AUDIOPHILE EDITION

GERSHWIN

Concerto in F • Rhapsody in Blue
Variations on *I Got Rhythm* • Second Rhapsody

Jeffrey Siegel, Piano

St. Louis Symphony Orchestra

Leonard Slatkin

George Gershwin (1898–1937)
Works for Piano and Orchestra

Gershwin in 1924 posing with the original cover to the *Rhapsody in Blue* piano score (Gershwin Archives).

George Gershwin, contrary to popular legend, did not invent American music. He did contribute to its definition and he did put it on the map – literally in concert halls throughout the world.

While Ives, Copland and Barber are admired and widely performed also, when American music is discussed, say, in France, the name of Gershwin is invariably invoked. Ravel, for example, was an unabashed Gershwin fan; Bartók, in Budapest during the Twenties, ordered all the new Gershwin piano music as soon as it was published. The great English master Vaughan Williams made a point when he said, 'We must not make the mistake of thinking lightly of the very characteristic art of Gershwin.' Alban Berg and Gershwin formed a curious mutual admiration society and the former's teacher, the formidable master, Schoenberg, had kind things to say of Gershwin, a frequent tennis partner, though found little good to say of most of his contemporaries.

This is not to imply that Gershwin was universally admired; he often received unfavourable reviews, some inspired by simple envy, some based on honest appraisal of his shortcomings as, for want of a better term, a musical thinker. Although Gershwin's formal musical education was more solid than legend has it, he was more likely to rely on intuition than the rule books, though he did attempt to 'balance the head and the heart', as he once put it. Generally it was the heart (not to be confused with sentimentality) that won out: a natural, romantic flow of melody, brightened with crisp rhythms and enriched with haunting, blue-tinctured harmonies.

Gershwin's 'very characteristic art' is rooted in American popular song. Even his severest critics grant him mastery of that exacting form; it is the structure of the larger works that disturbs them. Gershwin was conscious of flaws, but despite them the compositions work; they are effective and, consequently, remarkably popular, like the songs and dances from which they have evolved. If Gershwin began as a child of Tin Pan Alley, he rapidly graduated into the musical theatre. He had a keen sense of showmanship and it might be conjectured that his musical form was more closely attuned to the lyric stage than to textbook definitions.

Gershwin came to these textbooks comparatively late as musical educations go. He was about twelve in 1910 when

the Gershwins acquired a second-hand upright piano. The intended 'victim' was older brother Ira, but it was George who sat at the keyboard and surprised everyone by playing a current popular song. It was soon learned that he had taught himself on a neighbour's piano. His performance – Ira Gershwin recalls being especially impressed with his left hand – plus blandishments, convinced his parents that he, not Ira, would take piano lessons.

The conventional pattern ensued, with a difference. Gershwin began lessons with the ubiquitous neighbourhood lady at fifty cents a lesson. The difference lay in Gershwin's approach; he consumed the lesson books and depleted the teachers. This continued for nearly two rather unproductive years. Gershwin probably gleaned more from the concerts he attended by Godowsky, Lhévinne and Leo Ornstein (he carefully preserved the programmes). Some time in 1913 Gershwin was introduced to a gifted teacher, Charles Hambitzer, who hailed his then fourteen-year-old pupil as 'a genius'. Hambitzer was a first-rate musician, a pianist of more than passing ability and a composer of few pretensions. Gershwin's studies were directing him towards a pianistic career and obviously Hambitzer had plans for him. 'He wants to go in for this modern stuff,' Hambitzer once wrote his sister, 'jazz and what not. But I'm not going to let him for a while. I'll see that he gets a firm foundation in the standard music first.'

Hambitzer also encouraged Gershwin to make a study of theory, and later orchestration, with Edward Kilenyi, Sr. It was some lime during this period (c. 1919) that Gershwin composed his first 'serious' work, the *Lullaby* for string quartet. It was not a composition in the conventional sense, but rather a study in harmony prepared for Kilenyi. Though Gershwin chose not to publish the *Lullaby*, it was frequently performed by string groups (made up generally of friends of the composer) in the early Twenties.

