

Gershwin: An American in Paris

George Gershwin (1898–1937) and his influences

George Gershwin was born in New York, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants who had settled in the city in the 1890s.

His musical interest only started with the family's purchase of a piano in 1910, and he progressed rapidly under local teachers, becoming a pupil of Charles Hambitzer in 1912. In 1914 he left school to pursue a musical career.

Tin Pan Alley (popular songs)

From 1915–1917, Gershwin worked as a ‘song plugger’ for the music publisher Jerome H Remick & Co. This work involved playing the publisher’s songs to professional performers to persuade them to take them into their repertoire. Tin Pan Alley songs were generally aimed at amateur singers and tended to be novelty songs and melodramatic ballads, but they also embraced the latest styles, such as ragtime, the cakewalk, and later jazz and blues, although often in sanitised versions aimed at the mass market. Through this experience, Gershwin gained a deep understanding of the idiom of these popular songs, which were often written using a formula prescribing certain harmonic progressions, melodic shapes, phrase patterns and the overall structure. During this time, Gershwin started to compose his own songs.

Broadway (musicals)

After leaving Remich in 1917, Gershwin’s pianistic skills gained him work as a Broadway accompanist and by 1918, he was writing songs for Broadway musicals, producing his first full musical, La La Lucille, in 1919. He went on to produce a string of hit musicals, including Lady be Good! (1924), Strike up the Band (1927) and Girl Crazy (1930) and many of his songs became ‘standards’ – widely-known songs that formed the core repertoire of jazz musicians, dance bands and other popular musicians of the time (e.g. Someone to Watch Over Me, Strike up the Band, Fascinating Rhythm, I Got Rhythm).

Jazz

Gershwin was a remarkable improviser and was highly familiar with the blues and jazz styles of the time. The jazz influence can be heard in all of his music: from the world of Tin Pan Alley and Broadway musicals to the concert music. Gershwin’s syncopations, use of blue notes and certain accompaniment patterns show a strong influence of 1920s jazz. His instrumentation, too, betrays this influence, from his inclusion of saxophones in American in Paris to effects such as the clarinet glissando at the opening of Rhapsody in Blue, extensive use of muted brass, trombone glissandi and a cymbal hit with a hard stick.

Classical concert music

Gershwin had always shown a strong interest in classical concert music beginning with his exposure to the piano music of Liszt, Chopin and Debussy whilst he was a student. He employed many composition teachers, including Rubin Goldmark and Henry Cowell, and during his trip to Paris he also requested (but was refused) composition lessons from Ravel and Stravinsky. His concert works include the highly successful Rhapsody in Blue (1924) for piano and orchestra, Piano Concerto in F (1925), Preludes for Piano (1926), An American in Paris (1928) and A Cuban Overture (1932). Each

of these works fused jazz and Broadway influences with the orchestration and forms of classical music and proved instantly successful. Gershwin also composed one of the best-known American operas, *Porgy and Bess* (1935), which is especially striking in the operatic repertory for its unique mix of classical, jazz and blues elements.

Perhaps influenced by Gershwin's success, many classical composers, particularly those writing in a neoclassical style, continued to develop this particular line of jazz-influenced concert music, examples being Ravel's *Piano Concerto in G*, Milhaud's *La Creation du Monde*, Stravinsky's *Ebony Concerto* and many works by Kurt Weill, Aaron Copland, and Leonard Bernstein. Gershwin was equally inspired by techniques of twentieth century classical composers, for instance the whole-tone scales and added-note harmonies of Debussy, the bitonality of Stravinsky and Milhaud, the polyrhythms of Stravinsky and the sudden textural contrasts of Poulenc.

Gershwin died at the early age of 38 from a brain tumour at a stage in his career when he was still developing as a composer: we can only guess at what he might have achieved had he lived longer.

An American in Paris

Background

In 1928, Gershwin went on a trip to Europe, visiting London, Vienna and Paris. This was not a concert tour but more of a social visit: he was keen to meet the major European composers and experience the European musical scene. He met neoclassical composers such as Poulenc, Milhaud and Auric and other leading composers of the day including Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Ravel. During the trip, he started composing a tone poem loosely based on his European experiences, called *An American in Paris*, which he wrote in Paris and Vienna and orchestrated on the boat back to New York. It was premiered on 13 December 1928 by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra at Carnegie Hall, New York. It was an instant success and quickly found its way into the orchestral repertoire, subsequently being made into the score of a 1951 film of the same name.

Form and structure

An American in Paris is often described as a tone poem. This form, developed in the nineteenth century usually refers to a large-scale composition for orchestra whose structure is based on a story, or 'programme', notable exponents of the form being Liszt and Richard Strauss. It implies a somewhat loose form, containing musical passages that are descriptive rather than developmental in nature. However, composers such as Sibelius proved that tone poems could be both descriptive and tightly structured.

