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### Oscar Levant: Pianist, Gershwinite, Middlebrow Media Star

Caleb Taylor Boyd

*Washington University in St. Louis*

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

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Oscar Levant: Pianist, Gershwinite, Middlebrow Media Star

by

Caleb T. Boyd

A dissertation presented to  
The Graduate School  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2020  
St. Louis, Missouri

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Washington University in St. Louis

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# Abstract

Oscar Levant: Pianist, Gershwinite, Middlebrow Media Star

by

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Todd Decker, Chair

Following George Gershwin's death in 1937, his friend and fellow pianist Oscar Levant (1906-1972) constructed a multifaceted professional career across many forms of modern media that not only helped him build and maintain his popular status as a Gershwinite, but also helped establish Gershwin's piano music in the American concert hall canon. For nearly twenty years, Levant – more often than any other pianist – performed *Rhapsody in Blue* and the Concerto in F in concert halls, in outdoor stadia, on radio, and in films. He first came to national attention in 1938 as a regular panelist on the radio quiz show *Information Please*. His weekly demonstrations of his vast musical memory amazed listeners, and his rapport with his fellow panelists and penchant for a smart jibe or quick retort earned him popularity as a wit. With 1939, he used his radio fame to launch an additional career as a touring pianist, and by 1942 many Americans recognized him as the leading interpreter of the Rhapsody and the Concerto in F. Levant performed works by other composers, as well, but none so often as Gershwin, and he maintained his popular status as top Gershwin pianist for many years.

Levant's success as a pianist hinged upon his identity as a culturally fluid musician, one who moved effortlessly between the popular and serious musical spheres. In the early twentieth century, American middlebrow consumers sought cultural self-improvement – including a better understanding of classical music – in their spare time and through easily accessible means, like the radio, recordings, affordable concerts, and films. As a radio pianist, Levant often played Gershwin's music on many different radio programs, particularly the variety and symphony concert formats. As a touring pianist, Levant often appeared as a symphony guest musician in “pops,” benefit, or other special concerts the general public could afford. One particular popular venue, the outdoor Lewisohn Stadium in New York City, featured Levant as pianist for its annual Gershwin Nights for many years. Levant was the first pianist to record all of Gershwin's large works for piano, and his recording of *Rhapsody in Blue* remained a bestseller for many years. Finally, Levant was the only pianist in the 1940s and early 1950s to play Gershwin's piano music in major motion pictures, like Irving Rapper's *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945), Lloyd Bacon's *You Were Meant for Me* (1948), and Vincente Minelli's *An American in Paris* (1951). At a time when Gershwin's brand of classical-jazz was not considered concert-hall canon, Levant used his celebrity status to build a successful wide-ranging career, and he brought performances of his friend's music to vast audiences eager to hear it. Levant's work during this period helped establish Gershwin's piano music in the American concert-hall canon.

Until now, there has been no academic inspection of Levant's career and his importance to the legacy of George Gershwin's music. Levant himself wrote three humorous autobiographies: *A Smattering of Ignorance* (1940), *The Memoirs of an Amnesiac* (1965), and *The Unimportance of Being Oscar* (1968). Sam Kashner and Nancy Schoenberger's *A Talent for Genius: The Life and Times of Oscar Levant* (1998) is currently the only Levant biography

available. Due to the mass digitization of numerous national newspapers and periodicals, this dissertation uncovers new information particularly concerning Levant's boyhood in Pittsburgh, his early career as a pianist in New York City, his work as a radio pianist, and his hundreds of recitals and symphony orchestra guest appearances from the late 1930s to the mid-1950s. Finally, this document draws upon Levant's personal papers and documents available at the Library of Congress and the University of Southern California.

# Chapter 1

## The Contiguous Careers of a Brooklyn Composer and a Pittsburgh Pianist

This chapter begins by detailing Oscar Levant (1906-1972) as a young musician and piano student in Pittsburgh. Levant's training in classical piano lasted for about eleven years, and while his boyhood education was classically intensive, he gained some experience in his hometown working in emerging forms of mass media, particularly radio. Levant moved to New York City in 1922. The chapter continues to follow his professional path in Manhattan, where he received further classical training from Sigismond Stojowski (1870-1946), a well-known European composer, pianist, and teacher. Eventually, Levant drifted away from classical piano and recalibrated his focus toward pop piano, particularly with Ben Bernie's Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra. Not only did he play in one of the most well-known and successful dance orchestras, but through association with this group Levant also gained early experience with recordings, radio, and film. This previously only generally understood period of Levant's life is here documented in detail. The chapter concludes with a look at Levant's seven years as Gershwin's best friend, companion and professional assistant. Levant's training in both classical and popular music, coupled with his close relationship to the most famous American composer-pianist of the time, set him up for future recognition as the leading popular Gershwin pianist from the 1940s to the mid-1950s.

Throughout this narrative of Levant's biography up to 1937, I include reciprocal details from Gershwin's life. This strategy foregrounds key differences in their distinct developments into mature musicians. While Levant was the more thoroughly trained pianist, he lacked a sound education in composition. He only had brief tutelage under Joseph Schillinger and Arnold Schoenberg. By contrast, Gershwin received less training in classical piano and a much more extended education in composition. Gershwin's studies in classical piano began much later in his life (at the age of twelve), never included a well-known teacher, and lasted only about seven years. He quit piano lessons to focus on improving his skills at composition with such teachers as Edward Kilenyi, Joseph Schillinger, and Henry Cowell, among others.

Musicologists and historians have well discussed and documented Gershwin's success as both a popular and serious composer, and they usually situate Levant on the sidelines as a "sidekick," who rode on Gershwin's coattails. While Gershwin's financial success enabled him to focus on composition, Levant in his early professional career worked as both a popular performer and composer of songs and serious works. His efforts in popular music led to brief success as a film composer, even before Gershwin wrote for Hollywood. However, unlike Gershwin, Levant produced only one tune that became a standard, "Blame It on My Youth" (1935). Furthermore, analysis of this song reveals a strong melodic kinship to the Love Theme of *Rhapsody in Blue*. Also unlike Gershwin, Levant never produced a work for the concert hall that entered regular performance repertoire. His efforts at serious composition, like his Piano Sonata, at least demonstrate an artist eager to experiment with modern sonorities; but despite Levant's desire to gain recognition as a composer, his creations never appealed to the listening public. Thus, Levant never achieved Gershwin's level of success as a composer. Levant's talents lay in his skill as a performer.

This chapter explains the journey that Levant took from Pittsburgh student to early interpreter of Gershwin's piano music, particularly *Rhapsody in Blue* and the Concerto in F. The rest of the dissertation, which discusses Levant's immensely successful multimedia career as the leading interpreter of Gershwin's piano music in the 1940s and 1950s, draws upon the historical foundation laid here.

## 1.1 Levant in Pittsburgh, 1906-1922: Classical Piano Student and Performer

Oscar Levant was born to Max and Annie Levant on 27 December 1906. Of Russian Orthodox Jewish heritage, Max and Annie ran a jewelry store on Fifth Avenue in Pittsburgh. They named Oscar after his uncle Oscar Radin (1874-1957), who was conducting Broadway shows before the child grew one year old.<sup>1</sup> In his autobiography *A Smattering of Ignorance*, Levant explains that his "first recollection of the theater" and his earliest memory of George Gershwin occurred at a performance of *Ladies First* in Pittsburgh.<sup>2</sup> Starring Nora Bayes and conducted by Radin, the show spent one week at Pittsburgh's Alvin Theatre beginning 2 September 1918. Concerning Gershwin's piano, Levant remembers: "I had never heard such fresh, brisk, unstudied, completely free and inventive playing."<sup>3</sup> Gershwin's performance had a profound impact on the eleven-year-old, and although he would not meet the man face-to-face

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<sup>1</sup> Radin led the orchestra for the musical *The Alaskan*, which opened at the Knickerbocker Theatre on 12 August 1907. Internet Broadway Database, "The Alaskan," <http://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/the-alaskan-6353>, last accessed 5 Jan 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Oscar Levant, *A Smattering of Ignorance* (1939; Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Publishing, 1942), 147-148. At the time, the show was titled *Look Who's Here*. Gershwin toured with the Harry B. Smith and A. Baldwin Sloane show as the orchestra's pianist before it played on Broadway. "Nora Bayes Opens Alvin," *Pittsburgh Press*, 25 Aug 1918; Howard Pollack, *George Gershwin: His Life and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 227.

<sup>3</sup> Levant, *Smattering*, 148.

for another six years, Levant says the feelings of “jealousy and revenge” he felt at that performance would become the “dominating influences” of his life.<sup>4</sup>

Although Max and Annie customarily provided musical training for each of their children, Max always considered music merely a hobby and expected his sons to pursue more serious careers. The eldest son Harry (1895-1950) studied violin and loved it so much that he rebelled against his father’s wishes. He later became a successful musical director of Broadway shows, including three by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart: *I’d Rather Be Right* (1937-1938), *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938-1939), and *Pal Joey* (1940-1941).<sup>5</sup> While at the University of Pittsburgh, the second son Benjamin wrote music for the cap and gown shows but chose urology as his profession. Howard, the third son, entered dentistry.

At age seven, around late 1913 or early 1914, Oscar received early piano instruction from Benjamin, ten years his elder. In his second autobiography, *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*, Levant specifically recalls playing Beethoven symphonies arranged for piano four-hands.<sup>6</sup> He later took lessons from Martin Miessler (1880?-1958), who had studied with Robert Teichmüller (1863-1939) at the Leipzig Conservatory.<sup>7</sup> Miessler’s recitals typically featured works by European composers, like Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Brahms and Liszt.<sup>8</sup> In his later touring career, Levant would parody exactly this sort of recital program by inserting humorous verbal commentary and

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>5</sup> John Young Kohl, “The Curtain Rises,” *Morning Call* (Allentown, Penn.), 7 Oct 1945. Harry Levant conducted the road version of the Gershwin musical *Of Thee I Sing* and took over for William Daly as director of *Let ‘Em Eat Cake*. See “*Of Thee I Sing* a Swift-Moving Musical Satire,” *St. Louis Star and Times*, 5 Dec 1932; and Harold E. Cohen, “Notes of the Stage and Screen,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 21 Nov 1933. During a performance of *Mexican Hayride* (1944-1945), Harry suffered a stroke that impeded him the rest of his life. Sam Kashner and Nancy Schoenberger, *A Talent for Genius: The Life and Times of Oscar Levant* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 1994), 280; see also Harold V. Cohen, “The Drama Desk,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 18 Nov 1950.

<sup>6</sup> Oscar Levant, *Memoirs of an Amnesiac* (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), 40.

<sup>7</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 40-41; June Greene, “Their Dreams Came True: Oscar Levant Studied Piano Against Will,” *Pittsburgh Press*, 22 Apr 1940.

<sup>8</sup> For examples, see “Violin and Piano Recital,” *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, 27 Jan 1911; and “To Give Studio Recital,” *Pittsburgh Press*, 17 Dec 1911.

anecdotes between pieces. With Miessler, Levant studied Carl Czerny's method for piano virtuosity. He found Czerny's exercises in appropriate fingering frustrating and "never quite overcame the limitations of this method, because the main characteristic of my youth was literalness."<sup>9</sup> In 1940, his mother told a reporter that he hated his piano lessons: "He objected to practicing and it was a familiar scene in the Levant living room to see young Oscar sitting at the upright with tears streaming down his cheeks pounding his lesson."<sup>10</sup> Harry Levant told the *Pittsburgh Press* in 1941: "You almost had to drag him out of the alley where he was playing with the other kids, to get him to come in and practice or play for some visitor. He'd howl and bawl, the little bum."<sup>11</sup> Still, Oscar persisted and by the age of nine he was well known locally for his musical ability.<sup>12</sup>

Levant received further classical training as a member of his high school's orchestra.<sup>13</sup> According to *The Pittsburgh Press*, he graduated from the eighth grade and entered Fifth Avenue High School on 31 January 1919.<sup>14</sup> A March issue of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* lists him as a pianist in the orchestra, then conducted by Charles A. Rebstock.<sup>15</sup> As a member, Levant would have played at school and civic functions. Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine the precise months and years he spent with the group. By May 1920, Oscar Demmler, who also taught the school's music appreciation course, had become the director.<sup>16</sup> Levant does not mention

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<sup>9</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 41.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Greene.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Kaspar Monahan, "Show Shops: 'Big Brother' Gives Lowdown on Oscar Levant," *Pittsburgh Press*, 11 Aug 1941.

<sup>12</sup> Greene.

<sup>13</sup> Prior to entering the Fifth Avenue High School Orchestra, Levant had played piano in the Forbes Public School Band. "Lou Martin: (This Week's Cover Subject)," *Billboard* 55, no. 32 (7 Aug 1943): 4.

<sup>14</sup> "1,983 Grade Pupils Finish Grade Course in Local Schools," *Pittsburgh Press*, 2 Feb 1919.

<sup>15</sup> George Keppel Thomas, "Pittsburgh High Schools Train Twelve Fine Orchestras," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 30 Mar 1919.

<sup>16</sup> Harvey B. Gaul, "Musical Comments and Current Events: High School Concert," *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, 9 May 1920.



Rebstock in his writing, but he refers to Demmler as “one of my major influences.”<sup>17</sup> Levant says he left the orchestra because rehearsals were held after school hours: “In front of a class I said that Mr. Demmler was forced to attend because he was paid but I wasn’t.”<sup>18</sup> The school’s 1920 yearbook does not identify Levant as part of the orchestra.<sup>19</sup> However, the 1922 yearbook not only lists his name, but also features a posed photo of the orchestra with Levant standing squarely in the center of the group (Figure 1.1).<sup>20</sup> He probably joined the orchestra in early 1919, left sometime while Demmler was conductor, and returned a couple of years later.

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<sup>17</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 49.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Fifth Avenue High School (Pittsburgh, Pa.), *Fifth Avenue Life* (1920), 94.

<sup>20</sup> Fifth Avenue High School (Pittsburgh, Pa.), *Fifth Avenue Life* (1922), 54 and 88.



**Figure 1.1. Oscar Levant and the Fifth Avenue High School Orchestra, 1922.**

Levant understandably resented the orchestra's inconvenient rehearsal schedule, because he did earn money as a classical pianist at various local social functions. Even at age eight he received one dollar from actress Lillian Russell for playing during her dental appointment.<sup>21</sup> On 28 January 1918, at the age of eleven, he performed for the Pittsburgh Colloquium Club at the home of Mrs. Arthur E. Braun. His selections included a piano fantasy by Mozart, "Two Skylarks" by Leschetizky, and a capriccio by Mendelssohn.<sup>22</sup> Levant also worked at local Jewish events. On 2 February 1919, he gave two piano selections for a meeting of the Hebrew Ladies'

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<sup>21</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 45.

<sup>22</sup> "Among the Clubs: Colloquium Club," *Pittsburgh Press*, 29 Jan 1918.

Hospital Aid at the William Penn Hotel.<sup>23</sup> On 6 July 1921, he attended a conference of Pittsburgh Jews at Schenley High School, where he performed “a program of classic selections” with violinist Milton Lomask.<sup>24</sup> Finally, the Council of Jewish Women hired him and violinist Harry Azinsky (1907-1978) for a dinner at the Fort Pitt Hotel on 26 April 1922.<sup>25</sup> Levant boasts that he “practically [became] the accompanist for every youthful violinist in the city.”<sup>26</sup> He would put this experience performing with violinists to great use later in New York City.

Levant’s early gigs extended beyond society functions and events with his high school orchestra. Less than two years after the first nationwide radio broadcast, Levant appeared as a soloist on Pittsburgh’s KDKA.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Levant participated in the nascent stages of radio performance. He belonged to the pioneer generation that understood the central role such new technology could have in the career of a budding, serious musician. As discussed in the second chapter, Levant would owe his future fame to the medium of radio, as he achieved nationwide stardom on the quiz show *Information Please*. But, for now, Levant appeared on air with local musicians, and his repertoire consisted of standard classical pieces. His first documented radio performance occurred on 8 March 1922. He shared airtime with the Mozart Quintet of Avalon (Pennsylvania), a group of four male vocalists with a piano assistant. His solo pieces included Chopin’s Scherzo No. 3 in C-sharp minor, Liszt’s Polonaise in E major, and a capriccio by

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<sup>23</sup> “Society News: Club Notes,” *Pittsburgh Press*, 30 Jan 1919; and “Hebrew Ladies’ Aid Body Holds Meeting,” *Pittsburgh Press*, 3 Feb 1919.

<sup>24</sup> “Films of Palestine to be Shown Here,” *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, 5 July 1921.

<sup>25</sup> “Additional Society: For Mrs. Rauh,” *Pittsburgh Press*, 27 Apr 1922. Harry Azinsky, later known as Harry Azen, would join Paul Whiteman’s orchestra in 1941, and later recorded with such artists as Rosemary Clooney, Frank Sinatra, and Billie Holiday. Don Rayno, *Paul Whiteman: Pioneer in American Music, Volume 2: 1930-1967* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 462.

<sup>26</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 49.

<sup>27</sup> KDKA was the radio station that delivered the first nationwide radio broadcast on 2 November 1920.

Brahms.<sup>28</sup> In a later broadcast on 26 May, he and Azinsky performed several other works, including Dvořák's "Indian Lament" and Vieuxtemps' *Ballade et polonaise*, op. 38.<sup>29</sup> These selections from standard nineteenth-century European repertoire indicate Levant's designs on a career as a classical pianist.

Levant's high school music appreciation course, provided him with an early education in form and analysis. From 1910 the Pittsburgh Symphony had ceased operation due to lack of funding, so the Pittsburgh Orchestra Association invited Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra for five matinee and evening engagements every year, beginning with the 1916-1917 season.<sup>30</sup> As a member of Demmler's class, Levant attended these programs at a student rate, discussed the programmed works in class, and assisted Demmler with illustrations at the piano.<sup>31</sup> Stokowski's programs offered Pittsburgh audiences a wide variety of classical music from the Baroque to the modern. Music Levant may have analyzed and performed in class include works from Bach, Mozart and Beethoven to Wagner, Schoenberg, and John Alden Carpenter.<sup>32</sup>

As a boy in Pittsburgh, Levant began classical piano training at an early age, studied a standard repertoire of European masters, performed in various venues and social contexts,

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<sup>28</sup> Radio listing, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 5 Mar 1922; and radio listing, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 8 Mar 1922.

<sup>29</sup> "Westinghouse Radio Program," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 26 May 1922. According to a listing in the *St. Louis Star Times*, the performance was also transmitted to St. Louis. "Tonight's Radio Program," *St. Louis Star and Times*, 8 Mar 1922.

<sup>30</sup> "Pittsburgh Orchestra Association Program," *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, 11 Aug 1919.

<sup>31</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 49.

<sup>32</sup> In the years Levant was a high school student, the Philadelphia Orchestra presented in Pittsburgh such works as Bach's Concerto for Three Pianos and Orchestra in C major, Mozart's Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra in E flat, Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth Symphonies, Brahms First and Fourth Symphonies, and many selections from Wagner. Contemporary and recent works from European and American composers presented at these shows included Schoenberg's Five Pieces for Orchestra (1909), T. Carl Whitmer's *A Syrian Night* (1919), and John Alden Carpenter's *A Pilgrim Vision* (1920). "In the World of Music: Mme. Samaroff Plays Feb. 16," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 9 Feb 1919; "The World of Music: Trio of Artists Coming," *PPG*, 2 Mar 1919; "Philadelphia Orchestra to Open Season Friday," *PPG*, 7 Nov 1920; "Music: The Ninth Symphony," *PPG*, 9 Apr 1921; "Music," *PPG*, 10 Apr 1921; "Orchestra Will Give Second Concert Here," *PPG*, 4 Dec 1921; "Music Notes and Reviews," *PPG*, 4 Apr 1922.

participated in early broadcast performances at Pittsburgh's KDKA, and studied both classical and modern scores from European and American composers in his high school music appreciation course. He received a thorough standard education for a future concert pianist. However, he lacked instruction from an established European teacher, a hole he intended to fill by pursuing further study in New York City.

## **1.2 Gershwin in New York, 1898-1922: Student and Aspiring Composer**

Like Levant, Gershwin studied classical piano from a young age, but he started later in his childhood: Levant began lessons at age seven, and Gershwin at age twelve. Gershwin's progress seems to have been slower, and his classical piano studies ended when his instructor Charles Hambitzer died in 1918. He redirected his focus toward composition, wrote and published several songs and solo piano pieces, and had them sung on Broadway. By 1922, the year Levant would move to New York City to study classical piano, these two men demonstrated different career trajectories: the younger as a classical pianist, and the elder as a songwriter.

Like Levant, George Gershwin spent his childhood in a Jewish neighborhood of a metropolitan area (Manhattan's Lower East Side).<sup>33</sup> He also grew up in a household that encouraged his musical activities. Writing in 1931, biographer Isaac Goldberg says Gershwin was regularly exposed at home and school to "unsophisticated ballads" and "Scotch ditties" that "meant nothing to him." He considered musicians "sissified."<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, evidence of his

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<sup>33</sup> From 1904 to 1906, the Gershwins also lived on 126th Street in Harlem, another Jewish neighborhood. Pollack, *Gershwin*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Goldberg lists popular songwriters, such as Harry von Tilzer, Charles K. Harris, and others. Goldberg, *George Gershwin: A Study in American Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), 53-54.

boyhood musical interests reveals an inclination toward the popular and light classical. Gershwin recalls he regularly discussed classical music with violinist and playmate Max Rosen (1900-1956), and he experimented with a friend's player piano. As an errand boy at a neighborhood piano dealer, he stole some practice time. In late 1910 or early 1911, Morris and Rose Gershwin purchased an upright piano with intentions for Ira, George's older brother, to study the instrument. Ira briefly took piano lessons from his aunt Kate Wolpin, however the family marvelled when George demonstrated ability to play a popular tune with both hands.<sup>35</sup>

Gershwin had several early classical piano teachers, but his progress was slow and did not accelerate until after he was in high school. According to Goldberg, Gershwin's first three piano teachers were women, but this may be incorrect. The first teacher may have been Wolpin, who may have started George on the same primer Ira used: Ferdinand Beyer's *Elementary Instruction Book for the Piano Forte*.<sup>36</sup> Following brief instruction with a male neighbor, George studied with Frances Broads Greene (1890-1972). Until now, her full name has not been known.<sup>37</sup> Her husband sold sequins, embroidery, and other materials from the Garment District's Mitchell Building. From mid-1911 to either late 1912 or early 1913, Greene assigned Gershwin

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<sup>35</sup> Goldberg quotes George: "No sooner had it [the piano] come through the window and been backed up against the wall than I was at the keys. I must have crowded out Ira very soon." I understand this description as a colorful exaggeration of a short amount of time. Quoted in Goldberg, 56. Pollack's estimation of late 1910 as the period the Gershwins purchased their piano is supported by a 1924 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* interview with the composer. George said: "I started out to be a pianist – nothing sensational about that – taking my first lessons at the age of twelve and a half years. My memory is good on that point." This statement places the beginning of his piano studies at around March or April 1911, several months after the piano was purchased. Pollack, 711 (fn7), 713-714; Edward Cushing, "George Gershwin - Brooklyn Boy Composer," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 18 May 1924.

<sup>36</sup> Goldberg mentions the primer but does not name Gershwin's first three teachers.

<sup>37</sup> Until now, she has been identified only as "Mrs. Louis A. Greene." A *New York Times* obituary for a Louis A. Greene reveals he left behind a widow named Frances. Scouring genealogy websites, I came across one of their granddaughters, Melanie Melia, who confirmed that her grandmother indeed did teach Gershwin "for a very short period of time." The 1911/1912 Manhattan directory lists one Louis A. Greene operating a business at 41 W 25th Street. Obituary, "Louis A. Greene," *NYT*, 26 Jan 1953; Phone interview, Melanie Melia, 20 May 2019; *Trow's General Directory of the Boroughs of Manhattan and Bronx, City of New York*, vol. 125 (Manhattan, City of New York: Trow Directory, Print and Bookbinding, Co.), 606.

easy material, like Schumann's piano works for children.<sup>38</sup> Eventually, she approached Rose Gershwin and said she was no longer qualified to teach him.<sup>39</sup> Around his freshman year at the High School of Commerce (1912-1913), George studied with Hungarian pianist and composer Lajos Serly (d. 1939), who handed him a book of opera reductions for piano. Within six months Gershwin could play Rossini's *William Tell* overture.<sup>40</sup> However, as Richard Crawford notes, such reductions "were not standard fare for a novice seeking to establish a solid piano technique."<sup>41</sup>

Shortly thereafter, circa 1913, Gershwin sought out Charles Hambitzer (1878-1918), a multi-instrumentalist in the Waldorf-Astoria Orchestra. Unimpressed with the results of Gershwin's education with Serly, Hambitzer said, "Let's hunt up that guy [Serly] and shoot him."<sup>42</sup> Although Gershwin once claimed he never played "very serious things" as a piano student, he told music critic Walter Monfried that his lessons with Hambitzer included works by Liszt, Chopin, and Debussy.<sup>43</sup> Levant confirms, in addition to warming-up with a Czerny exercise, Gershwin often played Chopin preludes in his final years. Pollack postulates that Hambitzer, a composer of operettas and tone poems, also served as an early compositional model for the young pianist. Gershwin claimed in 1931 that his aspirations to be a pianist ended upon

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<sup>38</sup> Greene believes that Gershwin was nine years old when he began his studies with her, but Howard Pollack argues that the Gershwins did not purchase their upright until late 1910, which would make Gershwin around twelve years old when he began his studies. Daly, "Hy Gardner Calling: The Daly Mail," *New York Herald Tribune*, 15 July 1959; Pollack, 24-25.

<sup>39</sup> Melia says, "She [Frances Broads Greene] taught him for a very short period of time and then she went to his mother and said you need to hire somebody much better than I am to teach him." Interview.

<sup>40</sup> A pianist named Goldfarb so impressed Gershwin that he sought out Serly, who was Goldfarb's teacher. Pollack, 25. Serly had studied with Franz Liszt and had played in an orchestra led by Johannes Brahms. Before moving to New York in 1905, he was music director of the Royal Opera Comique in Budapest and organizer of the first Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra. "Lajos Serly, Composer and Conductor, Dies," *Albuquerque Journal*, 2 Feb 1939. Gershwin identifies him as "Von Zerly."

<sup>41</sup> Richard Crawford, *Summertime: George Gershwin's Life in Music* (New York: Norton, 2019), 13.

<sup>42</sup> Walter Monfried, "Charles Hambitzer Was My Greatest Influence, Says *Rhapsody* Writer," *Milwaukee Journal*, 28 Jan 1931.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

Hambitzer's death, as he told Monfried: "With his death went my career as a pianist. He has been the greatest musical influence in my life."<sup>44</sup> Thus, with 1918, Gershwin ceased taking piano lessons and recalibrated his professional focus toward a career in songwriting and composition.

In addition to his piano studies, Gershwin received an early education in music theory, orchestration, instrumentation, and chromatic modulation. Upon Hambitzer's suggestion, Gershwin began composition lessons with Edward Kilenyi (1884-1968), a Hungarian immigrant violinist, composer, and conductor who had studied with Pietro Mascagni and Daniel Gregory Mason.<sup>45</sup> Unusual for an aspiring composer, Gershwin did not travel to Europe for instruction nor were his studies solely grounded in intense study of European masterworks. Susan Niemoyer says that, unlike many music teachers at that time, Kilenyi did not observe the distinction of various musics into highbrow and lowbrow categories. Rather, he not only supported Gershwin's interest in popular and theater music, but encouraged him to examine the works of classical masters as a foundation for a personal style of composition.<sup>46</sup> As Kilenyi writes in an unpublished memoir:

A good teacher of musical composition when making his talented students acquainted with the classics warns them not to imitate the individual characteristics found in them. Though students could apply and employ certain principles found ... from Bach to Schonberg, the applications must not be imitative.<sup>47</sup>

Kilenyi drew lessons from Percy Groetschius's *The Materials Used in Musical Composition* (1913 revised edition), a textbook considered the "Bible of Harmony" by jazz musicians at the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Scholars argue over the exact years that Gershwin studied with Kilenyi. Pollack suggests that Gershwin studied with Kilenyi, off and on, for at least four years sometime between 1915 and 1923. Pollack, 31.

<sup>46</sup> Susan Niemoyer, "George Gershwin and Edward Kilenyi, Sr.: A Reevaluation of Gershwin's Early Musical Education," *Musical Quarterly* 94, no. 1-2 (Spring-Summer 2011): 17.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Ibid., 28.



time.<sup>48</sup> Kilenyi, who was working on an English translation of Arnold Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre* (1915), later claimed that he had schooled Gershwin in Schoenberg's teachings.<sup>49</sup> In addition to his lessons with Kilenyi, Gershwin also took an orchestration course from Rossetter G. Cole (1866-1952) at Columbia University.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, from either late 1922 or early 1923, Gershwin studied composition with Rubin Goldmark (1872-1936), a more prominent teacher than Kilenyi and one of the first American composers to use Negro spirituals as a source for symphonic works.<sup>51</sup> Pollack speculates that Gershwin may have studied with Goldmark as late as 1925.<sup>52</sup> Thus, Gershwin had received several years of instruction in composition, harmony, and orchestration from several teachers prior to the premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue* in 1924.

Gershwin's earliest known compositions date from around the time he began piano studies with Hambitzer. With friend and lyricist Leonard Praskins (1896-1968), Gershwin wrote "Ragging the Traumerei" (1912 or 1913), a syncopated reimagining of Schumann's short piano piece from *Kinderszenen*, op. 15 (1838).<sup>53</sup> Gershwin also wrote short works for solo piano, including *Tango* (1914). In May 1914, Gershwin heard that Jerome H. Remick & Co. sought a pianist with sight-reading and transposition skills. Hambitzer may have encouraged him to apply

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>49</sup> Kilenyi mentions particularly the idea of *Stufenreichtum*, or "smoothness, richness of stepwise progressions, part writing of voices to create fresh, new, lush or strange chromatic harmonies." Quoted in Pollack, 32.

<sup>50</sup> Niemoyer, 24.

<sup>51</sup> The New York Philharmonic performed Goldmark's *A Negro Rhapsody* (1922) numerous times between 1923 and 1933. The premiere in January 1923 occurred during Gershwin's short period as a Goldmark student. Pollack, 33-35.

<sup>52</sup> Pollack, 34.

<sup>53</sup> Perhaps Frances Broads Greene had selected Schumann's "Traumerei" as an early study piece.

for the job.<sup>54</sup> Following his successful audition, he decided to quit high school and work for fifteen dollars a week at Remick's, where he would remain until early 1917.<sup>55</sup>

While working at Remick's, Gershwin became acquainted with the publisher's music and show business clientele, established contacts beneficial to his later career, and expressed early a desire to experiment with pop music's potential. Pianist and composer Felix Arndt (1889-1918) helped Gershwin record his first piano rolls, the earliest documents of Gershwin's pianism.<sup>56</sup> He discovered and closely studied the show songs of Jerome Kern and decided "most popular music was of inferior quality and that musical-comedy music was made of better material."<sup>57</sup> Fellow plugger Harry Ruby (1895-1974) remarked upon Gershwin's "artistic mission of popular music": "We thought he was going highfalutin'. The height of artistic achievement to us was a 'pop' song that sold lots of copies, and we just didn't understand what he was talking about."<sup>58</sup> Soon, in 1916, Gershwin met the vaudeville dancer Fred Astaire. In his 1959 autobiography, Astaire said:

We struck up a friendship at once. [...] I told George how my sister [Adele] and I longed to get into musical comedy. He in turn wanted to write one. He said, "Wouldn't it be great if I could write a musical show and you could be in it?"<sup>59</sup>

That idea would not materialize until 1 December 1924, when *Lady, Be Good!* debuted at the Liberty Theatre.

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<sup>54</sup> "It was through Hambitzer's influence that George got his first jobs as pianist for music publishers and theaters." Monfried.

<sup>55</sup> Gershwin had only attended high school for two years. Robert Kimball and Alfred Simon, *The Gershwins* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), xxiii; Pollack, 61-62.

<sup>56</sup> Kimball and Simon, xxiii. Some recordings include "Bantam Steps (a Raggy Fox Trot)" (recorded January 1916), Harry von Tilzer's "When You're Dancing the Old Fashioned Waltz," and Gershwin's own "Rialto Ripples" (released September 1916). William G. Hyland, *George Gershwin: A New Biography* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003), 19.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Goldberg, 81.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in David Ewen, *George Gershwin: His Journey to Greatness* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 26.

<sup>59</sup> Fred Astaire, *Steps in Time: An Autobiography* (1959; New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 55.

Gershwin soon convinced several producers to place some of his songs in their Broadway shows. During Gershwin's employment, Remick refused to publish most of his creations. Nevertheless, in 1916, Gershwin found other publishers and eventually got one of his songs into a Broadway show.<sup>60</sup> Harry von Tilzer published Gershwin's first song, "When You Want 'Em, You Can't Get 'Em, When You've Got 'Em, You Don't Want 'Em," written with friend Murray Roth.<sup>61</sup> Hoping to get one of their songs sung at the Winter Garden, Gershwin and Roth took "The Runaway Girl" to Sigmund Romberg (1887-1951), the Shuberts' staff composer, who liked the song but asked staff lyricist Harold Atteridge to write new lyrics. The end result, "The Making of a Girl," was Gershwin's first Broadway tune, interpolated in the revue *The Passing Show of 1916*.<sup>62</sup>

While at Remick's, Gershwin formed a working relationship with lyricist Irving Caesar (1895-1996), with whom he would write his first major hit song, granting him financial leeway to focus on composition and theater work. To Gershwin biographers Robert Kimball and Alfred Simon, Caesar recalled Gershwin's popularity at Remick's and the beginning of their songwriting partnership:

George was a much-sought-after accompanist there. [...] the way he played the piano was unique. [...] So with George I used to make up titles just to have him sit down and go up and down the keys and see what he could strike from them, and he could work wonders. [...] He was very viable and adaptive. You see, George wrote with chords. His chordation was so interesting, so modern and remarkable, and out of his chordation came the melodies.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Gershwin's earliest completely surviving composition, "Rialto Ripples," is his only creative effort issued by Remick during his employment. Pollack, 220-221.

<sup>61</sup> Pollack, 221.

<sup>62</sup> William A. Everett, *Sigmund Romberg* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 18.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Kimball and Simon, 23. Pollack notes that Caesar may have known Gershwin from high school. Pollack, 224.

After Gershwin left Remick's, Vivienne Segal interpolated Gershwin and Caesar's "You-oo Just You" and "There's More to the Kiss Than the X-X-X" into the Charles Dillingham production *Miss 1917*. The quality of the songs compelled the show's manager, Harry Askin to notify Max Dreyfus (1874-1964), head of T. B. Harms music publishing. Gershwin explains what happened next:

I wanted to be a songwriter, but somehow no one seemed to recognize the fact. Finally I got a telephone call from T.B. Harms, the publishers who do ninety percent of all show music. [...] Later I found out that Askin had spoken to them about me. I got an appointment to play for them and Max Dreyfus, who became head of the company after Harms' death, heard me.<sup>64</sup>

In February 1918, three months before Hambitzer's death, Dreyfus hired Gershwin as a salaried staff composer.<sup>65</sup>

Gershwin eventually wrote a tune that became a national hit and secured his financial future. In late 1919, Harms published Gershwin and Caesar's "Swanee," a one-step parody of Stephen Foster's minstrel tune "Old Folks at Home" (1851). Although Muriel De Forrest introduced "Swanee" in Ned Wayburn's *Capitol Revue* at the Palace, the song did not catch on with the music-buying public.<sup>66</sup> However, after Gershwin played the tune for Broadway star Al Jolson at a Winter Garden party, Jolson adopted the song and interpolated it into his current hit revue *Sinbad*.<sup>67</sup> Jolson's January 1920 recording for Columbia sold two million copies. The song remained No. 1 in the country for nine weeks, sat at the top of the *Billboard* charts for nine more, and became one of Jolson's signature numbers.<sup>68</sup> Within the first year of its release, Gershwin

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<sup>64</sup> Cushing, "Brooklyn Boy Composer."

<sup>65</sup> Gershwin maintained his relationship with T. B. Harms and its successor Chappell throughout his life. Pollack, 89-91. Charles J. Hambitzer died on 11 May 1918 at Bellevue Hospital. "Obituary Notes," *NYT*, 12 May 1918.

<sup>66</sup> Pollack, 236-237.

<sup>67</sup> Kimball and Simon, 24; Pollack, 240-241. Sigmund Romberg had written most of the music for *Sinbad*, but he welcomed the new song. Everett, 18.

<sup>68</sup> James Fisher, *Al Jolson: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994), 135.

earned \$10,000 from royalties (\$130,000 in 2019). On a 1934 NBC broadcast, Gershwin said, “‘Swanee’ penetrated the four corners of the earth.”<sup>69</sup> He had lain a firm foundation for his career as a songwriter and composer. As Goldberg explains it, “George Gershwin was made.”<sup>70</sup>

While serving as the regular composer for *George White’s Scandals*, Gershwin got his first opportunity to collaborate with popular dance band leader Paul Whiteman (1890-1967). In 1920, former Ziegfeld dancer George White (1891-1968) hired Gershwin to supply music for his annual *Scandals*, which were two-act stage revues presented at the Globe Theatre.<sup>71</sup> Gershwin continued to write for White’s *Scandals* until 1924. For the 1922 *Scandals*, White hired Whiteman as a special attraction. Gershwin knew Whiteman from the Palais, where his band frequently performed Gershwin’s songs, but the two men had never worked together. To close the first act, Gershwin penned for Whiteman “I’ll Build a Stairway to Paradise” (lyrics by Ira Gershwin). Gershwin’s music, Whiteman’s band, and a risqué costume change for the dancers ensured the number’s success with the audience, as one reviewer reports:

The Whiteman instrumentalists, who jazzily enrapture the attendance with their seductive harmonies. There is a decorative finish to the first half of the entertainment – one of those big, smashing stairway things in black and white, wherein, if we applaud enough [and we of course do] the shapely ladies involved divest themselves and are enjoyably exposed in their underclothing.<sup>72</sup>

The song’s exciting performance evoked a *joie de vivre*, encapsulating the young and vibrant Jazz Age in one knockout stage number.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Quoted in Deena Rosenberg, *Fascinatin’ Rhythm: The Collaboration of George and Ira Gershwin* (New York: Dutton, 1991), 39.

<sup>70</sup> Goldberg, 99. Furthermore, Pollack says, “‘Swanee’ brought him fame and fortune at age twenty-one, and he remained quite well-off for the rest of his short life.” Pollack, 193.

<sup>71</sup> The Globe Theater is now called the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre on West 46th Street.

<sup>72</sup> Percy Hammond, “The Theaters: Mr. White’s New ‘Scandals’ is to be Commended, as Something Like Mr. Ziegfeld’s ‘Follies’,” *New York Tribune*, 29 Aug 1922.

<sup>73</sup> “No other revue series produced as long a list of durable standards as [*The Scandals*]. Moreover, the music was totally of a type and period, joyously reflecting the hedonistic excitement of the era of wonderful nonsense as well

Thus, by 1922, the year that Levant moved to New York from Pittsburgh, Gershwin had established himself as a leading popular songwriter. The premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue* lay several months in the future. Levant arrived in New York to continue his studies as a classical pianist. He soon realized, in order to make ends meet, he would have to sharpen his pop piano proficiency, an additional skill his Pittsburgh education had not offered him.

### **1.3 Levant in New York, 1922-1924: Classical Piano Student and Dance**

#### **Band Pianist**

The date of Levant's move from Pittsburgh to New York cannot be pinpointed with precision. In his second autobiography *Memoirs of an Amnesiac* (1965) Levant says, upon his father's sudden death in December 1921, he dropped out of high school and moved to New York to study piano.<sup>74</sup> Biographers Sam Kashner and Nancy Schoenberger offer February 1922 as the month of departure without support of evidence.<sup>75</sup> However, Pittsburgh papers report that Levant played piano in several social and local radio performances between March and June that year.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, in 1940, his mother told a Pittsburgh reporter that "he had only a half semester to go to complete high school" when he told his family that he planned to move.<sup>77</sup> As mentioned earlier, Levant entered high school in January 1919, so his final semester on the four-year

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as its more pensive, bluesy moments." Gerald Bordman, *American Musical Revue: From The Passing Show to Sugar Babies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 76.

<sup>74</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 52.

<sup>75</sup> Kashner and Schoenberger, 27.

<sup>76</sup> "Tonight's Radio Program," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 8 March 1922; "Additional Society: For Mrs. Rauh," *Pittsburgh Press*, 27 April 1922; "Westinghouse Radio Program," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 26 May 1922; "Three Hospitals Graduate Nurses," *Pittsburgh Press*, 2 June 1922.

<sup>77</sup> Greene, "Their Dreams Came True."

curriculum would have begun in the fall of 1922. This evidence suggests that he waited at least until mid-August or early September to move from Pittsburgh to New York.<sup>78</sup>

Initially, Levant lived in several furnished apartments, until he moved into a brownstone on 80th Street, where he shared two rooms with three other young men he describes as the mascot for the New York Yankees (Eddie Bennett), a homosexual, and a bookie/bootlegger, who provided the group with ample spending money. The bookie left after a few weeks, so the three remaining roommates found a place on West 51st Street, between Eighth Avenue and Broadway, near the Capitol Theatre, a 4000-seat movie palace.<sup>79</sup> Although only a few minutes walk from the Winter Garden Theatre, Central Park and Carnegie Hall, Levant thought the place “total squalor.”<sup>80</sup> He spent his time reading in Times Square, practicing piano in a rented room, and attending symphony concerts. He also frequented Irving Berlin’s publishing firm at 1607 Broadway, just a five-minute walk from his room. There, he met vaudevillians, song pluggers, and stride pianists like Luckey Roberts (1887-1968) and James P. Johnson (1895-1955).<sup>81</sup>

Despite browsing the racks at Berlin’s and meeting popular pianists, Levant moved to New York with dreams of being a classical pianist.<sup>82</sup> Shortly after arrival, Levant started piano lessons with Polish composer and pianist Sigismond Stojowski (1870-1946), a student of Ignaz Paderewski, who according to the *New York Times*, “repeatedly endorsed [him] as one of the

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<sup>78</sup> After moving to New York, Levant says he waited six months to return home, coinciding with the arrival of the Al Jolson musical *Bombo* in Pittsburgh, which played the Alvin Theatre there from 5-10 February 1923. That places his arrival in New York around August or September 1922, not February. Levant, *Memoirs*, 52.

<sup>79</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 54-55. The Gershwin Theatre currently sits on this block.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 64. Johnson would soon write the immensely popular “Charleston,” featured in the all-black musical comedy *Runnin’ Wild* (1923)

<sup>82</sup> “He once thought of himself as a potential concert pianist, and studied for a while under Stojowski.” “In or of the Changing Times Square Panorama,” *NYT*, 17 June 1928.

most authoritative exponents of his methods and musical ideals.”<sup>83</sup> In the early decades of the century, Stojowski’s compositions were often performed in New York, and he frequently appeared in recitals and concerts, including performances at Carnegie Hall.<sup>84</sup> From 1906 to 1911, Stojowski headed the piano department at the Institute of Musical Arts (later the Juilliard School of Music).<sup>85</sup> From Fall 1918, he taught piano at the Master School of Music, located at 110 Remsen Street in Brooklyn Heights, where he allotted “a limited number of hours per week to teaching advanced pupils.”<sup>86</sup> The Master School specialized in voice training but also offered courses in piano and music theory. In October 1923, Stojowski opened his own Master School at 150 West 76<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City.<sup>87</sup> Levant probably stopped taking classical piano lessons with Stojowski sometime in 1925.<sup>88</sup> In any case, while Gershwin had studied piano mostly with unknown musicians, Levant received instruction from a Paderewski protégé with contemporary accolades.

As Paderewski had done, Stojowski stressed the importance of continued practice with precise fingering tailored to the individual pianist as an aid to muscle memory, granting both accuracy and freedom during performance: “The right fingering must be found, by which is meant one perfectly fitting the case and the hand. Hands, of course, are not identical.”<sup>89</sup>

Stojowski also stressed “faithfulness to the text” but considered slightly altering a score

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<sup>83</sup> “Stojowski is Dead; Polish Pianist, 76,” *NYT*, 6 Nov 1946.

<sup>84</sup> “Mr. Stojowski’s Concert,” *NYT*, 2 Mar 1915.

<sup>85</sup> Joseph A. Herter, *Zygmunt Stojowski: Life and Music*, Polish Music History Series (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2007), 52-57.

<sup>86</sup> Master School of Music ad, *Brooklyn Life*, 26 Oct 1918.

<sup>87</sup> Herter, 57.

<sup>88</sup> Herter inaccurately claims Levant studied with Stojowski for four years. A 1941 profile on Levant in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* says he studied with Stojowski for three years, which would place the end of his lessons in 1925, the year he joined Ben Bernie’s Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra. James Treverton, “The Irrepressible Oscar Levant – Composer, Conductor, Pianist, Actor, Author, Buffoon,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 15 Nov 1941.

<sup>89</sup> Sigismond Stojowski, “Practice as an Art,” *Etude* 55, no. 9 (Sept 1937): 565.



“preferable to bungling the job, because of lack of endurance, or a limited span of hand.”

Nevertheless, he frowned upon performers’ freely arranging a score to their liking:

Some virtuosi are prone to go too far in that direction. Instead of resorting to clarification or simplification, they indulge in additions and distortions. These are often reprehensible, as combining bad faith with bad taste, for the sake of mere display.<sup>90</sup>

In his later career as an interpreter of Gershwin’s music, Levant would express guilt for extemporizing on his friend’s scores. Such guilt perhaps arose from his early training as a classical pianist with a teacher such as Stojowski. Although Levant only studied with Stojowski for three years, his influence stuck. Indeed, in 1940, Levant called Stojowski “a magnificent pedagogue who has the art of transporting his pupils into that state of inspiration and admiration that makes them want to do their best.”<sup>91</sup>

While studying with Stojowski, Levant and his fellow students attended a Paderewski concert with the New York Symphony at Carnegie Hall on 7 December 1922. Afterward, Stojowski arranged a student recital in Paderewski’s room at the Plaza Hotel. Levant, awed by his “first personal contact with a world-famous artist,” played one of Paderewski’s *Legende*. In *Memoirs*, Levant says the internationally acclaimed pianist called him “very talented,” but in an interview with Kashner and Schoenberger, one of Levant’s cousins claimed Paderewski had said Levant could only be taught technique and did not have “the soul of a concert pianist.”<sup>92</sup> By this account, Paderewski, a quintessential romantic pianist, believed Levant at this point possessed technical skill but no ability to express feeling or emotion through his playing. Despite Paderewski’s opinion, Levant would eventually build an immensely successful career as a

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 566.

<sup>91</sup> Rose Heylbut, “The Odyssey of Oscar Levant,” *Etude* 58, no. 5 (May 1940): 316.

<sup>92</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 64; and Kashner and Schoenberger, 35.

touring pianist, specializing in Gershwin's music but also performing large works by many other composers.

From the fall of 1922, in addition to symphony concerts and Stojowski's piano lessons, Levant immersed himself in popular and jazz music at a moment when Gershwin's songs appeared in various Broadway shows. Levant balked at the idea of playing pop music, but he did so in order to support himself: "I was forced to play dance music. Since I had been orientated to a different musical background I had an unearthly contempt for most of the tunes we played."<sup>93</sup> He briefly worked at the Ambassador Hotel in a piano/violin/cello trio that played popular songs for the diners. His attempts to insert classical artists like Mozart into his routine led to his immediate dismissal.<sup>94</sup>

Soon, George Gershwin's music piqued Levant's interest. Levant's brother Harry lived in a 51st Street apartment with Pearl Eaton (1898-1958), a *Follies* dancer who taught a tap class for girls in the latest stage shows. Eaton hired Levant as an accompanist.<sup>95</sup> He recalls frequently playing for the girls "I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise," so Levant was a rehearsal pianist for the girls who danced in George White's *Scandals of 1922*, which featured the first performance of that number.<sup>96</sup> He considered Gershwin's songs to be "something worthy of envy."<sup>97</sup> He frequently went to the New Amsterdam Theatre and sat in the pit to watch his uncle Radin

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<sup>93</sup> Levant, *Sattering*, 149.

<sup>94</sup> Kashner and Schoenberger, 33.

<sup>95</sup> Doris Eaton Travis, *The Days We Danced: The Story of My Theatrical Family from Florenz Ziegfeld to Arthur Murray and Beyond* (Seattle: Marquand Books, 2003), 52-53. The Eatons were a celebrity family, with sisters Pearl, Mary (1901-1948), and Doris (1904-2010), and brother Charles (1910-2004).

<sup>96</sup> The *Scandals of 1922* opened at the Globe Theatre on 28 August. Nevertheless, I am not confident at placing Levant's arrival in New York prior to this date. Levant, *Memoirs*, 57.

<sup>97</sup> Levant, *Sattering*, 149.

conduct the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1922*.<sup>98</sup> Harry, who conducted the final two weeks of *Spice of 1922* (late August to early September) at the Winter Garden, invited him to play in the orchestra. One of the songs in the show was Gershwin's "Yankee Doodle Blues" (lyrics by Irving Caesar and Buddy DeSylva).<sup>99</sup> Despite his skills as a classical pianist, his years of study had not prepared him to perform in a Broadway pit. Harry would kick the piano whenever Levant struggled to stay in tempo.<sup>100</sup>

In the fall of 1923, after a summer visit to Pittsburgh, Levant returned to Stojowski's classes, started practicing the "more advanced" works by Debussy, and acquired his "first extended engagement" as a paid musician at the Mikado Inn, a popular Japanese roadhouse in Croton-on-Hudson, a town of less than 2500 people located about thirty miles north of New York City.<sup>101</sup> Many automobile enthusiasts barreled down the roads of the area and would stop for a meal and drink at the Mikado's large outdoor garden and pavilion.<sup>102</sup> While employed at the inn, Levant slept in the cellar with the waiters.<sup>103</sup>

With a steady, daily work schedule, and a listening audience more casual and relaxed than one may find at the Ambassador Hotel, Levant explored and refined his developing jazz piano skills. Levant's experience accompanying violinists on Pittsburgh radio had prepared him for this job. The small ensemble, which played both classical and popular music for the guests,

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<sup>98</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 57-58. See also Heylbut, "The Odyssey of Oscar Levant." The *Follies of 1922*, featuring Will Rogers and Gilda Gray, opened at the New Amsterdam Theatre on 5 June 1922. "Greenwich Village is Etched in Frank Play," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 14 May 1922.

<sup>99</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 58. *Spice of 1922* played at the Winter Garden from 6 July to 9 September 1922.

<sup>100</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 58.

<sup>101</sup> A 1941 article says Levant started work at the Mikado Inn "about 1923." More specifically, Levant says he started there after a summer visit home and "during his second year in New York," which would be the fall of 1923. Frederick James Smith, "Bad Boy Makes Good," *LAT*, 30 Mar 1941; Levant, *Memoirs*, 53.

<sup>102</sup> For more information on the area, see Croton-on-Hudson Historical Society, *Croton-on Hudson*, Images of America (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2001).

<sup>103</sup> Levant may have exaggerated his number of roommates when he said, "I shared sleeping quarters with twenty or thirty Japanese waiters." Levant, *Memoirs*, 53.

operated as a trio on weekends but shrank to a piano and violin on weekdays. Levant describes a typical Mikado Inn evening:

The upright piano on which I played had a horizontal string across it, on which hung a one-dollar bill—a not too subtle hint for tips, which were forthcoming as the evening progressed and the clientele grew boisterous and drunk.<sup>104</sup>

When the Mikado boarded up for the night, Levant continued playing in downtown Manhattan. Sammy Wilson, a pianist with an orchestra that played on New York's WFBH, helped him get early work with dance bands at these venues.<sup>105</sup> Around late 1923 or early 1924, Levant sometimes played with Wilson and other musicians after midnight at Proctor's Fifth Avenue Theater.<sup>106</sup>

Particulars of Levant's life from the summer of 1924 are uncertain. A press announcement reveals a possible upcoming New York concert debut for Levant:

Oscar Levant ... who has been spending a period of assiduous study under Sigismond Stojowski in this city, will make a public appearance before long, and those who have heard him play in private expect him to make a marked impression. Young Mr. Levant has an uncommonly facile and finished technic and a tone of exceptional richness in color. He has not neglected the musical side of his art and is making himself thoroughly acquainted with harmony and counterpoint. Mr. Stojowski does not hesitate to predict a brilliant future for his gifted pupil.<sup>107</sup>

I have found no evidence that such an event took place. Nevertheless, the announcement reveals that, in addition to piano performance, Levant studied harmony and counterpoint during his early New York years. As mentioned earlier, Levant's studies with Stojowski progressed through 1924

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<sup>104</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 62-63.

<sup>105</sup> In the 1930s, Wilson led orchestras at New York's Hotel Edison and later at St. Louis's Coronado Hotel. Franken, "Night Spots-Orchestras: Green Room, Hotel Edison, New York," *Billboard* 47, no. 50 (14 Dec 1935): 11; "Sammy Wilson's Band Returning to Coronado," *St. Louis Star and Times*, 11 June 1938. See also "Round the Town with Reagan," *St. Louis Star and Times*, 18 June 1938.

<sup>106</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 65. Levant notes that the gangster Ernest "Big Frenchy" Menet often danced along to their music. Menet had been in Sing Sing prison for two decades. He was released in September 1923 but arrested again a few weeks later. He was paroled in March 1924 with the stipulation that he would leave the United States and never return. Thus, Levant's performances with Wilson at Proctor's must have occurred within that time period. "Freed on Pledge to Leave U.S. After Many Years in Jail," *Buffalo Times*, 19 Mar 1924.

<sup>107</sup> "Musical Items: Oscar Levant to Debut Shortly," *Huntsville Times*, 10 Jun 1924.

and into 1925, Levant also continued to work as a restaurant pianist in Croton-on-Hudson through 1924.<sup>108</sup>

Within his first two years of New York life, Levant had assumed dual roles as a pop pianist and a classical piano student. When his studies with Stojowski ended in 1925, Levant had studied piano for eleven years, about four years longer than Gershwin. While Gershwin had no famous piano teacher, Stojowski was a European instructor with contemporary acclaim. While Gershwin in 1918 had redirected his career focus toward songwriting, Levant chose to expand his experience in piano performance once his lessons with Stojowski concluded. After a rocky introduction to pop piano at the Ambassador Hotel and a week at the Winter Garden, Levant daily honed his skills as a popular pianist at a speakeasy just outside the city. In 1925, he would find himself in one of New York's most popular hotel orchestras.

#### **1.4 Gershwin, 1923-1924: Composer of “Serious Jazz”**

While Levant entertained motorists at a lodge thirty-miles upstate, Gershwin advanced his career as a composer. With experience in both pop and classical piano and composition, he developed a particular style of composition that combined the forms, languages, and contexts of both idioms. From 1923 to 1924, Gershwin debuted as a concert pianist, discovered effective ways to combine the seemingly incongruous realms of highbrow classicism and popular jazz,

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<sup>108</sup> In *Memoirs*, Levant lists several popular tunes at the Mikado, cluing us in to the extent of his employ. He says the most popular request was “Show Me the Way to Go Home” (1925), followed by “Charley, My Boy” (1924) and “Yes, We Have No Bananas” (1923). “Show Me the Way to Go Home” was not popularized in the United States until Vincent Lopez began programming it in the fall of 1925, well after Levant had left the Mikado. Levant must have been joking when he said this Prohibition-era drinking song by a British duo was a popular “American spiritual” at the Mikado while he was there. However, he was probably being honest about the popularity of the other two songs. Levant, *Memoirs*, 62-63; D.J.M., “Turning the Radio Dial,” *Harrisburg Evening News*, 23 Nov 1925.

wrote a wildly successful concerto-like rhapsody for Paul Whiteman's Orchestra, and witnessed his first successful Broadway show, featuring all of his own songs written with his brother Ira.

In Spring 1923, photographer Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964) proposed a recital featuring Tin Pan Alley tunes to his friend Eva Gauthier (1885-1958), a mezzo-soprano specializing in modern classical songs. As an "accompanist and guide" he recommended to her Gershwin, whose recent popular songs, like "Swanee" and "Stairway to Paradise," he highly admired.<sup>109</sup> The recital occurred on 1 November 1923 at New York's Aeolian Hall, a venue for serious music. In-between vocal selections from Béla Bartók, Arnold Schoenberg, and other classical composers, Gauthier sang Gershwin's "Stairway to Paradise," "Innocent Ingenue Baby," "Swanee," and "Do It Again."<sup>110</sup> Critic Deems Taylor praised Gershwin's jazz piano and his unexpectedly bold quotation of classical music during performance:

He expounded the rhythmic subtleties of the jazz numbers brilliantly and with exactly the proper atmosphere of impromptu that makes good jazz playing so fascinating. His insertion of a shameless quotation from [Rimsky-Korsakov's] *Scheherazade* in the middle of 'Do It Again' quite ruined the decorum of his audience.<sup>111</sup>

Furthermore, Paul Whiteman biographer Thomas A. DeLong claims Gauthier's performance of popular tunes from a concert-hall stage "'respectabilized' current Tin Pan Alley tunes."<sup>112</sup> As Van Vechten glibly summarizes it, "Jazz at last, it seemed, had come into its own."<sup>113</sup>

Gauthier's recital prompted Whiteman to plan a similar hybrid concert at the same venue for his Palais Royal Orchestra. Whiteman intended "An Experiment in Modern Music" to

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<sup>109</sup> In the first serious article on Gershwin to be published, Van Vechten said, "With 'I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise' [...] I completely capitulated to his [Gershwin's] amazing talent and nominated him to head my list of jazz composers." Carl Van Vechten, "George Gershwin: An American Composer Who is Writing Notable Music in the Jazz Idiom," *Vanity Fair* (March 1925): 78; Robert Wyatt, "The Seven Jazz Preludes of George Gershwin: A Historical Narrative," *American Music* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 70-71.

<sup>110</sup> She also sang popular songs by Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, and Walter Donaldson.

<sup>111</sup> Deems Taylor, "Music," *New York World*, 2 Nov 1923.

<sup>112</sup> Thomas A. DeLong, *Pops: Paul Whiteman, King of Jazz* (Piscataway, NJ: New Century, 1983), 61.

<sup>113</sup> Van Vechten, 78.

demonstrate jazz music's progression from its supposed rustic and rudimentary nascent period to its present-day status as a music appropriate for any concert-hall stage. He commissioned Gershwin to write a piece for the concert. Gershwin already had ideas for a classical-jazz hybrid work that would demonstrate possibilities for jazz outside of its dance-hall context: "There had been so much chatter about the limitations of jazz. [...] Jazz they said, had to be in strict time. It had to cling to dance rhythms. I resolved, if possible, to kill that misconception with one sturdy blow. [...] The rhapsody, as you see, began as a purpose, not a plan."<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, he believed jazz as evocative of the modern zeitgeist and considered its unique timbres as an appropriate and democratic update to the timbres of traditional orchestral music:

The principal contribution of jazz to [...] tone art is in the branch of sound – the technique of color. Jazz admits of all sounds – of instrumental and mechanical devices that would be impossible in the symphonic orchestra – and for that reason it is new. But jazz is more of a spirit and it's a hell of a word to define. It is an expression of the day, nervous and vivid, just as the waltz was an expression of the day in the time of Johann Strauss, the waltz king.<sup>115</sup>

Finally, Gershwin conceived the piece as an evocation of the modern American urban soundscape:

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<sup>114</sup> Quoted in Goldberg, 139.

<sup>115</sup> Quoted in Cushing, "Boy Composer."

It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattle-ty-bang that is often so stimulating to a composer. [...] And there I suddenly heard – and even saw on paper – the complete construction of the rhapsody, from beginning to end. [...] I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America – of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our blues, our metropolitan madness.<sup>116</sup>

Gershwin says he “had already done some work on the rhapsody” by 20 December.<sup>117</sup>

Following the Aeolian Hall concert on 12 February 1924, many critics described the *Rhapsody in Blue* as an original work mirroring the dynamic ebb and flow of contemporary urban life. *New York Times* critic Olin Downes recognized the Rhapsody’s “irresistible vitality and genuineness.”<sup>118</sup> Later that year, bandleader Ben Bernie wrote in *Variety*, “The number has created a sensation in even the high-brow circles, and [...] Paul Whiteman deserves great credit for bringing to the attention of the public this undisputed masterpiece of the new and modern school.”<sup>119</sup> Moreover, many critics praised Gershwin as a young composer who had demonstrated a unique compositional voice. For example, Downes criticized Gershwin for

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<sup>116</sup> Quoted in Goldberg, 139. Similar American works evoking urban soundscapes, had already been written by other American composers. John Alden Carpenter’s ballet *Krazy Kat*, based on the George Herriman comic-strip character, combined jazz with European expressionist elements. Cole Porter’s *Within the Quota* (1923), a satirical one-act ballet of American life written for Rolf de Mare’s Ballets Suedois, featured a Harlem Negro chorus and Broadway dancers. For the music, Porter combined Stravinsky’s ostinati and Milhaud’s polytonality with elements from jazz and ragtime. The Ballets Suedois premiered Porter’s ballet with Milhaud’s *La creation du monde* at Paris’s Theatre des Champs-Elysees on 25 October 1923. The Ballets Suedois performed Porter’s ballet at New York’s Century Theater on 28 November 1923. Although these works preceded Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, some critics thought them too European, American audiences did not receive them well, and they have never thrived on the American stage. For example, the *New York Tribune*’s Francis D. Perkins said Porter had “drunk deeply of the Milhaud-Honegger spring” and his “jazz smacked of ... Darius Milhaud rather than George Gershwin.” Gilbert Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1924), 231-243; Charles Schwartz, *Cole Porter: A Biography* (New York: The Dial Press, 1977), 81-82.

<sup>117</sup> Quoted in Goldberg, 139. However, Gershwin told the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* that composition began on 7 January 1924. Pollack notes that same date inscribed on Gershwin’s short score. Pollack believes Gershwin began planning the piece in December but did not actually start notating it until January. Cushing, “Boy Composer” ; Pollack, 296-298.

<sup>118</sup> Olin Downes, “Music: A Concert of Jazz,” *NYT*, 13 Feb 1924.

<sup>119</sup> Ben Bernie, “Ben Bernie Admits He’s Friendly with Paul Whiteman and Gang,” *Variety* 75, no. 13 (13 Aug 1924): 36.



“technical immaturity” but praised his ability to “[express] himself in a significant and, on the whole, highly original manner.”<sup>120</sup>

Due to the success of the *Rhapsody in Blue*, Whiteman incorporated it into his shows at the Palais Royal and also performed it while on tour. In June 1924, Whiteman recorded the *Rhapsody* for Victor Records with Gershwin at the piano. The work made Whiteman very rich. According to DeLong, “*Rhapsody in Blue* became [Whiteman’s] signature tune and his theme song. [...] It was not too long before his personal income quadrupled to over \$400,000 a year.”<sup>121</sup>

The *Rhapsody in Blue* notwithstanding, 1924 was a very productive year for Gershwin, as he also completed three stage musicals. *Sweet Little Devil* opened at the Astor Theater in January. In July, he crossed the Atlantic to write the music for *Primrose*, which debuted at London’s Winter Garden in September. Finally, he had his first major Broadway success with *Lady, Be Good!*, the first show to feature all music written with his brother Ira. Opening on 1 December, the show featured hits like the title song, “Fascinating Rhythm,” and “The Half of It, Dearie, Blues.” Philip Furia says *Lady, Be Good!*, with Gershwin’s brand of blues and jazz and Ira’s penchant for capturing the bite of urban American vernacular, heralded the discovery of a uniquely American form of musical theater.<sup>122</sup> Indeed, Pollack calls *Lady, Be Good!* “one of the quintessential American theatrical works of the 1920s.”<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Downes, *NYT*, 13 Feb 1924.

<sup>121</sup> DeLong, 64.

<sup>122</sup> Philip Furia, *Ira Gershwin: The Art of the Lyricist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>123</sup> Pollack, 326.

## 1.5 Levant, 1925-Summer 1927: From Cellar Rat to Dance Band Cat

As Gershwin soared to national notoriety as a songwriter and composer, Levant moved back to New York City from the recesses of the Mikado Inn's overpopulated cellar and quickly found work as a dance band pianist. While Gershwin had redirected his focus toward composition once Hambitzer died, Levant sought more advantageous work as a pop pianist in 1925. Levant had developed his pop piano skills so finely that he caught the attention of Ben Bernie, leader of the Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra and manager of several dance orchestras operating under his name. While in Bernie's employ, Levant would acquire valuable experience as a pop pianist in various venues, particularly the hotel restaurant, the vaudeville house, and the silent movie theater stage. Additionally, his earliest recordings and his first film appearance date from his tenure as a member of Bernie's band.

According to Kashner and Schoenberger, by January 1925 Levant had left the Mikado Inn at Croton-on-Hudson and moved in with his brother Harry, who now had an apartment at The Congress on 161 West 54th Street with his wife Pearl and their daughter Doris (born in 1917).<sup>124</sup> Carnegie Hall lay two blocks north, and the recently erected Broadway Theatre (then known as B.S. Moss's Colony Theatre) sat across the street. Actress Mary Eaton (Pearl's sister) occupied the residence beneath the Levants.<sup>125</sup> Relieved from his months sleeping in a crowded basement, Levant found comfort with his family in the heart of New York City's theatre district.

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<sup>124</sup> Kashner and Schoenberger gathered their information about Levant and the Congress through a 1992 interview with Doris (Levant) Scadron. Kashner and Schoenberger, 43. Harry was frequently on the road touring with shows. In the late months of 1924, Harry travelled as director of the musical *Artists and Models*, which had closed on Broadway in May. That show played at Chicago's Auditorium Theatre in February 1925, but it is not clear whether Harry still led the show. Oscar may have moved into the apartment while Harry was on the road. "Theatrical Notes," *Pittsburgh Press*, 5 Oct 1924; "Artists and Models" ad, *Chicago Tribune*, 8 Feb 1925.

<sup>125</sup> Mary Eaton (1901-1948), an actress from childhood, had appeared with Fred and Adele Astaire in Sigmund Romberg's stage musical *Over the Top* (1917-1918). George M. Cohan had hired her to play Rozello in *The Royal*

Half a mile away from the Levant apartment, at 42nd Street and Broadway, sat the Knickerbocker Hotel, where Oscar landed his first job with a large dance band. From 11 November 1924, the hotel's grill featured one of Ben Bernie's orchestras led by Irwin Abrahams, later known as Vic Irwin.<sup>126</sup> Levant boasts that his playing was quite excellent, but his Mikado Inn period had made him "a flash pianist, full of technical ornamentation, appoggiatura and cascading frills, but in the jazz lexicon signifying absolutely nothing."<sup>127</sup> Despite that, he no longer needed his brother to kick the piano to keep him in tempo. He soon left the Knickerbocker and joined a four-piece pit orchestra for the Barry Connors play *Hell's Bells*, which opened at Wallack's Theatre on 26 January 1925. Although the youngest player in the group, Levant considered himself the superior musician: "My playing filled out the gaping holes in this puny orchestra of not very competent players."<sup>128</sup>

According to Levant, his first "job with any status" was at Ciro's Club at 141 West 56th Street. Here, just two blocks from his apartment, Levant played in a "six-piece society orchestra" led by Dave Bernie, Ben's brother.<sup>129</sup> The New York hotspot, fashioned after the famous Ciro's in Paris, opened on 29 December 1924 and was visited by such silent film stars as Peggy

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*Vagabond* (1919-1920). She next appeared in the 1920, 1921, and 1922 editions of the Follies. As Levant moved in above her at the Congress, she was concluding a successful run in *Kid Boots*, another Ziegfeld production.

<sup>126</sup> "Music: Here and There," *Variety* 76, no. 13 (12 Nov 1924): 31; "Radio: Abrahams on Two Stations," *Variety* 78, no. 4 (11 Mar 1925): 45. The exact date that Levant joined the group is not known. If he was with the group from the outset, then he would have left the Mikado Inn and moved into Harry's apartment sometime around the beginning of November 1924.

<sup>127</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 66.

<sup>128</sup> The play starred Humphrey Bogart and Shirley Booth. In *Memoirs*, Levant incorrectly refers to the theatre as the George M. Cohan. Levant, *Memoirs*, 66.

<sup>129</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 66; Mark Hellinger, "Cortez Love Rift Links Peggy," *New York Daily News*, 7 Jan 1925. It is not clear when Levant joined the Ciro's Club Orchestra, but it was probably when *Hell's Bells* closed at Wallack's after star Eddie Garvie accidentally shot fellow actor Clifton Self with what he thought was a prop gun. Levant does not refer to this incident in his memoirs. The show re-opened at Daly's 63rd Street Theatre on 24 February 1925. "Actor Wounded on Stage," *New York Daily News*, 12 Feb 1925. "Hell's Bells!" matinee ad, *New York Daily News*, 23 Feb 1925.

Hopkins Joyce, Dagmar Godowsky, Alice Brady, and Clara Kimball Young.<sup>130</sup> By mid-February 1925, Mary Hay and Clifton Webb had become the club's star dancers.<sup>131</sup> Levant went with the Hay-Webb show on a six-week vaudeville tour of the Greater New York area, opening at B.F. Keith's Palace on Broadway on 30 March.<sup>132</sup> Levant's work with this short program convinced Ben Bernie to hire him for his flagship orchestra.<sup>133</sup> Levant began working directly under Ben Bernie after the Hay-Webb show's final outing at Proctor's Theatre in Newark on 15 May 1925.<sup>134</sup> Thus, in the span of three years, Levant had acquired sufficient popular piano skills to work with one of the leading dance band orchestras in the city. His orientation toward classical piano would seem to be completely left behind.

Bernie's flagship group had been playing at the Hotel Roosevelt since it opened on 22 September 1924.<sup>135</sup> The massive hotel occupies an entire city block between Madison and Vanderbilt Avenues at Forty-fifth and Forty-sixth Streets. In the mid-1920s, advertised as a "city within a city," the structure housed 1100 guest rooms, as well as residential suites, various stores, beauty salons, and restaurants.<sup>136</sup> A week after the hotel opened, WNYC began broadcasting Bernie's show from the hotel's Dance Grill on Monday and Wednesday nights, thus extending

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<sup>130</sup> "Down to Earth with the Stars," *New York Daily News*, 4 Jan 1925.

<sup>131</sup> Bernadine Szold, "About Town," *New York Daily News*, 22 Feb 1925.

<sup>132</sup> B.F. Keith's Palace ad, *New York Times*, 29 Mar 1925. When the Hay-Webb show played the Hippodrome the week of 26 April, Florence Mills, famed for her breakthrough role in *Shuffle Along*, was also on the bill in her vaudeville debut with Will Vodrey's Orchestra. Levant incorrectly states that her role in *Shuffle Along* came later. "The Hippodrome," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 26 Apr 1925; Levant, *Memoirs*, 67.

<sup>133</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 67.

<sup>134</sup> Proctor's Theatre ad, *Madison Eagle* (New Jersey), 8 May 1925. According to a 1928 *New York Times* article, Levant first worked with Bernie at the Hotel Roosevelt and then "accompanied Bernie into vaudeville." Thus, Levant must have joined the orchestra directly after his engagement with Dave Bernie. "In or of the Changing Times Square Panorama," *NYT*, 17 June 1928.

<sup>135</sup> Ad, "The Roosevelt: A Great New York Hotel Opening September 22nd," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 15 Sept 1924.

<sup>136</sup> Ad, "The Roosevelt," *Boston Globe*, 20 Sept 1924.

