

Program Notes for Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue

Mar. 5-7

Passacaglia, Op. 1 ANTON WEBERN (1883-1945)

Composed in 1908.

Premiered on November 8, 1908 in Vienna, conducted by the composer.

It is wholly appropriate that the first work to bear an opus number by Anton Webern, Arch Modernist, should be cast in one of the most ancient and revered forms of Western music. The *passacaglia* (*chaconne* is another name for the same form) dates from at least the beginning of the 17th century, and was used extensively by such Baroque composers as Bach, Pachelbel, Couperin and Purcell. Its structure is a simple but demanding one: continuous variations on a short, recurring and unchanging theme. That Webern should resort to such a tradition-laden genre points to important aspects of his artistic philosophy, his compositional technique, and his place in the flow of music history.

When he began to study composition with Arnold Schoenberg in 1904, Webern had already received a doctorate in musicology from the University of Vienna. His studies there under Guido Adler, one of the great pioneers in the research of older music, culminated in his doctoral dissertation, an edition of the *Choralis Constantinus* of Heinrich Isaac (ca. 1450-1517). Isaac was one of the greatest composers of the Renaissance, a contemporary of Josquin des Pres, and a master of the rich contrapuntal style of the 16th century. Webern's work with the music of Isaac was far more than an academic exercise, however, since the aesthetic and technique of that era became an integral part of his conception of music. He viewed the era of this so-called "Netherlands style" as a peak in the history of music, a time when the emotional and technical components of the art were in perfect balance. He cited Bach and the "classics" (i.e. Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven) as the other high points. He felt that he and his colleagues — Schoenberg and Berg — could again create such an era if they would return to the structural principles of earlier times; namely, in his words, "a penetration of the musical material in the vertical [harmonic] and the horizontal [melodic] ."

Webern's study with Schoenberg reinforced his bent toward earlier music because of Schoenberg's special emphasis on the works of Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. This Passacaglia was written in 1908, the last year that Webern was a student of Schoenberg, and both master and scholar regarded it as a "journeyman" piece — the work of a finished apprentice ready to display his tonal wares to the world. While it clearly reflects the musical personality of its creator, it also traces influences to the works of the composers through which he was led by Schoenberg — Bach's Chaconne for solo violin; the finale of Brahms' Fourth Symphony; the variation technique that obsessed the aging Beethoven in such works as the *Diabelli Variations*. In addition, Webern tossed into this heady brew his extensive knowledge of the Netherlanders' contrapuntal technique to create in the Passacaglia a work rife with references to the past. The members of the Second Viennese School, as Webern, Berg and Schoenberg came to be known, saw themselves as the legitimate heirs to these great earlier traditions — as *evolutionary* rather than *revolutionary* composers.

The cutting edge of that evolution was harmony. Since at least the time of Chopin, the tonal harmonic system had been extended to include an enormous wealth of auxiliary tones and chords which sometimes, by the end of the 19th century, had only the most tenuous relationship to the nominal key. At exactly the time of the Passacaglia — 1908 — this tonal language had been stretched beyond the breaking point by Schoenberg's Second String Quartet and the song cycle *The Book of the Hanging Gardens*. The Passacaglia stands right on the precipice — still tonal, but with many vertical combinations not accountable by traditional theory. Within a year, Webern had also abandoned tonality. This work, however, remains firmly rooted on D, minor at beginning and end, major in the center — exactly the route followed by Bach's Chaconne. It is a work that stands, Janus-like, looking both back into history and forward into an uncertain future.

Webern's biographer, Hans Moldenhauer, wrote of the Passacaglia, "The unmistakable Webern physiognomy is already there: soloistic use of instruments; economy and transparency belying the large orchestral apparatus; contrapuntal invention producing a wealth of thematic transformations; extensive use of triplets; subdued dynamics; and, finally, silence as a structural element." Webern described the piece as consisting of 23 variations following the presentation of the theme, with a "development-like" coda to conclude the work. The eight-measure theme, which outlines the key of D minor, is presented at the outset by pizzicato strings. (The sonority and the silences recall the finale of Beethoven's "Eroica.") The theme is heard clearly for only a few variations before it gradually becomes absorbed into the texture of the music. The D tonality and the length of the theme, however, continue to exert their influences throughout the piece. The structural lines of tension are carefully controlled to produce three climaxes during the course of the work, and it is these swells of emotion rather than the individual adventures of the theme that the listener may follow most easily as the piece unwinds.