An American in Paris is programmatic in a general way, with Gershwin himself stating, "As in my other orchestral compositions, I've not endeavoured to present any definite scenes [...] The rhapsody is programmatic only in a general impressionistic way, so that the individual listener can read into the music such episodes as his imagination pictures for him". This absence of a programme is borne out by the music: the most that can be inferred is that the first part of the work uses a French-influenced style of music and the second part a predominantly American style.

Melody

It is clear from the structure that melody is the most important element in the work. From his apprenticeship in Tin Pan Alley and his experience of writing hit musicals, Gershwin was well aware of how to compose a memorable melody, and he applies this skill to great effect in *An American in Paris*.

Memorability is generally achieved by repeating an idea as many times as possible, whilst changing aspects of it to keep it sounding fresh. Gershwin adheres to this principle by first basing his melodies on repeated motives, and then repeating his melodies many times during the course of his work with changes in the harmonization, instrumentation and so on.

Repeated motives

To take an example, melody A1 is mostly derived from the opening one-bar motive, which is based on three notes, C D and E. This motive is repeated and slightly varied in each of the next five bars and then at bar 12, the whole phrase is repeated, meaning that by bar 17, the opening motive has been heard 12 times.

Most of Gershwin's melodies are similarly derived from a short motive. For instance, the three taxi-horn notes of A2 (bar 30) are heard 12 times up to bar 59; the opening 2 bar motive in A3 (119–120) is heard three times before an answering phrase (125–126) is heard, which is then itself sounded nine times (125–135). The first phrase of B1 (396–399) is immediately repeated as it is in many subsequent appearances.

Repetition and development of longer melodies

As can be seen from the structure table above, melodies and motives from them are constantly being repeated and reused. To sustain the interest, Gershwin varies the context in which the melodies reappear using techniques such as:

- reharmonizing the melody (e.g. B1 is harmonized differently at bar 564)
- adding a countermelody (e.g. a countermelody is added to A1 in bassoons at bar 79)
- changing the key (e.g. B1 is in Bb major at 396 but in G major at bar 431)
- changing the rhythm (e.g. A1's rhythm is changed in bars 204–220)
- rhythmic augmentation (e.g. bars 130–1 (horns) is an augmentation of 129, A3, bars 675)
- rhythmic diminution (e.g. A4, bars 269–272 are heard in diminution in bars 273–4 and 301–320)
- using them as countermelodies (e.g. A1 in horns bars 316, A3 in horns bar 665)

Finally, it is worth mentioning that some of Gershwin's melodies hint at the blues scale through their use of 'blue notes'. Typical characteristics of the (sung) blues scale are that the third degree is somewhere between the major or minor, and likewise the seventh degree is somewhere between the major and minor seventh. Gershwin's melody B1 hints at this by including a D flat in the melody against a D natural in the harmony in bar 397 beat 3, while the countermelody at 406 in the cellos contains a flattened seventh, Ab.

Harmony and tonality

Gershwin's harmonic writing in An American in Paris is essentially functional diatonic harmony, but enhanced with influences from 20th century classical music and jazz. Examples of these are as follows:

- chromaticism (e.g. bars 64–67, 239–248, 381)
- whole-tone scale (e.g. b.110)
- ‘wrong note’ harmonies - unresolved dissonances (e.g. in the taxi horn sections, e.g. bars 40–43)
- bitonality (e.g. b.559, 3rd eighth – D major and Ab major are heard simultaneously)
- parallel movement (e.g. cello part at bars 16–23, trumpets at 283, chords at 369)

Despite the complexity of the harmony, there is a very clear sense of key. This is often created by strong perfect cadences: new sections are often preceded by the dominant of the new key. An example of this is at bars 106–110, where the new key of Bb major is prepared with a held chord of F major, its dominant. Similar passages happen at bars 248–9, 391–2, 563–4 and 644–645. The first statement of A3 is harmonized with tonic and dominant chords (bars 119–132) and two of the themes follow a conventional outline by moving to subdominant harmony for their third phrase (e.g. B1, b.404, B2, b.486).

The key structure is not particularly tight, but the beginnings and ends of the two main sections establish F major as the tonic key of the piece, with Bb major as an important subsidiary key.

F major: Section A opening and ending

Bb major: Section B opening

F major: Coda ending (bar 645 to end)

Bb major is also used in Section A, being the key in which theme A3 is first stated (bar 110 and 152). Other significant keys are E major (for the first appearance of theme A4 at bar 249), Db major (bar 28 and bar 136), and D major (for B2’s initial statement in bar 482 and its restatement in bar 541).

To give the impression of forward movement, Gershwin tends not to stay in any one key for too long. There are several ‘sideslips’ of a semitone (for instance the move from a Db pedal to a D pedal in bar 44), and repeated statements of the same theme are often varied by sounding them in a different key each time (e.g. B1 appears in Bb, G and A major in bars 392–470, while A1 appears in many different keys in section A).

