

Nevada Chamber Music Festival 2024
"1920's Songbook"
Sunday, December 29, 2024, 7:30 p.m.
Program notes by Chris Morrison

George and Ira Gershwin: "Fascinating Rhythm," "How Long Has This Been Going On"
(1924 and 1927, 3 minutes each)

George Gershwin is, of course, one of the most beloved American composers of the twentieth century. His songs, orchestral music like *Rhapsody in Blue* and *An American in Paris*, Broadway shows, and his most ambitious work, the "folk opera" *Porgy and Bess*, effectively bring together the worlds of classical music, jazz, and popular music – musical realms that Gershwin never felt were mutually exclusive. He had his first hit at age 21 with "Swanee," and was soon composing for Broadway.

One of Gershwin's early Broadway successes, the first of many collaborations with his lyricist brother Ira, was *Lady Be Good* (1924), the source of the song "Fascinating Rhythm." Fred Astaire and his sister Adele Astaire introduced it, combining singing and dancing, on Broadway, and they later recorded it, with Gershwin on the piano, in 1926. This celebration of how rhythm "pit-a-pats through my brain" and "drive[s] me insane" was later energetically danced by Eleanor Powell in the 1941 movie *Lady Be Good*, and was recorded by Tony Bennett, Ella Fitzgerald, Mel Tormé, Sarah Vaughn, Judy Garland, Buddy Rich, and a host of others,

"How Long Has This Been Going On?" was originally composed for the 1927 Broadway musical *Funny Face*, and later also appeared in the Broadway production *Rosalie*. The song, in which styles of kissing are compared and the wonders of romantic kisses are praised, remained obscure until recorded by Peggy Lee and Benny Goodman, at which point it quickly became famous, also later covered by Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Bing Crosby, and many others.

Ray Henderson, Buddy De Sylva and Lew Brown: "The Birth of the Blues"
(1926, 3 minutes)

The Buffalo-born Ray Henderson became a very popular composer on Tin Pan Alley. Working with lyricists Lew Brown and Buddy De Sylva, Henderson wrote the music for the series *George White's Scandals* as well as a number of musicals from the 1920s into the 1940s. Among his hits were "Bye Bye Blackbird," "I'm Sitting on Top of the World," "The Thrill is Gone," "Button Up Your Overcoat," and "Has Anybody Seen My Girl?" Another of his best-known songs is "The Birth of the Blues," composed for *George White's Scandals of 1926*. Paul Whiteman recorded the song that same year, and it also was a best-seller for Bing Crosby in 1941 and for Frank Sinatra in 1957.

Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht: "Surabaya, Johnny"
(1929, 5 minutes)

Kurt Weill was one of the most important composers of stage works in his time. He had already established himself as a composer, pianist, and teacher in Germany when he had his first big successes with his collaborations with Bertolt Brecht, including the famous *The Threepenny Opera*. In 1935 he moved to the United States, where he continued to compose musicals. "Surabaya Johnny" derives from the Weill-Brecht collaboration *Happy End*, their much-less-successful sequel to *The Threepenny Opera*. The song is sung by a young girl, Lilian Holiday, who is about to be abandoned by Surabaya Johnny. He has promised her gold and green forests, but it turns out that he was deceiving her all along: "You didn't want love, Johnny, you wanted money. I gave you all I had. You wanted more."

Cole Porter: "Night and Day"
(1932, 3 minutes)

Cole Porter remains one of America's best-known songwriters, his songs remembered for their catchy melodies and his witty lyrics. While he had classical training, Porter was from the beginning drawn to musical theater. After studies at Yale, where he was already composing songs by the dozens, and the Schola Cantorum in Paris, he enjoyed his first big successes in the late 1920s. By the 1930s, with musicals like *Anything Goes* and *DuBarry Was a Lady*, and scores for Hollywood films like *Born to Dance*, Porter was one of the best-known songwriters of his time. He had some later hits as well, including one of his most successful musicals, *Kiss Me, Kate*, as well as the film *High Society*. A list of his hit songs includes "I Get a Kick Out of You," "You're the Top," "Begin the Beguine," "Love For Sale," and "I've Got You Under My Skin." Fred Astaire's last stage show before moving to Hollywood and the movies, *Gay Divorce* from 1932, was the source of one of Porter's best-known songs, "Night and Day." Within months of the song's debut, it had been recorded more than thirty times, including by Astaire himself. Later recordings were made by artists as diverse as Billie Holiday, Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Bill Evans, Sergio Mendes, Ringo Starr, Willie Nelson, and U2.

Erwin Schulhoff: 5 *Grotesken*, Op. 21 Nos. 1-3
(1917, 9 minutes)

Early on, composer and pianist Erwin Schulhoff was encouraged musically by Antonín Dvořák. After studies at the Prague Conservatory and in Vienna, Leipzig and Cologne – where he quickly absorbed most of the important musical trends of his day – Schulhoff served in the Austrian Army in World War I, ending the war in an Italian prisoner-of-war camp. After the war and back in Prague, he joined the faculty of the Prague Conservatory. He performed both

classical music and jazz as a pianist, and composed prolifically. He even made some early recordings. But by the early 1930s, his Jewish descent led to his music being banned by the Nazis, and his Communist sympathies attracted animosity in Czechoslovakia. For a time he worked as a pianist, composer, and arranger under a pseudonym. In June 1941 he was deported to the Wülzburg concentration camp, where he died of tuberculosis.

