

Concerto in F

George Gershwin

Born: September 26, 1898 – New York City, New York

Died: July 11, 1937 – Los Angeles, California

Piece Length: Approximately 35 minutes.

On February 12, 1924 Paul Whiteman presented a concert in Aeolian Hall in New York City entitled “An Experiment in Modern Music”. Whiteman selected a number of compositions which he felt highlighted the “melodies, harmony, and rhythms which agitate the throbbing emotional resources of this young restless age.” For much of the concert, the audience was underwhelmed. The final work on the program, however, was *Rhapsody in Blue* by George Gershwin, and the audience response was tremendous. The work became an instant hit, helping encourage Gershwin’s ambition to compose works for the concert hall. Among the audience members at this concert was the conductor Walter Damrosch. Impressed by what he heard, he contacted Gershwin the next day to commission a large-scale piano concerto for the New York Symphony Orchestra.

Gershwin began work on the commission in May 1925, completing it on November 10 of that year. The concerto marks a major step in Gershwin’s development as, unlike the *Rhapsody*, Gershwin orchestrated the concerto himself. The composition also showcases Gershwin’s attempts at composing a work that adheres more with the traditional concerto forms one finds in the works of the great masters from the 18th and 19th Centuries.

Gershwin’s concert works were always met with a mixed reaction during his lifetime. Audiences generally were extraordinarily enthusiastic. His contemporary musicians, however, had mixed opinions. Maurice Ravel adored his work, and one can easily see Gershwin’s influence on Ravel’s later works, such as the jazz influenced Piano Concerto in G. The English composer William Walton raved about Gershwin’s orchestration in the Concerto in F. Perhaps most surprising, the great modernist composer Arnold Schoenberg—who lived near Gershwin and would come over to his house to play tennis—wrote a touching tribute to Gershwin shortly after his death, stating “...he expressed musical ideas, and they were new, as is the way he expressed them.... He has something to say and he says it.”

But other musicians were not so complimentary. Aaron Copland, who would compose his own jazz-influenced Piano Concerto the year after the premiere of the Concerto in F, never acknowledged Gershwin’s work when discussing American music. Once, when asked about him by a student, Copland merely commented “He was a good Broadway composer.” After hearing the Concerto in F, Prokofiev found it “amateurish.” The influential New York Times critic Olin Downs—who loved the *Rhapsody*—criticized Gershwin’s formal approach in the work and wrote of the concerto: “Gershwin has tried earnestly and sincerely.... He has not succeeded because the form he employs is not native to a composer of his experience.”

While the criticism from Downs is harsh, he may have inadvertently hit upon what makes this masterpiece actually work. One can see the general outline of concerto form on both the large scale structure—a fast-slow-fast three movement format. This is also present within each of the individual movements: the first movement is a sort of sonata form, the second can be heard as a 5-part rondo (ABACA), and the third a very loose rondo form. Downs may be correct that traditional concerto form would not be “native” to a composer who had found great success as a songwriter on Tin Pan Alley or on Broadway. But it would also be absolutely correct to say that what makes Gershwin’s musical language so fantastic and evocative of New York City in the 1920s—the energetic rhythms, the fresh harmonies,

the melodic invention—might be stifled if boxed into a form that developed in the eighteenth century in Europe. By having a freer approach to the traditional concerto form, Gershwin created a uniquely American piano concerto that has remained one of the most frequently performed works of the genre during the twentieth century.

The first movement, marked *Allegro* (fast) opens boldly with an orchestral exposition that presents three of the five(!) main ideas Gershwin will work with in the movement. Starting in the first measure the timpani, percussion, and upper winds present the first idea which has been compared to a sledgehammer. It is quickly followed by a second idea derived from the rhythms of the Charleston, a dance style that was popular in the 1920s and a hallmark of the jazz age. The rhythms are distinguishable by its asymmetric syncopation (repeating a 1-2-3-1-2-3-1-2 pattern). The third musical idea, a pentatonic scale with a dotted rhythm that rises and falls is first heard in the bass clarinet. Once the orchestral exposition finishes, the soloist enters, introducing the fourth idea, a blues theme that is a contrast to all the other themes. In this way, Gershwin is already moving away from conventional form, creating a structure that perfectly compliments the number of memorable ideas and the freshness of his rhythmic and harmonic vocabulary. After a short piano cadenza, where one might expect a second theme to appear Gershwin presents a new, lighter section. Many of the previous ideas are heard here including fragments of the Charleston rhythm that move back and forth between the winds and piano resulting in a call-and-response effect, punctuated by the pentatonic idea scattered throughout the orchestra. Eventually, the piano presents a playful new theme (five!) that features heavy syncopations. From here, Gershwin moves even further away from traditional sonata form while continuing to masterfully develop his musical ideas, resulting in a movement that listeners can easily follow along with and remain engaged.

The second movement, again a clearer 5-part rondo form (A-B-A-C-A) opens with a short introduction marked *Adagio* (slow) in which a muted solo horn sets a sultry mood. Soon, the A section begins at a slightly faster tempo, marked *Andante con moto* (Walking tempo, with motion). This section presents a blues theme with an extended solo for the trumpet accompanied by a trio of clarinets. In a stroke of brilliance, Gershwin never has the piano play during any of the A sections in this movement, helping the clarity of structure. The B section is faster paced, with the piano finally entering with playful grace notes against pizzicato strings that seem to imitate a banjo. The C section presents a new, highly expressive melody and builds towards a passionate climax before coming to a sudden stop as the A section appears one last time before the movement drifts away.

The finale, marked *Allegro agitato* (Fast and agitated), is similar to a Rondo form in which the main musical idea (typically labeled A) is alternated with contrasting ideas. While in classical era music rondo form is rather strict—either in a 5-part (ABACA) or 7-part (ABACABA) format—here Gershwin treats the structure much more freely. The movement opens swiftly without introduction right into the A theme: an aggressive, fast, toccata-like theme first presented in the orchestra before the piano takes over. The B section features a heavily syncopated theme first heard in the horns, piano, and cellos against strong beat pulse played by the trombone, tuba, and basses. This theme is actually from the first movement: it is the theme the piano opens with, just played at a faster tempo. The C section has a couple of ideas: the first heard in a muted trumpet, and the second that features dazzling virtuosic runs that are first heard in the solo flute and clarinet. Aside from bringing back a theme from the first movement in the B section, Gershwin also brings back a melody from the second movement as well as the timpani idea that opens the entire concerto, helping create even greater cohesion on a large scale. After a stirring climax played by the entire orchestra, the toccata-like music appears one more time energetically pushing towards the coda, in which Gershwin bookends the entire work by bringing back the opening measures of the concerto before ending with a powerful F major chord.