Bernie's audience to those jazz enthusiasts listening at home.<sup>137</sup> By the time Levant joined the group, millions of Americans had heard Bernie's orchestra at the hotel, on radio, and on phonograph.<sup>138</sup> A popular New York attraction and brand, Bernie and his band remained at the Hotel Roosevelt for six years.<sup>139</sup>

Levant's first phonograph recordings date from his tenure with the Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra. From 1925 to 1927, his name appears on studio records indicating his participation in numerous studio sessions and providing us with some understanding of the extent of his employ with the group.<sup>140</sup> The first disc from Vocalion, recorded on 10 August 1925, featured Moe Jaffe and Nat Bonx's "Collegiate," with Walter Donaldson and Gus Kahn's "Yes Sir, That's My Baby" on the reverse side. Future recordings with Bernie's orchestra included such songs as "Sleepy Time Gal," "Bell Hoppin' Blues," and "He's the Last Word." One of the last songs Levant recorded with Bernie was the Seymour Simons and Richard A. Whiting tune "Rosy Cheeks" on 8 April 1927.<sup>141</sup>

Bernie's band played a swift and lively form of dance music characterized by a variety of timbres, sudden shifts to distant keys, and unexpected interludes between statements of refrains. All of these elements occur in the Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra's recording of "Collegiate," the earliest audio evidence of Levant's progress in pop pianism. The band precedes the song with a short introduction in A-flat major with jazzed quotations of two familiar tunes: "Auld Lang

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<sup>137</sup> The first broadcast was on 29 September 1924. "Turning the Radio Dial," *Harrisburg Evening News* (Pennsylvania), 29 Sept 1924.

<sup>138</sup> "Branch of Ciro's is Coming to N.Y.," *Brooklyn Citizen*, 13 Dec 1924.

<sup>139</sup> Frank Cullen, et al., "Ben Bernie," in *Vaudeville Old & New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America, Volume 1* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 103.

<sup>140</sup> See Brian Rust, *Jazz and Ragtime Records (1897-1942)*, "Ben Bernie and His Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra," edited by Malcolm Shaw (Denver: Mainspring Press, 2002). By Levant's account, Bernie often fired and rehired him due to his antics. Levant, *Memoirs*, 72.

<sup>141</sup> Levant's participation in the Hotel Roosevelt performances is confirmed by a March 1927 *Billboard* article, which lists "J. Kenn Sisson, Oscar Levant and Al Goering" as "piano and arrangers." Al Armer, "Jazz Jottings," *Billboard* 39, no. 12 (19 Mar 1927): 27.

Syne” and Arthur Sullivan’s “Hail, Hail, the Gang’s All Here” from *The Pirates of Penzance* (1879). After the vocal exclamation “Rah! Rah! Rah!,” the song proper begins. With the first statement of the refrain, the reeds and trombone engage in a stunted call and response patter, while the banjo and piano provide a brisk harmonic accompaniment, a tuba tooting underneath it all. The trumpets briefly join in at the bridge. Save for Levant’s accompaniment and the trumpet entrance, the music sounds composed, not improvised. A vocal group takes up the second statement of the refrain. Levant’s dynamic pianism can be heard here. His brilliant delivery contains a syncopated, dashing, frilly, and almost honky-tonk quality, the sort of technique he had only recently developed while employed at the Mikado Inn. Following an eight-bar interlude of call and response between the high and low brass, the vocal group returns for a third statement of the refrain with new words, and Levant is right there with them. After a four-bar stop-time interlude with transposition a step down to G-flat major, saxophonist Jack Pettis improvises a countermelody during the fourth refrain statement, the original melody heard underneath in a staccato delivery by the trumpets. Then, following a two-bar transition a half-step up to G minor, the final statement of the refrain begins with saxophones and brass ping-ponging the melody. A mode switch during the bridge lasts to the end with the singers cheekily declaring: “Well! So you’re old men!”

As the “Collegiate” recording indicates, Levant’s flashy improvised accompaniment was a significant element of the Hotel Roosevelt’s sound. He provides harmonically ambitious piano solos on other Bernie recordings. Stand-out examples include the harmonically disengaging sixteen-bar interlude in “A Little Bit Bad” (recorded 7 December 1925), as well as his sixteen-bar solo for “Up and At ‘Em” (23 March 1926), wherein the entire orchestra drops out so his talent can be heard without distraction.

In addition to performances at the Hotel Roosevelt and in the recording studio, Levant played with Bernie's orchestra in movie theatres. In mid-1925, Hugo Riesenfeld (1879-1939), composer and musical director for Broadway's Rivoli and Rialto theatres, dismissed the symphony orchestra at the Rivoli and adopted a new "jazz policy" for this silent film venue.<sup>142</sup> Beginning on 12 July, each evening a different group of "New York nightclub performers" would play with the projected film, while Bernie's band supplied a separate "special jazz program" onstage.<sup>143</sup> This may have been the first instance in New York wherein only jazz music was heard live in a cinema, as one reviewer declared the new Rivoli "our first all-jazz motion picture theater."<sup>144</sup> Participation in this novelty experiment further increased the notoriety and work load of Bernie and his band.<sup>145</sup> The earliest print evidence of Levant's membership with this groundbreaking group comes from a full-page ad in the 9 September issue of *Variety* magazine, which lists the musicians and their instruments. The ad announces the orchestra's engagement at the nearby Rialto, for a season that lasted from mid-August to December.<sup>146</sup> Riesenfeld also led the theater orchestra at the Rialto. Levant played in both the Bernie band and the theater orchestra each evening.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> "Amusements-Manhattan," Rivoli ad, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 12 July 1925.

<sup>143</sup> It is not certain whether Levant was yet a member of the group. In his memoirs, he does not mention playing with Bernie at the Rivoli. "Night Clubbers Appear in Person," *New York Daily News*, 19 July 1925.

<sup>144</sup> Helen Klumph, "Jazz Picture Theater Opens," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 July 1925. See also Paul Lopes, *The Rise of a Jazz Art World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 91.

<sup>145</sup> D.J.M., "Turning the Radio Dial," *Harrisburg Evening News*, 24 Sept 1925.

<sup>146</sup> Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra ad, *Variety* 80, no. 4 (9 Sept 1925): 53.

<sup>147</sup> In *Memoirs*, Levant mentions working with Bernie at the Rialto, but not the Rivoli. However, Levant's mother told the *Pittsburgh Press* in 1940 that Bernie hired Levant to play at the Rivoli, while Riesenfeld concurrently hired him for "the theater's orchestra." She may have been confused about the theater's name, because Riesenfeld had dismissed the Rivoli symphony orchestra but kept the one at the Rialto. Nevertheless, Levant played with Bernie at the Rivoli and later the Rialto. Greene, "Their Dreams Come True."

Levant first gained recognition as an interpreter of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, while in Bernie's band. By the time of the Rialto engagement, Levant boasts that he had developed into a highly skilled pop pianist:

There were a lot of great acts at the Rialto. Ray Bolger was in a double with another fellow. Ray was a kid then, and so was I. "Remember the Rialto?" I asked him recently. He said, "You were not only in the orchestra – you were the orchestra." I could play show music better than anybody.<sup>148</sup>

In 1924, Harms published several versions of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, including reductions for solo piano and for two pianos. In *Memoirs*, Levant says he "learned the piece immediately."<sup>149</sup> By 1926, Levant could play the Rhapsody well enough to entertain a live audience, including royalty. In Summer 1926, on hiatus from Bernie's band, Levant sailed to London with saxophonist Rudy Wiedoeft (1893-1940). From late June through August, the duo performed at New Princes Hotel on Jermyn Street (near where the Princes Arcade now sits).<sup>150</sup> Levant became a regular patron at the famous 43 Club, where he "suffered with good grace the adulation of a small coterie of admirers."<sup>151</sup> One evening the Prince of Wales (the future King Edward VIII) invited him to his manor. Levant says, "I arrived and immediately plunged into a

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<sup>148</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 72.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>150</sup> After a private performance on 26 June, they gave their first public performance two days later. Their repertoire consisted of light classical pieces, like Franz Drdla's *Souvenir* in D major and *Song of the Volga Boatmen* by Tchaikovsky, as well as Wiedoeft's own compositions. Levant says he played a solo variation of Irving Berlin's "What'll I Do." They recorded some of this repertoire for British Columbia records, and it is available on CD. "Wiedoeft a Success," *Variety* 83, no. 11 (30 Jun 1926): 3; "Another Country Conquered!" ad, *Variety* 84, no. 5 (18 Aug 1926): 26; Levant, *Memoirs*, 77-78; Rudy Wiedoeft, *Rudy Wiedoeft: "Kreisler of the Saxophone"*, 1 compact disc (London: Saxophone Classics, [2011]).

<sup>151</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 79. Levant probably delivered some impromptu performances at the 43 Club, located less than a mile away from the New Princes Hotel. For more information on this notorious dance venue, see Judith R. Walkowitz, *Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 209-229.



rendition of *Rhapsody in Blue*.<sup>152</sup> Thus, Levant performed a solo version of the *Rhapsody* overseas for British royalty just two years after the piece's premiere.<sup>153</sup>

Levant continued to perform the *Rhapsody* when he returned to the United States in early September.<sup>154</sup> He covered for pianist Harry Perrella one week at Paul Whiteman's Palais Royal in late 1926 or 1927.<sup>155</sup> Moreover, Levant explained many years later: "I played the *Rhapsody* more often than Gershwin did. Once I played it in a tabloid version four times a day, twenty-eight times in one week. That was during a vaudeville tour with Ben Bernie."<sup>156</sup> Indeed, in mid-January 1927, while engaged for a week at the Palace on Broadway, Bernie spotlighted Levant in a medley of Gershwin pieces that concluded with the *Rhapsody*:

Instrumentally the band is turning in five numbers, closing with a Gershwin medley that has an excerpt from *Rhapsody in Blue* as the climax. The rehashing of this composer's melodies brings to mind that New York has yet to hear a band play "Fascinating Rhythm" and get as much out of it as Bernie's bunch does.<sup>157</sup>

On 29 January, Bernie unveiled at the Brooklyn Mark Strand Theatre a "new routine" that featured Levant and the *Rhapsody in Blue*.<sup>158</sup> A review from *Exhibitors Herald* describes this new program:

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<sup>152</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 78-79. Kashner and Schoenberger say Levant played the *Rhapsody* while at New Princes.

Although this is very probable, I have found no contemporary evidence. Kashner and Schoenberger, 55-56.

<sup>153</sup> Concerning the rest of his sojourn in Europe: Levant accompanied vaudevillian Frank Fay (1891-1961) at the Palladium one week. In late August 1926, Levant and Fay flew from London to Paris. Levant took in a performance of Wagner's *Die Walküre* and visited American actor and dancer Harry Pilcer (1885-1961). Levant, *Memoirs*, 79-81; "Passages Abroad," *The Stage* (26 Aug 1926): 11.

<sup>154</sup> Fay arrived in New York on 3 September 1926; Levant says his ship docked four days later. "U.S. Zionist Heads Due on Cunarder," *Brooklyn Times Union*, 3 Sep 1926; Levant, *Memoirs*, 81.

<sup>155</sup> I have found no contemporary evidence of this event. Levant mentions meeting vocalists Bing Crosby and Al Rinker, whom Whiteman recruited in late 1926. Perrella became Whiteman's regular pianist when Grofé turned his focus toward arranging in 1924. When Perrella's alcoholism caused him to miss performances, Whiteman fired him in 1928 and replaced him with Roy Bargy, a musician from Isham Jones's band. Levant, *Memoirs*, 68; DeLong, *Whiteman*, 79, 117.

<sup>156</sup> *The Pause That Refreshes on the Air*, 20 Sep 1942, Marr Sound Archives, University of Missouri-Kansas City.

<sup>157</sup> Sid, "New Acts This Week: Ben Bernie's Band," *Variety* 86, no. 1 (19 Jan 1927): 23. In early November 1926, while Bernie's band was engaged for a week at Washington D.C.'s Century Theatre, Levant played the *Rhapsody in Blue* one evening at the Carlton Club. This is the earliest print evidence I have found that mentions Levant performing the piece, but it is not clear whether this was a solo piano performance or with Bernie's band. "Coming Attractions," *Washington Post*, 24 Oct 1926; "Carlton Club Enlists Stars," *Washington Post*, 7 Nov 1926.

Ben Bernie and his organization opened behind a scrim upon which soft blue floods spread from the bridges. Back of the scrim were soft ambers and magenta on a cut-out set of a high wall covered with blue velvet, backed up by black cyclorama. At the close of the first number the scrim was raised and the “young maestro” entered from the side. The repertoire included special arrangements of late selections, and the guest artists were: The Smith Brothers, Scrappy Lambert and Billy Hillpot [...] Fion Van Mar, [...] Georgie Raft, a diminutive colored boy who copies Raft’s dances and style, Dillon Ober [...] and Oscar Levant, whose principal contribution was George Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue.”<sup>159</sup>

The Strand show contained elements from Bernie’s earlier Palace show.<sup>160</sup> In *Memoirs*, Levant

relates a game he would play with his colleagues

Another member of the act was George Raft, who did a Charleston to “Sweet Georgia Brown.” I would play a short version of *Rhapsody in Blue*, and George, who was a great gambler, would bet with a friend on my playing of one passage in *Rhapsody*. It consisted of eight bars in which the left hand makes jolting leaps to the bass – if you hit the right notes. The bet was on whether I’d connect with those bass notes. The negative side rarely won.<sup>161</sup>

In summary, Levant began to learn the Rhapsody shortly after its publication, played a solo version of it overseas in 1926, and performed “a tabloid version” with the Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra in a special feature in January 1927. Thus, Levant was an early interpreter of Gershwin’s Rhapsody, performing the work in various venues in the United States and in England.

Levant’s participation in Bernie’s band not only garnered him recognition as an early interpreter of the *Rhapsody in Blue*, but also brought him further and more varied work as a jazz musician in film theaters. Barney Balaban and Sam Katz, who owned a chain of Chicago movie palaces known as “wonder theaters,” briefly hired him while visiting New York. At the end of

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<sup>158</sup> “Inside Stuff: On Music ,” *Variety* 86, no. 3 (2 Feb 1927): 50; Brooklyn Mark Strand ad, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 30 Jan 1927.

<sup>159</sup> “Presentation Acts: Brooklyn Mark Strand: Week Ending February 5,” *Exhibitors Herald* (12 Feb 1927): 33-34.

<sup>160</sup> Sid, “New Acts This Week,” *Variety* 86, no. 1 (19 Jan 1927): 23.

<sup>161</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 72. The passage Levant refers to is probably bars 115-122, which features wide leaps in the bass and the ritornello theme in the treble. Gershwin, *Rhapsody in Blue*, solo piano score (New York: Harms, 1924), 11.

1925, their company merged with Paramount Pictures, which owned the Rivoli and the Rialto, to form Publix Theatres Corporation. Levant says, “I played for the pictures, I played for the stage shows; I was accompanist and soloist – I did everything.”<sup>162</sup>

Levant’s professional relationship with Bernie also led to his onscreen debut in an early sound film short. From 1922, Riesenfeld had supplied inventor Lee De Forest (1873-1961) with musicians to film using his new Phonofilm sound-on-film process. With April 1923, Riesenfeld had equipped the Rivoli for the presentation of Phonofilm pictures.<sup>163</sup> Levant appears in the Phonofilm *Ben Bernie and All the Lads*, released to theaters equipped for Phonofilm projection sometime in mid-1925.<sup>164</sup> The twelve-minute musical short features the orchestra on a stage, with Levant at the piano. In one long take, they play through a medley of tunes, including Bernie’s own “Sweet Georgia Brown” and Gershwin’s “Oh, Lady Be Good!” (1924).<sup>165</sup>

As discussed later in Chapter 5, Levant’s work as an actor and musician in film helped sustain his status as a symbolic owner of Gershwin’s music. Unlike his later Hollywood film appearances, the Phonofilm does not grant Levant nor his piano any special status. He remains in profile and the rest of the orchestra frequently drowns out his playing. Situated center screen and wildly waving his baton, Ben Bernie is the star of the film, although his back remains turned toward the audience. The film’s novelty is its sound, synchronized with the onscreen movement of one of New York’s most popular radio and hotel orchestras. However, only theaters equipped with Phonofilm’s projection technology could provide audiences with the full image-with-sound effect. DeForest included the Bernie picture as part of a nationwide theater tour to demonstrate

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<sup>162</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 74.

<sup>163</sup> See Lee de Forest, *Father of Radio: The Autobiography of Lee de Forest* (Chicago: Wilcox & Follett Co., 1950), 358-374.

<sup>164</sup> “The De Forest Phonofilm” ad, *Burlington Free Press* (Burlington, Vt.), 14 Oct 1925.

<sup>165</sup> The short film is available on YouTube. Alex .Allen, “Ben Bernie COMPLETE sound film 1924-1925!!!,” <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=suJ-6X-kruc>>, last accessed 18 May 2019.

the new projection technology, so many Americans outside New York got to see and hear a band they had previously heard only on the radio or phonograph.<sup>166</sup> Although the short only briefly features the Gershwin tune, Levant's first film appearance points toward that facet of his future professional career.

Levant and Gershwin's first face-to-face meeting occurred through connections with Bernie's orchestra. In August 1925, Phil Charig (1902-1960), a Bernie protégé and Gershwin's rehearsal pianist for *Lady, Be Good* (1924-1925) and *Tell Me More* (1925), took Levant to Gershwin's apartment.<sup>167</sup> At the time, Gershwin was working on the first movement of his Concerto in F, a composition Levant would later affectionately call "our concerto."<sup>168</sup> Levant would champion this work in his later career as a concert pianist. The tongue-tied Levant believed he did not make an effective first impression, as he remembers in 1940:

I was bristling with inarticulateness. George mistook my confusion and admiration for disapproval, which in turn made him involuntarily hostile. His swift and mettlesome piano playing had so stimulated and excited me that the old dormant envy was reborn. He was merely annoyed and returned to his work. I left, having successfully made my usual bad impression.<sup>169</sup>

David Ewen counters, "Actually, Gershwin took note of the young man and liked his acid wit and penetrating intelligence." Nevertheless, even though Levant "became a visitor to 103rd

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<sup>166</sup> "Talking Pictures to be Shown at the Century," *Jackson (Miss.) Clarion-Ledger*, 13 Dec 1925.

<sup>167</sup> Levant says Gershwin was working on the first movement of the concerto. Gershwin and Daly performed the completed first movement in a two-piano form on 27 August at a party held by Alfred and Blanche Knopf. Edward Jablonski, *Gershwin* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 101. According to David Ewen, Levant had asked a mutual friend (probably a member of the Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra) to ask Charig if he could arrange the meeting with Gershwin. Charig met Levant in a cafe and "found him to be a brash and rapier-tongued fellow who talked at the top of a shrill voice while rocking in his chair and keeping his feet on the table." Levant refers to Charig as "a rather effete man," "my first real friend" and "the musical arbiter and mentor of my youth," although they occasionally had fights. Ewen, 154; Levant, *Memoirs*, 71.

<sup>168</sup> Levant, *Smattering*, 153.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

Street,” several years would pass before Levant and Gershwin’s relationship would evolve into a close and daily friendship.<sup>170</sup>

Levant continued to see Gershwin at parties. On Saturdays, Lou Paley, one of Gershwin’s lyricists, and his wife Emily would hold soirées in their apartment on West Eighth Street.<sup>171</sup> According to Levant, “The Paley home was the gathering place for people interested in newer and fresher ideas relating to the theater, music and painting.”<sup>172</sup> Regular attendees included such show business luminaries as Broadway producer Alexander A. Aarons, who with Vinton Freedley produced most of Gershwin’s early shows, like *For Goodness Sake* (1922) and *Lady Be Good!*.<sup>173</sup> Other usual Paley guests included playwright Samuel N. Behrman and lyricist Buddy DeSylva. Charig first brought Levant to these gatherings around March 1927.<sup>174</sup>

At this time, rather than close friends, Gershwin and Levant operated more as gentle rivals, and Saturday nights at the Paleys granted Gershwin a platform to demonstrate his skill over his piano-playing competitors. As a member of one of New York’s most popular on-air hotel orchestras, Levant certainly represented competition. Lyricist Howard Dietz, who lived below the Paleys, said he started regularly attending the parties after witnessing Gershwin play while some forty people sat around listening in silence. If Gershwin were absent, the Paley guests would ask Levant to play in his place.<sup>175</sup> Thus by 1927, Levant established himself as a

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<sup>170</sup> Ewen, 154.

<sup>171</sup> Samuel N. Behrman, *People in a Diary: A Memoir* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), 239-244.

<sup>172</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 84.

<sup>173</sup> For more, see Jennifer Ashley Tepper and William A. Everett, “Alexander A. Aarons and Vinton Freedley: The Smart Sophisticates,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Musical Theatre Producers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 119-125.

<sup>174</sup> Upon Levant’s first visit to the Paleys’, Behrman was in attendance and presently writing his play *The Second Man*, which opened at the Guild Theatre in April 1927. The Paleys asked Levant to play something, and he obliged with Chopin’s “Winter Wind” etude. Levant, *Memoirs*, 84.

<sup>175</sup> Howard Dietz, *Dancing in the Dark* (New York: Quadrangle, 1974), 60-61.

Gershwin interpreter within the composer's own circle of friends—a circle that was embracing Levant himself at the time.

As the 1920s roared on, his aspirations as a classical concert pianist seemingly forgotten, Levant established credibility as a pop pianist in a variety of contexts. With Ben Bernie's Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra, Levant performed in hotels, film theaters, vaudeville houses, on radio, and on the silver screen. He also made acquaintance with Gershwin through Bernie connections. Finally, he learned the *Rhapsody in Blue* and became an early interpreter of the work with Bernie.

## **1.6 Gershwin, 1925-1927: The Concerto in F and the Piano Preludes**

While Levant's career as a jazz pianist blossomed, Gershwin reached even greater heights as a popular composer, and penned a piece for one of America's most prestigious symphony orchestras. In April 1925, about a month prior to Levant joining the Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra, Walter Damrosch (1862-1950), conductor of the New York Symphony, commissioned a new work for piano and orchestra from Gershwin. As mentioned earlier, Gershwin was already working on the first movement when Charig brought Levant to meet him in August. Elated at the possibility of "another piece to play," Levant says: "It was one of the most exciting moments I ever had. I was a kid and he and Bill Daly played the first movement. Then I went to the first performance."<sup>176</sup> Gershwin would perform the Concerto in F with the New York Symphony six times from December 1925 to January 1926. Scheduled to appear with

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<sup>176</sup> Levant, *Sattering*, 152; Oscar Levant, *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*, manuscript (Library of Congress, Music Division, Oscar Levant Papers, 1939-1965).

Bernie at the Rialto, Levant called in sick and attended the concerto's premiere at Carnegie Hall on 3 December.<sup>177</sup>

While the *Rhapsody in Blue* had been written for a jazz orchestra, Gershwin wished to demonstrate with the concerto his ability to write a large work for a symphony orchestra. Before the premiere of the work, Gershwin provided a short description of its form and themes to the press. He explained that he followed the traditional three-movement structure with two fast sections surrounding a slow middle section, and he described each movement's individual themes.<sup>178</sup> He stressed that, although he followed sonata form, "I have endeavoured to give it the elasticity which modern evolution demands."<sup>179</sup> In a couple of articles for *Theatre* magazine, he called jazz "the voice of the American soul" that "will in time become absorbed into the great musical tradition as all other forms of music have been absorbed."<sup>180</sup> In the journal *Singing*, he clarified, "I have attempted to utilize certain jazz rhythms worked out along more or less conventional symphonic lines." Thus, he intended to present a proper concerto, but imbued with material relevant to the American present. He understood his concerto as a hybrid and pleaded against labelling the work as "jazz" or "classic music": "Labels mean nothing at all. Good music is good music."<sup>181</sup>

From its premiere, critical opinions differed on the concerto's value and quality. Many recognized Gershwin's effort to incorporate jazz into a traditional musical form, blurring the lowbrow-highbrow divide. W.J. Henderson said: "It has the moods of the contemporaneous dance without their banality. It has lifted their means and their substance. [...] It very frequently

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<sup>177</sup> Bernie's band was currently playing at the Rialto.

<sup>178</sup> "World of Music," *Brooklyn Standard Union*, 29 Nov 1925.

<sup>179</sup> Quoted in "World of Music," *Brooklyn Standard Union*, 18 Oct 1925.

<sup>180</sup> George Gershwin, "Our New National Anthem" (1925), in *The George Gershwin Reader*, 89-91 ; and George Gershwin, "Jazz is the Voice of the American Soul" (1926), in *The George Gershwin Reader*, 91-94

<sup>181</sup> George Gershwin, "Mr. Gershwin Responds to Mr. Kramer" (1926), in *The George Gershwin Reader*, 99.

reminds one of the frantic efforts of certain moderns. It drops into their language, sometimes, but it has more to say.”<sup>182</sup> However, Lawrence Gilman, music critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*, called the concerto “only fairish music – conventional, trite, at its worst a little dull.”<sup>183</sup> Paul Rosenfeld, who actively sought new forms of American musical expression and had praised the works and pianism of Leo Ornstein, called the Concerto in F “the juiciest and most entertaining of Gershwin’s works” with some interesting themes, but he concluded that it lacked significant development and tension overall.<sup>184</sup>

Such debates continued for years as the New York Philharmonic and other symphony orchestras frequently performed the work. As discussed in chapters three and four, Levant would become a principal champion of the concerto and perform it hundreds of times in the concert hall and on the radio. These performances allowed critics to assess the work again and again.

In early 1925, Gershwin began composition on a set of piano preludes, but progress on this project slowed over the next two years while he wrote and performed the Concerto in F and scored four Broadway shows.<sup>185</sup> Like Bach, Chopin, and Debussy before him, he initially conceived a set of twenty-four preludes. However, three of those preludes are the only solo piano pieces Gershwin published in his lifetime, besides the piano arrangements of his songs released as *George Gershwin’s Songbook* in 1932, also through New World Music.

In May 1926, Peruvian contralto Marguerite d’Alvarez (1886-1953) held a Town Hall debate on the merits of jazz with Reverend John Roach Straton. The conservative reverend of

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<sup>182</sup> W.J. Henderson, “Gershwin Concerto in F Played,” *New York Sun*, 4 Dec 1925.

<sup>183</sup> Quoted in “Notes and Half Notes,” *La Crosse Tribune*, 13 Dec 1925.

<sup>184</sup> Paul Rosenfeld, *Discoveries of a Music Critic* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), 267-268.

<sup>185</sup> *Tell Me More* opened at the Gaiety Theatre on 13 April, but lasted only thirty-two performances. Beginning on 28 December 1925, *Tip-Toes* played at the Liberty Theatre for 194 performances. Two days later, *Song of the Flame* opened at Forty-fourth Street Theatre, lasting 219 performances. Finally, *Oh, Kay!* opened at the Imperial Theatre on 8 November 1926, and played for 256 performances.



Calvary Baptist Church possessed a racist and anti-Semitic fear of Jews and their power as creators in contemporary American entertainment. He labelled jazz as “bootleg music” and “the music of the savage, intellectual and spiritual debauchery, utter degradation.” Thoroughly flummoxed, d’Alvarez retorted that jazz “expresses our true American life better than any sermon” and that she wanted the *Rhapsody in Blue* played at her funeral.<sup>186</sup> In July 1926, Gershwin singled out Straton when he wrote for *Theatre* magazine, “The most vicious opponents of jazz bring the impartiality of complete ignorance to their judgment seat.”<sup>187</sup>

Gershwin premiered five preludes at a Hotel Roosevelt recital with d’Alvarez on 4 December 1926. The Hotel Roosevelt event, like the Aeolian Hall concert and the Gauthier recital, was both a defense of jazz as a relevant modern art form and a vehicle for the promotion of Gershwin’s material. Goldberg explains that Chopin had brought the mazurka and the polonaise to the salon. Likewise, “[Gershwin] desired to show that jazz has a validity of its own and that it, like the pre-symphonic dances, contained the germs of a greater development.”<sup>188</sup> For the recital, Gershwin performed the preludes prior to intermission. Selections prepared by d’Alvarez included French and Spanish songs by composers like Debussy and Pedrell, and a segment of Gershwin tunes, including “Nashville Nightingale,” “Clap Yo Hands” and “Lady Be Good.”<sup>189</sup> Isidore Gorin joined Gershwin for a presentation of *Rhapsody in Blue* on two pianos.<sup>190</sup>

Scholars have pondered which of his piano preludes Gershwin presented at the Hotel Roosevelt recital. Contemporary reports describe the first as “a vigorous bit of syncopation,” the

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<sup>186</sup> Straton and d’Alvarez quoted in “Jazz Funeral,” *Austin Statesman*, 11 May 1926; see also “Dr. Straton and Singer Debate Future of Jazz,” *Detroit Free Press*, 7 May 1926.

<sup>187</sup> George Gershwin, “Does Jazz Belong to Art?” (1926), in *George Gershwin Reader*, 95.

<sup>188</sup> Goldberg, 223.

<sup>189</sup> “‘Super-Jazz’ on Concert Stage Wins High Approval,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, 19 Dec 1926.

<sup>190</sup> Jablonski, *Gershwin*, 135.

second as a nocturne “lyrical in vein,” the third with a jazz melody and a “Chopinesque bass,” the fourth as “a little languid and mostly French post-romantic in atmosphere,” and the fifth with “a Charleston for the left hand and a Spanish melody.”<sup>191</sup> Musicologist Robert Wyatt argues that Gershwin included in the Hotel Roosevelt recital the three preludes eventually published as *Preludes for Piano*. He identifies the first on the program as Prelude III in E-flat minor, the final Spanish-tinged piece as Prelude I in B-flat major, and either the second or fourth selection as Prelude II in C-sharp minor.<sup>192</sup>

In his 1931 biography of Gershwin, Goldberg claimed the preludes were the least known of Gershwin’s works, and “have been underestimated and overlooked by pianists, both in private and in public.”<sup>193</sup> In his career as a radio and touring pianist, as discussed in chapter three, Levant sought to remedy this oversight and frequently performed those preludes as encores following concerts and recitals. As a regular performer at the Hotel Roosevelt, Levant certainly at least knew about the Gershwin-d’Alvarez recital. Although he left no indication, he very well may have attended.

## **1.7 Levant, Summer 1927-1930: Broadway Actor and Hollywood Musician**

In the final years of the 1920s, Levant expanded his resumé. He released his first recording of the *Rhapsody in Blue*, making him one of the first pianists after Gershwin to record the work. He often appeared on radio to perform the piece. Levant also started writing his first pop tunes. Mirroring Gershwin’s early efforts at songwriting, Levant published his first songs

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<sup>191</sup> F.D. Perkins, “Gershwin Gives His First Public Recital of the Year,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 5 Dec 1926; “Super-Jazz,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, 19 Dec 1926.

<sup>192</sup> Robert Wyatt, “The Seven Jazz Preludes of George Gershwin: A Historical Narrative,” *American Music* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 82.

<sup>193</sup> Goldberg, 223-224.

with Remick and then Harms. At this time, Levant also became an actor. Leaving the Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra behind, Levant debuted on Broadway playing a character very much like himself in a successful Hal Skelly show. Finally, with prospects to capitalize on the sound film and the booming pop music market, RKO hired him for its nascent music department, making Levant a pioneer musical film composer.

On 2 December 1927, Levant received an early morning phone call. Frank Black, the conductor of the NBC Radio Orchestra, had scheduled to record the Rhapsody, but his pianist had failed to appear, so Levant agreed to substitute on short notice.<sup>194</sup> Levant claimed to be the first pianist to record this work after Gershwin, but he is mistaken. Frank Banta, Jr. recorded the work with B.A. Rolfe's Orchestra (The Edisonians) for Edison just one month prior.<sup>195</sup> In his lifetime, Levant would record the piece three additional times.<sup>196</sup>

Gershwin, eager to hear Levant's recording, invited him to his home. In *A Smattering of Ignorance*, Levant reports that Gershwin stated a preference for his own recording: "I like mine better."<sup>197</sup> At first, Levant probably took this comment as snobbery, but he later agreed that

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<sup>194</sup> In *Smattering of Ignorance*, Levant claims that he recorded with Frank Black early in 1925. To complicate matters further, Kashner and Schoenberger, without explanation, place the recording date in early May 1928. However, Ross Laird, in his catalog of Brunswick recordings, lists the recording date at 2 December 1927. The disc went on sale in February 1928. Levant, *Smattering*, 150; Kashner and Schoenberger, 73; Ross Laird, *Brunswick Records: A Discography of Recordings, 1916-1931. Volume 2: New York Sessions, 1927-1931* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001), 524.; Brunswick sales ad, *Chicago Tribune*, 16 February 1928, p. 6.

<sup>195</sup> Banta's recording was made on 4 Nov 1927 and released as Edison 52145 in December. Levant, *Memoirs*, 75; Redhotjazz.com, "Rhapsody in Blue: Renditions of Rhapsody in Blue Recorded before George Gershwin's Death in 1937," <[redhotjazz.com/rhapsody.html](http://redhotjazz.com/rhapsody.html)>, last accessed 15 May 2019; Edison Records ad, *Cullman* [Alabama] *Tribune*, 1 Dec 1927.

<sup>196</sup> Levant recorded an abridged performance of the piece in mid-1943 with Paul Whiteman's Orchestra for the 1945 Gershwin biographical film *Rhapsody in Film*. This recording was made available on V-disc for American soldiers overseas. In May and June 1945, Levant recorded the work with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra for Columbia Records. On 11 October 1945, Levant appeared on the radio show *The Pause That Refreshes*, with Andre Kostelanetz and his orchestra. Interspersed with his own commentary, he presented a medley of Gershwin tunes, which included excerpts from *Rhapsody in Blue*. Subsequently titled, "Gershwin: A Portrait," this performance was later released on the 1981 Medallion album *Oscar Levant for the Record*.

<sup>197</sup> Levant, *Smattering*, 151; *Memoirs*, 75.

Gershwin's recording was superior, reconsidering Gershwin's reaction as blunt honesty.<sup>198</sup> When the two musicians became more intimate friends, Gershwin would often react critically, sometimes even dismissively, toward Levant's creative efforts. Since Levant openly discusses several of these moments in his memoirs, Gershwin's critical opinion of his work, whether favorable or disagreeable, mattered to him. Levant never considered that Gershwin may have reacted out of envy. Other writers report that Gershwin loved hearing Levant play the Rhapsody as columnist Sidney Skolsky wrote in 1931:

Sunday night is open house at George's penthouse. George loves to sit around and listen to people play the piano. One of his favorite guests is a young composer, Oscar Levant, who amuses George by playing *The Rhapsody in Blue* for him.<sup>199</sup>

Despite Gershwin's opinion, Levant's recording of the Rhapsody was very popular, and in the late 1920s orchestra leaders invited him to perform the piece live on air. Radio bands and orchestras in film theatres and dance halls constantly programmed the piece. Levant says: "I was never asked to play anything but the *Rhapsody*. I merely increased its vogue and added to my reputation as a monopianist." After his fourth radio appearance, he played the piece with Ernő Rapée's orchestra during a "Roxy Broadcast."<sup>200</sup> These performances strengthened his popular association with the work, leading one Pittsburgh critic to believe he contributed to its fashionable persistence. Just shortly after the release of the Frank Black record, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* columnist Charles F. Danver, commenting upon Levant's live performances of

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<sup>198</sup> Levant, *Smattering*, 151.

<sup>199</sup> Sidney Skolsky, "Behind the News," *New York Daily News*, 13 Feb 1931.

<sup>200</sup> I have been unable to find a contemporary report of this event. Rapée (1891-1945) gained national fame as the director of Roxy's orchestras with radio broadcasts from the theatre that mixed light classical and popular music. From 1920, Rapée led the grand orchestra at Roxy's Capitol Theatre. Around 1928, Rapée began leading the Roxy Symphony Orchestra at the Roxy Theatre. Levant, *Smattering*, 151; Tibor Frank, *Double Exile: Migrations of Jewish-Hungarian Professionals through Germany to the United States, 1919-1945*, Exile Studies: An Interdisciplinary Series 7 (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 222.

*Rhapsody in Blue*, said, “Oscar was principally responsible for making this unique opus what it is today.”<sup>201</sup>

Levant’s tenure with Bernie’s orchestra ended when he landed a role as pianist Jerry Wexler in the George Manker Watters and Arthur Hopkins play *Burlesque*.<sup>202</sup> The story concerns Skid and Bonny, husband and wife vaudevillians (played by Hal Skelly and Barbara Stanwyck), who hope to be discovered by a major Broadway producer. Once picked for a Charles Dillingham show, Skid leaves Bonny for another woman and descends into alcoholism.<sup>203</sup> Wanting “a real piano player” to play Jerry, Hopkins selected Levant, who had no previous experience in acting. He allowed Levant to choose the songs he would play onstage at the piano during the second act’s party scene, wherein Skelly performs a drunken wedding dance. According to one report, the act included a snippet of the *Rhapsody in Blue*: “From the piano [Levant] entices a few bars of *Rhapsody in Blue* in a manner that would not displease even Mons. Gershwin.”<sup>204</sup> Levant sometimes opted to insert new songs during a performance, usually something currently popular: “If [Levant] likes a new tune – he plays that – Gershwin and Rodgers tunes come tinkling out as soon as he hears them – and upon occasion even new Levant melodies have pleased Plymouth audiences.”<sup>205</sup> Thus, Levant’s daily executions of this scene paralleled his impromptu performances at the Congress or at the Paleys, and a different crowd each day had an opportunity to see and hear him perform something by Gershwin.

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<sup>201</sup> Charles F. Danver, “Pittsburghesque: A Young Paderewski” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 4 September 1928.

<sup>202</sup> Bernie’s contract with the Hotel Roosevelt expired on 19 March. He and his band immediately joined Sophie Tucker for a spring edition of the revue *Gay Paree*, which began at the Winter Garden on 21 March. Levant mentions playing with Bernie in this Shubert revue, which closed on 9 April. In late June, Bernie’s band travelled to Los Angeles for an engagement at the Pantages; Levant remained behind probably for *Burlesque* rehearsals. “Songstress Sophie and Bernie Band in Spring *Paree*,” *New York Daily News*, 22 Mar 1927; Levant, *Memoirs*, 72-73; “Pantages Features Orchestra,” *LAT*, 26 Jun 1927.

<sup>203</sup> After a brief tryout period in Long Beach and Stamford, the play opened at the Plymouth Theater on 1 September 1927.

<sup>204</sup> R.M. Harrison, “The Theatre and Its People,” *Windsor Star*, 14 Dec 1928.

<sup>205</sup> “In or of the Changing Times Square Panorama,” *NYT*, 17 June 1928.

Levant started publishing his songs while appearing in *Burlesque*. For a list of Levant's published and unpublished songs, see Appendix A. Levant says he was a teenager when he started writing songs, but he did not copyright his first song, "Keep Sweeping the Cobwebs off the Moon," until 27 December 1927, on his twenty-first birthday.<sup>206</sup> Thus, Levant began his career as a composer later in life than Gershwin had. Levant briefly worked as a songwriter at Remick's, which published his first three tunes.<sup>207</sup> In February 1928, he was spotted at a party for Desylva, Brown and Henderson music publishers. Attendees included other songwriters, like Maurice Abrahams, Sidney Clare, and Fred Fisher.<sup>208</sup> Sometime in 1928, a producer of stage musicals and Harms representative (probably Max Dreyfus) offered Levant a songwriting contract.<sup>209</sup> Fanny Brice sang a couple of Levant's early songs written in New York. Levant claims he wrote "It's Gorgeous to Be Graceful" for Brice and the musical *Fioretta*.<sup>210</sup> Brice also sang Levant's "If You Want the Rainbow (You Must Have the Rain)" in the quasi-talkie *My Man* (Warner Bros., 1928).

Levant's short stint as a Broadway actor led to his transition to a Hollywood film studio musician and songwriter. On 14 July 1928, *Burlesque* closed on Broadway after 372

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<sup>206</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 86; Library of Congress, *Catalog of Copyright Entries, Part 3: Musical Compositions for the Year 1927*, New Series, vol. 22 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1928), 1330.

<sup>207</sup> "[...] before 1929. I was then at Remick Music Publishing House which was quite a famous popular music publishing house." Levant, *Memoirs*, manuscript. Those three tunes were "Keep Sweeping the Cobwebs off the Moon," "Just a Little Way away from Home" (both written with lyricists Sam M. Lewis and Joe Young), and "If You Want the Rainbow (You Must Have the Rain)" (Billy Rose and Mort Dixon, lyrics).

<sup>208</sup> The firm was celebrating its one-year anniversary. N.T.G., "Joys and Glooms of Broadway," *Variety* 90, no. 6 (22 Feb 1928): 42. In 1912, Abrahams co-wrote "Ragtime Cowboy Joe." Levant would later work with Clare in Hollywood. Fisher was a co-owner of McCarthy & Fisher music publishers. As a joke, Levant says Fisher loved throwing a typewriter out the window. Levant, *Memoirs*, 88.

<sup>209</sup> Kashner and Schoenberger identify the man as Max Dreyfus, but I have found no source where Levant explicitly states that Dreyfus recruited him for Harms. Supposedly, the contract was written on the back of a restaurant menu. Kashner and Schoenberger, 82-83; Charles F. Danver, "Pittsburghesque," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 4 Sep 1928; "Bebe Daniels Star at Rialto Next Week," *Allentown Morning Call*, 11 Jan 1930.

<sup>210</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, manuscript. *Fioretta* ran at the Earl Carroll Theatre for 111 performances, from 5 Feb to 11 May 1929. Brice also performed this unpublished song in the film *Be Yourself!* (United Artists, 1930).

performances. From August 1928 to March 1929, Levant toured with the show to cities like Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Chicago, and St. Louis.<sup>211</sup> In February, *Billboard* reported that Paramount had contracted Levant along with other members of the Broadway cast to appear in a filmic adaptation of *Burlesque*, retitled *The Dance of Life* (Paramount, dir. John Cromwell and A. Edward Sutherland).<sup>212</sup> The film, released to theaters in August 1929, was Levant's first appearance in a Hollywood picture and it included the popular party scene from the play.

Levant was part of a massive migration of musicians, composers, and songwriters to Hollywood in the late 1920s. As Katherine Spring explains, Hollywood studio moguls wanted to use songwriters' talent in order to cross-promote sound films with the booming pop music industry, creating "a watershed period of transformation in the corporate landscape of American mass entertainment."<sup>213</sup> Moreover, the advent of the sound film threatened the job security of theater musicians in New York and other cities. Dreyfus recommended Levant to William LeBaron, a songwriter himself and RKO's head producer.<sup>214</sup> In early March 1929, LeBaron hired Levant for RKO's nascent music department and paired him with lyricist Sidney Clare (1892-1972).<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Levant's presence in the touring cast is mentioned in several sources. The touring cast's final stop was Werba's in Brooklyn from 25 February to 8 March. Ad, Werba's Brooklyn, *Brooklyn Standard Union*, 2 Mar 1929.

<sup>212</sup> "The Week on Broadway: 2 from Stage Play for 'Burlesque' Cast," *Billboard* 41, no. 8 (23 Feb 1929): 7.

<sup>213</sup> Katherine Spring, *Saying It with Songs: Popular Music and the Coming of Sound to Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1-4.

<sup>214</sup> In October 1928, the Radio-Keith-Orpheum Corporation (RKO) formed from a merger of the Film Booking Offices of America (FBO), Keith-Albee-Orpheum Theatres, and the Radio Corporation of America (RCA). RCA's David Sarnoff served as the chairman of the board. Richard B. Jewell with Vernon Harbin, *The RKO Story* (London: Arlington House, 1982), 10.

<sup>215</sup> Kashner and Schoenberger, 86-87; "Local Boys on Coast," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 11 Mar 1929; "Here and There," *Variety* 95, no. 5 (15 May 1929): 65. Levant worked with Clare in an RKO workshop and, preferring the high rises of New York, lived at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel. Clare told one reporter, "You walk through the lobby at the Roosevelt Hotel and it's just like being at Lindy's or the other hangouts on Broadway." Quoted in Florabel Muir, "Most Leading Song Writers of Main Stem Now on Coast," *New York Daily News*, 23 June 1929.

Levant and Clare's work featured heavily in RKO's first several years of production.<sup>216</sup> RCA's David Sarnoff believed in a forthcoming sound technology market that united radio, film, theatre, and television, therefore he formed RKO to ensure a financially lucrative future for his company.<sup>217</sup> RKO exhibited its dedication to sound film by releasing only talking pictures in 1929, a decision that resulted in an "abbreviated" production year.<sup>218</sup> Levant and Clare generated fourteen songs for six of those thirteen films.<sup>219</sup> However, because RKO repurposed some of these songs as sourced or non-diegetic music, Levant and Clare's music appeared in almost all of the RKO productions that year. For example, Ann Pennington shimmied to "You're Responsible" in *Night Parade*, and LeBaron recycled "Loveable and Sweet," "Someone," and "Come in the Water, the Water is Fine" as live band music in *Dance Hall*. Although only two films with Levant/Clare songs ranked in RKO's top-ten highest grossing films for the 1929-1930 season, RKO continued to use Levant and Clare's 1929 songs in later years.<sup>220</sup> For example, "My Dream Memory" from the most successful Levant/Clare film (*Street Girl*) appeared as diegetic ballroom music in *Danger Lights* (1930) and as title and end-card music for *The Lady Refuses* (1931).<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Most of these songs were published by Harms, and RKO kept the copyrights. Kashner and Schoenberger, 88.

<sup>217</sup> However, he did not predict the October 1929 stock market crash that stifled the motion picture industry. Richard B. Jewell, *RKO Radio Pictures: A Titan is Born* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 19.

<sup>218</sup> Jewell with Harbin, 14.

<sup>219</sup> See Appendix A. *Love Comes Along* was released in January 1930, but the songs "Until Love Comes Along" and "Night Winds" were copyrighted in December 1929.

<sup>220</sup> Ranked third, *Street Girl* grossed \$1 million for a profit of \$500,000. *Loves Come Along* starring Bebe Daniels ranked seventh, grossing \$479,000 for a \$90,000 profit. *Rio Rita*, based on the Harry Tierney stage musical and the sound film debut of Bebe Daniels, was an overwhelming success for RKO, raking in \$2.4 million for a \$935,000 profit. That's a higher gross and profit than *King Kong* would make two years later. Richard B. Jewell, "RKO Film Grosses, 1929-1951: The C.F. Tevlin Ledger," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 14, no. 1 (Mar 1994), Appendix 1: [1-2].

<sup>221</sup> Steiner may have selected "My Dream Memory" because of its association with Betty Compson, the star of *The Lady Refuses* who had sung the song in *Street Girl*.



Although the majority of the Levant/Clare films were not top moneymakers for RKO, jazz groups picked up several of their songs. “My Dream Memory” had minor success. Several bands performed and recorded the song, including those led by Bert Ambrose, Gus Arnheim, and Nat Shilkret, among others. Paul Whiteman’s orchestra offered an instrumental version of the song on the 30 July 1929 episode of *The Old Gold Paul Whiteman Hour*.<sup>222</sup> The 17 Dec 1929 episode of that radio program featured three Levant/Clare songs: “You’re Responsible” (Bing Crosby, vocals), “With You - With Me” (Mildred Bailey, vocals), and “Tanned Legs” (Rhythm Boys, vocals). Additionally, Whiteman and Crosby recorded Levant and Clare’s “Gay Love” for Columbia. Although many of Levant and Clare’s RKO songs enjoyed some degree of performance and airplay, none of them became jazz standards. Nevertheless, as an inaugural member of RKO’s music department, Levant should be counted as one of the original musical film composers. The *Los Angeles Times* recognized that in 1933, a period when the screen musical was not in favor with studio executives: “Nacio Herb Brown, Arthur Freed and Levant were all pioneers of the musical films, when the rage was on four years ago.”<sup>223</sup>

In addition to his work as a songwriter, Levant had many other roles at RKO Studios. He attended meetings to determine who would play leading ladies.<sup>224</sup> For *Night Parade* (released 27 Oct 1929), Levant briefly appeared in a party scene playing on the piano the Levant/Clare song “You’re Responsible” while former Ziegfeld girl and blackbottom dancer Ann Pennington tap danced.<sup>225</sup> Levant may also have an uncredited role in *Midnight Mystery* (released 1 June 1930),

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<sup>222</sup> Whiteman used Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* as his theme song for this show.

<sup>223</sup> Edwin Schallert, “British Stars Going Musical,” *LAT*, 31 Mar 1933.

<sup>224</sup> Levant, *Smattering*, 94.

<sup>225</sup> This was Levant’s second film appearance in a Hollywood picture.

ghosting at the piano for actor Ivan Lebedeff as he plays excerpts from Liszt and Chopin.<sup>226</sup>

According to actress Dorothy Lee, although none of his songs appears in the film, Levant accompanied music rehearsals for *The Cuckoos* (released 4 May 1930), a Wheeler and Woolsey musical comedy: “We could hardly rehearse because he was such a riot.”<sup>227</sup>

Besides his songs with Clare for *Leathernecking* (1930), due to the quick decline in popularity of the film musical, Levant’s responsibilities at RKO for the next several years narrowed. On 4 December 1929, RKO hired Max Steiner as head of the music department, replacing Victor Arabelle. In September 1930, Steiner received a letter ordering him to dismiss everyone not under contract.<sup>228</sup> Since Levant had extended his contract for another year in May 1930, he briefly stayed on.<sup>229</sup> Furthermore, due to the minimal success of most of LeBaron’s productions, Sarnoff replaced him as executive producer with David O. Selznick in October 1931.<sup>230</sup> Thus, Levant could no longer work as LeBaron’s “right-hand man.”<sup>231</sup> Even more deleterious for Levant’s prospects, musicals declined in popularity with American audiences after 1929. Levant’s responsibilities were restricted to writing stock music, for films like *The Silver Horde* (released in October 1930) and *Kept Husbands* (released in January 1931). By December 1931, RKO’s music department only had five people under contract; *Variety* listed Harry Tierney as the only composer and songwriter.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> The pieces are Liszt’s *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12 in C-sharp minor* and Chopin’s *Etude in C minor* and *Waltz in C-sharp minor*. Levant also may have played Liszt’s *Liebestraum*, sounded diegetically from a player piano.

<sup>227</sup> Quoted in Mark A. Miller, “The Wild and Wooley Wit of Wheeler & Woolsey,” *Filmfax* 29 (October/November 1991): 80. Due to Lee’s story, I strongly suspect that Levant also accompanied rehearsals for *Rio Rita*. For that film, Pearl Eaton choreographed the dances, and it may be Levant’s piano that is heard in the film during those numbers.

<sup>228</sup> Peter Wegele, *Max Steiner: Composing, Casablanca, and the Golden Age of Film Music* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 60.

<sup>229</sup> “Levant’s Metro Year,” *Variety* 99, no. 7 (28 May 1930): 63.

<sup>230</sup> Nathan Platte, *Making Music in Selznick’s Hollywood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 37.

<sup>231</sup> Levant, *Sattering*, 94.

<sup>232</sup> Leonard Levinson, “Music Now in the Studios,” *Variety* 105, no. 3 (29 Dec 1931): 40.

Although a pioneer composer for Hollywood sound films, Levant entered the business on the eve of the decline of the film musical. In the early 1930s, studios redirected their focus toward dramas, where “music was more dispensable,” usually heard only with the opening and end title cards, or rationalized diegetically as sourced sound, like dance music emanating from an onscreen radio. Indeed, Hollywood produced about one hundred musicals in 1930, but only fourteen in 1931.<sup>233</sup>

By the 1930s, Levant had expanded his resumé to include songwriter, stage and silver-screen actor, and Hollywood composer. Focused intensely on composition, Gershwin never became an actor nor a film musician. Furthermore, Levant wrote music specifically for Hollywood films two years before Gershwin.<sup>234</sup> With his “two-year hegira at very good money in Hollywood” waning, Levant nevertheless felt “[somewhat emergent] from the Gershwin shadow.”<sup>235</sup> He continued to pen pop tunes and steadily worked as a radio orchestra pianist, a facet of his career discussed in the next chapter. Levant also turned to writing for the stage musical, a genre that Gershwin dominated. Through the course of the 1930s, the Depression years, Levant and Gershwin became close friends.

## **1.8 Gershwin, 1927-1929: European Success and *An American in Paris***

While Levant plunked the *Rhapsody in Blue* on the Broadway stage and pursued a temporarily fruitful career as a songwriter and musician in Hollywood, Gershwin went on a European tour, heard the accolades of his stage and concert works overseas, continued to

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<sup>233</sup> Wegele, 60.

<sup>234</sup> As discussed later, Fox hired Gershwin to write music for *Delicious* (1931).

<sup>235</sup> Levant, *Smattering*, 154.

improve his education in composition, and composed several more successful stage musicals and concert hall works.

In March 1928, Gershwin and his family went on a three-and-a-half month European tour. This was actually Gershwin's fifth trip overseas. After a brief sojourn in London, they travelled to Paris, where Frances Gershwin delivered a concert of Gershwin songs with George serving as accompanist. On 29 May, they heard Dimitri Tiomkin with Vladimir Golschmann and the Paris Opera orchestra present the European premiere of Concerto in F. One French critic extolled, "This very characteristic work made even the most distrustful musicians realize that [...] jazz might perfectly well exert a deep and beneficent influence in the most exalted spheres."<sup>236</sup>

Gershwin's Paris holidays provided him an idea for a symphonic poem about a travelling homesick New Yorker strolling about and enthralled by the Parisian streets.<sup>237</sup> In January 1928, he began composition of *An American in Paris*, completing a majority of the work while in Paris that spring and summer. As with the Rhapsody, *An American in Paris* possesses a pleasing tunefulness and frequently evokes sounds of a contemporary urban environment, literally with the use of taxi horns. In 1930, Gershwin wrote about his inspiration: "The originator uses material and ideas that occur around him and pass through him. And out of his experience comes this original creation or work of art, unquestionably influenced by his surroundings which include very largely what we call the Machine Age."<sup>238</sup> As with his two prior large concert works, Gershwin demonstrated his desire to produce hybrid symphonic works that blended sounds of the twentieth-century metropolis, with elements of contemporary jazz and traditional orchestral music.

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<sup>236</sup> Quoted in Ewen, 131.

<sup>237</sup> He first conceived the idea in 1926.

<sup>238</sup> George Gershwin, "The Composer in the Machine Age" (1930), in *George Gershwin Reader*, 120.

Like the Concerto in F, *An American in Paris* received its premiere by a major American symphony orchestra, the New York Philharmonic conducted by Walter Damrosch at Carnegie Hall. Also like the concerto, the press provided a pre-concert description of the piece's structure – as well as a detailed program.<sup>239</sup> Critical response to Gershwin's new work was largely positive. Edward Cushing at the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* called the piece “spontaneous and fertile of ideas” with materials “that have not been worn thin and defaced by centuries of careless usage.”<sup>240</sup>

Despite his success as a songwriter and as a composer for stage musicals and concert-hall works, Gershwin continued to expand his education in composition, a pursuit he kept to the end of his life. Immediately prior to his 1928 trip abroad, Gershwin had met the French composer Maurice Ravel at a party thrown by Eva Gauthier. Gershwin mentioned to Ravel that he would like to study composition with him, whereupon Ravel told Gauthier “that it would probably cause him to write bad ‘Ravel’ and lose his great gift of melody and spontaneity.”<sup>241</sup> While abroad, Gershwin sought other potential teachers, including Nadia Boulanger, Jacques Ibert, and Igor Stravinsky. All of them, for various reasons, declined.<sup>242</sup>

According to Levant, meeting composers like Ravel and Stravinsky in the late 1920s had alerted Gershwin to “his lack of schooling and of an acknowledged master.”<sup>243</sup> However, from the late 1920s, failing to secure a prominent European composer as a teacher, Gershwin instead

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<sup>239</sup> Gershwin had related to Deems Taylor a detailed narrative for the piece, which appeared in New York newspapers and in the concert's printed program. For example, see Harold A. Strickland, “Between the Leger Lines,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 9 Dec 1928.

<sup>240</sup> Edward Cushing, “Music of the Day,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 14 Dec 1928.

<sup>241</sup> Merle Armitage, *George Gershwin* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1938), 199.

<sup>242</sup> Boulanger said she had very little new to offer him. Ibert told Gershwin the “few weeks” he had remaining in Paris were not enough for a proper instruction in orchestration. Stravinsky admitted disinterest in Gershwin's music. See Pollack, 120-121.

<sup>243</sup> Levant is wrong on the first count. As mentioned earlier, Gershwin had received good instruction in composition from Kilenyi. Levant, *Smattering*, 176.

sought American musicians. For two years, Gershwin studied with American composer Henry Cowell (1897-1965), famed for his experimental piano works featuring cluster chords and extended techniques, like plucking the strings. Cowell understood that Gershwin wished to write “classical” music updated and infused with “great American music” – a goal that Cowell appreciated. Guessing the lessons may have begun in 1927, Cowell says Gershwin didn’t take his exercises in counterpoint very seriously: “I don’t think he ever felt that there was any value in the study.”<sup>244</sup> From 1931, Cowell included the *Rhapsody in Blue* in a lecture on “jazz-built music” for his “Appreciation of Modern Music” course at the New School for Social Research.<sup>245</sup> That same year, Cowell would say Gershwin “failed to create anything worthy in this idiom, because he makes the mistake of removing the jazzy elements when he arranges his jazz for ‘classic’ works, and the residue is sticky and commonplace sentimentality.”<sup>246</sup>

Despite what Cowell thought or said about him, by the end of the 1920s Gershwin had written large symphonic works that expanded upon the *Rhapsody*’s jazz-classical language. Although these works met with mixed critical results, Gershwin had acquired American and European admiration as a young composer with a unique sound and style that tapped into the vitality and rhythm of the happening world.

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<sup>244</sup> Quoted in Joel Sachs, *Henry Cowell: A Man Made of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 159.

<sup>245</sup> The New School for Social Research, “The New School for Social Research, Inc: 1931 Fall,” course listings, New School Digital Archives, <[http://digitalarchives.library.newschool.edu/index.php/Detail/objects/NS050101\\_ns1931fa](http://digitalarchives.library.newschool.edu/index.php/Detail/objects/NS050101_ns1931fa)>, accessed 4 May 2019.

<sup>246</sup> Quoted in Pollack, 127. While Gershwin still may have been studying counterpoint with Cowell, he briefly took lessons in harmony with Wallingford Riegger (1885-1961), known today for avant-garde symphonic and chamber works that employ both atonalism and dodecaphony. Riegger had been living in New York since 1928, but Gershwin’s brief period of instruction probably began after Riegger joined Cowell on the faculty of the New School for Social Research in 1931. Pollack, 127; Stephen Spackman, *Wallingford Riegger: Two Essays in Musical Biography*, I.S.A.M. Monographs, no. 17 (Brooklyn: Institute for Studies in American Music, 1982), 9.

## 1.9 Levant and Gershwin, 1930-1934: Close Friends

Although Levant had known Gershwin for several years, their acquaintance did not develop into a close friendship until 1930, after Levant returned to New York from Los Angeles. Encouraged by his success in Hollywood films but with the popularity of the musical film subsiding, Levant tried his hand at composing for the Broadway stage, an area of American popular entertainment Gershwin had already conquered. In early 1930, Levant penned several songs for the musical *Ripples*, a Charles Dillingham production about Rip van Winkle. This Fred Stone vehicle played at the New Amsterdam Theatre, while George and Ira Gershwin's *Strike up the Band* played across the street at the Selwyn (now the American Airlines Theatre). Pollack notes that George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind's book about "intolerance, paranoia, hypocrisy, self-serving moralizing, and exaggerated patriotism" during wartime, encouraged the Gershwins to extend their songwriting talent toward the satirical and witty, beyond what Levant calls "the clichés of boy-meets-girl songs."<sup>247</sup> Levant, who had been writing such songs only for a few years, considered Gershwin's music superior to his own: "*Strike up the Band* was worse than my show, but not musically."<sup>248</sup> He skipped out on his show to spend his evenings at the Selwyn. Lee Gershwin, Ira's wife, found him there and invited him to Riverside Drive, where she and Ira shared adjoining apartments with George.<sup>249</sup>

In *A Smattering of Ignorance*, Levant implies that he immediately became a permanent fixture at the Gershwins' apartments at 33 Riverside Drive, but his work history provides an

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<sup>247</sup> Pollack, 399-400; Levant, *Smattering*, 156.

<sup>248</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, manuscript.

<sup>249</sup> Levant, *Smattering*, 157. *Ripples* opened on 11 February and closed on 29 March. *Variety* reports that Levant went to Los Angeles in late February to continue his work at RKO Pictures; his return to New York was announced in the 6 August 1930 issue of that magazine. So, his meeting with Lee Gershwin must have occurred in mid-February 1930. "Along the Coast: Incoming Writers," *Variety* 98, no. 7 (26 Feb 1930): 71; "L.A. to N.Y.," *Variety* 100, no. 4 (6 Aug 1930): 4.

alternative story. Finding their home constantly filled with guests and hangers-on, Levant says he practically moved in with the Gershwins:

Here, I discovered I was a born leader, for I soon took charge of this hitherto disorganized group ... From the first day's supper I worked up to having four and five meals a day with the Gershwins, eating my way through the composition of the music and lyrics for *Delicious* and *Girl Crazy*.<sup>250</sup>

According to Pollack, the Gershwins worked on *Girl Crazy* from the summer to the early fall of 1930.<sup>251</sup> They signed a contract for a Fox film musical on 10 April 1930, but they did not go to Los Angeles to work on *Delicious* until early November.<sup>252</sup> From February to early August, Levant himself was in Los Angeles for further work at RKO. Thus, I believe the “four and five meals” period with the Gershwins, the beginning of their intimate friendship, did not coalesce until the fall or winter of 1930.

Once Levant and Gershwin became close friends, they went to many parties together. Doris Eaton Travis briefly discusses Gershwin and Levant's friendship in her memoirs. In late 1927, Doris returned to New York from a stint in Hollywood and moved in with her sister Mary at The Congress. Mary and Doris threw frequent Sunday parties attended by celebrities, like Fanny Brice, Gertrude Lawrence, Beatrice Lillie, Marilyn Miller, Billy Rose, and Clifton Webb.<sup>253</sup> Doris briefly mentions Levant and Gershwin at these parties:

They [Levant and Gershwin] were quite a pair. Some say the relationship was one-sided, and Oscar frequently was very trying for George. [...] Gershwin had a childlike enthusiasm for playing his own music, and he was more often than not the one at the piano on those wonderful Sunday afternoons. He and Oscar would always come together and leave together.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Levant, *Smattering*, 157-158.

<sup>251</sup> Pollack, 465.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 482-483.

<sup>253</sup> Travis, 141-143; Kashner and Schoenberger, 43.

<sup>254</sup> Travis, 141-143.



Doris couches these memories in the late 1920s, but her recollection of Levant and Gershwin's visits to her home must date from the early 1930s.<sup>255</sup>

Levant and Gershwin also went to many concerts together. In March 1931, they attended the American premiere of Berg's *Wozzeck* in Philadelphia. In November 1934, they heard the New York premiere of Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* at the Met.<sup>256</sup> In September 1932, Levant accompanied George and Ira to the opening of *Of Thee I Sing* at the Chicago Grand Opera House. After George conducted the overture, Harry Levant directed the rest of the show. After Ira, George Kaufman, and Morrie Ryskind won Pulitzers for writing *Of Thee I Sing*, Levant called the snub of George's music "a cruel oversight." He said, "[George] was upset about it and Ira refused to accept until George urged him to do so."<sup>257</sup>

Levant used his friendship with Gershwin to improve his knowledge in composition and to become better acquainted with Gershwin's writing process. Levant helped Gershwin with his early drafts and manuscripts and, since Gershwin had more than one piano in his home, Levant assumed the role of second pianist:

The two pianos in George's apartment made it possible for us to play his music together as it was written, for it was his custom to sketch his large works for two pianos before scoring them. The *Second Rhapsody* and the *Cuban Overture* were written in this way and played over by us before assuming their final form.<sup>258</sup>

With a commission for a new work from Boston Symphony conductor Serge Koussevitzky, Gershwin repurposed the "Rhapsody in Rivets" musical sequence from *Delicious*. Levant says

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<sup>255</sup> Before he left for Hollywood in 1929, Levant was still living with Harry and Pearl in the apartment above Doris and Mary. If Doris remembers Gershwin and Levant arriving and leaving together, this was probably in the early 1930s, when Levant spent a majority of his time at Gershwin's Riverside Drive apartment. Moreover, Levant says when Lee Gershwin approached him at the Selwyn in early 1930, he had only met her once before. Levant, *Sattering*, 157.

<sup>256</sup> Levant, *Sattering*, 133; Levant, *Memoirs*, manuscript.

<sup>257</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 124-125.

<sup>258</sup> Levant, *Sattering*, 158.

he was constantly by Gershwin's side during the "rewriting" of the *Second Rhapsody*.<sup>259</sup> The project began in Los Angeles, but Gershwin completed the version for symphony orchestra in New York, with Levant's help, on 23 May 1931.<sup>260</sup> Gershwin composed the overture, initially titled *Rumba*, after a trip to Cuba in February 1932. In *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*, Levant says, "I was at the second piano while [Gershwin] composed the overture."<sup>261</sup> Gershwin completed the orchestration days before the work's premiere at Lewisohn Stadium on 9 August.<sup>262</sup> Levant's assistance with Gershwin's creation of these symphonic works is seldom mentioned.

Levant also worked with Gershwin during the drafting and orchestration of the opera *Porgy and Bess*. With designs on writing an American opera featuring elements of Negro folk song, in January and late July 1934 Gershwin twice visited Charleston, South Carolina. He met with *Porgy* novelist Dubose Heyward and studied the music and folk song of the Gullahs living on Ferry Island.<sup>263</sup> On one of these occasions, he sent Levant a postcard, which Levant soon lost.<sup>264</sup> Back in New York, Gershwin composed all new music based on the Gullah songs he had heard. After the opera's premiere, in conversation with novelist and poet John Van Alstyne Weaver, Levant called the show "a right step in the wrong direction."<sup>265</sup> At first, he thought the opera contained too many "song hits with Broadway endings," but later confessed regret in his memoirs for that criticism.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 121-122.

<sup>260</sup> James Wierzbicki, "The Hollywood Career of Gershwin's Second Rhapsody," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 60, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 140. Koussevitsky premiered the *Second Rhapsody* with the Boston Symphony on New Year's Day 1932. Gershwin was the soloist, and Levant was in attendance. Levant, *Memoirs*, 122.

<sup>261</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 126.

<sup>262</sup> Pollack, 535-536.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 577.

<sup>264</sup> Levant says this is the only mail he ever received from Gershwin. Levant, *Smattering*, 125.

<sup>265</sup> Levant does not specify whether this conversation occurred after the trial opening in Boston on 30 September 1935 or the Broadway premiere. Levant, *Memoirs*, 126.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*

Gershwin had such faith in Levant's devotion that he asked him to play his compositions within professional contexts. In late 1930 or early 1931, Gershwin approached Toscanini, the director of the New York Philharmonic, to pitch a new work to him.<sup>267</sup> At the time, the *Second Rhapsody* remained unorchestrated, so Gershwin asked Levant to accompany him as a second pianist at the hearing. They also played the *Rhapsody in Blue* for Toscanini, and Gershwin was shocked when the conductor admitted he had never heard of it.<sup>268</sup> James Wierzbicki notes that Gershwin and Levant also played the two-piano version of *Second Rhapsody* for Koussevitzky, winning a spot for the work in the Boston Symphony's repertoire.<sup>269</sup>

In August 1932, Gershwin was billed to play the Concerto in F and both rhapsodies at a Lewisohn Stadium all-Gershwin concert. Deciding the effort too strenuous, he asked Levant to play the concerto in his place. Concerning this significant moment in his professional career – the first time he would play the concerto in public – Levant later said, “I had no inhibitions or taboos except I was quite nervous, I discovered, as I walked onstage.”<sup>270</sup> Despite his live performance jitters, Levant performed from memory before 17,000 people that night. Gershwin repaid him with a pocket watch that he forever cherished, saying, “It is by this watch that I have been late for every important appointment since then.”<sup>271</sup> Levant's lengthy career as a Gershwin pianist at this popular venue began that evening. In Chapter Four, I discuss in detail Levant's frequent appearances at the annual Lewisohn Stadium Gershwin Nights from the late 1930s to the early 1950s.

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<sup>267</sup> Levant incorrectly guesses the time period as “the late 1920s.” Levant, *Memoirs*, manuscript.

<sup>268</sup> Toscanini ultimately decided against both works, opting for two pieces by American composer Abram Chasins Levant, manuscript, *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*. The program occurred on 8, 10, 12, and 18 April 1931 at Carnegie Hall.

<sup>269</sup> Wierzbicki, 139.

<sup>270</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, manuscript.

<sup>271</sup> Levant, *Smattering*, 166.

Briefly, Levant and Gershwin both took lessons in composition from Joseph Schillinger (1895-1943), a professor at the New School for Social Research. Levant began his studies with Schillinger upon Gershwin's suggestion.<sup>272</sup> Other prominent figures who studied with Schillinger were largely jazz musicians, like Glenn Miller, Vernon Duke, and Benny Goodman. From 1932, Schillinger tutored Gershwin in his—according to Levant's simplified description of the process—"reduction of all musical procedures ... to a mathematical system."<sup>273</sup> According to Schillinger, Gershwin studied with him for about four and a half hours a week. Music historians today regard Schillinger as a significant and influential teacher, who possessed "limited understanding of music history and theory."<sup>274</sup> Levant notes that evidence of Schillinger's influence can be found in the choral and crap game music of *Porgy and Bess*, the two-voice canon in the *Cuban Overture*, and the "*I Got Rhythm*" *Variations* (1934).<sup>275</sup> When Gershwin moved to Los Angeles in August 1936, his studies with Schillinger ceased. Thus, Gershwin's pursuit of education in composition lasted from the time he quit studying classical piano with Hambitzer to the year before his death.

Although Levant in later years often waxed nostalgic on his friendship with Gershwin, affectionately recalling concerts with him and playful hours at the piano and the ping-pong table, he also notes a certain "small element of nastiness" between him and his friend – "a fondness for putting the blast on each other." For example, Gershwin always played his own music at evening parties, an invariable recurrence to which Levant responds, "An evening with Gershwin was a Gershwin evening." During one of these many displays, Levant waited for a lull into which he

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>274</sup> Paul Nauert, "Theory and Practice in *Porgy and Bess*: The Gershwin-Schillinger Connection," *Musical Quarterly* 78, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 10-12.

<sup>275</sup> Levant, *Smattering*, 177-178.

inserted, “Tell me, George, if you had to do it all over, would you fall in love with yourself again?”<sup>276</sup> Levant admired Gershwin’s art and enjoyed his company, and Gershwin certainly understood that Levant was willing to help him. Nevertheless, Levant recalls several times when Gershwin would become very agitated and cross with him, often leaving Levant’s feelings hurt. For example, when Gershwin realized that Levant had taken his advice on studying composition with Schillinger, he angrily accused him of jealousy and imitation.<sup>277</sup>

One particular moment divulged by Levant has been repeated by biographers and gossip columnists and even dramatized in the 1945 Irving Rapper Gershwin biopic *Rhapsody in Blue*. In November 1933, Gershwin asked Levant to accompany him to a Pittsburgh Symphony concert, where he was scheduled to perform the *Rhapsody in Blue* and the *Concerto in F*. They took a late train and shared a drawing room. As they were deep in discussion, Gershwin slinked into the lower berth. Levant reluctantly clambered up to the more uncomfortable upper berth. Shortly thereafter, according to Levant, Gershwin awoke from his snooze and mumbled: “Upper berth – lower berth. That’s the difference between talent and genius.”<sup>278</sup>

This quote encapsulates the tense relationship between these two men. Gershwin knew that Levant was the better pianist, for he had studied classical piano longer, had a more illustrious teacher in Stojowski, and had experience playing both classical and popular music on radio, film, the vaudeville stage, and in hotel restaurants and dance halls. Nevertheless, Gershwin had more thorough training in composition, and had secured status as a popular American composer through the *Rhapsody in Blue*, numerous songs, and several stage musicals. Gershwin was a creator whose unique works brought him wealth and fame; Levant was merely a

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 177-178.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 170.

performer, an “interpreter and sidekick.”<sup>279</sup> Whether received as condescension or as crude honesty, Gershwin’s words certainly stuck with Levant since he repeated it in his autobiography. Levant eventually agreed with Gershwin, even if not in print. The unpublished manuscript for *Memoirs* makes a political comparison: “To compare myself with George is like comparing Lyndon Johnson and John F. Kennedy.”<sup>280</sup> Despite his life’s success as a concert pianist, Levant was convinced he was a subordinate artist.

