George Gershwin was not the first composer to bring the sounds of jazz and other styles of American popular music to the concert hall, and he certainly has not been the last. But he was perhaps the most successful and influential composer to do so. At a time when our popular music still was widely regarded as frivolous and unworthy of serious consideration, Gershwin combined elements of blues and 1920s jazz with compositional forms and instrumental resources established by European musicians. Sadly, he did not live to see his best works take their rightful place as classics of American concert music, but today there is no doubt that they are just that.

Gershwin had achieved exceptional success as song writer and a composer of Broadway musicals by the time he reached age 25. In 1924, his Rhapsody in Blue demonstrated his ability to write concert music also. The tremendous acclaim that work garnered brought a commission from Walter Damrosch, a renowned conductor, to compose a piano concerto. Gershwin immediately accepted Damrosch’s invitation, in part to lay to rest any lingering doubts about his capabilities. “Many persons had thought that the Rhapsody was only a happy accident,” he later explained. “Well, I went out, for one thing, to show them that there was plenty more where that had come from.”

The Piano Concerto in F did just that and then some. It is perhaps Gershwin’s most successful attempt at a large-scale instrumental composition using the idioms of American popular music, a fresh and vital fusion of jazz rhythms, blues harmonies and classical form. The concerto was first heard in a performance at Carnegie Hall on December 3, 1925. Though critics’ reactions were mixed, the audience responded with great enthusiasm, and their judgment has, of course, prevailed.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR: Following a flourish of timpani strokes and snappy woodwind figures, Gershwin establishes the asymmetrical rhythm of the Charleston, the signature dance of the jazz-happy 1920s. Almost at once he adds a theme in skipping rhythms, introduced by bassoon. The orchestral paragraph that occupies the opening minute of the first movement brims with modern urban energy, but the piano joins the proceedings with a new idea in a languorous vein. A third subject, again given out by the orchestra, recaptures the energy of the opening and reestablishes the Charleston rhythm. Having established vigorous and relaxed moods and materials, Gershwin moves fluidly between them during the remainder of the movement.

Gershwin described the second movement as being in the style of the blues. The music actually has nothing of the structural and harmonic character of that essential American song form, but long melodic lines spun by trumpet and oboe do suggest the sweet melancholy of many blues tunes. The piano brings brighter material, with lightly tripping rhythms and laughing figures.

The finale returns to quick tempo and high energy we heard at the start of the concerto. Gershwin described this movement as “an orgy of rhythms, starting violently and keeping to the same pace throughout.”
Scored for solo piano, piccolo and 2 flutes; 2 oboes and English horn; 2 clarinets and bass clarinet; 2 bassoons; 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones and tuba; timpani, percussion and strings.

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