Like all of Webern's works, the Passacaglia takes concentrated listening. It can be (and has been) the subject of extensive disquisition. (Musical theorists are absolutely in clover when they undertake analyses of Webern's music.) It can also be a moving listening experience, if we are willing to give the music the proper attention, and to attend it with clear mind and fresh ears.

Symphony No. 8 in B minor, D. 759, "Unfinished" **FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)**

Composed in 1822.

Premiered on December 17, 1865 in Vienna, conducted by Johann Herbeck.

The mystery surrounding the composition of the "Unfinished" Symphony is one of the most intriguing puzzles in the entire realm of music. The work was left incomplete not because Schubert's death intervened, as happened with Mozart's *Requiem*, Bartók's Viola Concerto or Puccini's *Turandot*. Indeed, the Eighth Symphony occupied Schubert fully six years before his death at the pathetically early age of only 31. It is known that Schubert composed the first two movements of this "Grand Symphony," as he referred to it, in the autumn of 1822, and then abruptly stopped work. He sent the manuscript to his friend Anselm Hüttenbrenner, who was supposed to pass it on to the Styrian Music Society of Graz in appreciation of an honorary membership that that organization had conferred upon Schubert the previous spring. Anselm, described by Schubert's biographer Hans Gal as a "peevish recluse," never sent the score. Instead, he squirreled it away in his desk, where it gathered dust for forty years. It was not until 1865 that he presented it for performance to Johann Herbeck, director of Vienna's Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, in return asking that one of his own tedious overtures also be included on the concert. Schubert's magnificent torso was an immediate success at its premiere, and has since maintained its position as one of the most popular symphonic pieces ever written.

Lacking conclusive evidence, writers on Schubert have advanced a fascinating variety of explanations as to why the young composer never completed the last two planned movements of this Symphony. Among others: he was too ill with syphilis; he could not be bothered with the labor of writing down the last two movements; his friends believed he was basically a song composer rather than an instrumental composer, and their arguments caused him to lose faith in this large work; the last two movements were lost; he despaired of ever having a work of this scale performed; a new commission intervened; Hüttenbrenner's servant used the manuscript to start a fire. All of these have been proven false. The truth is that, despite exhaustive research, there is no conclusive evidence to support any single theory. The explanation currently given the greatest credence is that Schubert thought he could not match the wonderful inspiration of the first two movements in what was to follow, so he abandoned this Symphony for work on another project and simply never returned to complete it.

Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony is notable for the beauty of its themes, the richness of its orchestration, the sincerity of its emotional expression, and the clarity of its structure. The first movement is a sonata-

allegro form that begins without introduction. The first theme, in the dark tonality of B minor, is made up of three components: a brooding, eight-measure phrase heard immediately in unison cellos and basses; a restless figure for violins; and a broad melody played by oboe and clarinet. As the music grows in intensity and dynamic level, it modulates to the key of the second theme, the bright, contrasting tonality of G major. This theme, one of the most famous melodies ever written for orchestra, is played by cellos over a syncopated accompaniment in violas and clarinets. A series of decisive chords and a tossing-about of fragments of the second theme bring the exposition to a close. The development, based entirely on the movement's opening phrase, begins softly in unison cellos and basses. This lengthy central section rises to great peaks of emotional tension before the recapitulation begins with the restless violin figure of the first theme. The oboe-clarinet theme is heard again, as is the renowned second theme, before the movement ends with restatements of the cello and bass phrase that began both the exposition and the development. The second movement is in the form of a large sonatina (sonata form without a development section) and flows like a calm river, filled with rich sonorities and lovely melodies. Of it, Alfred Einstein wrote, "The whole movement in its mystery and unfathomable beauty is like one of those plants whose flowers open only on a night of the full moon."

Symphony No. 3, "The Camp Meeting" **CHARLES IVES (1874-1954)**

Composed in 1901-1904.

Premiered on April 4, 1946 in New York, conducted by Lou Harrison.

Reference — Allusion — Resonance: the means by which Charles Ives sought to create what Proust described as "a tapestry of experiences remembered."