Hambitzer's early death undoubtedly contributed to Gershwin's diversion from a career as a concert pianist. An indifferent student, he left high school in May of 1914 at the age of fifteen to take a job as a pianist with Remick's, a publishing house in Tin Pan Alley. The locale was not notable for musical excellence – but at the time there were two exceptional musical forces at work that would change that, and influence the young 'piano pounder', Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern.

Gershwin had already begun to dabble in song-writing, luckily more under the influence of Kern and Berlin than the songs he pounded out daily on 28th Street. As early as 1913 he produced a couple of tunes and though he never forgot them, he hoped that others would. Just a few months before he left high school a programme for an 'entertainment' held at brother Ira's literary club lists him as performing his own composition, a tango.

Gershwin spent nearly three years in what his first biographer Isaac Goldberg aptly called 'plugger's purgatory', roughly from May 1914 to March 1917. Ira Gershwin's diary of the time noted that his brother left Remnick's 'in order to be able to study unhindered'. His pianistic career had not exactly grown apace during those years (though the interminable playing was good for the fingers), nor had his creativity been afforded much outlet. At the same time he augmented his income by cutting piano rolls (which, though mechanical, reveal a distinctive style), he had published his first song, *When You Want 'Em You Can't Get 'Em, When You've Got 'Em You Don't Want 'Em* (1916) and his first solo piano piece, *Rialto Ripples* (composed 1916, published the next year).

To underwrite his studies with Hambitzer and Kilenyi, Gershwin also found work as accompanist, or playing in small groups, or as a rehearsal pianist. In February 1918 he joined the staff of T.B. Harms as a composer: he was not yet twenty years old. Within a year, among other songs, he, with the aid of lyricist Irving Caesar, presented Harms with *Swanee*, which became by the following year, under the aegis of Al Jolson, one of the great song 'hits' of all time.

The popularity of *Swanee* led to other assignments – show scores primarily, including a series of five George White *Scandals* (1920–24). Success tended to divert him away from systematic study, but among his papers are examples of his work with Kilenyi at the time. He also enrolled at Columbia University to take courses with the noted Rossetter G. Cole: *19th Century Romanticism in Music* and *Elementary Orchestration*. He had also begun the practice of keeping 'Tune Books', in which he jotted down ideas, most of them for songs. He also kept a portfolio of piano *Novelettes*, some of which would surface years later as the Piano *Preludes*, or as thematic ideas or transition passages in the *Rhapsody in Blue* and the *Concerto in F*.

Why all the consternation then when Gershwin crossed the musical tracks in 1924 with the *Rhapsody in Blue*? He had already been there but no one had noticed. AlI that was required was a catalyst; what occurred, in fact, was a convergence of three: the emergence of popular jazz (as opposed to true folk art), the burgeoning of Paul Whiteman and his Orchestra and the tossing off by Gershwin of a little one-act opera, *Blue Monday*.

For the *Scandals* of 1922 Gershwin and lyricist B.G. DeSylva decided – no one seems to know why – to go arty. DeSylva concocted a 'libretto' with a Harlem bar setting and provided lyrics for Gershwin's songs. Except for the title song and another entitled *Has Anyone Seen Joe?* (based on the theme of *Lullaby*), there is scant vintage Gershwin in *Blue Monday*. There are many fascinating instrumental passages linking the songs which intimate a Gershwin to come, however. But the 'opera', produced by Gershwin and DeSylva over a period of five feverish days, received what is known as mixed notices. Some critics hated it: 'The most dismal, stupid and incredible blackface sketch... ever... perpetrated'. Some admired it: '...a human plot of American life, set to music in a popular vein, using jazz only at the right moments, the sentimental song, the Blues, and above all, a new and free ragtime recitative.' One critic even went so far as to predict: 'This opera will be imitated in a hundred years.'

Gershwin and Walter Damrosch, who commissioned both the *Concerto in F* and *An American in Paris,* in 1925 (Gershwin Archives).

