5 *Blue Monday* and New York Theatrical Aesthetics

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The New York of George Gershwin's childhood was awash in entertainment choices: vaudeville, variety, revues, operetta, musical comedies, Yiddish theater, dramatic plays, operas, symphony concerts, and more. In 1927, Gershwin wrote:

> Having been born in New York and grown up among New Yorkers, I have heard the voice of that soul. It spoke to me on the streets, in school, at the theater . . . Old music and new music, forgotten melodies and the craze of the moment, bits of opera, Russian folk songs, Spanish ballads, chansons, ragtime ditties combined in a mighty chorus in my inner ear. And through and over it all I heard, faint at first, loud at last, the soul of this great America of ours.[1]

Gershwin evocatively describes a soundscape that pulses with all kinds of music that are ostensibly at different points in the cultural hierarchy, but that he portrays as equally compelling parts of his personal musical environment. He recognizes no difference between opera and folksongs, chansons and ragtime, old and new music. While some early twentieth-century critics asserted strict distinctions between high and low culture and maintained that one should have little to do with the other, the reality was rather different. American audiences expected to hear references to highbrow and lowbrow culture on vaudeville bills and in musicals, plays, and comedies. Ingenious mixtures of musical and theatrical conventions often provided the mass appeal to productions that otherwise were simply a repackaging of a few familiar plot tropes.

Gershwin scholars and critics looking back on his career often focus on Gershwin's modernity, his skillful use of jazz in his concert repertoire, and marvel at his ability to cross the divide between popular and classical music. Many people interpret Gershwin as essentially an art music composer who happened to work in musical theater. The over-representation in musicological scholarship that privileges Gershwin's "classical" works such as *Rhapsody in Blue*, Concerto in F, and *Porgy and Bess* compared to his songs and musicals demonstrates the bias of the field toward the long compositions that are routinely performed in concert music spaces and analytical approaches that are grounded within the classical repertory.[2] But viewing Gershwin as primarily a theatrical composer provides a different

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vantage point on his career, and one, I argue, that is truer to the development of his compositional voice. Gershwin's pluralistic style is not a disruption to previous practice. Rather, his work reflects an outlook shared by many early twentieth-century musical theater composers. They strove to write music that transgressed stylistic boundaries and included numbers from multiple genres to appeal to audiences and producers who valued musical versatility and flexibility. While it is a truism that all artists build on what came before them, in Gershwin's case, this observation seems to have been obscured in favor of a narrative that privileges the ways in which Gershwin's career was unusual, instead of how it worked within an aesthetic framework rooted in the New York theater scene of his youth. This frame of reference must include the training and musical aesthetics of the theater composers working in New York City before World War I, the features that impresarios believed characterized a successful production, and the effect of racialized ideas about music and American identity. Many of Gershwin's biographers situate his first opera, *Blue Monday* (1922), as the last of his substantial early compositions before his artistic and critical breakthrough with *Rhapsody in Blue* in 1924. But *Blue Monday* is also the summation of the influences he absorbed from his education and cultural environment. Written for white singers in blackface, this work injects classical sensibilities into a piece of popular entertainment with musical inspirations from a variety of sources that cross racial and cultural divides.

Although Gershwin tended to downplay his formal training, Susan Neimoyer has demonstrated that Gershwin had an excellent and thorough private musical education, which provided him with ample tools to write concert and theatrical music. His student notebooks and accounts by his teachers attest that he was well acquainted with tonal theory and orchestration. Moreover, in addition to his lessons, much of Gershwin's training occurred through a sort of communal apprenticeship to the jazz and ragtime performers in New York who provided him with examples to follow as a composer and pianist.[3] While Neimoyer characterizes Gershwin's combination of private lessons and aurally based informal study as unusual for white composers, it seems to have been a common way for black composers to receive their musical instruction at the turn of the twentieth century. Some black Broadway composers such as Will Marion Cook and J. Rosamond Johnson attended conservatories, but most African Americans had little access to formal, institutional training. Will Vodery, for example, the African American composer who helped Gershwin find work early in his career and later arranged *Blue Monday*, received his only institutionalized education through music classes offered at his Philadelphia high school. In his late teens, he probably studied

privately with Louis Koemmennich, once a teacher with the University of Berlin who had relocated to Philadelphia, and Hugh A. Clarke, professor of music at the University of Pennsylvania. In addition to this classical training, Vodery started arranging songs for black vaudeville musicians as a teenager and, like Gershwin, basically grew up in the theater business with access to mentorship from ragtime composers and popular performers.[4]

Composers with little formal education, as exemplified by George M. Cohan and Irving Berlin, were the exception among the most important white theatrical composers active prior to World War I. Many Broadway figures including Victor Herbert, Ivan Caryll, Julian Edwards, and Reginald De Koven received their schooling at prestigious European conservatories and wrote art music while also composing musical comedies and operettas that combined characteristics of many different kinds of music. Gershwin's reluctance to acknowledge his own expertise may have been a strategy to associate himself with Berlin's story and ingratiate himself with critics and reporters who were always looking for a good rags-to-riches narrative. Other people in his network, especially Isaac Goldberg, confirmed the impression that he was an autodidact by minimizing Gershwin's musical background. In his hagiographic biography, Goldberg paints a compelling image of Gershwin toiling in what Goldberg describes as the "slavery in the galleys" of a song plugger's studio learning how to compose through observation and osmosis.[5] Goldberg presents Gershwin as a self-taught genius in the nineteenth-century romantic tradition of the great man, whose art springs from an internal, natural force.[6]

