

# **An American in Paris**

## **George Gershwin**

In the spring of 1928 George Gershwin took his fifth trip to Europe, bringing with him his sister, Frances; his brother, Ira; and Ira's wife, Leonore. While he was there he worked on his tone poem *An American in Paris*. Gershwin was, in fact, an actual American in Paris for part of the time that he worked on the piece, and Ira reported that the entire "blues" section of *An American in Paris* was composed in the Hotel Majestic in that city. Other parts, however, were written in New York City (where he had sketched a good deal of the piece before he set sail), in Vienna, and, after his return from abroad, at a farm in Connecticut. All of the orchestration was carried out in the United States.

Gershwin's career was going swimmingly, and if he had cared he could have sat back and basked in the knowledge that he had two shows running concurrently on Broadway just then — *Funny Face* and *Rosalie* — and another, *Oh Kay!*, packing in crowds in London. But he was often driven by a desire to be more than "just" a composer of musical comedies, and much of his time in Europe he gave over to seeking out advice and coaching from composers who were esteemed for their concert

music. One of the composers Gershwin most admired was Maurice Ravel, whom he had met during a trip the latter made to New York in January 1928. During his visit Ravel had marveled at hearing Gershwin improvise at the piano and had enjoyed a grand time attending a

performance of *Funny Face*. Gershwin had asked Ravel if he might study with him, but the French composer politely declined, insisting that Gershwin's talent was already perfectly formed and that he would have nothing to contribute. But since Gershwin was so obviously sincere in his desire to pursue more "classical" instruction, Ravel wrote a letter of introduction that Gershwin could present to the esteemed teacher Nadia Boulanger should he find himself in France. This Gershwin did, but Boulanger reiterated Ravel's opinion and firmly refused to risk suffocating Gershwin's originality through the imposition of academic rigor. Despite his efforts, Gershwin was left to his own devices, forced to clear his own path toward a distinctive fusion of popular and classical styles on the concert stage.

*An American in Paris* was written in response to a commission from the conductor Walter Damrosch. He had previously commissioned Gershwin's Piano Concerto in F, in 1925, and soon after that he broached the idea of a second commission. The work was on Gershwin's mind before he left home, but the experience of being in Paris proved highly stimulating. The composer and pianist Mario Braggiotti, who was studying at the Paris Conservatoire, went to visit Gershwin at the Hotel Majestic, where he arrived unannounced. "Attired in a dressing gown," Braggiotti reported,

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### **In Short**

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

**Died:** July 11, 1937, in Hollywood, California

**Work composed:** 1928

**World premiere:** December 13, 1928, at Carnegie Hall in New York City, Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge that same year with the New York Philharmonic to form today's New York Philharmonic)

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** February 26, 2008, Lorin Maazel, conductor, in Pyongyang, Democratic People's Republic of Korea

**Estimated duration:** ca. 17 minutes

Gershwin gaily ushered me inside with that vague and stunned manner of one who was holding tightly to the thread of a creative mood. Beside his Steinway was a group of bridge tables covered with all sizes and makes of French taxi horns ... "I'm looking for the right horn pitch for the street scene of a ballet I'm writing. Calling it *An American in Paris*. Lots of fun."

Audiences agreed that it was lots of fun, and the *Brooklyn Eagle* reported of the premiere that the listeners responded "with a demonstration of enthusiasm impressively genuine in contrast to the conventional applause which new music, good and bad, ordinarily arouses."

**Instrumentation:** three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, three saxophones (alto, tenor, and baritone), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, orchestra bells, snare drum, bass drum, triangle, xylophone, tomtoms, four French taxi horns, wood block, celesta, and strings. The work is played here in the slightly revised orchestration made after Gershwin's death by Frank Campbell-Watson (1898–1980); it somewhat subdues Gershwin's saxophone parts, entirely eliminating a passage in which the composer had indicated that all three players should double on soprano saxophones.

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## The Work at a Glance

In an interview for the magazine *Musical America*, Gershwin discussed his tone poem *An American in Paris*:

This new piece, really a rhapsodic ballet, is written very freely and is the most modern music I've yet attempted. The opening part will be developed in typical French style, in the manner of Debussy and the Six, though the themes are all original. My purpose here is to portray the impression of an American visitor in Paris as he strolls about the city and listens to various street noises and absorbs the French atmosphere.

As in my other orchestral compositions I've not endeavored to represent any definite scenes in this music. The rhapsody is programmatic only in a general impressionistic way, so that the individual listener can read into the music such as his imagination pictures for him.

The opening gay section is followed by a rich blues with a strong rhythmic undercurrent. Our American friend, perhaps after strolling into a café and having a couple of drinks, has succumbed to a spasm of homesickness. The harmony here is both more intense and simple than in the preceding pages. This blues rises to a climax followed by a coda in which the spirit of the music returns to the vivacity and bubbling exuberance of the opening part with its impressions of Paris. Apparently, the homesick American, having left the café and reached the open air, has disowned his spell of the blues and once again is an alert spectator of Parisian life. At the conclusion, the street noises and French atmosphere are triumphant.



Gershwin in Paris in 1928