Ives conceived none of his works as abstract music, comprising mere chord progressions, rhythmic patterns and melodic leadings complete within themselves. His music was meant, like the transcendental writings of his fellow New Englander Ralph Waldo Emerson (whom Ives revered), to lead the mind on to something beyond the everyday, to some ideal for which the work of art stood as a sign post, or perhaps a doorway. The actual sounds of the music were therefore secondary to the vision they attempted to embody. The means Ives used to realize his conceptions were the songs and the dances, the hymns and the marches — the uniquely American music — that he experienced as a boy in post-Civil War Danbury, Connecticut. Despite all the iconoclasm and the experiments, the joyously layered jumbles, the startlingly juxtaposed complexities and simplicities, Ives was always trying to recapture, in transcendental terms, the flavor and the spirit of his turn-of-the-century boyhood: its warm family ties, its exuberant public celebrations, its reverent religious observances, its raucous good fun, its lost innocence.

Ives made his living as an insurance executive, freeing him from any commercial considerations about the performance of his music. He was therefore able to write exactly as he pleased, and he experimented constantly with techniques to sharpen and intensify the message of his music during the years of his greatest productivity, before a heart attack in 1918 left him too weak for concentrated work. Polytonality, simultaneous rhythms, quarter-tones and cluster harmony were only some of the means he devised, partly for the sheer joy of doing it, but primarily for the manner in which they conveyed his vision. "I found early that I *could not* go on using the familiar chords," he explained. "I *heard* something different." For thematic material, he borrowed fragments from the songs, marches and hymns that had such strong associations with his past: stringing familiar but disembodied phrases one after another, layering them atop each other, varying them with enormous ingenuity. (One of the most intriguing challenges in listening to Ives' compositions is to identify the quotations as they fly by.) Each of these musical bits rises out of its immediate context to excite its own particular emotional reference/allusion/resonance in the listener, creating a vast and ever-changing panorama of moods and feelings. Perhaps only the music of Mahler is as rich in its wide, starkly varied expressive range. Ives could write devastatingly beautiful music if the vision called for it (the critic Peter Yates once admitted that Ives' was the only American music which could make him cry), but he could also concoct the most glorious cacophonies when he felt they were needed.

Frequently both extremes, and many shadings in between, were mixed within a single work. Ives' music is seldom, as he said of the conservative and simplistic compositions of his time, "pretty-pretty," but it is stimulating, full of touching associations, and, very often, of considerable musical substance. In approaching his music, it is well to accept the feisty challenge Ives shouted to one concert-goer who was loudly denouncing a piece by his friend Carl Ruggles: "Stop being such a damned sissy! Why can't you stand up before fine, strong music like this and use your ears like a man!"

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Like Bach and Handel, Ives was an inveterate miner of his own music. One of his chief compositional processes was the recycling in new guises of earlier pieces, especially those he churned out seemingly non-stop during his student days at Yale and in his years as organist (1899-1902) at Central Presbyterian Church in New York. Ives explained the sources and history of the Third Symphony in his characteristic aphoristic manner in his *Memos*: "The Third Symphony was finished and copied out in fall in 1911. (It was mostly scored between 1901-1904 — good ink copy made by Tams [Publishing Company in] 1911.) The middle movement was the *Children's Day Parade* (for string quartet and organ), and was played in Central Presbyterian Church, New York, on organ alone in 1902. The first and third movements were played in Central Presbyterian Church in 1901.... The first and last movements were fully scored a few years later, mostly about 1901 to 1904. The themes are mostly based around hymns." The three original organ pieces on which the Symphony's movements were based are now all lost. The prototype for the first movement was a *Prelude* given at Central Presbyterian on December 12, 1901; Ives played a *Postlude*, the model for the second movement, there on May 12, 1902; and he introduced the closing *Piece for Communion* in December 1901. The movements were apparently orchestrated and worked into the form of a symphony between 1901 and 1904, but then the manuscript, as with virtually all of Ives' music, lay untouched and unperformed. He dug the score out early in 1911 to have a professional copy made (at his own expense) by the Tams Publishing Company, and Gustav Mahler, who was then in New York as music director of the Philharmonic, saw the piece, was fascinated, and expressed an interest in performing it during the following season. Tams gave the composer-conductor the score, which he planned to study in Europe that summer. Mahler was suddenly struck ill, however, and died in Vienna in May. The score was lost. (In his biography of Ives, David Wooldrige reported finding an aged musician in 1954 in Munich who claimed to have read through the Third Symphony with Mahler during the summer of 1910. The claim, however, is not substantiated by other sources.)