Gershwin's high-profile search for new teachers later in his career is reminiscent of a similar play for credibility that motivated many pre-World War I musicians to publicize their work with European teachers. American critics and audiences distrusted the abilities of a classical composer or performer trained in the United States. For a composer who had earlier positioned himself as someone who had learned the craft from on-the-job training, publicly pursuing more instruction was a way for Gershwin to move the narrative to a place where he might be taken seriously as a classical composer. After securing the commission for Concerto in F, for example, Gershwin announced (or perhaps joked) that he had bought some theory books, so he could read up on concerto form.[7] His obvious interest in art music was not entirely a publicity stunt, but a person can have more than one motivation for their actions.

The musical scene in New York changed significantly during the 1920s, which may be one reason Gershwin wished to publicize his search for

a music teacher in the classical tradition. The aspirational critical rhetoric before the War that posited a distinct difference between popular and classical music, not just stylistically, but also socially and culturally, was becoming fact.[8] Particularly by the early 1930s, the segregation of the popular and classical audiences was such that composers who once moved rather easily between the two worlds had more and more difficulty straddling this divide. The career of Vernon Duke, a composer whom Gershwin admired and who also worked in multiple musical spheres, is an instructive example. Duke not only developed contrasting styles for his popular songs and his "serious" music, but he also used a different name when presenting these works to the public. For his operas, ballets, and instrumental pieces he composed under his given name, Vladimir Dukelsky, using Duke only for works he deemed popular, such as his musicals and film scores. Gershwin, therefore, had examples of at least two possible approaches for his career. As a young composer and pianist, he was exposed to people who routinely transgressed genre boundaries in their pieces to produce a flexible musical style that functioned in multiple realms. Or, he could have followed the lead of composers he met in the 1920s, like Duke, who compartmentalized their work to conform to conventional divisions between highbrow and lowbrow music. Obviously, he chose the former path.

Musical Eclecticism and Theatrical Aesthetics

During the first part of the twentieth century, Gershwin worked within an entertainment economy that was dominated by musical comedies, operettas, and vaudeville. Composers, impresarios, and performers routinely worked in all three genres, blurring the lines between each type of entertainment. Powerful syndicates based in New York controlled the booking in the majority of the theaters in the country and sent out hundreds of shows and vaudeville acts every season to travel the nation.

Scholars who study Broadway musical theater before the 1930s often make a distinction between operettas and musical comedies based upon how similar the work is to conventional operas. Operettas (or comic operas as they were usually called at the time) generally feature a relatively rational plot and musical coherence, European or pseudo-European characters and settings, as well as a musical style and level of technical difficulty that is similar to that of opera. Musical comedies combine flamboyant song and dance numbers, Tin Pan Alley songs, and plots with American characters and settings, although many stories contain a trip abroad on the flimsiest of excuses to provide a note of exoticism.[9] These categories are clearer in

retrospect, however, than they were in the moment. Generally, the genre designation seemed to derive from the marketing needs of the premiering theater, the composer, the producer, or the stars. Critics and impresarios thought technically difficult operatic musical numbers were "high class," while Tin Pan Alley songs or pieces that overtly drew upon the musical and theatrical traditions of minstrelsy were "popular." Producers evaluated a show partly based upon the amount and quality of the "high class" and "popular" music present in the production, and valued scores and even individual songs with a pleasing combination of both.

A similar inclination to combine high and low culture existed in Yiddish theater. Yiddish impresarios and writers emulated the melodramas, operettas, farces, and extravaganzas popular among English-speaking audiences, while at the same time retaining elements of Jewish music and culture. European opera, Eastern European folk music, *klezmer*, ragtime, and Tin Pan Alley songs, as well as Jewish sacred music influenced the sound of Yiddish theater.[10] Although Gershwin never wrote for a Yiddish production, he attended many Yiddish shows and knew the leading composers and impresarios who specialized in the genre. According to Walter Rimler, when Gershwin was sixteen he was "asked to collaborate with . . . Sholom Secunda [composer of "Bei mir Bist du Schön"] on a Yiddish operetta . . . But Secunda considered him too young and inexperienced, and the plan fell through."[11] Indeed, Goldberg contends that Gershwin's use of blue notes was as much an influence from "Polish pietists" as it was "the folk song of the Negro."[12]

The advantage of Gershwin's eclectic musical background was that it provided him with the tools to write the sort of genre-crossing scores popular at the beginning of his career. Hundreds of musical comedies that were at once formulaic and highly variable were produced between 1900 and 1920 in New York City. Unlike the integrated, plot-driven pieces that became popular in the 1930s and 1940s, these works were a chaotic amalgamation of exotic or urban locales, ridiculous plot twists, lavish dance numbers, and songs of every type. Musicals typically contained numbers with influences that ranged from European transplants such as operatic arias and Viennese waltzes to homegrown ragtime Tin Pan Alley songs and minstrel-style parodies. In a handwritten autobiographical note, Will Marion Cook described his music in these terms when remembering a rehearsal for his first musical, *Clorindy*: "First I started in with the verse of 'Hottes' Coon [in Dixie]' which they learned and wowed in five minutes . . . Then the development of the operatic part – full of rhythm and modulations, peculiar cadences . . . didn't make sense to their acute and alert ears."[13] Thomas Riis characterizes the score for *In Dahomey* (most of which was written by Cook and Alex Rogers) as one that does not have

stylistic unity. Cook included what Riis describes as "stirring operatic effects in his choruses" along with elements from ragtime, black folk music, and Romantic-period concert music.[14]

