

Daniil Trifonov Plays Gershwin

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

George Gershwin/arr. Robert Russell Bennett: *Porgy and Bess: A Symphonic Picture*

George Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess* (1935) is widely regarded as his masterpiece, and a half dozen of its songs have become part of the American canon. Indeed, "Summertime" is the quintessential American ballad. In 1942, the conductor Fritz Reiner asked composer Robert Russell Bennett to compile a symphonic suite from *Porgy and Bess*. Bennett and Gershwin had been friends; Bennett had assisted with the orchestration of some of Gershwin's Broadway shows. Bennett's Symphonic Picture captures the sultry atmosphere of Catfish Row in summer. He incorporates "Summertime" and several other celebrated tunes from the opera, also borrowing from the "Storm Music" and the "Picnic Party." He concludes with a transition to "It Ain't Necessarily So." The sections are played without pause.

Daniel Bernard Roumain: *Autumn Days and Nights* (World Premiere, New Jersey Symphony Commission)

For the second consecutive year, the New Jersey Symphony concludes the season with the world premiere of a commissioned work by Resident Artistic Catalyst Daniel Bernard Roumain (DBR). *Autumn Days and Nights* takes its title from last autumn, when DBR began composing it. "I've often felt that the promise of winter, spring, and summer runs restless in the simmering smoke of autumn days and nights," he has written. "It's the season of change and challenge, and this orchestral concerto does just that, inviting the musicians into sound collages based on Haitian folk music (e.g., 'Merci Bondye'), the Black national anthem ('Lift Every Voice and Sing'), African-American spirituals ('Wade in the Water'), and my own 'Hallelujah Chorus.'" *Autumn Days and Nights* consists of a single movement comprising multiple sections, which are separated by the briefest of pauses. The work is dedicated to New Jersey Symphony Music Director Xian Zhang.

George Gershwin: Concerto in F Major for Piano and Orchestra

The premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue* in 1924 established George Gershwin as a major figure in American composition, expanding his celebrity in Tin Pan Alley and on Broadway to the concert hall. Recognizing

Gershwin's appeal to a broader audience, conductor Walter Damrosch arranged for the New York Symphony to commission an orchestral work from the talented young man. Gershwin lacked experience writing for symphony orchestra, but accepted the commission, casting himself as piano soloist. His broad concept of the Piano Concerto's movements was 'Part one, rhythm. Part two, blues. Part three, more rhythm.' With his instinctive flair for jazz and his thorough understanding of pop culture, Gershwin caught the energy and optimism of the era, incorporating Charleston dance rhythms and the blues of muted trumpet. Syncopations and sensual melodies colored by blue notes link the concerto to jazz. With one foot in the classical camp and the other in the jazz halls of Harlem, this Gershwin masterpiece is unique in the literature.

George Gershwin/arr. Robert Russell Bennett: *Porgy and Bess*: A Symphonic Picture

George Gershwin (composer)

Born: September 26, 1898, in Brooklyn, New York

Died: July 11, 1937, in Beverly Hills, California

Robert Russell Bennett (arranger)

Born: June 15, 1894, in Kansas City, Missouri

Died: August 18, 1981, in New York City

Composed: Gershwin composed the opera in 1934 and 1935; Bennett arranged this Symphonic Picture in 1942.

World Premiere: March 1943 in Pittsburgh; Fritz Reiner conducted the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

Duration: 24 minutes

Instrumentation: two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, two alto saxophones, tenor saxophone, banjo, timpani, glockenspiel, xylophone, woodblock, steel bells, cymbals, triangle, snare drum, suspended cymbal, bass drum and strings

One of the great ironies of American music is that George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* was a failure when it was first performed at New York's Alvin Theatre in October 1935. The critics panned it and the production was commercially unsuccessful. Today, *Porgy and Bess* is widely regarded as Gershwin's masterpiece, and a half dozen of its songs have become part of the American canon. Indeed, "Summertime" is the quintessential American ballad.

The opera occupied Gershwin for years, with the most intensive work occurring between February 1934 and September 1935. *Porgy and Bess* was the culmination of his consuming interest in the African-American experience. The story is based on Dubose Heyward's 1925 novel *Porgy* about life among the locals in Charleston's Catfish Row neighborhood. Gershwin called upon Heyward to collaborate with his brother (and longtime lyricist) Ira Gershwin in adapting the tale as a libretto.

From the start, it was an ambitious and risky undertaking. The subject matter – focused not only on a disadvantaged subculture within American society but also addressing disability, drug addiction, and drunken violence – was a far cry from traditional opera. (Gershwin attempted to dodge that pitfall by labeling it a “folk opera.”) Furthermore, Gershwin was a highly sought-after songwriter, but he had little experience writing through-composed music. Another issue was his lack of orchestration skill. Gershwin grew up playing Tin Pan Alley and did not have formal conservatory training. He often enlisted assistance when adapting his shows for Broadway.

The year after the premiere, Gershwin compiled a symphonic suite based on *Porgy's* music; however, the score fell into obscurity and was not rediscovered until 1958. At that point, Ira Gershwin retitled it *Catfish Row Suite*.

