

Blog 12 An American in Paris

Growing up in a Brooklyn tenement, Gershwin learned classical piano and attended symphonic concerts, but also played the popular hits of the day in his first job, promoting new songs by performing them in department stores and music shops. This led to him arranging and recording for gramophone and player piano rolls, at the same time as which he started writing songs of his own, so that by the start of the 1920s he was making a name for himself as a Broadway revue composer.

The idea of combining a symphony orchestra with popular jazz and Broadway style was starting to emerge at this time, to which Gershwin contributed his 'greatest hit', *Rhapsody in Blue*, which was an immediate success. Naturally, there were subsequent requests to compose other pieces in the same style, and in 1928 Gershwin presented *An American in Paris*, inspired by a visit to the French capital to visit Ravel two years previously. There is a possibly untrue story that Ravel declined him composition lessons, claiming 'why be a second-rate Ravel when you could be a first-rate Gershwin?' or, in another version 'You should give *me* lessons'. Ravel himself was undoubtedly influenced by Gershwin's style, as heard in his own jazzy *Piano concerto in G*.

An American in Paris was briefly intended as another work with solo piano but is scored as a purely orchestral piece – although that already large symphony orchestra is expanded to include saxophones, percussion and four taxi horns Gershwin brought back with him. Stylistically, the opening section is quite close to the style of contemporary French composers and avant-garde cabaret, with piquant harmonies and complex rhythmic layering; however, its central slow melody and the Charleston that follows are straight out of the American musical theatre style.

Gershwin himself performed the celeste part on the first recording of this piece, as no other keyboard player was available in the studio.

The film of the same name, starring Gene Kelly, was released in 1951 and is based around this rhapsody and other segments of Gershwin's music. The version SCO are playing is abridged and the scoring revised for a standard orchestra, but loses none of the material or the character of the original.

Further listening:

[Poulenc: Les Biches \(ballet suite\)](#)

[Ravel: Piano Concerto in G](#)

[Gershwin: Three Preludes for piano](#)

Simon Wilkins

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Email: sarepava@gmail.com