The song reigned supreme in these early musical comedies. Shows were designed around the needs of the stars and the music, not the story. Very often, the plot was merely an excuse to move from song to song. For example, Charles Dillingham, one of the most important New York City producers before World War I, kept track of the level of applause and number of encores after each song.[15] Those that did not measure up to his expectations were replaced. Whether the new song made much sense with the plot was irrelevant. As Jeffrey Magee points out, many productions from the 1910s relied on vaudeville performers who essentially transplanted their independent acts, or at least their personas, from vaudeville into musicals.[16] Stars frequently interpolated their own signature songs into a musical without regard to the circumstances of the narrative. Because of concerns that would have sounded familiar to nineteenth-century opera composers, some powerful Broadway composers such as Victor Herbert and Irving Berlin began including "no interpolations" clauses in their contracts to maintain some measure of control over the content of their scores.[17]

In this context, it is no surprise that Gershwin became suspicious of the classifications that musicians and critics tended to apply to music. He complained that "'classical music' . . . means as many things as there are people who say it . . . From any sound critical standpoint, labels mean nothing at all. In other words, ideas are the things that count, not mere labeling of form."[18] According to musicologist Larry Starr, "to speak of a rapprochement between cultivated and vernacular in Gershwin's art" is misguided: "his music tells us in the clearest possible way that, while the schism might be our perception, it is not his aesthetic reality . . . [Gershwin] never believed in the validity of the schism to begin with."[19] Starr acknowledges, however, that Gershwin's stylistic versatility was essential to his success as a theatrical composer and moreover that Gershwin was clearly aware that critics and audiences thought there was a difference between high and low art; classical and popular music. Whether he believed in the distinction or not, Gershwin, like other composers, often wrote music that included markers of different styles in one piece.

The musical career and agility of Victor Herbert may have been one example Gershwin emulated whether consciously or not in his approach to his music and career. Herbert wrote in every major genre: musical comedies, operettas, opera, extravaganzas, popular song, orchestral pieces, concerti, etc. He was a composer, cellist, and conductor, as well as one of the

most important figures on Broadway when Gershwin first entered the field. During a revealing written exchange between Herbert and his producer Charles Dillingham over revisions to one of his operettas, Herbert disclosed that he accepted that the perception existed that there was a difference between popular and classical music. Yet, he argued that multiple factors such as lyrical content or the context in which a piece was performed went into this distinction in addition to musical style. The clash between Herbert and Dillingham is instructive because it not only illustrates Herbert's ideas about genre, but also the economic and artistic pressures that contributed to a show's development. These same forces influenced Gershwin's work.

On December 5, 1903, Dillingham asked Herbert to replace a number in his latest work, *Babette*, starring Fritzi Scheff.

> The Pierrot song that Mme Scheff has in the second act does not receive a single encore and we are taking it out as soon as you can give us something to replace it. What we want in the middle of this act is a stirring song for the star, for . . . she, of course, is our drawing card. I would suggest a stirring march song, and something that will show off her voice and yet not interfere with the big number in the last act.[20]

This letter precipitated an argument between the two men that lasted over a month. Dillingham begged Herbert to write a number that would disrupt the primarily operatic style of the score, but Herbert denied that he could write such a piece without the proper lyrics. All the while, Herbert disputed Dillingham's basic premise that a "stirring march song" (by which he meant a "popular" number) would solve the problems Dillingham had identified.

After receiving Dillingham's first letter, Herbert replied in a terse telegram "Need popular lyrics to write popular songs. Send me a few as soon as possible."[21] Apparently, Herbert sent something to Dillingham fairly quickly, which he rejected explaining:

> I would say that you have got an entirely wrong idea about the music of "Babette". You say that the last number you sent is "very brilliant". It <u>is</u> brilliant, but, like the rest of the music, it lacks popular features. The business is unsatisfactory, partly because the book of the second act is not up to the mark, and partly because the music is too high-class . . . You know that I think the music is the best ever composed in America, and it has made a great impression with the boxes and first twenty rows of the orchestra which are filled every night, but nobody comes in the gallery or balcony.[22]

Herbert, seemingly insulted, wrote back,

> Both the "Wizard" <u>and</u> the "Serenade" [earlier shows] were declared to be "too heavy" by the papers when they were first performed. If I had to follow the advice

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> of every empty headed, uneducated, unmusical newspaper-scribbler, my lot would be a sad one. I have told you repeatedly, and you ought to know yourself, that a "popular" song must have "popular" words.[23]

Dillingham persists in his request and clarifies that popular music is a repertoire that "all the bands are playing . . . and everybody is whistling."[24] On January 20, Herbert followed up with: "Of course I understand what you mean and what you want, and I am perfectly willing to write a song for Miss Scheff that can be whistled, hummed, organ-ized, band-aged etc. etc. but you forget that I have told you a dozen times! (at least!) that a song of that character must have popular and witty lyrics!"[25]