Gershwin died in 1937. Five years later, Fritz Reiner asked Robert Russell Bennett to compile a symphonic suite from *Porgy and Bess* in 1942. A composer, conductor, and orchestrator, Bennett had been a friend of Gershwin's and had assisted with the orchestration of some of his shows. The Symphonic Picture he crafted for Reiner and the Pittsburgh Symphony has since become the standard concert hall version of Gershwin's score.

Far more than a medley or pastiche, Bennett's score captures the sultry atmosphere of Catfish Row in summer, with ample solos for non-conventional orchestral instruments like saxophones for added color. Not until more than six minutes into the Suite do we hear more familiar music from the Overture and the first big tune, “Summertime.” From there, Bennett moves seamlessly and skillfully through the opera's other celebrated songs, also borrowing from the “Storm Music” and the “Picnic Party.”

Bennett wrote a synopsis for the 1943 premiere of *Porgy and Bess: A Symphonic Picture* in Pittsburgh. The sections are played without pause.

1. Scene in Catfish Row (with peddlers' calls; Strawberry Woman; Crab Man)
2. Opening Act III “Clara, Clara” (Requiem)
3. Opening Act I (Introduction)
4. Summertime
5. I Got Plenty O' Nuttin'
6. Storm Music (Hurricane)
7. Bess, You Is My Woman Now
8. The Picnic Party (Oh, I Can't Sit Down)
9. There's a Boat Dat's Leavin' Soon for New York
10. It Ain't Necessarily So

Daniel Bernard Roumain: *Autumn Days and Nights* (World Premiere, New Jersey Symphony Commission)

Daniel Bernard Roumain

Born: December 11, 1971, in Margate, Florida

Composed: 2023–2024

World Premiere: These performances are the world premiere.

Duration: 21 minutes

Instrumentation: three flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), three oboes (3rd doubling English horn), three clarinets (3rd doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (3rd doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, a large percussion complement requiring three players (two tom toms, glockenspiel, vibraphone, marimba, large triangle, crash cymbals, bass drum, xylophone, suspended cymbal, and snare drum); timpani and strings

New Jersey Symphony Resident Artistic Catalyst Daniel Bernard Roumain – who goes by DBR – is having a busy year. In addition to his activities with our community and our orchestra, he is an Associate Professor in Arizona State University’s School of Music, Dance, and Theatre. He founded and runs DBR LAB there, a project-based development and production space for ASU students. He serves as Vice Chair for the Board of Directors of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters, and sits on the board of the League of American Orchestras. Additionally, he is on the Sphinx Organization’s Advisory Committee. Roumain is active as a performer, educator, composer, and activist.

This weekend’s premiere is the culmination of DBR’s three-year commitment to the New Jersey Symphony’s artistic leadership team. For the second consecutive year, the Symphony is concluding the season with a commissioned work by DBR. His composer’s note follows in its entirety.

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During the 2022–23 concert season, the New Jersey Symphony’s final concert featured a commissioned work, my *Farah (Joy)* for Voice and Orchestra, and Stravinsky’s iconic *The Rite of Spring*. Both works examined themes of joy and loss and placed the focus on the musicians of the orchestra, centering their musicality and ongoing collaboration with our Music Director Xian Zhang. I was moved and struck by the Stravinsky, and how closely the musicians and Xian Zhang had to work with one another in order to make a sincere and memorable performance. It required preparation and patience and trust. It resulted in well-deserved ovations each night, and I was reminded of the power and glory of instrumental music and taken by the sight and sound of this specific orchestra. So it became clear that I wanted to compose a work for them and for Zhang that would be a type of concerto for orchestra – centering on the musicians and allowing all of them to be seen and heard.

The title *Autumn Days and Nights* points to when the work began, during the autumn months of 2023. I’ve often felt that the promise of winter, spring, and summer runs restless in the simmering smoke of autumn days and nights. It’s the season of change and challenge, and this orchestral concerto does just that, inviting the musicians into sound collages based on Haitian folk music (e.g., “Merci Bondye”), the Black national anthem (“Lift Every Voice and Sing”), African-American spirituals (“Wade in the Water”), and my own “Hallelujah Chorus.”

I was also influenced by two books by my favorite authors: Bell Hooks's *All About Love* and Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*. Since the isolating days of the COVID-19 pandemic, my relationship to the things I love and have lost continues to occupy and crowd my creative mind. I looked to Hooks and Gibran for guidance and clarity, and found solace in these words by Hooks, who reminded me that it's the absence of something that might help us understand its role in our lives:

When I was a child, it was clear to me that life was not worth living if we did not know love. I wish I could testify that I came to this awareness because of the love I felt in my life. But it was love's absence that let me know how much love mattered.

In writing for the orchestra, Gibran reminded me of the liminal space between composing and collaborating with dozens of musicians over space and time:

Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be alone, even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music ... The musician may sing to you of the rhythm that is in all space, but he cannot give you the ear which arrests the rhythm nor the voice that echoes it.

