

A little Gershwin History

George and Ira Gershwin, the reigning princes of America's Musical Theatre kingdom, have left the world with a treasure box of magnificent compositions. Brooklyn-born to Rose and Moishe, who had immigrated from Russia, George first displayed interest in music at the age of ten when his parents bought a piano for his older brother Ira, but to their surprise and Ira's relief, it was George who played it.

Ira, the lyricist, and introvert counterpart to his socialite brother, didn't actually partake in music collaborations until 1921 when the two worked on their first major success: *Porgy and Bess*, which premiered in 1924. From then on, until George's untimely death from a brain tumor in 1937 at age 38, both Gershwin's wrote almost exclusively with each other, composing over 2 dozen musicals and many individual song hits.

Their greatest achievement was most certainly the elevation of musical comedy into an art form. After George's pass-

ing, Ira continued to collaborate with icons, such as Kurt Weill, Jerome Kern, Harold Arlen and Burton Lane, among many others. While Ira didn't commit to working in music until he was 25 years old, George was intrigued by classical music from an early age, admiring Alban Berg, Darius Milhaud, Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg. He was highly influenced by Ravel's orchestral technique, most notable in his own *Concerto in F for piano and orchestra*, a tribute to the traditional concerto form and a testament to the considerable development in Gershwin's compositional technique.

Many piano greats have performed the work, from Oscar Levant and Lazar Berman to Svjatoslav Richter, yet it was pianist, composer and teacher Leopold Godowsky III, the composer's nephew, and son of their sister Frances, who played one of the most romantic and truly heartfelt renditions of this piece.

Not all Gershwin's and their descendants have been musi-

cally inclined. Arthur, the youngest of the sibling quartet became a stockbroker, who managed to write one show that made it to Broadway. The self-described "unknown" Gershwin's only musical *The Lady Says "Yes"*, enjoyed more than 80 performances.

Frances was the first in the family to perform as a child, and accompanied George to Europe. Together they performed at parties, but although she displayed bankable talent, Frances settled for family life, and later a career as a painter. Daughter Alexis, who initially wanted to become a pianist, now holds the musical torch in the family. Fortunate for us, she is a beautiful and a fiercely devoted vocalist who carries on her family's unique legacy, being the only Gershwin to ever record Gershwin and and a strong advocate for bringing romance back into people's life through her uncle's timeless music.