer's life and works. Consequently, the volume is divided into three primary parts: 1) "The Historical Context," which explores Gershwin's life, education, and connections with local communities in New York and Los Angeles; 2) "Profiles of the Music," which offers discussions of his compositional practices as they pertained to specific genres and local stimuli; and 3) "Influence and Reception," which examines various responses to and treatments of Gershwin's music after his death.

Gershwin's compositions do not sit easily in a single musical category. Because he consciously combined classical music, jazz, blues, and popular song – artistic traditions with different performance practices and conventions of musical notation – his compositions do not always speak to a clearly definable audience or evoke a particular moment in American history. Instead, they are shifting entities, whose content, orchestration, performance style, and cultural significance continue to change from one generation to the next.

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