Perhaps Gershwin felt some remorse for his cold words to his friend. Nevertheless, events that transpired over the next couple days demonstrate how close they were, how highly Gershwin admired Levant’s talent, and how well they worked together as musicians and entertainers. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reported that, following rehearsals with the Pittsburgh Symphony, the two were spotted in attendance at a Pittsburgh-Nebraska football game and that Gershwin considers Levant “the best contemporary interpreter of his music.”<sup>281</sup> Later, following the concert, Richard S. Rauh, the co-founder of the Pittsburgh Symphony Society, invited Gershwin to his home for a reception. Numerous socialites, celebrities, and attendees from the concert migrated over to the Rauh residence, where Gershwin and Levant provided “a demonstration of physical prowess at the keyboard”:

Gershwin and Levant headed for the music room. Then began one of the most exciting piano recitals the guests had ever heard. Modern music, jazz, played by its two outstanding masters. First the composer of the *Rhapsody in Blue* played; then Levant played, and finally the two sat down together and turned out one duet after another. And so far into the night. A good time was had by all – except the Rauh grand piano, which took a terrific beating. It was discovered later that the pianists had broken four of the keys!<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Pollack, 153.

<sup>280</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, manuscript.

<sup>281</sup> Harold W. Cohen, “Notes of the Stage and Screen,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 20 Nov 1933.

<sup>282</sup> Charles F. Danver, “Pittsburghesque,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 15 Jul 1937.

### 1.9.1 Two Levant Works: Sonatina (1932) and “Blame It on My Youth” (1934)

In *A Smattering of Ignorance*, written at a time he actively promoted himself as a composer, Levant claims he considered Gershwin’s writing talent superior to his own, so he put on hold his own compositional aspirations because of his devoted focus on Gershwin’s creative activities:

Once I had been admitted to George’s friendship I took so much pleasure in the things he was writing and doing that I did nothing of my own. I got so much, vicariously, out of his ability and creativeness that whatever latent talents I had were completely submerged. In consequence I had no formative period as a composer. Listening to him improvise and play was enough for me.<sup>283</sup>

Despite these words of humility, Levant did continue to compose throughout his tenure as Gershwin’s friend. Throughout the 1930s, he wrote numerous songs with such lyricists as Arthur Freed and E.Y. Harburg. His song “Lady, Play Your Mandolin” (1931, lyrics by Irving Caesar) was featured in the first Warner Bros. Merrie Melodies cartoon and became a mild hit. In late 1931, Levant, with Vivian Ellis, penned several songs for the Fred Thompson/Clifford Grey musical *Out of the Bottle*, which opened at the London Hippodrome on 11 June 1932.<sup>284</sup> In 1934, he provided the score for Ben Hecht’s experimental film *Crime without Passion*.<sup>285</sup> Despite what Levant says, he continued to compose while working with Gershwin. Nevertheless, Levant’s efforts paled in comparison to Gershwin’s success.

Despite his lack of formal education in serious composition, Levant’s years playing in speakeasies and hotel orchestras provided him with a performative edge, and his knowledge of

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<sup>283</sup> Levant, *Smattering*, 160.

<sup>284</sup> It closed on 3 September 1932. The musical was based on the Thomas Anstey Guthrie novel *The Brass Bottle* (1900), and initially was titled *If It Happened to You*. “Chit Chat: Withdrawals,” *The Stage* (8 Sept 1932): 10; “Notes about the Players,” *Boston Globe*, 18 Oct 1931; “2 English Musicals,” *Variety* 105, no. 3 (29 Dec 1931): 36; “Chit Chat: If It Happened to You,” *The Stage* (17 Mar 1932): 10.

<sup>285</sup> Most New York critics praised the film for its anti-Hollywood aesthetic, but “outside the larger cities there was no audience for the film at all.” William MacAdams, *Ben Hecht: The Man behind the Legend* (New York: Scribner’s, 1990), 172-173

modern jazz scales and harmonies is evident in his serious works from the 1930s. His musicianship gained the attention of Aaron Copland, who met Levant at one of Gershwin's "miscellaneous evenings," probably in early 1932.<sup>286</sup> At the time, Levant was writing his *Sonatina*. Levant describes his piece: "Certainly it wasn't learned, its foundation in jazz was an occupational rather than an intellectual trait, and it was devoid of profundity or significance."<sup>287</sup> Despite Levant's low opinion of his own work, Copland encouraged him to complete the piece and included it in a festival of modern American music at Yaddo on 30 April 1932.<sup>288</sup>

Levant's critical assessment of his *Sonatina* (1932), a three-movement work for solo piano, is accurate.<sup>289</sup> The piece bears dissonant harmonic language and reveals Levant's contemporary understanding of extended jazz harmonies and techniques, like dominant thirteenth chords and quartal chords. However, several moments in the work reveal that Levant lacked thorough training in applying his knowledge of jazz harmonies to composition and seemed to follow a more "see what sticks" approach. The first movement of the *Sonatina* serves as a good example. For the listener, the form is easy enough to follow. Levant organized the first movement as an ABAB form with codetta, or a sonata form with primary and secondary material and no development section. However, significant melodic and harmonic development occurs within each section. The first section features a treble melody based on the A Dorian #4 scale. In the opening measures, Levant immediately emphasizes the scale's tritone between A and D# in the right hand (Figure 1.2). At bar 10, Levant repeats the opening motto, varied by the addition of a boogie-woogie like walking bass in the left hand. With bar 15, Levant approaches what

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<sup>286</sup> Levant, *Smattering*, 222.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>288</sup> From 1926, Yaddo, the Saratoga Springs estate of American financier Spencer Trask, was a resort for contemporary musicians and artists. For more see, Rudy Schackelford, "The Yaddo Festivals of American Music, 1932-1952," *Perspectives of New Music* 17, no. 1 (Autumn-Winter 1978): 92-125.

<sup>289</sup> Oscar Levant, *Sonatina*, piano score (New York: Robbins, 1934).



sounds like a half cadence on G-flat major, setup first by D-flat dominant harmony and then a B-flat dominant #5 chord. Since the movement's main theme is rooted on A, such harmonic choices are very unusual. The first A-section concludes with an A dominant thirteenth chord (bars 50 to 52). The B section features an arching moderato theme in A minor (Figure 1.3). Although harmony occasionally returns to A, Levant sometimes chooses distant or unrelated harmonies for the intervening measures – like B-flat major in bar 58. The B-section concludes on a B dominant b5 chord followed by a quartal chord built on G# (Figure 1.4). This semblance of a half cadence leads to the return of the A material with the primary theme slightly varied. Unlike the first A section, the second A section concludes with a D dominant thirteenth chord, followed by the secondary theme transposed to G. With the codetta, Levant firmly reiterates A as the movement's central pitch by constructing harmonies based on A Lydian before concluding the piece with an A minor 9 chord (Figure 1.5).

Con ritmo  $\text{♩} = 80$

The musical score for the first movement of Oscar Levant's Sonatina, measures 1-19, is presented in four systems. It is written for piano in 2/4 time. The tempo is marked 'Con ritmo' with a quarter note equal to 80. The score shows a dense texture of chords and melodic fragments in both the right and left hands. Dynamics include *f* (forte) and *mf* (mezzo-forte). The key signature has one sharp (F#).

Figure 1.2. Oscar Levant, Sonatina, 1<sup>st</sup> mvt, mm. 1-19.

Moderato - Poco mosso  $\text{♩} = 100$

*p espressivo*

The musical score for the first movement of Oscar Levant's Sonatina, measures 53-56, is presented in two systems. It is written for piano in 4/4 time. The tempo is marked 'Moderato - Poco mosso' with a quarter note equal to 100. The music is marked 'p espressivo' (piano, expressive). The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score shows a more spacious texture with longer note values and expressive phrasing in both hands.

Figure 1.3. Oscar Levant, Sonatina, 1<sup>st</sup> mvt., mm. 53-56.



Figure 1.4. Oscar Levant, Sonatina, 1<sup>st</sup> mvt., m. 77.



Figure 1.5. Oscar Levant, Sonatina, 1<sup>st</sup> mvt., mm. 120-129.

Levant soon felt that he did not fit in with Copland's group. When programming the two-day Yaddo Festival, Copland heavily recruited members of the League of Composers and fellow former Nadia Boulanger students.<sup>290</sup> Levant belonged to neither of these groups. Composers on the Yaddo program that featured Levant's Sonatina included Roy Harris, Marc Blitzstein, and Robert Russell Bennett. Although Levant would continue a professional relationship with

<sup>290</sup> Aaron Copland and Vivian Perlis, *Copland: 1900 through 1942* (New York: St. Martin's / Marek, 1984), 201.

Bennett, he did not acquaint himself with the League for very long. He later explained in *A Smattering of Ignorance* he felt out of place, like “an interloper from Broadway” with no “firm foundation and sound development.”<sup>291</sup>

Unlike his serious compositions, Levant’s efforts in popular song temporarily yielded some fruit. However, he only wrote one song of lasting endurance, a tune that borrows a Gershwin melody. Between 1927 and 1939, Levant wrote over eighty popular songs, but only one of them—“Blame It on My Youth” (1934, lyrics by Edward Heyman)—became a jazz standard.<sup>292</sup> Despite well-known recordings by major pop vocalists like Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole, no one has written about the song’s resemblance to an extract from Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*. Indeed, analysis of Levant’s melody reveals an identical structure and shape to that work’s Love Theme. For the sake of clarity, I have transposed both examples below to the key of C major. Gershwin’s Love Theme (Figure 1.6) begins on the mediant of the scale and rises by quarter note from E to G, spanning the interval of a minor third. The melody falls an octave and then rises by quarter note from G to D, encompassing the interval of a perfect fifth. The opening bars of the refrain to “Blame It on My Youth” yield the same melodic and intervallic structure (Figure 1.7). Levant’s refrain also begins on the mediant of the scale and rises a minor third, before falling an octave and rising again a perfect fifth. Thus, as the melodic and structural similarity between the two pieces indicates, Levant based the hook of his most successful song on a theme from Gershwin’s most well-known and enduring large-scale work. Levant partially relied on Gershwin’s creativity when writing his one contribution to the American popular song canon.

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<sup>291</sup> Levant, *Smattering*, 223.

<sup>292</sup> Oscar Levant, “Blame It on My Youth,” piano-vocal score (New York: Harms, 1934).



Figure 1.6. The Love Theme to Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*.

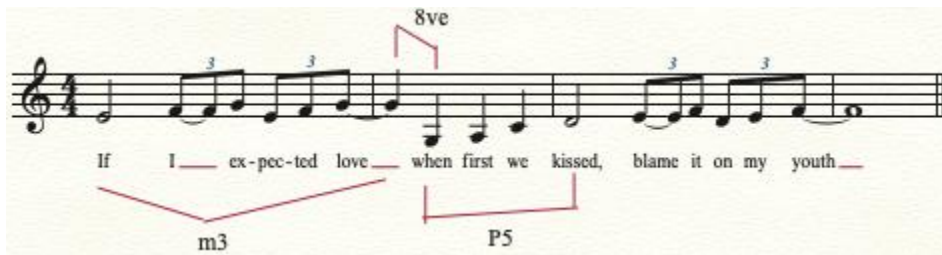


Figure 1.7. The Refrain to Levant’s “Blame It on My Youth.”

The bulk of Levant’s popular and serious compositions never acquired the same public appeal as Gershwin’s oeuvre. Levant stopped writing songs in 1939, the year he became a national radio celebrity on *Information Please*. That turn in his professional career is discussed in Chapter Two. The awkwardness of Levant’s Piano Sonatina, especially those moments that bear some semblance of a musical cadence without actually being a cadence, reveals the efforts of a pianist ambitiously pursuing an additional career as a composer without possessing a thorough education or strong background in serious composition. The experimental, language of his few serious works never caught on with Americans. Gershwin’s formal education in composition exceeded Levant’s and his ability to continuously produce music that appealed to Americans resulted in a much more successful and financially lucrative career as a composer.

## 1.10 Levant, 1935-1936: Further Work in Hollywood and Studies with Schoenberg

As he witnessed Gershwin's desire to continue studying composition, Levant realized his own lack of education in that area. Thus, in 1935 when Levant returned to Los Angeles for continued work in Hollywood, he approached exiled German composer Arnold Schoenberg for lessons. With Schoenberg, as he had with Copland, Levant found an elite musician who appreciated his efforts in composition and helped him get them performed. Nevertheless, although Levant inserted popular elements into his works, his proclivity toward high modernism and dissonance resulted in music enjoyed by few listeners.

In February 1935, while Gershwin was in New York finishing the score to *Porgy and Bess*, Levant returned to Los Angeles.<sup>293</sup> With help from S. N. Behrman, Levant got a job at Fox Studios, where he was again paired with Sidney Clare, but like the majority of their early RKO efforts, they produced no major hits.<sup>294</sup> In late 1936, briefly back at RKO, Levant wrote three songs with Dorothy Fields for the Ginger Rogers musical *In Person*. RKO later used one of those songs, "I Got a New Lease on Life," as background score for one scene in *The Smartest Girl in Town* (1936). Furthermore, pianist Michael Feinstein first noticed that the same tune appeared in the background score to *Shall We Dance* just prior to Astaire and Rogers' performance of Gershwin's "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off."<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> He briefly worked at MGM with lyricist Gus Kahn. Together they wrote a batch of songs intended for *Hollywood Revue of 1933*, later retitled *Hollywood Party* (1934). Levant and Kahn's songs were never used. Those songs, listed in Appendix A, are available at the Library of Congress.

<sup>294</sup> Levant had previously worked at Fox Studios. Through most of 1933 he worked as producer Sol Wurtzel's assistant. He wrote no music for the studio in 1933. By Levant's account, he mainly accompanied Wurtzel on his nightly gambling binges. Although he is not given screen credit, Levant did help write the script for *Orient Express* (1934), an adaptation of the Graham Greene novel *Stamboul Train*. His 1933 and 1935 stints at Fox are mixed, confused and condensed into one section of *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*. Levant, *Memoirs*, 110-112.

<sup>295</sup> Feinstein revealed this to Kashner and Schoenberger, 88.

While supporting himself through his film work, Levant also studied composition with a major European composer. He started taking private lessons with Arnold Schoenberg.<sup>296</sup> Several other film composers sought the tutelage of the creator of the twelve-tone system, including Alfred Newman and David Raksin. Several of Levant's few serious works date from his student years with Schoenberg, including a string quartet, a *Nocturne* for orchestra, and a one-movement piano concerto. All are written using a modernist, often highly dissonant, musical language. Some feature jazz rhythms and other elements to "make [them] palatable to popular taste."<sup>297</sup> For example, the thirteen-minute concerto bears the influence of both Schoenberg and Gershwin. This one-movement concerto is discussed further in Chapter Three.

Schoenberg organized performances of some Levant pieces written under his tutelage. For example, on 14 April 1937 at Trinity Auditorium, the Los Angeles Federal Music Project Symphony Orchestra premiered Levant's *Nocturne* in a concert of works by Schoenberg and his pupils.<sup>298</sup> In October, Schoenberg arranged a concert of his pupils' works performed by the Kolisch Quartet in Denver, with Levant's String Quartet on the program. Schoenberg thought highly of Levant's work. He praised him as a "very talented young American composer" to several people and even hoped Levant may become his teaching assistant.<sup>299</sup> Gershwin did not share Schoenberg's high opinion of Levant's music, calling his efforts "confused."<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Schoenberg emigrated to the United States in 1934, and began teaching part time at the University of Southern California from Summer 1935. In his appointment books, Schoenberg recorded intermittent lessons for Levant from April to September 1935, and again from October 1936 to November 1937. Sabine Feisst, *Schoenberg's New World: The American Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 205; Kashner and Schoenberger, 154.

<sup>297</sup> Oscar Levant, *The Unimportance of Being Oscar* (1968; New York, Pocket Books, 1969), 147.

<sup>298</sup> Gershwin was in the audience. Levant, *Smattering*, 138. Other works on the program included Webern's Passacaglia, Adolph Weiss's *American Life*, and Schoenberg's *Pelleas und Melisande*. "Schoenberg Repeats Wednesday," *B'nai B'rith Messenger*, 9 Apr 1937.

<sup>299</sup> Quoted in Feisst, 208. See also Levant, *Unimportance*, 146.

<sup>300</sup> Quoted in Levant, *Smattering*, 185.

Nevertheless, he offered to pay for an orchestral reading of one of Levant's "complex symphonic works."<sup>301</sup> Levant declined the offer.<sup>302</sup>

### 1.11 Levant and Gershwin, 1936-1937: The Final Months in Hollywood

The Gershwins moved to Hollywood in August 1936 to work on the Astaire-Rogers vehicle *Shall We Dance* for RKO. As was his habit in New York, Levant regularly visited the Gershwin home and spent a lot of time with his friend. Levant appears in Gershwin's home movies, playing the piano and smoking a cigarette in the yard.<sup>303</sup> They often purchased new sheet music and privately sang through the songs featured in the latest Broadway shows and Hollywood film musicals. He mentions some of their particular favorites: "You'd Be So Easy to Love," a Cole Porter song from the Broadway show *Anything Goes* (1934) and "I've Got You Under My Skin," another Porter song from *Born to Dance* (1936), which Levant called "our song." Levant notes that his gay friends "could never accept [the song] with a straight face," particularly the phrase "under the hide of me." I do not take this anecdote as evidence that Gershwin and Levant had a romantic relationship, rather they probably found a mutual humor in the song because they realized how often they spent time together and how close they were.<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 129.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>303</sup> Ira Gershwin, "Gershwins, 1936-1939--Ira Gershwin--Home Movies," YouTube video, LibraryofCongress, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-ECLduZTNI>>, uploaded 27 Sept 2018, last accessed 18 May 2019.

<sup>304</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, manuscript. It is worth noting that Levant frequently refers to gay culture, acquaintances or friends, usually for the purposes of off-color or inappropriate humor. He says his first gay roommate in New York popped his pimples for him. As mentioned earlier, he discussed hanging out with the "effete" Charig and frequently getting into fights with him. On the 13 December 1940 episode of *Information Please*, when asked the question "What do you call a bassoon player?", he responded, "A Fagott," pronouncing the word as the German word for "bassoon." Finally, in the manuscript to *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*, he refers to director Irving Rapper as "slightly homosexual if such a thing is possible." Such quotes demonstrate a phobia of gay culture. Perhaps Levant made such statements to avoid being accused of homosexuality himself.



Gershwin and Levant were frequently seen together at Los Angeles area parties. On 28 August 1936, following an all-Wagner concert at the Hollywood Bowl, Gershwin along with Harold Arlen, Levant and others, spent an evening in Jerome Kern's apartment. Gershwin played through the score to *Of Thee I Sing* and Levant entertained everyone with a performance of the Rhapsody. Kern played music from *Show Boat*, while everyone sang along as Moss Hart conducted.<sup>305</sup> On 19 September, Gershwin threw a party in Moss Hart's honor, and attendants included Levant, Kern, Berlin, and Arlen.<sup>306</sup> In late October, Gershwin and Levant entertained guests at the opening of the Dunes resort in Palm Springs.<sup>307</sup> During one of these many parties, Levant was asked if he thought Gershwin's music would be played in one hundred years. He responded: "Yes, if George is alive."<sup>308</sup>

A lot of our knowledge concerning details of Gershwin's decline are due to Levant's documentation. In early February 1937, Gershwin began to show signs of mental confusion. Levant reports that during a performance of the Concerto in F with Alexander Smallens and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Gershwin flubbed a passage on the keys that he had never heard him miss before.<sup>309</sup> Supposedly, after the concert, the upset Gershwin turned to Levant and said, "When I made those mistakes, I was thinking of you, you bastard."<sup>310</sup> At the time, Gershwin's brain tumor had not been diagnosed. Levant said he would often go up to Gershwin's room and find him holding his head in agony. In an interview with Kashner and Schoenberger, June Levant said Oscar had brought her one evening to the Gershwin home, where he and George played

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<sup>305</sup> Sidney Skolsky, "Hollywood," *Washington Post*, 1 Sept 1936;

<sup>306</sup> Sidney Skolsky, "Hollywood," *New York Daily News*, 21 Sept 1936.

<sup>307</sup> Gabriel Landon, "Informality Marks Opening of Popular Palm Springs Resort," *LAT*, 1 Nov 1936;

<sup>308</sup> Sheilah Graham, "Taylor Going to Ball with Jean Harlow," *Hartford Courant*, 26 Jan 1937.

<sup>309</sup> Levant, *Smattering*, 198-199. Gershwin appeared with the LA Philharmonic on 10 and 11 February. It is unclear on which day the lapse in memory occurred. Philharmonic Auditorium concert ad, *LAT*, 9 Feb 1937.

<sup>310</sup> In a 1993 interview with Kashner and Schoenberger, June Levant claimed Gershwin said this to Oscar. Kashner and Schoenberger, 176.

excerpts from *Porgy and Bess*. At one moment, while Oscar sang the part of Crown, Gershwin put his arm around June and began “hugging and patting” her.<sup>311</sup> June did not believe Oscar noticed, but he did comment on it in an unpublished draft of *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*:

George kept moving toward her. It was very strange. I don't know if it was part of the syndrome of sickness or not. Anyway, to use an old fashioned phrase, he was horny, as sick as he was. That didn't bother me. I loved George.<sup>312</sup>

On 3 July, Levant, Behrman, and Sonya Levien visited Gershwin and found him in a miserable condition. Behrman later said: “The light had gone out from his eyes. [...] I had a sinking feeling: he is no longer with us.”<sup>313</sup> Six days later, Gershwin fell into a coma. He died on 11 July 1937 in Los Angeles.

Afterward, Levant participated in a Los Angeles Gershwin memorial concert broadcast over CBS radio. Levant initially considered playing the Rhapsody and the Concerto in F at a memorial concert held at New York's Lewisohn Stadium on 8 August, but that task eventually fell to Harry Kaufman.<sup>314</sup> However, a month later on 8 September, Levant performed the Concerto in F with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, conducted by Charles Previn, at the Hollywood Bowl's Gershwin tribute concert. Levant had not played such a live concert before a vast audience since his performance of the same concerto at Lewisohn Stadium in 1932. Whereas only the local Stadium crowd heard his 1932 performance, CBS radio broadcasted the Hollywood Bowl concert to listeners across the nation. Many Americans, especially those on the East Coast, stayed up late to hear the memorial.<sup>315</sup> The concert featured celebrities, musicians

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<sup>311</sup> As told by June Levant to Kashner and Schoenberger, 185.

<sup>312</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, manuscript.

<sup>313</sup> Quoted in Jablonski, 320.

<sup>314</sup> “Concert Will Pay Gershwin Tribute,” *NYT*, 21 Jul 1937; “Gershwin Memorial Concert Held Here,” *Brooklyn Citizen*, 10 Aug 1937.

<sup>315</sup> CBS stayed on air after regular programming hours in order to broadcast the two and a half hour long concert for the East Coast. “CBS Waiting up for H'wood Bowl Gershwin Program,” *Variety* 127, no. 11 (25 Aug 1937): 31.

and conductors from both the classical and popular worlds. George Jessel served as master of ceremonies. Otto Klemperer opened the concert directing an orchestral arrangement of the Second Prelude. Next, popular bandleader Nat Shilkret led the Philharmonic through *An American in Paris*. Then, Fred Astaire, Al Jolson, and Gladys Swarthout sang several of Gershwin's songs with Victor Young at the podium. Following Levant's performance of the concerto, an orchestra medley of Gershwin songs led by Nat Finston preceded selections from *Porgy and Bess*, featuring members of the original cast, including Anne Brown and Todd Duncan. Jose Iturbi closed the concert with the *Rhapsody in Blue*.<sup>316</sup> This all-Gershwin memorial concert, with Levant as a featured pianist, anticipates the Gershwin Nights at Lewisohn Stadium, where Levant would regularly demonstrate his mastery of Gershwin's piano music.

The crowd of 19,662 spectators warmly applauded Levant's performance, and the press subsequently lauded him, as well.<sup>317</sup> Walter Winchell said Levant "thefted the honors."<sup>318</sup> The *Los Angeles Times*' Isabel Morse Jones said: "Levant might profitably give an all-Gershwin piano program indoors some time. He is the best Gershwin exponent heard out here so far."<sup>319</sup> Levant himself comments on his own performance: "In all modesty, I was an enormous hit."<sup>320</sup> Although Levant received national attention with this performance, recognition as a popular wit and national personality was yet to come.

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<sup>316</sup> Isabel Morse Jones, "Gershwin Memorial to End Bowl Season," *LAT*, 5 Sept 1937. Homer Canfield, "Radiologic," *Santa Ana Register*, 8 Sept 1937. It's worth noting that a format very similar to this concert – featuring mostly orchestral music, a *Porgy and Bess* segment, and closing with the *Rhapsody in Blue* – became the regular format for later Gershwin Nights at Lewisohn Stadium.

<sup>317</sup> Attendance reported in Isabel Morse Jones, "Plans for Philharmonic Season Announced," *LAT*, 19 Sept 1937. A recording of the concert is available. *George Gershwin Memorial Concert: Hollywood Bowl September 8, 1937*, 2 CDs (North American Class, 1998).

<sup>318</sup> Walter Winchell, "Shakespeare Feud Hot, Winchell Finds," *San Francisco Examiner*, 12 Sept 1937.

<sup>319</sup> Quoted in Kashner and Schoenberger, 192.

<sup>320</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, manuscript. The published version of the quotation exaggerates Levant's original words: "I played the Concerto, and in all modesty, was the hit of the evening." Levant, *Memoirs*, 138.

## **1.12 Conclusion**

The multimedia career as Gershwin disciple that Levant pursued after 1937 was maintained through his persistent performance of this symbolic role through live concert appearances, radio and film. As this chapter details, Levant had already established himself as a figure in all of those forms of modern musical media, and he would spend the next two decades building and maintaining a career as the leading interpreter of Gershwin's piano music through those media. In the next chapter, I discuss how Levant's symbolic ownership of Gershwin's music was further aided by his inbetweener status as both a classical and jazz performer, particularly on the radio, which lent him a particular popular status that helped situate him ahead of other contemporary Gershwin pianists.

## Chapter 2

### The Musical Middlebrow and Oscar Levant as Radio Pianist

Oscar Levant's career as a radio pianist spans the Golden Age of radio, from the early 1920s to the late 1940s. The trajectory of his radio career reveals his cultural fluidity as he worked from local classical musician, to dance band pianist, to radio orchestra featured player, to nationally recognized musical savant, to touring Gershwin specialist. In the early stages of radio, Levant infrequently appeared on Pittsburgh's KDKA as a classical musician. While working as a radio pianist in the mid-1930s on shows like the *Hoffmann Ginger Ale Hour* with William Daly, Levant participated in music variety programs that presented a miscellany of material to listeners at a crucial time when radio helped Americans develop individual tastes and educate themselves on classical music. In 1938, when Levant joined the question-and-answer show *Information Please*, he gained instant national fame as a musical expert and wit. He parlayed that fame into a successful career as touring recitalist and guest pianist with symphony orchestras. His appearances on radio concert programs to play Gershwin works like *Rhapsody in Blue*, the Concerto in F, and the Piano Preludes relayed his full talent as a concert pianist to the largest audience of Americans. By 1942, the nation recognized Levant as the leading interpreter of George Gershwin's piano music.

Part of Levant's radio success lay in his status as a middlebrow figure, a classically trained pianist with additional experience as a popular musician. He also appeared on radio as

more and more Americans, particularly middlebrow consumers, sought cultural self-improvement in their leisure time through easily accessible methods. Radio counteracted the sacralization of the classical canon established in elitist entertainment spaces, like the symphony hall. Middlebrow consumers, wary of such spaces but desirous of improving their understanding of the classical canon, used radio as an accessible educational tool. Meanwhile, Levant participated in many radio programs that presented large classical works in hybrid forms or truncations, arrangements suitable for the general listener satisfied with just the quotable or memorable moments of a work. As a co-host on *Kraft Music Hall* with Al Jolson in the late 1940s, Levant presented many such truncations of classical concertos while he simultaneously sought to demonstrate his ability to play more than just Gershwin's piano oeuvre.

## **2.1 Highbrow, Lowbrow, and Middlebrow Culture**

Through the nineteenth century, American cultural spaces slowly segmented into the high arts for the elite few and the low popular arts for everyone else. According to Lawrence Levine, urban social elites distinguished themselves by sacralizing their entertainment spaces. The opera house and the symphony hall became a precious sanctum for social elites, who claimed and guarded the classical music performed in those spaces. Simultaneously, elites railed against military band music and popular amusements, like the minstrel show. Consequently, a cultural (and spatial) distinction between "refined" elite music and "vulgar" popular music replaced the miscellany programs that had entertained socially and culturally mixed American audiences of the mid-century. Furthermore, a code of appropriate comportment emerged, wherein respectable concertgoers sat in silence to contemplate uninterrupted presentations of European art music.

Levine concludes that, by the turn of the century, America's elites had successfully established "the illusion that the aesthetic products of high culture were originally created to be appreciated in precisely the manner late nineteenth-century Americans were taught to observe."<sup>1</sup> This bifurcation process continued into the twentieth century as leading musical figures like conductor Theodore Thomas shoved popular and light classical pieces out of subscription series concerts and reallocated them for "pops," special, and benefit concerts.<sup>2</sup>

As the twentieth century progressed, cultural commentators began using the terms "highbrow" and "lowbrow" to identify these two musical spheres. The words come from phrenology, cranial studies which ranked races in intelligence by the height of the brow. According to Michael Kammen, phrenology-obsessed Victorians popularized these terms and equated them not only with racial categories but also levels of cultural development. By the twentieth century, "highbrow" had become associated with cultural sophistication and European white culture, especially the "great" works of the classical music canon. "Lowbrow" indicated cultural simplicity, particularly any form of mass culture.<sup>3</sup>

The term "Middlebrow" emerged in the 1920s but did not obtain broader usage until later.<sup>4</sup> In 1949, Russell Lynes published a satirical article in *Harper's* on the "brow" phenomenon, firmly enconcing the nomenclature in the American lexicon. To Lynes, Middlebrows pretend to be Highbrows and cheapen culture by using it to the benefit of their

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow / Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 229.

<sup>2</sup> This process is discussed further in Chapter Three.

<sup>3</sup> Kate Macdonald, "Introduction: Identifying the Middlebrow, the Masculine and Mr Miniver," in *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880-1950: What Mr Miniver Read*, ed. Macdonald (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 6. In 1986, Andreas Huyssen noted that this Victorian discourse also split along gender lines and identified mass culture as feminine, "while high culture, whether traditional or modern, clearly remains the privileged realm of male activities." Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 47.

<sup>4</sup> Janice Radway, "The Scandal of the Middlebrow: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Class Fracture and Cultural Authority" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 89, no. 4 (Fall 1990): 703.

social mobility. He divides the Middlebrows into Upper and Lower categories. Upper Middlebrows control the distribution of ideas to the masses through institutions like the press, the film industry, and museums. They fraternize with Highbrows and constantly worry about the suitability of their own taste. The Lower Middlebrows are greater in number and associate more with Lowbrows.<sup>5</sup>

As Lynes essay indicates, a significant component to middlebrow culture is self-enrichment. In *Culture as History*, historian Warren Susman discusses the development of self-enrichment as a cultural phenomenon. Around 1880, as the United States developed into a bustling mass society, a “culture of personality,” or an interest in the peculiar self, emerged.<sup>6</sup> People with “personality” stood out from the crowd and easily navigated their social milieu by having mastered the art of being interesting. Such people used their leisure time for the purpose of self-cultivation. Therefore, the personal goals of private study became self-confidence, the evasion of feeling inferior, popularity, and social mobility.<sup>7</sup> Lynes identifies the middlebrow consumer as a social-climbing parvenu, “who uses culture to satisfy social or business ambitions.”<sup>8</sup> Janice Radway also roots middlebrow culture in the culture of personality: “That culture [middlebrow culture] was aimed at people like me who wanted desperately to present themselves as educated, sophisticated, and aesthetically articulate.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Russell Lynes, “Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow,” *Harper’s* (Feb 1949): 19-28.

<sup>6</sup> Susman offers several possible explanations for this shift in America’s social order, including urban anxiety, a transformation from a producing nation to a consuming nation, and a transformation from scarcity to abundance, among other reasons. Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (1973; New York: Pantheon, 1984), 271-285.

<sup>7</sup> Susman, 271-285.

<sup>8</sup> Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers: The Shaping of American Popular Taste* (New York: Harper, 1954), 313.

<sup>9</sup> Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 5.



With self-improvement as the ultimate goal, middlebrow culture, unlike high culture, unhesitatingly associates itself with the commercialism of mass culture. Middlebrow social institutions market high culture as an easily accessible and consumable product. Middlebrow forms include those mass products and social institutions designed for and accessed by consumers interested in acquiring cultural capital and thereby strengthening their social prestige. David Savran explains that “middlebrow” is “an elastic category into which a great many cultural productions could conveniently fall.”<sup>10</sup> For example, Lynes mentions correspondence courses as one such cultural production. Other middlebrow forms include the Encyclopedia Britannica or a set of recordings of Great Composers. Middlebrow consumers also consult “professional experts” by attending museum lectures, reading book and music reviews, or tuning in to talk programs.<sup>11</sup> A musical middlebrow activity includes any event wherein the consumer easily accesses music associated with highbrow culture. Such activities include listening to classical music on phonograph, radio, or television, or attending an affordably priced symphony concert.

Some commentators have criticized middlebrow culture as a phony and deficient mixture of both popular and elite culture. In his *Seven Lively Arts* (1924), Gilbert Seldes, who argued that popular arts deserved a form of criticism and level of prestige equal to high arts, warned against what he called the “bogus” arts, a pretentious middle form that hijacks the best elements of high art and convinces consumers that it is genuine.<sup>12</sup> Dwight MacDonald shared Seldes’s disdain for the “bogus” arts, which he called “Midcult.” Unlike Seldes, MacDonald viewed mass culture as

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<sup>10</sup> David Savran, *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Janice Radway, “On the Gender of the Middlebrow Consumer and the Threat of the Culturally Fraudulent Female,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 93, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 872.

<sup>12</sup> Gilbert Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1924), 349.

purposefully created to distract the public. Since he also viewed mass culture as in competition with high culture, he considered Midcult a confusing “middlebrow compromise.” Like mass culture, MacDonald saw Midcult’s sole purpose as distraction in disguise: “It pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them.”<sup>13</sup> Radway offers a different view of middlebrow culture as a “counterpractice” to elitist control of taste and cultural value. Rather than “aping” high culture, she argues the middlebrow caters to a “general” consumer wary or contemptuous of highbrow academicism.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the middlebrow consumer desires culture in an accessible and digestible form.

## **2.2 Listening to Classical Music on the Radio: A Middlebrow Activity**

A primary node for middlebrow social activity is the radio. In the early twentieth century, new media like the phonograph and the radio catered to the budding and blossoming social class interested in upward mobility and self-improvement. Radio counteracted the contemporary sacralization of classical music and the concert hall by providing highbrow music to any person at home who could afford a radio set and possessed the desire to listen. Early advocates of radio saw classical music as a means to familiarize culturally ignorant and formerly isolated American citizens to “morally uplifting” art, specifically the European canon. Through their radio sets, the greatest number of Americans—people of every class, gender, and race—encountered classical music and developed their individual tastes. Many listeners were guided by the middlebrow culture of personality, seeking easily accessible ways of improving themselves during their leisure time. Some radio analysts, like Theodor Adorno, believed radio an insufficient medium

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<sup>13</sup> Dwight MacDonald, “Masscult and Midcult” (1960), in *Masscult and Midcult: Essays against the American Grain* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2011), 3-71.

<sup>14</sup> Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, 9-10.

for the presentation of symphonic music. However, Gershwin recognized the importance of radio to his contemporary success. As I discuss later, many popular concert programs featured a miscellany of music from canonic works to excerpts from popular Broadway shows. The contiguous placement of Gershwin's music on programs that also featured classical standards helped legitimate his music to a listening audience, many of which were accessing classical music for the first time.

Classical music acted as a central component to early radio's mission as a public service, producing a generation of classical music lovers. David Goodman explains that concert music served radio's "civic paradigm and its ambition to create modern citizens with a developed capacity to absorb information [and] empathize across cultural borders."<sup>15</sup> Today, classical music stations operate on the periphery, catering to a unique niche of listeners. However, in the interwar period, many classical music programs could be found on the major radio networks. The New York Philharmonic and the Cleveland Orchestra began airing concerts in 1922, followed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1925. The following year, the San Francisco Symphony and the New York Symphony Orchestra initiated their own broadcasts.<sup>16</sup> In 1937, RCA's David Sarnoff organized the NBC Orchestra under Arturo Toscanini specifically for the radio performance of classical music.<sup>17</sup> In 1938, according to a Princeton Radio Research Project survey, more than half of radio listeners identified classical or both classical and popular music as their listening

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<sup>15</sup> David Goodman, *Radio's Civic Ambition: American Broadcasting and Democracy in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 118.

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth H. Marcus, *Musical Metropolis: Los Angeles and the Creation of a Music Culture, 1880-1940* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 146.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Horowitz, *Understanding Toscanini: A Social History of American Concert Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 152-153.

preference.<sup>18</sup> Ernö Rapée, the director of the Radio City Music Hall Symphony, proclaimed that radio concerts had surmounted the great brow divide and nurtured Americans into active classical music listeners.<sup>19</sup> A few years later, Deems Taylor echoed Rapée's thought:

There is an increase in interest in classical music. [...] Its cause, in my firm belief, is the radio, the medium that has made it possible for almost any person living on this continent to come in contact with great music regardless of where he may be living or of how much or little he may be earning. To the millions who listen to the radio, classical music is a comparatively new experience.<sup>20</sup>

As the technology improved and the cost of a set diminished, the percentage of American households with a radio receiver increased from 11.1 percent in 1924 to over eighty percent in 1940.<sup>21</sup> According to Taylor, in 1940, American homes contained about 37 million radios with an estimated eighty million listeners. Of those eighty million, an estimated six million tuned in to classical music programs.<sup>22</sup>

Part of the radio's appeal was the ease of access it offered to listeners, some of whom believed knowledge of classical music promised upward social mobility. In a 1941 survey of listeners to WNYC's *Masterwork Hour* (a classical concert program), Edward A. Suchman found that many listeners (about half of the program's audience) used that radio program to increase their knowledge of classical music.<sup>23</sup> One respondent explained: "I had no musical education, and never would have sought out concerts. Music had to be brought to me. Radio did

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<sup>18</sup> Dixon Skinner, "Music Goes into Mass Production," *Harper's* (Apr 1939): 484-490.

<sup>19</sup> "Erno Rapee Believes Radio Creates Music Lovers," *The Milwaukee Journal*, 10 Jun 1938.

<sup>20</sup> Deems Taylor, *The Well Tempered Listener* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1940), 39.

<sup>21</sup> Marcus, 143.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor refers to classical music as "good music." Taylor, 268.

<sup>23</sup> Suchman says the radio either played an "initiating" or "nursing" role in these listeners' interest in classical music. Other listeners claimed they used the radio as a supplementary tool for an already fully developed interest. Suchman notes that radio may also lead to a decrease in interest, but his study of active listeners to a particular classical concert program could not cover that. Edward A. Suchman, "Invitation to Music: A Study of the Creation of New Music Listeners by the Radio," in *Radio Research: 1941*, edited by Paul Lazarsfeld (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1941), 148.

this. Since good music could be had without effort or expense I began to listen to it.”<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, some of the survey’s respondents acknowledged self-improvement and social prestige as motivations for their continued listening. A schoolteacher said:

When I began to teach school I decided it would be a good idea for me to know about music if I had to teach it. Otherwise I might not be in line for a raise. Feeling that I was a child as far as music was concerned, when I read in the paper about the [Ernest] Schelling concerts I decided to listen to them. From that point I was able to proceed to an interest in other good music, at first only over the radio, later at concerts.<sup>25</sup>

A young cashier said he listened to classical music on radio because he believed the activity increased his social status among his circle of friends: “My father and my mother tease me about my love of highbrow music. But they and my two brothers are really proud of me. Most of the people I know do not appreciate fine music, but they also respect me because I listen.”<sup>26</sup> Finally, a young physician admitted he listened because he believed his rich clients would expect someone in his profession to possess good taste in music: “I’ve been nursing my musical listening along very conscientiously. As a doctor I feel that I should be interested in the great music of the world. Besides my practice is mostly with wealthy people and I must know something about music.”<sup>27</sup>

Gershwin’s music arose at the same time people were listening to the radio and acquiring a taste for classical music. On musical variety shows like *The Hoffmann Ginger Ale Hour*, Gershwin’s symphonic music appeared on the same programs as music from the classical canon. Such popular concert programs nullified the cultural distinction between high and low. People like William Daly and Oscar Levant presented Gershwin’s music as something equally

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 148-149.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 171.

prestigious and equally popular as music by classical composers like Verdi and Tchaikovsky, or operetta and musical comedy composers like Herbert and Romberg. Gershwin recognized the importance of radio and its vast audience to his career as a songwriter and composer of larger works. According to his secretary Nanette Kutner, he once said:

Radio has done a lot for me. I agree that radio can kill a popular song faster than any other medium. [...] I feel that radio has educated the public musically to the point where they can thoroughly enjoy an opera. Radio never hurt symphony concerts and operas because they can't be played thirty times a night. I believe that in music everyone possesses natural good taste. Radio helped to develop that taste.<sup>28</sup>

Gershwin understood that radio allowed him to reach a broad audience presently tuning in in order to learn more about opera and symphonic music. In 1934, Gershwin used his own radio show *Music by Gershwin* to perform and explain some details of his compositions to listeners. In this sense, Gershwin himself was a middlebrow figure.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the broad access radio offered, German critic Theodor W. Adorno considered broadcasts of classical music, particularly the symphony, as inferior to the live encounter in a concert hall. Among other inadequacies, he noted that radio orchestras trimmed a symphony down to recognizable themes, destroying the possibility of hearing the work's manifold unity and reducing it to a "medley or potpourri" of quotations.<sup>30</sup> Kirsten MacLeod identifies collections of aphorisms and quotations, like *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, as products catering to middlebrows, who desired easily accessible tidbits of cultural information.<sup>31</sup> The same

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Nanette Kutner, "Radio Pays a Debt" (1936), collected in *The George Gershwin Reader*, edited by Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 248.

<sup>29</sup> For more, see Chapter One.

<sup>30</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "The Radio Symphony: An Experiment in Theory," in *Radio Research: 1941*, edited by Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank M. Stanton (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1941), 110-139. Also available in Adorno, "The Radio Symphony (1941)," in *Essays on Music*, 251-270, edited by Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> Kirsten MacLeod, *American Little Magazines of the Fin de Siècle: Art, Protest, and Cultural Transformation*, Studies in Book and Print Culture (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 291.

fetishization of information occurs through what Adorno calls “atomistic listening” of the radio symphony. He says: “In the isolation of the symphonic theme, only the trivial remains. And in turn it is the triviality of the symphonic detail which makes it so easy to remember and own it as a commodity under the more general trademark of ‘culture.’”<sup>32</sup> Adorno’s elitist views of the integrity of classical music devalues performance of such works on the radio. No mode of listening, whether in the concert hall or by radio, carries any more intrinsic value than another. Value lies with the myriad experiences of individual listeners, whose objectives, expectations and resultant feelings of satisfaction or disappointment will vary. Americans used the radio to hear classical music, because that medium offered an easy and affordable access point.

As I explain below, Levant participated in atomistic reductions of classical music on popular variety and quiz shows, like *The Hoffman Ginger Ale Hour*, *Information Please*, and *Kraft Music Hall*. He also occasionally performed on symphony programs at a time when many Americans used the radio to improve their understanding of classical music.

### **2.3 Oscar Levant as Radio Pianist**

Oscar Levant operated as a middlebrow figure through the medium of radio, building a reputation as an intellectual musical wit that he maneuvered into a successful career as a touring musician and popular Gershwin interpreter. Levant’s career as a radio pianist progressed from local classical musician, to dance band pianist, to featured player in a radio orchestra, to popular musical wit, and finally to musical star on a par with the likes of Al Jolson. As discussed in Chapter One, in the early 1920s, Levant occasionally appeared on Pittsburgh’s KDKA as a piano soloist and accompanist, making him one of the pioneers in classical music on the radio. After

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<sup>32</sup> Adorno, “The Radio Symphony,” 131.

honing his pop piano skills at the Mikado Inn in Croton-on-Hudson, New York, he played popular music in Bernie's dance band, whose performances from the Hotel Roosevelt were broadcast on WEAJ.<sup>33</sup> In the early 1930s, Levant worked mainly as an orchestra pianist for weekly radio programs, where he participated in many different forms of musical middlebrow. As a member of William Daly's radio orchestra, he received his first regular feature segment, wherein he performed short excerpts of classical music, including works by Gershwin. Briefly on *The Swift Hour*, Levant served as pianist while Sigmund Romberg explained musical pieces and delivered short music history lessons. Despite his years as a radio musician, Levant did not acquire sustained national renown until he worked as a jokester and musical savant on the popular quiz show *Information Please*. Finally, after he had used his radio stardom to build a successful career as a touring pianist and film celebrity, he left *Information Please* to co-host the highly popular *Kraft Music Hall* with Al Jolson.

### **2.3.1 Levant on Radio with Ben Bernie, 1925-1927**

Levant's first prolonged experience in radio performance came as a Ben Bernie dance band pianist. Levant joined Bernie's flagship group, the Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra, sometime after mid-May 1925.<sup>34</sup> The group appeared nightly at the hotel's grill, from which WEAJ broadcast the Monday and Wednesday performances. Levant remained with the Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra for about two years.<sup>35</sup> In addition to pop tunes, Bernie's shows also included jazzed-up

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<sup>33</sup> For more, see Chapter One.

<sup>34</sup> The earliest Levant could have appeared on radio with the Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra was the 18 May 1925 broadcast.

<sup>35</sup> Bernie's Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra went on a western tour of Pantages theatres, beginning in May 1927 in Minneapolis. Levant is not present in a publicity photo of the orchestra printed in Spokane. Pantages Theatre ad, *Spokane Chronicle*, 21 May 1927. After July tryouts in Long Branch, *Burlesque* opened at the Plymouth Theatre on 1 September 1927 and ran through 14 July 1928. For more, see Chapter 1.



classical music. Thus, in his first extended gig as a radio pianist, Levant participated in the presentation of classical music excerpts repackaged in a shortened and digestible form for a general audience.

Bernie's live shows and (by association) his broadcasts featured a mix of popular song and selections from light classical music, operettas and stage musicals. One radio listing reveals the sort of repertoire the band delivered. On 7 May 1925, the Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra appeared at a banquet celebrating the opening of Schenectady's Hotel Van Curler.<sup>36</sup> They played Richard Fall's "Oh Katharina!," a popular song recorded by Bernie, vaudevillian Billy Murray, and others that year. Bernie also selected Thurlow Lieurance's "By the Waters of Minnetonka" (1913), a song from the Indianist movement that Paul Whiteman had recorded the previous year. Light classical works included Edward MacDowell's "To a Wild Rose" from *Ten Woodland Sketches* (1896) and Tchaikovsky's "June" barcarolle from *The Seasons* (1876). Finally, Bernie selected excerpts from contemporary stage musicals, including Rudolf Friml and Herbert Stothart's *Rose-Marie* and Gershwin's *Lady, Be Good*, which was presently running at Broadway's Liberty Theatre.

According to the above program, Bernie's shows included the jazzed-up classical music that Adorno detested as vulgar.<sup>37</sup> Concerning the 10 June 1925 radiocast from the Hotel Roosevelt, the *Ithaca Journal* reported:

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<sup>36</sup> This performance, broadcasted by WGY, took place before Levant joined the group. "Radio Broadcasting Programs," *Berkshire Eagle*, 7 May 1925. The Hotel Van Curler is now called Elston Hall.

<sup>37</sup> In his 1933 essay "Farewell to Jazz," Adorno referred to jazz borrowings of themes and other musical strains from German composers like Beethoven and Wagner as "disrespectful" irritations that indicate an "impoverishment" of musical creativity. Theodor W. Adorno, "Farewell to Jazz" (1933), reprinted in *Essays on Music*, 496-500, edited by Richard Leppert, translated by Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

It was Ben Bernie who was responsible for the crystal clear jazz that moved along without a hitch, making one forget that crackles of static might be ruling the air in spots. Bernie's 'Day After Day' was one of the night's best bets, and again a famous band master showed that he could not resist 'pepping up' some classical tune in another number.<sup>38</sup>

Raymond Francis Yates lamented that most radio dance orchestras in 1925 presented a "zoological brand of music" that included "fox-trot versions" of Wagner arias and Strauss waltzes. Although he declared that such bands made jazz worse, he said that some of the dance band leaders had "been able to lift [jazz], not to an art, but to a sort of craftsmanship that deserves some kind of recognition." Along with Paul Whiteman and Vincent Lopez, Yates mentions Bernie as a leader with "an enjoyable technique all his very own, and it seems to us that he has supplied jazz with some real originality."<sup>39</sup> Employing racist language, Bernie himself explains at length why he blended classical music with jazz elements:

I express the mood of civilized society today in its reaction against our civilization. We are borne down by sophistication. Everything is too complex. Let us get back to nature and the good, healthy earth, let us give rein to the instincts that are primeval, let us express emotions as the pioneers in bronze and iron would express them. That is why I seek inspiration in the folk-song of savage tribes, in the tunes and harmonies of the levee blacks, in the 'blues' of old New Orleans and the Barbary Coast. Art is looking backward to the primitives. We are discovering great healthy virtues in the earliest music and literature. [...] So in music I am giving the public what it craves, by adapting classical music to syncopated time or down to jazz, plain and simple.<sup>40</sup>

Bernie justifies his classical arrangements within the then-in-vogue primitivist movement, which spawned hybrid concert-hall works like Milhaud's *La création du monde* (1923). He also considers such music as a popular alternative to elitist culture: a middlebrow product that packages in a palatable and accessible form high art to an audience that desires it.

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<sup>38</sup> D. J. M., "Turning the Radio Dial," *Ithaca Journal*, 11 Jun 1925.

<sup>39</sup> Raymond Francis Yates, "The Broadcast Listener," *Windsor Star*, 8 Aug 1925.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in "Music Goes Back to Primitive; It's Wholesome Jazz, Says Bernie," *San Francisco Examiner*, 17 Jun 1927.

### 2.3.2 Levant on Radio with Bill Daly, 1932-1934

Following his years as a member of Ben Bernie's Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra, Levant's next extended tenure as a radio pianist occurred under the guidance of Bill Daly, beginning in 1932.<sup>41</sup> Levant appeared as a weekly featured pianist on WOR's *The Hoffman Ginger Ale Hour*, directed by Daly, from 25 March 1932 to the show's finale on 30 December.<sup>42</sup> In late 1933, Levant resumed radio work with Daly for CBS's *The Adventures of Admiral Byrd*.

Daly's radio programs provided a wider variety of music and ensembles than Bernie's broadcasts. Like Bernie's shows, Daly's radio programs included selections from both classical favorites and popular Broadway shows. However, Daly led a full-sized orchestra, not a hotel dance band. Furthermore, on *The Hoffman Hour*, Levant received his first weekly feature, enabling him to demonstrate the range of his piano skills, particularly his ability to play classical piano pieces. Thus, through his association with Daly, Levant's radio career shifted away from dance music and toward middlebrow shows that provided serious music in appealing miscellany programs to general listeners in their homes. Finally, Levant frequently played selections of Gershwin's music within the context of a show that presented both highbrow classical music and popular selections from musical theater. At a time when more and more Americans used the

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<sup>41</sup> Inbetween that time, Levant made one of the earliest recordings of *Rhapsody in Blue* with Frank Black's Orchestra, published several songs, appeared in a successful Broadway play, wrote music for RKO's first music department, and helped Gershwin (now his close friend) with composition of the Second Rhapsody. For more information, see Chapter One.

<sup>42</sup> The *Hoffman Hour* debuted on 25 September 1931, airing on Fridays at 9 PM New York time. Levant probably joined the show when Daly took over Josef Pasternak's role as director with the 25 March 1932 episode. Radio listings for the show only identify Levant as a regularly featured pianist starting with Daly's first episode. Levant doesn't mention Pasternak in his memoirs. In *A Smattering of Ignorance* and *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*, he refers to two separate incidents that occurred on the 11 March 1932 episode. However, Gregory Stone was the featured pianist on that day. Whether Levant landed the gig through Daly's influence, he got a weekly feature upon Daly's arrival. Oscar Levant, *A Smattering of Ignorance* (1939; Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing, 1942), 260; Levant, *Memoirs of an Amnesiac* (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), 106; "Evening Post's Radio Time-Table," *New York Evening Post*, 11 Mar 1932; "Radio Programs," *Brooklyn Times Union*, 25 Mar 1932.

radio to familiarize themselves with classical music, programs like *The Hoffman Hour* helped establish Gershwin as a composer whose music fit comfortably alongside that of canonic composers.<sup>43</sup>

With *The Hoffman Hour*, Levant joined a large radio orchestra with an assembly of prominent and popular musicians. Like Levant, William Daly was a friend of Gershwin's and collaborated with him on several musical comedies in the 1920s. Daly also helped Gershwin draft several compositions, including the Concerto in F. In addition to Levant, the orchestra included two musicians, who would soon become nationally recognized jazz celebrities: trombonist Tommy Dorsey and clarinetist Benny Goodman.<sup>44</sup> Each episode featured a quartet of vocalists: baritone Nelson Eddy, contralto Veronica Wiggins, tenor Harold Hansen, and soprano Margaret Speaks. Prior to the *Hoffman Hour*, Eddy, the show's headliner, had performed with the Metropolitan Opera and appeared in several Philadelphia productions of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. He would later star in numerous MGM film operettas with soprano Jeanette

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<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, ratings and listenership statistics for this show are unavailable. Harrison B. Summers' catalog of Golden Age radio ratings includes shows featured on the Mutual Network, which did not coalesce until 1934. Jim Ramsburg's later catalog starts with the 1932-1933 season. Harrison B. Summers, *A Thirty-Year History of Programs Carried on National Radio Networks in the United States, 1926-1956* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1971); Jim Ramsburg, *Network Radio Ratings: A History of Prime Time Programs through the Ratings of Nielsen, Crossley and Hooper* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2012).

<sup>44</sup> Levant mentions Dorsey and Goodman in *A Smattering of Ignorance*, however he does not mention the show by name. This has led Levant biographers Kashner and Schoenberger to confuse the Hoffman Ginger Ale Orchestra with the Grape Nuts Orchestra, a later group led by Daly with Levant at the piano. Levant, *Smattering*, 259-260; Kashner and Schoenberger, 127-128. Goodman also mentions playing in a radio show with Levant in March 1934, yet he too does not mention the show's name. This very well may have been *The Adventures of Admiral Byrd*, a show sponsored by Grape Nuts cereal. Benny Goodman with Richard Gehman, "That Old Gang of Mine," *Collier's* 137, no. 2 (20 Jan 1956): 26.

MacDonald.<sup>45</sup> Speaks would become a famous radio singer through her later work with Daly on *The Voice of Firestone*.

The *Hoffmann Hour* format exemplifies what radio annotator David Hall calls “popular concert programs”:

These are the half-hour and sometimes one-hour programs that make use of a good-sized orchestra, usually with featured soloists, the repertoire consisting of familiar selections from opera, light opera, and musical comedy ... symphonic favorites ... as well as the better known items from the realm of art song and sentimental song.<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, each episode of *The Hoffman Hour* featured roughly fifteen musical selections: a lineup of show tunes, concert overtures, opera excerpts and selections of classical music performed by contrasting groups from a full orchestra to solo piano to a string quartet to vocal solos, duets, and trios. Levant correctly states that the orchestra “played no real jazz and little popular music of any kind.”<sup>47</sup> Daly usually began each show with an ensemble piece (like excerpts from Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Mikado*) that demonstrated the program’s full musical forces. Each episode included a couple of popular orchestral extracts from light classical works or comic opera and operetta, like the Minuet from Haydn’s *Toy Symphony*, “Dance of the Comedians” from Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride*, and “March of the Toys” from Herbert’s *Babes in Toyland*. Eddy, Wiggins, Hansen and Speaks each received a solo segment. Eddy was particularly fond of operatic arias, like “Toreador Song” from Bizet’s *Carmen*, and songs with military subjects, like “Boots” (poem by Rudyard Kipling; music by Hazel Felman). Rather than the orchestra, Levant

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<sup>45</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Popular Music*. 4th ed., s.v. “Eddy, Nelson, and Jeanette MacDonald” (Oxford University Press, 2006). For more on Eddy and MacDonald’s MGM operettas, see Todd Decker, “Loud, Pretty, Strong, White [Repeat]: The Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy Operettas at MGM (1935-1942),” in *The Oxford Handbook of Musical Theatre Screen Adaptations*, 357-378, edited by Dominic McHugh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>46</sup> David Hall, “Musical Continuity for Radio,” in *Music in Radio Broadcasting*, edited by Gilbert Chase, NBC-Columbia University Broadcasting Series (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1946), 95.

<sup>47</sup> Levant, *Smattering*, 259-260.

sometimes accompanied the vocalists at the piano. For example, he assisted Eddy in performances of songs, like Frank Bridge's "Love went a-riding" and Jacques Wolfe's "De Hallelujah Rhythm." Each show ended how it began, with a full ensemble number, usually a selection of tunes from a Broadway show, like Vincent Youmans' *Hit the Deck*.

In addition to these selections from opera, operetta, and "symphonic favorites," Daly regularly programmed music by Gershwin. The orchestral works presented on *The Hoffman Hour* with Bill Daly were "Song of the Flame," the overture to *Of Thee I Sing*, and *Rhapsody in Blue*. Vocal works with orchestra included selections from *Funny Face*, *Tip Toes*, *Of Thee I Sing*, *Delicious*, *Lady Be Good*, *Rosalie*, *Strike up the Band*, *Girl Crazy*, and *Tell Me More*. The selections from *Of Thee I Sing*—the opening of Act 2 and "Love is Sweeping the Country"—were so popular with the listening audience that Daly repeated the numbers on a subsequent program.<sup>48</sup> Those selections also featured at the end of the show's final episode.

Levant also had his own segment, probably about three or four minutes in length.<sup>49</sup> The repertoire indicates Levant's cultural fluidity: his ability to play selections from both the highbrow and popular cultural realms. He most frequently performed on his own, but he sometimes played a selection from a concerto. Table 2.1 lists all the composers whose works Levant played during his solo segment on *The Hoffmann Hour*.<sup>50</sup> The table also shows how many times Levant performed a particular composer. (Complete detailed listings for *The Hoffman Hour* with Bill Daly can be found in Appendix B.)

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<sup>48</sup> "Nelson Eddy Sings," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 7 Aug 1932.

<sup>49</sup> No recordings of this show have surfaced.

<sup>50</sup> The list does not take into account performances with a vocalist or other orchestral works on the show.

Composer	Total
Chopin	12
Liszt	8
Saint-Saëns	4
Arensky	2
Bach	2
Gershwin	2
Kreisler	2
Borodin	1
Debussy	1
Delibes	1
Fall	1
Friedman	1
Grieg	1
Liadov	1
Ochs	1
MacDowell	1
Moszkowski	1
Paderewski	1
Pick-Mangiagalli	1
Rachmaninoff	1
Smetana	1
Weber	1

**Table 2.1. Composers Performed by Levant on *The Hoffmann Ginger Ale Hour*.**

This selection of names comprises a performance repertoire much broader and more diverse than the material Levant played in his later career as a touring recitalist. According to available concert reviews from that period, which is discussed in Chapter 3, Levant did not perform works by Delibes, MacDowell, Paderewski, and several other names in the table. The list may partially reflect the composers he studied during his student years, especially under Stojowski. Indeed, some of Levant’s choices are common student works, like “Butterfly” by Grieg and “The Music Box” by Friedman, not to mention the works of Chopin, Liszt and Debussy.

The composers Levant played most frequently on *The Hoffman Hour* were canonic composers: Chopin and Liszt. Like Eddy's arias and concert songs, Levant's segment brought the highbrow association of classical music to a show populated largely by excerpts from Broadway shows and operettas. Not only were those names familiar to American radio listeners—what David Hall would have called “favorites”—but many of their works, like Chopin's Fantasy-Impromptu or Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 10, allowed Levant to demonstrate his technical skill and virtuosity.

Sometimes Levant performed with a small group of musicians. On 29 July 1932, he played the Allegro from J. S. Bach's Concerto for Two Violins in D minor with Daly and violinists Michel Gusikoff and Maximilian Pilzer.<sup>51</sup> On 14 August, he and a string quartet played a dance by Borodin. He also played two-piano works with Daly: two movements from Arensky's Suite of Two Pianos, op. 15; three variations from Bach's *Goldberg Variations* (arranged by Reger); and an arrangement (probably Daly's) of Gershwin's “Song of the Flame” for two pianos and orchestra.

In late 1933, Levant returned to the East Coast from his second stint in Hollywood and resumed working with Bill Daly as a pianist in a radio orchestra.<sup>52</sup> In *A Smattering of Ignorance*, Levant says he “was acting court pianist, at a distance of six thousand miles, to Admiral Byrd” at

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<sup>51</sup> Gusikoff was a semi-regularly featured violinist on the show and probably a member of the orchestra. He later became concertmaster of the New York, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestras. Pilzer, a guest on the show, was the concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic.

<sup>52</sup> The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* places him at Los Angeles's Colony Club with Sol Wurtzel in late August 1933. He returned to the East Coast sometime afterward. In mid-September, the *Gazette* reported that Levant was in Pittsburgh visiting family. In *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*, Levant incorrectly recalls the date: “Around 1934, I had to start playing the piano again after a period of years as a songwriter.” “Colony Club Center of Film Life,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 23 Aug 1933; “Notes of the Stage and Screen,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 15 Sep 1933; Levant, *Memoirs*, 113.



that time.<sup>53</sup> In November, CBS began broadcasting the *Adventures of Admiral Byrd*, which aired every Saturday night at 10 PM and featured Admiral Richard E. Byrd during his second expedition to Antarctica.<sup>54</sup> From a special radio station onboard one of Byrd's ships, the S.S. *Jacob Ruppert*, the signal was bounced to New York City from Buenos Aires for each half-hour episode. Grape Nuts Cereal sponsored the program, which aired for two years.<sup>55</sup> For the 1933-1934 season, the show was the second-highest rated Saturday night program and the twenty-sixth ranked overall, pulling more listeners than Fred Allen, the Philadelphia Orchestra, and Leo Reisman and Eddy Duchin's orchestras.<sup>56</sup> According to listings, Daly's association with the show ended with the 4 July 1934 episode.<sup>57</sup>

The program's unusual format combined news, documentary, adventure, and musical entertainment. CBS announcer Charles Murphy reported news of the expedition to the listening audience.<sup>58</sup> From New York, Daly led the Grape Nuts Orchestra and chorus, with Gordon Graham and Marie Silveira as soloists.<sup>59</sup> Available radio listings suggest that Levant did not receive any kind of special feature as he had on *The Hoffman Ginger Ale Hour*. The few listings that provide the repertoire indicate Daly's choices consisted almost entirely of popular music and selections from Broadway shows – no classical music as one would have heard on *The Hoffman Ginger Ale Hour*. For example, for the 21 April 1934 episode, Daly chose – among other popular selections – “March of the Toys” from Victor Herbert's *Babes in Toyland*, “Beyond the Blue Horizon” from the film *Monte Carlo* (1930), Leon Jessel's *Parade of the Wooden Soldiers*

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<sup>53</sup> Levant, *Smattering*, 168-169.

<sup>54</sup> The show moved to Wednesdays at 10 PM on 30 May 1934. “Radio Listings,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 30 May 1934.

<sup>55</sup> Levant, *Smattering*, 169.

<sup>56</sup> The top rated show for Saturday night's that season was *Robert Ripley's Saturday Night Party*. Ramsburg, 37.

<sup>57</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 3 Jul 1934.

<sup>58</sup> Ramsburg, 37.

<sup>59</sup> Carrol Nye, “S.C.-Notre Dame Game on Dial: Networks List Trojan Battle,” *LAT*, 25 Nov 1933.

(1905), and “New Sun in the Sky” from *The Band Wagon* (1931).<sup>60</sup> According to Levant, Byrd and his crew would respond with musical entertainment of their own, including “sea chanteys and barroom ballads.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, the contrast between modern show tunes from New York City and amateur performances from the South Pole provided much of the show’s novelty.<sup>62</sup>

### 2.3.3 Levant on Radio with Sigmund Romberg, Late 1934

In 1934, Levant very briefly worked with another middlebrow figure, Sigmund Romberg, whose *The Swift Hour* also packaged classical music in an interesting and approachable manner. The direct address and semi-educational format of the show fits within early radio’s public service agenda and also serves as a model for Levant’s later “talking recitals.” From 6 October 1934, *The Swift Hour*, sponsored by Swift Meats, aired every Saturday on NBC radio at 8 PM.<sup>63</sup> For the 1934-1935 season, Romberg’s nationally broadcast show ranked fourth on Saturday evenings, ahead of *Your Hit Parade*, *Roxy and His Gang*, and conductor and arranger Andre Kostelanetz. *The Swift Hour* ranked thirty-second overall, with an estimated average 3.2 million homes tuning in.<sup>64</sup> Appendix C lists the contents of each *Swift Hour* episode that featured Levant as a pianist.

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<sup>60</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 21 Apr 1934. Gershwin’s music was part of the show. The first episode opened with music from Gershwin’s *Let ‘Em Eat Cake*. “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 18 Nov 1933.

<sup>61</sup> Levant, *Sattering*, 169.

<sup>62</sup> Levant says Byrd’s crew delivered “with slightly frigid intonations.” Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> In February 1935, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reporter Darrel V. Martin identified Levant as a “prodigious composer” of songs, who was currently “writing” three radio shows: *The Swift Hour* with Sigmund Romberg, *The Gibson Family*, and Otto Harbach’s *Music at the Hayden’s*. Of these three programs, Levant mentions only *The Swift Hour* in his memoirs, and he claims to be only a pianist on the show. Martin likely confused or conflated his information. Since Levant served as Romberg’s pianist, he probably played piano for the other two shows as well, rather than composing new music or writing scripts. Here, I discuss only *The Swift Hour* as the show’s format and content highlights Levant’s middlebrow status and anticipates his later “talking recitals.” Darrell V. Martin, “Levants’ Musical Quartet: Four Brother Display Genius,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 2 Feb 1935.

<sup>64</sup> Ramsburg, 45-46.

Historian Joan Shelley Rubin situates Romberg's *Swift Hour* within the growing American middlebrow culture of the 1930s, when more recognized and reputable American intellectuals began joining the airwaves. William Lyon Phelps, an English professor at Yale who had advocated for the study of contemporary literature, co-hosted the show with Romberg. With his segment on each episode, Phelps delivered a monologue in a friendly and conversational style that combined "gossip, homily and criticism."<sup>65</sup> He reassured listeners seeking to climb the social ladder that one need not seek a formal education in order to become an intellectual, rather one could simply read "great books" and develop personality. In other words, he reinforced the notion that "culture, while accessible, was a matter not of training but of accumulation."<sup>66</sup>

In addition to Phelps's cultural commentary, Romberg introduced and explained selections of classical music in an approachable and interesting manner. This delivery appealed to the general American listener, who may have considered classical music too highbrow, antiquated, or boring. He prearranged and conducted medleys from composers of comic operas and operettas, like Emmerich Kalman and Oscar Straus. He also organized music history lessons as dramatic sketches. For example, a playlet from the second episode dramatized the life of Jacques Offenbach and featured the Barcarolle from *Tales of Hoffmann*. Romberg also used the program to present new orchestral works he had written specifically for the show.

Levant only participated in the show for about a month. In *The Unimportance of Being Oscar*, Levant discusses the incident that led to his release from the show: "For one particular program I was scheduled to play the *Moonlight Sonata*. It was easy to do, so I didn't give it

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<sup>65</sup> Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 285.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

much thought. I hit a wrong note in the second bar. Romberg fired me.”<sup>67</sup> That incident occurred on the 3 November 1934 episode, which related “Romberg’s version of how Beethoven composed the *Moonlight Sonata*.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, if Levant had been with the show from the beginning, he only played piano on five episodes before Romberg let him go. In Chapter Three, I argue that Levant used Romberg and Phelps’s familiar, conversational approach while he toured the country, presented various classical piano works to American audiences, and captivated and comforted them with anecdotes, jokes, and seemingly off-the-cuff lectures.

#### **2.3.4 *Information Please, 1938-1947***

As a panelist on the popular quiz show *Information Please*, Levant entered the next stage of his radio career: musical wit and popular professional expert. By the late 1930s, Levant had many years experience with radio performance both as a classical and popular pianist. His 8 September 1937 performance of the Concerto in F at the Hollywood Bowl Gershwin memorial concert, broadcast nationwide over CBS radio, brought him the greatest national attention he had ever received.<sup>69</sup> However, he did not immediately turn that national recognition into a lucrative concert career. Instead, after writing music for producer David O. Selznick’s film *Nothing Sacred*, he returned to New York radio. Levant’s service as a musical expert on *Information Please* brought him instantaneous nationwide celebrity and also made him a popular radio intellectual, like Phelps. Levant became a household name. Americans tuned in to marvel at Levant’s seemingly boundless knowledge of music history, to witness his ability to play almost any tiny excerpt of popular or classical music from memory, and to laugh at his unexpected

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<sup>67</sup> Oscar Levant, *The Unimportance of Being Oscar* (New York: Putnam, 1968), 38.

<sup>68</sup> “The Radio Parade,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 28 Oct 1934.

<sup>69</sup> See Chapter One.

quips and comments on historical figures or popular culture. Levant's middlebrow status as a popular radio wit and intellectual generated for him a lucrative career as a touring musician and recording artist, wherein for about fifteen years he built an even greater legacy as a classical pianist and a popular interpreter of Gershwin's piano music. Indeed, Levant says, "My career as a concert pianist took on a new vitality after *Information Please*."<sup>70</sup>

Joan Shelley Rubin situates *Information Please* within early twentieth-century middlebrow culture, particularly the phenomenon of education radio and American educational activities, like spelling bees and living room trivia games. The radio quiz show format arose in the mid-1930s with programs like *Professor Quiz's Night School of the Air* and *Dr. I.Q.* Such programming helped redefine "having culture" as "having information," a mental bank of facts or a *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* or the *Encyclopedia Britannica* on the shelf for quick and easy reference. Facts can be easily obtained in leisure time through joining a book club, or attending a public lecture, or listening to the radio. With a large store of facts, one can easily contribute to conversations on almost any topic. For the middlebrow consumer, facts aided personality and contributed to self-growth.<sup>71</sup> With the radio's easy (and free) access, as well as its informal address, one could tune in to shows like *Information Please*, and later impress friends and acquaintances with facts acquired from a half hour of listening. Consequently, as Rubin explains, one's popularity and social status increases. Moreover, one need not be a college graduate to render an academic's education irrelevant.<sup>72</sup> To use MacDonald's pejorative, *Information Please* was Midcult, or mass culture disguised as highbrow culture.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 147.

<sup>71</sup> Rubin, 26.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 315-320. See also John K. Hutchens, "Who Thought up the Quiz Show?," *New York Times Magazine* (23 Aug 1942): 12-13, 31.

<sup>73</sup> Dwight MacDonald, *Masscult and Midcult: Essays against the Grain*, 35.

17 May 1938 marked the first broadcast of *Information Please* from NBC's WJZ station in New York. Each half-hour episode featured a panel of four "experts" answering a variety of questions on topics such as literature, politics, history, current events, sports, music, and science. Questions could have one or more correct answers, and the moderator ultimately decided whether a question had been answered satisfactorily. The creation of producer Dan Golenpaul, *Information Please* reversed the standard format for the question-and-answer quiz show.<sup>74</sup> The questions came not from the show's producers, but from the listening audience. This format created an appealing interactive relationship between listeners and the expert panelists that turned the audience into scholars, if they could stump the experts. Furthermore, if a question stumped the panel, the listener who submitted the question won a set of the Encyclopedia Britannica.