In these letters, Dillingham claims "high-class" music only attracts the wealthy audience members who can afford box seats or the best spots in the orchestra section and begs Herbert for music that will bring in other patrons in order to fill the whole theater. While Dillingham professes to value Herbert's "high class" music, he thinks that the imbalance between popular and more classical-style music in *Babette* is hurting the show and, most importantly, the bottom line. Herbert, on the other hand, rejects the idea that a song with a catchy melody will provide Dillingham with what he wants. While he never says this explicitly, the subtext of his objections seems to be that Dillingham has reduced the show into a series of almost unrelated numbers rather than a score that is greater than its individual parts. Herbert repeatedly insists that the lyrics are crucial (perhaps even more important than musical style) in controlling whether an audience will think a piece of music is "popular." Additionally, Herbert suggests in his January 20 letter that a popular song is one that can be arranged for other instrumentations (the organ or the band). Considering that operatic music was routinely arranged in a similar manner, this reinforces Herbert's contention that popular style is about more than musical elements. Gershwin's reluctance to acknowledge a divide between classical and popular music seems aligned with Herbert's argument that genre distinctions are less a matter of notes and more a matter of audience perception, which is controlled as much by lyrics and theatrical context as by the musical style. As in Herbert's case, producers expected Gershwin's early songs, musicals, and revues to attract a wide audience, and they counted on musically pluralistic scores to do the job. Gershwin had to adapt to these demands.

Ragtime's Example and Jazz as American Music

While art music and Tin Pan Alley songs were significant influences on the musical comedies that Gershwin heard while he was maturing as a composer, African American music played an equally important role in

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musical theater and his compositional style. Jazz was the pre-eminent black musical genre by 1925 when the success of *Lady Be Good!* and *Rhapsody in Blue* had secured Gershwin's reputation as one of the best young composers in New York. Gershwin's approach to jazz and his uneasiness about the music as both a black and an American musical style were similar to the anxieties about ragtime circulating among white musicians and critics before World War I. While acknowledging the connection between black people and jazz, Gershwin repeatedly denied that jazz was primarily a black musical genre, instead asserting that it reflected an American national identity that was larger than any one racial or ethnic category. His stance replicates the conversations about ragtime occurring in the musical press before 1920.

During the early twentieth century, ragtime underwent a transformation from a genre marked as black to a type of music that symbolized American vitality. In the racially polarized environment of the times, the term "American" music, as it was used in the print media, really meant music accepted by white people as representative of a white America. At the turn of the twentieth century, musicians and critics alike generally understood ragtime as a black genre born in the South.[26] Thus, while it originated in the United States among American citizens, critics identified ragtime as black music, not American music. As an anonymous author in the black newspaper *The Freeman* explained in 1897, ragtime was a "movement now very popular with Negro specialists."[27] While today many people think of ragtime as piano solos written by composers such as Scott Joplin, at the time, ragtime had a much more expansive meaning that encompassed syncopated music for piano or dance bands, as well as popular songs with texts written in black dialect called coon songs.[28] Black and white singers (so-called coon shouters) performed this repertoire in vaudeville and musical comedies. White singers generally appeared in blackface because to do otherwise would have been interpreted as a cross-racial performance unacceptable to many white people in Jim Crow America. Theater managers and critics evaluated white singers based upon how closely they could replicate a stereotypical image of African American musicians. In reports from 1902 to the United Booking Office, owned by vaudeville impresarios B.F. Keith and Edward Albee, for instance, managers reported that the famous coon shouter Tom Moore was "a white man who sings coon songs nearer like a negro than any one we have had" and was the "best singer of coon songs, outside of [Ernest] Hogan."[29]

Ragtime was controversial in black and white communities. For many white critics, ragtime's rhythms were too "hot" and primitivistic. To them the popularity among young white people of black music associated with

dancing and hedonism indicated an unacceptable coarsening of musical culture. In 1901, the president of the American Federation of Musicians complained: "The ragtime craze has lowered the standard of American music as compared with other countries. We have duty as well as business to look after, and we will not give way to a popular demand that is degrading."[30] Meanwhile, for some black critics, ragtime undermined African American claims to musical respectability and by extension their quest for political and cultural equality. In one heated article from the *Negro Music Journal*, the author refused to accept ragtime as black music, charging instead that the style was a fraud enacted by white people hoping to discredit the black race:

> White men also perpetrate so-called music under the name of "rag-time" representing it to be characteristic of the Negro music. This is also a libelous insult. The typical Negro would blush to own acquaintance with the vicious trash that is put forth under Ethiopian titles. If *The Negro Music Journal* can only do a little missionary work among us, and help banish this "rag-time" epidemic, it will go down in history as one of the greatest musical benefactors of the age.[31]

Other black critics and musicians disagreed. They were happy to associate blackness with ragtime as a modern genre developed by African Americans and thus uniquely suited to black musical aesthetics. James Reese Europe, composer and the conductor/founder of the Clef Club Orchestra, consistently promoted his organization's ragtime as "a kind of symphony music that no matter what else you think, is different and distinctive, and lends itself to the playing of the peculiar compositions of our race."[32] He asserted that "music breathes the spirit of a race and, strictly speaking, it is a part only of the race which creates it."[33] Europe's belief in the innate musicality of African Americans was shared by most musicians and critics of the time period.