Gershwin in hiding at the Whitehall Hotel in 1925, in an attempt to get away from the busy, crowded Gershwin household around tho corner, so that he could finish the *Concerto in F* (Gershwin Archives).

A 1928 party at singer Eva Gauthier's home, to which Maurice Ravel had been invited, and in accepting the invitation, had asked that he be able to meet Gershwin and hear him play. From left to right around Ravel, who is seated; Oskar Fried, a conductor; Eva Guathier; Manoah Leide-Tedesco, conductor of the San Carlo Orchestra; and George (Gershwin Archives).

Although that augury has some years to run, George White made up his mind forthwith: he yanked *Blue Monday* out of the *Scandals* before it could be done again. But Paul Whiteman, whose orchestra played in the pit, was impressed and remained a champion of it for years (he even attempted a Carnegie Hall revival, retitling it *135th Street*, but to no avail). When he was crowned 'King of Jazz' (by his press agent) Whiteman decided to educate the masses as well as esthetes in the true significance of 'jazz'. When he scheduled a concert towards this end at Aeolian Hall, he remembered Gershwin's little opera of two years before.

The word 'jazz' by 1924 was a catchall, all things to all men. To Whiteman it meant the exploitation of certain obvious devices used by real jazzmen, then dressing them up in tricky big band arrangements and performing them with missionary zeal. There was something titillating about dancing to the kind of music that may have originated in brothels. Whiteman did make a substantial contribution to popular music and to the rise of the big band, but his 'jazz' was a naïve parody of the real thing.

Gershwin in 1931 at Greta Garbo's home in Hollywood, while he was composing the music for the film *Delicous*, out of which came the *Second Rhapsody*. Artur Rodzinski, in the background, was there to conduct *An American in Paris* with the Los Angeles Philharmonic (Gershwin Archives).

It was Whiteman's 1924 *Experiment in Modern Music* that catapulted Gershwin into creating the *Rhapsody in Blue*. He accomplished this first by announcing that Gershwin was writing a new work for the concert (to Gershwin's surprise) and then convincing the composer he could do it in the month before the concert. Although involved in preparing a new show for production, Gershwin was caught up in Whiteman's enthusiasm and dipped a little into his Tune Books for some ideas; the general structure of what he first planned to call 'American Rhapsody' came to him during a train trip to Boston – the famous slow middle theme during a party at a friend's home. Work began on 7 January (about three days after the newspaper announcements) and the more or less completed *Rhapsody in Blue* (Ira Gershwin's title idea) was ready for the concert on 12 February 1924. 'More or less' because some of the piano solo passages were improvised during the performance. A notable contribution to the success of the *Rhapsody* was Ferde Grofé's orchestration which was, of course, geared to the special talents of the Whiteman band – although Gershwin's manuscript contains several suggestions along these lines, including the opening clarinet whoop. The later full symphonic orchestration was also done by Grofé – although Gershwin chose to do the orchestration of all of his later large scale works himself.

The impact of the *Rhapsody* – praises, damns, controversy – placed the youthful composer in the spotlight and he was soon approached by the New York Symphony Society, through its conductor, Walter Damrosch, to compose a full scale piano concerto. Gershwin was on the move again in the spring of 1925 – in London, in fact, for the opening of one of his musicals; it was there that he began sketching ideas for a 'New York Concerto'. By the summer, in July, he spent full time on the concerto and completed the piano sketch in September. Orchestration followed and the work was finished on 10 November 1925 (the premiere took place in Carnegie Hall on 3 December). The *Concerto in F*, to use Gershwin's final title, marked an interesting growth in Gershwin's art since the *Rhapsody in Blue*. There were those who were disappointed because it was not as musically raffish as the earlier work; critics pointed out its 'structural deficiencies'. But Gershwin had invested the work with a life-force that has sustained it in the concert halls for nearly half a century; it is undoubtedly the most popular American piano concerto. It is the only Gershwin work in which he adheres to conventional musical form – more or less, again. The first movement follows the traditional sonata structure, but its rhythms are based on the popular 'Charleston'. Its main piano theme, simple and direct, is one of Gershwin's happiest inventions. The middle movement, nocturnal, bluesy, is beautifully sustained, whatever its technical form. The final movement returns to the energetic character of the opening of the first and rondo-wise reintroduces ideas from the first movement as well as new themes. With the *Concerto in F* Gershwin took a long step forward.