It was not until after World War II that interest in performing the Third Symphony revived. The avant-garde American composer and champion of modern music Lou Harrison produced a score from Ives' original pencil manuscript, and conducted it with the New York Little Symphony on April 5, 1946, the first of Ives' major orchestral works to be performed since Nicolas Slonimsky had presented the *Three Places in New England* with the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 1932. The Symphony created a sensation. Niel Straus wrote in *The New York Times* the next day, "It possessed a freshness of inspiration, a genuineness of feeling and an intense sincerity that lent it immediate appeal and manifested inborn talent of a high order ... music close to the soil and deeply felt." Harrison repeated the work on an all-Ives program at Columbia University's Second Annual Festival of Contemporary American Music in May, and other conductors, including Koussevitzky, were suddenly clamoring to give their own performances. The Symphony won a Pulitzer Prize and the New York Music Critics Circle Award in 1947, newspapers and wire services carried the story, and Charles Ives was famous overnight — for a work he had written 43 years earlier. Ives, who at that late stage in his life played the part of the growling curmudgeon to perfection (he stubbornly refused to attend the premiere, so his wife, Harmony, represented the family alone), grumbled that "prizes are the badges of mediocrity," but accepted the Pulitzer award and sent half of the money to Harrison. "He was a wonderfully generous man," remembered the Symphony's first conductor. The score was published by Arrow Music Press in 1947; Henry Cowell's revision was issued in 1964 by Associated, and the critical edition, prepared by Kenneth Singleton from materials in the Ives Collection at Yale University, appeared in 1983.

Ives subtitled his Third Symphony "The Camp Meeting," and gave each of its movements a heading: "Old

Folks Gatherin [sic], "Children's Day" and "Communion." The music incorporates the hymn tunes that were used in the church organ pieces on which it was based: Lowell Mason's *Azmon* (1839, "Oh for a thousand tongues to sing") and Charles Converse's *Erie* (1868, "What a friend we have in Jesus") in the first movement; Mason's *Fountain* (1830, "There is a fountain filled with blood") and Andrew Young's *Happy Land* (1838, "There is a happy land") in the second; and William Bradbury's *Woodworth* (1834, "Just as I am without one plea") in the finale. Ives admitted writing this Symphony in a more conservative idiom than other of his major works. He reasoned that since "a number of the themes and general subject matter had to do with religious themes, knowing that, if played at all, it would probably be played in church ... before people who couldn't get out from under it," he wrote it in a manner "to some extent boiled down, or rather suppressed, technically speaking." Ives left no detailed account of the music itself, though he did tell the conductor and composer (famous for his scores to many of Hitchcock's films) Bernard Herrmann that he wished the second movement "to represent the games which little children played while their elders listened to the Lord's word." Because of its restrained style, reminiscences of traditional tunes and limited instrumental requirements (one each of woodwinds, two horns, one trombone, strings and bells), the Third Symphony has been among the most frequently heard of Ives' compositions. In its quintessential Americanness, it bears out Leonard Bernstein's contention that Ives was "our first really great composer — our Washington, Lincoln and Jefferson of music."

Rhapsody in Blue, Original Jazz Band Version **GEORGE GERSHWIN (1898-1937)**

Composed in 1924; orchestrated by Ferde Grofé.

Premiered on February 12, 1924 in New York, conducted by Paul Whiteman, with the composer as piano soloist.

For George White's *Scandals of 1922*, the 24-year-old George Gershwin provided something a little bit different — an opera, a brief, somber one-acter called *Blue Monday* (later retitled *135th Street*) incorporating some jazz elements that White cut after only one performance on the grounds that it was too gloomy. *Blue Monday*, however, impressed the show's conductor, Paul Whiteman, then gaining a national reputation as the self-styled "King of Jazz" for his adventurous explorations of the new popular music styles with his Palais Royal Orchestra. A year later, Whiteman told Gershwin about his plans for a special program the following February in which he hoped to show some of the ways traditional concert music could be enriched by jazz, and suggested that the young composer provide a piece for piano and jazz orchestra. Gershwin, who was then busy with the final preparations for the upcoming Boston tryout of *Sweet Little Devil* and somewhat unsure about barging into the world of classical music, did not pay much attention to the request until he read in *The New York Times* on New Years Day that he was writing a new "symphony" for Whiteman's program. After a few frantic phone calls, Whiteman finally convinced Gershwin to undertake the project, a work for piano solo (to be played by the composer) and Whiteman's 22-piece orchestra — and then told him that it had to be finished in less than a month. George thought that he could complete the short score in time, but, since he was unfamiliar with the techniques of writing for instrumental ensemble, he asked that Whiteman's arranger, Ferde Grofé (whose greatest fame came as composer of the 1931 *Grand Canyon Suite*), do the orchestration.