The overwhelming success of Irving Berlin's 1911 Tin Pan Alley song "Alexander's Ragtime Band" marked a significant change in the reception of ragtime by white audiences and critics. White writers crowned Berlin the "King of Ragtime" and began to downplay the African American musicians who had previously dominated the genre. Many white singers stopped blacking up to perform the music. The iconography of sheet music covers changed from the overt racism of minstrelsy-style visual stereotypes in favor of images of white performers associated with a particular piece. In this context, the widespread practice of "ragging the classics" (i.e. arrangements of famous classical pieces using syncopated rhythms) changed from a method of musically representing respectability through a demonstration of black musicians' familiarity with white art music, to a way of "whiting" African American music. By washing ragtime through pieces by white

classical composers, the style could be wiped of some of its association with black music and, in the racial logic of the early twentieth century, become Americanized. Although black musicians, such as James Reese Europe, still insisted that ragtime was a black art form, the rhetoric used by white people about the genre indicates that for many of them ragtime had become increasingly divorced from blackness. Instead, they called the music simply "American" or American "folk" music – a designation which allowed them to suggest an intimate connection to American identity without having to confront race directly. The Act II finale of Irving Berlin's first musical, *Watch Your Step* (1914), is an example of this process. In this long choral number, Berlin takes quotations from six well-known operas and incorporates them into ragtime dances. Meanwhile, an actor playing Giuseppe Verdi begs the chorus not to ruin the melodies by ragging them. The chorus rejects his entreaties, singing that they must modify those old European melodies to fit the needs of the new energetic and youthful American nation. When Berlin promoted the show, he amplified the message in his music by declaring "rag-time is the one distinctive American contribution to the musical materials of the world."[34]

By the time Gershwin began composing, he would have heard "ragged" music all over New York. Perhaps, then, it should come as no surprise that his first composition, "Ragging the Traumerei" (1913) is an example of "ragging the classics." It is striking, however, that from the beginning of his compositional career, he was thinking about ways to combine classical and popular styles.[35] "The Real American Folksong (is a Rag)" (1917), the first song by George Gershwin with lyrics by his brother Ira, demonstrates that the Gershwins understood the cycle of cultural appropriation followed by claims of nationalism that arguably began in minstrelsy.[36] Gershwin's musical setting is not a traditional rag, as the verse is in 6/8, but the cut-time chorus features the syncopated rhythms typical of ragtime.[37] This metrical change follows the text. The song opens with "Near Barcelona the peasant crooned / The old traditional Spanish tunes / The Neapolitan street song sighs" – effectively placing folk music within European rural traditional cultures with the text and lilting melody. The rest of the lyrics, which Ira called "too much like an essay" read like an artistic manifesto.[38] They go on to assert that American folksongs are superior to other folk traditions because they are rhythmically exciting, reflecting the energy of the American people and the youth of the nation itself. "With folk songs plaintive and others gay / In their own peculiar way. American folk songs, I feel, / Have a much stronger appeal . . . For it's inoculated / With a syncopated / Sort of meter, / Sweeter / than a classic strain; . . . The real American folk song is like a Fountain of Youth."[39] The change to cut time in the chorus reorients the music toward ragtime and away from what, in

this context, is the dowdy meter of 6/8. Ragtime reflected the young, vigorous, and healthy image that many people, including George Gershwin, had of America. Ira's lyrics accurately describe ragtime's journey from a genre at first vilified or at least dismissed by critics to one celebrated for its American qualities. There is no overt mention of ragtime as black music, only the insistence that rags are American music.

Framed in similar terms to the anxiety over ragtime twenty years earlier, jazz was, if anything, an even more controversial subject in the early 1920s. The so-called "Jazz Problem" affected composers and critics alike as they struggled to describe this new style, its proper cultural position, and its artistic worth. Opinions ranged from views similar to those held by violinist Franz Drdla, who thought that "jazz is the characteristic folk music of modernity," to Anne Shaw Faulkner, who warned her readers of "jazz music and its evil influence on the young people of to-day."[40] As in ragtime, African American critics were divided between praising jazz as a black art form and denouncing it for its musical impurity or stylistic characteristics that left jazz open to racist critiques of the music and the people associated with it. African American critic J. Cogdell's complaints about jazz echoed those of some white writers when he described what he saw as jazz's vulgarity. He warned that the music would corrupt its listeners and castigated the genre for its wholesale appropriation of musical styles.

> Our prohibited instincts riot disgustingly here like thirsty men in a desert oasis; we revel in "jazz." This "lets off steam" but it deplorably cheapens our instincts and corrupts the true spirit of music. Jazz is essentially a capitalistic production, it steals its melodies from all sources, the Masters, the Negroes, the Orient, with naïve greed and unconcern, then proceeds to ruin them. It is as noisy and rapacious as the system that creates it.[41]

Cogdell's comments, couched in a critique of capitalism, is a condemnation of jazz's transgressive exuberance. Critics agreed that the style could not be contained as it sprawled from popular to art music; its performers and composers were black and white, Christian and Jewish; it was found in dance halls and in musical theater productions; it ranged from improvisatory band charts to scored symphonic compositions. Cogdell dismissed jazz for its impurities and its enthusiastic appropriation of the Masters (art music), the Negroes, and the Orient (by which he meant Jewish musicians). Jazz challenged not just artistic paradigms, but also cultural, racial, and social structures.[42]

When he talked about jazz later in his career, George Gershwin used rhetoric that was similar in approach to that used by him and his brother in "The Real American Folksong (is a Rag)." While Gershwin defended jazz against racist propaganda, he also tried to separate jazz from black

antecedents by focusing on its transformation from black folk music to a style that connected to all Americans through its rhythmic energy and modernity. In several essays, he repeatedly made a clear distinction between black music and American music.

