

An American in Paris

George Gershwin (1898-1937)

George Gershwin might have learnt his trade in the music halls of Broadway, but by 1928, the year he wrote *An American in Paris*, he'd also become a highly successful composer for the concert hall. His *Rhapsody in Blue* had gone down a storm in 1924, followed swiftly by his Piano Concerto the following year. He was keen, however, to write a concert piece that didn't rely on piano pyrotechnics for its success.

Gershwin had visited Paris in 1926, hopping across the Channel from a London production of his musical *Lady, Be Good* to sample the delights of the French capital. And in early 1928 he met Maurice Ravel while the French composer was on a concert tour of the United States, even going so far as to request lessons with him. Ravel declined, famously responding that his American colleague would be better off as a first-rate Gershwin than as a second-rate Ravel, but he also offered Gershwin a letter of introduction to Nadia Boulanger, Parisian teacher to dozens of phenomenally successful composers from Aaron Copland to Philip Glass. Gershwin duly travelled to Paris to meet her in March 1928, playing her a few minutes' of his music. Her response, perhaps predictably, was that she had nothing to teach him.

Having a ball in Paris

But Gershwin had a ball in the French capital anyway. He visited Ravel, Milhaud, Poulenc and Prokofiev; he performed both the *Rhapsody in Blue* and Piano Concerto to adulation from audiences and critics; and he attended countless parties, where he found his music adored.

He'd had an idea for an impressionistic tone poem about the French city since that 1926 trip, but his later visit cemented

things. He sketched out a piano score of *An American in Paris* in situ, returning to New York by the end of summer 1928 and completing the orchestration by mid-November. The piece was premiered on 13 December 1928 by the New York Philharmonic under Walter Damrosch, to warm acclaim.

The music

Gershwin wrote in his original programme note: '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.' Those street noises, which accompany the catchy 'walking' theme that opens the piece, include the distinctive parps of Parisian taxi horns – and Gershwin himself bought a set in Paris, which he shipped back specially for the New York premiere.

'The opening gay section,' Gershwin continues, 'is followed by a rich blues with a strong rhythmic undercurrent. Our American has succumbed to a spasm of homesickness.' It's a solo trumpet that first introduces the sultry blues tune, soon taken up across the orchestra. Back to Gershwin: '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. Apparently the homesick American, having left the café and reached the open air, has disowned his spell of the blues and is once again an alert spectator of Parisian life.' Despite one last outing for the blues theme – which ends up on a mournful solo tuba – it's the street music that's triumphant, with even those taxi horns making a final reappearance.

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