

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.

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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

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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.

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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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