Themes and ideas for the new piece immediately began to tumble through Gershwin's head, but it seems that the vision of the work's finished form did not appear until he was on a train to Boston for the opening of *Sweet Little Devil*: "It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattley-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. No new themes came to me, but I worked on the thematic material already in my mind and tried to conceive the composition as a whole. I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America — of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our blues, our metropolitan madness. By the time I reached Boston I had a definite *plot* for the piece, as distinguished from its actual substance." Late in January, only three weeks after it was begun, Gershwin completed the *Rhapsody in Blue*, except for some solo piano figurations. "I was so pressed for

time," he wrote, "that I left them to be improvised at the first concert. I could do that as I was to be the pianist." Grofé completed the orchestration on February 7th.

The premiere of the *Rhapsody in Blue* — New York, Aeolian Hall, February 12, 1924 — was one of the great nights in American music. With this concert, billed as an "Experiment in Modern Music," Whiteman wanted to demonstrate both the historical development of jazz as a particularly American phenomenon and the manner in which the jazz style might be utilized in modern concert compositions. The program included piano solos by Zez Confrey (notably his deathless *Kitten on the Keys*), arrangements for the full orchestra of such pop tunes as *Alexander's Ragtime Band* and *Limehouse Blues*, examples of various jazz treatments of well-known songs, a *Suite of Serenades* by Victor Herbert, and, as the center piece for the evening, Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. Many of the era's most illustrious musicians attended: Mischa Elman, Fritz Kreisler, Jascha Heifetz, Moriz Rosenthal, Serge Rachmaninoff, Walter Damrosch, Leopold Stokowski, Willem Mengelberg. Critics from far and near assembled to pass judgment; the glitterati of society and culture graced the event. Gershwin fought down his apprehension over his joint debuts as serious composer and concert pianist, and he and his music had a brilliant success. "A new talent finding its voice," wrote Olin Downes, music critic for *The New York Times*. Downes' predecessor at the *Times*, Carl Van Vechten, wrote to Gershwin, "You crowned the concert with what I am forced to regard as the foremost serious effort by an American composer." Conductor Walter Damrosch told Gershwin that he had "made a lady out of jazz," and then commissioned him to write the *Concerto in F*. There were critical carpings about laxity in the structure of the *Rhapsody in Blue*, but there were none about its vibrant, quintessentially American character or its melodic inspiration, and it became an immediate hit, attaining (and maintaining) a position of popularity almost unmatched by any other work of a native composer.

The *Rhapsody in Blue* has been arranged for almost every conceivable instrumental ensemble, from concert band to mandolin quartet, but it is best known in the version for symphony orchestra and piano that Ferde Grofé made soon after Gershwin's death. The composer himself made two keyboard arrangements of the work — one for two pianos (one piano plays the solo part, the other duplicates the orchestra), which he "recorded" (on multiple passes) on Duo-Art piano rolls in 1925, and another for solo piano in 1927. Grofé's original orchestration calls for three woodwind players (performing on five sizes of saxophones, clarinet, bass clarinet and oboe), two trumpets, two horns, two trombones, tuba doubling on string bass, a variety of percussion, banjo, celesta, orchestral piano and eight violins. Into the original full score, which is now in the Library of Congress, Grofé wrote the names of the musicians in Whiteman's band who would play the parts. Prominent among these names is that of clarinetist Ross Gorman, whose ability to play a smooth gliss on his instrument inspired Gershwin to create the bluesy opening gesture of the music, which is so important to setting the mood of the piece. Historical musicology has shown that the revival of period instruments and performing practices can reveal a composer's original conception more faithfully than can its filtering through the media of another time and sensibility. This evening's performance of the jazz band version of the *Rhapsody in Blue* allows both a clearer view of Gershwin's original intentions for what became his most famous concert work and a nostalgic reminiscence of the time when a younger America's artistic identity was just emerging.