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<sup>74</sup> Most of this show's episodes are available on Old Time Radio Researchers (OTRR). So many episodes survive because *Information Please* was the first program that NBC allowed to be recorded and re-broadcast. This instigated the practice of recording programs rather than repeating them at a later and more convenient time for the West Coast. As John Dunning explains, "Being spontaneous ... was impossible to repeat." John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 345.

Season	Average Hooper Rating <sup>75</sup>	Average Listeners (in millions) <sup>76</sup>	Ranking (day of week)	Ranking (overall)
1938-1939	7.6	5.07	unranked (Tuesday night)	Not in Top 50
1939-1940	13.1	9.01	8th (Tuesday night)	27th
1940-1941	12.9	9.19	3rd (Friday night)	28th
1941-1942	12.2	8.94	4th (Friday night)	41st
1942-1943	12.6	9.64	8th (Monday night)	38th
1943-1944	11.5	8.86	7th (Monday night)	45th
1944-1945	10.7	8.69	13th (Monday night)	Not in Top 50
1945-1946	10.1	8.36	12th (Monday night)	Not in Top 50
1946-1947	7.9	6.72	unranked (Wednesday night)	Not in Top 50

**Table 2.2. Information Please Hooper Ratings and Rankings.**

<sup>75</sup> Ramsburg explains that one Hooper rating point represents one percent of radio-owning households. In the appendices to *Network Radio Ratings*, he provides a table that supplies the number of homes represented by one rating point with each broadcast season. As expected, this number increases with each season. The Hooper rating presented in my table is the average rating for the entire season. Thus, in any given week, the number may be higher or lower than the average. Ramsburg, 229.

<sup>76</sup> This number is calculated by taking the average Hooper rating and multiplying it first by the number of households represented by one rating point, then by 2.5, a number Ramsburg uses as a “conservative guesstimate” of listeners per home. Ibid.

For most of its stay on the airwaves, *Information Please* was a successful program. Table 2.2 contains the show's Hooper ratings, average number of listeners, and average ranking for each season it was on the air.<sup>77</sup> The show's most successful years, by average number of listeners, were 1939 to 1943, with the highest number of average listeners acquired during the 1942-1943 season, with 9.64 million people. During the show's peak years, Levant concurrently worked to build a financially lucrative career as a touring pianist. By 1942, Americans not only recognized Levant as the famous wit from radio, but also the leading advocate of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Concerto in F*.

Levant alone cannot be credited with the show's success. The show featured other popular "intellectuals," and their exhibitions of facts, as well as their fascinating repartee, kept people tuning in each week. The show's regular assemblage of talking personalities featured "cerebral giants" selected by Golenpaul.<sup>78</sup> A book critic for the *New Yorker*, Clifton Fadiman (1904-1999) hosted and moderated the show. A Columbia University graduate, he had previous experience on radio as a reviewer of literature. He dictated the pace, presented the questions, and attempted to keep the show professional and entertaining. According to Rubin, his "witty and knowledgeable" approach led to his popular appeal as an "intellectual and man-next-door."<sup>79</sup> With each episode, the four-person panel consisted of two permanent seats, one rotating slot, and one guest chair, usually occupied by a celebrity or politician promoting a new film or book. John Kieran (1892-1981), a World War I veteran and sports editor for the *New York Times*, served as the first regular weekly panelist. With a science degree from Fordham University and a lifelong

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<sup>77</sup> All data from Ramsburg, *Network Radio Ratings*.

<sup>78</sup> Jim Cox, *The Great Radio Audience Participation Shows: Seventeen Programs from the 1940s and 1950s* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 101.

<sup>79</sup> Rubin, 320.



enthusiasm for ornithology, he acted as the sports and science expert.<sup>80</sup> Gilbert Seldes refers to the other regular panelist, Franklin P. Adams (1881-1960), as a sophisticated columnist and “the patron saint of the smart.”<sup>81</sup> Adams belonged to the Algonquin Round Table, a club of intellectuals, poets, and writers, whose cultural observations, gibes and aphorisms often circulated in gossip columns. His *New York Herald Tribune* column “The Conning Tower” had made him a popular authority on Shakespeare.<sup>82</sup>

Golenpaul originally selected musicologist Sigmund Spaeth as the musical expert, but quickly replaced him with Levant. Many radio listeners would have recognized Spaeth as a music intellectual. In the early 1930s, Spaeth had hosted NBC’s *The Tune Detective*, wherein he explained the classical roots of well-known tunes.<sup>83</sup> An earlier commitment to the University of Hawaii prevented Spaeth from participating in the summer’s programs. Irving Kolodin, music critic for the *New York Sun*, directed Golenpaul to a *New York Post* article that described Levant as “the wag of Broadway.”<sup>84</sup> Levant first appeared on *Information Please* on 5 July 1938.<sup>85</sup> During his one appearance on 27 September, Spaeth matched Levant’s musical knowledge but not his personality. Spaeth believed he had performed well, answering most questions correctly but his attempts at humor fell flat. Consequently, the music chair went permanently to Levant. Spaeth attributed his failure to a present and increasing decadence in public taste. As Gary Rosen

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<sup>80</sup> “John Kieran’s World: A Remarkable Place,” *Bridgeport Post* (Conn.), 29 Nov 1964.

<sup>81</sup> Seldes, *Seven Lively Arts*, 281.

<sup>82</sup> For more on the Algonquin Round Table, see Scott Meredith, *George S. Kaufman and the Algonquin Round Table* (Boston: G. Allen & Urwin, 1977).

<sup>83</sup> Gary Rosen, *Unfair to Genius: The Strange and Litigious Career of Ira B. Arnstein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 114-116.

<sup>84</sup> Michael Mok, “Here’s Broadway’s Herring Barrel Philosopher,” *New York Post*, 27 June 1938.

<sup>85</sup> This episode, as well as most episodes from the series, are available at *Information Please*, Old Time Radio Researchers Group Library (OTRR), I Series, <<http://otrlibrary.org/i.html>>, last accessed 15 Jan 2020.

explains, “Levant had become serious music’s funny man.”<sup>86</sup> Spaeth grouched years later, “Mr. Oscar Levant has been my substitute [on *Information Please*] all the way through.”<sup>87</sup>

From his first episode, Levant demonstrated a vast knowledge of music history. For example, Fadiman asked the panel to name pieces of classical music associated with given subjects, i.e. “Napoleon” (Beethoven’s *Eroica* Symphony) and “a railroad train” (Honegger’s *Pacific 231*). Levant answered five out of six correctly.<sup>88</sup> The audience applauded him. With his first appearance, Levant had not yet developed a familiar and witty repartee with Adams and Kieran. He directed his answers and comments either inward or toward Fadiman. He also does not crack very many jokes. Nevertheless, in subsequent episodes through the summer, Levant’s banter with his fellow panelists quickly developed to the consistent delight of the audience. He sat on the panel every other week starting with the 26 July episode. Levant left after the 10 July 1944 episode, but returned on 22 April 1946 and remained as a regular panelist until 28 May 1947.

Once Levant became a semi-regular panelist, each episode usually featured him demonstrating his musical memory and technical skills at the piano. In addition to his ability to recall facts from music history, Levant could play almost any given tune or classical excerpt at the piano from memory when asked. For example, on the 27 December 1938 episode, Levant successfully played from memory four classical musical selections based on clues provided by Fadiman. They were “adventurous scamp” (Strauss’s *Till Eulenspiegel*), “bewitched broomstick” (Dukas’ *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*), “cry of the warrior maidens” (Wagner’s *Die Walküre*), and “love of Romeo and Juliet” (from Tchaikovsky). Later, on the 24 January 1939 episode, Fadiman

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<sup>86</sup> Rosen, 186-187.

<sup>87</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>88</sup> He could not come up with Saint-Saëns’s *Danse macabre* for “a graveyard frolic.”

asked Levant to play the principal theme of a work in response to a “famous passage” from the work supplied by the studio pianist Joe Kahn.<sup>89</sup> Levant correctly answered with the main themes from Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony, Schubert’s Unfinished Symphony, and Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto in C Minor. Levant could also continue a piece of music where Kahn left off, a skill he demonstrated on 13 June 1939. The selections were J. S. Bach’s C minor Fugue, the last movement of Beethoven’s “Appassionata,” and Chopin’s A minor Etude, op. 25/11. In addition to revealing Levant’s memory, these demonstrations also reduced classical pieces to their themes, rendering them as recognizable quotations for the listening audience and encouraging the sort of atomized listening that Adorno abhorred.

Other questions demonstrated Levant’s ability to identify classical works simply from a single musical line from a random instrument. On 14 November 1939, Levant correctly placed Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 6, Brahms’s Symphony No. 4, and the Scherzo from Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony with passages played by a string bass. Later, on the 13 December 1940 episode, Levant correctly identified the bassoon solos from the opening of Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 6, Dukas’ *Sorcerer’s Apprentice*, and Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade*.<sup>90</sup> On 28 November 1941, Levant knew trumpet passages from Wagner’s *Lohengrin* and Gershwin’s *Of Thee I Sing*.<sup>91</sup> On 25 September 1942, Levant recognized French horn passages from Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony and Dvořák’s New World Symphony; Adams identified a horn excerpt from Wagner’s *Tannhauser*. Finally, on 31 May 1943, Levant identified the first movement of Schubert’s Unfinished Symphony, the first movement of Brahms’s First Symphony, and Strauss’s *Till Eulenspiegel* simply from the second violin part.

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<sup>89</sup> Studio pianist’s name from Dunning, *On the Air*, 341.

<sup>90</sup> This was also the episode where Levant made the off-color remark about bassoon players mentioned in Chapter 1.

<sup>91</sup> No one identified the Lord Chancellor passage from Arthur Sullivan’s *Iolanthe*.

Questions read by Fadiman sometimes referred to George Gershwin, demonstrating the importance of the composer to listeners of the program. The Gershwin works most frequently referenced on the show were *An American in Paris*, Concerto in F, *Of Thee I Sing* and *Porgy and Bess*. Levant regularly demonstrated his knowledge of Gershwin's compositions.<sup>92</sup> On 29 November 1938, Levant corrected Fadiman when he referred to *An American in Paris* as a symphony: "It's not a symphony; it's a tone poem." Later, on 5 November 1940, when given the line "I'm young, I'm a swell conversationalist, and I've got a chance to be president," Levant correctly identified the character Wintergreen from *Of Thee I Sing*. Curiously, questions from available episodes on which Levant appeared usually do not pertain to the *Rhapsody in Blue*. Perhaps listeners, who wanted to stump the panel, did not submit questions about the Rhapsody because of its fame and also for its association with Levant.<sup>93</sup> Gershwin songs often mentioned on the show were "The Man I Love," "S'Wonderful" and "Lady Be Good." On 14 November 1939, Kahn played the bridge from "S'Wonderful" and Levant successfully responded with the rest of the refrain. Moreover, Levant could tell when Kahn did not present a song in its original key. On 10 May 1943, when Khan played a passage from "Embraceable You," Levant exclaimed, "The piano's too high!"

Seven years on *Information Please* brought Levant national renown as a popular intellectual, musician and wit. He joined a panel of professional experts at a moment when such middlebrow individuals began to appear more frequently on radio. The quiz show format played to the middlebrow consumer's desire for cultural information in succinct and easily absorbable

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<sup>92</sup> On the 11 July 1939 episode, Fadiman did mention that Levant had performed at the Lewisohn Stadium Gershwin Night the previous evening.

<sup>93</sup> In one exception, on 10 January 1939, Levant correctly answered that Gershwin wrote the Rhapsody for Paul Whiteman's Aeolian Hall concert.

portions—as simple facts or, in the case of classical music, as quotation. Although Levant sometimes demonstrated his knowledge of Gershwin’s music, in available recordings of the show Fadiman never introduces Levant as a leading Gershwin pianist. The show also did not offer Levant the opportunity to demonstrate at length his pianistic skills. However, while serving as the *Information Please* music expert, Levant contemporaneously appeared on concert programs for full presentations of Gershwin’s large piano works.

### **2.3.5 Levant as Leading Gershwinite: Appearances on Various Radio Shows, 1938-1942**

Levant’s popular appeal on *Information Please* reinvigorated his career as a radio pianist. The celebrity status he gained by participating in the show eventually led to further appearances on radio concert programs, shows like *Magic Key of RCA* and *Voice of Firestone*. Prior to his first national tour, which did not begin until the 1939-1940 season, Levant appeared on several nationally broadcast comedy and variety shows as a guest. Most of the time, in addition to volleying jokes with the show’s host, he often sat at the piano, usually to play a Gershwin selection. These appearances permitted Americans from the comfort of their living room to hear Levant give uninterrupted performances of Gershwin’s music. Moreover, he frequently performed the Concerto in F at a time when few played it on the radio, not to mention the concert hall. By January 1942, when Levant began touring as a “talking recitalist”, he had established himself as a nationally recognized musician and wit, as well as the leading contemporary interpreter of Gershwin’s piano music.

On 2 October 1938, three months after his debut on *Information Please*, Levant appeared on NBC’s variety show *Magic Key of RCA*. As the *Chicago Tribune* reported, Levant “[honored]

a close friendship with George Gershwin by a rendition of the late composer's Concerto in F."<sup>94</sup> In 1939, Levant twice appeared on NBC's *The Voice of Firestone* to offer selections of Gershwin's concerto. On the 9 January 1939 episode, Levant played the concerto's third movement with Alfred Wallenstein leading the NBC Symphony Orchestra. The *New York Daily News* printed a positive review: "Oscar Levant discarded the clown's mantle and went serious on the Margaret Speaks-Alfred Wallenstein concert. The *Information Please* jester turned out to be an excellent craftsman in his rendition of the third movement from Gershwin's Concerto in F."<sup>95</sup> Levant returned to the show on 16 July to perform the full concerto, the symphony this time led by Frank Black.<sup>96</sup>

With the 1939-1940 season, while also appearing on *Information Please*, Levant went on his first national tour with the *Rhapsody in Blue* and Concerto in F as his main repertoire.<sup>97</sup> Some of his live appearances were broadcast on radio. On 10 December 1939, Levant performed the *Rhapsody* with the Detroit Symphony on ABC's *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*, one of the most popular symphony concert programs in the country.<sup>98</sup> The *New York Daily News* reported, "Oscar Levant, the music expert on *Information Please*, demonstrated last night that he not only can talk music but also play it." Later, on 27 August 1940, Levant travelled to the Golden Gate Exposition and played *Rhapsody in Blue* and the Concerto in F with the San Francisco Symphony, a performance led by Meredith Willson. Nine-thousand people filled the California Coliseum to capacity that night; many more tuned in. The *San Francisco Examiner* reported:

"Levant is an extraordinarily talented musician. His fingers are nimble and true. He has a catchy

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<sup>94</sup> Levant only performed the third movement that evening. "Lotte Lehmann and Fred Stone on *Magic Key Hour*," *Chicago Tribune*, 2 Oct 1938.

<sup>95</sup> Sid Shalit, "Listening In," *New York Daily News*, 10 Jan 1939.

<sup>96</sup> "Brief City News," *Greenwood Index-Journal* (South Carolina), 16 Jul 1939.

<sup>97</sup> I discuss this tour in depth in Chapter 3.

<sup>98</sup> In 1938, according to a survey, the show ranked fifth in nationwide popularity. Skinner, 485.

rhythm. His playing has color, finesse and melodic charm. Last night's crowd acclaimed him."<sup>99</sup> Concerning other radio appearances that year, he twice stopped by NBC's variety program *Kraft Music Hall* in Los Angeles, then hosted by Bing Crosby, to play music by Gershwin. On 28 March 1940, after trading quips with Crosby, Levant offered Gershwin's Second Prelude, a piece he frequently employed as a concert encore.<sup>100</sup> He returned on 18 July and, in addition to an excerpt from Scarlatti's C-major Sonata and Debussy's "La soirée dans Grenade" from *Estampes*, he also played a solo-piano version of Gershwin's "Fascinatin' Rhythm."<sup>101</sup>

In 1941, Levant continued to appear on radio outside of *Information Please* in order to play Gershwin's music. On the 3 September 1941 episode of *Millions for Defense*, a radio show sponsored by the United States Treasury Department to help sell war bonds, Levant delivered a musical salute to Gershwin, along with established Gershwinites, like Fred Astaire, Todd Duncan, Ann Brown, and the Juanita Hall Choir, among others.<sup>102</sup> Astaire had starred in Gershwin Broadway shows, like *Lady, Be Good* and *Funny Face*, as well as the RKO film musical *Shall We Dance*, in which he sang numerous Gershwin tunes, including "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off" and "They Can't Take That Away from Me." Duncan and Brown had played the original *Porgy and Bess*, and had recently shared the stage with Levant at the 1941 Lewisohn Stadium Gershwin Night.<sup>103</sup> The *Tampa Tribune* reported, "Fred Astaire and Oscar Levant brought back pleasant memories of Gershwin hits when presenting their impressive tribute to the

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<sup>99</sup> Alexander Fried, "9,000 Acclaim Oscar Levant in Fair Concert," *San Francisco Examiner*, 28 Aug 1940.

<sup>100</sup> "Oscar Levant to Appear on *Kraft Music Hall* Tonight," *Greenville News* (South Carolina), 28 Mar 1940.

<sup>101</sup> "Program Prevues," *Shreveport Times*, 18 July 1940.

<sup>102</sup> "Air Ya Listenin?," *Mason City Globe-Gazette* (Iowa), 3 Sep 1941. Earlier, on 2 July 1941, Levant had appeared on the inaugural *Millions for Defense* program with the rest of the *Information Please* regulars for a short question-and-answer round. Levant did not play the piano. A recording of that episode is available on *Judy Garland and Friends*, podcast, "Judy Garland Podcast 1941-08-02 Treasury Hour - Millions for Defense," <<https://judy-garland.podomatic.com/>>, uploaded 17 May 2019, last accessed 3 Aug 2019.

<sup>103</sup> I discuss Levant's career as the regular pianist at the annual Lewisohn Stadium Gershwin Nights in Chapter 4.

great composer on *Millions for Defense*.”<sup>104</sup> The *New York Daily News* proclaimed, “With Oscar Levant serving as a scintillating pianist and narrator, the procession of songs made us realize again what a great composer Gershwin was!”<sup>105</sup>

One particular guest radio appearance demonstrates how, by the early 1940s, Levant had used his radio career and his live appearances across the United States to establish himself as the leading interpreter of Gershwin’s piano music within five years of Gershwin’s passing. By late 1942, Levant had a hugely successful career as a “talking recitalist.” On 20 September of that year, Levant appeared on *The Pause That Refreshes*, a CBS radio musical variety show sponsored by Coca-Cola. As he did in his recitals, he talked about Gershwin and his familiarity with his works. Moreover, host Albert Spalding introduced Levant:

A few years ago, two men used to meet regularly to play new music by George Gershwin. Both admired Gershwin’s music. Both played it very well. And they got new pieces by Gershwin long before anyone else did, because one of the men was Gershwin himself. The other was Oscar Levant, our guest today. A composer and a brilliant pianist himself, Oscar Levant knew Gershwin so well and worked with him so closely that he became without question the foremost interpreter of Gershwin’s work.<sup>106</sup>

Levant followed that introduction with a performance of the *Rhapsody in Blue* and two of Gershwin’s piano preludes.

*Information Please* had brought Levant national stardom. He used that stardom to build a lucrative radio and touring career. Americans now knew Levant as a famous wit and piano virtuoso. They also knew him as a close friend to Gershwin and considered him the ascendant interpreter of Gershwin’s music at a time when few touring pianists performed his works,

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<sup>104</sup> “On the Air Today,” *Tampa Tribune*, 5 Sep 1941.

<sup>105</sup> Ben Gross, “Listening In,” *New York Daily News*, 4 Sep 1941.

<sup>106</sup> *The Pause That Refreshes on the Air*, 20 September 1942, Marr Sound Archives, University of Missouri-Kansas City.



especially the Concerto in F. In April 1943, a *Washington Post* readers' poll listed Levant as one of the "Top Ten" preferred soloists. Ranked ahead of him were Jascha Heifetz, Eugene List and Jeanette MacDonald – the latter two tied for second. Levant ranked ahead of classical musicians like Vladimir Horowitz, Lily Pons, Lawrence Tibbett, and Fritz Kreisler.<sup>107</sup>

### **2.3.6 Levant on *Kraft Music Hall*, 1947-1949**

After his final episode of *Information Please* on 28 May 1947, Levant moved with his family to Los Angeles, where he co-hosted *Kraft Music Hall* with Al Jolson.<sup>108</sup> This show was the most popular regular program of Levant's radio career. His ability to share the stage with a star as big as Jolson, demonstrates how enormous Levant's stardom had become. As with *The Hoffman Ginger Ale Hour*, Levant once again had his own weekly segment. While Jolson's popular songs (accompanied by either Levant or the show's orchestra) provided most of the musical entertainment, Levant's classical piano segment brought prestige to the show. Each man's performance repertoire demonstrates their own respective canons. Jolson sang tunes he had historically sung on Broadway and film, as well as other popular standards. Likewise, Levant usually offered selections from popular classical music by composers any general listener should know. Although Levant sometimes played Gershwin, his selections mirror his desire (at this point in his career) to demonstrate his value as an interpreter of works by composers other than Gershwin.<sup>109</sup> Moreover, most of his *Kraft Music Hall* repertoire comes from material he recorded for Columbia Records. Finally, Levant's performances simplified classical pieces for

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<sup>107</sup> "Favorites Chosen in Music Poll," *Washington Post*, 4 Apr 1943.

<sup>108</sup> All episodes referenced in this section can be accessed at *Kraft Music Hall*, Old Time Radio Researchers Group Library, K Series <<http://otrlibrary.org/k.html>>, last accessed 15 Jan 2020.

<sup>109</sup> This shift in Levant's career is discussed in Chapter Three.

the middlebrow listener to recognizable themes, encouraging the atomistic listening that Adorno deplored.

On 13 August, *Radio Daily* reported that the J. Walter Thompson Company had drawn up a contract for Levant to appear as a co-host with Al Jolson on a rebranding of NBC's *Kraft Music Hall*, previously hosted by Bing Crosby.<sup>110</sup> According to the stipulations of his contract, Levant was to appear on every Thursday episode from 9 to 9:30 PM for a period of thirteen weeks, from 2 October to 31 December, with an option for renewal after that time. Responsibilities included "playing the piano, reading lines, making yourself available for conferences with writers and other program personnel, assisting in devising material for the program (primarily that portion of the program in which you will appear) and taking part in rehearsals."<sup>111</sup> Thus, Levant had some control over the music he would perform during his allotted solo time, however most of his repertoire came from material he recorded for Columbia Records. The contract granted him two guest appearances on other radio programs every thirteen weeks, as long as those programs did not share airtime with *Kraft Music Hall*. He also received time away for motion picture commitments.

Though it may seem unusual to pair Levant with a superstar like Jolson, both men at the time were mega-celebrities. Jolson, who had made Gershwin's "Swanee" a hit in 1919 had maintained his musical stardom into the 1940s. In 1946, historically the year the film industry sold the most tickets. Columbia Pictures' biopic *The Jolson Story* won three Oscars at the 17th Academy Awards, including Best Music and Best Scoring. Although Larry Parks had played the film's lead role, Jolson dubbed his singing voice for the film's soundtrack. Contemporaneously,

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<sup>110</sup> "Main Street," *Radio Daily*, 13 Aug 1947. Crosby moved to *Philco Radio Time* on ABC.

<sup>111</sup> Typewritten *Kraft Music Hall* contract, dated 12 Aug 1947 (University of Southern California, Doheny Library, Cinema-Television Archive, Oscar Levant Collection, box 1, folder 33).

Levant had finished a successful run on *Information Please*. His piano recitals and symphony orchestra appearances had earned him national recognition as not only the leading Gershwin pianist, but one of the most popular classical pianists in the country. As the co-host, Levant served as Jolson's musical foil, a subject which constituted a hefty amount of the show's comedy.

Each episode followed the same formula, operating largely on scripted banter between Levant and Jolson. The pop tunes selected for each program were usually standards, especially those from Jolson's stage and film career.<sup>112</sup> After an introduction from announcer Ken Carpenter, Jolson opened every show with the final bars to the popular song "April Showers" (1921, Lou Silvers and Buddy De Sylva): "So keep looking for a bluebird and listening for its song whenever April showers come along."<sup>113</sup> For the first segment, Jolson would sing a popular tune backed by Lou Bring and His Orchestra. Regular choices included "Toot, Toot, Tootsie" (1922, Gus Kahn, Ernie Erdman, and Danny Russo), "I'm Just Wild about Harry" (1921, Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake), and "Yaaka Hula Hickey Dula" (1916, E. Ray Goetz, Pete Wendling, Joe Young). Next, Levant joined Jolson onstage for three or four minutes of scripted banter. Common subjects included Jolson's age and his extravagant wealth.<sup>114</sup> Levant's solo piano segment lasted about three or four minutes. He usually selected a short piece or a concerto excerpt by a popular classical composer, like Grieg or Tchaikovsky. Levant's classical music segment contrasted with Jolson's opening popular number.<sup>115</sup> Then, Jolson would often

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<sup>112</sup> For a complete list of Jolson's *Kraft Music Hall* repertoire, see James Fisher, *Al Jolson: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 160-165.

<sup>113</sup> Jolson had introduced the Buddy DeSylva and Lou Silvers song in the 1921 musical *Bombo*, which also featured the popular songs "California, Here I Come" and "Toot, Toot, Tootsie," also regularly featured on *Kraft Music Hall*.

<sup>114</sup> For example, on the 15 January 1948 episode, Jolson kidded: "When I can't sleep, I don't count sheep. I count mink."

<sup>115</sup> This segment was usually preceded by a one-minute commercial advertising a Kraft product, like Velveeta.

reminisce about songs from the past and – accompanied by Levant – would sing fragments or a full chorus from them, creating a pastiche of popular tunes, sometimes with comedic interjections of classical quotations from Levant.<sup>116</sup> The show’s guest usually arrived for the next segment, which lasted for about seven or eight minutes. After some banter with the guest, more music would follow, unless the guest were a non-musician. The final minutes of the show, like the opening segment, featured Jolson, accompanied by the orchestra, singing a closing number.

Whereas Levant’s remarks on *Information Please* were completely off the cuff, his *Kraft Music Hall* repartee with Jolson was largely scripted. In *The Great Audience* (1950), Gilbert Seldes rightfully argued that Levant succeeded on *Information Please* because he appeared as his genuine, unfiltered, sarcastic and often obnoxious self. By contrast, on *Kraft Music Hall* Seldes heard Levant’s scripted gags and “endless jokes about Jolson’s age and ignorance” as a dilution of his personality:

His attack was no longer clean and brilliant. He read without conviction parodies of his own spontaneous and caustic wit, and became for two or three dolorous years the poor man’s Oscar Levant, a conspicuous downgrading which came close to degradation.<sup>117</sup>

*Kraft Music Hall* converted Levant’s well-known wit into a manipulated cultural artifact, just like the classical music arrangements he presented. Reviews for the show usually praise the music while scorning the banter. *Variety* noted that Levant often projected discomfort while speaking at the microphone, and the show’s segues from banter to music lacked “naturalness and ease.” However, *Variety* liked “the casual crossfire and barbs,” as well as “Levant’s pianistic

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<sup>116</sup> For example, on the 12 February 1948 episode, between moments of dialogue with Levant, Jolson sang extracts from the refrains of “I Dream of Jeannie,” “Stormy Weather,” “Blue Skies,” “Singing in the Rain,” “Somewhere over the Rainbow,” “Oh! What a Beautiful Mornin’,” “Darktown Strutters Ball,” “I’ll Get By (As Long As I Have You),” and “After the Ball.”

<sup>117</sup> Gilbert Seldes, *The Great Audience* (New York: Viking Press, 1950), 205.

pyrotechnics.”<sup>118</sup> *Billboard* also found the banter between Jolson and Levant as “strictly forced laughter,” recommending that “Jolson would do better to sing more, and Levant should do more of the pianistics.”<sup>119</sup>

Despite the criticism, *Kraft Music Hall* received high ratings. Table 2.3 contains Nielsen ratings and rankings for the show from 1947 to 1949, the two seasons with Jolson and Levant as co-hosts.<sup>120</sup> In its first season, the show was ranked Number One on Thursday nights. Since each episode featured Levant in his own piano segment, *Kraft Music Hall* brought Levant the largest listening audience he had ever acquired: an average seventeen million listeners during the first season.

Season	Average Nielsen Rating	Average Listeners (in millions)	Ranking (day of week)	Ranking (overall)
1947-1948	18.9	16.96	1st (Thursday night)	20th
1948-1949	12.8	12.04	5th (Thursday night)	38th

Table 2.3. *Kraft Music Hall* Nielsen Ratings and Rankings.

With *Kraft Music Hall*, Levant once again had a weekly feature like he had on *The Hoffman Ginger Ale Hour* in 1932. Table 2.4 lists the number of times Levant played works by a certain composer during his *Kraft Music Hall* feature segment. See Appendix D for more detailed data. Most of Levant’s *Kraft* repertoire came from music he had recorded for Columbia Records and thus encompasses a narrower range of composers than his *Hoffman* selections.

<sup>118</sup> “Radio Reviews: *Kraft Music Hall*,” *Variety*, 6 Oct 1948.

<sup>119</sup> Sam Chase, “Radio and Television Program Reviews,” *Billboard*, 9 Oct 1948.

<sup>120</sup> For the monthly Nielsen ratings, see Ramsburg, 282 and 286.

Although by 1942 Levant had established himself as the leading Gershwin pianist, he played selections from Grieg, Tchaikovsky, Khachaturian and Rachmaninoff more frequently than Gershwin on *Kraft Music Hall*, mirroring his contemporary effort to counter opinions of him as a Gershwin specialist.<sup>121</sup> Although Levant's segment brought highbrow prestige to a show dominated by popular music, he often presented classical music, particularly the larger works, in truncated forms, accessible arrangements that emphasized main themes for the general listener. Below, I analyze Levant's *Kraft Music Hall* reduction of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto.

Composer	Total
Rachmaninoff	13
Chopin	8
Grieg	8
Khachaturian	7
Tchaikovsky	7
Gershwin	6
Debussy	5
Lecuona	5
DeFalla	4
Beethoven	2
Brahms	1
Godowsky	1
Liszt	1
Massenet	1

Table 2.4. Composers Performed by Levant on *Kraft Music Hall*.

Most of the time, Levant presented pieces that he had already recorded for Columbia Records. Thus, his segment served as a weekly three-minute commercial for his available

<sup>121</sup> This is discussed in Chapter Three.

recordings.<sup>122</sup> All of his Chopin selections appeared on his *Oscar Levant Plays Chopin*, released by Columbia around December 1946. In May 1946, Levant released his solo piano album *Oscar Levant Plays Popular Moderns*. The pieces from the album that Levant offered during his solo segment include Lecuona's "Malagueña" (five times), the "Fire Dance" and "Miller's Dance" by DeFalla (three times and once, respectively), and "Claire de lune" and "Golliwog's Cakewalk" by Debussy (four times and once, respectively). Levant played excerpts from Grieg's A Minor Piano Concerto more frequently than any other work – eight times. Columbia released Levant's recording with Efrem Kurtz and the New York Philharmonic on 19 April 1948.<sup>123</sup> In June 1948, *Billboard* reported that the album ranked third in Best-Selling Record Albums by Classical Artists.<sup>124</sup> The album disappeared and reappeared in the *Billboard* charts throughout the summer.<sup>125</sup> Thus, Levant's weekly appearances on *Kraft Music Hall* helped sell his Columbia recordings.<sup>126</sup>

Six times on the show, Levant played a Gershwin selection. He presented excerpts from the Concerto in F three times, the Second Prelude twice, and a truncated version of *Rhapsody in Blue* once. He had recorded all of these pieces for Columbia. Despite only playing the *Rhapsody*

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<sup>122</sup> The only pieces that Levant presented during this segment that were not released by Columbia are Godowsky's "Alt Wien," the "Méditation" from Massenet's *Thaïs*, and excerpts from Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto.

<sup>123</sup> Jochen Rudelt, ed., *A Rhapsody in Blue: The Extraordinary Life of Oscar Levant*, booklet (Sony Classical, 8 CDs, 2018), 55.

<sup>124</sup> "Best-Selling Record Albums by Classical Artists," *Billboard* 60, no. 23 (5 Jun 1948): 26.

<sup>125</sup> It last appeared (at Number Two) on 14 August 1948. Interestingly, Rubinstein's 1942 recording of the Grieg with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra reappeared in the charts that summer. So, Levant's performances may have inspired caused a bump in sales for another recording. Rubinstein's Grieg reached Number One on 3 July 1948 and was the eleventh highest selling classical recording for 1948. Levant's recording did not make that list. "Best-Selling Record Albums by Classical Artists," *Billboard* 60, no. 27 (3 Jul 1948): 26; "Best-Selling Record Albums by Classical Artists," *Billboard* 60, no. 33 (14 Aug 1948): 26; "Music-Radio: Best-Selling Packaged Records," *Billboard* 61, no. 1 (1 Jan 1949): 34. See also Harvey Sachs, *Rubinstein: A Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 438.

<sup>126</sup> This is not the case for his Columbia recording of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto. Although Levant presented excerpts from the concerto seven times on *Kraft Music Hall*, his album, which was released on 25 October 1948, never charted with *Billboard*.

one time, his 1945 recording of the piece with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra consistently stayed in the *Billboard* charts for years. It's initial success is certainly due to Levant's appearance in the 1945 Irving Rapper film *Rhapsody in Blue*.<sup>127</sup> *Billboard* reports the album at Number One in November 1945.<sup>128</sup> It was the bestselling classical album of 1946.<sup>129</sup> After Levant signed on to *Kraft Music Hall*, the album had consistently remained in the Top 5, but *Billboard* ranked the album back in the Number One slot in December 1947 and later reported it as the second highest selling classical album of 1947, ahead of Earl Wild's recording of the same piece with Paul Whiteman's Orchestra.<sup>130</sup> Levant's annual appearances at the Lewisohn Stadium Gershwin Nights, as well as his tours and recitals, also certainly contributed to sustained sales. However, it cannot be overlooked that *Kraft Music Hall* offered Levant the largest listening audience he had ever received.

Though Levant continued to play Gershwin's piano works on radio and in the concert hall, he regularly gave his broadest audience—the *Kraft Music Hall* listeners—selections from what was probably the most popular classical concerto of the mid-century: Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto. Levant never recorded the concerto for Columbia, so the piece's prominence in his *Kraft Music Hall* repertoire seems peculiar. However, Levant performed the full concerto at the Hollywood Bowl on 31 August 1948, so he used his radio segment as a practice space for the upcoming concert. Furthermore, Levant's continued performance of

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<sup>127</sup> *Billboard* reports the album at Number One in November 1945. "Best Selling Record Albums by Classical Artists," *Billboard* 57, no. 45 (10 Nov 1945): 28. The album remained in the *Billboard* charts throughout 1946.

<sup>128</sup> *Billboard*, "Best Selling Record Albums by Classical Artists," 10 Nov 1945.

<sup>129</sup> "1946 Music-Disk Toppers: Winners, 1946 Honor Roll of Hits," *Billboard* 59, no. 1 (4 Jan 1947): 3.

<sup>130</sup> Rubinstein's recording of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto ranked first; Levant's Chopin album was ranked eighth that year. "Best-Selling Record Albums by Classical Artists," *Billboard* 59, no. 49 (6 Dec 1947): 30; "UAL Music-Record Poll," *Billboard* 60, no. 1 (3 Jan 1948): 19.



excerpts from the concerto after August 1948 can be explained by the piece's prominence elsewhere in popular culture. The 1945 British film *Brief Encounter* (dir. David Lean), which prominently uses music from the concerto as both diegetic music and background score, introduced the work to film audiences in the United States.<sup>131</sup> In the following years, due to high popular and critical acclaim, libraries, cinemas, and television stations throughout the United States continued to screen *Brief Encounter*.<sup>132</sup> The concerto also played a central musico-dramatic role in Republic's *I've Always Loved You* (1946; dir. Frank Borzage), starring Philip Dorn and Catherine McLeod. Three recordings of the concerto were bestsellers in 1946: Rachmaninoff himself with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Artur Rubinstein with Vladimir Golschmann and the NBC Orchestra, and György Sándor with Artur Rodzinski and the New York Philharmonic.<sup>133</sup> Finally, some of the melodies from the concerto were used for popular tunes in the 1940s. Songwriters Jack Elliott and Don Marcotte repurposed the first movement's lyrical E-flat major theme for their song "I Think of You." Buddy Kaye and Ted Mossman took the second theme of the last movement as a source for their pop song "Full Moon and Empty Arms." By 1945, Frank Sinatra had recorded both of these songs.

On *Kraft Music Hall*, Levant always presented concerto movements in shortened arrangements that highlighted memorable moments and themes, resulting in what Adorno would call an "atomized" form. The excerpts from the Rachmaninoff concerto played by Levant over

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<sup>131</sup> For more, see Ivan Raykoff, "Concerto con amore," *Echo* 2, no. 1, < <http://www.echo.ucla.edu/Volume2-Issue1/raykoff/raykoff-article.html> >, last accessed 29 Sep 2019.

<sup>132</sup> To offer just a few examples, see "*Brief Encounter* to be Presented on CBS KWKH *Screen Guild*," *Shreveport Times*, 25 Jan 1948; "*Brief Encounter* in Reshowing," *San Francisco Examiner*, 4 Dec 1948; and "*Brief Encounter* Plays at Midtown," *Syracuse Post-Standard*, 29 Apr 1949.

<sup>133</sup> "UAL Music - Record Poll," *Billboard* 59, no. 1 (4 Jan 1947): 15.

the course of eight disparate *Kraft Music Hall* episodes are listed in Table 2.5.<sup>134</sup> The abridged versions of these movements serve several functions. They fit within the time frame of Levant's segment of the show. They prominently feature two of Levant's performative strengths: lyricism and percussiveness. Finally, they assuage general listeners by foregrounding themes and memorable bits, particularly those musical moments adapted into popular song and featured prominently in *Brief Encounter*. In short, Levant's Rachmaninoff abridgements are quintessential middlebrow forms of classical music.

Movement	Inclusive measures	Air dates
I: Moderato	Mm. 83-140, 246-261, 354-375	29 January 1948 20 May 1948 7 October 1948 3 March 1949
II: Adagio sostenuto	Mm. 63-78, 87-93, 120-128*, 136-162	23 December 1948 5 May 1949
III: Allegro scherzando	Mm. 121-152, 281-292, 299-376	4 November 1948 29 April 1949

**Table 2.5. Levant's Performances of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto on *Kraft Music Hall*.**

Levant and Lou Bring's Orchestra performed a shortened version of the first movement four times on *Kraft Music Hall*. This version, which lasts for about two and a half minutes (the length of a pop record), can be divided into an opening vocalise, which contrasts with a more turbulent closing section. Levant and Bring exclude most of the music from the movement, highlighting a popular theme, a march, and the closing material. The abridged first movement opens immediately with the E-flat major secondary theme (Figure 2.1), the source of the popular

<sup>134</sup> The score consulted for this analysis is Sergei Rachmaninoff, *Second Concerto for Piano : op. 18*, Kalmus Miniature Orchestra Scores no. 137 (New York: E.F. Kalmus).

song “I Think of You.” The second section features a percussive C-minor march, with the primary theme in the strings, beginning at bar 246 (Figure 2.2), followed by the whirling coda in the same key beginning at bar 354 (Figure 2.3).



Figure 2.1. Rachmaninoff, Second Piano Concerto, 1<sup>st</sup> mvt., mm. 83-89, piano.

This image shows a musical score for the first movement of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, measures 246-251. The tempo is marked 'Maestoso. (Alla marcia.)'. The score is written for piano and strings. The piano part features a percussive march rhythm, while the strings play a primary theme. The key signature is C minor, and the time signature is 3/4. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'ff' and 'pizz.'.

Figure 2.2. Rachmaninoff, Second Piano Concerto, 1<sup>st</sup> mvt., mm. 246-251, piano + strings.



Figure 2.3. Rachmaninoff, Second Piano Concerto, 1<sup>st</sup> mvt., mm. 354-355, piano + strings.



Figure 2.4. Rachmaninoff, Second Piano Concerto, 1<sup>st</sup> mvt., mm. 370-end, piano.

The final bars of the coda allow Levant to showcase his virtuosic agility with the piano, however his first few performances of this movement on *Kraft Music Hall* suggest that he required more practice before his Hollywood Bowl concert. He runs into trouble with the closing measures of the movement (Figure 2.4). Rachmaninoff's score calls for a series of right-hand triplets (a rest followed by two triads). Simultaneously, the left hand counters with eighth-note figures. For the 29 January 1948 episode, Levant simplifies the effort required by playing the right-hand triads as eighth notes in alignment with the left hand. With the 20 May 1948 episode,

Levant slows the pace at this moment, but he keeps the simplified execution. After his Hollywood Bowl performance, Levant played the abridged version of the first movement two more times on *Kraft Music Hall*: 7 October 1948 and 3 March 1949. With these two performances, he decided to quicken the tempo of the closing measures, but he simplified the right hand's work even further to just quarter notes. The live audience on both of those nights did not seem to notice the simultaneous quickening/simplification of the coda, as they applauded and whistled at his effort.

Levant and Bring presented an abridged version of the concerto's second movement only twice. Once again, they eliminate the majority of the music and highlight the theme. This abridged version, which lasts for about two-and-a-half to three minutes, can be divided into three sections: main theme in piano (various keys) – solo piano episode – main theme in strings (E major). The first section begins in the middle of the movement (Figure 2.5), with the piano sounding the main theme (originally in E major) in D minor, then A minor, then (following a leap to bar 87) in C minor. The second section, a short cadenza for solo piano (bars 120-128), allows Levant to demonstrate his virtuosity and prepares the return of the theme in the home key.<sup>135</sup> The third section features the theme in the strings with the piano playing rolling triplet arpeggios (Figure 2.6). Although no contemporary pop music repurposed any of the second movement's music (Eric Carmen used this theme for his 1975 song "All by Myself"), most of it did sound during the closing dramatic moments of *Brief Encounter*.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> For the 23 December 1948, Levant only plays bars 125 to 128. For the 5 May 1949 episode, Levant plays bars 120-128.

<sup>136</sup> Ivan Raykoff, "Concerto con amore."

Figure 2.5. Rachmaninoff, Second Piano Concerto, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvt., mm. 87-88, piano + strings.

Figure 2.6. Rachmaninoff, Second Piano Concerto, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvt., mm. 133-137, piano + strings.

As with the first movement, Levant's abridged version of the third movement, which he performed only twice, can be divided into a lyrical opening section that contrasts with a more energetic closing section, lasting about three minutes and removing more than half of the music.

Rather than the first theme, Levant highlights the secondary theme in B-flat major, the melody used for the pop song “Full Moon and Empty Arms” (Figure 2.7). This theme also occurs three times in *Brief Encounter* during romantic moments.<sup>137</sup> The closing section encompasses most of the movement’s final one hundred bars, which feature swift piano passagework and the “Full Moon” theme in various keys.



Figure 2.7. Rachmaninoff, Second Piano Concerto, 3<sup>rd</sup> mvt., mm. 121-127, piano.

Levant’s performances of excerpts from Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto on *Kraft Music Hall* present the music in a middlebrow form. He extracts memorable themes from a large symphonic work and packages them in a succinct, digestible and accessible arrangement for a general listening audience. Adorno decried such simplified radio presentations of large classical pieces as he believed such truncations encouraged listeners to focus only on thematic moments rather than contemplate the manifold unity of the entire work. Such condensed presentations suited Levant’s purposes. He brought prestige to a popular variety program by performing a piece of classical music. He reduced a large work to its quotable essentials and fit the arrangement within the narrow time frame allotted. He included only moments from the concerto that the audience would recognize, mainly the themes and passages that had been repurposed for

<sup>137</sup> Raykoff, “Concerto con amore.”

pop tunes. Finally, he demonstrated his ability—with varying success—to play the large works of other composers besides Gershwin.

## Conclusion

Levant developed as a professional pianist as radio developed as a modern medium. He belongs to a generation of musicians who understood the importance of this new technology to their professional careers. In the 1920s, he appeared on radio as both a classical pianist on early KDKA radio and as a pop pianist in New York with one of the most popular dance bands of the era. In the 1930s, Levant played with large radio orchestras and was a regularly featured musician on *The Hoffman Ginger Ale Hour*. He later achieved national recognition, however, as a musical expert on *Information Please*. He used his newfound radio stardom to launch additional careers as a touring pianist and a film star.<sup>138</sup> By 1942, he had earned the title of leading Gershwin pianist through his tours and guest appearances on radio programs like *Ford Evening Hour*, *Voice of Firestone* and *Magic Key of RCA*. In the late 1940s, Levant reached his largest radio audience on the highly popular *Kraft Music Hall*, where he weekly demonstrated his ability to play not only Gershwin, but works by composers like Tchaikovsky, Grieg, and Rachmaninoff.

Levant's radio presence established him as a middlebrow figure with experience in both the popular and classical music spheres. He helped canonize Gershwin during the heyday of popular concert programs, which featured a variety of music from operatic excerpts, to light classical, to art songs. Such shows, like *The Hoffmann Ginger Ale Hour*, programmed Gershwin's music alongside works by composers like Bach, Liszt, and Verdi at a moment when

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<sup>138</sup> For his film career, see Chapter 5.



more and more Americans accessed classical music through radio. Levant also participated in hybrid, atomized, or truncated forms of symphonic works that appealed to the middlebrow listener who sought to understand classical music only through quotable themes and memorable passages.

## Chapter 3

### The American Concert Industry and Oscar Levant as Touring Pianist

Throughout the 1940s and into the mid-1950s, Levant appeared in solo recitals and joint concerts with symphony orchestras across the country. As discussed in Chapter 2, national audiences knew him as a wit and musical savant on the radio quiz show *Information Please*. His guest appearances on other radio programs brought him additional recognition as a concert pianist and interpreter of George Gershwin. By 1942, he had established himself as the leading authority on Gershwin's piano music. This chapter discusses the role his career as a touring pianist played in establishing and maintaining that recognition and authority.

Levant set himself apart from fellow touring pianists through his repertoire and popular recognition as a Gershwin interpreter. He entered the concert industry at a moment when European pianists, like Vladimir Horowitz, Arthur Rubinstein, and Rudolph Serkin dominated the field with European classical music. Levant differentiated himself from these musicians by specializing in Gershwin's piano music. In the 1940s and early 1950s, no professional pianist played *Rhapsody in Blue* and the Concerto in F as often as Levant did. For a list of Levant's concert and recital dates (and the repertoire he played each appearance), see Appendix E. Later in his career, in an effort to expand his cache of performance material, Levant added to his repertoire familiar and popular classical works, like Grieg's A Minor Concerto and

Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto. Nevertheless, his recognition as the top Gershwin pianist remained firm to the end of his concert career in the mid-1950s.

Levant's success also hinged upon a powerful publicity machine which backed him through most of his career and emphasized his fluid identity as both a popular and serious musician. Indeed, in addition to Gershwin's music, Levant appealed to a wide and diverse American audience through solo recitals advertised and enacted as middlebrow music events. His wit and reputation for breaking concert-hall decorum diversified him from contemporary classical musicians and provided a novelty element that appealed to audiences beyond concert-hall regulars. Levant consistently attracted large or sell-out crowds. Furthermore, his appearances with symphony orchestras usually lay outside the regular subscription series as special, festival, benefit, or "pop" concerts within the budget of middle-class Americans. His publicity re-assured concert-hall regulars that, despite his popularity as a radio and film star, his classical training and serious devotion to his art promised an evening of quality musicianship.

These strategically combined business maneuvers collectively made Levant one of the highest paid touring musicians in the country and helped install Gershwin's music in the American concert-hall canon at a moment when Levant's fellow concert pianists offered established European works.

### **3.1 Levant and the Concert Industry Boom of the 1940s**

Socio-structural alterations to American concert culture and its business models—in process from the turn of the century—proved lucrative to a popular performer, like Levant. Levant began his touring career at a moment when many American symphony orchestras were

shifting their business models not only to attract more clientele, but also to relegate the more popular, non-canonic works to spaces outside the subscription series format. Meanwhile, local concert organizers and big-name talent agents worked to improve business strategies and build a stronger rapport, leading to high rewards for all involved. As explained in Chapter 2, Levant already possessed celebrity as a national radio star by the time he began regularly performing in concerts with symphony orchestras in late 1939.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, he instigated his first national tour as a piano recitalist in January 1942, just as the concert industry boom began to swell. With strong management and a powerful media machine behind him, Levant executed a successful touring career that blossomed under the concert industry's new business strategies, lasting some fifteen years and winding down as the boom began to subside.

Levant instigated his touring career after American cultural guardians had firmly established venues like the concert hall and the opera house as culturally sacrosanct spaces for the performance of the European classical canon.<sup>2</sup> At the Chicago Symphony, conductor Theodore Thomas pushed the orchestra's lighter repertoire to "popular" programs outside the regular winter series.<sup>3</sup> Such special concerts featured lighter genres, like overtures, marches, and dance music: the sort of fare one would hear at outdoor band concerts. Furthermore, with this sacralization of the indoor concert hall as an elite sonic space came a code of proper conduct. Thomas reminded concertgoers that distractions like talking and late arrivals defeated the purpose of a symphony concert: contemplation of good instrumental music for the benefit of

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<sup>1</sup> His first appearance with a symphony orchestra that was not part of an outdoor concert or on radio, was with the Pittsburgh Symphony at Syria Mosque on 24 November 1939.

<sup>2</sup> For more, see Chapter Two.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Dimaggio, "The Problem of Chicago," in *American Bourgeoisie: Distinction and Identity in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Sven Beckert and Julia B. Rosenbaum (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 213.

listeners' moral health and well-being.<sup>4</sup> This distinction between elite and popular art, as well as the concert-hall code of proper conduct, continued into the twentieth century.

Levant benefitted from an escalation in the number of “popular” concerts provided by the nation’s symphony orchestras. Most of his guest appearances during the winter season occurred outside the subscription series in special programs, like benefit or “pops” concerts. The lower price of a “pops” concert, more affordable than a subscription series ticket, attracted a broader audience than the average symphony hall crowd. Orchestras, then and now, most often schedule such programs to build audiences and raise revenue. From the turn of the century, “pops” concerts had been increasing in number. To cite just a few examples, in 1885 the Boston Symphony Orchestra began offering the prototype of their present-day Boston Pops shows.<sup>5</sup> The Buffalo Philharmonic began offering concerts at “popular prices” in 1902, followed by the Detroit Symphony in 1915, the Kansas City Philharmonic in 1936, and the Pittsburgh Symphony in 1941.<sup>6</sup> Through the course of his touring career, all of these symphonies invited Levant to appear in special, pops, or free concerts. Levant most often played Gershwin music for such special events. Toward the latter half of his career, Levant began learning concertos by other composers in order to strengthen his European repertoire.

Levant’s prospects as a solo recitalist increased due to other ongoing changes in the nation’s concert industry. In the few decades prior to his recital career, the American concert

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<sup>4</sup> Theodore Thomas, *Theodore Thomas: A Musical Autobiography*, ed. George Upton (1905; New York: Da Capo Press, 1965), 338-340.

<sup>5</sup> From 1885, the Boston Symphony Orchestra offered variety Promenade Concerts at the Music Hall, presently the Orpheum Theatre. Once the BSO moved to Symphony Hall in 1900, the Promenade shows officially became “The Symphony Hall Pops” and later “The Boston Pops.” The Charles River Esplanade became a site for free BSO concerts in 1929. Harry Ellis Dickson, *Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops: An Irreverent Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 20 and 59.

<sup>6</sup> “Will Give Buffalo Orchestra on a Par with Any Other City,” *Buffalo Courier*, 19 Aug 1902; “‘Pop’ Concert by Local Orchestra,” *Detroit Free Press*, 24 Jan 1915; William A. Everett, *Music for the People: A History of the Kansas City Philharmonic Orchestra* (Kansas City: Rockhill Books, 2015), 29; “Levant, Goodman Set for Pitt Symph Specials,” *Variety* 144, no. 10 (12 Nov 1941): 41.

industry evolved into a network of managers and civic-minded local culture advocates who conspired to bring live classical music to smaller communities. At the turn of the twentieth century, local business-class women often formed society groups that raised money to bring music to their cities. Unfortunately, quite often their efforts resulted in net losses.<sup>7</sup> From 1921, the concert business received a healthy boost through “organized audiences,” an idea of Chicago managers Harry P. Harrison and Dema Harshbarger, founders of the National Civic Music Association. They encouraged local arts enthusiasts to organize concerts for their communities through fund-raising and offering subscription services. In some places like Mansfield, Ohio, the subscription service fostered a concert patronage that extended beyond the town limits, creating a unique and eager community within a community.<sup>8</sup> James M. Doering explains, “The organized-audience plan was appealing because it kept costs down, fostered community involvement, and exposed smaller communities to high-quality artists.”<sup>9</sup> By 1931, Civic Music Associations operated in 275 American cities.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the Richmond, Indiana Civic Music Association sponsored Levant’s first appearance as a touring recitalist: on 22 January 1942 at Richmond’s Coliseum.<sup>11</sup>

As Levant’s touring career progressed, he participated in and benefitted from other contemporary market shifts. First, due to a May 1941 Federal Communications Commission (FCC) ruling that prohibited radio networks from also operating as talent agencies, NBC and

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<sup>7</sup> See Ralph P. Locke and Cyrilla Barr, “Patronage—and Women—in America’s Musical Life: An Overview of a Changing Scene,” in *Cultivating Music in America: Women Patrons and Activists since 1860*, edited by Locke and Barr (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 246-247.

<sup>8</sup> “Civic Music Series to Continue,” *Mansfield News-Journal*, 16 Apr 1942.

<sup>9</sup> James M. Doering, *The Great Orchestrator: Arthur Judson and American Arts Management* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 79.

<sup>10</sup> “Drive to Begin for Members,” *Muncie Star Press*, 20 Sep 1931.

<sup>11</sup> “Oscar Levant to be Presented at Coliseum on January 22,” *Richmond Palladium-Item*, 8 Jan 1942. The other two concerts in Richmond’s Civic Music Association series that season featured the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra and bass-baritone John Gurney. “Indianapolis Symphony here on Nov. 18,” *Richmond Palladium-Item*, 7 Nov 1941.

CBS dropped their artists' bureaus.<sup>12</sup> This ruling permitted artists to appear more frequently on radio. Second, Americans were attending classical music concerts more frequently than ever before. According to *Variety*, the 1940-1941 concert season grossed an all-time-high of \$35 million (\$617 million in 2019). Leading talent executive Fred Schang credited the radio for the unprecedented rise in concert attendance.<sup>13</sup> Third, at the beginning of the decade, talent representatives increased efforts to contact local theaters and community groups across the country for their clients.<sup>14</sup> After the war, a tremendous rise in community concerts, pop concerts, and the college and university markets strengthened the industry's success.<sup>15</sup>

Levant's employment by NBC on *Information Please* gave him an advantage in this exploding market. The nation's radio networks had the largest talent rosters in the country. From 1938, his early guest appearances with symphony orchestras were handled by NBC's talent bureau, which became the independent National Concerts and Artists Corporation (NCAC) after the 1941 FCC ruling.<sup>16</sup> It is not clear when Levant left NCAC, but the corporation still represented him as late as the 1945-1946 season.<sup>17</sup> Sometime in early 1947, he signed a contract with Columbia Concerts Corporation (CCC), the former CBS talent bureau.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to his appearances with the nation's symphony orchestras in subscription and "pops" programs, Levant also frequently performed in university halls and field houses. This

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<sup>12</sup> The ruling also freed radio stations from network domination and became effective on 16 September. "Postpone FCC Radio Decrees until Sept. 16," *Chicago Tribune*, 23 July 1941.

<sup>13</sup> "Radio Gets Credit for Boom in Concert Field," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 4 July 1941.

<sup>14</sup> In October 1941, Columbia Concerts Corporation and National reported a 5- to 7-percent increase in bookings for the coming season. "Columbia, NBC Concert Bureaus Report 85-90% 1941-42 Bookings Increased, 5-7% Over Last Season," *Variety*, 8 Oct 1941.

<sup>15</sup> "Culture Biz Boom Hayride: Clamor Loud for Top Names," *Billboard* 57, no. 47 (24 Nov 1945): 3, 40.

<sup>16</sup> "Engles Resigns on Eve of Sale of NBC Bureau," *Billboard* 53, no. 37 (13 Sept 1941): 6. "NBC Artists' Service Sold," *Decatur Daily Review*, 18 Dec 1941. NBC sold its talent bureau in December 1941, and it became the independent and functioning NCAC in January 1942.

<sup>17</sup> "Music: Levant Ill, Plays Here Nov. 6; Borge Oct. 22," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 14 Oct 1945.

<sup>18</sup> "Extend Levant Concerts," *Variety* 167, no. 4 (2 July 1947): 40.

market particularly escalated once the Second World War had ended. Levant appeared with symphony orchestras at Rice, Texas, Michigan, and other campuses, and he gave recitals at Clemson, Chapel Hill, Oklahoma State, Kentucky, and elsewhere. Sometimes Levant's tour brought him to high school auditoriums in cities like Phoenix, Miami, and Lubbock, Texas. During wartime, he also performed for military audiences. On 8 April 1945, Levant and the Houston Symphony performed the *Rhapsody in Blue* for soldiers and their families at Camp Wolters, one of the largest United States Army training facilities.<sup>19</sup> Two days later, he gave a recital and dined with military at Bergstrom Field's Recreation Hall prior to a performance with the Houston Symphony at the University of Texas in Austin.<sup>20</sup>

Due to his celebrity and multimedia presence, Levant consistently drew large crowds and earned "fat fees" for his appearances.<sup>21</sup> Biographers Sam Kashner and Nancy Schoenberger claim that Levant became the highest paid touring concert artist in the United States, "eclipsing Vladimir Horowitz and Artur Schnabel."<sup>22</sup> Such a statement is difficult to prove, but some comparisons with Levant's concert-hall competitors can be made. During the Depression, Vladimir Horowitz earned \$1500 a concert.<sup>23</sup> In 1938, Rudolf Serkin made about \$1000 (\$18,400 in 2019) per solo appearance.<sup>24</sup> In 1940, Levant took \$750 (\$13,900 in 2019) for appearing in Toronto with Percy Faith's Orchestra.<sup>25</sup> However, by the mid-1940s, Levant's fee had increased substantially. In 1945, Levant earned \$4700 (\$68,000 in 2019) for just one night in

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<sup>19</sup> "Levant Interviews the Longhorn," *The Longhorn* (Camp Wolters, Tex.), 13 Apr 1945.

<sup>20</sup> John J. Griffin, Capt., Air Corps, to Oscar Levant, letter, 21 Apr 1945 (University of Southern California, Doheny Library, Film and Television Archives, Oscar Levant Papers [USCOLP], box 1, folder 8); M.T., "Levant Shows His Greatness," *Austin American*, 11 Apr 1945.

<sup>21</sup> "Radio Gets Credit for Boom in Concert Field," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 4 July 1941.

<sup>22</sup> Sam Kashner and Nancy Schoenberger, *A Talent for Genius: The Life and Times of Oscar Levant* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 1994), xi.

<sup>23</sup> Harold C. Schonberg, *Horowitz: His Life and Music* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 115.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Lehmann and Marion Faber, *Rudolf Serkin: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 123.

<sup>25</sup> NBC Broadcasting contract, USCOLP, box 1, folder 33.



Portland, Maine.<sup>26</sup> By comparison, during the 1947-1948 season, Arthur Rubinstein asked for \$3500 per appearance. In addition to his appearance fee, Levant also collected a substantial commission from ticket sales. Levant's fifteen concerts in January 1950 alone raked in \$75,000 (\$808,000); his share of that gross was \$48,000 (\$517,000).<sup>27</sup> His six-week tour in early 1951, despite many cancellations, earned him \$85,000 (\$849,000).<sup>28</sup> Finally, for a month's worth of appearances from mid-March to mid-April 1952, Levant earned \$23,376.96 (\$228,360) from his share of commissions.<sup>29</sup> Whether Levant earned more money than Horowitz or Rubinstein, he certainly was very highly paid.

The 1940s was a boom decade for touring artists; Levant's career commenced at the moment of its upswing. He gave tremendously successful concerts during that time and stopped working as audiences began to dwindle. When box office revenue began to decline in the early 1950s, Levant blamed the rise of television. Commenting on his success in the previous decade, he said, "I don't think there ever was an American artist who meant anything at the box-office before me. ... Maybe that's not entirely true, but I did stimulate things so others could come in."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> "Culture Biz Boom Hayride: Clamor Loud for Top Names," *Billboard*, 24 Nov 1945.

<sup>27</sup> "Oscar Levant Does Sock \$75,000 in 15 Concert Dates; 48G His Share," *Variety* 177, no. 9 (8 Feb 1950): 80.

<sup>28</sup> "Levant Share 85G in 6-Week Concert Tour," *Variety* 182, no. 7 (25 Apr 1951): 2.

<sup>29</sup> According to a statement from Columbia Artists' Management, in 1952 Levant collected a twenty-percent commission from his recitals, and a fifteen-percent commission from his orchestra appearances. Columbia Artists Management, typewritten letter, 25 April 1952 (USCOLP, box 1, folder 33).

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in "Oscar Levant Thinks Music is on Downbeat," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, 8 Mar 1952.

## **3.2 Other Touring Pianists**

As a touring pianist, Levant created a unique performance niche for himself that differentiated him from his contemporaries. Levant faced heavy competition throughout his career as a recitalist. Concert pianists like Sergei Rachmaninoff, Arthur Rubinstein, Vladimir Horowitz, and Rudolf Serkin stuck to a repertoire that emphasized European classical music, while Levant included more modern music. Unlike other Gershwin pianists, like Jesus Maria Sanroma and Earl Wild, Levant had the additional advantage of personal affiliation with the composer. Furthermore, Levant represented a rare type of recitalist, who used humor and direct address to engage his audience. Before Levant, turn-of-the-century American audiences had laughed at Vladimir de Pachmann's stage antics and applauded his virtuosity. Victor Borge, a contemporary of Levant, relied more on physical comedy and slapstick humor during his American shows. However, unlike Pachmann and Borge, Levant almost never interrupted his playing for the sake of a gesture, joke, or pratfall. Save for Rachmaninoff and Pachmann, all of these musicians worked simultaneously with Levant during the concert industry boom. I briefly discuss their individual careers below not only to draw comparisons, but also to demonstrate how Levant set himself apart from his colleagues and immediate predecessors.

### **3.2.1 Sergei Rachmaninoff**

From the 1920s to the early 1940s, Sergei Rachmaninoff maintained a steady American career as a conductor, composer and touring pianist with a repertoire of European music. Aside from his own music, his American concerts usually featured works from European composers of previous centuries, like Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, and Liszt. By the late 1930s, many critics considered both Rachmaninoff's compositions and his performance repertoire as dated.

Alfred Frankenstein noted his “almost total reliance on literature of the past.”<sup>31</sup> Moreover, following a St. Louis recital in late 1937, one critic wrote: “Yesterday’s program could have been performed before gas foot lamps, with horses hitched to carriages outside ... neither as performer nor as composer has Rachmaninoff made any concessions to the twentieth century.”<sup>32</sup>

Levant’s career escalated around the time that Rachmaninoff’s career was winding down, and although he played more modern music than Rachmaninoff did, Levant initially emulated the Russian man’s proclivity to play his own material.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Levant played his own Piano Concerto several times during the early 1940s. However, listening audiences generally reacted negatively toward Levant’s highly dissonant compositions. Although both Rachmaninoff and Gershwin had played and toured with their own music, Levant could not successfully maintain a performance career with his own creations.

### 3.2.2 Vladimir Horowitz

Like Rachmaninoff, Vladimir Horowitz also belonged to the “volcanic” school of Russian pianism, and specialized in a broad range of composers from the European classical canon. Horowitz also frequently performed and recorded works of his fellow Russians Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, and Scriabin.<sup>34</sup> He almost never programmed compositions from

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Lifetime of Music* (New York: New York University Press, 1956), 345.

<sup>32</sup> The St. Louis recital included Bach’s Italian Concerto, Beethoven’s “Tempest” Sonata, Chopin’s Scherzo in C-sharp minor, Liszt’s “Sonnetto del Petrarca,” and several of Rachmaninoff’s Preludes. Reed Hynds, “Rachmaninoff Digs Nuggets of Gold from Piano,” *St. Louis Star and Times*, 15 Nov 1937.

<sup>33</sup> Rachmaninoff’s final recital occurred in Knoxville at the University of Tennessee on 17 February 1943. In addition to his own works, he played transcriptions of music by Wagner and Rimsky-Korsakov. He died eleven days later. Thus, he missed the greater part of the concert industry boom.

<sup>34</sup> See “Rachmaninoff’s Work on Records,” compiled by Philip L. Miller, in Bertensson and Leyda, 433-438.

American composers.<sup>35</sup> A contemporary of Levant, Horowitz immigrated to the United States, where he played nearly 350 concerts between 1928 and 1935, and then worked simultaneously with Levant from the 1940s to the mid-1950s.<sup>36</sup>

Like Levant, Horowitz is a middlebrow figure, a classically trained pianist who presented highbrow music through media and public venues that most Americans of any class could easily access in their leisure time. He never starred as a fictional version of himself in any Hollywood film, but he did perform frequently on radio. WOR broadcast his Carnegie Hall debut.

Thereafter, he occasionally played on radio works of the European classical canon, like the Tchaikovsky concerto, Liszt's Second Concerto, and Rachmaninoff's Third Concerto.<sup>37</sup>

Horowitz did not appear in outdoor stadiums as often as Levant did. He never performed at Lewisohn Stadium. However, he did play the Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky concertos at the Hollywood Bowl in the 1940s.<sup>38</sup> He also appeared in several television concerts, including the 1968 CBS special, *Vladimir Horowitz: A Television Concert at Carnegie Hall*.<sup>39</sup>

Levant and Rubinstein both played Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto. From his American debut at Carnegie Hall on 12 January 1928, Horowitz's name has been closely associated with this work. Horowitz won the audience over with an impressively fast execution of the octave passage just prior to the last movement's recapitulation—a moment Olin Downes described as “a tiger let loose.”<sup>40</sup> In later years, pianists like Arthur Rubinstein, Levant, and

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<sup>35</sup> He recorded Samuel Barber's Sonata in E-flat Minor, op. 26, for RCA Victor. He also transcribed for piano Sousa's *Stars and Stripes Forever*, which he premiered at Carnegie Hall in 1945 and subsequently recorded. Schonberg, 158 and 379.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>37</sup> “Today's Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 3 Jan 1932; “Variety Abounds in Programs of Radio Stations,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 11 Mar 1934.

<sup>38</sup> “Symphony Program Outlined,” *LAT*, 2 Aug 1942; “At Hollywood Bowl,” *LAT*, 31 Jul 1949.

<sup>39</sup> Schonberg, 224.

<sup>40</sup> Olin Downes, “Of Playing from Memory,” *NYT*, 22 Jan 1928.

Horowitz himself had competing recordings of the concerto. Unlike those by Rubinstein and Horowitz, Levant's recording, which contains several faltering moments, never charted on *Billboard*, but Levant boasts, "I did succeed in playing it faster than Horowitz had."<sup>41</sup> As discussed in Chapter 5, Levant also presented excerpts from the concerto in two major feature films.

Horowitz and Levant shared a healthy friendship as they both travelled the concert circuit in the 1940s and early 1950s. In *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*, Levant claims he attended every premiere of a Prokofiev sonata that Horowitz offered at the Soviet consulate in the 1940s.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, he says Horowitz "gave him lessons in cancellations for concerts":

I used to cancel two weeks ahead of time when I was ill. He said: "Never do that. Cancel at the last minute." The year my mother died ... I'd cancelled Cincinnati ... Horowitz took my place, and then cancelled, and then I was called again.<sup>43</sup>

They also shared a common appreciation for popular music. Schonberg explains:

Levant amused Horowitz. They would do outrageous things at the piano, each trying to outprank the other, improvising jazz pieces into which classical themes were inserted, even to playing with their backsides. Both liked jazz piano ... and they would work up arrangements of popular tunes.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, it seems the musical leisure activities Levant once enjoyed with Gershwin, he now shared with Horowitz. Despite his affinity for pop music, Horowitz never publicly performed it like Levant had in the 1920s and 1930s.

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<sup>41</sup> Oscar Levant, *Memoirs of an Amnesiac* (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), 239.

<sup>42</sup> Oscar Levant, *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*, manuscript (Library of Congress, Music Division, Oscar Levant Papers, 1939-1965).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>44</sup> Schonberg, 169.

### 3.2.3 Arthur Rubinstein

In contrast to Horowitz's Romantic virtuosity, biographer Harvey Sachs describes Polish pianist Arthur Rubinstein's style as "austere virtuosity" and "of the antispectacular school of Brahms, [Joseph] Joachim, and [Heinrich] Barth."<sup>45</sup> Rubinstein maintained a regular career as a touring musician in America from 1937 to 1976.<sup>46</sup> Due to difficulties with overseas travel during the war years, most of Rubinstein's activity was confined to the United States from 1937 to 1947.<sup>47</sup> Within this span of time, he and Levant were friends and also rival performers.<sup>48</sup> Rubinstein's performance repertoire at this time was much broader than Levant's, but their simultaneous careers bear several similarities and even some indication of each man influencing the other.

Levant and Rubinstein played many of the same modern pieces. Prior to his prolonged sojourn in the United States, Rubinstein spent a lot of time in Spain, and he became a major proponent of modern works by Spanish composers, particularly the "Fire Dance" from Manuel De Falla's ballet *El amor brujo* (1904-05), a work frequently performed on radio and in recitals by Levant.<sup>49</sup> Other modern repertoire the two men shared include Khachaturian's Piano Concerto, Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, Poulenc's *Mouvements perpétuels*, the Polka from Shostakovich's *The Golden Age*, and selections from Prokofiev's *Visions fugitives*.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Barth was Rubinstein's teacher. Harvey Sachs, *Rubinstein: A Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 85.

<sup>46</sup> Rubinstein himself once said, "He [Paderewski] was a great musician but not really gifted for the piano. He had an overwhelming personality – his greatest success was in bowing. He played Chopin in a very sentimental way. He used to break chords, for example. I fought that style because I knew that Chopin was better than that." Quoted in *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>48</sup> Polish composer Wiktor Labunski explains that Levant regularly dropped in at Rubinstein's Los Angeles home: "He usually came toward the end of the evening and immediately asked for coffee, which he drank in enormous quantities all evening, simultaneously smoking one cigarette after another." Quoted in Sachs, 287.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 215, 259, 280, 287, 439.

In the 1940s, Levant and Rubinstein had several competing recordings of the same concertos. Rubinstein's second recording of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto, with Artur Rodzinski and the New York Philharmonic, was released in 1946. Levant's recording for Columbia with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra was released in December the following year. Rubinstein recorded Grieg's A minor concerto with Ormandy in 1942; Levant's recording with Efrem Kurtz and the New York Philharmonic came out six years later.<sup>51</sup> Finally, Levant included both the Grieg and Tchaikovsky concertos in his performance repertoire late in his touring career.

