

GEORGE GERSHWIN

Born 26 September 1898 in Brooklyn, New York; died 12 July 1937 in Hollywood, California.

An American in Paris (1928)

PREMIERE OF WORK: New York, 13 December 1928; Carnegie Hall; New York Philharmonic; Walter Damrosch, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 19 November 1933; Syria Mosque; Antonio Modarelli, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 17 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, three saxophones, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (including four taxi horns), celesta and strings.

In 1928, George Gershwin was not only the toast of Broadway, but of all America, Britain and many spots in Europe, as well: he had produced a string of successful shows (*Rosalie* and *Funny Face* were both running on Broadway that spring), composed two of the most popular concert pieces in recent memory (*Rhapsody in Blue* and the Piano Concerto in F), and was leading a life that would have made the most glamorous socialite jealous. The pace-setting *Rhapsody in Blue* of 1924 had shown a way to bridge the worlds of jazz and serious music, a direction Gershwin followed further in the exuberant yet haunting Piano Concerto in F the following year. He was eager to move further into the concert world, and during a side trip in March 1926 to Paris from London, where he was preparing the English premiere of *Lady Be Good*, he hit upon an idea, a “walking theme” he called it, that seemed to capture the impression of an American visitor to the city “as he strolls about, listens to the various street noises, and absorbs the French atmosphere.” He worried that “this melody is so complete in itself, I don’t know where to go next,” but the purchase of four Parisian taxi horns on the Avenue de la Grande Armée inspired a second theme for the piece. Late in 1927, a commission for a new orchestral composition from Walter Damrosch, music director of the New York Symphony and conductor of the sensational premiere of the Concerto in F, caused Gershwin to gather up his Parisian sketches, and by January 1928, he was at work on the score: *An American in Paris*. When he returned to New York in late June, he discovered that the New York Symphony had announced the premiere for the upcoming season, so he worked on the piece throughout the autumn and finished the orchestration only a month before the premiere, on December 13, 1928. *An American in Paris*, though met with a mixed critical reception, proved a great success with the public, and it quickly became clear that Gershwin had scored yet another hit.

For the premiere, Deems Taylor collaborated with the composer to produce the following insouciant description of *An American in Paris*: “You are to imagine an American visiting Paris, swinging down the Champs-Élysées on a mild, sunny morning in May or June. He starts without preliminaries and is off to the tune of The First Walking Theme, a straightforward diatonic air designed to convey the impression of Gallic freedom and gaiety. French taxicabs seem to amuse him particularly, a fact that the orchestra points out in brief episodes introducing four real Paris taxi horns.

“Our American strolls on through the medium of The Second Walking Theme, which is announced by the clarinet in French with a strong American accent. Both themes are now discussed at some length. At this point, the American’s itinerary becomes somewhat obscured. It may that he continues down the Champs-Élysées, and that when The Third Walking Theme makes its eventual appearance our American has crossed the Seine and is somewhere on the Left Bank. Certainly it is distinctly less Gallic than its predecessors, speaking American with a French intonation as befits that region of the city where so many Americans gather. The end of this section is couched in terms so unmistakably, albeit, pleasantly blurred as to suggest that the American is on a *terrasse* of a café exploring the mysteries of Anise de Lozo.

“And now the orchestra introduces an unhallowed episode. Suffice it to say that a solo violin approaches our hero (in the soprano register) and addresses him in the most charming broken English. Of course, it is possible that the whole episode is simply a musical transition. This may well be true, for otherwise it is difficult to believe what ensues: our hero becomes homesick. He has the blues, and if the behavior of the solo trumpet be any criterion, he has them very thoroughly.

“However, nostalgia is not a fatal disease. Just in the nick of time the compassionate orchestra rushes another theme to the rescue, two trumpets performing the ceremony of introduction. It is apparent that our hero must have met a compatriot when a noisy, cheerful, self-confident Charleston is heard. Walking Theme Number Two enters soon thereafter, enthusiastically abetted by Number Three. Paris isn’t such a bad place after all: as a

matter of fact, it's a grand place! Nice weather, nothing to do until tomorrow, nice girls. The blues return but mitigated by the Second Walking Theme — a happy reminiscence rather than a homesick yearning — and the orchestra, in a riotous finale, decides to make a night of it. It will be great to get home; but meanwhile, this is Paris!”

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