> In speaking of jazz there is one superstition, and it is a superstition which must be destroyed. This is the superstition that jazz is essentially Negro. The Negroes, of course, take to jazz, but in its essence it is no more Negro than is syncopation, which exists in the music of all nations. Jazz is not Negro but American. It is the spontaneous expression of the nervous energy of modern American life.[43]

Gershwin recognized that the development of jazz reception and music was comparable to that of ragtime, for in the same article he writes: "The more one studies the history of jazz during the last fifteen years the more one realizes that it is following precisely the same course that all dances of the past have followed. Beginning with crudity and vulgarity, it has gradually been freeing itself and moving towards a higher plane."[44] In 1927, Gershwin wrote that jazz might seem to be a black form of music, but that did not take away from its American nature, which he was careful to say was not "negroid" but rather was "black and white. It is all colors and all souls unified in the great melting pot of the world."[45]

Gershwin's early compositions demonstrate a knowledge of American folk songs, a growing commitment to jazz, and an interest in classical music. He composed many Tin Pan Alley songs, some of which exhibited influences from various combinations of Americana, jazz, and European music including "We're Six Little Nieces of Our Uncle Sam" (1917 or 1918, featuring quotations from patriotic songs paired with musical exoticism reminiscent of *The Mikado* by Gilbert and Sullivan), "Little Sunbeam" (1918, which contains bold harmonies that Gershwin marked a "Debussyian vamp"), "Yan-Kee" (1920, a bluesy parody inspired by Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*), "Yankee Doodle Blues" (1922, a humorous song with hints of the blues along with extended quotations from "Yankee Doodle"), and "Mischa, Jascha, Toscha, Sascha" (1921). This last piece was a novelty song performed, according to Ira, "by the writers at the slightest provocation."[46] Ira's text pays tribute to four Russian-born Jewish violinists (Mischa Elman, Jascha Heifetz, Toscha Seidel, and Sascha Jacobsen) who were stalwarts in the flourishing New York party scene that George also frequented. Dena Rosenberg argues that the text represents the Gershwins' ideas about highbrow and lowbrow music.[47] The brothers contrast classical music (stiff but important) with popular music (syncopated and American). "For though we play the high-brow stuff, / We also like the syncopations / Of Uncle Sammy . . . We're only human / And like to shake a leg to jazz . . . High-brow He-brow may play low-brow / In his

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privacy. / But when concert halls are packed, / Watch us stiffen up and act."[48] The music is equally witty. For example, open fifths – the intervals that violinists use to tune their instruments – accompany the moment the four violinists' names are sung. A parody of "Humoresque" by Dvořák and a few bluesy chords liven up the otherwise rather straightforward Tin Pan Alley-style accompaniment. At the same time, Gershwin also composed two concert pieces – *Novelette in Fourths* (1919), which he recorded on a piano roll, and *Lullaby* (1919) for string quartet. Just a few years later, he composed art music that included jazz influences, effectively washing jazz through white compositions and helping to validate his contention that jazz was American not black music. Although *Rhapsody in Blue* is the most famous early example of the juxtaposition of classical music and jazz in Gershwin's output, it was a slightly earlier piece that sent him down the path of truly combining the two styles – the one-act opera *Blue Monday*.

Blue Monday: A Way Forward by Looking Back

Gershwin wrote *Blue Monday*, a one-act opera with lyrics by B.D. DeSylva, to open the second act of the 1922 production of *George White's Scandals*.[49] George White was a dancer turned impresario who organized yearly editions of revues he called *Scandals* between 1919 and 1939. DeSylva and Gershwin, who wrote the music for the *Scandals* produced between 1920 and 1924, originally pitched the idea of a one-act blackface opera to White relatively early in the compositional process for the 1922 show, but White rejected the concept. Not long before the show went into rehearsals, however, White changed his mind. DeSylva and Gershwin claimed they wrote the entire opera in only five days.