Although both men shared an appreciation for modern classical music, they differed on the subject of modern popular music. Unlike Levant, Rubinstein did not play pop music and he considered jazz to be beneath his standards. In a 1920 interview with a European reporter, Rubinstein railed against the jazz-influenced symphonic works currently in vogue:

I want to laugh when I hear the various sorts of 'jazz' compositions born in Europe, when I see how many attempts and how many talents are wasted, how much aspiration is burned up year after year on the pagan altar of jazz.<sup>52</sup>

Despite his disdain for such music, Rubinstein did learn and include Gershwin's bluesy Second Prelude in his performance repertoire. He recorded it for RCA Victor in 1946.<sup>53</sup>

Although Rubinstein looked upon popular music with disfavor, this did not preclude him from performing in middlebrow venues, like Levant so often did. Indeed, Rubinstein appeared at the Hollywood Bowl twelve times during the 1940s. The concertos he presented at this outdoor amphitheater were all nineteenth century pieces, except Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto

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<sup>51</sup> See Donald Manildi, ed., "A Rubinstein Discography," in Sachs, 443-472; and Liner notes, *Rhapsody in Blue: The Extraordinary Life of Oscar Levant*, edited by Michael Feinstein, 8 compact discs ([S.I.] : Sony Music Entertainment, 2018), 58.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Sachs, 194.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

and the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*.<sup>54</sup> Rubinstein also appeared numerous times on the East Coast for performances at New York's Lewisohn Stadium. While the majority of Levant's appearances at this venue occurred with the annual Gershwin Nights, discussed in Chapter Four, Rubinstein presented works from three European composers: Tchaikovsky's First, Brahms's Second, and Rachmaninoff's Second.

Finally, on a few occasions, Rubinstein delivered recitals sans printed programs and advertised as impromptu evenings. It is highly likely that Levant's talking recitals, also advertised as concerts with spontaneous selections, prompted Rubinstein to experiment with a similar concept. Prior to Levant's first talking recital in January 1942, Rubinstein did present a "group of piano soli announced from the stage" at Lewisohn Stadium on 13 August 1941.<sup>55</sup> However, this was not a full recital, rather a segment of a larger concert. Three years later, after Levant had demonstrated great success with his talking recitals, Rubinstein provided a programless recital in San Francisco on 14 May 1945. Available reviews indicate that Rubinstein only announced works from the stage; he neither joked, nor gossiped, nor teased the audience, nor offered history lessons—all elements of Levant's recitals. One reporter characterized the event as a "novelty" with a "delightful feeling of spontaneity and aliveness ... and a pleasant intimacy [gained] by the artist's informal announcements."<sup>56</sup>

Rubinstein tried the experiment again at Carnegie Hall on 25 February 1946. He told one reporter :

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Stern, "Music for the (American) People: The Concerts at Lewisohn Stadium, 1922-1964" (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2009), 571. According to the *New York Times*, for this segment he selected works by Chopin and Albéniz's "Navarra." One of his encore pieces was DeFalla's "Fire Dance." R.P., "Rubinstein Heard at Stadium Close," *NYT*, 14 Aug 1941.

<sup>56</sup> Margaret Gessler, "Rubinstein in Brilliant Program," *Oakland Tribune*, 14 May 1945.



The chief reason for this departure from the accepted rule [of a printed program] is my discovery by long experience of the fact that a prearranged and printed program tends to become a heavy obstacle to the mature and free artist for the best expression of his art. Facing an audience from the stage, we interpreters possess a sense of fine perception to the climate of the hall, its acoustics, of the always different qualities of the piano placed at our disposal and, last but not least, of our own state of inspiration. Yet to be aware of all this becomes of no avail if we are compelled to play compositions which are unsuitable for the occasion, merely because they were announced in print long before.<sup>57</sup>

Rubinstein argues his deviation from standard concert practice provides greater freedom to the performer and creates a situation where the appropriate program can be supplied for any given evening and performance space. In all likelihood Rubinstein noticed the success of Levant's spontaneous recitals and tried the experiment himself, without all the vulgar elements that elites would consider inappropriate for Carnegie Hall. Whereas Levant rebelled against highbrow concert-hall decorum, Rubinstein merely rebelled against printed programs.

### **3.2.4 Rudolf Serkin**

Another Levant contemporary, Bohemian pianist Rudolf Serkin built an American touring career in stark contrast to Levant's not only through the repertoire presented, but also the highbrow elitism surrounding Serkin's events. From 1936, Serkin travelled the American concert circuit simultaneously with Levant, until the latter's retirement in the mid-1950s. From 1941, Serkin also worked as an educator at the Curtis Institute, serving as its director from 1968 to 1976. He continued to play concerts into the late 1980s. While Levant concurrently used the radio, film, and the concert hall to establish himself as salient Gershwinite, Serkin played his diametric opposite with a performance repertoire of canonical, largely German, works. Thus,

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<sup>57</sup> Quoted in "World of Music," *Middletown Times Herald*, 8 Mar 1946.

when Levant instigated his talking recitals in 1942, they counterpoised the elitist musical experience typically provided by performers like Serkin.

Concerning the classical piano canon, unlike Levant, Serkin followed the *Werktreue* ideal. Adherents to the *Werktreue* concept believe that the composer's original intentions are paramount and present in the score, which supersedes any performer's interpretation or whim. In a sense, *Werktreue* represents a mid-century form of modernism, a highbrow reaction designed to safeguard elite classical music culture from mass culture contamination. Indeed, although other elite gatekeepers had come before him and many more assisted him, Serkin's decades of work guaranteed that the American concert-hall canon remained very European and very German. Levant acted as a fly in the ointment, ensuring Gershwin's piano works also had spots in that canon. According to biographers Stephen Lehmann and Marion Faber, by the 1950s, Serkin had become the "embodiment and disseminator of European culture" and "a towering presence in American culture: a musician of unquestioned authority and success who conveyed and represented his art as an ethical activity."<sup>58</sup> In Levant's words, Serkin had "a lofty attitude toward music."<sup>59</sup>

Levant's and Serkin's concurrent careers operated along non-converging paths. Serkin almost never played American works, but rather programmed standard European repertoire.<sup>60</sup> Levant's recitals included works by American, Cuban, and Russian composers. Serkin's recitals represented and reinforced the highbrow notions of moral goodness and elite separatism.

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<sup>58</sup> Lehmann and Faber, 4-5.

<sup>59</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 219. In 1960, while railing against *Masscult*, Dwight MacDonald contrasted Liberace's kitsch cape and candelabra with Serkin's "business-like" stance toward the piano. Dwight MacDonald, "Masscult and Midcult" (1960), in *Masscult and Midcult: Essays against the American Grain* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2011), 27.

<sup>60</sup> One exception is MacDowell's Second Piano Concerto.

Levant's talking recitals disregarded those notions and traversed the high-low divide. However, Serkin's influence continued long after Levant had retired.

### 3.2.5 Other Pianists Who Played Gershwin

Many other pianists performed Gershwin music on the concert circuit in the 1940s and 1950s. The musicians listed below represent only some of the more prominent names. None of these artists, not even Earl Wild, performed Gershwin, especially the Concerto in F, as frequently and to as much acclaim as Levant did.

Like Levant, Puerto Rican musician Jesús María Sanromá (1902-1984) frequently performed Gershwin's music, but he firmly established himself as a serious classical musician well before his forays into popular music. By the early 1920s, after his studies at the New England Conservatory, he had become a favorite of Boston Symphony conductors Pierre Monteux and Serge Koussevitsky. Indeed, biographer Alberto Hernández says, “[Sanromá] was the first official pianist in an American orchestra.”<sup>61</sup> Sanromá became known as an interpreter of Gershwin's music through his summer appearances with Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops. Fiedler regularly programmed the *Rhapsody in Blue*, sometimes more than once a summer. In 1935, Sanromá recorded the Rhapsody with Fiedler and the Pops at RCA Victor, and he was the first pianist after Gershwin to record the Concerto in F, again with the Pops, in 1940. Despite his connection with Gershwin and the Pops, critics considered Sanromá a serious pianist. He was neither a jazz-band pianist nor a radio orchestra musician like Levant had been. A critic for the *Washington Post* considered Sanromá a “prime expert” on Gershwin's music, but “Gershwin

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<sup>61</sup> Alberto Hernández, *Jesús María Sanromá: An American Twentieth-Century Pianist* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), xxii.

never pretended to the virtuosity of Sanromá.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, critics viewed Sanromá as a better pianist than Gershwin, and one more deeply ensconced in the highbrow concert-hall world.

Like Levant and Sanromá, Percy Grainger was one of the few pianists living in America who played Gershwin’s Concerto in F, but he came to the work late. Biographer John Bird explains that Grainger began practicing the concerto in late 1943 and included it in his performance repertoire with 1944. It should be noted that Grainger’s interest in the piece dates from the time Levant began regularly performing the work on radio and in concert halls across the country. Grainger also made several piano transcriptions of Gershwin songs.<sup>63</sup> Like Levant in the 1940s, Grainger too appeared on university campuses, like Alabama’s Troy University, where he played Tchaikovsky’s First Concerto and his transcription of “The Man I Love.”<sup>64</sup>

With much experience in radio orchestras himself, Earl Wild gave Levant the strongest competition for the title of top Gershwin pianist. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Wild worked as regular pianist in the NBC Symphony. In 1942, while serving as a member of the U.S. Navy Band, he earned notoriety when he performed the *Rhapsody in Blue* on radio with the NBC Symphony in Toscanini’s first all-American program. Wild says at the time he was not familiar with the score, but, “I was hailed all over the world as an authority on the music of Gershwin.”<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, in 1945, Whiteman asked Wild to record the Rhapsody with him, and they toured with the Rhapsody and the Concerto in F across the country.<sup>66</sup> Although Wild frequently performed Gershwin’s piano compositions, he did not have a well-known personal history with Gershwin, like Levant had. He also did not have mass celebrity, name recognition, or a film

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<sup>62</sup> Brown, “Postlude: Full House at Gershwin Program Here,” *Washington Post*, 19 June 1943.

<sup>63</sup> John Bird, *Percy Grainger* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 258.

<sup>64</sup> “Big Audience Hears Percy Grainger in Melodic Piano Concert at S.T.C.,” *Troy Messenger*, 7 Nov 1949.

<sup>65</sup> Earl Wild, *A Walk on the Wild Side: A Memoir* (Palm Springs: Ivory Classics Foundation, [2011]), 118.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas A. DeLong, *Pops: Paul Whiteman, King of Jazz* (Piscataway, NJ: New Century, 1983), 272.

career. As I discuss in the next chapter, Wild became the ascendant Gershwin interpreter only after Levant retired in the mid-1950s.

### 3.2.6 Other Humorous Pianists: Vladimir de Pachmann

Levant did not create the concept of the impish piano virtuoso that breaks concert decorum through telling jokes, teasing the audience, or directly addressing his listeners, because Ukrainian pianist Vladimir de Pachmann had done it decades earlier. In the late 1800s and into the early twentieth century, Pachmann built a notorious career as a leading musician of his era.<sup>67</sup> Part of the attraction of a Pachmann show included not only his stellar musicianship, but also his onstage antics. He would pantomime during the music, like “fingering the air” during certain passages.<sup>68</sup> Pachmann would interrupt his own performance to directly address the audience, sometimes to explain the structure of a piece, even as he played it.<sup>69</sup> Such running commentary could promote, according to some reviewers, a greater general appreciation of the composition.<sup>70</sup> He would talk directly to audience members, as when he asked one attendee to stop fanning herself: “Madame, I am playing in 3/4 and you are fanning in 6/8.”<sup>71</sup> Despite being labelled a

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<sup>67</sup> Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1950), 574.

<sup>68</sup> M. S. W., “Chopin Program Given in Recital by de Pachmann,” *Baltimore Sun*, 13 Nov 1923.

<sup>69</sup> On 3 March 1924 at Carnegie Hall, upon striking the opening notes of Mozart’s A major Sonata, he grinned at the audience and said, “Ah, that’s music!” He also interpreted passages with remarks like, “Now, this is where he cries” and “Here the war comes in.” “‘Stupid!’ Hisses Pianist at Tittering Audience when He Almost Falls,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 4 Mar 1924.

<sup>70</sup> An Indianapolis reporter wrote, “If DePachmann speaks of the nature of the composition, the listener may be sure that he will by that remark be inducted into a new and more sympathetic appreciation of the composition.” “First Time Here in 12 Years,” *Indianapolis Star*, 25 Nov 1923. Pachmann’s 1925 recording of the Chopin Waltz in D-flat Major, op. 64/3 clues us in to what a contemporary Pachmann recital may have sounded like. Before the music, he describes how he will play the piece—the slow section with “staccato a la Paganini”—then varies tempo and adds notes throughout the performance.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Mark Mitchell, *Vladimir de Pachmann: A Piano Virtuoso’s Life and Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 3.

“clownish eccentric,” audiences recognized in him a great artist, as biographer Mark Mitchell explains, “Comic genius and musicianship are not, a priori, at odds.”<sup>72</sup>

Just as Levant became closely associated with Gershwin’s piano music, many Americans thought of Pachmann as a Chopin pianist. James Huneker derogatorily referred to him as a “Chopinzee.”<sup>73</sup> Pachmann often balked at this diminution of his talents. In 1908, he told a reporter, “What would my American friends say if I told them that in Vienna I am hailed as a masterful interpreter of Beethoven; in France, as an authority on ... Bach, Haydn, Scarlatti, and Mozart ... in the Scandinavian countries as a player con amore of Schubert and Schumann?”<sup>74</sup> Likewise, after Levant built his career on his status as a Gershwin interpreter, he attempted to demonstrate his equal ability to play the large works of other composers, like Tchaikovsky, Grieg, Rachmaninoff and Anton Rubinstein.

Pachmann viewed his unconventional stage comportment as a way to relax the audience and draw them closer to the performer and music. During his farewell tours of the United States from 1923 to 1925, Mitchell explains that, at this late stage in his career, Pachmann’s proclivity for theatrics, on and off stage, increased. For example, after his 11 October 1923 recital at Carnegie Hall, a critic for the *Musical Courier* explained that Pachmann delighted the audience with “sallies and pantomiming, which often earned a hearty laugh even in the midst of his playing.”<sup>75</sup> Mitchell reasons that Pachmann’s behavior resulted from the stress of a highly demanding touring schedule, as well as a desire to “pierce the membrane of formality” and

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>73</sup> James Gibbons Huneker, *Steeplejack: Volume II*, in *Steeplejack: Two Volumes in One* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922), 42.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in “Music,” *Buffalo Courier*, 15 Sept 1907.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Mitchell, 156.

endear himself to his audience.<sup>76</sup> Pachmann did not consider himself an upstart railing against a social code that checked the vulgar crowd at the door. He merely wanted to be comfortable, to entertain, and to be liked.

To purposefully provoke laughter from an audience offended elitist expectancies of proper concert-hall behavior. Pachmann's stage antics annoyed many New York critics, including one for the *Brooklyn Standard Union*, who wrote:

Pachmann may be an exception but it is neither good sense nor good taste to "talk in meeting," especially in a beautiful musical meeting, even if one is exceptionally gifted and clever. Art is art, and even a de Pachmann should, so it seems, conform to its vital tenets, one of the very most vital and imperative of which demands that one (every one) shall preserve his artistic and personal dignity ... and not permit himself under any circumstance to lapse from that lofty standard.<sup>77</sup>

This critic defends the highbrow concert hall decorum that American elites had guarded and enforced in their cherished performance spaces since the mid-1800s. To New York elites, Carnegie Hall was not a Broadway stage, but rather a temple of high art, a sanctum where standards of appropriate behavior should be strictly observed.

Pachmann's stage presence may have influenced Levant as a recitalist. Pachmann performed in New York several times from October 1923 to April 1925. Although Levant lived in Croton-on-Hudson for most of that time, it is not unreasonable to assume that he would have attended at least one of Pachmann's concerts. In *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*, Levant says that Carnegie Hall's house manager John Totten allowed him to see all the concerts for free.<sup>78</sup>

Whether Levant actually saw Pachmann live in concert, he certainly would have read the reviews and reports of his recitals in the New York press.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 151 and 161.

<sup>77</sup> "World of Music," *Brooklyn Standard Union*, 19 Apr 1925.

<sup>78</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 159.

Moreover, following Levant's 9 March 1943 recital in Philadelphia at the Academy of Music, Linton Martin at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* drew a comparison between Pachmann and the *Information Please* wit:

Levant combined qualities that used to be characteristic of piano recitals by the late Vladimir de Pachmann ... Perhaps Levant sees himself as something of a successor to de Pachmann in combining comments with keyboard performance, even though he may not aim to be another "Chopin-zee" among pianists of the present.<sup>79</sup>

As I explain below, like Pachmann, Levant directly addressed his audience during his talking recitals, and sometimes during his appearances with symphony orchestras. Many of his stage antics, like smoking or blowing his nose, were considered inappropriate in a concert hall setting. He also used part of his recital time to discuss the history of a piece and its composer. However, unlike Pachmann, Levant almost never interrupted the music to act the social misfit. His demeanor during musical performance remained serious and stoic.

### **3.2.7 Other Humorous Pianists: Victor Borge**

A contemporary of Oscar Levant, Danish pianist Victor Borge also enjoyed a successful—and much longer—career as a musical entertainer and humorist. Many Americans remember Borge as a popular pianist-comedian on radio and television, and in the concert hall. However, he initially presented himself as a straight classical pianist. While touring Europe in the late 1920s and 1930s, Borge developed a piano comedy act, wherein he “turned concert halls into vaudeville theaters.”<sup>80</sup> During his performances, he often told stories, usually humorous

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<sup>79</sup> Linton Martin, “Theme and Variations: Pianists in Performances May Prove Unpredictable,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 14 Mar 1943. Although he never claimed to be a leading Chopin interpreter, as explained in Chapter 2, he frequently played Chopin on the radio. He also featured Chopin's short pieces in his talking recitals. Finally, Columbia released his album *Oscar Levant Plays Chopin* in late 1946.

<sup>80</sup> Frank Cullen, et al., *Vaudeville, Old & New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 132.



ones, about the composer of the music he was about to play.<sup>81</sup> After the Nazis invaded Denmark, Borge sailed to the United States, landing in New York on 28 August 1940.<sup>82</sup> He quickly endeared himself to radio audiences with his piano skills and his gentlemanly voice, which many Americans considered a facet of his “old-world manner.”<sup>83</sup> He became a regular feature on *Kraft Music Hall*, hosted by Bing Crosby. Borge later hosted *The Victor Borge Show*, a half-hour radio program on NBC.

Although both Levant and Borge worked against concert hall decorum by addressing the audience and telling jokes, they operated under markedly individual brands of musical mischief. Borge’s shows more closely resembled a vaudeville act, a virtuosic mix of comedy with musical numbers, while Levant’s shows were legitimate piano recitals with jokes and discussion between each piece of music. Famously, Borge would spend several minutes introducing a piece that he would never actually play. The genius of his comedy lay in his fetishization of piano music that he offered in unsatisfying snippets or withheld from his audience entirely. By contrast, Levant’s comedy centered on his own reputation as a sardonic wit and musicological know-it-all. When it came time to play the piano, he donned the mask of the concert pianist, turned to his instrument, and played a piece to its completion. Through his recitals, Levant burlesqued elitist concert-hall culture but not classical music itself.

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<sup>81</sup> He later compiled these stories and musicological asides into two books: *My Favorite Intermissions* (1971) and *My Favorite Comedies in Music* (1980). Victor Borge and Robert Sherman, *My Favorite Intermissions* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971); Borge and Sherman, *My Favorite Comedies in Music* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1980).

<sup>82</sup> Jacob Wendt Jensen, *Victor Borge: Mennesket bag smilet* (Copenhagen: People’s Press, 2014), 96-100

<sup>83</sup> Cullen, 132.

### 3.3 Levant's Publicity

Throughout his touring career, Levant's publicity generated and controlled a discursive network of print media that helped maintain audience desire to see and hear him.<sup>84</sup> Although Levant gained national celebrity as a musician and wit through his radio appearances, behind him he had the additional benefit of a powerful media machine that insured the long endurance of his celebrity. When Levant began his first recital tour in January 1942, most Americans knew him only as the *Information Please* court jester, but press packets supplied by his representatives helped strengthen and sustain the popular notion of Levant as not only a leading classical pianist, but also the preeminent Gershwin interpreter. Prior to Levant's arrival in town, local newspapers usually provided readers additional information about his life and accomplishments, largely drawn from these packets. The archives at the University of Southern California contains two of Levant's publicity packets—one from NCAC (nineteen pages) and the other from CCC (eight pages).<sup>85</sup> The NCAC packet probably dates from 1942.<sup>86</sup> Since the most recent film mentioned in the second packet is *An American in Paris* (1951), it certainly comes from CCC, Levant's management by the 1950s. Therefore, press material preceded Levant's arrivals for the entirety of his touring career. Since both packets share some of the same language, the CCC lifted a lot of publicity material from the NCAC.

Due to the abundance of identical language between the two packets, local reportage of Levant's coming appearances varied little, resulting in a discourse on Levant's celebrity that

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<sup>84</sup> Here we have the beginnings of a discursive network that followed Levant into his film career, discussed later in Chapter Five.

<sup>85</sup> National Concert and Artists Corporation [NCAC], "Press Material on Oscar Levant" (USCOLP, box 2, folder 1); [CCC], untitled publicity packet (USCOLP, box 2, folder 1).

<sup>86</sup> The latest Hollywood film mentioned in this packet is *Kiss the Boys Goodbye* (1941). The NCAC formed in January 1942. As mentioned earlier, the NCAC formed from the NBC talent bureau in January 1942.

remained largely consistent across his career. Both packets contained short pre-written stories that local reporters could copy verbatim.<sup>87</sup> For example, many articles usually clarified that, despite his fame as a joker, Levant was “foremost a musician,” a phrase that a review from his first recital claimed came from his publicity release.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, the NCAC packet states, “Author, actor, wit and radio personality - Levant is first and foremost a musician - one of the highest calibre.”<sup>89</sup> A nearly identical sentence appears in the CCC packet as well: “Despite his manifold activities, Levant is first and foremost a musician and of the highest calibre.”<sup>90</sup> This phrase followed Levant around the country to reassure hesitant concertgoers that, despite Levant’s quips, they would experience a bona fide piano recital from a stellar performer.<sup>91</sup> In addition to his talent as a pianist, both press packets also call Levant a “prolific composer.”<sup>92</sup> Consequently, many articles referred to Levant as a “prolific composer” of popular songs, film music, Broadway shows and concert-hall works.<sup>93</sup> In the early 1940s, Levant occasionally performed his own Piano Concerto. The positive language of his publicity, in this case, could not counteract the largely negative audience reaction to most of his musical creations.

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<sup>87</sup> A note on the NCAC packet’s title and contents page indicates that the material was sent to local concert managers, who were directed to release stories to the press one at a time. NCAC, “Press Material,” [1].

<sup>88</sup> “Levant Answers That Question about His Ability as a Pianist,” *Palladium-Item* (Richmond, Ind.), 23 January 1942.

<sup>89</sup> NCAC, “Press Material,” [4].

<sup>90</sup> [CCC], publicity packet, [1].

<sup>91</sup> To list only a few: “Oscar Serious about Music,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 16 Jan 1944; “Oscar Levant at Kiel Auditorium,” *Breese Journal*, 3 Apr 1947; “Here Next Sunday,” *Atlanta Daily World*, 22 Jan 1950; “Oscar Levant Performance Scheduled in Guion Friday,” *The Battalion*, 11 Apr 1951.

<sup>92</sup> “Levant is a gifted and prolific composer.” NCAC, “Press Material,” [3]. “Levant is a prolific composer.” [CCC], publicity packet, [2].

<sup>93</sup> To list only a few: “Oscar Levant to be Presented at Coliseum on January 22,” *Palladium Item* (Richmond, Ind.), 8 Jan 1942; “Oscar Levant to Be Soloist with Houston Symphony on April 7,” *Baylor Lariat*, 27 Mar 1945; “Stage and Music: Oscar Levant Recital,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 30 Mar 1947; “Oscar Levant, Colorful Musician, Will Appear in Emporia April 7,” *Emporia Gazette*, 14 Mar 1951; “Kohler Women’s Club Having Oscar Levant on March 5,” *Sheboygan Press*, 25 Feb 1953.

Levant's publicity reinforced popular opinion of him as a great Gershwin pianist. The NCAC packet reads, "Levant is considered one of the finest interpreters of Gershwin's music."<sup>94</sup> Throughout most of the 1940s, while Levant toured under NCAC's management, this very statement appeared in numerous newspapers.<sup>95</sup> In comparison, the authors of the CCC material strengthened the language to also mention the two men's friendship and to proclaim Levant the eminent Gershwin interpreter: "He [Levant] was Gershwin's closest friend and it is fitting that through the years since that master's untimely death, Levant has become known as the principal exponent of his music."<sup>96</sup> Use of the phrases "Gershwin's closest friend" and "principal exponent" appeared frequently in Levant's coverage after Columbia began distributing its Levant package.<sup>97</sup>

Levant's press also emphasized his culturally fluid identity. Using the press material as a reference, newspapers often summarized Levant's biography as a classically trained boy from Pittsburgh, who studied with Sigismond Stojowski in New York, but also played with Ben Bernie's hotel jazz band. Additionally, many articles noted his radio and film stardom and his best-selling autobiography, *A Smattering of Ignorance*. One prewritten article in his CCC press packet declared he "delighted millions of listeners with his music," held a "special position in the affections of the young," and possessed the "unique ability to bridge the gap between popular

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<sup>94</sup> NCAC, "Press Material," [9].

<sup>95</sup> To list only a few: "Levant in Role of Pianist at Coliseum Thursday Night," *Palladium Item* (Richmond, Ind.), 18 Jan 1942; Norman Nairn, "Ovation Greets Oscar Levant with Civic," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, 3 May 1943; "Levant and Gershwin," *Ohio Jewish Chronicle*, 15 Oct 1943; "Oscar Levant to Appear in Wichita," *Wichita Catholic Advance*, 16 Feb 1945; "Shrine Artist Gives Credit to Gershwin," *Des Moines Tribune*, 17 Feb 1945.

<sup>96</sup> [CCC], publicity packet, [6].

<sup>97</sup> To list only a few: Howell Jones, "Music: Levant to Appear," *Atlanta Constitution*, 8 Jan 1950; "Oscar Levant Pursues Four Careers," *El Paso Times*, 21 Jan 1951; "Oscar Levant to Appear with Symphony Monday," *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, 25 Jan 1953; and "Bushnell Concert to Feature Piano of Oscar Levant," *Hartford Courant*, 11 Nov 1954. *Variety* referred to Levant as the "principal exponent" of Gershwin's death several years prior to Levant's contract with Columbia management. "Levant Plays Himself in WB Gershwin Film," *Variety* 151, no. 3 (30 Jun 1943): 3.

and classical music.”<sup>98</sup> As expected, this language appeared in numerous local announcements.

For example, in January 1949, a Phoenix paper reported:

His mastery of the keyboard in selections either classical or swing has made him a favorite of millions. No musical personality in our time has his unique ability to bridge the gap between popular and classical music, and his influence by word and performance on the growth of musical appreciation is extraordinary.<sup>99</sup>

Likewise, in February 1950, the *Minneapolis Star* stated: “No other musical personality of the day has had the unique ability to bridge the gap between popular and classical music as does Oscar Levant, pianist and musical personality.”<sup>100</sup> Unsurprisingly, similar language appears in other newspapers across the country.<sup>101</sup> Such reportage argued that Levant held legitimate claims to both the entertainment and classical worlds—that his serious operations within the highbrow concert-hall circuit were just as appropriate as his jaunts and cavorts in popular media, like radio and film.

Despite vigorous and persuasive support from this corporate-generated discourse, Levant contested some of the claims made by his management. By the 1950s, while under CCC management, Levant felt overworked and grew frustrated with touring and his publicity agents. In a 1951 interview in Emporia, Kansas, he told reporters that he had nothing to do with the content of his publicity releases, which he declared largely untrue, based on old information, or fabricated by his representatives. When he told reporters that he did not enjoy concert tours, they said that this countered his publicity. Indeed, the CCC packet includes a page titled “Oscar Levant Relaxes in Concerts,” which reads:

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<sup>98</sup> [CCC], publicity packet, [8].

<sup>99</sup> “Oscar Levant to Appear in Concerts at Phoenix,” *Casa Grande Dispatch*, 6 Jan 1949.

<sup>100</sup> “Levant Links Popular and Classical,” *Minneapolis Star*, 12 Feb 1950.

<sup>101</sup> For examples, see Howell Jones, “Music: Levant to Appear,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 8 Jan 1950; *Emporia Gazette*, 19 Mar 1952; “Kohler Women’s Club Will Have Lavent Thursday,” *Sheboygan Press*, 5 Mar 1953; and “Oscar Levant at OSC Coliseum,” *Salem Capital Journal*, 10 Apr 1953.

The cameras of the movie world terrify the famous Pittsburgh pianist, author, wit and raconteur, and the microphone has never ceased to be a source of fright. But put Levant before an audience—he is completely at ease. This is truly a paradox, for the screen or radio star usually fears his public en masse.<sup>102</sup>

Levant responded to the Emporia press: “Don’t talk about my publicity. I never see it; it is arranged by my agent and my concert managers. It mostly is made up of ancient things I may or may not have once said and a dreamy idea of what my managers wish people to think I am like.”<sup>103</sup> Levant already felt overworked by his schedule; the misrepresentation within his publicity and resultant confrontations with local reporters piled on additional stressors.

False or fabricated information notwithstanding, Levant’s corporate publicity aided him tremendously during his touring career. The packets ensured that local press across the country would have access to the same information, write articles using the same or similar language, and therefore continue to perpetuate the discourse that helped sustain Levant’s stardom. Upon the announcement of a Levant recital or symphony orchestra guest appearance, a potential concertgoer could pick up her local newspaper and learn additional information about the musician and wit she only knew from the radio or the movie screen. She would discover that despite Levant’s impudent personality, he had a reputation as a serious and gifted classical pianist. She would also read about Levant’s close relationship with Gershwin and his esteem as the finest purveyor of the composer’s piano works. Most importantly, the publicity material promised the potential ticketbuyer an enriching and memorable experience, as the CCC packet guaranteed: “Levant has delighted millions of listeners with his fabulous memory and his verbal

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<sup>102</sup> [CCC], publicity packet, [4].

<sup>103</sup> E.W., [no title], *Emporia Gazette*, 9 Apr 1951.

adroitness on radio programs. ... His personal appearance ... will reveal the complete Levant, one of the most adroit and versatile performers in American history.”<sup>104</sup>

### 3.4 Levant’s “Talking” Recitals

Levant and his management designed a recital experience that burlesqued the sacralization of the concert hall space in place since the turn of the century. Levant brought a unique approach to the recital that made this sort of event both comfortable and fun for his audiences. His recitals were unorthodox presentations that combined music with gossip, wisecracks, and “caustic, sentimental, personal and intimate” comments.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, his printed programs, if any were provided, listed no repertoire, rather, as announcements reported, he selected pieces on the spur of the moment. He played selections from canonic composers like Bach and Beethoven, as well as popular modern works by Debussy, Gershwin, and others. Announcements also usually foretold that Levant would ad lib in-between pieces: “The unique feature of the comment on his personal appearances, it is reported, is that no one knows what Levant will say. Not even Levant.”<sup>106</sup> However, consultation of contemporary reviews indicates that Levant’s solo appearances were less impromptu and more planned and scripted in advance than advertised. Nevertheless, his recital format’s relaxed and conversational approach drew him closer to his audience and set him apart from other classical pianists—like Serkin, Horowitz, and Rubinstein—who followed expected concert decorum.

Through the course of an evening of classical music, elitist concert hall habitués expected performers to execute their task seriously and with as little distraction as possible while the

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<sup>104</sup> [CCC], publicity packet, [1].

<sup>105</sup> “Many Facets Reflect Oscar Levant’s Brilliancy,” *Orlando Sentinel*, 1 Jan 1950.

<sup>106</sup> “Levant’s Comment Won’t Be Missing in Program Here,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 23 Mar 1947.

audience sat in silent contemplation. In his *The Well-Tempered Listener* (1940), Deems Taylor noted that solo recitals could be uncomfortable affairs for the average listener:

The sheer discomfort of the modern recital is something to daunt any but the most incorrigible of music lovers. To sit in an unpleasantly decorated, vilely ventilated auditorium, twenty yards from the platform, on a seat that was designed with no particular reference to the human frame, holding one's overcoat in one's lap, wedged in-between anonymous and faintly hostile neighbors, friendless, comfortless, tobaccoless – this is a high price to pay even for one of the “Razumovsky” Quartets.<sup>107</sup>

Levant countered the stigma of stuffy concert-hall decorum by bringing his impish personality to his live shows. He made his piano recitals casual and fun events, as if the audience were spending an evening with him in their own living rooms—as regular listeners to *Information Please* actually did.

Levant upset concert-hall decorum in numerous ways. He drank coffee at the piano, and sometimes apologetically stepped backstage for a cigarette. Aside from talking and telling jokes, he manicured his nails and blew his nose. He told stories about celebrities, conductors, and other famous pianists.<sup>108</sup> Sometimes he used music to have fun with stragglers. For example, Levant used an excerpt from Poulenc's *Mouvements perpétuels* as a running gag to embarrass any latecomers as they took their seats.<sup>109</sup> However, Levant's approach did not involve vaudeville antics while playing, as in a Victor Borge show. Levant resumed full professionalism when he turned to the piano: “Gaiety and banter are a part of his program, but [...] once he sat down at the keyboard, the fun was over and he played masterfully, and with great technical skill.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Deems Taylor, *The Well-Tempered Listener* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1940), 288.

<sup>108</sup> Max de Schauensee, “Oscar Levant is Quite Informal but Brilliant at Academy,” *Evening Bulletin* (Philadelphia), 10 Mar 1943.

<sup>109</sup> T.C.O., “Musical Views and Reviews,” *Emporia Gazette*, 9 Apr 1951.

<sup>110</sup> “Levant Answers That Question about His Ability as a Pianist,” *Palladium-Item* (Richmond, Ind.), 23 January 1942. Nearly ten years later, a Palm Beach reporter made the same observation: “From the moment he sat down at the piano, the cloak of the comedian fell off, and he was every inch the musician.” “Oscar Levant Concert Please Crowd of 1,360,” *Palm Beach Post*, 14 Feb 1951.



Levant's casual approach comforted any middle-class spectators seeking self-improvement through an evening of classical music but unaccustomed to elitist recital comportment. Others, with no interest in Bach or Beethoven, came to see a celebrity and, perhaps, left with a greater appreciation for highbrow art. One reviewer describes the audience at Levant's 23 January 1942 recital in Chicago:

There were two classes of people who attended Oscar Levant's "piano recital with commentary" at the Civic Opera House last Friday. 1. The regular concert clientele. 2. The radio listeners. The first group had difficulty stifling their laughter and maintaining their regular concert hall decorum. The second group had difficulty concealing their admiration for Bach and other highbrow "deep" stuff. Group No. 1 came to sneer and remained to laugh at this young upstart masquerading as a harlequin pianist, and Group 2 came to be bored during the music and remained to sit enthralled.<sup>111</sup>

Some critics, though apprehensive, responded favorably to Levant's unusual shows. A

Minneapolis journalist detailed his reaction to Levant's tomfoolery:

As a staid and grizzled old music critic, I can't bring myself to approve of this unconventional behavior, which carried to its logical extreme would reduce a recital to a shambles. But as a man who has sat serious-meined and straight-spined through 1379 piano recitals where a giggling spell would have had me thrown out by the usher, I'll admit I enjoyed a hearty whoop or two last night, and when I got outside I felt like tipping over garbage cans instead of sitting here writing a lot of old secondhand words.<sup>112</sup>

This balance of the impish with the professorial, the crude comment and the historical anecdote, front porch gossip and stellar musicianship, comprised a recipe for success at a moment when Americans, particularly the radio-listening masses, attended concerts in record numbers.

The typical Levant evening can be exemplified by his 9 March 1943 appearance at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia. It was his first solo recital in that city. The *Evening Bulletin* reported:

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<sup>111</sup> Paul K. Damai, "Radio Short Circuits," *The Hammond Times* (Munster, Indiana), 28 Jan 1942.

<sup>112</sup> John K. Sherman, "Levant Gags His Way through Piano Recital," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 15 Apr 1947.

Everything was informal. There were frequent references to such people as Bob Hope, Garbo, Hepburn, Orson Welles and Gracie Allen; there were anecdotes about famous pianists of the past—List [sic], Paderewski and de Pachmann, At one point Mrl. Levant said: “Gee, how I’d like a cigarette just now!”; with this he disappeared off stage into the wings. However, when it came to his actual playing, it was evident to one and all that the pianist is a first-rate performer who takes his music entirely seriously.<sup>113</sup>

He not only caused this critic to rethink his own social categories, but also to re-evaluate his learned musical reactions. Although Levant loved to remain casual with his audience, when it came time to actually make music, he became a thorough professional. From this description, attending a Levant recital was not a highbrow affair. It was like thumbing through a film magazine, reading the latest celebrity gossip, or tuning in to an episode of *Information Please*, except you could see and hear Levant in person, with the uplifting addition of musicological lessons followed by classical piano performed by a stellar musician.

Even though Levant never announced his program prior to his arrival, comparisons of numerous reviews over the years indicates that, most of the time, he played many of the same few pieces in roughly the same order. He also repeated many of the same jokes, one-liners, and anecdotes. Thus, his recitals were partially scripted, and his setlists were somewhat predetermined. In 1951, he told a reporter that Johnnie Evans, the agent who travelled with him, determined each evening’s program.<sup>114</sup> This contradicts the advertisements that claimed the spontaneity of his musical choices and comments. In fact, Levant’s recitals were constructions of the entertainment culture industry, with a small repertoire ranging from the Baroque to the modern era that changed little throughout his touring career.

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<sup>113</sup> Max de Schaunessy, “Oscar Levant is Quite Informal but Brilliant at Academy,” *Evening Bulletin* (Philadelphia), 10 Mar 1943.

<sup>114</sup> E.W., *Emporia Gazette*, 9 Apr 1951.

To illustrate, here follows a description of the typical Levant recital, gleaned from evidence in newspaper clippings from 1942 to 1953. Some reviews report that Levant usually began with a statement like, “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen--there that ought to prove I’m not as rude as everyone says I am.”<sup>115</sup> He would claim incapability to deliver a quality lecture-recital, but nevertheless under managerial duress he would “give two inadequate performances for the price of one.”<sup>116</sup> He then announced he would begin with his encores—a set of Chopin pieces—so the audience members, if they so choose, could leave early: “I’ll begin with the encores and then we can all go home.”<sup>117</sup> These well-crafted openers served multiple purposes. First, they immediately defused the stuffy and aristocratic air of the concert hall, permitting the audience to relax, especially those attendees unaccustomed to or intimidated by the space and occasion. They also mocked his own celebrity, drawing him nearer to his audience, all before he played a single note.

Following the opening “encore” segment, Levant provided a heavy dose of classical music, especially Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. He presented their works in a casual manner that deflated the air of sanctity around them. One Chicago reporter said he “seemed to dismiss these men as mere excuses for anecdote rather than serious composers.”<sup>118</sup> Prior to playing

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<sup>115</sup> T.C.O., “Musical Views and Reviews,” *Emporia Gazette*, 9 Apr 1951. Similar statements are reported in Leonard Lyons, “Broadway Medley,” *San Mateo Times*, 2 Feb 1949; and Ethelyn Sexton, “Typical Levant Humor Sparkles M.S.C. Show,” *Lansing State Journal*, 23 Jan 1952. Levant delivered a nearly identical line as Oscar Farrar in Warner Bros.’s *Romance on the High Seas* (1948, dir. Michael Curtiz).

<sup>116</sup> Samuel L. Singer, “Levant Plays (and Talks) at Academy,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 10 Mar 1943; Samuel T. Wilson, “Oscar Levant in One Man Vaudeville,” *Columbus Dispatch*, 31 Oct 1943; “Levant Pleases City Audience,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 7 Jan 1944.

<sup>117</sup> Singer, 10 Mar 1943; Eugenia B. Gordon, “Levant Sallies, Music Please,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 14 Apr 1944. For his first recital in Richmond, Indiana, he played two waltzes, the Etude in C-sharp and the Berceuse. “Levant Answers That Question about His Ability as a Pianist,” *Palladium Item and Sun-Telegram* (Richmond, Ind.), 23 Jan 1942. His “encores” segment on 2 March 1950 in Davenport included two waltzes, the Berceuse, a “nameless” etude, and the “Black Key” and “Revolutionary” etudes. Bill Wundram, Jr., “Levant, in Dual Role of Wit and Top Concert Pianist, Delights Audience at Masonic Temple,” *Quad City Times* (Davenport, Iowa), 3 Mar 1950.

<sup>118</sup> Edward Barry, “Oscar Levant’s Recital a Lively One-Man Show,” *Chicago Tribune*, 24 Jan 1942.

Bach's Partita No. 1, some reports quote him saying he must begin with a Bach piece, because "it is always programmed on a serious recital."<sup>119</sup> He spoke about Bach's many children: "He had twenty children and wrote lots of great music, so he didn't have much time for fooling around."<sup>120</sup> Some reviews say, before launching into the partita, he would shout, "Be back in nine minutes!"<sup>121</sup>

Levant eventually recorded most of this repertoire for Columbia Records, ensuring an even more regular and unvaried setlist that would eventually sell discs. In early recitals, Levant's selection of Beethoven sonata could vary. He often referred to the Moonlight Sonata as "a blockbuster of boredom," but ultimately stuck with it after recording it for Columbia in June 1946.<sup>122</sup> Sometimes, he preceded the performance by saying he would play with his "customary arthritic abandon."<sup>123</sup> Of his Brahms repertoire, he most frequently played the Rhapsody in B minor, the Intermezzo in A major, op. 118/2 and the Waltz in A-flat major, op. 39. The last two he recorded for Columbia in May 1947.

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<sup>119</sup> Eugenia B. Gordon, "Levant Sallies, Music Please," *Atlanta Constitution*, 14 Apr 1944. He said something similar at Michigan State in 1952. Ethelyn Sexton, "Typical Levant Humor Sparkles M.S.C. Show," *Lansing State Journal*, 23 Jan 1952.

<sup>120</sup> Quoted in A.W.H., "Levant Recital Pleases Audience," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, 13 Apr 1947. Reports of this anecdote are also found in J. Dorsey Callaghan, "Pianist Levant Entertains the Easy Way," *Detroit Free Press*, 7 Feb 1950; and Marion Koch, "Pianist-Humorist Levant Renders Brilliant Concert," *Sheboygan Press*, 6 Mar 1953.

<sup>121</sup> Edward Barry, "Oscar Levant's Recital a Lively One-Man Show," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 24 Jan 1942; Singer, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 10 Mar 1943; *Sheboygan Press*, 6 Mar 1953.

<sup>122</sup> He played the "Tempest" Sonata at his first recital in Richmond, and one movement from it in Dayton in October 1943. *Palladium Item*, 23 Jan 1942; Merab Eberle, "Talking Pianist Presents Hybrid Performance," *Dayton Journal Herald*, 22 Oct 1943. In 1943 in Philadelphia, he played the first movement of the Piano Sonata No. 19 in G minor, op. 49/1. Singer, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 10 Mar 1943. Evidence of his performance of the Moonlight Sonata from 1946 onward is found in numerous sources, including John K. Sherman, "Levant Goes His Way Through Piano Recital," *Minneapolis Star*, 15 Apr 1947; Bill Wundram, Jr., "Levant, in Dual Role of Wit and Top Concert Pianist, Delights Audience at Masonic Temple," *Quad City Times* (Davenport), 3 Mar 1950; and Koch, *Sheboygan Press*, 6 Mar 1953.

<sup>123</sup> He is cited using the phrase prior to the Beethoven in several sources, including "Wisecrack," *Daily Oklahoman*, 16 Jan 1944; Clifford Bloom, "Levant, Quips—and a Piano," *Des Moines Register*, 19 Feb 1945; Sherman, *Minneapolis Star*, 15 Apr 1947; Wundram, Jr., *Quad City Times* (Davenport), 3 Mar 1950; "Oscar Can't B Flat-He's Sharp," *Vancouver Sun*, 18 Jan 1951; Sexton, *Lansing State Journal*, 23 Jan 1952; and Koch, *Sheboygan Press*, 6 Mar 1953. An early report has him saying this prior to the Bach partita. *Palladium Item*, 23 Jan 1942. He even used the phrase on the 11 Oct 1963 episode of *The Tonight Show with Jack Paar*. Doc Quigg, "Oscar Levant Provides Needed Lift to Friday Night Television," *Bend Bulletin* (Bend, Oregon), 12 Oct 1963.

Levant usually next featured a Liszt rhapsody, using the moment to educate the audience about the composer's importance to the modern solo piano recital. Just like Beethoven and Bach, he spoke of Liszt as if he were a modern celebrity one could read about in *Look* magazine. He referred to Liszt as "the Sinatra of his day," so enamored with his profile that he placed the piano in its traditional position so the pianist faces the wings.<sup>124</sup> Levant said this historic decision worked to his disadvantage: "Now as for me, I don't particularly care. My profile is globular."<sup>125</sup>

Many reviews report that Levant frequently played solo piano versions of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and the Concerto in F, as well as some of the Preludes. As with his orchestra guest appearances, he used the vehicle of the solo recital to demonstrate his mastery of Gershwin's compositions. Contemporary reviews report he played the Concerto and the Rhapsody like improvisations, usually in a truncated form, as he had done with the Rhapsody while working with Ben Bernie. Concerning his performance of "condensations" of the two large works plus the preludes, a Louisville reviewer said: "Levant demonstrated his complete mastery of this particular idiom. They were pulsating and alive, discreetly pedaled, brilliantly articulate."<sup>126</sup> In 1952, a Michigan reviewer said, "He took the *Rhapsody in Blue* at a swifter tempo than offered by many pianists—all to the good."<sup>127</sup> In 1950, a Detroit reviewer said "his improvisations on the Gershwin Concerto in F made of that work a magnificent solo piano composition."<sup>128</sup> Another reviewer, who said he played the concerto with "considerable abandon

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<sup>124</sup> Reports of this story are found in *Palladium-Item*, 23 Jan 1942; Eberle, *Dayton Journal Herald*, 22 Oct 1943; Sherman, *Minneapolis Star*, 15 Apr 1947; J. Dorsey Callaghan, "Pianist Levant Entertains the Easy Way," *Detroit Free Press*, 7 Feb 1950; Rex Ballard, "Levant Captivates Recital Audience with Artistry, Wit," *Davenport Daily Times*, 3 Mar 1950; and Koch, *Sheboygan Press*, 6 Mar 1953.

<sup>125</sup> Ballard, *Davenport Daily Times*, 3 Mar 1950.

<sup>126</sup> William Mootz, "Levant Plays Gershwin Very Well; That is All," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 22 Jan 1950.

<sup>127</sup> Sexton, *Lansing State Journal*, 23 Jan 1952.

<sup>128</sup> Callaghan, *Detroit Free Press*, 7 Feb 1950. In the last chapter, I discuss Levant's performance of a solo-piano reduction of the Concerto in F in *You Were Meant for Me* (Fox, 1948, dir. Lloyd Bacon).

and noise,” stated: “One may or may not care for Oscar Levant’s humor, and his witticisms [...] left this reviewer cool, but one thing you can’t overlook, and that’s his ability as a Gershwin whacker.”<sup>129</sup>

Levant’s true encore material consisted of a handful of pieces, most of which he eventually recorded. Customarily, Levant closed his concert with short popular selections from recent or modern composers, like Debussy’s *Clair de lune*, the Polka from Shostakovich’s *The Age of Gold*, De Falla’s “Ritual Fire Dance” from the ballet *El amor brujo*, and Lecuona’s *Malagueña*. The last three pieces were contemporary modern pieces that showcased Levant’s strength and speed. Despite their often harsh sonorities, these pieces appealed to audiences—and perhaps to Levant as well—because of their percussiveness, velocity, brevity, and theatricality. He eventually recorded all of these pieces for his album *Oscar Levant Plays Popular Moderns*, released by Columbia in 1946.

Levant’s solo recitals were middlebrow events featuring a popular radio star, who mixed wisecracks with performances of classical works from the Baroque to the contemporary. His success benefited from not only his stardom but also a simultaneous rise in American classical concert attendance in the 1940s. Although Levant was one of the highest grossing solo concert artists of the era, to the end of his solo recital career, he stuck to a somewhat rigid and narrow setlist mostly comprised of pieces he had recorded. However, critics and audiences over the years did not seem to notice or care. He continued to attract immense crowds until his last solo recital in Corvallis, Oregon on 18 April 1953.

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<sup>129</sup> Brian Storm, “Oscillating Oscar Orates Much, Plays Gershwin with Abandon,” *Corvallis Gazette-Times*, 20 Apr 1953.

### 3.5 Levant's Appearances with Symphony Orchestras

In addition to his solo recitals, Levant also appeared regularly as a guest artist with numerous symphony orchestras across the country. Levant's 24 November 1939 concert with the Pittsburgh Symphony marks his first appearance as a regularly touring concert pianist.<sup>130</sup> In contrast to his recitals, Levant tended to behave himself when appearing with an orchestra, unless the occasion were a benefit or Gershwin concert. Moreover, his collection of performance pieces appears diminutive when compared to the repertoires of his contemporaries. Starting out as a *Rhapsody in Blue* and Concerto in F specialist, he soon wished to move beyond Gershwin, but his touring schedule and responsibilities to radio and Hollywood hindered his study of new works. In 1945, he began programming additional concertos, and he received praise and good reviews for some of them. Nevertheless, Levant continued to offer the *Rhapsody* and Concerto in F throughout his career, playing them more often than any other pianist. Thus, he remained categorized as a Gershwin specialist up to his last appearance as a touring orchestra pianist in 1955.<sup>131</sup>

Levant's appearances with symphony orchestras were usually more formal than his solo recitals. I have found few examples of him addressing the audience or breaking decorum for the purposes of humor while sharing the stage with a conductor and orchestra. Such moments

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<sup>130</sup> Prior to that evening, in addition to his radio performances, he had appeared twice with the New York Philharmonic at Lewisohn Stadium and once at the Hollywood Bowl, the Gershwin memorial concert. The Pittsburgh event was his first appearance as a guest pianist in a symphony hall.

<sup>131</sup> Levant's final appearance as a touring orchestra pianist was at an outdoor concert with the Milwaukee Symphony on 11 August 1955. After that appearance, he decided to quit touring altogether and cancelled his 16 August appearance with the Buffalo Pops. He very briefly returned to the stage in 1958 for two performances. He played the Shostakovich Second Piano Concerto with the Los Angeles Music Festival Symphony Orchestra on 2 June. His final concert was on 2 August at the Hollywood Bowl, where he again played the *Rhapsody* and the Concerto in F. Levant, *Memoirs*, 263; Bill Curley, "Levant 'King of Keys' Here Despite Upsets," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 12 Aug 1955; Albert Goldberg, "Levant Gives Good Account of Himself," *LAT*, 3 Jun 1958; Margaret Harford, "Tribute to Gershwin Draws 20,000 to Bowl," *Los Angeles Mirror News*, 4 Aug 1958.

usually occurred either during Gershwin festivals, or after Levant's main scheduled work had been played. For example, following a 1943 all-Gershwin concert in Detroit, to the audience's delight, he "jog-trotted off stage" with his head back, elbows in and knees up.<sup>132</sup> Sometimes he joked with the audience during encores. Nevertheless, although he often seemed fidgety or nervous, Levant usually approached a performance with a symphony orchestra within the codes of the concert hall. He once lamented that people came to his concerts to hear him crack a joke, not necessarily to hear him play: "What is a wit, anyway? A guy who gets a wisecrack in print every two years. I'm a concert pianist, too, you know. But nobody believes me."<sup>133</sup> Evidently, Levant could not escape his impudent persona when he wanted to be taken seriously. Despite his years of classical piano training, a fact often mentioned in his concert announcements, the American public recognized him foremost as a musical wit.

When Levant started his touring career in 1939, he had very few large works to offer: only the *Rhapsody in Blue*, Concerto in F, and his own piano concerto.<sup>134</sup> By 1943, after he had established himself as leading popular Gershwin pianist, he desired to move beyond Gershwin and learn new works by other composers. Levant expressed this wish to Cleveland Orchestra conductor Erich Leinsdorf. He added that playing the same two Gershwin works caused his mind to wander during performance, but his touring and radio commitments permitted him no time to practice new material. Leinsdorf responded:

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<sup>132</sup> J. D. Callaghan, "Levant and Kurtz Win Audience Completely," *Detroit Free Press*, 14 May 1943.

<sup>133</sup> Aline Mosby, "Funnyman Levant is Bored; No One Takes Him Seriously," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 9 July 1947.

<sup>134</sup> He had been playing the first movement of the Grieg concerto since 1942, but not the full work.



It would be a serious loss not only to yourself, but to the entire field of good music, ... if you did not carry out the idea. ... Your name, as a musician, is closely connected with Gershwin, and while this has given you the advantage of attaining a fantastic degree of popularity and publicity, it has also labeled you ... a specialist.<sup>135</sup>

Leinsdorf encouraged him to take the summer off to prepare new music for both symphony orchestras and his recital program. He reassured Levant that only a few performances of new pieces were required “to establish in the minds of the people that you can do something besides Gershwin.”<sup>136</sup> Levant accomplished this task, for he first performed the complete Grieg Concerto in A minor with the National Symphony Orchestra on 23 January 1945. He added concertos by Tchaikovsky, Khachaturian, and other composers to his repertoire in the late 1940s. I discuss reception of Levant’s performances of these works below. Even though he learned and presented a few additional works, orchestras continued to engage him for a Gershwin evening.

Levant’s concerto repertoire appears extremely small in comparison to his contemporaries. Throughout his career as a guest pianist with symphony orchestras, he only played seven multi-movement concertos:

- Rubinstein’s Fourth Piano Concerto (1864)
- Grieg’s Concerto in A Minor (1868)
- Tchaikovsky’s First Piano Concerto (1874-75)
- Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto (1900-01)
- Gershwin’s Concerto in F (1925)
- Khachaturian’s D-flat Piano Concerto (1936)
- Shostakovich’s Second Piano Concerto (1957)

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<sup>135</sup> Erich Leinsdorf to Oscar Levant, letter, 15 Nov 1943 (USCOLP, box 1, folder 13).

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

In addition to these large concertos, his repertoire also included five single-movement concerto-like pieces:

- Honegger's *Concertino* (1924)
- Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924)
- Gershwin's *Second Rhapsody* (1931)
- Gershwin's "*I Got Rhythm*" *Variations* (1934)
- Levant's *Piano Concerto* (1941)

Additionally, well before he began his touring career, Levant played Robert Russell Bennett's single-movement *Charleston Rhapsody* with the New York Sinfonietta on 18 February 1931.<sup>137</sup>

There are also stray examples of Levant playing selections from other concertos, like the Scherzo from Saint-Saëns' G minor concerto.<sup>138</sup> He presented a movement from a Mozart concerto on an episode of Alexander Woollcott's *Town Crier* radio program.<sup>139</sup> Finally, Irving Kolodin claimed Levant knew all of Beethoven's concertos, but I have found no evidence he performed any of them live.<sup>140</sup>

Much of this concerto repertoire falls into the popular classical category: classical music well-liked by American audiences. These popular classical pieces received frequent radio airplay and interpolations into film scores. Moviemakers reasoned that such classical music added an element of prestige to their productions without alienating the popular crowd. In other words, the average radio-listening, film-going American recognizes these works at least by name if not by melody or theme.

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<sup>137</sup> "Bennett Conducts Own Work in Sinfonietta Concert," *New York Sun*, 19 Feb 1931. I have found no evidence of any further performances by Levant of this work.

<sup>138</sup> Levant performed the Saint-Saëns on the radio program *Design for Happiness* with the Women's Symphony Orchestra of Chicago on 17 November 1940 and on the 30 November 1942 episode of *Bell Telephone Hour*. "Stars Will Combine Talent in Radio Program to Boost Red Cross Drive," *Tampa Times*, 16 Nov 1940.

<sup>139</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 166.

<sup>140</sup> Irving Kolodin, "The Trouble with Oscar," *Saturday Review* 55, no. 37 (9 Sep 1972): 14.

Below, I discuss contemporary reception of Levant's performances of his repertoire. Because he performed the Rachmaninoff, Honegger, Rubinstein, Shostakovich, and Gershwin's Second Rhapsody and "*I Got Rhythm*" *Variations* so seldom, I do not include discussion of them here.<sup>141</sup> Rather, in addition to his own concerto, I focus on the large works Levant played in the concert hall most frequently.

### 3.4.1 Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*

Levant played the *Rhapsody in Blue* over one hundred times during the course of his touring career. In Chapter One, I discussed Levant's early Rhapsody performances as a Ben Bernie pianist and George Gershwin's close friend. In Chapter Two, I detailed Levant's radio presentations of the work as he simultaneously launched his touring career. Due to frequent radio play and numerous recordings, including his own, Levant did not need to inspire public and critical appreciation of the work. However, Levant's fans did expect him to play it. His live appearances, in conjunction with his radio performances, quickly established Levant as the premier Rhapsody interpreter. Indeed, he once told the press the Rhapsody was "the only thing anybody wants to hear me play."<sup>142</sup>

Many members of the press declared Levant a leading performer of the work. In 1943, a Rochester critic wrote: "I don't think I have ever heard him do [the Rhapsody] better than he did last night."<sup>143</sup> In 1945, a Louisville critic agreed, "That jazz masterpiece [...] is wearing

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<sup>141</sup> I discussed Levant's performances of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto at the Hollywood Bowl and on *Kraft Music Hall* in Chapter Two. I cover the two Gershwin works in Chapter Four.

<sup>142</sup> Eugenia Bridges Harty, "Oscar Levant Well Informed on the History of Constitution," *Atlanta Constitution*, 21 July 1943.

<sup>143</sup> Norman Nairn, "Ovation Greets Oscar Levant with Civic," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, 3 May 1943.

extremely well. [...] Just about no one plays Gershwin as well as he.”<sup>144</sup> In 1950 an Oakland critic said: “General opinion is that he is the foremost exponent of the work; the most authentic since the composer himself. He doesn’t overplay it or strain for effect, but plays it with the dignity of directness and sincerity.”<sup>145</sup>

Levant played the piece so frequently that many critics declared his name and celebrity had become synonymous with the work. In 1950, the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* reported the Rhapsody “has become closely associated with the pianist’s name.”<sup>146</sup> A couple of months later, an Oakland critic agreed, “Levant has been associated with the Rhapsody so long and intimately that they are inseparable in the public mind.”<sup>147</sup> By mid-century, the *Rhapsody in Blue* as played by Oscar Levant summoned nostalgic ruminations of the Jazz Age. Indeed, following Levant’s appearance with the University of Arkansas Symphony Orchestra in February 1953, the university’s director of bands wrote:

To many in the audience, the Rhapsody in Blue was no doubt the whole of last evening’s concert. The Rhapsody bespeaks of a period in American music more strongly than the Tchaikovsky concerto reflects a given period in Russian culture. On the surface the Rhapsody is dated – even outdated but on further examination in the hands of an understanding artist it reveals not only a trend in modern American music which has its ramification in what is being written today, but it also reflects the entire folk mores or customs of an era.<sup>148</sup>

After a symphony orchestra performance, Levant frequently played a solo piano version of *Rhapsody in Blue* as an encore. Following a presentation of the Concerto in F with the Houston Symphony Orchestra on 12 January 1944, Rice University’s *Thresher* reported that

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<sup>144</sup> Dwight Anderson, “Levant Makes Gershwin Sing but Mutilates Grieg Concerto,” *Louisville Courier Journal*, 30 Jan 1945.

<sup>145</sup> Clifford Gessler, “S.F. Symphony’s Pop Concert Packs Hall,” *Oakland Tribune*, 3 Apr 1950.

<sup>146</sup> B.B., “Oscar Levant Cavorts for Crowd in Semi-Pop Concert,” *St. Louis Star-Times*, 27 Feb 1950.

<sup>147</sup> Gessler, *Oakland Tribune*, 3 Apr 1950.

<sup>148</sup> E. J. Marty, “Audience which Packs Field House Hears Oscar Levant and University Symphony,” *Northwest Arkansas Times*, 21 February 1953.

Levant encored with a “concert-piano arrangement” of the *Rhapsody* and “three incidental works of [Gershwin],” probably two of the Piano Preludes and perhaps a solo piano arrangement of one of Gershwin’s songs. The reporter cheekily declared: “Oscar put on a good show. ... The Houston Symphony also played.”<sup>149</sup>

Levant’s encore presentation of the *Rhapsody in Blue* at the Hollywood Bowl on 25 July 1950 provides an example not only of how Levant presented the work as an encore, but also how he may have performed this piece during his talking recitals. That evening Levant performed the Concerto in F for an all-American program that also included works by Barber, Antheil, and Kern.<sup>150</sup> After the concerto, the audience called Levant back to the stage for several encores. The third time, someone in the crowd shouted, “Rhapsody!” Referring to the *Los Angeles Times* critic, who for years had written negatively about the piece and the monotony of the annual Hollywood Bowl all-Gershwin concerts, Levant shouted back, “Mr. Goldberg doesn’t like it! ... To hell with Goldberg!” and launched into the Rhapsody.

Levant’s Hollywood Bowl encore performance is a unique abridgement of the work. As Ryan Bañagale explains, *Rhapsody in Blue* has always existed as an “arrangement,” never as a “composition” with a definitive full score provided by the composer.<sup>151</sup> Indeed, since the piece’s 1924 debut at Aeolian Hall (with Ferde Grofé’s orchestral arrangement for Whiteman’s jazz band of Gershwin’s initial two-piano score), multitudes of dance bands, symphony orchestras, and various other combinations of ensemble have presented their own arrangements of the

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<sup>149</sup> “After Oscar What?,” *Rice Thresher*, 13 January 1944.

<sup>150</sup> Albert Goldberg, “Rodzinski Conducts American Composers,” *LAT*, 26 July 1950.

<sup>151</sup> Ryan Bañagale, *Arranging Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue and the Creation of an American Icon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-5.

music. And each historical performance—be it on radio, in a recording studio, or at the Hollywood Bowl—is unique, changing with each interpretation.

As David Schiff explains, five published versions of the *Rhapsody in Blue* exist: a 1924 solo piano reduction, a 1924 two-piano/four-hands edition, a facsimile edition of Grofé’s original score for Whiteman’s twenty-three man jazz band, Grofé’s 1926 orchestral arrangement in miniature score, and Henry Levine’s arrangement for two pianos (copyrighted 1943). The solo piano reduction cuts passages. Schiff says the 1926 Grofé arrangement introduces new orchestral colors and doublings not present in the facsimile edition, which does not provide a complete piano part.<sup>152</sup> For the sake of clarity, just as Schiff did in his study of the *Rhapsody*, I will use Grofé’s orchestral arrangement as the reference score in my analysis of Levant’s solo piano performance.

Although Levant’s myriad solo presentations of the work certainly changed from performance to performance, analysis of his Hollywood Bowl encore suggests that he probably preserved the order of the passages; changes made to the melodic structure are largely inconsequential, like added grace notes or sudden glissandi for demonstrative spectacular effect. The available recording reveals many of the hallmarks of Levant’s virtuosic pianism, particularly extreme speed (even during the Love Theme) and heavy percussiveness.<sup>153</sup> Levant reduces the *Rhapsody* to about nine minutes, making several cuts as presented in Table 3.1. Throughout his performance, Levant largely plays the piano part—including the part in both the solo and tutti

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<sup>152</sup> David Schiff, *Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4-7.

<sup>153</sup> Gordonskene, “Oscar Levant Plays Gershwin Live at the Hollywood Bowl-1950 - Past Daily Mid-Week Concert,” *Past Daily* web blog, <<https://pastdaily.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/1-a-phil-hollywood-bowl-1950-part-2.mp3>>, last accessed 7 June 2018.

sections—as printed in the 1942 miniature orchestral score.<sup>154</sup> Despite the cuts, Levant presents his selections in the order they appear in the orchestral score. However, as some of my transcriptions demonstrate, Levant definitely did not use the solo-piano score as a reference for all of his orchestral reductions. Some of his changes result from his own invention.

Orchestral score measure numbers
1-80
107-114
127-137
170-223
247-324
347-386
415-424
449-end

**Table 3.1. Inclusive Measures of *Rhapsody in Blue* in Levant’s Hollywood Bowl Encore Performance.**

For the opening fifteen bars (Figure 3.1), which include the “clarinet” glissando and the introduction of the ritornello theme, Levant presents the melody largely as printed in both the 1924 solo piano score and the 1942 orchestral score. He adds several grace notes for a “bent-note” effect that does not significantly alter the structure of the melody. His left-hand approximation of the harmony adheres closely to that printed in the solo-piano music and the 1924 two-piano score. In Figure 3.1, Levant’s additions are marked with a star symbol (★). The Bowl audience knew these opening measures well (indicated by their applause of recognition as Levant enters the fourth bar). Levant makes no significant changes to the melody. He only adds

<sup>154</sup> George Gershwin, *Rhapsody in Blue*, miniature orchestral score, scored by Ferde Grofé (New York: Harms, 1942). As David Schiff explains, the solo piano score excises music from rehearsal 14 to four bars before rehearsal 19, and permits additional cuts. See Schiff, 6.

grace notes to heighten the music's "bluesy" character, while his freedoms with the tempo augment the improvisatory character of his performance.

The image displays a musical score for the first system of an encore performance of 'Rhapsody in Blue'. The score is written for piano and is divided into six systems. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 4/4. The notation includes various musical elements such as triplets, grace notes, and dynamic markings. A red dashed box highlights a section of the bass line in the second system, labeled '(applause / noise)'. The score concludes with a final measure marked '10' and a fermata.

Figure 3.1. Levant Hollywood Bowl Encore, *Rhapsody in Blue*, mm. 2-15.



Levant's melodic alterations neither mar the identity of Gershwin's themes nor result in something creatively new, rather they highlight his virtuosity and intensify the improvisatory character of his performance. Levant alters the phrasing and placement of the melody without distorting the identity of the melody itself. For example, during one variation of what Schiff calls "trunk song 2," Levant plays tied pitches as two individual notes and plays one melodic fragment an octave higher than specified in the orchestral score (see the star symbols in Figure 3.2).<sup>155</sup> Later on, during a long cadenza passage, Levant excises half a bar, as indicated with the red box in Figure 3.3. This moment occurs during four bars of an ostinato pattern, so Levant's excision may have resulted from a counting error. As with the opening fifteen bars, these performative choices are unique to this presentation but do not significantly alter melodic identity.



Figure 3.2. Levant Hollywood Bowl Encore, *Rhapsody in Blue*, mm. 212-219, right hand.

<sup>155</sup> Schiff, 16.

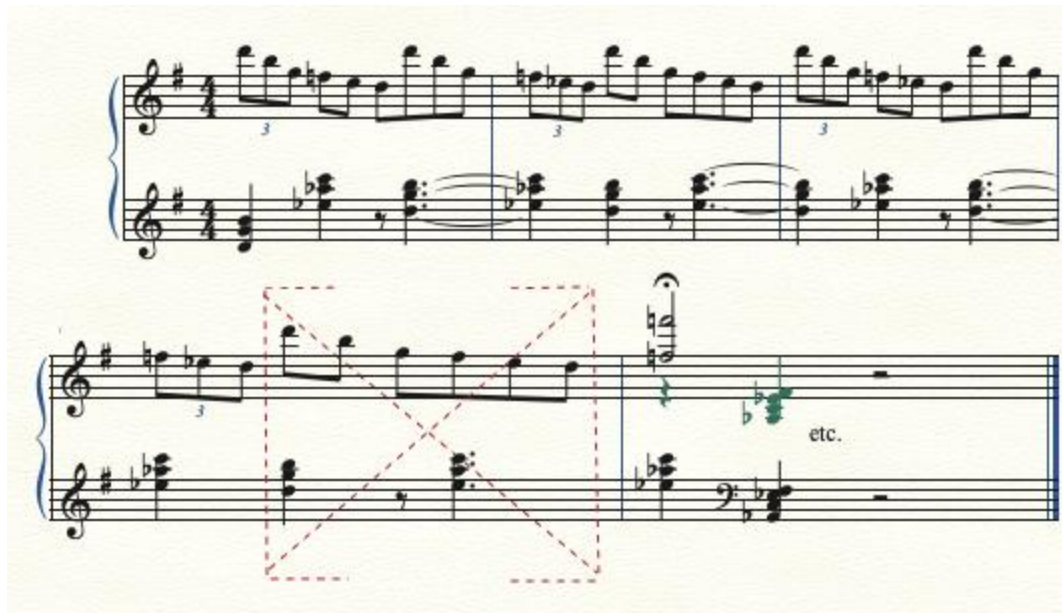


Figure 3.3. Levant Hollywood Bowl Encore, *Rhapsody in Blue*, mm. 251-255.

Levant's only significant alterations to the music occur during a transcription of an orchestra-only passage. His changes do not transform the melody, but rather add counterpoint and enhance virtuosic spectacle. For a section marked "Tempo giusto" (bars 72-80), Levant presents the ritornello theme unaltered in the right hand but adds a contrapuntal bass line which has no equivalent in available scores of the *Rhapsody*. Levant's improvisational additions for this passage are indicated by the red notes in Figure 3.4. These left-hand parallel octaves are Levant's own invention, added for spectacular effect during swift passagework. He concludes the passage with a sudden and quick glissando in a high right-hand register, also with no precedent. This moment immediately precedes Levant's first cut to the score, whereupon he jumps from bar 80 to 107. Thus, the glissando also works as a neat but obvious cadential effect before Levant's first major excision of musical material.



Figure 3.4. Levant Hollywood Bowl encore, *Rhapsody in Blue*, mm. 72-80.

The *Rhapsody* has always existed as an arrangement, a malleable musical creation with no authoritative manuscript from an individual creator; however, in his memoirs, Levant disclosed his guilty conscience for taking what he considered many liberties with Gershwin's music toward the latter end of his touring career:

I played Gershwin until it exuded out of my body. I got bored with it I guess. I transmuted my interpretation, my fingering changed. My interpretation changed and the guilt became unbearable. I don't know what it was based on. [...] The music I'm happy to say, I have no claim on it. But there was a proprietary feeling for a while. Naturally it belongs to the world.<sup>156</sup>

<sup>156</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, manuscript. For the published equivalent, see Levant, *Memoirs*, 148.

With his Hollywood Bowl encore performance of *Rhapsody in Blue*, despite his excisions, truncations, ornaments, and other additions, his alterations are not so transgressive. Nevertheless, Levant admits to changing the music, altering fingering, and enjoying a feeling of personal ownership of the music—all things that his classical piano instructor Sigismond Stojowski frowned upon.<sup>157</sup>

### 3.5.2 Gershwin's Concerto in F

Levant played the Concerto in F as often as he played the *Rhapsody in Blue*. Between 1932 and 1958, he presented the concerto over one hundred times in concert. In the early 1940s, Levant established himself as the foremost performer of the work during a period when almost no one else programmed it. The last pianist to play the concerto as frequently was Gershwin himself. In the next chapter, I discuss Levant's recurring appearances at Lewisohn Stadium, which helped establish him as top interpreter of Gershwin's piano music in New York. His broader concert career extended that title nationwide.

Levant's tours offered local critics live performances by which they could assess the work's artistic and canonic value. After Gershwin premiered the Concerto in F in 1925, although well received by the public, many critics dismissed it as an unsuccessful blend of classical and popular idioms. In an era when Gershwin's music still was not considered canonic, Levant's frequent live performances of the Concerto in F allowed listeners nationwide to re-evaluate its aesthetic merits and cultural worth. Some critics, while appreciating Levant's musicianship, continued to consider the work a problematic composition: "To anyone seriously concerned with music, the work remained formless, but Levant gave it a sparkle and bounce almost sufficient to

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<sup>157</sup> See Chapter One.

push such thoughts away.”<sup>158</sup> Other commentators disagreed and praised Gershwin’s art along with Levant’s pianism:

Gershwin had everything (or almost everything) and Mr. Levant has everything with which to play the concerto. Gershwin’s melody is instrumental rather than vocal, his music has the Kern charm plus his own character and bite. His harmonies are expressive, attractive and interesting and his rhythm is irresistible. His form is perfect, each thought is a neat and rounded entity and any structural change would come as a shattering blow.<sup>159</sup>

Some critics, like Pittsburgh’s Donald Steinfirt, believed the concerto Gershwin’s strongest and most viable work, with a rightful claim to a spot in the American canon. In 1939, following Levant’s debut with a symphony orchestra, Steinfirt wrote:

Of all the works which George Gershwin left behind him, it is perhaps the Concerto in F which will live longest, for it is the most truly representative of this talented composer. Full of the jazz idiom with melodies tumbling over themselves in profusion, it is a world of zest and zing, moving forward impetuously and never failing to excite. Today, it is as fresh as the day it was first played nearly thirteen years ago. If current situations condition composers, as they must inevitably do, then George Gershwin wrote the history of the roaring twenties in his Concerto in F as truly as Haydn mirrored the court of Prince Esterhazy.<sup>160</sup>

Several critics noted that, considering the concerto’s hybrid character, Levant’s pianism struck an appropriate balance of concert-hall austerity and Jazz Age frivolity. The *Hartford Courant* said, “He makes Gershwin neither brash nor longhaired, and too many pianists are inclined to prettify him.”<sup>161</sup> For some listeners, Levant’s realization of the concerto was the most ideal, because they heard it as a close approximation of Gershwin’s own interpretation.