Serge Koussevitzky with Gershwin in Boston, 1932, for the premiere of the *Second Rhapsody* (Gershwin Archives).

Gershwin devoted most of the following three years to writing songs for musicals: the successful revised *Strike Up the Band*, *Girl Crazy* (both 1930) and *Of Thee I Sing* (1931). The Gershwins travelled to Hollywood late in 1930 to produce their first original film score for a new forgotten movie, *Delicious*. The script called for an extended musical sequence for which Gershwin concocted a *Rhapsody in Rivets* (originally 'Manhattan Rhapsody'). Work completed in Hollywood, Gershwin returned to New York where he decided to expand and develop the 'Manhattan Rhapsody', and by 23 May 1931, had completed it, including orchestration. His final title was simply *Second Rhapsody*. The romanticism of the first rhapsody is generally absent from the second, a decidedly austere work for Gershwin, beginning with the rather ominous 'rivet theme' which opens it. Gershwin was especially pleased with the 'orchestration and form', but the work itself did not achieve the instant popularity as had the *Rhapsody in Blue*. It remains one of his neglected compositions, and perhaps while transitional, is one of his most interesting.

To help finance work on his opera *Porgy and Bess* (with a libretto by DuBose and Dorothy Heyward) Gershwin became host of a radio show, *Music by Gershwin*, and early in 1934 toured with an orchestra. For the tour he devised one of his most delightful works, *Variations on 'I Got Rhythm'*. Begun during a vacation in Palm Beach, Florida, he continued

work during a stopover with the Heywards in Charleston, South Carolina. Dorothy Heyward, who had transformed her husband's novel into the play then being used as the basis for the opera, was impressed with Gershwin's ability to work on so complex a piece away from the piano, since the Heywards did not have one at the time. Gershwin's cross-country tour began on 14 January 1934, when the *Variations on 'I Got Rhythm'*, dedicated to his brother Ira, was performed for the first time.

Edward Jablonski
Booklet notes reprinted from the original LP release

Gershwin at his practice keyboard in 1934, on tour with the *Variations on* '*I Got Rhythm*'. Vocalist James Melton looks on, while unidentified lady sits at right (Gershwin Archives).

Gershwin completes his last finished painting in Beverly Hills, 1937. It is of Arnold Schoenberg, who much admired Gershwin (Gershwin Archives).

Jeffrey Siegel

The American pianist Jeffrey Siegel enjoys a formidable international career. Critics on both sides the Atlantic have been lavish with their praise: 'An extraordinary impressive musician' *(London Daily Telegraph)*; 'Dazzling' *(New York Times)*; 'A magnificent artist who literally overflows with music' *(Berlin Die Welt)*. He has been engaged as soloist by many of the world's leading orchestras, among them the New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, London, Amsterdam, Minnesota, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Detroit, and the National Symphony orchestras. After hearing Siegel play Arthur Rubinstein wrote, 'I was deeply moved by your performance and enchanted with the beautiful tone you produced; I wish you much success with all my heart.'

Jeffrey Siegel brings to Gershwin's music a special artistry and flair; the rare combination of superb musicianship, virtuosity and his teenage experience as a weekend jazz pianist!

He performs extensively throughout the world and has been engaged by such diverse conductors as Pierre Boulez, Sir Georg Solti, William Steinberg, Walter Susskind, André Kostelanetz, Arthur Fiedler, Mitch Miller and Aaron Copland.

Leonard Slatkin

Internationally acclaimed conductor Leonard Slatkin is Music Director Laureate of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO), Directeur Musical Honoraire of the Orchestre National de Lyon (ONL), and Conductor Laureate of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. He maintains a rigorous schedule of guest conducting throughout the world and is active as a composer, author, and educator. Slatkin has received six GRAMMY Awards and 35 nominations.

