

Homage to George Gershwin

A LOSS TO MODERN MUSIC

By David Ewen



even when I had cause to find fault. Few people I have known well have been able to take criticism so gracefully as George.

Thus, I knew him well during the period in which he soared from a position of comparative unimportance in Tin-Pan-Alley to the highest rank in American music—a rank that brought him great wealth, world- renown and nationwide adulation. If there was one thing about Gershwin that impressed me even more than his prodigious musical talent, it was the unostentation, the unaffected charm, the supreme modesty and simplicity with which he walked through triumph after triumph in a career that would have turned many a level head.

THE son of simple, warm-hearted middle-class Jews, George Gershwin never lost the simplicity of heart of an unspoiled Jewish boy. He remained closely associated with his people; he always affirmed his Jewishness, spoke of it frequently, expressed his unswerving allegiance to Jewish interests—even in those high social circles where a Jew is not always looked upon with favour. It was always easy to have him join any Jewish cause he thought worthy of support; where the interests of his co-religionists were concerned he was always sympathetic, generous and solicitous.

His family relationship was characteristic of his sweetness of personality. Great fame and fortune did not divorce him from his middle-class relatives—some of whom were modest business people. It was well known by his inner circle that he supported the members of his family to the very remotest branch of the family tree. Generosity was essential to him.

His deep attachment to his parents was equally well known. Whenever the great or the near-great gathered at his beautiful home for cocktail parties, George's parents—Yiddish accent and all—were prominent among the honoured guests. They always moved freely, and with dignity, in George's intimate circle. When George's father died, some three years ago, it was a shock from which he never recovered completely.

Particularly touching was the bond that existed between George and his mother. She attended all performances of his important works, occupied the most prominent seat, and was always the first to congratulate him with a maternal kiss. He purposely rented for her a sumptuous apartment near his own, on East 72nd Street, so that he might visit her daily. "You know," George once told intimate friends, "my mother is the type of woman for whom composers write mammy songs. Only—I mean them!"

WHERE his music was concerned, George was more keenly conscious of shortcomings than his severest critics. He frequently spoke of his faults as a creative artist, lamented them bitterly. He often told me—and he said it with the utmost sincerity—that he would happily exchange all his wealth, luxury and position to become a really great composer. Even as regards his best works—the "Rhapsody" and the "Concerto," both of which he loved with the adoring affection of a proud parent—he had many a qualm.

In fact, it was my impression that George Gershwin underestimated his own genius. He magnified technical faults until his virtues assumed for him pygmy stature. He had something of the exaggerated veneration for technical skill and musical erudition which the unschooled so often have for formal academic training. It was impossible for him to believe honestly that, with mere intuition and instinct, he could sometimes achieve what other composers could not, even after endless years of theoretical training.

I had too high a regard for George Gershwin, as composer and man, to insult his memory by overestimating his importance. As a matter of fact, I had frequently pointed out glaring shortcomings in the "Rhapsody" and the "Concerto"—yawning gaps of musical creation which revealed much immaturity and self-consciousness. However, though some defects preclude his entry into the Valhalla of great composers, he had many extraordinary qualities as a composer which must not be forgotten.

His incomparable genius—a melodic invention, his inexhaustible imagination, his remarkable vitality and freshness, his rhythmic resourcefulness—these are qualities which may, after all, give many of his works, including his songs, a life much longer than any of us suspected.

THE tragedy of Gershwin's death lies principally in the fact that it curtailed a creative career that was reaching greater and greater maturity. Whether Gershwin would have attained immortality, had the normal span of life been permitted him is a question which can never be answered. Frankly, I do not think so; the creative obstacles that faced him were too formidable even for his prodigious native equipment. However, he was acquiring greater self-assurance as a composer with each new large work. His last opus, the opera "Porgy and Bass," is his most integrated artistic conception; a work, still oppressed by obvious faults, but of adult conception splashed with moments of sheer inspiration. Had Gershwin lived, the repertoire of serious music in the jazz idiom would have been enriched limitlessly.

The life-story of Gershwin is too well known to require detailed repetition. However, since this is not only a remembrance but a final evaluation, the essential details of his life should be recorded succinctly for the last time. He was born in Brooklyn, New York, on September 28, 1898, and as a child was brought to Grand Street, on New York's East Side. His childhood was, therefore, spent in New York's gutters. Music, at that time, was to him merely a dull necessity. He studied the piano, instructed by a grey-haired, half-deaf maestro who charged him 25 cents a lesson.

When he was 16 years old, George applied for a position as pianist in Remick's music publishing house. He was accepted, and for three years he received his initiation in America's popular music. It was not long before he turned his hand to popular composition. At 19, he composed his first musical-comedy.

