GEORGE GERSHWIN  
Concerto in F  
Born: September 26, 1898, in Brooklyn, New York  
Died: July 11, 1937, in Hollywood, California  
Work composed: Between May and November 10, 1925  
World premiere: December 3, 1925, at Carnegie Hall in New York, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony Society and the composer as piano soloist.

On the afternoon of February 12, 1924, musical New York gathered at Aeolian Hall, on 42nd Street (where the State University College of Optometry now stands), to witness a concert that bandleader Paul Whiteman was presenting under the intriguing rubric “An Experiment in Modern Music.” Whiteman believed that the future of American concert music would involve a fusion of European symphonic traditions with jazz. Most of the program he presented that day was far from what could honestly be described as “experimental” in 1924. But it did include the premiere of one work that exemplified his vision: George Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue for piano and orchestra.

Though some critics applauded enthusiastically, others were somewhat guarded in their evaluations of Gershwin’s new piece. In The New York Times, critic Olin Downs allowed that Rhapsody in Blue revealed “a talent and an idiom, also rich in possibilities for that generally exhausted and outworn form of the classic piano concerto.” A news report in the same paper described the Whiteman ensemble: “Pianos in various stages of deshabillé stood about, amid a litter of every imaginable contraption of wind and percussion instruments.” The reporter concluded that the scene “would have curdled the blood of a Stokowski or a Mengelberg.”

As it happened, both Stokowski and Mengelberg were in the hall that afternoon, as were violinists Fritz Kreisler, Jascha Heifetz, and Misha Elman; pianist Moritz Rosenthal; composers Sergei Rachmaninoff, Igor Stravinsky and John Philip Sousa; and conductor Walter Damrosch. Damrosch was one of the city’s leading musical citizens. He had inherited the directorship of the New York Symphony Society when his uncle Leopold died, in 1885, and held the post with only brief respite until that orchestra merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928.

Damrosch was so impressed with Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue that he immediately commissioned a concerto he could introduce with his New York Symphony. Gershwin happily accepted the commission and then — the legend goes — did a bit of study to find out just what a concerto was. One suspects that this story, which has been repeated by biographers ever since, probably derives from nothing more than a bon mot. Nevertheless, Gershwin most certainly did not come to his concerto armed with a complete compositional technique. His native talent was unquestionable and his facility as a pianist unimpeachable, but the niceties of orchestral writing were still uncharted ground. In his Broadway work, Gershwin had always followed the customary practice of simply writing the tunes and leaving the instrumentation to an arranger. Even the Rhapsody in Blue was not entirely his creation; the instrumentation had been carried out
by Whiteman’s staff orchestrator Ferde Grofé, who worked from Gershwin’s piano score. Gershwin therefore acquired a copy of Cecil Forsyth’s *Orchestration*, a standard textbook at that time, and learned enough from it to write the whole orchestral score of the **Concerto in F** on his own, though no doubt with some pointers from colleagues.

Broadway obligations prevented Gershwin from diving into his concerto immediately, and he didn’t buckle down to serious work on it until May 1925, while he was in London updating material for the English production of his musical *Tell Me More*. On July 22, back in New York, he started turning his sketches into a manageable score, at the head of which he inscribed the title *New York Concerto*. He worked on it every day during a stay at Chautauqua in August, and he appears to have let the movements flow from start to finish. Notations in the piano manuscript indicate that the first movement was written in July, the second in August and September, and the third in September. After that, he busied himself for another five or six weeks with the orchestration for full orchestra. By the time he had completed the project, the initial title had been replaced simply by *Concerto in F* — not *F major* or *F minor* (though the former would be accurate) — and it has been so identified ever since. Eliminating the referential title was an essential step towards the composer’s goal. “Many persons had thought that the *Rhapsody* was only a happy accident,” Gershwin remarked later. “Well, I went out, for one thing, to show them that there was plenty more where that had come from. I made up my mind to do a piece of absolute music. The *Rhapsody*, as its title implies, was a blues impression. The concerto would be unrelated to any program. And that is exactly how I wrote it.”

Gershwin wisely organized a run-through of his concerto in November — he hired the sixty-piece orchestra himself — and Damrosch wisely attended. Everybody was delighted with what they heard, but Damrosch, drawing on his years of orchestral experience, seems to have offered some well-chosen advice. As a result, Gershwin cut expanses from each of the movements (in addition to making a number of smaller changes), yielding a tighter work for the imminent premiere. The concert was sold out, and the audience cheered rapturously at the conclusion of the *Concerto in F*. Critics were more reserved; they had already heard a perfectly good example of Gershwin’s “symphonic-jazz fusion” when the *Rhapsody in Blue* was unveiled a year before, and they found less to be excited about the second time around. One critic proclaimed the work “interesting and individual,” another found it “conventional, trite, [and] a little dull.” Damrosch was not to be swayed. He was a true believer in the piece, as he made clear in the flowery speech he delivered from the stage at the premiere: “Lady Jazz, adorned with her intriguing rhythms, has danced her way around the world. . . . But for all her travels and her sweeping popularity, she has encountered no knight who could lift her to a level that would enable her to be received as a respectable member in musical circles. George Gershwin seems to have accomplished this miracle. He has done it boldly by dressing this extremely independent and up-to-date young lady in the classic garb of a concerto. Yet he has not detracted one whit from her fascinating personality. He is the prince who has taken Cinderella by the hand and openly proclaimed her a princess to the astonished world.”
It’s hard to follow such an effusion. We might add that this “up-to-date young lady” seems to have had at least a passing acquaintance with the virtuosic piano concertos of Franz Liszt and Sergei Rachmaninov and that her coming-out party was foreshadowed in a piano prelude Gershwin sketched about a year earlier, which he essentially re-worked into the opening theme of the third movement. But for a succinct description of how the piece unfolds, we can fortunately turn to Gershwin’s own description, which the New York Herald-New York Tribune printed in advance of the premiere:

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.

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