Rhythm

Gershwin's rhythmic writing in An American in Paris is of course heavily influenced by jazz, Broadway musicals and popular dance music (syncopation and the Charleston rhythm), but it also displays rhythmic techniques used by neoclassical composers (such as the use of irregular meters and polyrhythms of different types). His sudden contrasts of texture, combined with irregular phrase structures and devices such as diminution give the music an unpredictable quality that also contributes to the rhythmic interest. Rhythmic features of interest include:

Syncopation

This takes several different forms:

- off-beat accented accompaniment figures (accompaniments for A2 (bars 28), A4 (249), B1 (392)).
- syncopation in the melody (e.g. in "LA SORELLA" bars 98 and 100, B1 bar 404, 'sync' bar 471, B2 bar 483).
- syncopation produced through irregular subdivisions of the bar (e.g. the 3+3+2 accents at bars 103, 508, the 3+2+3 rhythms every second bar from bar 516)

Polyrhythm

A common device is for Gershwin to switch a melody temporarily from a duple to a triple meter, such as 3/8 or 3/4, whilst maintaining a strong duple meter accompaniment pattern, i.e. 2/4 or 4/4. Examples of this are:

- bars 555–571: 3/8 is combined with 4/4 in bars 564–571
- bars 655–661: 3/8 (upper strings) is combined with idea A4 in 2/4 (brass)

Changes of meter

Given that the work has such striking rhythmic qualities, it is perhaps surprising how few changes of meter there are. Section A is mostly in 2/4 but there are a few time signature changes: bars 204–219, which includes 2/4, 3/4 and 5/4 bars, and bars 312–332. Section B is mostly in 4/4, with a few switches between 2/4 in the coda.

Regularity

The reason why the rhythmic irregularities described above have such a strong impact is because much of the rest of the music has a strong, regular pulse, making the irregularities far more noticeable. One of the main contributing factors to the feeling of regularity are the stride accompaniments. Examples of these in both 2/4 and 4/4 occur at bars 1–23, 79–86, 119–146, 279–282, 392–405 and 482–491.

The first beat of the bar is often emphasized by the melodies Gershwin uses, in which two-bar phrases are common (such as in themes A1, A2, A3, A4, B2).

Texture

The texture of An American in Paris is almost entirely melody-dominated homophony. Exceptions are the odd bar of monophony (e.g. b.201, 515) and occasional passages in homorhythm (e.g. bars 556–560). Countermelodies are fairly frequent, notably those added against theme B1 (e.g. cello bar 414). Held chords, over which melodic fragments are sounded are often used in codetta-like or transitional passages (e.g. those in the passages at bars 358–391 and 478–481); sometimes these are built up a note or two at a time (e.g. bars 71–78 and 583–589). Pedal notes also appear, often with changing harmonies above them (e.g. bars 97–104, 239–248, 461–464).

Instrumentation

Gershwin's work is scored for symphony orchestra: woodwind with the normal doublings (piccolo, cor anglais and bass clarinet), standard brass section, an expanded percussion section, three saxophones, celeste and strings.

The percussion section contains a large number of instruments, including four taxi horns, pitched on different notes: for the first performance, Gershwin had these shipped over specially from Paris. Other instruments he uses include side drum, cymbal, bass drum, triangle, xylophone (e.g. b.32), tom tom (b.77), wood block (b.85) and bells (b.133). He also uses a range of percussion techniques, some of which were borrowed from jazz and musicals:

- snare with wire brush (b.265)
- snare rim shot (b.350)
- cymbal tremolo played with a stick (b.369)
- timpani hit in the middle of the skin 'with no tonality' (i.e. of indefinite pitch) (b.564)

The jazz influence is also notable in his inclusion of alto, tenor and baritone saxophones, which make their first entrance in section B (bar 396). Together with the trombone, tuba and trumpet played with a 'felt crown', pizzicato strings and off-beat percussion, give this passage a distinctly jazzy flavor. The saxophones also play an important part in adding a 'dance-hall feel' to theme B2 in bars 482–549.

Colorful orchestration is apparent throughout the work, with well-judged instrumental effects, striking tone colors and inventive instrumental combinations. Notable examples include:

- the brash-sounding high clarinet solo and handstopped chromatic scales for horns at b.119
- the cor anglais solo, accompanied by muted divisi strings and clarinets (bars 204–220)
- the woodwind flourishes, tom toms and cymbal at bars 249–255
- the handstopped horn and muted trumpets at bars 269–277
- the rapid string and wind scales at bars 324–345 and 564–571
- celeste/pizzicato string chords at bars 369–372
- the solo violin lines at bars 362, 373 and 381
- the solo string quartet at b.412

Generally, in the louder passages, extensive doubling is used, creating a rich, full sound. There are prominent parts for brass and percussion, giving the music a brash quality in places. The string writing is varied, with frequent use of pizzicato (e.g. b.392), multiple stopping (402), tremolo (106), divisi (604), harmonics (170), trills (174), muting (204) and solo strings (412). Lyrical melodic material is often doubled in two or more octaves on the violins and/or violas (e.g. b.439), and sometimes two or more parts play in unison for a richer sound (158, 446). Sudden alternations of material and texture are often reinforced.