Schulhoff sketched his five *Grotesken* during the years of World War I. While his music reflected a wide range of influences, the *Grotesken* seem almost anti-Romantic in their dance-like approach, brittle textures, and wit (the latter sometimes seems to embrace the madcap world of silent film). The first piece is light-hearted, with some surprising harmonic changes. The second aspires to be a waltz, but its stuttering rhythms give the music a humorously off-kilter quality. Sprightly and outgoing, the third of the *Grotesken* likewise has a playful quality, including a more lyrical, decorative central section.

Maurice Ravel: Violin Sonata No. 2 in G major (1923-27, 18 minutes)

In the early 1920s, Ravel accompanied violinist Hélène Jourdan-Morhange on a short tour. The two shared a love for jazz, which had by this time become quite popular in Paris and throughout France. When she commissioned Ravel to compose what would become the Sonata in G major, he decided to make jazz part of the work's expressive language. During those years, however, Ravel was still suffering from the depression that had emerged in him during World War I, and he had a hard time completing the Sonata. Only in 1927 was he able to complete the work. By that time, though, Jourdan-Morhange, to whom the work is dedicated, had retired from performing due to arthritis, and it was violinist Georges Enescu who premiered the work, with Ravel himself at the piano, in 1927.

Ravel apparently believed that the violin and piano aren't particularly compatible, and one can sense this tension in the Sonata's first movement: the music is mostly lyrical, but there is an edge to some of the melodies, and a certain independence in the paths the two instruments take. Their contrapuntal interplay culminates in the short fugue-like section that concludes the movement.

The jazz influence that underlies much of this music truly comes to the fore in the second movement, "Blues." The year after he completed this Sonata, Ravel visited the United States for the first time, and during that trip he commented "To my mind, the 'blues' is one of your greatest musical assets, truly American despite earlier contributory influences from Africa and Spain...While I adopted this popular form of your music, I venture to say that nevertheless it is French music, Ravel's music, that I have written. Indeed, these popular forms are but the materials of construction, and the work of art appears only on mature conception where no detail has been left to chance." The Sonata concludes with a brilliant, bustling Perpetuum mobile. Ravel biographer Roger Nichols wrote of this movement's "propulsive rhythms, where harmony and melody are in some cases secondary."

George Gershwin: *Three Preludes*
(1923-26, 7 minutes)

First performed by Gershwin himself at New York's Roosevelt Hotel in December 1926, the three *Preludes* were meant to be part of a longer cycle, titled "The Melting Pot," that he didn't live to complete. The two outer pieces, both marked "fast, rhythmically, and decisively," are barely over a minute in length. The first opens with a five-note motif on which the rest of the piece, with its hints of jazz and Brazilian music, is based. Gershwin called the middle *Prelude* "a sort of blues lullaby." Over a steady bass line and chords, a simple melody based on thirds is heard. After a short, dramatic introduction, the third *Prelude* features two melodies that answer one another, moving between major and minor keys, over lively syncopated rhythms.

Paul Hindemith: *Viola Sonata in F major, Op. 11 No. 4*
(1919, 16 minutes)

Teacher, violist, composer, and conductor Paul Hindemith was one of the most influential musicians of his day. He actually started as a violin player, but at the age of twenty-four, in the very year that he composed the present work, he made the definitive switch to the instrument with which he was identified for the rest of his life. Some of his works of this time are wild and dissonant, reflecting the Expressionism that was such an influence then. But the *Sonata in F major* is balanced, as one writer put it, "between classical form, folk nostalgia, and modern harmony."

The work's three movements are performed without break. Hindemith displays some harmonic adventurousness in the first movement, which in its three minutes and 41 measures moves through something like ten different keys. Over a quiet piano, the viola introduces the first theme. Soon the piano takes it up, and the two instruments exchange lead and accompaniment roles throughout. A short cadenza leads into the second movement, a theme with four variations. Hindemith describes the main theme as like a folk song. Starting in the major, the music moves to the minor for the first variation, in which the piano and viola lines overlap one another. The second variation is staccato and rhythmic, the third more lyrical, and the fourth builds to a climax. Then comes the third movement, which encompasses three more variations on that same theme as well as another main melody, heard at the start, with a distinctive ascending scale. These combine in something like a sonata-allegro form, in which both tunes are developed. That folk theme at different points takes off at breakneck speed, emerges in a fugue, becomes a repeating ostinato (reprising a similar passage in the second movement), and is the basis of a triumphant final statement by both instruments.

Erwin Schulhoff: *Five Pieces for String Quartet*
(1923, 14 minutes)

In Schulhoff's music – which includes eight symphonies, an opera, and much chamber and piano music – one hears a wide variety of influences, from late Romanticism, jazz, and Dada to Neoclassicism, Expressionism, and avant-garde techniques. One can hear these diverse influences in the *Five Pieces for String Quartet*, which were well-received and earned Schulhoff an invitation to the then famous IGNM (Internationale Gesellschaft für Neue Musik) Festival in Salzburg, where he encountered even more new music and made important contacts in the musical and publishing worlds. Each of the *Five Pieces* reflects a different musical style. The set opens with a faintly ironic Viennese Waltz, with some surprising dissonances, urgent interludes, and rhythmic playfulness. The following Serenata is equally ironic, a rather creepily nocturnal piece in quintuple meter. Then comes a short, but wild and propulsive, Czech Dance. The fourth movement Tango is languid and insouciant, but also rather stern and crepuscular in character, not perhaps a tango one would actually wish to dance to. The set concludes with a rousing, swirling, breathless Tarantella.