Following a 1944 performance with the Cincinnati Orchestra, one critic proclaimed:

Gershwin’s F major concerto in Levant’s hands reproduced, as nearly as could be expected the inimitable style and spirit of the composer’s interpretation of it. Levant’s

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<sup>158</sup> Reed Hynds, “Levant’s Concert Fun for Everyone,” *St. Louis Star and Times*, 17 Nov 1941.

<sup>159</sup> F.E.C., “Levant and Goossens Team up to Do Right By Gershwin and City Loves It,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 25 Jan 1944.

<sup>160</sup> D.S. Steinfirt, “Oscar Levant Scores Hit in Concert Here,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 25 Nov 1939.

<sup>161</sup> T.H.P., “Levant Gets Good Hand at Bushnell,” *Hartford Courant*, 19 Mar 1953.

conception of the flavor Gershwin gave in projecting the incisive, crisp rhythms so strongly characteristic of his music, was clearly revealed. The musical sentences were graphic and clean-cut in his playing, and were jugged out in the nonchalant manner by which Gershwin interpreted them. Levant's shadings and phrasings are Gershwinesque and have that improvisational character which emanates from a flair for projecting the composer's stylistic idiom. Levant's pronounced rhythmic sensitivity urges him toward accuracy in cooperation with the orchestral accompaniment but does not destroy the abandon and elasticity needed to preserve the individuality of Gershwin's music.<sup>162</sup>

Levant's performance with the Chicago Symphony two days later inspired similar remarks: "His playing of the Concerto in F was the most authentic I have heard since Gershwin's own."<sup>163</sup>

Other critics disagreed and heard Levant's interpretation as more indicative of his own "mallet-fingered, hard-as-nails approach."<sup>164</sup> After a 1950 performance in Minneapolis, one critic said:

His playing, as befits Gershwin, has a kind of deadpan expressiveness, a hard tone which he doesn't allow to glow or expand much, a rhythmic push that gives sharpness to syncopated and mechanistic figures. There's no sentimental smearing, and a quick-fingered dexterity is summoned for in the clinches.

Nevertheless, this critic said Levant "knows his business, and is telling us an old story he has long known how to tell."<sup>165</sup>

Despite some negative criticism, the Concerto in F, like the Rhapsody, became closely identified with Levant, as much as with Gershwin. Moreover, Levant's numerous performances of the work across the country helped affirm public opinion of him as the leading interpreter not only of this piece, but all of Gershwin's piano music. Even as early as 1939, Steinfirst proclaimed, "The Concerto is as American as roast turkey and just as tasty a dish, and there is no

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<sup>162</sup> Mary Leighton, "Symphony Concert," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 22 Jan 1944.

<sup>163</sup> Claudia Cassidy, "Oscar Levant Outdoes Himself; Slavenska Dances with Troupe," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 24 Jan 1944.

<sup>164</sup> T.C.O., *Emporia Gazette*, 9 Apr 1951.

<sup>165</sup> "Gershwin-Levant Teams Means Lucious Melody," *Minneapolis Star*, 20 Feb 1950.

better exponent living of this vital music than Oscar Levant.”<sup>166</sup> By 1944, a Cincinnati critic said that Levant’s “authoritative interpretation” of the concerto had “universal appeal.”<sup>167</sup> In 1951, Paul Hume declared, “Oscar Levant has no equal in his playing of Gershwin’s major piano works.”<sup>168</sup> Finally, in 1953, a Hartford critic wrote, “You feel that with Mr. Levant you’re getting the real, authentic lowdown on the composer.”<sup>169</sup>

### 3.5.3 Levant’s Piano Concerto

During the early stages of his touring career, Levant wished to present himself as a composer-performer, like Gershwin and Rachmaninoff. In the early 1940s, in addition to *Rhapsody in Blue* and Concerto in F, his own piano concerto—a much more harmonically astringent work than the Gershwin piece—was the only other concerto in his performance repertoire. His press packets listed the compositions he had created, and he often told local reporters that he considered himself primarily a composer. Levant told the *Cleveland Press* what he thought about his career as a concert pianist:

I don’t like it. It’s not my racket. And I don’t like being an author, either. That’s not my racket, either. I used to be a much better pianist ten years ago when I seriously studied music. It is very hard now. I like to compose, and that is what I consider myself: a composer.<sup>170</sup>

He told the *Pittsburgh Press*: “My music is complex and it’s not written to entertain. The audience won’t go out whistling a tune like they would *Dixie*.”<sup>171</sup> Levant insists his own

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<sup>166</sup> D.S. Steinfirst, *Pittsburgh Press*, 25 Nov 1939.

<sup>167</sup> Leighton, *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 22 Jan 1944.

<sup>168</sup> Paul Hume, “American Music Festival Opens with Concert by Quartet,” *Washington Post*, 3 Apr 1951.

<sup>169</sup> T.H.P., “Levant Gets Good Hand at Bushnell,” *Hartford Courant*, 19 Mar 1953.

<sup>170</sup> Milton Widder, “For Your Information, Oscar Levant Can Wisecrack – Off and on the Radio,” *Cleveland Press*, 3 Jan 1940.

<sup>171</sup> “Levant to Lead Symphony in his Composition ‘Dirge,’” *Pittsburgh Press*, 24 Nov 1939.

compositions lie toward the more serious and austere end of modern concert-hall repertoire and share little with Gershwin's classical-jazz hybrid.

Levant's Piano Concerto is a one-movement work that can be organized into four smaller sections as indicated by the composer in the manuscript score: Allegretto ritmoco (m. 1-237)—Andantino (m. 238-301)—Fuga (m. 302-416)—Meno mosso (Alla marcia) (m. 417-end).<sup>172</sup> Each section includes themes that Levant manipulates through developing variation. He blends highly dissonant language with melodic and rhythmic elements from popular music, like lots of syncopation, boogie-woogie rhythms, and melodic allusions to familiar songs and symphonic works. As critic Ray C. B. Brown explains, "The ostensible idiom is that of Gershwinian jazz with an infiltration of Schoenbergian atonality. [...] The central creative idea remains obscure."<sup>173</sup>



Figure 3.5. Oscar Levant, Piano Concerto, mm. 1-5.

<sup>172</sup> Oscar Levant, *Piano Concerto*, manuscript score (USCOLP, box 1, folder 33).

<sup>173</sup> Ray C. B. Brown, "Big Audience Hears Dual Bill of Philadelphia Orchestra," *Washington Post*, 29 Dec 1943.





Levant opens the work with a solo piano statement (finished by the flutes, oboes, and clarinets) that includes eleven of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale (Figure 3.5). Levant isolates and develops fragments of this statement throughout the Allegretto section. For example, at bar 39, a portion of the statement I have labelled **a** in Figure 3.5 later appears in the winds, extended slightly into a variant that mimics the banjo-picking opening of a minstrel tune, like “O Dem Golden Slippers” or “Polly Wolly Doodle” (Figure 3.6). Later, at bar 209, Levant develops the idea further and applies a Cuban rhythm (Figure 3.7). The piano opens the Andantino section with floating Debussian sharp-ninth and augmented chords, with syncopation in the right hand (Figure 3.8). At bar 272, Levant adds a boogie-woogie rhythm in the left hand (Figure 3.9). In reference to this moment, Levant said: “I wanted to make [my concerto] palatable to popular taste so I inserted a boogie-woogie strain in the middle of it. It spoiled the whole thing.”<sup>174</sup> With the Fuga section, the subject first appears in the violas and cellos beginning on F# (Figure 3.10). Levant develops this subject throughout the following measures. For example, at bar 307, the woodwinds initially sound the subject a fourth higher on B, but briefly veer off track with different melodic intervals (Figure 3.11). At bar 395, as the final Alla marcia section approaches, Levant inserts in the brass a jaunty reference to the walking theme from Gershwin’s *An American in Paris*. At bar 411, the piano briefly takes the idea and parodies it with harshly dissonant block chords (Figure 3.12).

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<sup>174</sup> Oscar Levant, *The Unimportance of Being Oscar* (1968; New York: Pocket Books, 1969), 147.



Figure 3.10. Oscar Levant, Piano Concerto, mm. 302-307, viola + cello.



Figure 3.11. Oscar Levant, Piano Concerto, mm. 307-312, woodwinds.



Figure 3.12. Oscar Levant, Piano Concerto, mm. 411-414, piano.

Due to its highly dissonant musical language, reception of the piano concerto was lukewarm at best. He premiered the fourteen-minute, one-movement work with Alfred Wallenstein and the NBC Radio Orchestra on 17 February 1942.<sup>175</sup> Virgil Thomson identified the work as a “fine piece of music” with good themes, lively rhythms, and comprehensible direct expression. However, Thomson considered “the spiritual isolation of the passages one from

<sup>175</sup> Sid Shalit, “Listening In,” *New York Daily News*, 18 Feb 1942.

another [to give] the whole a reserved and compartmental quality that weakens its impact.”<sup>176</sup>

Other reviews were not so accommodating. Commenting on the NBC broadcast, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* joked that listeners jumped to change the station: “When Oscar Levant played his concerto with the NBC Symphony Tuesday night, he practically upped *Fibber McGee and Molly*’s Crossley rating 10 points.”<sup>177</sup> After a couple of radio performances, only two symphony orchestras presented Levant’s concerto in a live concert hall: the Minneapolis Symphony in April 1942 and the Philadelphia Orchestra in December 1943. The latter orchestra programmed the work six times in four cities. All of these shows also included Gershwin’s Rhapsody on the program. A Minneapolis critic declared, “The Levant concerto belongs to the category of ‘unpleasant music’ and ranks somewhere between an indiscretion and a monstrosity.”<sup>178</sup>

Commenting on the Philadelphia Orchestra’s Carnegie Hall performance of the concerto, Olin Downes declared:

One listens to his strange and extraordinary jumble that he calls a piano concerto, which vibrates to night clubs and their clatter, lights, noises, rhythms, legs, drinks and Schoenberg in a singular settled though by no means complacent expression. A very nervous music! [...] It does not at first hearing particularly create a desire to hear it again or the belief that if one did so hear he would gain very much by the experience.<sup>179</sup>

I have found no reviews that mention Levant’s musical allusion to Gershwin’s *An American in Paris*. Perhaps his coarse language and fleeting ideas so confused critics that they did not catch the reference in one hearing.

The bad reviews of his compositions, particularly the concerto, probably convinced Levant to give up on composition. By early 1943, he decided that, with his current career

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<sup>176</sup> Virgil Thomson, *New York Herald Tribune*, 18 Feb 1942.

<sup>177</sup> Vincent Johnson, “Mature Leads with Classic Chin by Appearing on *Music Hall*,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 19 Feb 1942.

<sup>178</sup> John K. Sherman, “Music: Oscar Levant Plays at Pension Concert,” *Minneapolis Star*, 16 Apr 1942.

<sup>179</sup> Olin Downes, “Ormandy Presents Levant Concerto,” *NYT*, 15 Dec 1943.

trajectory as a concert pianist and radio personality, he simply could not allocate sufficient time and energy for composition. He told the *Washington Star*: “I am finished. You can’t dispense the kind of work I do—bond sales, radio talks, canteen performances, recitals—and create music. Composing is reflective. It is not as artistic as people think. It is hard work.”<sup>180</sup> Levant’s heavy touring schedule, coupled with his film work, prevented him the time necessary to compose, and audiences generally disliked the serious works he had finished. Kashner and Schoenberger provide a blunt but accurate observation: “Levant was not another Gershwin after all.”<sup>181</sup> After 1943, Levant spent the rest of his career performing works strictly by other composers.

### 3.5.4 Grieg’s A Minor Piano Concerto

In the early 1940s, Levant began to expand his concerto repertoire beyond Gershwin and himself, turning first to Grieg, a nineteenth-century composer with several popular classical compositions well known to Americans. Throughout the early twentieth century, the American public learned Grieg’s works, particularly the piano concerto, through numerous recordings, radio performances, and film interpolations.<sup>182</sup> In 1943, the year Levant started playing portions of Grieg’s A Minor Piano Concerto in public, a writer for the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* said, “Every pianist and lover of piano music counts [the Grieg concerto] among his

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<sup>180</sup> “Oscar Levant Here for Concert, Bows Out as Composer,” *Washington Star*, 27 Jan 1943.

<sup>181</sup> Kashner and Schoenberger, 265.

<sup>182</sup> A portion of Grieg’s piano concerto was used in the Ingrid Bergman and Leslie Howard film *Intermezzo: A Love Story* (1939), *The Hard-Boiled Canary* (Paramount, 1941), *Music for Millions* (MGM, 1944), among several others. Bandleader Freddy Martin had great success with his 1941 arrangement of the concerto, released on Bluebird. Arthur Rubinstein’s 1942 recording of the concerto with the Philadelphia Orchestra sold very well. Sales of Rubinstein’s recordings of the Grieg and a Tchaikovsky concerto exceeded \$250,000 in 1942. “Piano Artists Engaged for May Fete Here,” *Detroit Free Press*, 7 Mar 1943.

favorites.”<sup>183</sup> Thus, Levant selected a popular classical piece that American listeners already enjoyed.

Reception of Levant’s Grieg interpretation was mixed, though usually leaned positive. Some reviews noted a muscular performance, while others opined his lack of grace or appropriate sentimentality. One Omaha critic considered Levant’s energetic execution of the opening bars as “convincing of the artist’s pianistic ability.”<sup>184</sup> On his March 1951 Baltimore performance, one reviewer wrote: “The soloist missed some notes, but he plunged through big octave and chord passages with a sweep and a flurry. In the finale, his accenting suggested that Mr. Levant had learned his boogie woogie well, but then the Norwegian countryside is not his natural habitat.”<sup>185</sup> One displeased listener wrote negatively of his January 1945 Louisville performance: “With mutilation of phrasing and distortion of rhythmic patterns, he made a parody of Grieg’s honest, sincerely sentimental, deeply-felt music. Mr. Levant would do well to confine himself to Gershwin, in which he is superb.”<sup>186</sup>

### 3.5.5 Tchaikovsky’s B-flat Major Piano Concerto

Like the Grieg concerto, Tchaikovsky B-flat Piano Concerto was another popular classical work familiar to Levant’s audience. Like Grieg’s concerto, many Americans had heard Tchaikovsky’s piece on radio, recordings, and in film scores.<sup>187</sup> As mentioned earlier, Horowitz

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<sup>183</sup> Norman Nairn, “Ovation Greets Oscar Levant with Civic,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, 3 May 1943.

<sup>184</sup> Alice Beck, “Omaha Symphony Pleases Audience,” *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, 11 Nov 1943.

<sup>185</sup> Weldon Wallace, “Oscar Levant at the Lyric,” *Baltimore Sun*, 17 Mar 1951.

<sup>186</sup> Dwight Anderson, “Levant Makes Gershwin Sing, But Mutilates Grieg Concerto,” *Louisville Courier Journal*, 30 Jan 1945.

<sup>187</sup> Max Steiner used the concerto’s main theme in the opening credits for *The Great Lie* (1941). Excerpts from the concerto also occurred in *It Started with Eve* (1941), the Bugs Bunny cartoon *A Corny Concerto* (1943), *The Song of Russia* (1944), and *Song of My Heart* (1948), among other films and cartoons. Freddy Martin repurposed the main theme for the song “Tonight We Love” (1941). Vladimir Horowitz’s 1941 recording of the concerto with Arturo

and Rubinstein also frequently performed this concerto. Moreover, many American composers and critics considered Tchaikovsky a light composer. Aaron Copland described Tchaikovsky easier to “understand” than Beethoven, because with each listening it “always says the same thing to you.”<sup>188</sup> As far as Deems Taylor was concerned, only immature listeners could like Tchaikovsky. Taylor argued that Tchaikovsky’s greatness, not to mention his popularity, lay in his simplicity, songlike themes, and uncomplicated orchestrations, well-trimmed and “free of deadwood.”<sup>189</sup>

The popularity of the work with the nation’s symphony orchestras and the concert public certainly prompted Levant to perform the piece. He learned the Tchaikovsky concerto toward the middle of his touring career. After playing the third movement on the 20 May 1946 episode of *The Bell Telephone Hour*, Levant first presented the complete work in public at the Hollywood Bowl with the Los Angeles Philharmonic on 30 July 1947. Levant subsequently recorded the concerto and was featured playing excerpts from the work in *Humoresque* (Warner Bros., 1946, dir. Jean Negulesco) and the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers musical *The Barkleys of Broadway* (MGM, 1949, dir. Charles Walters).

Reception of his Tchaikovsky performances were, as with the Grieg concerto, mixed but usually encouraging. Commenting on the Hollywood Bowl concert, Albert Goldberg said the crowd enjoyed his “orthodox” performance, and “the thundering octaves of Tchaikovsky and the devil-may-care drive of the last movement raised his pianistic stock by several points.”<sup>190</sup>

Following a Carnegie Hall concert with the Philadelphia Symphony, Irving Kolodin said: “Some

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Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra was a bestseller. Finally, Arthur Rubinstein recorded the concerto several times – twice in the 1940s.

<sup>188</sup> Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music* (1939; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1957), 14.

<sup>189</sup> Taylor, 61-64.

<sup>190</sup> Albert Goldberg, “Levant Wins Approval of Bowl Crowd,” *LAT*, 1 Sept 1947.

technical passages were overhasty and others were blurred by pedal, not because of insufficient technique ... but for lack of overall control. The audience seemed not quite sure what to make of the experience after the first movement, but the energetic final pages brought a rousing response.”<sup>191</sup>

Because he performed Gershwin so frequently, critics usually considered the combination of Levant and Tchaikovsky a novelty. Kolodin said: “The combination was baffling ... for never before in Carnegie Hall had Levant played music not by George Gershwin or himself. [...] No doubt when Levant has been playing Tchaikovsky as long as he has Gershwin, he will play him just as well.”<sup>192</sup> A San Francisco critic said, “He naturally wants to play something else besides Gershwin, for which he is noted.”<sup>193</sup> Levant’s association with Gershwin was so strong that one critic heard his Tchaikovsky interpretation as Gershwinesque: “The Tchaikovsky concerto ... often seemed to have been rewritten by George Gershwin, and Mr. Levant lit into some passages that apparently wanted to beat Horowitz’s speed record, which is to set smoke on fire.”<sup>194</sup>

Thus, even as Levant started to include popular concertos by Grieg, Tchaikovsky and others in his later touring career, his association with Gershwin remained strong and often affected how critics heard his playing of any composer other than Gershwin.

### **3.5.6 Khachaturian’s D-flat Major Piano Concerto**

In addition to the popular classical works by Grieg and Tchaikovsky, Levant also added a popular modern concerto to his repertoire: Armenian composer Amram Khachaturian’s D-flat

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<sup>191</sup> I.K., “An I-Witness Report,” *Hackensack Record*, 22 Dec 1951.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> Clifford Gessler, “Symphony Wins Praise for Concert,” *Oakland Tribune*, 24 Jan 1951.

<sup>194</sup> Claudia Cassidy, “Levant Baffles His Audience in Concert Here,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 8 Mar 1953.



Major Piano Concerto (1936).<sup>195</sup> In the mid-twentieth century, due in part to Levant's efforts, Khachaturian's music achieved great popularity. The New York Symphony Orchestra with Efrem Kurtz recording of *Gayne Ballet Suite No. 1*, which included the "Sabre Dance," became a best-selling classical disc in 1947.<sup>196</sup> During his tenure as co-host of *Kraft Music Hall*, Levant played the "Sabre Dance" five times and published a version of it for piano solo.<sup>197</sup> He recorded it with Lou Bring's Orchestra in December 1947. Americans liked the "Sabre Dance" so much, it became a "jukebox hit" in 1948.<sup>198</sup> Levant later featured the excerpt in the MGM musical *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1949). Likewise, the Boston Symphony Orchestra's recording of Khachaturian's Piano Concerto with William Kappell also made the classical best-seller list in 1947.<sup>199</sup>

Since Levant had earned recognition as a popular interpreter of Khachaturian's "Sabre Dance" in the late 1940s, he soon added the composer's piano concerto to his performance repertoire and gained some notoriety for that work, as well. The work helped Levant demonstrate he could play large works by contemporary composers other than Gershwin. Like the "Sabre Dance," the concerto features chromatic language but clear and prominent melodies, as well as many swift scalar runs, percussive chords, and acrobatic moments that showcase Levant's virtuosity, strength, and dexterity. Levant first performed the concerto, along with Honegger's Concertino and Gershwin's Second Rhapsody, at the Hollywood Bowl on 26 July 1949.

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<sup>195</sup> In addition to the Gershwin material, Honegger's Concertino is also a popular modern work. Like the Khachaturian concerto, the Honegger Concertino, only eight minutes in length, showcased Levant's speed and proclivity for the percussive and powerful. He recorded the work in July 1949 but performed it live only three times: once at the Hollywood Bowl in July 1949 and twice with the New York Philharmonic in late December 1949.

<sup>196</sup> The record placed tenth; Levant's Columbia recording of *Rhapsody in Blue* placed second. "UAL Music-Record Poll," *Billboard* 60, no. 1 (3 Jan 1948): 19.

<sup>197</sup> Aram Khachaturian, *Sabre Dance : from Gayne Ballet*, arr. Oscar Levant (New York: Leeds Music Corporation, 1948).

<sup>198</sup> Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music. Vol. 5, Music in the Late Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9.

<sup>199</sup> The recording placed fourteenth. "UAL Music-Record Poll," *Billboard* (3 Jan 1948): 19.

Leinsdorf, who had encouraged him to expand his repertoire six years earlier, conducted the concert.<sup>200</sup> On 3 January 1950, Levant recorded the concerto for Columbia immediately after presenting it in a three-day engagement with Dmitri Mitropoulos and the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall during the New Year's season.<sup>201</sup> Over the next six months, he performed the concerto in Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Chicago, San Francisco, Philadelphia and Washington D.C.

Critics generally praised Levant's interpretations of the concerto, but considered the work itself an effective showpiece that lacked substance. *Los Angeles Times* critic Albert Goldberg, who often wrote negatively about Levant's frequent Gershwin performances at the Hollywood Bowl, approved of Levant's Khachaturian performance on 26 July 1949. Due to the three concertos Levant performed that night, Goldberg declared, "They were all played with a musician's rather than an entertainer's sense of responsibility." Although Goldberg considered the concerto "a dreary waste of Oriental clichés," he also said, "It is a flashy affair for a player with the right kind of fingers and a feeling for languid phrasing, all of which Mr. Levant displayed to nice advantage."<sup>202</sup> Goldberg recognized the concerto as a fiery crowd pleaser that Levant could effectively execute. Pittsburgh critic Donald Steinfirst echoed Goldberg's assessment of the concerto as a substanceless showpiece that Levant delivered well: "Mr. Levant was apposite in the extreme. His virtuosity had full play and his superb technical equipment ... combine to provide brilliant playing."<sup>203</sup> Finally, a St. Louis reporter also condemned the

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<sup>200</sup> Albert Goldberg, "Hollywood Bowl's 28<sup>th</sup> Season to Open Tuesday," *LAT*, 10 Jul 1949.

<sup>201</sup> The concert dates were 29-30 December and 1 January 1950. "Chatter: Broadway," *Variety* 177, no. 1 (14 December 1949): 62. Levant's recording of the Khachaturian Piano Concerto with Mitropoulos and the New York Philharmonic was released in March.

<sup>202</sup> Albert Goldberg, "Levant Gives Skillful Performance at Bowl," *LAT*, 27 Jul 1949.

<sup>203</sup> Donald Steinfirst, "Oscar Levant Draws Crowd to Mosque," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 11 Jan 1950.

concerto as “an elaborately flashy piece of emptiness” delivered with “a brilliant, electric quality” by Levant.<sup>204</sup>

Other writers reacted negatively toward Levant’s heavy and hammering approach. Chicago critic Claudia Cassidy thought Levant’s delivery “dry, thin and percussive except in an occasional passage of silvery scales.”<sup>205</sup> Concerning the New York performances, Olin Downes said:

In fortissimo passages and chords he is inclined to push tone, or whack the keys. This is unnecessary and undesirable. Mr. Levant has ample strength, he has plenty of flare and all that sort of thing, which the concerto needs, but he need not . . . treat the piano at moments as if his fingers were wire nails or swat his chords, instead of resonating them.<sup>206</sup>

Following a Robin Hood Dell concert that also included the *Rhapsody in Blue*, a Philadelphia critic wrote, “[Levant] not only upheld his reputation as an interpreter of Gershwin, but romped through the Concerto with grace and feeling. Though, at times, he appeared to wallop the keys, his fingers are quite capable of resonating the chords.”<sup>207</sup> Finally, San Francisco critic Alexander Fried called Levant’s touch “hard or boney in its dramatic emphasis.”<sup>208</sup>

Due to his reputation as a celebrity and well-known Gershwin performer, Levant’s performances of the Khachaturian concerto attracted capacity audiences, just as his Gershwin shows always did.<sup>209</sup> Nevertheless, Levant did not perform the Khachaturian concerto after his

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<sup>204</sup> “Oscar Levant Cavorts for Crowd in Semi-Pop Concert,” *St. Louis Star-Times*, 27 Feb 1950.

<sup>205</sup> Claudia Cassidy, “Oscar Levant’s Fans Pack Hall for His Concert,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 5 Mar 1950.

<sup>206</sup> Olin Downes, “Levant is Soloist for Philharmonic,” *NYT*, 30 Dec 1949.

<sup>207</sup> Marion Kelley, “Audience at Dripping Dell Hears Levant Play Gershwin,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 11 Jul 1950.

<sup>208</sup> Alexander Fried, “Levant Thrills Concert Throng,” *San Francisco Examiner*, 3 Apr 1950.

<sup>209</sup> For example, his 26 February 1952 performance of the concerto with the Kansas City Philharmonic attracted 2500 listeners, filling the music hall to near capacity. It was the most well attended subscription series concert for the Kansas City Philharmonic so far that season. C.B.N., “Crowd for a Concert,” *Kansas City Times*, 27 February 1952.

February 1952 Kansas City Philharmonic engagement. Substantial reviews of his recording with the New York Philharmonic consider the composition empty but the pianist fantastic.<sup>210</sup>

### 3.6 Conclusion

From the late 1930s to the mid-1950s, Oscar Levant managed a highly successful touring career during the concert industry's wartime and postwar boom period. His contemporary colleagues included recognized European master pianists, like Horowitz, Rubinstein, and Serkin. Nevertheless, Levant differentiated himself through his Gershwin specialization and became one of the highest paid musicians of the era. Due to his national celebrity on radio and in film, he attracted crowds who usually would not have attended a classical music concert. By the early 1940s, critics and the general American populace considered him the finest living interpreter of Gershwin's piano music. Although his repertoire consisted of works by other popular classical composers, he played *Rhapsody in Blue*, Concerto in F, and the Preludes profusely throughout the extent of his professional career. Toward the middle of his career, he attempted to move beyond the label of Gershwin specialist by programming concertos by other composers. Despite positive reviews for many of these efforts, orchestras continued to schedule him to play Gershwin to the end of his touring career. Levant brought live renditions of Gershwin's music to Americans all over the country. He helped keep this music, especially the Concerto in F, regularly programmed during a period when Gershwin's hybrid brand of classical-jazz was not only considered the music of a previous generation, but also not yet allowed a respectable space in American concert-hall canon. Unfortunately, Levant's nerves, demanding touring schedule,

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<sup>210</sup> For example, see "Recordings in Review: Droszky Built for Two," *Saturday Review* (25 Mar 1950): 54; and "Record Reviews," *LAT*, 7 May 1950.

physical health, and eventual descent into drug abuse prevented him from sustaining his concert career beyond 1955.

For nearly twenty years, Levant built and sustained a public image as a middlebrow performer and an authentic Gershwin interpreter. In the next chapter, I detail how Levant regularly demonstrated that status at one particular venue: New York's Lewisohn Stadium.

## Chapter 4

### **New York's Lewisohn Stadium and Oscar Levant at the Gershwin Nights**

As discussed in the previous chapter, from 1939 to 1955 Oscar Levant enjoyed a very successful career as a touring recitalist and symphony orchestra guest pianist. His radio and film celebrity, his middlebrow appeal, his recognized status as a Gershwin interpreter, and contemporary changes in the American concert market all compounded to his popular and financial benefit. This chapter presents a case study of Levant's annual performances at New York City's Lewisohn Stadium, a middlebrow space to which Levant regularly returned as the featured pianist of the Gershwin Nights, the venue's annual memorial concerts to George Gershwin. Through his appearances at Lewisohn from 1939 to 1953, Levant strengthened and maintained his popular appeal as leading Gershwin pianist within a cultural space historically connected to regular performance of Gershwin's orchestral music and located within the composer's home city.

Lewisohn Stadium on the campus of the City College of New York (CCNY) featured a summer concert series every year from 1918 to 1966. From its inception, the Stadium served as a middlebrow venue where New Yorkers could congregate and hear live music together. Entrance was offered at popular prices, thus the audience at Lewisohn on any given evening represented a

mixed swath of the New York population, crossing racial and class lines.<sup>1</sup> These regular summer concerts in an open-air arena, the first series of its kind in the United States, paralleled similar outdoor musical events already occurring in Europe. Symphony nights at Lewisohn featured the New York Philharmonic, which presented a repertoire broader than what was heard in the winter subscription season. They programmed European and American music, both traditional and contemporary. With its massive audience, Lewisohn served as a testing ground for new works, particularly those works representative of American composers' quest for a uniquely American orchestral voice. Once the *Rhapsody in Blue* heralded Gershwin as the possible leader in that quest, similar works in the jazz-classical vein in addition to Gershwin's were tried out at Lewisohn. Despite critical opinion of several of his compositions, Gershwin remained highly popular with Lewisohn audiences, and the size of his draw reflected that.

Great attention has been granted to New York's highbrow institutions, such as the Metropolitan Opera, Carnegie Hall, and Lincoln Center. Still much has been written about New York's popular cultural spaces, like Broadway, the Cotton Club, and other clubs and dance halls. Gershwin's music has been heard in all of these spaces, yet little has been written about the significance of Lewisohn Stadium as a middlebrow venue and its importance to Gershwin's legacy. According to Jonathan Stern, "While the Stadium concerts did not launch Gershwin's major orchestral works of the 1920s, an argument can be made that they did much to solidify their still-strong places in the standard concert repertoire."<sup>2</sup> In his dissertation, Stern demonstrates that the Stadium summer series, for decades, kept Gershwin's music in regular

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<sup>1</sup> As I explain below, through its affordable prices, concerts at the Stadium attracted a broader audience than one may see at a winter subscription series. Also, some concerts, like the annual Gershwin Nights, were covered by the black press.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Stern, "Music for the (American) People: The Concerts at Lewisohn Stadium, 1922-1964" (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2009), 55.

performance, allowing audiences and critics to hear and assess the works again and again. He does not focus on Oscar Levant's important and recurring role during that process.

Over four decades of concerts, Gershwin became the most frequently performed American composer at Lewisohn. From 1939 to 1953, Oscar Levant was the regularly featured pianist at Lewisohn's Gershwin Nights, which were all-Gershwin concerts that became annual memorial events shortly after the composer's death in 1937. A close inspection of the goings-on at these annual events lays out the story of George Gershwin at the Stadium, illustrates how Lewisohn served as a space for Gershwin's contested placement in American culture and the concert canon, reveals how Levant's recurring appearances here contributed to that placement, and shows how the Gershwin Nights strengthened Levant's concert career and established him as a leading interpreter of Gershwin's piano music.

#### **4.1 The Lewisohn Stadium Summer Concert Series**

Lewisohn Stadium, completed in 1915, was one of the oldest monolithic stadia in the United States. Mining mogul and arts enthusiast Adolph Lewisohn gifted the stadium to the City College of New York in 1914. The open-air structure sat on the CCNY campus between 135th and 136th Streets, and Amsterdam and Convent. The finished structure encompassed a baseball diamond, a dusty field, and running track with a semi-ellipsis of concrete seating. A row of sixty-four Doric columns ran along the upper tier, with a pavilion tower on each end.<sup>3</sup> Sources differ

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<sup>3</sup> Howard Dwight Smith, "Report on Trip to Princeton, College of City of New York, Yale and Harvard for the Purpose of Inspecting the Stadia at those Universities: Part II," *American Architect* 188, no. 2327 (28 Jul 1920): 124-126.



on the stadium's capacity; numbers range from 6,000 to 10,000.<sup>4</sup> With folding chairs and tables added to the field, turnout could reach 20,000. With standing-room-only concerts, the stadium could hold 22,000 people. Several popular concerts, especially some of the Gershwin Nights featuring Oscar Levant as pianist, approached or surpassed that number.

From the beginning, Lewisohn as a concert venue served a public purpose. In the days before radio, summertime signalled the end of the symphony concert season. Wealthy elites could vacation in Europe or at some rural resort. In 1910, Lithuanian conductor Arnold Volpe (1869-1940) convinced park commissioner Charles B. Stover to provide the first outdoor band concerts for those urbanites who remained in the city, unable to afford the luxury of travel but still appreciative of live music.<sup>5</sup> The summer concerts usually occurred over the course of several weeks in large open-air spaces. In summer 1917, the Uptown Municipal Band regularly played at St. Nicholas Park, adjacent to the east side of the CCNY campus, bounded by St. Nicholas Terrace and St. Nicholas Avenue. The presentation of live music in public parks had some drawbacks for the performers. For example, during one concert, a mischievous boy allegedly threw a ball of mud into a tuba bell. To circumvent audience interference, the Parks Department subsequently moved the band concerts to Lewisohn in 1918 and made them free to the public.<sup>6</sup>

When the Parks Department withdrew funding Volpe and his wife decided that affordable full symphony orchestra concerts, rather than free band music, would be a more lucrative enterprise at Lewisohn. To attract potential concertgoers unable to afford a winter season

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<sup>4</sup> Howard Dwight Smith, who examined the stadium in 1920 reports a capacity of 7000. According to Stern, the structure's concrete seats could hold 6000 spectators. Sophie Guggenheimer Untermeyer cites capacity at 10,000. Smith, "Report on Trip to Princeton"; Stern, fn 1, 1; Sophie Guggenheimer Untermeyer and Alix Williamson, *Mother is Minnie* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960), 71.

<sup>5</sup> Marie Volpe, *Arnold Volpe: Bridge between Two Musical Worlds* (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1950), 105-106.

<sup>6</sup> Untermeyer and Williamson, 69-71.

subscription, popular prices were set from ten to fifty cents (roughly \$1.75 to \$8.50, in 2019). Soldiers and sailors in uniform would be granted free admission. To help him raise production funds, Volpe hired his pupil Minnie Guggenheimer (1882-1966). She would serve as chairman of the Stadium Concerts committee until 1964, and become beloved by Lewisohn attendees, who affectionately called her “Mother Minnie.” Early on, she argued with potential wealthy donors, like Adolph Lewisohn, that since major European capitals already had charming outdoor summer concerts, New York City should demonstrate its status as a major global capital with its own open-air concerts at Lewisohn Stadium.<sup>7</sup>

The symphony evenings at Lewisohn featured first-rate musicians presenting classical music to the masses. Initially, early recruits for Lewisohn’s orchestra came from highbrow institutions like the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, the New York Symphony Society, and the New York Philharmonic. In 1922, the Philharmonic became the permanent orchestra at the Stadium.<sup>8</sup> The summer concert series at Lewisohn preceded and served as a model for similar outdoor series by other major American symphony orchestras, like the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl, the Philadelphia Orchestra at the Robin Hood Dell, the Chicago Symphony at Ravinia, and even the Boston Pops at the Charles River Esplanade.<sup>9</sup>

Concert programs favored both traditional classical music and more popular fare typical of outdoor band concerts, like marches, waltzes and excerpts from popular operettas. When the Philharmonic became a permanent fixture, Lewisohn programming gravitated toward more

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<sup>7</sup> Volpe, 138; Untermeyer and Williamson, 71-73.

<sup>8</sup> Howard Shanet, *Philharmonic: A History of New York’s Orchestra* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 239-240.

<sup>9</sup> Untermeyer and Williamson, 68. The Boston Symphony Orchestra’s pop concerts had existed in some form since 1885, but these concerts did not become outdoor events at the Charles River Esplanade until the summer of 1929. Harry Ellis Dickson, *Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops: An Irreverent Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 60-61.

traditional winter season fare, “with occasional special features.”<sup>10</sup> Symphony nights at Lewisohn included symphonies, overtures, concertos, symphonic poems, and shorter symphonic works. Critic Lawrence Gilman declared that public taste had changed since the 1910s: “Opera potpourris and Von Suppé does not fill the stands. Beethoven, Wagner and Verdi do.”<sup>11</sup> The novelty rested in the number of traditional symphony concerts offered every summer. With so many low-priced performances, Lewisohn audiences each summer could hear and critique live canonic and contemporary art with greater ease and more frequency. Gilman said the Stadium “has for its object nothing less sensational than offering the New York concertgoer the greatest music in the orchestral repertoire for approximately what he would pay for a package of cigarettes.”<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the canonic symphonic repertoire, programming also featured new and recent jazz-influenced orchestral music. This inclusion demonstrates the Stadium Concerts committee’s interest in the search for an American composer, who not only could challenge European hegemony of the symphonic canon but also express something uniquely American.<sup>13</sup> For many Americans, not to mention Europeans, that unique American expression was jazz. After Gershwin had captured the attention of critics and concertgoers with his brand of symphonic jazz, Lewisohn served as a testing ground not only for Gershwin’s works, but also for jazz-inspired works by other composers. Examples include Frederick Converse’s *Flivver Ten Million* (1927), Aaron Copland’s Piano Concerto (1927), Werner Janssen’s *New Years Eve in New York* (1929), and Robert Russell Bennett’s Concerto Grosso for Small Dance Band and

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<sup>10</sup> Francis D. Perkins, “The Stadium Concerts,” *New York Herald*, May 1934. Found in Archival Collection, Buildings Collection, Lewisohn Stadium, Morris Raphael Cohen Library, City University of New York [CUNYLS].

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Gilman, “The Stadium Carries On,” *New York Herald Tribune*, Jun 1933, CUNYLS.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See Stern, 94.

Orchestra (1932). However, as Stern notes, save for some of Gershwin's compositions, none of these new works entered concert canon: "The crowds loved the jazz-inspired music and were wanting composers to join Gershwin, but the critics had had enough of it."<sup>14</sup>

## 4.2 Audiences at Lewisohn Stadium

The Stadium audience represented a broad spectrum of the city population, average New Yorkers, the people who had heard Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* on the radio. They wanted to hear live music, they wanted easy access to it, and they came to Lewisohn to listen closely. As discussed below, the Lewisohn experience offered music in an inviting and relaxed environment, devoid of stuffy concert hall rules for appropriate comportment. In this context, the Gershwin Nights were especially successful, because not only did Gershwin's music reach the ears of the people who loved it, but the casual and relaxed atmosphere mirrored the carefree and unfettered era that his music evoked.

In 1932, a writer for the *New York Times* speculated that, although there may be some knowledgeable musicians in the crowd, average Lewisohn concertgoers possessed little to no knowledge of classical music. He speculated people attended stadium concerts for a variety of reasons. They enjoy music, probably live nearby, and consider an outdoor concert a pleasurable way to pass an evening. However, according to the *Times*, these average listeners, these popular crowds, were not actively seeking to improve their music education, rather they sought relaxation and entertainment.<sup>15</sup>

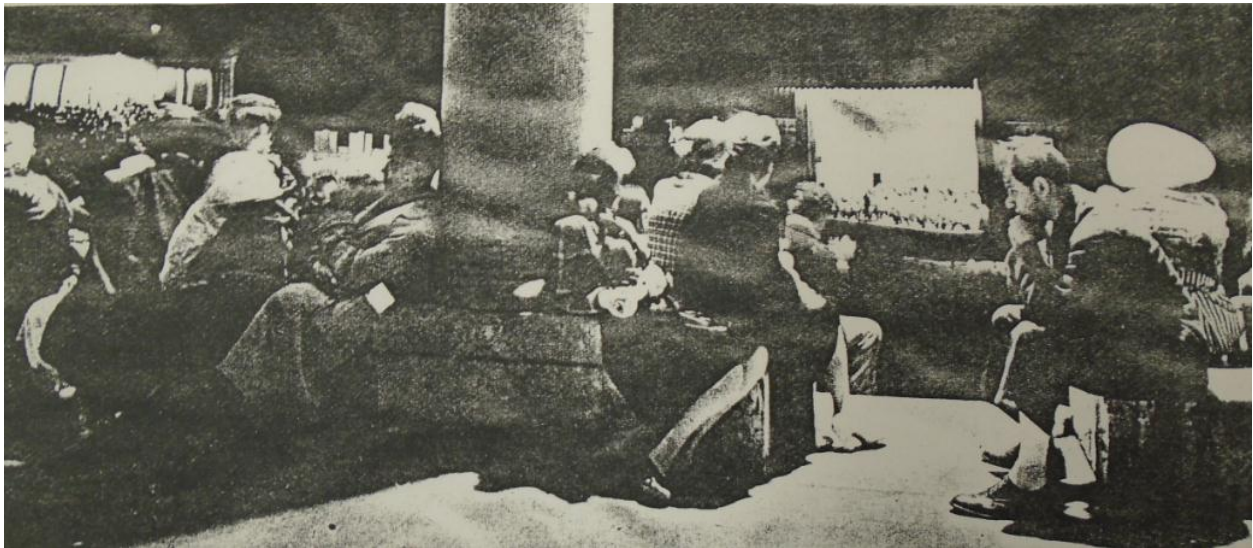
Others disagreed with this snobbish view. In 1924, Francis D. Perkins at the *Herald Tribune* said audiences at Lewisohn seem to "go to a Beethoven and Brahms program ...

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>15</sup> "The Lewisohn Stadium Concerts: The Obligations to a Popular Audience in Quality of Performances and Contemporary Works on Programs," *New York Times* [NYT], 21 Aug 1932.

because they want to hear Beethoven and Brahms.”<sup>16</sup> Willem van Hoogstraten, who acted as the principal conductor of the symphony concerts from 1922 to 1938, viewed the audience as very receptive to the programs. He found in American audiences “an enthusiasm, a receptivity and a freshness of listening that European audiences do not have.”<sup>17</sup> Although the average Lewisohn concertgoer may have lacked basic music history knowledge, aside from what could be read in the program notes, that does not mean he was a passive listener merely seeking an evening without boredom. Photographic evidence suggests that Lewisohn audiences actively listened. An undated photo in the Stadium archives at CUNY (Figure 4.1) reveals a pack of men and women seated beneath the stadium’s columns, the onstage orchestra barely visible in the background. Right of the center of the photograph, one man sits on a column base, his chin and mouth resting in his hand in a pose not unlike Rodin’s thinker.<sup>18</sup>



**Figure 4.1. An Audience Listening to a Program at Lewisohn Stadium.**

<sup>16</sup> F.D. Perkins, “The Seventh Season: A Retrospect and Summary,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 24 Aug 1924.

<sup>17</sup> Grace Overmyer, “Willem Van Hoogstraten Hails the Rise of Music in the West,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 27 June 1927.

<sup>18</sup> Undated photographic image, unknown newspaper clipping, CUNYLS.

Guggenheimer worked to ensure that attendees had a comfortable and enriching experience, unique to the outdoors but more relaxed than the highbrow concert-hall space. As the music played, she encouraged couples to romance under the stars. A 1927 *New York Times* survey of the Lewisohn audience noted that even older couples, upon hearing a sentimental piece like Strauss's *Blue Danube Waltz*, would "relapse into charmingly affectionate postures."<sup>19</sup> If attendees particularly liked a piece, they would applaud and cheer. Guggenheimer also convinced the city board to allow the sale of beer, and she encouraged visitors to picnic. In 1934, Catherine MacKenzie described a typical Lewisohn audience:

It is a long ride to the Stadium and tiresome, but people go. The wooden benches are not favorable. They could be cool and comfortable elsewhere, but they have come for the music. The stadium is big, the crowd is big, the orchestra is too far away. There are neighborhood noises. With darkness the sprawling area of the stadium becomes intimate, the brilliant blue of the stage backdrop is nearer, in focus. Supporting sympathy of mood in the audience is evident to the most casual onlooker. People smoking, people drinking beer. Neckties are loosened, coats are off, because of the heat. Sodas are sipped through straws.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the distance, heat, and choice of seating, people came to Lewisohn to hear good music and they could behave as if they were in their own homes, listening to the radio or a phonograph.

After the war, the summer series had been an annual custom for nearly two decades. Contemporary reports indicate that many in the Gershwin Night audience visited Lewisohn for the nostalgia of a bygone era, when the market was doing perpetually well, and the sounds of Tin Pan Alley, particularly Gershwin's music, evoked the young and *jouissant* spirit of that time. In 1949, the *New York Times* noted that the continuous success of the Gershwin Nights could be greatly attributed to "its nostalgic mood of the Broadway life of its epoch as well as its evocation

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<sup>19</sup> Robert A. Simon, "How New York Takes Its Summer Music: The Crowds on the Green at Open-Air Concerts Are There to Enjoy, Not to Criticize," *NYT*, 17 Jul 1927.

<sup>20</sup> Catherine MacKenzie, "Symphonies under the Midsummer Sky," *NYT*, 5 Aug 1934.

of the freak virtuosity of jazz musicians and the dawning influence of serious music on Tin Pan Alley.”<sup>21</sup> In 1951, Douglas Watt wrote: “What we often try to do in a weak, sentimental way—bring back the past, the Charleston and other adornments of a giddier day—is vigorously accomplished by Gershwin’s music. For this brings back the spirit itself of a powerful man whose work produced joy.”<sup>22</sup>

### **4.3 The Lewisohn Stadium Gershwin Nights**

From the late 1920s, Gershwin’s music featured regularly at Lewisohn Stadium. Gershwin appeared as a featured artist on a few symphony nights and at the first all-Gershwin event on 16 August 1932. From 1937, the year Gershwin died, the Stadium Concerts committee continued the Gershwin Nights as annual memorial concerts. Other Lewisohn programs apart from the Gershwin Nights featured one or more Gershwin works, but these concerts were not all-Gershwin events. The Gershwin Nights occurred every year until the last Lewisohn summer concert series in 1966. From 1939 to 1953, Oscar Levant as regular Gershwin Night featured pianist picked up and continued Gershwin’s success at the venue.

The Gershwin Nights at Lewisohn Stadium were middlebrow events. They were concerts organized by cultural elites, Guggenheimer and the Lewisohn Concerts committee, and presented to a mass audience at popular prices in a sports arena. Most of the Gershwin Nights featured Gershwin’s orchestral music performed by the New York Philharmonic. Gershwin himself was a middlebrow composer. David Savran explains that Gershwin, with both his popular and concert-hall works, “[attempted] to negotiate and even reconcile the schism between highbrow and

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<sup>21</sup> C.H., “Gershwin’s Music Jams the Stadium,” *NYT*, 8 Jul 1949.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas Watt, “Same Old Story – Gershwin Night Sells Out at Stadium,” *New York Daily News*, 13 Jul 1951.

lowbrow entertainments.”<sup>23</sup> He combined the culturally simple with the culturally sophisticated in a way that incorporated the lowbrows and irritated the highbrows. Moreover, he expressed outright that he wished to use music of the masses to create American art: “Jazz I regard as an American folk music [that] can be used to make works of lasting value.”<sup>24</sup>

Between 1927 and 1936, Gershwin appeared at Lewisohn seven times, and he recognized the venue as an opportunity to reach a large live audience. Here, New Yorkers who couldn't afford winter season tickets to the Philharmonic, could hear the same orchestra play Gershwin's works at affordable prices in a casual environment. Recalling the first all-Gershwin concert in 1932, he said, “The thought occurred to me then, as I looked out over these 18,000 faces, that it is seldom one sees masses of people from all walks of life attending a single musical performance.”<sup>25</sup> In 1939, Levant also recognized the venue's importance to Gershwin:

These Stadium concerts were always singular events in Gershwin's year. They gave him contact with a larger audience than he ever experienced elsewhere, and it was an inexpressible satisfaction to hear his music played by such an orchestra as the Philharmonic. Owing, perhaps, to his background in the commercial theatre, where audience interest is the criterion of success – hence worth – he was keenly aware of the drawing power of the all-Gershwin programs.<sup>26</sup>

According to biographer Charles Schwartz, the 18,000 attendees of Gershwin's 25 July 1927 Lewisohn debut, wherein he played the Concerto in F and the Rhapsody, considered him “their composer, a man of the people who had risen from their ranks.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theatre, Jazz and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 66.

<sup>24</sup> George Gershwin, “The Relation of Jazz to American Music,” in *American Composers on American Music*, edited by Henry Cowell (1933; New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1962), 187.

<sup>25</sup> “Gershwin Makes Appeal for Concerts Fund,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 20 Jun 1935.

<sup>26</sup> Oscar Levant, “Variations on a Gershwin Theme” (1939), in *The George Gershwin Reader*, Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson, ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 11-12.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Schwartz, *Gershwin: His Life and Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), 148.



Lewisohn offered Gershwin the opportunity to conduct his own work before a live audience for the first time. On 26 August 1929, Gershwin conducted his *An American in Paris* and played the *Rhapsody in Blue*. A reported 20,000 people attended. The *Baltimore Sun* said, “Every seat in the huge Stadium was taken long before the beginning of the concert, and thousands stood.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the Lewisohn audience loved to see and hear Gershwin. Gershwin returned to repeat the concert the following year, and also included his Concerto in F.

Following the success of these concerts, the Stadium Concerts committee scheduled its first all-Gershwin concert, and the great attendance and response to the first Gershwin Night demonstrated that Lewisohn’s audience responded strongly to the music.<sup>29</sup> Twenty thousand packed the Stadium that evening. Reporting on the inaugural event, which was the first time the Philharmonic had presented a concert of works by a single American composer, critic Howard Taubman wrote:

In the face of these statistics, the critical attitude cannot help but be humble. What would it profit us to inveigh against the manifest disproportionateness of singling out Mr. Gershwin as the one American composer to be honored thus or against Broadway, popularity, the Great God Publicity and other equally elusive matters?”<sup>30</sup>

Despite critical opinion of Gershwin’s works, his popularity as demonstrated by the large Lewisohn crowds and the uproarious applause could not be denied.

After Gershwin’s death in 1937, the Gershwin Nights became memorial concerts. The Stadium Concerts committee decided to annually schedule all-Gershwin programs not only out of a sense of duty to the American composer the Stadium had nourished, but also financial

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<sup>28</sup> Leslie Harris, “Symphony without Conductor,” *Baltimore Sun*, 1 Sep 1929.

<sup>29</sup> Gershwin was the first living composer to receive the distinction of an entire concert of his own music performed by the Philharmonic. Only Beethoven and Wagner had been likewise honored with Lewisohn concerts devoted solely to their music.

<sup>30</sup> Only 17,000 people were allowed in the Stadium; a reported 4,000 more were turned away. Howard Taubman, “Music,” *NYT*, 17 Aug 1932.

necessity to meet or surpass its annual deficit. In 1932, the year of the first all-Gershwin program, the *New York Times* reported that the Philharmonic Stadium repertoire of classical and romantic music usually attracted a crowd that only filled about one-third of the venue. However, “special occasions,” like the Gershwin Night, usually drew huge crowds. The large gap between admissions and production costs had been met by a \$50,000 fund from a small group of guarantors, but the Depression made it increasingly difficult to raise that money. While maintaining popular prices, the committee sought numerous ways to rectify the situation. Since symphony concerts featuring solo instrumentalists were usually popular, the committee added more soloists to the schedule in 1935. This decision, unfortunately, also raised production costs. The all-Gershwin concerts with a featured soloist, particularly during the Depression, attracted large crowds and benefited the Stadium Concerts’ bottom line.<sup>31</sup>

Lewisohn paraphernalia emphasized Gershwin’s close relationship with New York musical culture and, by extension, his impact on American culture. Composer biographies printed in the Stadium’s Gershwin Night programs characterized the composer as an “East Side kid” and “a typical youngster of the big city,” who grew up to write works commissioned by Paul Whiteman and Walter Damrosch.<sup>32</sup> He and his brother Ira, “the lyricists of America,” modernized American folk forms and designed Broadway shows that “swept throughout the country.” Printed concert notes refer to *Porgy and Bess* as his “most ambitious work” with songs that “people loved to sing and sing again.”<sup>33</sup> Such words presented Gershwin not only as America’s composer, but New York’s composer, and his music was New York’s music. Indeed,

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<sup>31</sup> “\$15000 Needed for Stadium Concerts Fund,” unknown newspaper, [June 1936?], CUNYLS.

<sup>32</sup> “Stadium Sketch Book: George Gershwin,” *Stadium Concerts Review* 25, no. 14 (5-11 Aug 1942): 25; “Music of George Gershwin,” *Stadium Concerts Review* 28, no. 4 (9-15 Jul 1945): 15.

<sup>33</sup> “Stadium Sketch Book: George Gershwin”: 30

in 1946 John Briggs of the *New York Post* declared, “A Gershwin concert is to New York what a Mozart festival is in Vienna.”<sup>34</sup> After the 1950 Gershwin Night, critic Douglas Watt wrote: “There continues to be something so enlivening about Gershwin that it seems improbable he will ever be forgotten. His music is vigorous and full-blooded and admirably representative of a city and its people, of a world in itself.”<sup>35</sup> New Yorkers proudly claimed Gershwin as their composer, and members of the press recognized his contribution to the city’s culture.

Just as Lewisohn Stadium helped shape and evolve New York’s cultural life, Gershwin’s music was a dominant force and lasting presence throughout most of the Stadium’s existence. The Stadium committee’s decision to annually program Gershwin’s music helped his legacy tremendously. As Stern explains, although contemporary press often judged Gershwin’s art harshly, the committee and the Lewisohn audience “recognized greatness and supported him like no other artist, living or deceased, in the Stadium’s history up until that point.”<sup>36</sup> Due to the annual Gershwin Nights, Gershwin became the most frequently performed twentieth-century composer at Lewisohn Stadium, and Oscar Levant was the pianist who most frequently performed his music.<sup>37</sup>

#### **4.4 Oscar Levant at Lewisohn Stadium**

As the regularly featured pianist at Lewisohn’s Gershwin Nights from 1939 to 1953, Levant presented Gershwin’s piano works to a massive New York audience. Along with the music, his presence was an additional attraction due to his popularity as a radio celebrity, and

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<sup>34</sup> John Briggs, “Words and Music: All-Gershwin Concert Packs Lewisohn Stadium,” *New York Post*, 12 Jul 1946.

<sup>35</sup> Douglas Watt, “Gershwin Brings 23,000 to the Stadium,” *New York Daily News*, 7 Jul 1950.

<sup>36</sup> Stern, 134.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

later as a film star. Since audiences initially knew Levant as the star of the radio quiz show *Information Please*, his Lewisohn appearances strengthened public and critical opinion of him as an interpreter of Gershwin's music. He consistently drew massive crowds to the benefit of the Stadium's budget, his own career, and Gershwin's legacy. Just as Gershwin benefitted from the venue's consistent programming of his works, Levant benefitted from his consistent appearances at Lewisohn, over the course of fifteen years. Other pianists were featured at the Gershwin Nights but none as frequently as Levant. His continued presence at Lewisohn bolstered popular and critical opinion of him as the leading Gershwin authority in the two decades following Gershwin's death.

Prior to his establishment as the regularly featured pianist at the Gershwin Nights, some critics had already referred to Oscar Levant as an authority on Gershwin's music. Anticipating his appearance at Lewisohn's first Gershwin Night in 1932, *Variety* called him "Gershwin's favorite piano interpreter."<sup>38</sup> His performance of the Concerto in F at the 1937 Hollywood Bowl memorial inspired commentary. Writing for the *San Francisco Examiner*, Louella Parsons claimed, "The Gershwin concert was something we shall never forget especially Oscar Levant's playing."<sup>39</sup> Dale Armstrong, at the *Los Angeles Times*, said the concerto was "beautifully played."<sup>40</sup> Los Angeles's *B'nai B'rith Messenger* said, "Oscar Levant is considered a likely successor to the place in the musical world held by the late George Gershwin."<sup>41</sup> These quotes, however, reported upon isolated events. Levant's sustained presence at Lewisohn would produce

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<sup>38</sup> "Inside Stuff – Music," *Variety*, 2 Aug 1932.

<sup>39</sup> Louella O. Parsons, "Theaters: *Kentucky Moonshine*, Hill-Billy Musical, Will Star Joan Davis," *San Francisco Examiner*, 10 Sep 1937.

<sup>40</sup> Dale Armstrong, "Radiopinions," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 Sep 1937.

<sup>41</sup> *B'nai B'rith Messenger*, "Hollywood Briefs," 6 Jan 1938.

regular commentary on his ability to interpret Gershwin's music at a particular socioculturally important venue in Gershwin's home city.<sup>42</sup>

At the time of Gershwin's death, arguably no popular figure was more closely associated in the public imagination with Gershwin than Paul Whiteman, who had commissioned the *Rhapsody in Blue* and performed it with his jazz orchestra at the Bijou Theatre and on tours across the United States. When Whiteman's 1938 Gershwin Night was critically panned, he avoided the venue in the future. In 1938, the Gershwin Night was still considered an "occasional program" at the Stadium.<sup>43</sup> The majority of Gershwin Nights thereafter, until 1953, featured Alexander Smallens conducting the New York Philharmonic, with Oscar Levant as featured pianist. With this lineup, the Gershwin Nights became a Lewisohn institution. According to Levant, who suffered from debilitating stage fright most of his life, he initially resisted the job offer, but Rose Gershwin pleaded and changed his mind.<sup>44</sup> Considering popular familiarity of Whiteman with Gershwin's music, Levant and Smallens, with aid from the Philharmonic, were participating in a cultural capital struggle as Gershwin interpreters. With each appearance together, Levant and Smallens soon became as much a part of the Lewisohn Stadium mythos as the Gershwin Nights themselves.

Levant's joint onstage appearances at Lewisohn with other Gershwin authorities helped establish and maintain critical and popular opinion of his own Gershwin authority. Smallens, who led almost every Gershwin Night that featured Levant, was the original conductor of

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<sup>42</sup> Kashner and Schoenberger quoted an *L.A. Times* article that declared Levant "the best Gershwin exponent heard out here so far." I have been unable to find that article. Perhaps the quote comes from some other California newspaper. Sam Kashner and Nancy Schoenberger, *A Talent for Genius: The Life and Times of Oscar Levant* (New York: Silman-James Press, 1998), 192.

<sup>43</sup> Unknown author [Francis D. Perkins?], "Stadium Retrospect," *New York Herald Tribune*, [Late August?] 1938, CUNYLS.

<sup>44</sup> Oscar Levant, *Memoirs of an Amnesiac* (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), 147.

Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. Prior to the establishment of the Gershwin Nights, he had led opera performances at Lewisohn. He conducted his first all-Gershwin concerts at Lewisohn on 9 and 10 July 1936, and until 1960 he continued to lead every annual event, save the 1938 memorial featuring Whiteman. He practically made a lifetime career performing Gershwin music and eventually became part of the nostalgia surrounding the Gershwin Nights, as one reporter on the 1954 evening muses: "I couldn't help looking forward to the day when Alexander Smallens, 90 and much-honored, is conducting the 60th or 70th annual Gershwin concert on the Space Platform Amphitheatre No. 8"<sup>45</sup>

The one Levant-featured Gershwin Night that Smallens did not conduct was the first all-Gershwin Lewisohn concert in 1932. That night, William Daly led Levant and the Philharmonic in a performance of the Concerto in F. Daly was also a close friend of Gershwin's with an established working relationship. He arranged much of Gershwin's music for chamber orchestra and radio performances. Gershwin also dedicated the Three Piano Preludes to him.<sup>46</sup> He also asked Daly to conduct his performances of the *Rhapsody in Blue* at Lewisohn in 1931 and 1932.<sup>47</sup> At the time of the 1932 concert, Levant was working as Daly's pianist on the *Hoffman Ginger Ale Program*, an hour-long musical variety NBC radio show previously discussed in Chapter 2. Although his repertoire on the program usually consisted of solo piano pieces by canonical composers, Levant played the *Rhapsody in Blue* with Daly's orchestra on the program's 15 April 1932 episode.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Douglas Watt, "7,500 Attend Stadium's Repeat Gershwin Night," *New York Daily News*, 21 Jul 1954.

<sup>46</sup> Howard Pollack, *George Gershwin: His Life and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 191 and 391-392.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>48</sup> "The Microphone Will Present," *NYT*, 10 Apr 1932.

The New York Philharmonic had performed Gershwin's symphonic music, both at Lewisohn Stadium and in the concert hall. Prior to Levant's 1939 appearance as the featured pianist, the Philharmonic had played Gershwin music at thirteen Lewisohn concerts. The orchestra had premiered *An American in Paris* under Walter Damrosch at Carnegie Hall in 1928. The Philharmonic had programmed the *Rhapsody in Blue* with George Gershwin as soloist for a Young People's Concert at Carnegie Hall in 1929. Gershwin played the Concerto in F with the orchestra four times: once in 1928 and 1930, and twice in 1936. The Stadium was the venue where the Philharmonic played Gershwin's music to vast audiences on a regular basis.

Four of the Gershwin Nights with Levant as featured pianist also featured original cast members from *Porgy and Bess*. Five months after the opera's original run had closed on Broadway, the cast sang numbers from the opera at the 1936 Lewisohn Gershwin Night, accompanied by the Philharmonic. The performers included Anne Brown and Todd Duncan, the original Porgy and Bess, as well as the Eva Jessye Choir. Just as he had done for the Broadway production, Smallens conducted. Save for Whiteman's 1938 Gershwin Night, these cast members appeared each year thereafter until the show was revived on Broadway in 1942. I elaborate on the importance of the Gershwin Night *Porgy and Bess* segment below.

Finally, Levant was the only Gershwin Night pianist to also share the stage with Gershwin at Lewisohn. The Stadium was the site of a special and personal moment between the two men. The first all-Gershwin concert in 1932 featured all of Gershwin's large works for orchestra that he had written up to that time, including the Stadium premiere of the Second Rhapsody. In order to avoid the stress of performing three piano works, Gershwin asked Levant

to play the Concerto in F in his place.<sup>49</sup> Later, Gershwin expressed his gratitude by gifting Levant with a wrist watch inscribed: “From George to Oscar, Lewisohn Stadium, August 15, 1932.” For years Levant fondly recalled the moment, and it became one of his many rituals to carry the watch with him to every performance. Although Levant would hold a sentimental value for the venue after this concert, at the time he decided that concertizing as a profession would be “too strenuous” for him.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, seven years later, he began his fifteen-year career as a regular Gershwin Night pianist.

#### **4.4.1 Levant, the Radio Celebrity, Live at Lewisohn**

In 1939, when Levant was first hired as the featured pianist at Lewisohn’s Gershwin Nights, most Americans knew Levant as a musical wit on the radio. From July 1938, he was the music expert on the popular radio quiz show *Information Please*. On the show, he was regularly introduced as a musician, pianist, composer, and wit, but not a Gershwin expert. Dorothy Kilgallen, who would also later have her own extended career as a game-show panelist, noted that he was currently most well-known as a wit, but “could be a famous concert pianist.” Broadway and Hollywood notables knew that he was a Gershwin pianist, but most Americans did not. Kilgallen continues, “He played Gershwin music better than Gershwin did, but he always was more widely known and noisily publicized for his mots than his music.”<sup>51</sup> When Levant began his stint as the regular Gershwin Night featured pianist, he did not yet enjoy general public recognition as a Gershwin interpreter, rather Americans identified him first as a musically intelligent radio celebrity.

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<sup>49</sup> Oscar Levant, *A Smattering of Ignorance* (1939; Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing, 1942), 164.

<sup>50</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 122.

<sup>51</sup> Dorothy Kilgallen, “Kilgallen Balances Levant Wit and Music,” *Miami News*, 26 Dec 1938.



Levant's early appearances at the Lewisohn Gershwin Nights increased his own celebrity and helped establish critical opinion of him as more than a radio jokester. On *Information Please*, Levant had flaunted his wit, his vast knowledge of music (among other subjects), and his ability to play almost anything on demand, but with the Stadium concerts he demonstrated to live audiences and critics his competence as a piano virtuoso and professional performer of symphonic music. After his 1939 appearance, Howard Taubman said Levant "played the Concerto in F and *Rhapsody in Blue* with earnestness and high purpose."<sup>52</sup> In 1940, Olin Downes said, "Oscar Levant played superbly, not only as a virtuoso with every technical and total command of his medium, but as a very fine and sensitive artist."<sup>53</sup>

While the Stadium Concerts committee consistently struggled to cover its deficit, Levant's ability to draw large crowds helped their budget. Reviews of the early Gershwin Nights featuring Levant often note that he was an extra draw due to his radio celebrity. In 1939, Taubman said: "Oscar Levant is more than a piano soloist; he was a celebrated radio personality. No prize offered for any one who can identify the program."<sup>54</sup> The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* said he "jumped into first place as radio personality in the past year" and was "last night's extra drawing card."<sup>55</sup> In 1940, *Variety* reported: "The record crowd turned out not only to hear a recital of the works of America's greatest composer of symphonic jazz, but also to see and hear Oscar Levant as piano soloist."<sup>56</sup> Thus, although many of the Gershwin programs had attracted large audiences in the past, Levant attracted an additional radio-listening audience that previously may not have considered attending a concert of Gershwin's music.

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<sup>52</sup> Howard Taubman, "Stadium Concert Honors Gershwin," *NYT*, 11 Jul 1939.

<sup>53</sup> Olin Downes, "Stadium Concert Honors Gershwin," *NYT*, 14 Jul 1940.

<sup>54</sup> Taubman, *NYT*, 11 Jul 1939.

<sup>55</sup> "Gershwin Program Draws Record Crowd," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 11 Jul 1939.

<sup>56</sup> "Gershwiniana with Quiz Wiz Pianist a 22,000 Capacity Lewisohn Socko," *Variety* 139, no. 6 (17 Jul 1940): 32.

#### 4.4.2 Levant's Attendance Draw

The Stadium Concerts committee frequently released its attendance numbers to the press, and Levant's draw remained consistently and overwhelmingly strong. Table 4.1 contains reported attendance numbers at each Gershwin Night. Different newspapers frequently reported different numbers, and the Stadium Concerts committee frequently referred to a high number as a Stadium record. Thus, one can never know with certainty the exact attendance number for each Gershwin Night, and the possibilities of fudging and press agency should be taken into account. In any case, with wooden chairs and tables on the field, the Stadium was capable of holding over 20,000 people.<sup>57</sup> From 1939 to 1953, according to reported numbers, Levant consistently drew audiences of over 20,000 people.

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<sup>57</sup> "Seventy tables and ten thousand wooden camp chairs cover the field on summer nights to double the seating capacity." Untermeyer and Williamson, 78.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Attendance</b>	<b>Featured Pianist</b>
16 August 1932	17845	Gershwin
9-10 July 1936	7000 + 5000	Gershwin
9 August 1937	20223	Kaufman
12 July 1938	~19000	Bargy
10 July 1939	18000-20000	Levant
13 July 1940	22000	Levant
10 July 1941	24000-25000	Levant
10 August 1942	15000 (suspended due to rain)	Levant
11 August 1942	19743	Levant
6 July 1943	20000	Sanromá
6 July 1944	21000	Levant
12 July 1945	23000	Levant
11 July 1946	22000	Levant
7 July 1947	18300	Sanromá
29 June 1948	17000-18000	Wild
7 July 1949	20000	Levant
6 July 1950	23000	Levant
12 July 1951	21000	Levant
3 July 1952	18500	Levant

16 July 1953	20000	Levant
19-20 July 1954	11000 + 7500	Wild
11 July 1955	<18000	Wild
9 July 1956	10000	Wild
4 July 1957	<15000	List
13 July 1958	9000	List
18 July 1959	15000	Wild
30 June 1960	8000	List
24 June 1961	n/a	Wild
10 July 1962	11000	Wild
4 July 1963	9000	Wild
4 July 1964	7500	Wild
7 August 1965	n/a	Wild
4 August 1966	n/a	Boepple

**Table 4.1. Lewisohn Stadium Gershwin Night Attendance Numbers.**

Sometimes Levant's draw was the highest attended Lewisohn concert for the summer. For example, in 1942 the Stadium faced a slight drop in average numbers due to transportation problems and "unprecedented conditions of warfare," like adjustments to lighting for blackout conditions.<sup>58</sup> Also, on 28 July, a lightning bolt struck and damaged the band shell just prior to a concert.<sup>59</sup> On 10 August, only 15,000 people attended the Gershwin Night, which was cancelled after fifteen minutes due to severe rain.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, nearly 20,000 spectators arrived the following day for the rescheduled performance. It was the largest crowd for the 1942 season.<sup>61</sup> In the nearly two decades following Gershwin's death, with Levant at the piano and Smallens on the podium, the Gershwin Nights remained a strong draw and lucrative enterprise for the Stadium, despite hazardous weather and wartime difficulties.

The most well-attended Gershwin Night in the history of Lewisohn Stadium, according to reported numbers, occurred on 10 July 1941. This was Levant's third appearance as regular featured pianist, and the fifth appearance of original cast members during the *Porgy and Bess* segment of the show. The *New York Times* reported 24,000 attended the event, while 1000 more were turned away at the gate.<sup>62</sup> This surpassed the previous year's count by 2000. The *Times* said such a large draw to an outdoor event was a testament to the "unwaning popularity of George Gershwin's output."<sup>63</sup> Attendance dropped slightly over the next three years but remained at or

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<sup>58</sup> Olin Downes, "The Stadium Season," *NYT*, 16 Aug 1942.

<sup>59</sup> "Bolt Strikes Lewisohn Stadium, Wrecking the Orchestra Shell," *NYT*, 29 Jul 1942.

<sup>60</sup> "Rain Ends Stadium Music," *NYT*, 11 Aug 1942.

<sup>61</sup> Downes, *NYT*, 16 Aug 1942.

<sup>62</sup> Noel Straus, "Tribute by 24,000 to Geo. Gershwin," *NYT*, 11 Jul 1941. *New Journal and Guide* reported 25,000 in attendance, while the *New York Daily News* said 3000 had been turned away. Edgar T. Rouzeau, "25,000 Hear Gershwin Concert," *New Journal and Guide*, 19 Jul 1941; "24,000 Attend Gershwin Night for New High," *New York Daily News*, 11 Jul 1941.

<sup>63</sup> Straus, *NYT*, 11 Jul 1941.

above the 20,000 mark. The Gershwin Nights drew large crowds not only through the popularity of Gershwin's music, but also the popularity of the artists who performed it.

The release of Warner Bros.' Gershwin biopic *Rhapsody in Blue* boosted attendance in 1945, with a reported 23000 for the Gershwin Night on 12 July. The film had opened in New York theatres in late June.<sup>64</sup> As discussed in the final chapter, the finale of the picture featured Levant as a semi-fictional version of himself playing the Rhapsody at Lewisohn. A *New York Times* interview with Levant, published just prior to the concert, discussed the film and called Levant a "disciple of the late George Gershwin" and "an ardent Gershwinophile."<sup>65</sup> The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* also speculated, "All probably recognized something in the music that persists in freshness and in pull and in just plain satisfaction."<sup>66</sup> The very familiarity of the music coupled with Levant's film celebrity helped push the Gershwin Night attendance to high numbers.