Although some scholars speculate that the success of *Shuffle Along* (1921), the first African American musical on Broadway since 1910, was the impetus for *Blue Monday*, there are many antecedents for opera performed as part of popular entertainment. Edward Jablonski reports that Gershwin called the work a "vaudeville opera."[50] This designation acknowledges the long history of operatic performance in vaudeville, revues, and as part of other types of musical theater. Opera was presented in many different guises in popular entertainment. Minstrel shows frequently contained operatic parodies. Twenty to thirty minutes of opera arias, choruses, and sometimes even condensed versions of operas closed most all-black vaudeville shows at the turn of the twentieth century. Many pianists, violinists, harpists, and singers performed operatic excerpts, arrangements, and arias in short vaudeville acts. For example, Valerie Bergere and Company

presented a one-act play "taken from the opera *Carmen*" on the Keith–Albee vaudeville circuit in 1905 and 1906.[51] Gustave Kerker's *Burning to Sing or Singing to Burn*, a comedic one-act opera, first appeared on American vaudeville bills in 1904, and was still being performed as late as 1925. Skits featuring references to famous opera singers and impresarios were also a staple of vaudeville and the pre-War *Ziegfeld Follies*. Newly composed operatic works destined for vaudeville were often played for laughs and poked fun at operatic musical conventions and the peculiarities of wealthy but shallow opera lovers. An exception was *The Patriot* by Julian Edwards, a one-act "grand" opera about a fictional attempt on George Washington's life at Valley Forge which was performed on the vaudeville circuit in 1908 and 1909. *Blue Monday* breaks new ground because of its tragic ending and jazz, rather than ragtime, influences. At about twenty-five minutes, *Blue Monday* was too long (and too serious) for an otherwise upbeat revue that ran over three hours. Although the work received positive critical notice after the out-of-town tryout in New Haven, White cut *Blue Monday* from the *Scandals* following its New York premiere on August 28, 1922.

Set in Harlem, the libretto tells the story of a working-class African American woman (Vi) who shoots and kills her lover (Joe) in a fit of jealous rage thinking that he has received a telegram from another woman. In fact, the telegram informed him that his mother had died three years previously, but Vi had been misled by Tom, a gambler she rejected earlier in the opera, who told her that the message was from a rival. The working-class characters, the setting in a black neighborhood, and the use of jazz harmonies combined with operatic elements clearly presages *Porgy and Bess*. Will Vodery arranged *Blue Monday* and added the inscription "An Afro-American Opera" to his copy of the score. One reviewer, Gordon Whyte, was particularly complimentary of Vodery's arrangement, writing: "Whoever scored the orchestration is a master . . . At times it is symphonic in structure and the instrumentation is never muddled and always cleverly thought out."[52] Vodery, who arranged the score for *Shuffle Along*, had worked in musical theater and vaudeville since at least 1904. In 1922 he was one of the most important arrangers in New York. His description of the work accounts for not only the race of the characters, but also subtly asserts jazz as a black musical style and the lives of African Americans as a suitable subject for art music. The caption is rather poignant because Vodery knew black composers, including Will Marion Cook and H. Lawrence Freeman, who had tried to get their operatic work taken seriously for years with little success.[53]

Blue Monday is an opera because of formal distinctions: it is continuous and includes recitative. In other ways, however, the work features the same stylistic variety and overt references to highbrow and lowbrow music that were common in musicals. One reviewer described *Blue Monday* as "a little bit of 'La Boheme' with the Liebestod of 'Tristan' to close, burlesqued almost beyond recognition, but was remarkably swung."[54] The reference to *Tristan und Isolde* may have been a rather sloppy comparison to an opera with a tragic ending, since there is little in *Blue Monday* that is reminiscent of Wagner's music. Allusions to *Pagliacci* by Ruggero Leoncavallo, however, are clear enough. Both pieces have an opening prologue that primes the audience for the drama to come. The two works also share some plot points including a gossip who provokes the lead character's jealousy by repeating an overheard conversation and the murder at the end. Gershwin also included quotations from Felix Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" in a short section that was cut prior to the first performance.[55]

The prologue opens with a timpani solo, immediately evoking a connection between drumming and the black characters. Constantly changing emotional affect, the prologue careens from jazzy melodic figures that Gershwin would return to in *Rhapsody in Blue* to dramatic passages that support Joe's announcement that the piece would be "in operatic style and like the white man's opera the theme will be love! Hate! Passion! Jealousy." A bluesy Tin Pan Alley song (the titular "Blue Monday") sung by Sam the janitor follows the prologue. In quick succession, Gershwin stylistically evokes, in only about twenty-five minutes, an aria, a spiritual, an upbeat Broadway dance, and melodrama.[56] Gershwin quoted himself in two sections when he recycled the melody from his *Lullaby* (1919) in the prologue and in the centerpiece of the work, Vi's aria "Has Anyone Seen My Joe." Between each number, the opera is held together with a connective tissue of reprises of earlier themes, jazz licks, recitative, and anticipatory passages that add to the sense of heightened (even overheated) drama that infuses the work. Jablonski described Joe's aria, "I'm Going to See My Mother," dismissively as a "mammy song," but other writers have described it as a spiritual with its simple, heartfelt melody and thin texture.[57] Joe forgives Vi for shooting him with a reprise of "I'm Going to See My Mother" as he prepares himself for a reunion in the hereafter. The work ends with Vi's operatic flourish of despair when she realizes she has killed Joe over her baseless suspicions. The spiritual-like qualities of the music, enhanced by Vodery's soaring orchestration (complete with chimes), brings the opera to a melodramatic close.

Blue Monday's kaleidoscopic score fits right into the already almost schizophrenic combination of many different musical and theatrical styles typical of a revue. In some ways, *Blue Monday* resembles the stand-alone

Act II finales that appeared in some early musical comedies, because it is long, stylistically varied, and tells a coherent story. In this case, the ragtime melodrama that closes Act II of Irving Berlin's *Stop! Look! Listen!* (1915) is a plausible comparison. *Blue Monday* is also reminiscent of the operatic burlesques that included Tin Pan Alley-style songs as well as overt musical and textual references to specific works performed by Weber and Fields at the beginning of the century, including Victor Herbert's *The Magic Knight* (1906).

