

Wayne Schneider, ed. *The Gershwin Style: New Looks at the Music of George Gershwin*. Oxford University Press, 1999. xiv, 290 pp.

Reviewed by David Schiff

This volume, published just after the Gershwin centenary in 1998, already seems to belong to an awkward age of transition in musicology. A number of the book's twelve essays beat the drums for a new approach to Gershwin that would rescue him from the snobbery of high art prejudices, and for a more general attempt by musicologists to engage with popular culture. A look at the program for recent American Musicological Society meetings quickly reveals that the revolution has already happened; pop is everywhere. But Gershwin remains as elusive as ever.

The two most useful essays in the collection, "'Rotating' *Porgy and Bess*," by Wayne D. Shirley, and "Gershwin's *Blue Monday* (1922), and the Promise of Success," by John Andrew Johnson, are traditional musical scholarship of a high order. Shirley closely scrutinizes the evidence for Russian composer and pedagogue Joseph Schillinger's influence on Gershwin's great folk opera, and Johnson provides much valuable information about its intriguing precursor. Charlotte Greenspan's "*Rhapsody in Blue*: a Study in Hollywood Hagiography" similarly offers a systematic and surprisingly sympathetic guide to a film that many will be tempted to dismiss as kitsch.

None of these essays, however, really addresses the issue of Gershwin's style, and those that do suffer from apparently unconscious high art prejudices even when they protest against them. The ghost of Arnold Schoenberg—or is it Brahms, or Boulanger?—walks through many of the essays. The very title of Wayne Schneider's essay, "Gershwin's Operetta Overtures: Medley or Composition?" loads the dice in favor of the second category, as if a medley were, by definition, not a composition. (Schneider does not look at what to me is a more interesting phenomenon: the prestige and influence of operetta on Broadway which persists to this day.) Similarly, Larry Starr's "Musing on 'Nice Gershwin Tunes,' Form and Harmony in the Concert Music of Gershwin," while full of insights into Gershwin's craft, condescendingly praises Gershwin as "an intelligent and practical musician" capable of "long-scale compositional intent." And the late Stephen Gilbert gives Gershwin points for his "contrapuntal bias." Another sign that the academy is determined to praise Gershwin only on its own terms is Charles Hamm's call for "authentic texts" and study of performance style of the 1920s—you can't get much more old musicology

than that—in an essay which otherwise quite militantly calls for new approaches. Every historical reconstruction of Gershwin performance practice that I have heard has demonstrated the uselessness and irrelevance of such an approach for a body of music which lives on through performances in styles Gershwin could barely have imagined.

While it would be entirely misleading to view Gershwin as in any way marginal to American musical culture—quite the contrary—critics and especially other composers always had trouble placing him, and continue to. If I may indulge in Toveyisms, the problem is that Gershwin was at once the most normal of composers and the most abnormal. No one, not even Leonard Bernstein, has been able to repeat Gershwin's success in the theater and the concert hall, and as the gap between popular music and the classical repertory continues to widen (no matter how many times marketing departments hype "diversity"), it becomes harder to understand his ability to cross over an abyss which has swallowed everyone else whole. In Gershwin's time, the classical world took him quite seriously—except, that is, for his American rivals and their running-dog critics. Ravel and Schoenberg recognized compositional genius when they heard it. The very fact that Gershwin's three major concert pieces entered the repertory immediately and have never left it, and that *Porgy and Bess* stands unrivalled among American operas, should silence any talk about Gershwin's supposed compositional weaknesses, and should instead invite closer and more sympathetic analysis of his exceptional strengths.

But an understanding of the Gershwin style must rest on his songs, and the study of his songs must encompass an understanding of their place in musical theater. The latter task is a particularly challenging lacuna in Gershwin scholarship given the fact that none of Gershwin's shows have proven revivable. As a song writer Gershwin was distinctive, but not unique. He placed himself in relation to Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern, and his output paralleled the work of Richard Rodgers and Cole Porter. The question that C. Andre Barbera addresses in his "George Gershwin and Jazz"—why are jazz musicians so attracted to Gershwin's tunes—is a seductive red herring. Only one Gershwin tune has a special status in jazz, "I Got Rhythm," which Barbera barely discusses. Many other Gershwin tunes are jazz standards, as are Rodgers's "My Romance" and Porter's "Miss Otis Regrets," just to name two songs that would never be mistaken for Gershwin's. Neither Rodgers nor Porter display Gershwin's reliance on the blues scale, or on repeated notes, the latter a trait which Barbera relates to jazz improvisation.

I was surprised to find that none of the essays built on the pioneering work of Alec Wilder (1972) or, for the lyrics, Philip Furia (1990, 1996, 1998). Both of these writers, in quite different ways, give us a sense of how

song writers perceived their job, how they measured their own aesthetic success, and how they viewed their own tradition. The scholars in *The Gershwin Style*, much as they intend to take the songs seriously, refuse to take their milieu seriously, and so always seem to be looking at the songs from the outside and through a glass, darkly.

References

- Furia, Philip. 1990. *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley: A History of America's Great Lyricists*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 1996. *Ira Gershwin: The Art of the Lyricist*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 1998. *Irving Berlin: A Life in Song*. New York: Schirmer.
- Wilder, Alec. 1972. *American Popular Song: the Great Innovators, 1900–1950*. New York: Oxford University Press.