After Levant's final Lewisohn appearance in 1953, a noticeable drop in Gershwin Night attendance can be observed. Reported numbers never again reached the 20,000 mark. At the 1954 Gershwin Night, featuring Earl Wild, Guggenheimer was so distraught by the low turnout that she rushed onstage and announced the concert's cancellation. The audience shouted their disapproval. New York did receive rain that night, but not in the Lewisohn area. The concert went on, and a rushed second concert took place the following night. The total reported attendance for those two concerts was 18,500. Irvin Kolodin said, "The total for the two nights was well shy of customary outpourings on behalf of George Gershwin."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Bosley Crowther, "The Screen," *NYT*, 28 Jun 1945.

<sup>65</sup> "Mr. Levant Discusses Mr. Gershwin," *NYT*, 8 Jul 1945.

<sup>66</sup> Miles Kastendieck, "Music: Gershwin Night with Oscar Levant Draws Crowd of 23,000 to Stadium," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 13 Jul 1945.

<sup>67</sup> Irving Kolodin, "Irving Kolodin's I-Witness Report," *Newport News Daily Press*, 1 August 1954.

If the loss of Levant is not a primary cause, the downturn in Gershwin Night attendance can also be attributed to a general decline of concert attendance. As discussed in Chapter Three, Levant's career as a concert pianist occurred during a nationwide boom in live concert attendance that subsided with the rise of television in the early 1950s. Concerning attendance at the Stadium itself, Stern says that in its last two decades interest waned due to several factors, including the area's decline and white flight to the suburbs.<sup>68</sup> According to Irving Kolodin, by the early 1950s, the Lewisohn experience was a "nightmare."<sup>69</sup> Access to the Stadium was increasingly difficult, parking was too far away, planes from LaGuardia constantly interrupted the music, the sun was relentless, and, even though tickets remained at popular prices, choice of seating remained a concrete slab or a wooden chair. Most of these things had always been problems at Lewisohn. Nevertheless, Stern sums it up: "The Stadium was clearly no longer an ideal place for musical entertainment."<sup>70</sup>

#### **4.4.3 Levant as Gershwin Night Gershwinite**

When Levant first became the regular Gershwin Night pianist in 1939, he was not yet known as a great interpreter of Gershwin's piano works. He had played in radio orchestras and in popular dance bands, like Ben Bernie's Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra. He had also performed the Concerto in F once at Lewisohn and once at the Hollywood Bowl. Still, with all his experience in popular music performance, the public recognized him as the radio celebrity from *Information Please*. Annual appearances at the Stadium granted Levant the opportunity to demonstrate his intimate familiarity with Gershwin's piano music. Thus, Lewisohn served as Levant's own space

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<sup>68</sup> Stern, 237.

<sup>69</sup> Irving Kolodin, "NY's Lewisohn Stadium Not Ideal Place for Concerts," *Houston Post*, 1 Jul 1952.

<sup>70</sup> Stern, 191.

to perform a maintained symbolic ownership of Gershwin's music. The audience and critics quickly noticed.

Gershwin Night reviews sometimes referred to Levant as an authority on Gershwin's work, who interpreted the music as the composer intended. In 1939, Robert Sylvester said Levant's technique was "very reminiscent of the composer's own."<sup>71</sup> In 1940, Olin Downes said Levant played "as a very fine and sensitive artist, who recreated the composer's thought."<sup>72</sup> On Levant's 1941 performance of the Rhapsody and the Concerto in F, Noel Straus said, "No one else today is more fully en rapport with their interpretative needs, or brings more artistry or highly polished technical skill to their performance."<sup>73</sup> With the early 1940s, as discussed in Chapter Three, Levant had the additional support of promotional material from his concert management, the National Concerts and Artists Corporation (NCAC). Indeed, in 1943 *Variety* borrowed language from Levant's NCAC publicity packet and called him the "principal exponent" of Gershwin's music since his death.<sup>74</sup>

Levant also benefited from the Stadium's own publicity, which frequently stressed his close connection to Gershwin. Prior to his initial 1939 appearance, the *Times* ran a tightly-framed, side-view photo of Levant at the piano with the caption: "Made by Mr. Gershwin some days before his death."<sup>75</sup> Levant confirms in *Memoirs of an Amnesiac* that Gershwin had taken this picture.<sup>76</sup> One effect of this photograph was to offer the reading audience a more serious image of the musical wit they knew from the radio. The photo suggests a private musical

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<sup>71</sup> Robert Sylvester, "All-Gershwin Concert Heard by 20,000 at Lewisohn Stadium," *New York Daily News*, 11 Jul 1939.

<sup>72</sup> Olin Downes, "Stadium Concert Honors Gershwin," *NYT*, 14 Jul 1940.

<sup>73</sup> Straus, *NYT*, 11 Jul 1941.

<sup>74</sup> "Levant Plays Himself in WB Gershwin Film," *Variety* 151, no. 3 (30 Jun 1943): 3.

<sup>75</sup> H.F.P., "Les Troyen in Paris," *NYT*, 9 July 1939.

<sup>76</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 123.



moment to which Gershwin had access – evidence of an intimate friendship between the two men. The photo with its caption argues that Levant—better known at the time as a radio celebrity than a concert pianist—is a deserved and logical choice as piano soloist for Lewisohn’s third annual Gershwin Night. The *Times* printed the photo again the following year.<sup>77</sup>

Early on, columnists and critics referred to Levant as Gershwin’s friend. In 1939, Alice Hughes called him “one of Gershwin’s closest friends.”<sup>78</sup> Howard Taubman said, “George Gershwin was a friend of his, and he treasures his memory and his music.”<sup>79</sup> The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* called him an “old friend.”<sup>80</sup> Shortly after Gershwin’s death, Leonard Lyons referred to Levant as an intimate friend of Gershwin, who “respected Levant’s talents.”<sup>81</sup> Such wide publicity informed the public of Levant’s relationship with Gershwin and insinuated that bond was more intimate than any other pianist’s connection to the composer.

Levant appeared at other outdoor venues to play Gershwin’s music, and this too helped establish him as an ascendant Gershwin authority. From the late 1930s to the mid-1950s, he irregularly attended all-Gershwin concerts at the Hollywood Bowl, the Robin Hood Dell, and other places. Nevertheless, as a space to perform symbolic ownership of Gershwin’s work, Lewisohn Stadium was the most effective for Levant, because the Gershwin Nights were annual New York programs with consistently massive crowds. Eventually, Levant’s recurring presence at these annual events became as much a part of the Lewisohn mythos as the Gershwin Nights themselves. *New York Daily News* critic Douglas Watt muses after the 1949 Gershwin Night:

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<sup>77</sup> Olin Downes, “New Music Center: Impressive Response to Koussevitzky’s Realization of Lifelong Purpose,” *NYT*, 7 Jul 1940.

<sup>78</sup> Alice Hughes, “A Woman’s New York,” *Dayton Daily News*, 8 Jul 1939.

<sup>79</sup> Howard Taubman, “Stadium Concert Honors Gershwin,” *NYT*, 11 Jul 1939.

<sup>80</sup> “Gershwin Program Draws Record Crowd,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 11 Jul 1939.

<sup>81</sup> Leonard Lyons, “The Post’s New Yorker,” *Washington Post*, 15 Jul 1937.

I can see Oscar Levant, soloist at the annual Gershwin concert last night at Lewisohn Stadium, thirty years from now on a lovely summer evening at the same place. Out onto the old platform he hobbles, a gently endearing figure with a fringe of white hair and a fixed and strangely appealing leer on his face, to hammer out the percussive Gershwin melodies. And I can see myself weeping into my coke. He's the man for these concerts, no doubt about it.<sup>82</sup>

#### 4.5 Other Gershwin Pianists at Lewisohn

Levant was not the only featured pianist at the Lewisohn Gershwin Nights. From the first all-Gershwin concert in 1932 to the last Gershwin Night in 1966, six pianists besides Levant and Gershwin appeared (see Table 4.1). Most of these pianists were recognized interpreters of Gershwin's music themselves. Some appeared numerous times, and others only once or twice. None of them appeared as often as Levant.

Jesús María Sanromá performed at two Lewisohn Gershwin Nights: 6 July 1943 and 7 July 1947. Prior to his 1943 appearance at Lewisohn, the *San Francisco Chronicle* called Sanromá "one of the greatest pianists in America" and "closer to Vladimir Horowitz than anybody else."<sup>83</sup> *PM* critic Mark Schubart, citing Sanromá's own statistics, declared he would be performing the Rhapsody for the seventy-fourth time and the Concerto in F for the seventeenth time.<sup>84</sup> Schubart called Sanromá's 1943 performance "taut, powerful and convincing."<sup>85</sup> One of the Lewisohn concert committee members wrote, "Sanromá is a marvelous pianist."<sup>86</sup> Moreover, Gershwin had first chosen Sanromá, not Levant, to play the Concerto in F at the first all-Gershwin Lewisohn concert in 1932. However, due to a teaching engagement at the University

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<sup>82</sup> Douglas Watt, "20,000 Attend Gershwin Concert," *New York Daily News*, 9 Jul 1949.

<sup>83</sup> Alfred Frankenstein, "Gershwin Festival: Music to Recall an Era Gone, but Fabulous," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 Feb 1943.

<sup>84</sup> Mark Schubart, "A Pianist Statistician," *PM*, 6 Jul 1943.

<sup>85</sup> Mark Schubart, "Gershwin Fills Stadium Again," *PM*, [July 1943], CUNYLS.

<sup>86</sup> This red-ink inscription is found in a Lewisohn Stadium program archived at CUNYLS.

of Puerto Rico that summer, Sanromá was unable to comply.<sup>87</sup> Levant, who was not yet known as a performer of concerto repertoire, played the work that evening.

Eugene List appeared at three Gershwin Nights in the late years of the Stadium. Like Sanromá, List established himself playing works of canonic composers with America's symphony orchestras, but he performed non-mainstream works, as well. In 1934, after winning a youth competition, he gave the American premiere of Shostakovich's First Piano Concerto with Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra. In 1945, while in the Army, he gained international fame when he played Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto for President Truman at the Potsdam Conference. Thereafter, magazines and newspapers dubbed him "the Potsdam pianist." At the time of his first Gershwin Night in 1957, he had recently recorded the first album of works by Louis Moreau Gottschalk.<sup>88</sup> Like Levant, List played Gershwin on radio, in the concert hall, and in outdoor venues. In 1943, he played the *Rhapsody in Blue* with the New York Philharmonic in a broadcast Gershwin memorial concert.<sup>89</sup> In summer 1944, he played the Rhapsody by request at a non-Gershwin Night Lewisohn concert conducted by Thor Johnson. He appeared with the Philharmonic again to participate in an all-Gershwin program on Christmas 1954 at Carnegie Hall. Since his Gershwin Night appearances occurred in the Stadium's waning years, they were not as highly attended as Levant's, however following the 1958 evening, the *New York Age* said he "played with a genuine feeling for hybrid jazz."<sup>90</sup>

With ten appearances, Earl Wild dominates the latter years of the Lewisohn Gershwin Nights. Although he rose to national attention in the early 1940s, he did not become the

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<sup>87</sup> Alberto Hernández, *Jesús María Sanromá: An American Twentieth-Century Pianist* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 182.

<sup>88</sup> Harold C. Schonberg, "Eugene List, 66, Concert Pianist," *NYT*, 2 Mar 1985.

<sup>89</sup> "List Performs on Symphony," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 10 Jul 1943.

<sup>90</sup> R.A., "Gershwin Concert Hit with Large Audience," *New York Age*, 19 Jul 1958.

ascendant interpreter of Gershwin's piano music at Lewisohn until after Levant's last appearance in 1953. After the July 1955 Lewisohn Gershwin Night, Irving Kolodin wrote that Earl Wild "has hitched his pianistic wagon" to Gershwin, but "this native of Pittsburgh owes some part of his opportunity to another Pittsburgher, Oscar Levant, who was instrumental in building these annual events to their present magnitude."<sup>91</sup> Since both men were so closely associated with Gershwin, Wild said that people often misidentified him:

Levant first met Gershwin in 1928 and performed his *Rhapsody in Blue* and Concerto in F frequently – well before I began performing Gershwin. I was often referred to as Oscar Wild! I never knew if they were mixing up my name thinking of Oscar Levant because of the Gershwin connection or if they were actually thinking of the writer Oscar Wilde. [...] During the 1940s, I often played the role of musical "fireman," meaning that I frequently substituted for Levant at the last minute [...] when he was too "gone" to perform!<sup>92</sup>

Wild never substituted for Levant at Lewisohn because he was "too gone," but (as mentioned in Chapter Three) he did fill in elsewhere when Levant cancelled several of his shows in the early 1950s.

## 4.6 The Repertoire at Lewisohn Gershwin Nights

At the time of Gershwin's death, fans and critics argued whether his continuing fame would stem from the musical comedy stage or the concert hall. Many had trouble identifying Gershwin as a serious composer because of his popular status with audiences and his close relationship with Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and with popular figures such as George White and Paul Whiteman. Olin Downes believed that Gershwin, having established his popular status, desired to move beyond musical comedy and toward higher ideals by writing more serious works

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<sup>91</sup> Irving Kolodin, "Piano Soloist Tied Wagon to Gershwin," *New York Daily Sun*, 31 Jul 1955.

<sup>92</sup> Earl Wild, *A Walk on the Wild Side: A Memoir* (Palm Springs: Ivory Classics Foundation, [2011]), 146-147.

that gave “new potency and significance” to American art.<sup>93</sup> The annual Gershwin Nights at Lewisohn permitted critics and audiences alike an opportunity to continue the debate. Oscar Levant’s performances of Gershwin’s piano music at Lewisohn offered critics maintained focus on Gershwin’s underappreciated works, consistently opening up possibilities for re-evaluation.

Most of the featured Gershwin repertoire at Lewisohn was symphonic, particularly between 1943 and 1953, when vocal music was rarely programmed. Thus, it can be argued that Lewisohn’s programming helped tilt the argument toward Gershwin’s concert music. The *Washington Post* reported on this effect in 1948:

The record shows that such orchestral works as the Rhapsody, the Concerto, *An American in Paris*, and the *Porgy and Bess* music [the Robert Russell Bennett arrangement] are head and heels in front of the greater part of the work Gershwin did in musical comedy. It also is somewhat odd that of the hundreds of songs Gershwin wrote for Broadway, probably not more than a score are heard to any great extent today. Apparently the true Gershwin addict likes a mixture of the composer’s heavier and lighter pieces. Seventeen thousand such Gershwinites annually pack Lewisohn Stadium in New York on all-Gershwin Nights.<sup>94</sup>

Of course, Gershwin songs still circulated as popular recordings and on radio, television, and film, but only songs from *Porgy and Bess* received regular featured treatment at Lewisohn. Nevertheless, listeners could expect a heavy dose of orchestral music when attending a Lewisohn Gershwin Night.

Beginning in 1939, once Levant began to return annually as a featured pianist for these events, a model pattern in Gershwin Night programming slowly began to emerge. Music for symphony orchestra dominated each program, and four concert pieces were mainstays: the overture to *Strike up the Band*, *An American in Paris*, the Concerto in F, and the *Rhapsody in*

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<sup>93</sup> Olin Downes, “Gershwin Memorial: Retrospect of Rapid Rise of Composer and the Development of His Art,” *NYT*, 10 Jul 1938.

<sup>94</sup> Charles Honce, “Eleven Years After: Gershwin Rhapsody Lives,” *Washington Post*, 1 Feb 1948.

*Blue*. The first three were heard toward the beginning of the concert; the Rhapsody almost always concluded the evening. After intermission usually came music from the folk opera *Porgy and Bess*. Despite the installed sound system, Gershwin's popular songs for stage and film were very rarely performed at Lewisohn. Thus, the Lewisohn Gershwin Night model resembled a winter season symphony concert, sometimes sprinkled with lighter fare. The recurring appearance of the same pieces allowed critics and audience year after year to assess each work, judge its artfulness, and argue its place in the American canon.

#### 4.6.1 *Strike up the Band Overture*

From 1937 to 1966, the *Strike up the Band* overture signalled the opening of twenty-four Gershwin Night programs and appeared on an additional four. Reviews usually did not devote much attention to the overture, but rather treated it as the “traditional opening number” for the concert.<sup>95</sup> Commenting on the 1944 Gershwin Night, Noel Straus said the overture “set the keynote of the evening’s accomplishments by the verve, animation and infectious rhythmic impulse brought to its performance.”<sup>96</sup> However, in 1953, a reviewer for the *New York Times* had decided, “*Strike up the Band* is not Gershwin’s happiest inspiration and one observer would be content not to hear it for awhile.”<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, the piece remained on the regular program and even opened other all-Gershwin programs across the country. Whether critics cared for the work, the Lewisohn Gershwin Nights gave it regular hearings and inspired organizers of similar events to feature the piece as well.

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<sup>95</sup> Douglas Watt, “20,000 Attend Gershwin Concert,” *New York Daily News*, 9 Jul 1949.

<sup>96</sup> Noel Straus, “Gershwin’s Music Entertains 21,000,” *NYT*, 7 Jul 1944.

<sup>97</sup> J.B., “Smallens Leads Gershwin Concert; Levant Plays *Rhapsody* at Stadium,” *NYT*, 17 Jul 1953.

#### 4.6.2 *An American in Paris*

From 1929 to 1966, the symphonic poem *An American in Paris* received twenty-nine Gershwin Night performances, and thirty-six performances at Lewisohn altogether. Each Gershwin Night, the work most frequently occurred at the end of the first segment, just prior to intermission. Over the years, assessments of the orchestral work seem to have improved. In addition to continuous performance at Lewisohn, MGM's film *An American in Paris* (1951) certainly had a positive effect on the work's appraisal. Gershwin himself conducted the work at Lewisohn in 1929 and 1930. Following the work's Stadium premiere, a critic for the *New York World* wrote: "Mr. Gershwin's erratic episodes are not freighted with too much invention. [...] The result is deft, if prosaic vulgarity, a gaucherie unrelieved by exotic fancies or the saving grace of irony. [...] His melodies are unlovely and become more so by undisguised repetition." Another observer stated that Gershwin had made "the most gorgeous mistakes in orchestration."<sup>98</sup> After a 1936 performance, one critic said it had only "mild programmatic appeal."<sup>99</sup> However, after the 1953 Gershwin Night, a *New York Times* critic reported the piece "still retains its freshness, charm and the indefinable quality of wistfulness that suggests the American is a little bit homesick among the tooting of the Paris taxicabs."<sup>100</sup>

#### 4.6.3 *Rhapsody in Blue*

The *Rhapsody in Blue*, Gershwin's most recognized and popular work, did not need regular performances at Lewisohn to gain familiarity with American audiences. From its 1922 debut, numerous subsequent performances by Whiteman's band and other live and radio

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<sup>98</sup> *New York World*, "Music," 9 Jul 1929.

<sup>99</sup> No title, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 12 Jul 1936.

<sup>100</sup> J.B., *NYT*, 17 Jul 1953.

orchestras, as well as recordings, kept the American listening public familiar with the work. Its immediate popularity ensured its permanence on the Gershwin Night program. Recurring performances allowed critics to judge its canonic worth. The Rhapsody was performed forty times at Lewisohn between 1927 and 1965; thirty-two of those programs were Gershwin Nights. Curiously, conductor Johnny Green did not program the Rhapsody for the final Gershwin Night in 1966 with pianist Hans Boepple.

Despite its instant popularity from inception, critics still assessed the work after every Gershwin Night, and most agreed that the Rhapsody was Gershwin's most beloved composition. In 1939, Howard Taubman called it "an American classic."<sup>101</sup> Levant's performance was frequently described as the most thrilling part of the show. While he was the annual featured pianist, the Rhapsody always closed the evening, ensuring a most tumultuous applause at concert's end. In 1940, John Baird said, "Highlight of the evening, as far as the customers were concerned, was soloist Oscar Levant's expert playing of the famous *Rhapsody in Blue*."<sup>102</sup> In 1944, Noel Straus reported the Rhapsody "brought on the biggest demonstration" and a lengthy ovation.<sup>103</sup> Two years later, Straus repeated that "the climax of enthusiasm was evoked by the favorite *Rhapsody in Blue*," which was followed by "an uproar of approval."<sup>104</sup>

Hollywood immortalized this moment. During the intermission of the 1941 Gershwin Night, Warner Bros. filmed footage for the end of its Gershwin biographical film *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945). In the picture's finale, Levant appears as a fictionalized version of himself playing the piece with Paul Whiteman's orchestra as a memorial performance after the announcement of

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<sup>101</sup> Taubman, *NYT*, 11 Jul 1939.

<sup>102</sup> John Baird, "Gershwin Concert Heard by 22,000," *New York Daily News*, 14 Jul 1940.

<sup>103</sup> Noel Straus, "Gershwin's Music Entertains 21,000," *NYT*, 7 Jul 1944.

<sup>104</sup> Noel Straus, "Huge Throng Jams Gershwin Concert," *NYT*, 12 Jul 1946.



Gershwin's death. Historically, this never happened. Harry Kaufman had played the Rhapsody at the 1937 memorial, led by Ferde Grofé. Warner Bros. could have chosen the Hollywood Bowl, where Levant had played the Concerto in F at its 1937 memorial, but the Bowl had not yet established regular all-Gershwin concerts. Due to its annual Gershwin Nights, the Stadium was recognized as the more appropriate venue for the conclusion of the film's story. Even though, at the time of the filming, Levant had only played the Rhapsody twice at Lewisohn, the film both immortalized and mythologized his annual performances of the work.

Although critics sometimes said that Levant played like Gershwin had, Levant possessed the jazz musician's opinion that the score or the composer's intentions were not gospel. In *A Smattering of Ignorance*, he said, "It is a fallacy to assume that clarity and the most meticulous fidelity to a composer's indications are the open sesame to a complete projection of a musical work."<sup>105</sup> He claimed that Gershwin preferred Levant's interpretation of the *Rhapsody*. In 1939, one month before Levant's first appearance as the featured Gershwin Night pianist, national gossip columnist Hedda Hopper attributed this statement to Gershwin: "Only Oscar plays *Rhapsody in Blue* better than I."<sup>106</sup> Actor John Garfield had provided her with that anecdote in October 1938 when he told her: "You know, George Gershwin once said of Oscar, 'I only wish I could play *Rhapsody in Blue* as well as he does.'"<sup>107</sup> Whether Garfield was being truthful, Levant later told a Columbus newspaper the same thing: "George used to say I played his stuff better than he did."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Oscar Levant, *Smattering*, 44.

<sup>106</sup> Hedda Hopper, "Hedda Hopper's Hollywood," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 Jun 1939.

<sup>107</sup> Hedda Hopper, "What it Takes to be an Actor," *Washington Post*, 2 Oct 1938.

<sup>108</sup> "Levant and Gershwin," *Ohio Jewish Chronicle*, 15 Oct 1943.

The Rhapsody did not need the Gershwin Nights to gain approval and popularity, because it already had them. The recurring performances at Lewisohn allowed listeners to revisit a work they knew they loved and to mutually share their excitement and nostalgia together. The Gershwin Nights permitted critics to assess year after year whether the piece belonged in the symphonic canon, whether it deserved such continuous repetition. As the piece continues to be performed today, the answer seems to be in the affirmative. Indeed, following Levant's final Lewisohn Gershwin Night, a *Times* critic called the Rhapsody "simply indestructible," still retaining its "bounce and freshness."<sup>109</sup>

#### 4.6.4 Concerto in F

As with the Rhapsody, annual performances of the Concerto in F at Lewisohn Gershwin Nights allowed critics to question whether they had incorrectly assessed the work's canonic potential. From its premiere in 1925, although the audience had responded warmly, critics generally treated the Concerto in F as a failed attempt by Gershwin to write a serious work for symphony orchestra. As Levant explains, "They resisted him because he was a Broadway composer, and American music was rarely featured by symphony orchestras."<sup>110</sup> Biographer Charles Schwartz says that "it took some time and work on Gershwin's part for the piece to catch on."<sup>111</sup> The Gershwin Nights permitted that opportunity, and Levant's interpretation helped sway critical opinion of the work.

In total, the concerto was performed at the Stadium thirty-six times between 1927 and 1966. Gershwin himself presented the work four times at Lewisohn. Levant performed it at

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<sup>109</sup> J.B., "Smallens Leads Gershwin Concert; Levant Plays *Rhapsody* at Stadium," *NYT*, 17 Jul 1953.

<sup>110</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 121.

<sup>111</sup> Schwartz, 115.

Lewisohn fourteen times, including every year he was featured Gershwin Night pianist. As discussed in Chapter Three, in his career as a concert pianist, Levant played the concerto well over one hundred times with symphony orchestras across the country. In *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*, Levant said, “I played the Concerto in F numerous times and was its chief performer after George died.”<sup>112</sup> In fact, Levant said that he considered the concerto a better work than the Rhapsody, and the first American concerto “of merit since MacDowell.”<sup>113</sup>

Levant’s interpretation of the Concerto in F won him praise from many Gershwin Night critics. Samuel Chotzinoff, *New York Post* critic who had written favorably of the concerto upon its debut, spoke at length about Levant’s effort after the 1939 Gershwin Night:

The great audience appeared absorbed in the Concerto in F, which was in a sense, a posthumous triumph of the composer. It had never achieved the mass adulation accorded the *Rhapsody in Blue*. Perhaps it would have found greater favor if George Gershwin had not frightened everybody by calling it a concerto. A concerto sounds formidable and connotes the learned presence of the sonata form and other academic formulas which a rhapsody by nature avoids. Yet last night the concerto seemed shorn of its theoretic terrors. The gifted and enthusiastic Mr. Levant played it like an improvisation, and the willing audiences succumbed to its fine melodies, its irresistible rhythms and its pressing vitality. The concerto by any other name would be haunting, exhilarating and exciting music.<sup>114</sup>

According to Kolodin’s account, although Gershwin labelled the work as a highbrow form, Levant performed it that night like a jazz band piece, and his interpretation made the concerto more palatable for the Stadium audience. Levant did not record the concerto until May 1942 with Andre Kostelanetz and the Philharmonic, so some critics compared his early Lewisohn performances to available recordings at the time. In 1940, when Levant seemingly played the work more straight, one *Variety* critic objected:

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<sup>112</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 146-147.

<sup>113</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, manuscript, LOC.

<sup>114</sup> Samuel Chotzinoff, “18,000 in Stadium Hear All-Gershwin Concert,” *New York Post*, 11 July 1939.

Levant played the Concerto in F sympathetically and from memory, largely in the style of Jesús María Sanromá's recording for Victor. Unfortunately, this version didn't have the verve imparted to the same number by Roy Barge and Paul Whiteman's Orchestra in a Decca recording orchestrated by Ferde Grofé.<sup>115</sup>

This critic did not accept the work as a piece of serious concert-hall music inspired by the European concerto tradition, but appreciated its performance when presented like a jazz piece, as the Barge and Whiteman recording demonstrated. Following the 1945 Gershwin Night, *Times* critic Mark A. Schubart continued to peck the flaws in Gershwin's composition, but sided with Chotzinoff concerning Levant's jazzier interpretation:

No conscientious listener will deny the structural weaknesses in some of [Gershwin's] concert pieces, the vulgarities in others. [...] The most convincing playing of the evening was Mr. Levant's. Thoroughly familiar with Gershwin's style and idiom, he is not afraid to make jazz sound like jazz, but at the same time he manages to preserve the clean technique of the concert pianist. His reading of the Concerto was particularly gratifying, as it was neither over-romanticized nor made to sound "symphonic" or pretentious.<sup>116</sup>

Critics appreciated that Levant approached the work as a hybrid piece and found a middle-ground solution to make the concerto sound more like jazz and less like traditional classical music.

Levant and the Gershwin Nights are partially responsible for the concerto's longevity after Gershwin's death. While Levant was the ascendant Gershwin pianist at Lewisohn Stadium, the concerto appeared on Carnegie Hall subscription series concerts nine times. Levant was the guest pianist at four of those concerts.<sup>117</sup> Reporting on the all-Gershwin Carnegie concert on 18 April 1946, Nora Holt of the *New York Amsterdam News* said:

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<sup>115</sup> *Variety* (17 Jul 1940): 32.

<sup>116</sup> Mark A. Schubart, "Gershwin Concert Packs the Stadium," *NYT*, 13 Jul 1945.

<sup>117</sup> Levant played the Concerto in F at an all-Gershwin Carnegie concert on 18 April 1946, and again on 11, 12 and 14 December 1947. Walter Hendl played the concerto at Carnegie Hall on 3, 4 and 6 January 1946; Byron Janis performed it on 27 and 28 January 1949; and Hazel Scott performed it on 10 May 1952, as part of an all-Gershwin Carnegie concert that also featured Todd Duncan and June McMechin. For more information, see the New York Philharmonic Leon Levy Digital Archives, <https://archives.nyphil.org>, last accessed 13 December 2018.

Oscar Levant, it seems, was born to interpret Gershwin's music. At least he plays it with as much assurance, absorption and devotion as if it were his own brain child. The Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, and *Rhapsody in Blue*, were made excitingly brilliant under his steel fingers.<sup>118</sup>

With his background as a jazz-band pianist, Levant brought imaginative treatments to the piece that underscored its hybridity as a proper concerto brimming with popular elements. His unique, authoritative performances of the Concerto in F at Lewisohn, and in the concert hall, over a period of many years earned him consistent praise and improved critical opinion of the work.

#### 4.6.5 *Second Rhapsody*

The *Second Rhapsody* began as a piece of music called "Rhapsody in Rivets" that Gershwin had written for a montage sequence in the film *Delicious*. Several orchestrations of the *Second Rhapsody* exist: Gershwin's original, Roy Bargy's for Paul Whiteman, and Robert McBride's for Gershwin's publisher.<sup>119</sup> The last is the only published version available. The work has never been part of orchestral canon and was immediately panned upon its debut. Aside from the 1932 all-Gershwin evening when Levant and Gershwin appeared together, the *Second Rhapsody* was only heard twice at Lewisohn. Paul Whiteman's pianist Roy Bargy played it in 1938, and Levant performed it in 1949. If the *Second Rhapsody* had been repeatedly programmed at Lewisohn, perhaps critical opinion of the work would have softened like it had with the Concerto in F.

Commentary on the *Second Rhapsody* was usually negative, and many critics unfortunately compared the work to the *Rhapsody in Blue*. Howard Taubman, who heard

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<sup>118</sup> Nora Holt, "T. Duncan and Ann Brown Aid Symphony Benefit," *New York Amsterdam News*, 27 Apr 1946.

<sup>119</sup> For more information, see James Wierzbicki, "The Hollywood Career of Gershwin's *Second Rhapsody*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 60, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 133-186.

Gershwin's orchestration in 1932, said, "The Second Rhapsody showed little progress on Mr. Gershwin's part."<sup>120</sup> Commenting on Whiteman's 1938 performance of the Barge arrangement, the *Times* said, "The work, one regrets to say, is not a worthy successor to the first rhapsody. Neither the theme nor the treatment has the distinction of the first, and the whole piece seems bloated and pretentious."<sup>121</sup> In 1949, unaware of its two earlier performances, Douglas Watt said, "*Second Rhapsody*, never before played at the Stadium, is hardly worth the effort. [...] I'd have enjoyed hearing Levant run through a medley of show tunes in place of the *Second Rhapsody*."<sup>122</sup>

The *Second Rhapsody* is decidedly not part of the American symphonic canon today. The New York Philharmonic did perform it as part of a summer Promenade series at Philharmonic Hall in 1965. The last time the Philharmonic performed the work was at a Young People's Concert in 1974 led by Michael Tilson Thomas.

#### 4.6.6 *Cuban Overture*

The *Cuban Overture* was heard more frequently than the Second Rhapsody, but its occurrences are weighted toward the early period of the Gershwin Nights. Six of its twelve performances occurred prior to 1944, and it was only programmed twice in the 1950s. Originally billed as *Rumba*, it is the only Gershwin work that had its premiere at Lewisohn Stadium. To assuage fear that he had prepared a lengthy work, Gershwin promised that the *Rumba* would be his most modern work but not "a bigger brother to the rhapsody, because it is not as long, but it will be older because it will be more experienced and have many elements that were not in

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<sup>120</sup> Howard Taubman, "Music: 17000 Hear Gershwin Program," *NYT*, 17 Aug 1932.

<sup>121</sup> "Gershwin Concert Given at Stadium," *NYT*, 13 Jul 1938.

<sup>122</sup> Douglas Watt, "20,000 Attend Gershwin Concert," *New York Daily News*, 9 Jul 1949.

*Rhapsody in Blue.*<sup>123</sup> The premiere of the *Cuban Overture* received applause from the Lewisohn crowd but a lukewarm response from critics. Despite the addition of Cuban instruments to the traditional orchestra, Howard Taubman called it “merely old Gershwin in recognizable form.”<sup>124</sup> Gershwin himself felt that the work suffered at Lewisohn, because the extra percussion instruments “dissipated in the broad expanse of the stadium.”<sup>125</sup>

After the premiere, the *Cuban Overture* was not programmed again at Lewisohn until after the composer’s death, at the 1939 Gershwin Night. Of its twelve performances at Lewisohn, the overture most often appeared as the second work or the piece just after intermission. Despite its name, the overture opened only one Gershwin Night. In 1940, although the piece was only eight years old, *Variety* considered the overture “a somewhat dated piece largely based on the rumba rhythm, when American ears are more attuned to conga and other Latin-American tempos which have gained prominence here more recently.”<sup>126</sup> In the 1930s, Cuban musical elements were highly popular with American audiences. For example, Cuban composer Ernesto Lecuona’s “Malagueña” (1933) was successful as an orchestral work, a solo piano reduction, and as a song. Levant frequently performed “Malagueña” as an encore piece during his national tours, and it remains a well-known piece today.

*Cuban Overture* is presently considered one of Gershwin’s lesser known works for large orchestra. The piece did not appear as part of a Philharmonic subscription series until Kostelanetz chose it for a Gershwin program on Christmas of 1954. The Philharmonic played the

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<sup>123</sup> “New Gershwin Composition to Mark Concert,” *Binghamton Press*, 15 Aug 1932.

<sup>124</sup> Howard Taubman, “Music: 17,000 Hear Gershwin Program,” *NYT*, 17 Aug 1932.

<sup>125</sup> Quoted in Schwartz, 226.

<sup>126</sup> *Variety* (17 Jul 1940): 32.

work several times in the 1950s and 1960s, but after Lewisohn closed in 1966, the *Cuban Overture* was not programmed again until 1990 under Zubin Mehta's baton.

#### 4.6.7 *Porgy and Bess*

Gershwin Nights normally featured music from the folk opera *Porgy and Bess* following the intermission, and audiences at this venue adored it. The original 1935 *Porgy and Bess* was a mediocre success on Broadway, with a modest 124 performances at the Alvin Theatre, but Lewisohn audiences proved much more receptive to the music. Concerning the original production, Virgil Thomson, who wrote his *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1935) for an all-black cast, said Gershwin's opera was a "libretto that should never have been accepted on a subject that should never have been chosen [by] a man who should never have attempted it."<sup>127</sup> Hall Johnson, whose all-black choir had appeared at Lewisohn numerous times in the 1920s, also panned the opera, particularly the recitatives "set to musical lines which hamper [speech] intelligibility by the use of misplaced accents and unnatural inflections." However, he marked the talents of the cast as one of the opera's few saving graces.<sup>128</sup>

Concerning the performances of *Porgy and Bess* selections at Lewisohn, critics initially continued to deride the music, while ignoring audience response. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* said:

These [*Porgy and Bess* excerpts] were heard for the first time at the Stadium, and the response of the audience was enthusiastic. But *Porgy and Bess* is, nonetheless, Mr. Gershwin's outstanding failure, an anomalous work, neither opera nor musical comedy, pretentious, inflated and essentially third rate. The defects of the music, its lack of any real substance, any real style, were emphasized by last evening's performance in concert form.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Virgil Thomson, "George Gershwin," *Modern Music* 13, no. 1 (Nov-Dec 1935): 16-17.

<sup>128</sup> Hall Johnson, "Porgy and Bess – a Folk Opera: A Review," *Opportunity* (Jan 1936): 24.

<sup>129</sup> "Music of the Day: Gershwin Night at the Lewisohn Stadium with Excerpts from *Porgy and Bess*," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 10 July 1936.



Later reviews were much more gracious. In 1939, Howard Taubman said the choir “did their jobs with authority.”<sup>130</sup> The black press provided more detail and elaborated on their success. The *New York Amsterdam News* said Anne Brown and Todd Duncan were called back three times, and the audience so liked Duncan’s “I Got Plenty O’ Nuttin” that he was asked to repeat it.<sup>131</sup> In 1940, the *New Journal and Guide* said Brown and Duncan had “established themselves as perennial Stadium favorites,” while the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported “22,000 cheer as Negroes capture [the] high spot honors.”<sup>132</sup>

Brown, Duncan, and the choir’s well-received performances at Lewisohn may have inspired Decca’s 1940 release of *Selections from George Gershwin’s Folk Opera Porgy and Bess*. Despite the absence of the New York Philharmonic, this album resembles a *Porgy and Bess* segment at Lewisohn. It features Duncan, Brown, and the Eva Jessye Choir, as well as Smallens leading the Decca Symphony Orchestra. No other singers are involved on this release. All of the tracks, save “Porgy’s lament,” are selections that had been performed at Lewisohn. Abbie Mitchell sang “Summertime” in the original Broadway production, but Brown sings it on this recording, just as she had done at Lewisohn for the past several years. Brown also recorded “My Man’s Gone Now,” originally sung by the character Serena. Although John W. Bubbles introduced “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” Duncan, who had been singing the Sportin’ Life tune at Lewisohn, recorded it for this release, as well as the “Bizzard Song,” “I Got Plenty O’ Nuttin,” and “Bess, You Is My Woman.” Finally, even though Victor had earlier released selections from the opera featuring the Metropolitan Opera stars Lawrence Tibbett and Helen Jepson, Decca’s

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<sup>130</sup> Howard Taubman, “Stadium Concert Honors Gershwin,” *NYT*, 11 Jul 1939.

<sup>131</sup> Thelma Berlack-Boozer, “Crowd Enjoys Gershwin Bill,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 22 Jul 1939.

<sup>132</sup> “Race Artists Get Another Lewisohn Bid,” *New Journal and Guide*, 13 Jul 1940; “Todd, Ann, and the Eva Jessye Choir Hits on Geo. Gershwin Night,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 20 Jul 1940.

album was the first ever recording of the overture, “Clara, Clara,” and “I’m On My Way,” all of which had been heard at the Gershwin Nights.

The Lewisohn audience’s enthusiastic reception of the show’s music and original cast members may have inspired Cheryl Crawford to mount her immensely successful 1941 revival of the opera. Despite the financial failure of the original show, individual songs had increased in popularity since it closed on Broadway. Several artists had recorded songs from the show, and *Porgy and Bess* excerpts were popular not only at Lewisohn Stadium, but also at the Hollywood Bowl Gershwin memorials. After the July 1940 Lewisohn Gershwin Night, which set a Stadium attendance record, a critic for *Variety* suggested that the audience’s reception of Brown, Duncan and the choir’s performances was so enthusiastic that “the public is ready for a revival of Gershwin’s opera in the jazz idiom.”<sup>133</sup> The *New York Daily News* repeated that opinion after the 1941 Gershwin Night: “From audience reaction to the *Porgy and Bess* excerpts, a revival could successfully be made. It would tie-in nicely with the movie Hollywood intends to make of the composer’s life [*Rhapsody in Blue*]. And it would be a fitting tribute to one who rose from Brooklyn to the rank of immortal.”<sup>134</sup>

As Christopher Lynch has noted, a letter from Crawford to the Theatre Guild indicates her consideration of the venture as early as September 1940—two months after that year’s Lewisohn Gershwin Night.<sup>135</sup> For her revival, Crawford, who had helped stage the Dubose Heyward play at the Guild, hired many of the original performers from the Broadway show, including Brown, Duncan, and the Eva Jessye Choir. Smallens returned as the conductor. Her

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<sup>133</sup> *Variety* (17 Jul 1940): 32.

<sup>134</sup> John Baird, “24,000 Attend Gershwin Night For New High,” *New York Daily News*, 12 Jul 1941.

<sup>135</sup> Christopher Lynch, “Cheryl Crawford’s *Porgy and Bess*: Navigating Cultural Hierarchy in 1941,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 10, no. 3 (Aug 2016): 340.

revised version of the opera, which utilized a smaller orchestra and swapped recitative for spoken dialogue, opened in Maplewood, New Jersey in October 1941, three months after Lewisohn Stadium celebrated the Gershwin Night with the highest historic attendance record. When it opened on Broadway, Crawford, perhaps inspired by Lewisohn's method, offered seats at popular prices. The revival was such a success that the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* claimed:

It is true that its original New York opening was six years ago, but the box office success of the folk opera will be dated inevitably from Jan. 22 1942, the opening date of the revival [on Broadway]. Gershwin wrote his score for the nineteen thirties; it is the nineteen-forties that have hailed it as their own.<sup>136</sup>

Crawford's *Porgy and Bess* revival happened contiguously with the immense success of vocal selections from the opera at Lewisohn. The popularity of individual songs, sustained by their recurring appearance on Lewisohn Stadium programs as a lengthy block of *Porgy and Bess* music, cannot be refuted. Moreover, the revival's success was due to Crawford's decision to remove some highbrow elements that were also absent from the Lewisohn Gershwin Nights, like operatic recitative and high ticket prices.

Between 1944 and 1953, vocal music from *Porgy and Bess* was not regularly showcased at the Lewisohn Gershwin Nights.<sup>137</sup> The post-intermission segment instead featured yet another symphonic work: Robert Russell Bennett's *Porgy and Bess Symphonic Picture* (1943). Douglas Watt said the work, "though artfully arranged, is no substitute for the vocal score."<sup>138</sup> After Levant's final performance as featured Gershwin Night pianist in 1953, music from *Porgy and*

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<sup>136</sup> "Why Does 'Porgy' of Today Top Original?," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 29 Jun 1942.

<sup>137</sup> However, June McMechen, Todd Duncan, and the Eve Jessye Choir did appear in 1948.

<sup>138</sup> Douglas Watt, "20,000 Attend Gershwin Concert," *New York Daily News*, 9 Jul 1949.

*Bess* returned as a recurring segment at the Gershwin Nights for almost every year until the Stadium's annual summer series concluded in 1966.<sup>139</sup>

#### 4.6.8 The Piano Preludes

As discussed in Chapter One, Gershwin composed several piano preludes for a joint recital tour with Peruvian singer Marguerite d'Alvarez in 1926. The following year, he published three of those pieces with New World Music as *Three Piano Preludes*. According to Howard Pollack, the First Prelude in E-flat major resembles in character Debussy's "Golliwog's Cakewalk."<sup>140</sup> Gershwin referred to the slow Second Prelude in C-sharp minor as a "sort of blue lullaby," while the Third Prelude in B-flat major has a "Spanish" character.<sup>141</sup> In his 1931 Gershwin biography, Isaac Goldberg said these preludes are perhaps Gershwin's least known compositions and "have been underestimated and overlooked by pianists, both in private and in public."<sup>142</sup> Levant worked to increase their familiarity and regularly presented them as encores to audiences, including at Lewisohn.

Gershwin's Three Piano Preludes were never listed, as solo piano pieces, on the Gershwin Night programs, but orchestral arrangements of them were. Whiteman included Roy Bargy's arrangements as part of his 1938 show, and Smallens conducted Lewis Raymond's arrangements in 1940. Performance of the original pieces was left to the whim of the featured pianist. After Levant concluded each show with the *Rhapsody in Blue*, he was frequently called back onstage for encores. He almost always included one or more of the preludes. Sometimes, as was his

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<sup>139</sup> From 1953 to 1966, the only Lewisohn summer series that did not feature music from *Porgy and Bess* was Summer 1961. Vocal selections from the opera were included in every Gershwin Night program during that time, save the summers of 1964 and 1966, wherein the Bennett *Symphonic Picture* was selected.

<sup>140</sup> Pollack, 391.

<sup>141</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> Isaac Goldberg, *George Gershwin: A Study in American Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), 223-224.

custom in his recitals, he gave the crowd additional solo piano works by other composers. At the 1951 Gershwin Night, the audience called back Levant several times, whereon he played the Three Preludes and Lecuona's "Malagueña." Then, the *Times* reported, "Finally, Mr. Levant settled himself to a pair of improvisations, got a little twisted in one of them, audibly confessed his plight, and started off on a different track, all to the vast approval of the audience."<sup>143</sup>

As the Lewisohn Gershwin Night was a symphony-centric event, Gershwin's preludes were relegated to a spot outside the scheduled program. The exclusion probably accounts for the dearth of critical commentary upon them in available Gershwin Night reviews. Nevertheless, it was really up to the featured pianist whether they would be heard, and Levant played them often.

#### **4.7 The Effects of the Lewisohn Gershwin Night on Other Venues**

The model Lewisohn all-Gershwin program as detailed above was so successful that other outdoor, and even indoor concerts, copied its program and structure. These venues benefited from this decision. After Lewisohn had for several years attracted immense crowds to its Gershwin Nights, the Robin Hood Dell, summer home of the Philadelphia Orchestra, began to follow that model program for its all-Gershwin summer evenings, and those events were also well-attended. For example, Levant's 1 July 1940 concert, with Smallens as conductor, attracted 9600 people. Philadelphian Virginia Lewis sang numbers from *Porgy and Bess*. As at Lewisohn, the program featured the *Strike up the Band* overture, *An American in Paris*, and the Cuban Overture.<sup>144</sup> The Dell concert organizers benefitted from their decision to copy the Lewisohn

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<sup>143</sup> H.C.S. [Harold C. Schonberg], "Gershwin Attracts 21,000," *NYT*, 13 Jul 1951.

<sup>144</sup> Linton Martin, "9600 Hear Gershwin's Music at Dell," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2 Jul 1940.

model, because, although the outdoor venue featured seats for 6500 people, over twice that number attended the 1942 concert, featuring Levant and Anne Brown.<sup>145</sup>

The Los Angeles Hollywood Bowl also held regular all-Gershwin evenings, although their programming and structure varied from year to year. Despite the 1937 broadcast memorial featuring Levant and many other artists, all-Gershwin concerts were not initially held at the Bowl as annual events. Although billed as “Gershwin memorials” or “Gershwin Nights,” only four Bowl programs in the 1940s were all-Gershwin events. These programs usually did not follow the Lewisohn model, which emphasized large orchestral works. Rather, many Bowl Gershwin evenings demonstrated the venue’s proximity and close cultural connection to Hollywood. Here, unadorned concert music competed with novelty acts and Hollywood spectacle. For example, on 15 July 1941, as part of a concert provided by MGM Studios, the *Rhapsody in Blue* was performed by three pianists on three pianos.<sup>146</sup> The 16 July 1949 program featured marimbist Doris Stockton playing the Preludes, “Fascinatin’ Rhythm,” and selections from the Concerto in F.<sup>147</sup> Fanchon Simon and Marco Wolff, who choreographed many musical numbers for major Hollywood studios, filled their 15 July 1950 all-Gershwin program with stars of radio, television, and film, including their dancing Fanchonettes.<sup>148</sup>

In the early 1950s, after the release of their film *An American in Paris*, MGM Studios would control the annual Bowl Gershwin memorials. Although not customary for this venue, the 15 July 1951 all-Gershwin concert at the Hollywood Bowl copied the Lewisohn model.

Although *An American in Paris* wouldn’t open nationwide for another three months, many

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<sup>145</sup> “Levant and Anne Brown in Dell Gershwin Program,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 26 Jul 1942. “14,250 Jam Dell to Hear Gershwin Music,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 31 Jul 1942.

<sup>146</sup> Isabel Morse Jones, “Barrimore, Finston Share Bowl Honors,” *LAT*, 16 Jul 1941.

<sup>147</sup> Albert Goldberg, “Large Audience Hears George Antheil Music: Rose Conducts Program at Bowl,” *LAT*, 18 Jul 1949.

<sup>148</sup> “Gershwin Concert Hollywood Bowl Annual Feature,” *Covina Argus* (Covina, California), 14 Jul 1950.

Americans anticipated its release, and twenty-one thousand people packed the Bowl. MGM's musical director, Johnny Green, led the Los Angeles Philharmonic in the *Strike up the Band* overture, Bennett's *Porgy and Bess Symphonic Picture*, and *An American in Paris*. Levant, who also starred in the picture, sat at the piano for the Concerto in F and *Rhapsody in Blue*.

The success of the Gershwin Nights at Lewisohn even reached back into the concert hall. On 18 April 1946, the New York Philharmonic held a subscription series concert at Carnegie Hall that was effectively a miniature Lewisohn Gershwin Night indoors. After *An American in Paris*, Levant performed the Concerto in F. Following intermission, Brown and Duncan sang *Porgy and Bess* excerpts, and Levant closed the concert with the Rhapsody. In 1963, Andre Kostelanetz initiated the informal summer Promenade concerts at Philharmonic Hall. The cushioned seats were removed from the hall and replaced with tables and chairs, similar to the staging at Lewisohn. Listeners could drink beer and wine while enjoying the concert. Philharmonic historian Howard Shanet says the Promenade audiences were probably not "the masses," like one could find at Lewisohn, because the tickets were more moderately priced.<sup>149</sup> In any case, the 1965 Gershwin Promenade, presented four times in June and July, featured, among other works, the *Cuban Overture*, *Strike up the Band*, the *Second Rhapsody*, and a post-intermission *Porgy and Bess* segment.

## 4.7 Conclusion

With its affordable ticket prices, Lewisohn Stadium offered composers and performers a unique opportunity to present music to audiences more broadly representative of New York's population than highbrow spaces, like Carnegie Hall or the Metropolitan Opera. In the jazz era,

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<sup>149</sup> Shanet, 337 and 397.

the venue served as an experimental space for recent and contemporary music, particularly American works that blended jazz and traditional elements. At the time of his death, Gershwin's music was hugely popular, but his works were not considered part of American concert-hall canon.<sup>150</sup> Lewisohn's Gershwin Nights granted critics annual opportunities to reassess these works, while 20,000 New Yorkers cheered and applauded each one. Gershwin was certainly popular at the time of his death, but the Lewisohn Gershwin Nights, headlined by Oscar Levant, Alexander Smallens, and the New York Philharmonic, effectively maintained if not enlarged his following among popular audiences. As early as the 1940 Gershwin Night, John Baird notes, "Gershwin, dead so few years, is already an immortal and is swiftly adding to the many who love him for his tunes."<sup>151</sup> People returned to the Gershwin Nights year after year to hear music that they loved, while still others returned for the 1920s exuberance the music so vividly represented.

In the twenty years after Gershwin's death, Oscar Levant remained a major character in his Lewisohn story. Early on, Levant's radio celebrity attracted additional listeners, who normally wouldn't attend a concert of classical music. Soon he was recognized by many listeners and critics not only as a radio and film star but as a leading authority of Gershwin's piano music. Moreover, he helped mold and develop Gershwin's legacy by performing the *Rhapsody in Blue*, the Concerto in F and the Piano Preludes at Lewisohn numerous times. Due to his continuous presence at Lewisohn, over time, Levant became an established figure, along with Guggenheimer and Smallens, in the Gershwin Nights mythos. His fame and reach as a Gershwin interpreter would grow even more once he began regularly appearing in motion pictures, as the next chapter details

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<sup>150</sup> Francis D. Perkins, "Stadium Retrospect," *New York Herald Tribune*, [August 1938], CUNYLS.

<sup>151</sup> John Baird, "Gershwin Concert Heard by 22,000," *New York Daily News*, 14 Jul 1940.



## Chapter 5

### The Impudent Virtuoso and Oscar Levant as Film Star

Oscar Levant's film career spans thirty years (1925-1955) and closely follows the trajectory of his broader professional career from hotel band pianist, to Hollywood songwriter, to nationally recognized musician and wit, and finally to popular classical musician and leading Gershwin pianist. Early on, Levant only plays popular music onscreen. He first appeared on film as a member of Ben Bernie's Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra in the Phonofilm short *Ben Bernie and All the Lads* (1925). In 1929, Levant appeared in two Hollywood motion pictures. First, he reprised his stage role of pianist Jerry Evans in Paramount's *The Dance of Life* (1929, dir. John Cromwell and A. Edward Sutherland), an adaptation of the Broadway play *Burlesque*. While employed by RKO as a songwriter, Levant had a cameo in *Night Parade* (1929, dir. Malcolm St. Clair) as a piano accompanist to Ann Pennington, who danced to his song "You're Responsible."<sup>1</sup> He did not appear in film again until after he became a regular panelist on the popular radio quiz show *Information Please*. In late 1939, RKO-Pathé released to theaters the first of eighteen *Information Please* film shorts with Levant as a participant. Beginning in 1940, Levant appeared in supporting roles in feature films, playing either fictional versions of himself or musical characters that exuded his well-known, sarcastic personality. American audiences became acquainted with Levant's real-life persona through his unscripted appearances on

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<sup>1</sup> For more, see Chapter One.

*Information Please* (1938-1947). Popular print media, like radio and film magazines, sometimes commented on his personality, emphasizing the uncanny breadth of his musical knowledge, as well as his excoriating humor and nervous demeanor. Many of his film characters have these very same traits. This chapter presents Levant's musical film persona as an accomplished yet insulting classical pianist, a persona that can be distilled into the moniker the impudent virtuoso.

Levant possessed several unique personal qualities that appealed to the film industry. First, Hollywood studios did not have to shape Levant into a successful commodity that clicked with audiences; he came to the movies with a personality well-known to the American public. Levant's fame as a clever talking musician appealed to studios, which could easily assign him roles in both musical comedies and serious melodramas. He never played the leading man, always a supporting character, and the value of his filmic presence for the studios lay in the match between his public persona and film roles.<sup>2</sup> Like Levant himself, most of his characters work professionally as songwriters, composers, conductors, and pianists. This congruence between actor and acted enhanced the authenticity of his musical comedy roles, like the mischievous songwriter Billy Starbuck in Universal's *Rhythm on the River* (1940, dir. Victor Schertzinger), as well as his roles in melodramas, like radio and concert pianist Sid Jeffers in *Humoresque* (1946, dir. Jean Negulesco).

In addition to his musical capabilities, audiences also recognized Levant as a jokester, quick with a retort, insult, or unexpectedly cruel observation. Moreover, some directors permitted him to improvise lines, or scriptwriters supplied him with words he had previously used in the real world. Due to his previous work as a composer and jack-of-all-trades at RKO

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<sup>2</sup> Levant's name almost never appeared above the title in movie posters. The one exception, the Fox anthology film *O. Henry's Full House*, featured the names of all the players above the title.

and as Sol Wurzel's assistant at Fox in the late 1920s and early 1930s (see Chapter One), Levant thoroughly understood the film industry and the mechanics of its star-making process. Such experience and creative leeway granted him an unusual degree of control over his fictional characters and the resultant film persona they collectively comprised.

Just as spectators expected Fred Astaire to eventually stop acting and dance, contemporary audiences knew that any Levant film would feature him at the piano. In some of his musical moments, Levant provides piano accompaniment for another film star. In these instances, Levant's onscreen partners draw the audience's focus with their emphasized screen presence. Levant sometimes contributes vocals to a featured song, but always as part of a humorous duet or ensemble number: he never sings a solo. In nearly all of his film roles, Levant more fully demonstrates his solo star power through performances of classical piano music.<sup>3</sup> After Levant had established himself as a successful touring concert pianist, films began showcasing him as a concerto pianist with his own featured musical segments. Levant worked as a featured film pianist at a time when many Hollywood studios used classical music to bring prestige to their films. All of his presentations of piano concertos are condensed. As discussed in Chapter Two, radio symphony orchestras usually reduced large classical works to their primary themes and memorable musical passages in order to fit the music within the allotted time frame. Many people accessed classical music for the first time through radio performances and developed a taste for the repertoire. Likewise, Americans also accessed classical music through motion pictures that featured it in their soundtracks. Although Levant played condensed versions

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<sup>3</sup> In only two film appearances Levant never plays the piano. His role as Bill Peoria in *O. Henry's Full House* occurs within the context of an anthology film. His segment, an adaptation of "The Ransom of Red Chief," occupies only twenty-six minutes of the film. Levant played Mr. Capp in *The Cobweb*, which was released after Levant had retired from his career as a touring pianist and had begun drug rehabilitation therapy.

of concertos by Tchaikovsky, Liszt, and Rubinstein, he most frequently performed onscreen the large-scale works of George Gershwin.

Moreover, Levant was the only Gershwinite pianist to perform the *Rhapsody in Blue* and the Concerto in F on film in the 1940s and early 1950s. As discussed in Chapter Three, Levant championed these works in the concert hall and, by 1942, achieved national recognition as the leading interpreter of these works. Through much of his own influence, he ensured that the Rhapsody, the concerto, and the preludes were heard in films in the 1940s and 1950s. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of three of these filmic performances of Gershwin's music. Levant played a fictional version of himself in Warner Bros.' *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945, dir. Irving Rapper), a musical biography of Gershwin's life that concludes with a memorial performance of the Rhapsody filmed at Lewisohn Stadium. In Fox's *You Were Meant for Me* (1948, dir. Lloyd Bacon), Levant presented a solo-piano version of the Concerto in F. This may be the same solo version he performed during his "talking" recitals. Finally, in Adam Cook's dream sequence in MGM's *An American in Paris* (1951, dir. Vincente Minnelli), a symphony orchestra full of identical Levants presents the third movement of the concerto. All of these moments feature condensed concertos. Due to frequent broadcasts of these films on cable channels, like Turner Classic Movies, American audiences continue to access Gershwin's large piano works by way of Levant's film performances. Thus, Levant still entertains Americans with Gershwin's music long after he has passed.

## 5.1 Other Film Pianists

Levant's career as a film pianist occurred during a period when Hollywood studios used classical music to bring an element of prestige to their films. From the 1930s to the 1950s, studios released serious and adulating biographies of composers, like MGM's *The Great Waltz* (1938, dir. Julien Duvivier, et al.) and *Song of Love* (1947, dir. Clarence Brown), respectively on the lives of Johann Strauss II and Robert Schumann, and Columbia's Chopin picture *A Song to Remember* (1945, dir. Charles Vidor). As discussed later, Warner Bros.' Gershwin biopic *Rhapsody in Blue*, which stars Levant, follows the design of these films. Studios also hired well-known classical pianists, like José Iturbi and Arthur Rubinstein, to represent the highbrow musical Other within a film largely populated with popular vocal and dance music. Iturbi, due to his occasional tendency to also play boogie-woogie, represents a more ambiguous Other. Rubinstein never played supporting roles in film plots and indeed almost never spoke on film. His purpose was always to supply serious music, not to interact with the stars. After 1940, Levant never appeared merely as a special feature, but always as a supporting character, whose actions directly affected the main characters played by the top-billed stars. He also set himself apart from his fellow film pianists by being the only pianist to perform Gershwin's large piano works onscreen in the 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>4</sup>

Prior to Levant's performance of the Rhapsody in Rapper's Gershwin biopic, only one pianist (Roy Bargy) had performed the work in a film. At the release of Universal's Paul Whiteman biographical musical *King of Jazz* (1930, Universal, dir. John Murray Anderson), Americans recognized Whiteman as a leading interpreter of Gershwin's music due to his

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<sup>4</sup> Liberace plays a shortened Rhapsody in Warner Bros.' *Sincerely Yours* (1955, dir. Gordon Douglas), released shortly after Levant had quit touring.

commission of the Rhapsody, as well as his many recordings, tours, and his CBS radio show *The Whiteman Hour* (1929-1930), which opened with strains of the Rhapsody's Love Theme. With *King of Jazz*, Bing Crosby, along with the rest of the Rhythm Boys, made his onscreen debut, singing "Mississippi Mud" and other songs. The film also included Bargy's first film appearance and features him at the piano during the presentation of *Rhapsody of Blue*. From 1928 to 1940, Bargy served as Whiteman's "second in command on the podium, at the keyboard, and in the office."<sup>5</sup> Bargy never possessed the level of popularity that Levant could later claim in the 1940s.

Several Hollywood films from the 1940s feature appearances by Arthur Rubinstein, one of the leading touring and recording classical pianists of the era. As discussed in Chapter Three, Rubinstein and Levant were friendly rivals, but Rubinstein's performance repertoire focused primarily on the classical canon. However, in two of his appearances, he presented music from piano concertos written specifically for the film that blend classical and popular styles: Robert Russell Bennett's *57th Street Rhapsody* for United Artists' *Carnegie Hall* (1947, dir. Edgar G. Ulmer) and Leith Stevens's Piano Concerto in C minor for RKO's *Night Song* (1948, dir. John Cromwell).<sup>6</sup> In all of his film appearances, Rubinstein appears solely as a representative from the classical music world in order to bestow the prestige of his featured presence and musical performance upon the motion picture. Rubinstein's performance of Liszt's Liebestraum No. 3 in Universal's *Follow the Boys* (1944, dir. A. Edward Sutherland) takes place within the context of a variety show for America's armed forces and contrasts starkly with performances by popular stars, like George Raft, Dinah Shore, Sophie Tucker, Jeanette MacDonald, and Louis Jordan and

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas A. DeLong, *Pops: Paul Whiteman, King of Jazz* (Piscataway, NJ: New Century Publishers, 1983), 117.

<sup>6</sup> For more, see Tony Tracy, "'The Gateway to America': Assimilation and Art in *Carnegie Hall*," in *Edgar G. Ulmer: Detour on Poverty Row*, ed. Gary D. Rhodes (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 211-213; and Richard B. Jewell with Vernon Harbin, *The RKO Story* (London: Arlington House, 1982), 228.

His Orchestra. Furthermore, Rubinstein's name in title cards situate him as an important figure from outside Hollywood. With *Night Song*, he receives his own card, which recognizes him as the player of Stevens's concerto, accompanied by Eugene Ormandy and the New York Philharmonic.<sup>7</sup> The opening credits of *Carnegie Hall*, after listing the Hollywood stars, identify Rubinstein as one of "the world's greatest artists," along with other classical music figures who appeared in the film, like Walter Damrosch, Bruno Walter, Lily Pons, and several others. By comparison, after 1940 Levant's name always appears in title cards as a member of the supporting cast. Only one film, Rapper's *Rhapsody in Blue*, supplies him an additional card that recognizes him as the performer of Gershwin's Rhapsody and concerto.

Rubinstein also recorded piano music for two films in which he did not appear, and one of these films proudly announces him as a great classical pianist who contributed to the soundtrack. He provided all the piano music from Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto for Republic's *I've Always Loved You* (1946, dir. Frank Borzage), starring Philip Dorn and Catherine McLeod. Here, Rubinstein received his own card in the opening titles, which identifies him as the "world's greatest pianist featuring the music of Rachmaninoff, Chopin, Beethoven, Mendelsohn [sic], Wagner, Liszt, [and] Bach." Although he went uncredited, he also contributed solo piano pieces by Brahms, Liszt, and Robert Schumann featured in MGM's Clara and Robert Schumann biopic *Song of Love* (1947, dir. Clarence Brown).<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, newspaper reviews did note his involvement with the picture. For example, the *New York Daily News* printed, "Defly blending the music, which practically amounts to a concert by the great artist, Arthur

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<sup>7</sup> Rubinstein's name is the largest on the card.

<sup>8</sup> Harvey Sachs, *Rubinstein: A Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 289.

Rubinstein, [...] director Clarence Brown has made a treat that music lovers will long remember.”<sup>9</sup>

Spanish pianist José Iturbi enjoyed a film career as a featured pianist, particularly in MGM musicals, at the same time as Levant. In 1928, Iturbi began his career as a concert pianist in London, and debuted in New York City in 1929. He premiered as a conductor in Mexico City and subsequently led the Rochester Philharmonic for eight years. Iturbi was one of the regular conductors at the Robin Hood Dell, the summer home of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Like Levant, he sometimes played Gershwin’s music in outdoor stadiums. In August 1937, the month after Gershwin’s passing, he played the *Rhapsody in Blue* as part of a concert of all American compositions.<sup>10</sup> He would reprise this role at the 1937 Hollywood Bowl Gershwin memorial. Due to his additional appearances in films throughout the 1940s, his classical recordings sold very well. Indeed, in 1946, RCA Victor claimed to issue him the largest check “ever paid an artist for six months’ royalties.”<sup>11</sup>

Like Levant, Iturbi played fictional versions of himself, sometimes in supporting roles. Studios sought him out, because of his gentlemanly demeanor, his reputation within the classical world, and his handsome Spanish Otherness. Jeanine Basinger claims that, although Iturbi had speaking roles, he “usually stood outside from the action, just playing himself, the beleaguered talented musician that people were chasing after, trying to meet, or become involved with.”<sup>12</sup> This description is largely true, although I would add that several of his supporting characters do play significant narrative roles. For example, concerning the central conflict in MGM’s *Holiday*

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<sup>9</sup> Wanda Hale, “Music Hall Presents Rare Musical Treat,” *New York Daily News*, 10 Oct 1947.

<sup>10</sup> “What’s on the Air?,” *Boston Globe*, 9 Aug 1937.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Jill Smolowe, “Jose Iturbi, 84, Pianist, Had Roles in Pictures and Conducted Opera,” *NYT*, 29 Jun 1980.

<sup>12</sup> Jeanine Basinger, *The Star Machine* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 487-488.



in *Mexico* (1946, dir. George Sidney), the underage Christine (Jane Powell) falls in love with the much older Iturbi, who encourages her interest in music but displays no romantic affection toward her. Furthermore, Iturbi plays a love interest to Louise Rayton Morgan (Jeanette MacDonald) in MGM's *Three Daring Daughters* (1948, dir. Fred M. Wilcox), wherein he received top billing – his name coming before Jane Powell's in the opening credits and on movie posters. Levant never received such high treatment. Clearly, MGM saw leading-man potential in Iturbi that Levant lacked.

Unlike Levant, films usually situate Iturbi completely within the realm of the classical music industry. Classic Hollywood films generally construct classical musician characters as establishment figures: assimilated and respectable men and women of society. Rebellious or anti-establishment figures, usually young characters, sing or play modern music. While Levant's film characters associate with both of those social spheres, Iturbi usually plays with a symphony orchestra or in the privacy of his own home, never with a popular ensemble. MGM's *Two Girls and a Sailor* (1944, dir. Richard Thorpe) introduces Iturbi as a concert pianist with the London Symphony Orchestra.<sup>13</sup> His title card for MGM's *Music for Millions* (1944, dir. Henry Koster) lists the composers whose works he would present in the film, including Liszt, Grieg, Handel, Chopin, and others.<sup>14</sup> In MGM's *That Midnight Kiss* (1949, dir. Norman Taurog), Iturbi appears as a conductor and pianist politely adverse to popular music who plays music by Tchaikovsky, Liszt, and Chopin. The music Iturbi plays most often onscreen is European music, and his serious performances contrast with the popular fare featured. For example, in *Two Girls and a*

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<sup>13</sup> He first appears onscreen with Albert Coates, who is introduced as the conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra.

<sup>14</sup> *Music for Millions* features Iturbi as both a pianist and a conductor. In the film, he does conduct one popular classical piece: Victor Herbert's "March of the Wooden Soldiers."

*Sailor* his two-minute performance of DeFalla's "Ritual Fire Dance" in a two-piano version with his sister Amparo contrasts with performances of popular music in the film, like Xavier Cugat's "Bim Bam Bum" and "Rumba Rumba." In *Holiday in Mexico* (1946) Iturbi plays a condensed version of the first movement of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto.

Additionally, Americans recognized Iturbi as a highbrow pianist, who sometimes broke down with some boogie woogie. Basinger describes Iturbi as "a zany success," who played onscreen both classical and popular music "just to prove he was really an okay guy."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Iturbi plays a boogie-woogie version of "Three Blind Mice" with his grandchildren as audience in *Holiday in Mexico*. While portraying a serious pianist and conductor in MGM's *Thousands Cheer* (1943, dir. George Sidney), he assists Judy Garland in a swinging presentation of "The Joint is Really Jumpin' in Carnegie Hall." In *Three Daring Daughters*, he accompanies Jane Powell in the popular song "Route 66." Iturbi played the nice guy, who did not mind helping out or entertaining young folks with popular music. His gentlemanly demeanor and association with highbrow culture mark him as a squirely alternative to Levant's impudent jokester. The real-life Levant did not indulge in popular music; he was firmly entrenched in both the popular and classical spheres.

Popular pianist and songwriter Hoagy Carmichael appeared in several Hollywood films throughout the 1940s and 1950s, and his musical characters are analogous to Levant's. Carmichael initially gained national recognition as a composer of several popular songs, including "Stardust" (1929) "Georgia on My Mind" (1930) and "Up a Lazy River" (1930). In the 1930s, Carmichael had much more success as a songwriter than Levant, who only penned one

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<sup>15</sup> Basinger, 487.

song that has become a jazz standard, “Blame It on My Youth.” Numerous well-known popular artists recorded Carmichael’s songs, including Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, Jack Teagarden, and many others.<sup>16</sup> In 1951, he and lyricist Johnny Mercer won the Academy Award for Best Original Song with “In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening,” sung by Bing Crosby in Paramount’s *Here Comes the Groom* (dir. Frank Capra).<sup>17</sup> With the 1940s, film studios began using Carmichael in supporting roles. He played very sincere characters who, according to biographer Richard M. Sudhalter, “stood forever outside the main action, and outside any romantic involvement, commenting but never participating.”<sup>18</sup> For example, as Smoke Willoughby in Warner Bros.’ *Young Man with a Horn* (1950, dir. Michael Curtiz), Carmichael acts as a musical narrator whose reminiscences frame the story of trumpeter Rick Martin (Kirk Douglas) told in flashbacks. Furthermore, Curtiz’s film features three songs played by a dance band with Carmichael as onscreen pianist: “The Man I Love,” “S Wonderful,” and “Someone to Watch Over Me.” By contrast, Levant usually played the impudent and sarcastic close friend of a leading character and his actions often did affect the film’s narrative. Finally, unlike Levant, Carmichael never plays classical music in his film appearances, nor does he play Gershwin’s works for piano.

In the 1940s, Hazel Scott had several brief film appearances as a featured pianist and singer. Scott’s race and gender likely limited her potential to play a supporting character. Known for her boogie-woogie style and her penchant to “jazz-up” the classics, Scott released her first

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<sup>16</sup> John Edward Hasse, “Introduction,” in *The Stardust Road & Sometimes I Wonder: The Autobiography of Hoagy Carmichael*, viii, by Hoagy Carmichael (Da Capo Press, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Hasse, x.

<sup>18</sup> Richard M. Sudhalter, *Stardust Melody: The Life and Music of Hoagy Carmichael* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 249.

album *Swinging the Classics* with Decca in 1940. Two years later, she released *Her Second Album* with Decca, which included a sunny and upbeat solo-piano interpretation of Gershwin's "Embraceable You." Scott's limited appearances parallel those of singer Lena Horne, who according to Todd Decker "appeared as herself in a series of minimally produced musical segments, inserted as specialty numbers unconnected to the plots of their films."<sup>19</sup> Scott was always briefly featured, said very little, and disappeared once her feature had ended. For example, in MGM's *I Dood It* (1943, dir. Vincente Minnelli), Scott briefly appears with Horne in a performance of Richard Myers and Leo Robin's "Jericho." In *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945), Rapper featured her in performance of five Gershwin tunes: "I Got Rhythm," "Clap Yo' Hands," "Fascinating Rhythm," "Yankee Doodle Blues," and "The Man I Love." While this film features Scott as a piano and vocal performer of Gershwin's songs, no film depicts her specifically as an interpreter of Gershwin's piano music.