One of his recent recordings for Naxos is the world premiere of Alexander Kastalsky's *Requiem for Fallen Brothers* commemorating the 100th anniversary of the armistice ending the First World War. Other recent Naxos releases include works by Saint-Saëns, Ravel, and Berlioz (with the ONL) and music by Copland, Rachmaninov, Borzova, McTee, and John Williams (with the DSO). In addition, he has recorded the complete Brahms, Beethoven, and Tchaikovsky symphonies with the DSO (available online as digital downloads).

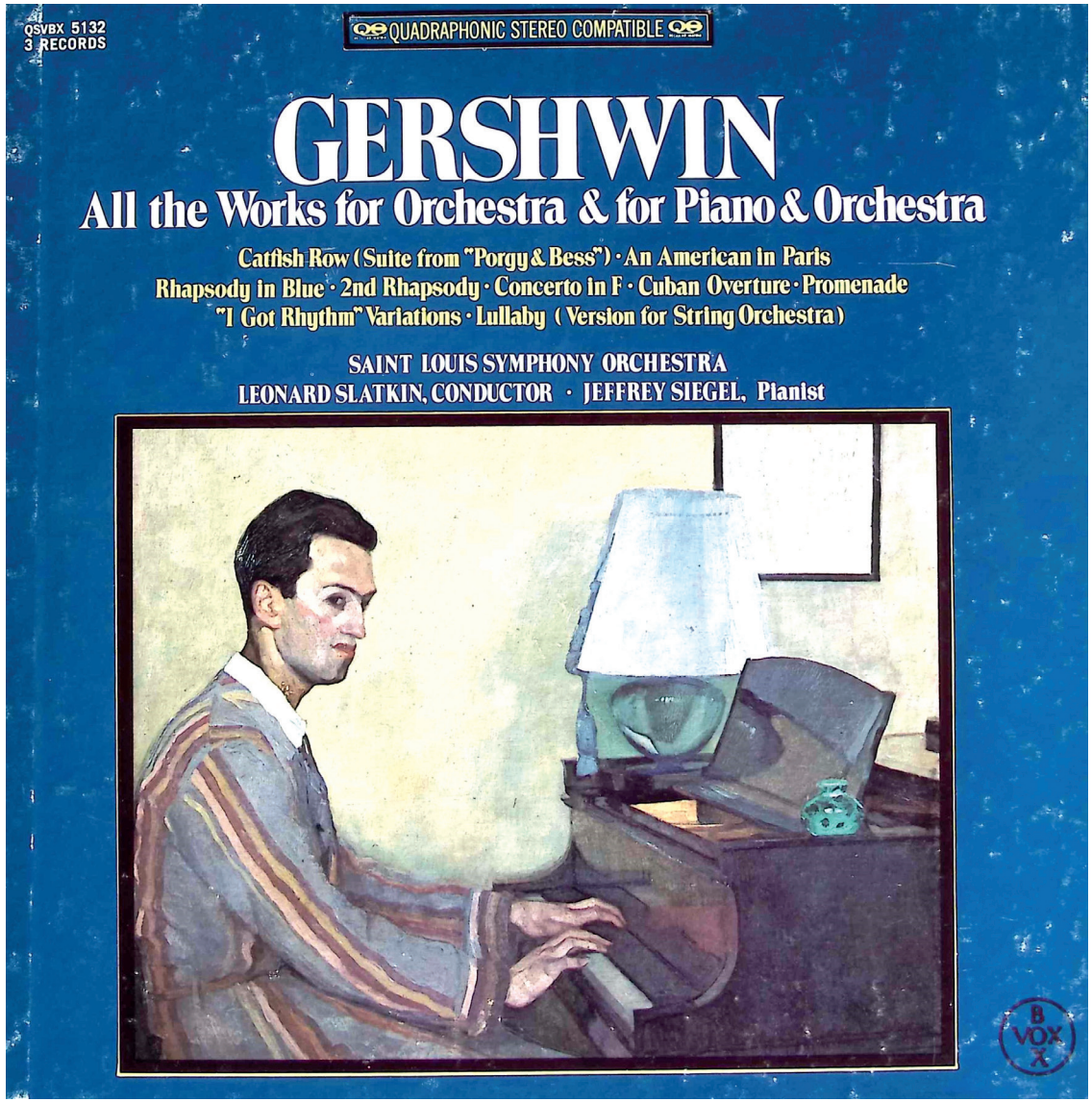
A recipient of the prestigious National Medal of Arts, Slatkin also holds the rank of Chevalier in the French Legion of Honour. He has received the Prix Charbonnier from the Federation of Alliances Françaises, Austria's Decoration of Honour in Silver, the League of American Orchestras' Gold Baton Award, and the 2013 ASCAP Deems Taylor Special Recognition Award for his debut book, *Conducting Business*. A second volume, *Leading Tones: Reflections on Music, Musicians, and the Music Industry*, was published by Amadeus Press in 2017. His most recent book, *Classical Crossroads: The Path Forward for Music in the 21st Century* (2021), is available through Rowman & Littlefield.

