

Adrian Symphony Orchestra

Program Note

Concerto in F for Piano and Orchestra

George Gershwin (1898 - 1937)

When George Gershwin died at the age of 38 he left behind a legacy recognized as groundbreaking in the American classical music tradition. Beginning in 1919 with “Swanee,” Gershwin presented the American public with a steady stream of distinctively American works, fusing older symphonic traditions with the newer, American style known as jazz. Music was everything to Gershwin, and he loved the jazz rhythms, the blues harmonies, and the huge collections of song that came from Broadway. But he also loved the traditional European styles that he had grown up with. He subtitled *An American In Paris* a tone poem for orchestra and saw *Porgy and Bess* as an opera. For the *Concerto in F* Gershwin drew inspiration from such as Mozart and Beethoven and composed his most classical work.

The *Concerto in F* was a commissioned work, requested by conductor Walter Damrosch. He was so impressed by the originality of *Rhapsody in Blue* that he asked Gershwin if he could compose a “proper” concerto. He happily accepted the commission although, as the story goes, he did not know exactly what a concerto was. He studied works by experts on the subject in between his Broadway obligations and apparently learned enough to compose the orchestrations for *Concerto in F* on his own, with only minor suggestions from colleagues. Happily, he had studied harmony and orchestration for several years and had a natural gift for melody and pacing. He also had an innate sense of what audiences would like. It was slow going, however, and working around other obligations, it took him several months to complete the work.

In his own words, the *Concerto in F* unfolds in this way:

“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 in the same pace throughout.”

We can only imagine what George Gershwin could have produced had he not died so young. He did, however, live long enough to make a huge impact on the progression of music that is distinctively and uniquely American.

Beryl McHenry