The more I read, the more I wrote, and the music poured onto the pages in a manner that renewed my love for the orchestra – this orchestra! – and reminded me of my responsibilities as a Black, Haitian-American composer: to find new ways to tell old stories, with and without words. *Autumn Days and Nights* is dedicated to my friend and colleague, Xian Zhang, a master musician and storyteller, who continues to lead, inspire, and push me towards a boundless creative horizon and world of ideas.

-Daniel Bernard Roumain (DBR)

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Autumn Days and Nights consists of a series of connected sections separated by the briefest of pauses. DBR opens with his own "Hallelujah Chorus," simultaneously played and sung by the string sections. He introduces the melodies of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" and "Wade in the Water" in counterpoint with the "Hallelujah" melody. The music builds to an initial climax, then moves to "For Sandra Bland," a lament for the young African-American woman who, three days after being arrested during a routine traffic stop in July 2015, was found hanged in a jail cell in Waller County, Texas. DBR begins this segment with an elegiac solo for cello, presently bringing in solo viola and violin for his moving tribute.

"The Joy!" is a complete contrast: vigorous and upbeat, with considerable imitation. Xylophone and oboe punctuate the string and woodwind sections as the texture grows more complex, culminating in a syncopated chorale for full brass.

Harp provides the introduction to "Home, Migration." String melodies emerge in this shortest of sections, before ceding to "The Night," which begins quietly in the double basses. "The Night" unfolds as a series of

sequential variations on the basses' ground, using triplets and other variation techniques. Presently, as at the beginning of *Autumn Days and Nights*, the strings play and sing at the same time, recalling DBR's "Hallelujah" melody. Gradually the orchestra expands to its fullest sonority, a splendid *ostinato* chorus with triplet accompaniment. The work concludes with "Rise!"— a triumphal fanfare for the final peroration.

George Gershwin: Concerto in F Major for Piano and Orchestra

George Gershwin

Born: September 26, 1898, in Brooklyn, New York

Died: July 11, 1937, in Beverly Hills, California

Composed: April–November 1925

World Premiere: December 2, 1925 at Carnegie Hall; Gershwin was the soloist while Walter Damrosch conducted the New York Symphony.

Duration: 31 minutes

Instrumentation: three flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), three oboes (3rd doubling English horn), three clarinets (3rd doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion battery, solo piano and strings

When Paul Whiteman's band premiered George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* in 1924, the 26-year-old composer became an overnight sensation. Gershwin was already well known on Tin Pan Alley and on Broadway. The *Rhapsody* expanded his musical empire to the concert hall, and increased Gershwin's fame and popularity.

The German conductor Walter Damrosch heard the premiere and was very impressed. Shrewd and farsighted, he recognized that Gershwin had something to offer to the classical world: a powerful draw at the box office. Damrosch had conducted the New York Symphony Society since 1903. He approached its president, Harry Harkness Flagler, about commissioning Gershwin to compose an orchestral work, convincing Flagler that the timing was right to take full advantage of Gershwin's surging popularity.

Gershwin accepted the commission, despite the fact that he lacked any experience writing for symphony orchestra. He decided to cast himself as piano soloist, as he had in the *Rhapsody*. He signed a contract with the New York Symphony in April 1925, agreeing to deliver the score and parts one week before rehearsals started in December, and to perform seven concerts with Damrosch's orchestra.

In his first sketches, the work bore the title "New York Concerto," but Gershwin had changed to the more sedate "Concerto in F" by mid-July. The music was shaping up to be anything *but* sedate. Gershwin's basic layout conformed with a traditional concerto: three movements in the order fast, slow, and faster. The atmosphere, however, was not at all traditional. Gershwin's initial thoughts ran along the lines of: Part one, rhythm. Part two, blues. Part three, more rhythm. With his instinctive flair for jazz and his thorough understanding of popular culture, he caught the energy and optimism of the era, incorporating Charleston dance rhythms and the blues of muted trumpet. He finished composing by September, and worked on the

orchestration — a more difficult task for him — throughout October and into November. The score is dated November 10, 1925. The premiere took place on December 3, 1925 at New York’s venerable Carnegie Hall.

The week before the first performance, Gershwin published an article about his new concerto in the *New York Herald - New York Tribune* on November 25, 1925. He described it thus:

The first movement employs the Charleston rhythm. It is quick and pulsating, representing the young enthusiastic spirit of American life. It begins with a rhythmic motif given out by the kettledrums, supported by other percussion instruments, and with a Charleston motif introduced by horns, clarinets, and violas. The principal theme is announced by the bassoon. 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 to the same pace throughout.

Walter Damrosch liked to say that Gershwin had “made a lady out of jazz” with this work. With its syncopated rhythms and sensual melodies colored by blue notes, the concerto has clear links to jazz. Gershwin bristled when it was labeled a “jazz concerto,” however. He was proud of his orchestration, a newly-acquired skill for him, and of the links he made among the three movements. The Concerto has remained an audience favorite for a century. With one foot in the classical camp and the other in the jazz halls of Harlem, this Gershwin masterpiece is unique in the literature.

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