Slatkin has conducted virtually all the leading orchestras in the world. As Music Director, he has held posts in New Orleans; St. Louis; Washington, DC; London (with the BBC Symphony Orchestra); Detroit; and Lyon, France. He has also served as Principal Guest Conductor in Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Cleveland.

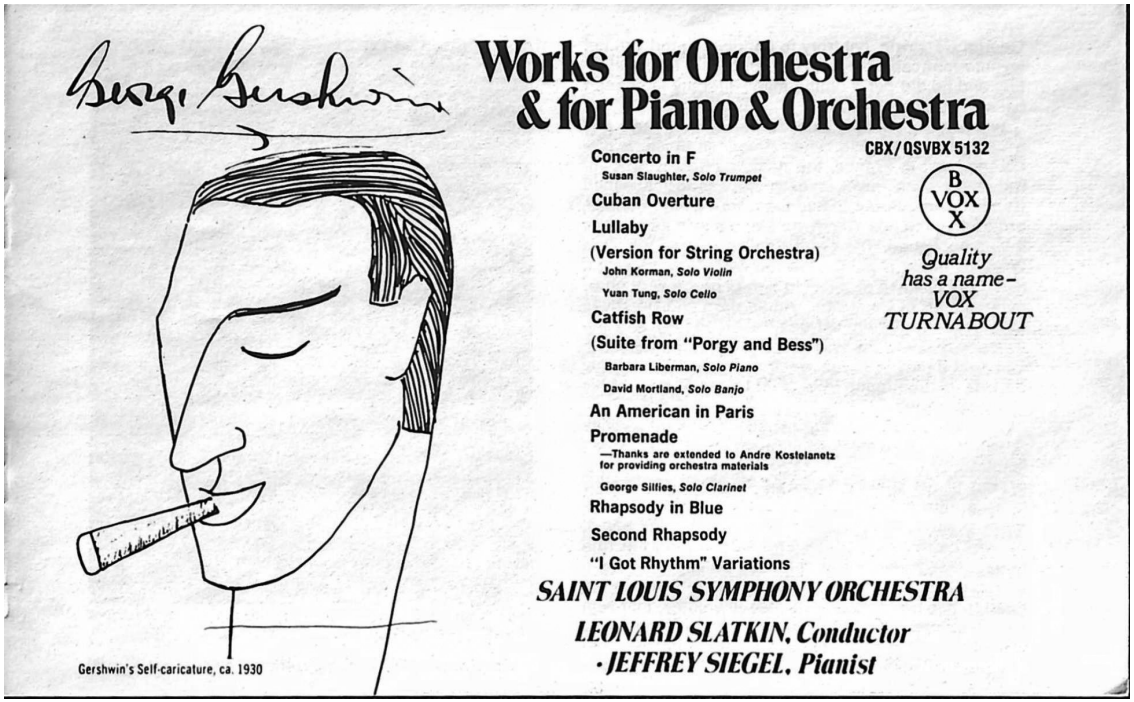
www.leonardslatkin.com

St. Louis Symphony Orchestra

Founded in 1880, the St. Louis Symphony is the second-oldest orchestra in the United States and is widely considered one of the world's finest. In September 2005, internationally acclaimed conductor David Robertson became the twelfth music director and second American-born conductor in the orchestra's history. The St. Louis Symphony continues to strive for artistic excellence, fiscal responsibility and community connection. The St. Louis Symphony is one of only a handful of major American orchestras invited to perform regularly at the prestigious Carnegie Hall. Recordings by the symphony have been honoured with six GRAMMY Awards and 56 GRAMMY nominations over the years. The orchestra has embraced technological advances in music distribution by offering recordings over the internet. The St. Louis Symphony download initiative includes live recordings of John Adams' *Harmonielehre*, Szymanowski's *Violin Concerto No. 1*, with Christian Tetzlaff, and Scriabin's *The Poem of Ecstasy* available exclusively on iTunes and Amazon.com. In 2009, the symphony's Nonesuch recording of John Adams's *Doctor Atomic* and *Guide to Strange Places* reached No. 2 on the *Billboard* rankings for classical music, and was named 'Best CD of the Decade' by the *The Times* of London. In September 2012, the St. Louis Symphony embarked on its first European tour with music director David Robertson. The symphony visited international festivals in Berlin and Lucerne, with stops in Paris and London as well, performing works by Beethoven, Brahms, Sibelius, Schoenberg, Gershwin and Elliott Carter. Christian Tetzlaff joined the symphony as featured soloist. In June 2008, the St. Louis Symphony launched *Building Our Business*, which takes a proactive, two-pronged approach: build