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THE recent premature death of George Gershwin—following an unsuccessful operation—was an irreparable loss to lovers of great music everywhere. It has removed from the world of modern music one of the most dramatic figures, and from the American scene one who for more than a decade has been the most integral part of it and who was first to translate successfully the American temperament and spirit into musical vernacular. It has removed one who, single-handed, had carried jazz from the gutter to a position of respectability and esteem in the eyes of the serious music world. It has removed one who—I can say without hesitation—was the most strongly endowed composer of our own day.

To me personally, the death of George Gershwin was a blow which it is not easy to forget. I had known George a little more than ten years. I first met him shortly after his composition of the "Rhapsody in Blue," when I was sent by a prominent newspaper to interview him about the future of jazz. From that time on I met him at periodic intervals—sometimes more frequently than others—at his home and in the theatrical district of New York. We exchanged conversation on every topic conceivable. He knew my work and always was overgenerous in his appraisal of what I have done. When my first book was published, he—who was so occupied with many duties and commitments—did not forget to send me a letter of high praise. He seemed, in our frequent contacts, to be incapable of anything but affection and solicitude. And he always listened with interest and respect to my opinions of his own works—

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"American Jewish Year Book"

The latest issue to hand of the familiar "American Jewish Year Book" namely, for the year 5698—1937-1938—contains a mass of information on matters relating to the Jewish world during the past year. Apart from its present-day usefulness, the volume may always be regarded as an invaluable work of reference.

The book (which is carefully edited by the well-known American publicist, Mr. H. Schneiderman, and published by the Jewish Publication Society of America) is of a bulky nature, and includes within its pages, among other things, a fascinating biographical study of the late Prof. Richard J. H. Gottheil, famous American Orientalist and Zionist.

An interesting feature of the present volume are the two articles on the Hebrew University, one of which is penned by Professor Joseph Klausner, of Jerusalem. Then, too, one discovers in this edition of the "Year Book," in more than fifty pages, a handy summary of the report of the recent Palestine Royal Commission. All in all, this issue of the "Year Book" ought to have a widespread and ready distribution.

HOMAGE TO GEORGE GERSHWIN

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IN 1923, he was encouraged by his friend, Paul Whiteman, to compose a long, serious musical work, in the jazz idiom, to be featured at an all-American Music Concert which Whiteman was scheduling at the Aeolian Hall. The result was the "Rhapsody in Blue," which, overnight, brought world-fame to its composer and to jazz.

"Rhapsody in Blue" was followed by other serious works in the jazz idiom which established Gershwin's reputation as an American composer more firmly. Principal among these was the "Piano Concerto," the symphonic-poem, "An American in Paris," the "Cuban Overture," a series of jazz piano preludes, and the opera, "Porgy and Bass."

During the composition of these serious works, Gershwin did not abandon the creation of popular tunes. He produced scores for some of the most successful musical comedies on Broadway, including the Pulitzer Prize "Of Thee I Sing!" creating musical scores which glistened with effervescent melodies.

In 1936, George Gershwin left for Hollywood to compose the score for the Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers picture, "Shall We Dance?" Upon its completion, he went over to the Goldwyn lot to produce the music for a Goldwyn revue. It was while Gershwin was engaged upon this task that his final, fatal illness overtook him.

—"American Hebrew."

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We have received a copy of an interesting Hebrew-English calendar. It is a thirty-two page book, giving all the actual English dates and Hebrew dates from 1917 to 1941. A person, for instance, looking for "yahrzeit" or a date of a barmitz can find the information in any moment. One need only know original English date of the event it occurred within the last two or four years).

It is an extremely convenient useful little book and is issued by the famous Heinz Company of America which distributes it freely to those who are interested enough to write for a copy. The address is Heinz Company, Department 10, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.

TWENTY YEARS WITHOUT

MENDELE

(Concluded from page 18).

draws the reader's attention from the main theme and into a field which no longer is art. other relic of his first period his inclination to generalise. city which he describes is inhabited by wise men only, another by people who are stupid and indolent. However, he broke away from this method, and gave us cities in which lived, on the same soil, individuals of totally different characteristics.

FROM his second period he tried over into the third a love for the common people, a clearly perceptible between the of his writings. The paradox of truth of the matter, however, that Mendele, while he really loved the Jewish people, cherished love for individual Jews. Israelik, the Jew who suffers, not arouse his genuine sympathy until, losing his individuality, becomes typical of the entire Jewish people. He sees the Jewish failings too clearly to love individual Jews. He sees all the failings of the individual; yet when he comes to describing an individual he creates not an evil character we might have expected from what he has said previously, but a human being possessed of good qualities also, with a heart capable of suffering and sorrow. A human being, wretched creature in a huge inimical world.

In our age of seething confusion we have not the repose necessary for a true appreciation and understanding of Mendele. But in these abnormal times. In a normal age Mendele will be restored to the supreme place that is rightfully his.

But even to-day we can appreciate the greatest of Mendele's achievements: He it was who raised Yiddish to the plane of a literary language. He cleared the path for Yiddish literature. And it was he who demonstrated that it was possible to write for the people in Hebrew language also. His achievements will keep his memory alive among those who love both