The critical reaction to the opera was generally positive. Out of nine reviews, only one writer hated the work. Charles Darnton thundered that it was "the most dismal, stupid and incredible black-face sketch that has probably ever been perpetrated. In it a dusky soprano finally killed her gambling man. She should have shot all her associates the moment they appeared and then turned the pistol on herself."[58] But others enjoyed *Blue Monday* and were ready to anoint it an American opera – a designation that had eluded composers such as George Bristow, William Henry Fry, and many others for generations. By the early 1920s, the anxiety among some critics about the lack of an American operatic style was becoming intense. Set against this context, it is remarkable that a New Haven critic called *Blue Monday* the "first real American opera . . . a genuinely human plot of American life, set to music in the popular vein, using jazz only at the right moments, the sentimental song, 'The Blues,' and above all a new and free ragtime recitative."[59]

Although some critics mentioned that the characters in *Blue Monday* were supposed to be African American, only one (Charles Darnton's negative commentary) pointed out that the singers were blacked up. The other reviews either described the work as being about "colored people" without specifying the actual race of the singers, or ignored the issue altogether. This willful blindness to race was not unusual. Blacking up was so common that critics often did not comment upon it. Many white people at the time were completely oblivious to the racism inherent in blackface, instead seeing it as merely a mask little different from other types of costumes.[60]

Just as earlier composers had effectively "whited" ragtime by combining it with influences from classical music, Gershwin accomplished the same thing with *Blue Monday* and jazz. Another way of looking at *Blue Monday* and his later classical works is that Gershwin was injecting elements of blackness into classical music. Gershwin's statements contending that jazz was an American musical style and minimizing the genre as a black art form, however, demonstrate that in the early 1920s, he seemed to be more interested in introducing whiteness into jazz. He boasted, for instance, that with *Rhapsody in Blue* he had "succeeded in showing that jazz is not merely

a dance; it comprises bigger themes and purposes."[61] Gershwin was not the only person to write music that tried to straddle the divide between jazz and classical music. Both Edmund Jenkins and John Powell composed symphonic jazz pieces well before Gershwin, but it was his music that caught the sustained attention of critics and, perhaps more importantly, Paul Whiteman.

Many reviewers emphasized that Paul Whiteman's Palais Royale Orchestra was one of the best things about the 1922 *Scandals*. The band provided the accompaniment for many of the numbers and performed some instrumental solos. Critic Charles Pike Sawyer reported that "the greatest hit of the evening was Paul Whiteman and his orchestra, which 'jazzed' Schubert and Beethoven symphonies to applause that was loud and long."[62] The 1922 *Scandals* was the first time that Gershwin and Whiteman worked together. This engagement kicked off a professional relationship that would be important to both of them for years to come. Gershwin wrote *Rhapsody in Blue* for the famous "An Experiment in Modern Music" concert Whiteman organized in 1924. The following year, Whiteman revived *Blue Monday* (renaming it *135th Street*), and he also programmed many Gershwin songs throughout his career. Whiteman's Modern Music concert was just the venue that Gershwin needed to launch his foray into art music. Critics were ready to hear Gershwin's compositions as a promising new development in American music in part because Whiteman had been priming them to hear music similar to Gershwin's as the next logical step in the development of jazz and American classical music with his own concerts and relentless promotion of his style of polished, concert jazz.

In 1924, Gershwin's steadily growing reputation as a young composer with a bright future came to fruition with the success of *Rhapsody in Blue* and his first hit musical, *Lady, Be Good!*. The seeds for both these pivotal works were planted in 1922 with some of the pieces for the *Scandals* of that year. *Blue Monday* contains many hints of Gershwin's skillful combination of jazz and classical music that matured with *Rhapsody in Blue* and later in *Porgy and Bess*. "(I'll Build a) Stairway to Paradise" – the big production number at the end of Act I in the *Scandals* – was also an important precursor to the harmonically complex, bluesy popular songs that would propel the rest of Gershwin's career.

Blue Monday seems to have stimulated Gershwin's desire to write an American opera. In a 1925 interview with Herbert S. Greenhalgh around the time Whiteman revived *Blue Monday,* Gershwin, using the racist and essentialist language common to the 1920s, said that "I shall certainly write an opera and I shall write it for niggers. Blacks sing beautifully. They are always singing; they have it in their blood. They have jazz in their blood,

too, and I have no doubt that they will be able to do full justice to a jazz opera."[63] Gershwin's initial attempt at American opera with *Blue Monday*, a piece designed not for the opera house but for the popular stage, demonstrates his ambition to be a composer who bridged divides between popular and classical, highbrow and lowbrow, musicals and operas, European and American national styles. This desire was shared by many early twentieth-century composers because it was at the heart of popular staged entertainments. Although scholars often think of Gershwin as a modernist who sought to bring the vitality of the American city to the staid confines of American art music, his work is grounded not in the conventions of classical music, but that of the theatrical traditions, economic pressures, and racial dynamics of New York City before the Great War. His music was born out of not just a turn to the future, but also a firm grasp of the past.

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