audiences and re-invigorate the St. Louis brand making the symphony and Powell Hall *the place to be*; and build the donor base for enhanced institutional commitment and donations. This is all part of a larger strategic plan adopted in May 2009 that includes new core ideology and a ten-year strategic vision focusing on artistic and institutional excellence, doubling the existing audience, and revenue growth across all key operating areas.



First released in 1974 as QSVBX 5132.



The first page of the original booklet from QSVBX 5132

George Gershwin's epochal *Rhapsody in Blue* brought the composer worldwide celebrity after its 1924 premiere. He was soon approached to write a concerto which was premiered the following year – the *Concerto in F* remains one of the most popular American works in the genre. The *Second Rhapsody* of 1931 is a more austere, transitional but fascinating score, while the *Variations on 'I Got Rhythm'*, dedicated to his brother Ira, is one of Gershwin's most delightful works. Stellar pianist Jeffrey Siegel is joined by multiple GRAMMY-winning conductor Leonard Slatkin and the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra in these classic Vox recordings from 1974.

The Elite Recordings for Vox by legendary producers Marc Aubort and Joanna Nickrenz are considered by audiophiles to be amongst the finest sounding examples of orchestral recordings

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George
GERSHWIN
(1898–1937)
Works for Piano and Orchestra

	Concerto in F (1925)	**33:02**
1	**I. Allegro**	**13:42**
2	**II. Adagio – Andante con moto**	**12:21**
3	**III. Allegro agitato**	**7:00**
4	**Second Rhapsody** (1931)	**14:44**
5	**Variations on *I Got Rhythm*** (1934)	**8:56**
6	**Rhapsody in Blue** (1924)	**17:57**

Jeffrey Siegel, Piano
Susan Slaughter, Solo Trumpet 2
St. Louis Symphony Orchestra
Leonard Slatkin

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Producers: Marc Aubort and Joanna Nickrenz • Engineering: Elite Recordings
Tape transfers: Mike Clements • Re-mastering engineer: Andrew Walton
Booklet notes: Edward Jablonski
Cover photograph: *Modern megapolis with tall skyscrapers* by Charles Parker (www.pexels.com)