Hollywood studios invited numerous pianists from both the classical and popular worlds as featured musicians in both musical comedies and serious melodramas. A serious musician like Rubinstein brought prestige to motion pictures through his performances of classical concertos, while studios proudly publicized his stoic presence in their films. Iturbi, professionally rooted in the classical sphere, often participated in the performance of popular music onscreen. He sometimes played supporting or romantic roles, and his genteel and kind disposition contrasts markedly with Levant's impudent and rude persona. Carmichael only played popular music onscreen, and studios always confined Scott's filmic presence to brief spectacles. None of these

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<sup>19</sup> Todd Decker, "Race, Ethnicity, Performance," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 203.

pianists ever played Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, Concerto in F, or Piano Preludes onscreen. In the two decades following Gershwin's death, this responsibility rested on Levant alone.

## 5.2 Oscar Levant's Film Persona: The Impudent Virtuoso

In nearly all of his film roles, Levant played a fictional version of himself, the "impudent virtuoso." As discussed in Chapter Two, Americans nationwide first became aware of Levant's penchant for witticisms and music through the popular radio quiz show *Information Please*, as well as his first autobiography *A Smattering of Ignorance*, which became the third bestselling nonfiction work of 1940.<sup>20</sup> He brought his well-known real-life personality traits (first established on radio and in print) to his film roles, resulting in a strong semblance between the real and fictional Levants. Richard Dyer explains that the film industry spends an exorbitant amount of money on building and perpetuating star images through publicity and other means. With every motion picture "it is the publicist's job to interpret the new film role in terms of pre-established stereotypes."<sup>21</sup> Throughout his film career, newspapers and entertainment magazines mentioned Levant's amazing musical knowledge and ability to recall and play almost any excerpt from popular or classical music. The press also noted his boorish behavior, his insomnia, and his perpetual smoking and coffee-drinking. These qualities of his real-life persona carried over into his film work, where he often played complementary film roles. Moreover, Levant often wandered from the script and improvised his own humorous and/or sarcastic rejoinders. Although Hollywood studios customarily molded the star image of their employees, Levant

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Korda, *Making the List: A Cultural History of the American Bestseller, 1900-1999: As Seen through the Annual Bestseller Lists of Publishers Weekly* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2001), 88.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars* (1979; London: BFI Publishing, 1990), 13.

exhibited a large amount of control over his onscreen persona. Finally, Basinger explains that “nobody was ever really a movie star inside Hollywood until his or her name went above the title of the movie.”<sup>22</sup> No motion picture, save the anthology film *O. Henry’s Full House*, granted Levant this status. With 1940, when Levant began to regularly appear in motion pictures, he always played supporting roles: witty and rude musicians, who often were close friends to the main characters.

Around 1940, Levant’s multimedia career blossomed tremendously. He had been on *Information Please* for two years, the previous November he had debuted as a concert-hall pianist with the Pittsburgh Symphony, Doubleday released his *A Smattering of Ignorance* in mid-January, and in August Paramount would release *Rhythm on the River*, Levant’s first significant supporting role since *The Dance of Life*.<sup>23</sup> In February, shortly after his autobiography’s release, *Life* magazine published a short feature article (with numerous pictures) that outlined his daily routine. Aside from the six *Information Please* shorts that RKO-Pathé had released to theaters at the time of the article’s publication, many Americans had only heard Levant on the radio or read his book.<sup>24</sup> This plant, probably from Levant’s publisher, emphasized many aspects of his real personality that his fictional roles would soon inherit. At the top of the article, a large picture shows Levant, surrounded by cigarette smoke, seated at a piano and concentrating on a new composition before him. The article immediately underlines his musical talent and work as both

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<sup>22</sup> Basinger, 16-17.

<sup>23</sup> “Levant Trains on Coffee for Concert with Symphony,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 24 Nov 1939; Thomas C. Linn, “Books of the Times,” *NYT*, 12 Jan 1940; “Reviews of New Films,” *Boston Globe*, 23 Aug 1940.

<sup>24</sup> The release dates for the first six *Information Please* film shorts can be found in “Booking Chart a Guide to Current Releases: Shorts: RKO Radio,” *Boxoffice* (10 Feb 1940), 88.

a popular and serious composer. The article goes on to describe Levant as an “irrepressibly impudent” night owl who eats breakfast at 2 PM and “drinks 30 to 40 cups of coffee every day”:

Never out of bed until afternoon, Levant is ready for sleep about dawn. He works afternoons, spends evenings wandering from place to place on Broadway, wisecracking like a Times Square Dr. Johnson to a group of devoted followers.

Furthermore, the article notes that he reads the morning papers in bed, before taking a sleeping pill and dozing off around 5 AM. The last (surely staged) photograph shows Levant lying in bed with his newspaper and a pack of cigarettes. On his nightstand sits an alarm clock showing the time as 5:00 (Figure 5.1).<sup>25</sup> In his subsequent film roles, Levant played musical characters very much like the witty, insulting, self-effacing, coffee-drinking, nicotine addict profiled in this article. Indeed, one meta moment in *Rhythm on the River* (released later that year) features Billy Starbuck (Levant), cigarette in hand, reading a copy of Levant’s *A Smattering of Ignorance* (See Figure 5.2).<sup>26</sup> Due to the autobiography’s popularity, many members of the film audience would have instantly understood the humorous connection made between character and star. In the film, Starbuck plops the book down and declares, “A very irritating book.”

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<sup>25</sup> “Music: Oscar Levant, A Musical Know-It-All, Writes Book about Music and Himself,” *Life* 8, no. 6 (5 Feb 1940): 55-57.

<sup>26</sup> Victor Schertzinger, *Rhythm on the River* (1940), Universal, 1 DVD (Universal, 2003), [55:54].



At 5 a.m., Oscar Levant is finally ready to retire. Having finished the newspapers and a last cigaret, he swallows a pill which he always takes to put himself to sleep.

**Figure 5.1. Levant as Depicted in *Life* Magazine, February 1940.**

Throughout his multifaceted career as an entertainer Levant often objected to how print media portrayed him. As discussed in Chapter Three, Levant's concert representatives (both the National Concerts and Artists Corporation, and Columbia Concerts Corporation) planted stories about him in local newspapers prior to his live appearances. He once pleaded with a reporter to read such stories with skepticism, because they remained out of date or did not describe him accurately at all.<sup>27</sup> Levant also objected to his depiction in the *Life* article. While filming *Rhythm on the River* in May 1940, he told an Associated Press reporter:

I read that I drink forty cups of coffee a day. Nobody could drink that much coffee – I drink a lot of it, and it gets to be forty cups. I'm supposed to be all kinds of a screwball, and I guess that's all right. I write a book, and the publishers want to sell it, so Levant gets more of that kind of publicity. I read where I've cracked a joke – anything the boys think up, out of Miller's joke book or anywhere, it gets pinned on me. Now that I'm

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<sup>27</sup> T.C.O., "Musical Views and Reviews," *Emporia Gazette*, 9 Apr 1951.



doing this – I don't call it acting – I guess it'll get worse. [...] I know it's got to be done, though; it's part of selling the book, or the radio show, or the picture. This legend about Levant – I don't believe any of it. You're here today and you're quoted right and left, and tomorrow you're gone, and you're a sucker if you take it seriously. I'm a musician, and that's what I'll be, and nothing else, when all this stuff is finished. [...] I'm not a know-it-all about music. I make pretty good guesses. [...] Sometimes, if you guess two out of four, you give the impression you know all the answers.<sup>28</sup>

As he would do throughout his professional career as a touring pianist, Levant counters his publicity and recognizes himself as a musician more than a wit. He argues that print media focuses on the spectacular and exaggerates his coffee drinking and musical knowledge, although he understands such inflated publicity as a necessary evil he must tolerate if he wishes to sustain his career. He correctly anticipates that his film work will only increase such publicity. Nevertheless, with each role, as discussed below, Levant found ways to assert some control over his screen persona, particularly by selecting the music he plays and going off script to improvise many of his lines.

Levant's impudent persona belongs to a tradition of insult humor that stretches back to the Greeks, flourished in American Yiddish theatre and vaudeville, and carried over into radio and film. Radio scholar Michele Hilmes explains that, by the 1930s, insult humor had become a staple of popular radio.<sup>29</sup> As Groucho Marx biographer Lee Siegel explains, "The two elemental, timeless qualities of comedy are the puncturing of the big and powerful by the small and powerless, and the wholesale discrediting and exposure of the human ego."<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, American insult humor may be rooted in the immigrant experience of finding oneself in an

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<sup>28</sup> Robbin Coons, "Famous Pianist Grows Weary of 'Levant Legend'," *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 31 May 1940.

<sup>29</sup> Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997), 183-190.

<sup>30</sup> Lee Siegel, *Groucho Marx: The Comedy of Existence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 28.

exciting, invigorating, and bustling society either ignorant of or indifferent to one's existence or social plight.<sup>31</sup> The art of the insult permits the skilled tactician to assert an American individuality that lampoons and defies authority and oppression. In his talking recitals in the 1940s and 1950s, as discussed in Chapter Three, Levant mocked concert hall decorum, historical figures of classical music, and himself. His film characters exhibited this same disdain for their social milieu and themselves.

As a young man working in New York as a popular pianist and songwriter, Levant surrounded himself with some of the city's most notorious wits. Levant knew many of the members of the Algonquin Round Table, a group of screenwriters, and Broadway columnists and playwrights who regularly met for lunch at the Algonquin Hotel to gab and hurl insults at one another. Levant's association with the group's members largely occurred after they had disbanded around 1929.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, Levant discusses several members of the group in his autobiographies. In *A Smattering of Ignorance*, Levant mentioned his friendship with the group's unofficial leader Alexander Woollcott, whom he met in either later 1933 or early 1934.<sup>33</sup> In *The Unimportance of Being Oscar*, Levant acknowledged appreciation for Dorothy Parker's scathing humor: "Dorothy could dig the deepest of anyone with a pen when she wanted to."<sup>34</sup> Finally, Levant counted Harpo Marx as one of his close friends. He met Harpo at the first all-Gershwin concert at Lewisohn Stadium on 16 August 1932. Thereafter, he frequently visited and

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<sup>31</sup> Siegel, 49-50.

<sup>32</sup> Sam Kashner and Nancy Schoenberger, *A Talent for Genius: The Life and Times of Oscar Levant* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 1994), 72.

<sup>33</sup> Levant says he met Woollcott after the latter had published an article about Gershwin in the November 1933 issue of *Cosmopolitan*. Oscar Levant, *A Smattering of Ignorance* (1939; Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing, 1942), 162-163; Alexander Woollcott, "George the Ingenuous," *Cosmopolitan* (Nov 1933): 32-33, 122-123.

<sup>34</sup> Oscar Levant, *The Unimportance of Being Oscar* (New York: Putnam, 1968), 64.

vacationed with Harpo, and even devoted a chapter to Harpo in *A Smattering of Ignorance* (“Memoirs of a Mute”).<sup>35</sup>

As vaudevillians Harpo and the rest of the Marx Brothers excelled at insult comedy. Siegel explains that, although insult humor already existed in film, the Marx Brothers brought something new: “brutal honesty, obscene and abusive behavior, [and] explicit contempt for other people.”<sup>36</sup> In numerous films for Paramount, such as *The Cocoanuts* (1929, dir. Robert Florey and Joseph Santley) and *Duck Soup* (1933, dir. Leo McCarey), the brothers chided and ridiculed authority and upper-class society figures, like policemen and wealthy aristocrats. Siegel says that the Marx Brothers’ comedy “beat away the elementalness of social façade,” exposing class as a social construction and celebrities as “concoctions of public relations machines and the collective imagination.”<sup>37</sup> Like the Marx Brothers, Levant gives the confidence of his milieu its comeuppance, if without the physical abuse. He told *Modern Screen* that he loved working in films, but he refused to kowtow to authority or heap extravagant praise on Hollywood: “I won’t ballyhoo the place. My enemies’ll say I’m on the Chamber of Commerce payroll.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, according to Levant, concerning his part in *Kiss the Boys Goodbye*, he told one reporter, “It’s the kind of part you get when the studio wants to break your contract.”<sup>39</sup> Such a remark works against studio expectations of employees to always promote and speak positively about their latest pictures. Levant’s filmic characters also hurled insults. In *Rhythm on the River*, when Oliver Courtney (Rathbone) shouts at Levant (as Billy Starbuck) to answer the ringing phone,

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<sup>35</sup> Levant, *Smattering*, 53-85.

<sup>36</sup> Siegel, 39.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14 and 22.

<sup>38</sup> Irving Wallace, “A Smattering of Levant,” *Modern Screen* (May 1941): 84.

<sup>39</sup> Oscar Levant, *Memoirs of an Amnesiac* (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), 181.

Starbuck lazily replies: “Stop muttering. Why don’t you articulate?”<sup>40</sup> In Paramount’s *Kiss the Boys Goodbye* (1941, dir. Victor Schertzinger), when a leading stage actress tells him that he is no Beethoven, Levant (as Dick Rayburn) responds, “Beethoven’s death mask looks better than you right now.”<sup>41</sup> In his introductory scene in *Rhapsody in Blue*, Levant acts rudely toward three women in the Harms music office, even whistling the opening horn call of Tchaikovsky’s B-flat minor concerto at the secretary.<sup>42</sup> Finally, in *Humoresque*, Levant (as Sid Jeffers) says to a beautiful young woman, “Every time I look at you, I get a fierce desire to be lonesome.”<sup>43</sup>

Radio and film fan magazines fueled the discourse about Levant’s obnoxious behavior. *Hollywood* magazine’s Irving Drutman said Oscar probably “insulted everyone of importance in the movie industry, even topping the record of Ben Hecht, Hollywood’s original no-man.”<sup>44</sup> Irving Wallace at *Modern Screen* described him as “surly, charming, witty – but constantly insulting.”<sup>45</sup> Dick Dorrance at *Mirror and Radio Guide* wrote “there apparently aren’t many things Oscar has a genuine respect for.”<sup>46</sup> In fact, Levant’s behavior proved too much for Delight Evans, the editor of *Screenland*. When Evans sent Ida Zeitlin to interview the cast of *Information Please*, the annoyed Levant said, “I wish I didn’t have to do it.” After Zeitlin’s article ran in a May 1940 issue of *Screenland*, Evans printed a full-page open letter in December to Levant, who

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<sup>40</sup> Schertzinger, *Rhythm on the River*, [55:58].

<sup>41</sup> Victor Schertzinger, *Kiss the Boys Goodbye* (1941), Paramount, 1 DVD (Zeus DVDs) [11:11-11:17].

<sup>42</sup> Irving Rapper, *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945), Warner Bros., 1 DVD (Buddha Video) [20:08-21:36].

<sup>43</sup> This was an improvised line. Jean Negulesco, *Humoresque* (1946), Warner Bros., 1 DVD (Warner Home Video, 2005) [34:25-34:33].

<sup>44</sup> Irving Drutman, “A Smattering of Insolence,” *Hollywood* (Nov 1940): 64.

<sup>45</sup> Irving Wallace, “A Smattering of Levant,” *Modern Screen* (May 1941): 86.

<sup>46</sup> Dick Dorrance, “The Irrepressible Oscar,” *Mirror and Radio Guide* 10, no. 3 (26 Oct-1 Nov 1940): 34.

she called “a spoiled small boy who wants to have his lollypop and suck it too.”<sup>47</sup> She scolded him for his petulance and she snarkily closed her letter:

People may accept the aloof pose of Garbo but she’s prettier than you are. Bing Crosby, whom I believe you admire and respect, doesn’t care about publicity either – but then he doesn’t need it. You do. Your reputation was founded on publicity. But now it’s plain you have to be coaxed and coddled into taking the nasty, horrid stuff. Well, you don’t have to take it. And we don’t have to take you, either. Goodbye, Mr. Levant.<sup>48</sup>

Despite Evans’s angry public missive, Levant would remain with *Information Please*, and he would also maintain a steady stream of film appearances where he would play chiding but musically talented characters similar to himself.

Levant improvised many of his insults, and such ad-libbing granted him some degree of control over his characters and film persona. Concerning *Rhythm on the River*, Levant says in *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*, “I played an unsympathetic part – myself – in which I was relentlessly and irrepressibly audacious, supplying many of my own lines.”<sup>49</sup> Contemporary newspapers reported on Levant’s improvisations. For example, the *Hartford Courant* noted, “Oscar Levant, radio favorite, music prodigy and Broadway favorite makes his screen bow in *Rhythm on the River* [...] playing ‘himself’ in the film in which he disregards the script and ad libs throughout the entire picture.”<sup>50</sup> He also contributed many of his own lines while shooting *Kiss the Boys Goodbye*. In its review of the motion picture, the *Richmond Times Dispatch* reported, “The film has Oscar Levant playing a reasonably accurate facsimile of Oscar Levant. [...] The Levant

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<sup>47</sup> Ida Zeitlin, “Time to Meet the Experts!,” *Screenland* (May 1940): 30-31, 82-84. Quote from Delight Evans, “The Editor’s Page: An Open Letter to Oscar Levant,” *Screenland* (December 1940): 17.

<sup>48</sup> Evans, 17.

<sup>49</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 180.

<sup>50</sup> “Radio Wit in Film Bow,” *Hartford Courant*, 27 Jun 1940. See also Robbin Coons, “Famous Pianist Grows Weary of ‘Levant Legend’,” *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 31 May 1940.

dialog [sic], incidentally, is largely his own ad-lib invention.”<sup>51</sup> Several of Levant’s cutting lines in Rapper’s *Rhapsody in Blue* are pulled directly from things he had said in real life to or about Gershwin, such as “An evening with Gershwin was a Gershwin evening” and “Tell me, George, if you had to do it all over, would you fall in love with yourself.”<sup>52</sup> In the manuscript to *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*, Levant says: “I was let loose on this picture [*Humoresque*] like I was Franz Liszt giving a recital. I did all my ad libs, some ferociously funny.”<sup>53</sup> Levant’s habit of going off script annoyed Jean Negulesco, the director of *Humoresque*. Reporter John Todd of the International News Service witnessed a confrontation between Levant and Negulesco:

Negulesco [smarts] under the laughter, but gets his chance to retaliate when he yells “cut” half way through the scene, after Levant has poured a cup of eye-opener coffee, and flicked something from his tooth with a finger nail!  
“What’d I do now?” he demands. “Pick the wrong tooth?”  
“No,” says Negulesco, “you picked the wrong line!”<sup>54</sup>

In MGM’s *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1949, dir. Charles Walters), Levant usually sticks to the lines provided him in the shooting script. However, he occasionally goes off script, particularly during scenes involving music. For example, prior to his performance of Khachaturian’s “Sabre Dance,” the script only stipulates: “He doodles aimlessly at piano, a moment – then lurches into the ‘Sabre Dance.’”<sup>55</sup> In the film, Levant provides snippets of classical piano music (discussed later) and ad libs “Did anybody here ask for the Sabre Dance?” People offscreen (their

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<sup>51</sup> Edith Lindeman, “Previews of New Movies Opening Here This Week: Kiss the Boys Goodbye at the Colonial,” *Richmond Times Dispatch*, 10 Jul 1941.

<sup>52</sup> Levant, *Smattering*, 170.

<sup>53</sup> Oscar Levant, *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*, manuscript (Library of Congress, Music Division, Oscar Levant Papers, 1939-1965). For the published equivalent of this quote, see Levant, *Memoirs*, 182.

<sup>54</sup> John Todd, “In Hollywood,” *Tipton (Indiana) Daily Tribune*, 24 Dec 1945.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Walters, et al., *The Barkleys of Broadway (1949): Shooting Script* (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street, 1949), 19, <

[https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic\\_entity%7Cbibliographic\\_details%7C2965](https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C2965) >, last accessed 18 Feb 2020.

exclamations probably added in post-production) shout requests for Liszt's "La Campanella" and *Rhapsody in Blue*. Levant continues: "Sabre Dance, anybody? ... Well, if you insist."<sup>56</sup> Finally, later in the film, in reference to Dinah Barkley's understudy, Levant replaced the sarcastic scripted line "That girl is a real comfort to have around" with the more insulting and direct "You know I find that girl completely resistible."<sup>57</sup> In addition to his musical talent, Levant also brought his well-known cutting humor to his film roles, and he exercised a degree of control over his characters by altering lines, resulting in funnier and sharper scenes.

In addition to his rude comments, the entertainment press frequently took note of Levant's chain smoking and gargantuan consumption of coffee. Drawing upon the 1940 *Life* article, Dorrance elaborated, "He drinks anywhere from thirty to forty cups of coffee each twenty-four hours" and "ranks as an inveterate chain smoker."<sup>58</sup> His caffeine and nicotine addiction carried over into his film work, where his characters puffed on an endless cigarette and swallowed bottomless cups of coffee (see Figure 5.2), usually within reach on the piano lid. They often immediately drink or smoke after the completion of a musical piece. For example, after accompanying Paul Boray (John Garfield) in a piano-violin reduction of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor, op. 62, Sid Jeffers snatches an already lit cigarette from the piano top and crosses the room to a waiting carafe.<sup>59</sup> In *You Were Meant for Me*, Oscar Hoffman caps a solo piano performance of Gershwin's concerto by immediately reaching for a cigarette and matchbook.<sup>60</sup> Levant's addictions sometimes serve comedic purposes. In a café scene in *An*

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<sup>56</sup> Charles Walters, *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1949), MGM, 1 DVD (Warner Home Video, 2005) [11:40-12:27].

<sup>57</sup> Walters, et al., *Barkleys of Broadway (1949): Shooting Script*, 76.

<sup>58</sup> Dorrance, 35.

<sup>59</sup> Negulesco, *Humoresque*, 1 DVD [27:26-27:35].

<sup>60</sup> Lloyd Bacon, *You Were Meant for Me* (1948), 20th Century Fox, 1 DVD (20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2012) [57:15-57:20].

*American in Paris*, Adam Cook (Levant) realizes that Jerry Mulligan (Gene Kelly) and Henri Baurel (Gene Guétary) pursue the same girl. In a bit of brilliant comic business, Cook nervously alternates sipping coffee and lighting multiple cigarettes.<sup>61</sup>



*Humoresque*



*You Were Meant for Me*



*Rhythm on the River*



*An American in Paris*

**Figure 5.2. Oscar Levant's Smoking and Coffee-Drinking Characters.**

<sup>61</sup> Vincente Minnelli, *An American in Paris* (1951), MGM, 1 DVD (Warner Home Video, 1999) [1:18:00-1:20:16].



The press also discussed Levant as a highly nervous and irritable person. In reference to his fussy demeanor, Drutman calls Levant “a supersensitive man ... in a continual state of crucifixion, [who] suspects everyone he knows of conspiring against him.”<sup>62</sup> Harpo Marx mentions Oscar’s various aversions in his autobiography:

I did get to show [Oscar] a little of Southern California. One of Oscar’s phobias was the outdoors. He regarded Nature as a gigantic plot to persecute Oscar Levant, and avoided the outdoors along with the evil hoodoos like physical exercise, hats, the number thirteen, the words “lucky” and “death,” and any mention of his childhood.<sup>63</sup>

In films, Levant almost always plays an urbanite, particularly a homebody, who detests rural or seaside environments and prefers being indoors.<sup>64</sup> In *Humoresque*, after Wright and Boray return from a swim in the ocean, Sid Jeffers, lounging lazily in a deck chair, says, “I believe in progress and indoor plumbing. When I feel the need of water, I take a shower.”<sup>65</sup> Ira Gershwin well knew this side of Levant’s personality, and wrote a song about it. “Weekend in the Country,” featured in *The Barkleys of Broadway*, burlesques Levant’s abhorrence for the outdoors:

Astaire and Rogers: A weekend in the country never will let you down.  
Levant: You’ll pardon my effrontery; I’d rather spend it in town.

During the song, the Barkleys (Astaire and Rogers) drag a reluctant Ezra Miller (Levant) along a country road toward a weekend estate outside the city. In a bit of comic business, Ezra twice tries to run back to the train and stops once to rest at a signpost (Figure 5.3).<sup>66</sup> Lester Marton,

Levant’s character in *The Band Wagon*, is a manic hypochondriac. While Marton walks down

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<sup>62</sup> Drutman, 27.

<sup>63</sup> Harpo Marx with Rowland Barber, *Harpo Speaks!* (1961; New York: Limelight Edition, 1986), 350-351.

<sup>64</sup> One exception is his role as Bill Peoria in *O. Henry’s Full House*.

<sup>65</sup> This line appears in the shooting script. Clifford Odets and Zachary Gold, *Humoresque (1946): Shooting Script*, (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street, 1946), 70

<[https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic\\_entity%7Cdocument%7C3023266](https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C3023266)>, last accessed 18 Feb 2020; Negulesco, *Humoresque*, 1 DVD [1:00:37-1:00:41].

<sup>66</sup> Walters. *The Barkleys of Broadway*, 1 DVD [38:32-41:20].

42<sup>nd</sup> Street with his wife (Nanette Fabray) and Tony Hunter (Astaire), a drunk steps on his foot and he screams: “Ow! I think he broke my leg. [...] I can stand anything but pain!” As his wife and Hunter help him into a taxi, he fears he is developing a hematoma and asks for cold compresses.<sup>67</sup> After Levant had ended his touring career and sought drug rehabilitation and therapy, he played the rude psychiatric patient Mr. Capp in MGM’s serious drama *The Cobweb* (1955, dir. Vincente Minnelli). One scene features the increasingly psychotic and mother-obsessed Capp in an ice bath, smoking and loudly singing the Theodor Morse and Howard Johnson song “M-O-T-H-E-R.”<sup>68</sup>



**Figure 5.3. Levant Hates the Outdoors, *The Barkleys of Broadway*.**

Finally, just as Levant had many Broadway and Hollywood friends, many of Levant’s supporting characters serve as close friends to lead characters, who are usually also musicians.

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<sup>67</sup> Vincente Minnelli, *The Band Wagon* (1953), MGM, 1 DVD (Warner Home Video, 2005) [10:05-10:44].

<sup>68</sup> Vincente Minnelli, *The Cobweb* (1955), MGM, 1 DVD (Warner Home Video, 2011) [1:32:25-1:33:52].

According to George F. Custen, biopic narratives use “close friends” as familiar tropes, particularly to generate the viewer’s “rooting interest” in the main character. Moreover, close friends usually serve as an elder “moral gyroscope” or “conscience” to the younger star and “[act] as a kind of surrogate for the imaginary audience member.”<sup>69</sup> Levant’s first and most significant “close friend” role is as himself in Rapper’s *Rhapsody in Blue*. Here, the fictional Levant not only sticks close to Gershwin’s side, but also mocks him for his inflated ego, comforts the neglected girlfriend (Joan Leslie), and continues performing the composer’s piano music after his death.<sup>70</sup> Later producers of both melodramas and musicals built upon this “role” and cast Levant as fictional close friends to other fictional musicians played by major stars. In *Humoresque*, Sid Jeffers (Levant) supports Paul Boray (John Garfield) as he rises to a star violinist and often berates him for his haughty attitude and relationship with the married Helen Wright (Joan Crawford). In *You Were Meant for Me*, the older Oscar Hoffman (Levant) warns the naive Peggy Mayhew (Jeanne Crain) that a relationship with bandleader Chuck Arnold (Dan Dailey) may not be worthwhile or manageable. In *The Barkleys of Broadway*, Ezra Miller (Levant) works to reunite his close friends, the quarreling Barkleys (Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers). Custen says that close friend characters “are usually as distant as the audience.”<sup>71</sup> Likewise, Basinger claims that Levant, like Iturbi, usually stood outside the action as an “ironic commentator.”<sup>72</sup> However, as noted above, some of Levant’s characters function as more than

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<sup>69</sup> George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 162-164.

<sup>70</sup> In this instance, Levant does not play an elder character, rather Levant and Gershwin are presented as roughly the same age, although the real Gershwin was eight years older than Levant.

<sup>71</sup> Custen, 165.

<sup>72</sup> Basinger, fn, 488.

ineffectual observers. His fictional counterparts significantly advanced their respective films' narratives.

Levant carried over to his film characters the real-life impudent musical persona that he had developed through his regular radio appearances on *Information Please*, as well as his first autobiography *A Smattering of Ignorance*. Reporters for radio and film magazines, gleaned additional information about Levant's personality from a 1940 *Life* magazine article, which depicted him as a heavy smoker, coffee drinker, and insomniac. Contemporary film audiences recognized that his character portrayals closely paralleled his own witty, rude, and musical personality. His fictional characters, usually close friends to the main characters, would cast aspersions at friends, strangers, and superiors alike, all with a cigarette and/or cup of coffee in hand.

### **5.3 Oscar Levant's Piano Performances in Film**

This section addresses Levant's role as a cinematic pianist. Table 5.1 contains a complete listing of Levant's musical performances in film. I place these roles into three subcategories: accompanist, solo pianist, and concerto pianist. With "featured" music, as opposed to underscore or sourced music, the performers are the central focus of an extended cinematic spectacle of music. Such performances feel complete (not fleeting or aphoristic), and the performer's presence and star power command the camera's attention. In many of Levant's filmic musical moments he does not operate as a featured pianist, but rather as an accompanist for featured vocalists and/or dancers. In these instances, Levant's plays the piano, but the central visual focus lies with the singer or dancer, not Levant. The table also details whether Levant's music is

covered by dialogue. This frequently happens in melodramas, where musical features that suspend or delay narrative do not belong to the genre's more realistic mode of narrative storytelling. Likewise, in musical comedies, dialogue often interrupts and covers a feature of serious classical music. In these instances, the dialogue is usually brief but masks the continuing music due to the importance of developing plot and the human voice's dominance of the soundtrack. Additionally, all of Levant's filmic performances of concertos are condensed. Condensed performances of classical pieces on film shorten a classical piece to recognizable themes and quotable musical passages so as to fit within the time allotted, usually about the same length as a popular song: three or four minutes. As discussed in Chapter Two, such reductions satisfy the middlebrow consumer's desire to understand a classical work through its main themes and other memorable passages. For a film musical, in addition to the reasons above, the shortening is necessary because the narrative must eventually continue.

Film / Character's Name	Work	Covered, Condensed
Dance of Life (1929) / Jerry Evans	Medley of popular songs	Covered
Night Parade (1929) / none	"You're Responsible" (feat. Ann Pennington)	
Rhythm on the River (1940) / Billy Starbuck	"What Would Shakespeare Have Said?" (feat. Crosby) "That's for Me" (feat. Martin)	
Kiss the Boys Goodbye (1941) / Dick Rayburn ("Oscar")	"Kiss the Boys Goodbye" Bach's "Sarabande" and "Passepied I" from the English Suite in E minor, BWV 810 "Dixie"	Condensed  Covered
Rhapsody in Blue (1945) / Oscar Levant	Concerto in F, 3rd mvt Rhapsody in Blue	Condensed, Interrupted Condensed
Humoresque (1946) / Sid Jeffers	Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto Gershwin's Third Prelude Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee" (feat. Garfield, violin dubbed by Isaac Stern) Sarasate's Zigeunerweisen, op. 20 (feat. Garfield, violin dubbed by Isaac Stern) Lecuona's "Malagueña" Wagner's Liebestod (arr. Waxman)	Condensed, Interrupted  Covered   Condensed
You Were Meant for Me (1948) / Oscar Hoffman	Gershwin's Concerto in F	Condensed
Romance on the High Seas (1948) / Oscar Farrar	"I'm in Love" (feat. Day) Levant's Cuban Rhapsody "It's Magic" (feat. Day)	Incomplete
The Barkleys of Broadway (1949) / Ezra Millar	Khachaturian's "Sabre Dance" "Weekend in the Country" (with Astaire and Rogers) Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto	Condensed, Covered

An American in Paris (1951) / Adam Cook	“By Strauss” (with Guétary and Kelly) “Tra-la-la” (with Kelly) Gershwin’s Concerto in F, 3 <sup>rd</sup> mvt	Condensed
O. Henry’s Full House (1952) / Bill Peoria		
The I Don’t Care Girl (1953) / Charles Bennett	“Hello, Frisco!” (with Graham) Medley: Liszt’s Liebestraum No. 3/Chopin’s “Winter Wind” Etude/ Liszt’s Piano Concerto No. 1 Bach’s Little Fugue in G minor, BWV 578 Rubinstein’s Fourth Piano Concerto	Covered  Condensed  Condensed, Covered
The Band Wagon (1953) / Lester Marton	“That’s Entertainment” (with Astaire, Buchanan, and Fabray) “I Love Louisa” (with Astaire) “That’s Entertainment” Reprise (with Astaire, Buchanan, Fabray, and Charisse)	
The Cobweb (1955) / Mr. Capp		

**Table 5.1. Levant’s Film Appearances with Featured Music.**

When Levant serves as an accompanist (without vocals) to a second musician, he plays a subsidiary role and the camera treats him as such. Rather than close-up shots of Levant’s face or his working hands at the keyboard, the camera favors the image of the singer or dancer or it frames Levant in a two-shot with his visual presence de-emphasized. For example, during a party scene in RKO’s *Night Parade* (1929), Levant, in an uncredited cameo appearance, accompanies Broadway dancer Ann Pennington on his own song “You’re Responsible.” In one long shot, Pennington stands at the center of the frame, with Levant at the piano framed to the right (Figure 5.4). The following shot closes in on her bare, moving legs.<sup>73</sup> In *Rhythm on the River* (1940),

<sup>73</sup> Malcolm St. Clair, *Night Parade* (1929), RKO, 1 DVD (Zeus DVDs) [31:28-33:58].

Levant supports Crosby as he sings “What Would Shakespeare Have Said” (Figure 5.4).<sup>74</sup> In a two-shot, Crosby stands screen left closer to the lens with his face toward the audience, while Levant keeps his back turned through the performance. In Warner Bros.’ *Romance on the High Seas* (1948, dir. Michael Curtiz), Levant accompanies Georgia Garrett (Doris Day) in two songs, “I’m in Love” and “It’s Magic.” The camera de-emphasizes Levant’s visual presence in what was Day’s cinematic debut. Levant even vanishes in darkness shortly after “It’s Magic” begins (Figure 5.4).<sup>75</sup>

However, in his later film roles when Levant began to sing, the camera grants him more equal attention with his onscreen musical partners (See Figure 5.5). After Levant performed “Weekend in the Country” with Astaire and Rogers in *The Barkleys of Broadway*, he sang (or appeared to sing) in at least one featured vocal number in every musical he starred in. For *An American in Paris*, Mack McLean dubbed his voice for Levant’s onscreen performance of Gershwin’s “By Strauss.” Although Levant’s onscreen singing voice is not his own, he shares screen space with fellow singers Kelly and Guétary (Figure 5.5). Even as Guétary and Kelly dance around the café, Levant’s torso remains in the foreground at the bottom of the screen.<sup>76</sup> Later on, Levant continues to share equal screen space with Kelly during a performance of Gershwin’s “Tra-La-La” (Figure 5.5). Only when the singing stops and Kelly’s tap routine begins does Levant occasionally recede, with shots of his back or with Kelly dancing in the

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<sup>74</sup> Schertzinger, *Rhythm on the River*, [3:57-4:47].

<sup>75</sup> Michael Curtiz, *Romance on the High Seas* (1948), Warner Bros., 1 DVD (Warner Home Video, 2012) [13:40-15:27 and 1:35:40-1:37:40].

<sup>76</sup> Minnelli, *An American in Paris*, [13:42-18:13].



foreground.<sup>77</sup> One difficulty in maintaining the visual intrigue of a singing pianist is his immobility. A solution is to have him stop playing and allow the orchestra to carry the music while the pianist continues to sing and walks about or dances. For his performance of “Hello, Frisco!” with Bob Graham in Fox’s *The I Don’t Care Girl* (1953, dir. Lloyd Bacon), Levant initially sits at the piano screen right with Graham standing behind the piano screen left (Figure 5.5). However, Levant soon stands up and joins Graham in some comedic business with a telephone followed by some rhythmic stage walking (the extent of Levant’s dancing talent).<sup>78</sup> With “That’s Entertainment” in *The Band Wagon* he equally shares the frame with Astaire, Fabray, and Jack Buchanan, and participates in some very simple dance steps (Figure 5.5).<sup>79</sup> When Levant sings in a featured vocal number, he receives equal visual emphasis on the screen with other star performers. If Levant ever sings alone, it is brief, usually for comedic effect, and never as a featured song.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., [46:22-50:05].

<sup>78</sup> Lloyd Bacon, *The I Don’t Care Girl* (1953), 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1 DVD (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2013) [16:57-19:25].

<sup>79</sup> Minnelli, *The Band Wagon*, [25:56-29:43].



Pennington (center) and Levant (right), *Night Parade* (1929), "You're Responsible."



Crosby and Levant, *Rhythm on the River* (1940), "What Would Shakespeare Have Said?"



Day and Levant, *Romance on the High Seas* (1948), "I'm in Love."



Day and Levant, *Romance on the High Seas* (1948), "It's Magic."

**Figure 5.4. Levant De-Emphasized as Piano Accompanist.**



Kelly, Guétary, and Levant, *An American in Paris* (1951), “By Strauss.”



Kelly and Levant, *An American in Paris* (1951), “Tra-La-La.”



Graham and Levant, *The I Don't Care Girl*, “Hello, Frisco!”



Buchanan, Astaire, Fabray, and Levant, *The Band Wagon* (1953), “That’s Entertainment.”

**Figure 5.5: Levant Emphasized as Singing Pianist.**

In most of his musical comedies, Levant’s presentations of solo keyboard music are not featured performances. Rather, if his characters do play solos, the performances are usually fragmentary, interrupted or within the context of a comic bit. In most of these cases, his impudent persona unites with his piano skills to create funny moments that bewilder, pester, or upset his screen partners. For example, in *Rhythm on the River*, Billy Starbuck (Levant) attempts

to convince a producer that his boss (Basil Rathbone) has been working diligently on a show's music. He plays excerpts from classical music, explaining that the opening chords to Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C-sharp minor, op. 3/2 are actually a lullaby sung by a dragon. The bit also includes strains from Chopin's Waltz in C-sharp minor, op. 64/2; Chopin's Etude in C-sharp minor, op. 10/4; and James Bland's "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny."<sup>80</sup> In *The Barkleys of Broadway*, prior to his featured and complete performance of Khachaturian's "Sabre Dance" (with an orchestra in underscore), Ezra Miller teases his audience with fragments of Chopin's "Winter Wind" Etude in A minor and Nocturne in F-sharp major, op. 15/2; and Liszt's Second Hungarian Rhapsody.<sup>81</sup> Levant's performance of Bach's Little Fugue in G Minor, BWV 578, in *The I Don't Care Girl* is a featured performance that opens with him playing the fugue on two keyboards. However, the feature evolves from Levant's solo keyboard music to a jazz ensemble arrangement, and finally to a fully orchestrated and choreographed dance routine, featuring Mitzi Gaynor as Eva Tanguay.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, Levant's performance is still humorous, as he wears a comically oversized Flemish hat and makes goofy faces at himself in a mirror (Figure 5.6).

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<sup>80</sup> Schertzinger, *Rhythm on the River*, [1:20:11-1:21:28].

<sup>81</sup> Walters, *The Barkleys of Broadway*, [11:49-12:26].

<sup>82</sup> Bacon, *The I Don't Care Girl*, [33:16-38:52].



Figure 5.6. Flemish Levant and Bach's Little Fugue in G minor, *The I Don't Care Girl*.

Only one film prior to Warner Bros.' *Rhapsody in Blue* showcases Levant in an uninterrupted performance of solo keyboard music. In *Kiss the Boys Goodbye*, Dick Rayburn discovers a harpsichord within the parlor of a plantation house. He sits down and plays excerpts from the "Sarabande" and "Passepied I" from J. S. Bach's English Suite in E minor, BWV 810. The initial medium shot frames Levant in profile at the keyboard, however there are no close-up shots of his working hands. Although the music concludes with a perfect cadence in E minor, the performance lasts for less than a minute. Several minutes later, threatened with a rifle by the homeowner, Rayburn returns to the harpsichord and plays a peppy rendition of "Dixie," a Confederate Civil War-era song whose popular strains contrast markedly with the Bach. Dialogue covers his performance, which shifts to a choral performance of the song by the plantation's workers, with Rayburn conducting and then dancing a wild jig.<sup>83</sup> The moment

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<sup>83</sup> Schertzinger, *Kiss the Boys Goodbye*, [24:45-25:18 and 34:33-36:19].

reveals that Rayburn (like Levant) can play not only popular music, but serious Baroque music as well.

After *Rhapsody in Blue*, only one film (the melodrama *Humoresque*) permits Levant complete performances of solo piano music. Both of these pieces, Gershwin's Third Prelude and Lecuona's "Malagueña," are drawn from Levant's "talking recital" repertoire. Indeed, Sid Jeffers applauds himself and shouts "bravo" after playing a condensed version of the "Malegueña."<sup>84</sup> One review from Levant's recital tours reports that he did the same thing.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, with *Humoresque*, Levant became the first pianist to perform Gershwin's Second and Third Piano Preludes on film. He delivers a complete performance of the Third Prelude, a one-minute piece that functions as transition music as Jeffers and Boray decide to attend a party. The performance begins in Jeffers' tiny apartment, as he sits at the piano and begins to bang out the prelude. The camera moves in from a medium shot of Levant to a close-up of his working hands, followed by a dissolve to a parallel image as Levant's hands continue to play the prelude in the spacious living room of Helen Wright (Joan Crawford). The camera pans up to a young blonde woman, smoking and closely watching Levant's handiwork. The shot then widens and pans left to reveal the size of the room filled with more well-attired attendees of the party.<sup>86</sup> Although dialogue does not drown out the prelude, the film does not treat the music like a showstopping feature. Rather, the short piece serves as transition music as Jeffers and Boray exit the modesty of a musician's quarters and enter the opulence of an elitist home. Shortly after finishing the Third Prelude, Jeffers begins the slow and bluesy Second Prelude while flirting with the woman

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<sup>84</sup> Negulesco, *Humoresque*, [1:22:22-1:23:25].

<sup>85</sup> Paul K. Damai, "Radio Short Circuits," *Hammond Times* (Munster, Indiana), 28 Jan 1942.

<sup>86</sup> Negulesco, *Humoresque*, [31:55-32:52].

standing near him (“Never saw you before, and I’ve enjoyed every minute of it.”).<sup>87</sup> Levant’s witticisms and other dialogue completely cover the Second Prelude for the thirty seconds it is heard in the film.

Levant’s featured presentations of large piano works, beginning with his performance of the Rhapsody in *Rhapsody in Blue*, represent a shift in Levant’s filmic stardom that parallels his broader musical career. Due to his regular appearances on radio’s *Information Please*, American audiences recognized Levant as a musical savant and wit, but not yet as an accomplished performer of large piano works. His career as a touring pianist (from late 1939) and his “talking recitals” (from 1942) established his reputation as an accomplished concert pianist. As discussed in Chapter Two, by 1942 Levant was one of America’s most popular touring musicians and he had earned the title of leading Gershwin pianist. Thus, unsurprisingly, the first film to feature Levant playing a large piano work was *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945).

Most of Levant’s films after Rapper’s *Rhapsody in Blue* feature him performing piano concertos or concerto-like pieces in truncated forms. All of these performances are condensed, and most of them are briefly covered by dialogue. In Chapter Two, I discussed Levant’s performances of such reductions as part of his career as a radio pianist. These shortened forms trimmed the concerto to memorable themes so that the performance would fit within the allotted airtime. Likewise, film musicals that feature performances of classical music usually reduce a long work to about the length of a popular song. In addition to Gershwin’s Rhapsody and Concerto in F, which I discuss later, Levant also presented on film large piano works by Tchaikovsky, Liszt, and Rubinstein. In all of these features, Levant’s star power commands the

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., [34:27-34:56].

screen. Shots detail his concentrated face either in close-up or in profile. Furthermore, the camera also offers the audience a view they could not enjoy in a concert hall: overhead and close views of his working hands at the keyboard. These close-up shots permit the viewer to marvel at the pianist's handiwork and emphasize a central component of the performing musician's stardom: virtuosic skill. As Ivan Raykoff explains, "A pianist's hands and fingers can represent technical ability as well as certain aspects of personality and character, especially for male pianists whose masculinity is somehow implicated in the functioning of their playing apparatus."<sup>88</sup> Most of the time, as Levant plays rude supporting characters, his onscreen pianism does not inspire romantic feelings from female characters. An exception is Ezra Miller, who dates numerous blondes through *The Barkleys of Broadway*, and even waves at four of them while he performs Tchaikovsky's concerto. Nevertheless, if Levant plays a concerto in a musical, his performance usually includes close-up shots of his hands, he commands entirely the camera's focus, and film viewers are invited to share in the gaze of onscreen spectators.

With *Humoresque*, Levant (as Sid Jeffers) presents an interrupted performance of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto during a radio symphony rehearsal. The film uses this interruption to contrast Jeffers' popular media alliance with Boray's classical music purism. The scene opens with an overhead shot of Levant, a lit cigarette resting in an ashtray on the piano lid. One shot briefly shows a closeup of Levant's working hands. The radio producer interrupts the music after a particularly long and virtuosic passage for the solo piano. He says "You're running overtime." The conductor instructs the orchestra to strike "letter D to letter R" and asks Jeffers, "Is that agreeable with you, Mr. Jeffers?" While smoking the cigarette and resting his head on his

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<sup>88</sup> Ivan Raykoff, *Dreams of Love: Playing the Romantic Pianist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 50.



hand, Jeffers responds: “Why bring personalities into the discussion? I’ll do it.”<sup>89</sup> Boray scoffs at the decision, causing the conductor to fire him. Playing the role of the close friend, Jeffers first motions at Boray to be quiet and then pleads with the conductor: “Why don’t you give the kid a chance. He’s never played on the radio before?” Here, as with most musical melodramas, classical music performance does not suspend the narrative but rather serves as a tool to push the narrative forward.

After *Humoresque*, Levant performed a truncated version of Tchaikovsky’s concerto in *The Barkleys of Broadway* (Figure 5.7). With this film, Levant exercised some degree of control over his onscreen representation. First, the shooting script indicates that Ezra Millar (Levant) plays Rachmaninoff’s *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* at a benefit concert.<sup>90</sup> After Arthur Freed had contracted Levant for the picture in March 1948, Levant began practicing the piece and presented excerpts on three episodes of *Kraft Music Hall*.<sup>91</sup> By the time of shooting, he must have felt uncomfortable with his progress and opted instead to play in the film the Tchaikovsky concerto, a piece he already had in his performance repertoire. In *The Unimportance of Being Oscar*, Levant explains that he suggested a new method for filming his performance:

[Pianists] are always shot the same way. Usually they open up with a very big closeup of the twinkling hands of the player (always with a mirror where the piano trademark ought to be), then they pull back slowly into a decreasingly dramatic long shot showing him surrounded either by massed musicians or (if he is in love) nothing at all. I claim the responsibility for suggesting an entirely new shot: I reversed it so that at the climax of the

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<sup>89</sup> These lines are in the shooting script. Jean Negulesco, *Humoresque* (1946), Warner Bros., 1 DVD, [21:53-24:39].

<sup>90</sup> Comden, et al., *The Barkleys of Broadway (1949): Shooting Script*, 87.

<sup>91</sup> Hedda Hopper, “Looking at Hollywood,” *Chicago Tribune*, 31 Mar 1948. Levant played excerpts from Rachmaninoff’s *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* on the 3 June, 10 June, and 11 November 1948 episodes of *Kraft Music Hall*. These episodes can be accessed through *Kraft Music Hall*, Old Time Radio Researchers Group Library, K Series, <<http://otrlibrary.org/k.html>>, last accessed 18 Feb 2020.

piece the camera came in from a very long shot and ended on my hands. I did this when I played a truncated version of some Tchaikovsky in *The Barkleys of Broadway*.<sup>92</sup>

Thus, Levant chose which concerto he featured in the film and how the camera recorded his performance.

*The I Don't Care Girl* features Charles Bennett (Levant) performing two classical concertos. His presentation of Liszt's First Piano Concerto takes place within a medley of two other pieces: Liszt's Liebestraum No. 3 and Chopin's "Winter Wind" Etude. While performing the Liebestraum, Bennett notices that his business partner Larry Woods (Bob Graham) is flirting with Eva Tanguay (Mitzi Gaynor) in the wings. In order to reclaim her attention and halt Woods' advances, Bennett suddenly switches from the sentimental Liebestraum to the virtuosic and highly chromatic Chopin Etude. Tanguay's business partner (played by Eddie McCoy) escorts her away from Woods. Bennett concludes his performance with a condensed version of the Liszt concerto. Through the duration of the concerto, one long shot captures Levant in profile screen right, his working hands visible (Figure 5.7).<sup>93</sup> Later in the film, he plays the final movement of Rubinstein's Fourth Piano Concerto at a party, surrounded by a crowd of silent and attentive onlookers, the orchestra performing either offscreen or as underscore. Several shots show Levant's concentrated face either in close-up or in profile. The camera frequently zooms in on his working hands (Figure 5.7).<sup>94</sup> Levant's performance of this serious music immediately follows a grand and colorful stage presentation of the song "I Don't Care," featuring Gaynor in flashy and feathered Vegas-girl costumes. Furthermore, the number briefly shows Levant and Wayne in emasculating tiger and abolitionist costumes. Therefore, the Rubinstein concerto

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<sup>92</sup> Levant, *Unimportance*, 100.

<sup>93</sup> Bacon, *The I Don't Care Girl*, [19:31-22:14].

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, [51:27-55:09].

counters the zaniness of the pop song with a few minutes of highbrow music. The performance also restores some of Levant's dignity.



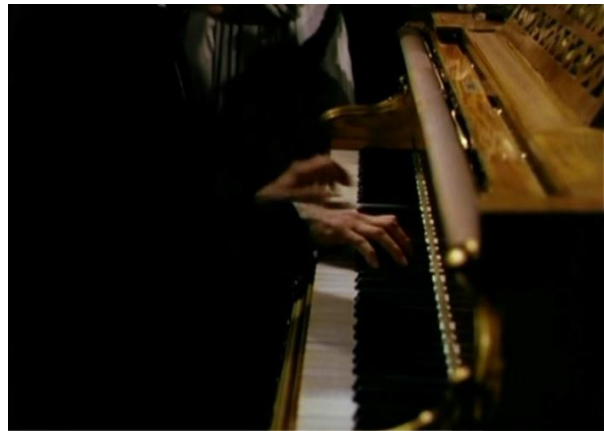
Tchaikovsky's B-flat Concerto in *Humoresque*



Tchaikovsky's B-flat Concerto in *The Barkleys of Broadway*.



Liszt's Piano Concerto in *The I Don't Care Girl*.



Rubinstein's Fourth Piano Concerto in *The I Don't Care Girl*.

**Figure 5.7. Levant and Condensed Performances of Classical Concertos**

Through his film career, Levant performed George Gershwin more frequently than any other composer. Hollywood used Levant's reputation as the leading Gershwin interpreter as a marker of authenticity. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, Levant's careers as a radio star, touring

recitalist, and symphony orchestra guest pianist established him as the top popular Gershwin pianist by 1942. His appearances in three Hollywood films sustain his association with Gershwin's music to the present day. Indeed, Americans today continue to access Gershwin's music through broadcasts of Warner Bros.' *Rhapsody in Blue*, Fox's *You Were Meant for Me*, and MGM's *An American in Paris* through cable movie channels and home video releases. Below, I discuss these performances at length, analyze the form of the condensed concertos, and explain how they function within the broader context of the films themselves and Levant's professional career as a popular classical musician.

#### **5.4 *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945)**

In 1945, Warner Bros. released the Gershwin biopic, starring the unknown Robert Alda as the composer, as well as several of Gershwin's real-life associates and friends, including Oscar Levant. *Rhapsody in Blue* premiered eight years after the composer's death, contributed to a continuing national dialogue about Gershwin's importance to American music, and featured a plethora of Gershwinite entertainers eager to honor their friend's legacy. In addition to Levant, the film also featured Al Jolson, Paul Whiteman, Hazel Scott, Anne Brown, and George White. The film's final scene reimagines the 1937 Lewisohn Stadium memorial concert. Historically, Harry Kaufman performed the Rhapsody with the New York Philharmonic that evening. However, Warner Bros. recorded footage for this scene during the intermission of the 1941 Lewisohn Gershwin Night, when Levant was the featured soloist.<sup>95</sup> The film's finale, discussed

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<sup>95</sup> "The World of Music," *South Bend Tribune*, 20 Jul 1941.

below, not only glorifies the composer and his beloved piece, but also Levant as Gershwin's heir, the living conduit of Gershwin's piano music.

Warner Bros. released their Gershwin biopic at a critical moment in the perpetuation of Gershwin's American musical legacy. The composer had only been dead a few years, and the memory of his passing still lingered in Americans' minds. Rapper's film contributed to a national discourse about Gershwin's postmortem importance to American music, specifically while composers, critics, and others debated whether he would be remembered for his popular songs, his concert works, or both. As a musical drama, the film gives greater weight to Gershwin's symphonic and operatic works, with less attention granted to his songs. Although Jolson sings "Swanee" in the picture, the film situates the song as the composition that propelled Gershwin to national attention, allowing him time to compose more serious works.

Rapper's *Rhapsody in Blue* exemplifies the Hollywood tendency for the creation and perpetuation of myths, particularly the idea of the historic great man. Paul Fryer explains that composer biopics "in general may not be the most reliable sources of historical fact."<sup>96</sup> Charlotte Greenspan notes that such films "have no intention of giving the audience nothing but the truth" and "the most intriguing critical questions ask where the fictions come from and what purposes they serve."<sup>97</sup> George F. Custen explains that biopics during the studio system era participated in the creation of history, restructuring it as a history of great men played by stars. Rapper's film glorifies Gershwin as the genius-composer who unites the old and the new, who, as the filmic Gershwin's aged music teacher declares, combines "ideals and material ambition" to "give

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<sup>96</sup> Paul Fryer, "Introduction" in *The Composer on Screen: Essays on Classical Music Biopics*, ed. Fryer (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2018), 7.

<sup>97</sup> Charlotte Greenspan, "Rhapsody in Blue: A Study in Hollywood Hagiography," in *The Gershwin Style: New Looks at the Music of George Gershwin*, ed. Wayne Schneider (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 146.

America a voice.” In other words, he respects the legacy of Western classical music, but also unhesitatingly takes advantage of capitalist opportunities in order to achieve financial success. The film compares him to classical composers, like Beethoven and Brahms, not Broadway composers like Kern or Romberg. Thus, the film argues that Gershwin belongs to a respectable lineage of great white male European composers, but his financially lucrative brew of classical forms, blues, and jazz makes him both thoroughly American and thoroughly modern. The film presents Levant as Gershwin’s friend, acolyte, performing companion, and finally living conduit.

Shortly after Gershwin’s death in July 1937, Hollywood immediately wanted to make a biographical film about the composer. RKO considered making a Gershwin biopic as early as August 1937. Isaac Goldberg wrote Ira Gershwin saying he knew RKO had a copy of his Gershwin biography and hoped he could receive “a nominal fee” for its use.<sup>98</sup> Ira responded that he believed the “tragedy too recent” and would not allow RKO to make the film. In 1940, several studios began negotiating with the Gershwin Estate, represented by Arthur Lyons, for the rights to a film and Gershwin’s music. Ira selected Warner Bros., who hired him in summer 1941 as a consultant.<sup>99</sup>

The film helped maintain Levant’s popular status as a Gershwin pianist. As discussed in Chapter Three, at the time of the film's release, Levant had been working as a touring pianist for several years, specializing in Gershwin's piano works, particularly the Rhapsody and the concerto. He had also appeared numerous times as the featured pianist at the annual Lewisohn Stadium Gershwin Nights, as well as other outdoor stadium all-Gershwin concerts, like those at

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<sup>98</sup> Letter from Isaac Goldberg to Ira Gershwin, 22 Aug 1937 (USC Warner Bros. Archives, *Rhapsody in Blue*, box 1, folder 10).

<sup>99</sup> Letter from Ira Gershwin to Elsie Goldberg, 6 Oct 1942 (USC Warner Bros. Archives, *Rhapsody in Blue*, box 1, folder 10).

Los Angeles's Hollywood Bowl and Philadelphia's Robin Hood Dell (See Chapter 4). The film reinforced and helped maintain Levant's popular status as leading Gershwin pianist. Indeed, twenty-three thousand people attended the 12 July 1945 Lewisohn Gershwin Night – the second-largest audience in the history of all-Gershwin concerts at that venue. The film drew upon information about Gershwin's life from Levant's autobiography *A Smattering of Ignorance*, including details about his worsening health, while working in Hollywood. Levant also contributed heavily to the film's soundtrack, recording all the piano music, including the moments mimed by Alda. Finally, the film features Levant in performances of the Rhapsody and the Concerto in F. I discuss his rendition of the Rhapsody below.

The earliest story drafts feature the Lewisohn Stadium memorial concert as a significant event in the film's narrative. In May, Ira suggested to producer Walter MacEwen that the film include "special spots" for "important personalities who originally introduced some of George Gershwin's most important works." He specifically recommended Levant, Jolson, and Whiteman.<sup>100</sup> In July, Warner Bros. captured footage of Levant with Paul Whiteman's Orchestra on the Lewisohn stage during the intermission of the 1941 Gershwin Night. In October, screenwriters Robert Rossen and Kathryn Scola drafted early treatments of the story, with help from Ira.<sup>101</sup> With these early treatments, the Lewisohn memorial concert already serves as the setting for the final scene with the Rhapsody as the featured music. Rossen first devises several

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<sup>100</sup> Internal communication from Walter MacEwen to Warren and Hal B. Wallis, 29 May 1941 (USC Warner Bros. Archives, *Rhapsody in Blue*, box 1, folder 5).

<sup>101</sup> Kathryn Scola and Ira Gershwin, *Rhapsody in Blue*, story and treatment outline, 24 Oct 1941 (USC Warner Bros. Archives, *Rhapsody in Blue*, box 1, folder 41); Robert Rossen, *Rhapsody in Blue*, treatment, 6 Nov 1941 (USC Warner Bros. Archives, *Rhapsody in Blue*, box 1, folder 42).

ideas that wind up in the film. Beginning with Deems Taylor onstage, he describes the conclusion, thusly:

Taylor: “But you’re not dead, George, not as long as your music is alive. For wherever and whenever it is played, George Gershwin will be at the piano playing it.” The conductor takes his place at the podium, raps his baton, *Rhapsody* begins. We cut to various faces reacting as though they believed in what the announcer has said, that George was really alive and was playing his beloved music at the piano. We go to the man at the piano. He suddenly Dissolves Out and in his place, we see George playing the first notes. The Camera Moves In to a Close Shot, as almost in a blurred shape we see George at the piano. But the notes of the *Rhapsody in Blue* are not blurred. They are clear and loud and strong, as we Fade Out.<sup>102</sup>

As their version of the story opened with the memorial concert as a framing narrative, Warner Bros. believed their vision too depressing, so Clifford Odets replaced them as scriptwriter.

Odets’ early outlines draw upon Levant’s autobiography *A Smattering of Ignorance*.

Custen explains that unlike other film genres, studios marketed biopics as well-researched epics, because “audiences demanded accuracy in biopics and studios wanted to satisfy that demand.”<sup>103</sup>

Levant’s book was a popular and recently published source on Gershwin’s life. Odets dramatizes several passages from the autobiography and elaborates fictional situations concerning Levant and Gershwin’s history and friendship. He expands the anecdote Levant told about first seeing Gershwin accompany Nora Bayes in a performance of *Ladies First* in Pittsburgh.<sup>104</sup> Odets fleshes out the story by having Levant meet Gershwin backstage, thereby establishing a friendly rivalry (rooted in fact) that lasts through the remainder of the story:

Since Oscar comes bearing gifts of admiration, those two should get along. But nothing doing! Instead it [sounds] like two catty dames ‘admiring’ each other’s new hat. The

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<sup>102</sup> Rossen, *Rhapsody in Blue*, treatment.

<sup>103</sup> Custen, 36.

<sup>104</sup> See Chapter One.



boys put the blast on each other without stint. And this blasting lasts for fifteen years, although later a shy and hidden love for each other is always hidden underneath.<sup>105</sup>

Odets also created a fictional girlfriend for Gershwin named Julie Harrison, who Oscar also winds up courting. “Julie Harrison” would later become “Julie Adams,” played in the film by Joan Leslie. Warner Bros. eventually rejected Odets’ script, which became the basis for *Humoresque*.<sup>106</sup>

With the final version of the script, writer Howard Koch took numerous liberties in adapting history to film, with many chronological inaccuracies. Many of the fictional adjustments concern Levant’s early relationship with Gershwin. The filmic Levant first meets Gershwin when the composer applies for a job at Harms. In fact, Levant did not meet Gershwin until 1925, after the composition of *Rhapsody in Blue*. The film also purports that Levant attended the first performance of *Rhapsody in Blue*, although Levant never mentions this in his memoirs—something he probably would have mentioned had it occurred. As discussed below, the final scene reimagines the 1937 Lewisohn Stadium Gershwin memorial concert with Levant at the piano. Levant himself called the film “a preposterous version of George Gershwin’s life” and identified himself as “the star of the picture, thanks to some quaint scriptwriters.”<sup>107</sup>

The *Rhapsody in Blue* film spurred a lot of musical middlebrow activity. In order to generate public interest, the National Federation of Music Clubs (NFMC) cooperated with theaters across the country by sponsoring the film.<sup>108</sup> To help theaters and music clubs with their efforts, Warner Bros. published and distributed a twenty-page glossy program titled *Rhapsody in*

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<sup>105</sup> Clifford Odets, *Rhapsody in Blue*, outline, 11 Apr 1942 (USC Warner Bros. Archives, *Rhapsody in Blue*, box 1, folder 10).

<sup>106</sup> Both Odets’ *Rhapsody in Blue* script and the *Humoresque* film feature an elder girlfriend of a rising musician, who drowns herself in the ocean.

<sup>107</sup> Levant, *Memoirs*, 147.

<sup>108</sup> “Music Clubs Back Rhapsody in Blue,” *Hagerstown Morning Herald*, 11 Oct 1945.

*Blue: The Jubilant Story of George Gershwin and His Music*. The program included numerous publicity shots and photographs from the film, as well as brief essays about Gershwin's life and music written by recognized musical figures from both the classical and popular worlds, including Paul Whiteman, Walter Damrosch, José Iturbi, Deems Taylor, Artur Rodzinski, and others.<sup>109</sup> Sigmund Spaeth, as co-chairman of the NFMC's Committee on Motion Picture Music, penned a "musical study outline of the motion picture" for use by music clubs as a guide for classes about the film and Gershwin's music. He listed songs that appear in the film and provided brief histories and analyses of the Rhapsody, the concerto, and *An American in Paris*. He also declared that the Gershwin biopic "should satisfy the most rabid of the composer's devotees, while to the comparatively uninitiated it may prove a revelation of American music in both the light and serious manner."<sup>110</sup> The year of the biopic's release, music clubs held Gershwin lectures that also included live performance and information about the biopic. To provide just one example, in November 1945 the McAllen (Texas) Music Club offered a "Motion Picture Music" lecture on the life and work of Gershwin, followed by performances of several songs and *Rhapsody in Blue*. The members concluded the evening by listening to the Concerto in F on record.<sup>111</sup>

Levant recorded all of the music played by Alda as Gershwin in the film. During the Aeolian Hall scene, when Gershwin debuts the Rhapsody with Paul Whiteman's band, Levant

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<sup>109</sup> *Rhapsody in Blue: The Jubilant Story of George Gershwin and His Music*, program from author's personal collection (Warner Bros., [1945]).

<sup>110</sup> Sigmund Spaeth, "Rhapsody in Blue: The Story of George Gershwin : A Musical Study Outline of the Motion Picture by Warner Bros. for Music Clubs and Classes," National Federation of Music Clubs, Committee on Motion Picture Music, author's personal collection, undated.

<sup>111</sup> "Music Club Members Have Motion Picture Study," *McAllen Monitor*, 25 Nov 1945. For further examples see, "Life of Composer Subject of Program," *Manhattan (Kansas) Republic*, 15 Mar 1945; and Mrs. S. C. Littlejohn, "Society: Music Club Has Gershwin Program," *Gaffney (South Carolina) Ledger*, 15 Sep 1945.

vociferously applauds a performance of the Rhapsody actually his own. Levant also recorded music from the Concerto in F. During a fictional broadcast of the *Music Appreciation Hour*, Levant performs the conclusion of the concerto's third movement with Walter Damrosch (Hugo Kirchhoffer) and the NBC Orchestra. In addition to this performance, Alda mimes a faltering performance of the work in a recreation of Gershwin's moment of forgetfulness with the Los Angeles Philharmonic.<sup>112</sup> Also, several scenes throughout the film feature Levant diegetically playing Gershwin tunes, often with Alda at the same piano. One party scene features Alda and Levant at two pianos presenting a medley of "Someone to Watch over Me" and "I Got Rhythm."<sup>113</sup> Levant's recordings of the Rhapsody and concerto for this film were released on V-disc and distributed to America's armed forces.<sup>114</sup>

The truncated performance of the Rhapsody at the end of the film can be divided into three parts (Table 5.2): an opening orchestral section, a solo piano cadenza, and a concluding orchestral section featuring the love theme. This reduction, about three minutes in length, includes four of the five primary themes plus the "tag" motif identified by David Schiff in his analysis of the work.<sup>115</sup> The measure numbers in Table 5.2 relate to Ferde Grofé's orchestral arrangement released by Harms in 1942.<sup>116</sup>

The final scene mirrors the earlier Aeolian Hall scene, when Alda's Gershwin had debuted the Rhapsody, but now Levant sits at the keys in the composer's permanent absence. Whiteman in a white tuxedo turns to the symphony orchestra, which sits on risers and nearly fills

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<sup>112</sup> For more, see Chapter One.

<sup>113</sup> I consider this an interrupted performance as the two songs are actually dissolved together in the soundtrack.

<sup>114</sup> Greg Gormick, liner notes, "George Gershwin Vol. 2: 'Gershwin & Friends' Original Recordings 1927-1951," 1 compact disc ([London]: Naxos, 2003).

<sup>115</sup> David Schiff, *Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 14.

<sup>116</sup> George Gershwin, *Rhapsody in Blue*, scored by Ferde Grofé, (New York: Harms, 1942).

the entire space of the Lewisohn shell. As the clarinet begins the opening presentation of the ritornello theme (Figure 5.8) followed immediately by the stride theme in the horns (Figure 5.9), the camera slowly pulls out to reveal the capacity audience seated on the field and in the concrete stands. Levant begins to play, and the New York skyline appears in the distance (Figure 5.12). The camera cuts to the sad onlooking faces of Ira and Lee Gershwin (Herbert Rudley and Julie Bishop), and George White. Levant jumps directly to the end of a piano cadenza (m. 280-287), which features the shuffle theme (Figure 5.10). Watching from the audience, Gershwin's filmic girlfriend (Joan Leslie) looks on in awe and suddenly sees the ghost of the composer materialize in Levant's place at the piano (Figure 5.12). Cutting to an overhead view, the camera focuses on Levant's hands at the keyboard (Figure 5.12) as the love theme begins (Figure 5.11). The camera pulls out as the sonorous waves ascend to the skies (Figure 5.12) and the final chords of the Rhapsody bring the film to its close.<sup>117</sup>

Orchestra	Solo Piano	Orchestra		
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>Cadenza</b>	<b>Love Theme</b>	<b>Agitato and Molto Marcato</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>
1-38	280-302	325-342	461-464, 481-486	508-510
Bb maj → Eb maj → Ab maj → F# min	Db maj → V of E maj	E maj	C maj	Bb maj

**Table 5.2. Formal Analysis of the Truncated Rhapsody in *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945).**



**Figure 5.8. Gershwin, *Rhapsody in Blue*, Ritornello Theme.**

<sup>117</sup> Rapper, *Rhapsody in Blue*, 1 DVD [2:15:18-2:20:14].



Figure 5.9. Gershwin, *Rhapsody in Blue*, Stride Theme.



Figure 5.10. Gershwin, *Rhapsody in Blue*, Shuffle Theme, mm. 280-281, piano.



Figure 5.11. Gershwin, *Rhapsody in Blue*, Love Theme.

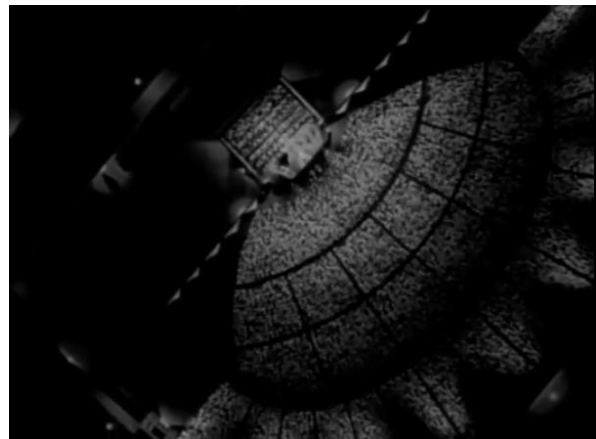
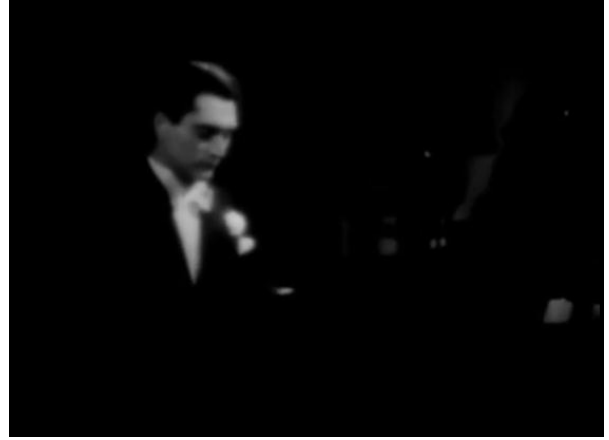


Figure 5.12. Levant's Performance of *Rhapsody in Blue* in Warner Bros.' *Rhapsody in Blue*.

The finale presentation of the *Rhapsody in Blue* serves multiple purposes. Like the numerous all-Gershwin concerts that occurred across the United States at that time, like the Gershwin Nights at Lewisohn Stadium, the work closes a celebratory memorial to the composer. Placement of the work at the end of the film, the moment that audiences would remember, encapsulates the importance of the work and its popularity with American audiences. Secondly, choosing Lewisohn Stadium as the setting of the final performance, when Warner Bros. could have selected the nearer and more convenient Hollywood Bowl, demonstrates the contemporary

importance of the stadium as a space for performance of Gershwin's orchestral music. Finally, the filmmakers quite overtly push the popular myth that although the composer has died, America still has Levant, who has actually absorbed Gershwin's spirit and continues to perpetuate the legacy of his piano music. With the original source now inaccessible, the performer assumes the aura of the creator.

### **5.5 *You Were Meant for Me* (1947)**

Two years after the release of Warner Bros.' Gershwin biography, Levant continued to play the filmic role of the Gershwin pianist and presented his own solo-piano arrangement of the Concerto in F in Fox's *You Were Meant for Me* (1947), starring Dan Dailey and Jeanne Crain. Set in the 1920s, young Indiana girl Peggy Mayhew (Crain) attends a Bloomington concert featuring dance band leader Chuck Arnold (Dailey). Oscar Hoffmann (Levant), Arnold's band manager who is a generation older, warns Peggy that Arnold keeps a busy and rigorous schedule that may not equip him for married life. She ignores Hoffmann's warnings and soon, after experiencing life on the road with the added weight of the Depression and the alienation of her hometown friends, longs for a return to her rural home. Chuck eventually abandons Peggy, but they reconcile once the Depression subsides and he reclaims his stage success. In addition to the concerto, the soundtrack includes numerous songs from the 1920s, like "Ain't She Sweet" (Milton Ager and Jack Yellen, 1927), "I'll Get By" (Fred E. Ahlert and Roy Turk, 1928), and "Happy Days Are Here Again" (Ager and Yellen, 1929). Levant did not join the film until late in its development. As I discuss below, due to Levant's involvement, the concerto became part of

the film's period-accurate soundtrack, and Levant continued to bring Gershwin's piano music to the broadest possible audiences.

Early draft screenplays and scripts for *You Were Meant for Me*, outlined and written by Valentine Davies and Elick Moll, indicate that the role of Arnold's manager was not originally conceived with Levant (or any particular musical celebrity) in mind. Only after Levant signed a contract with Fox did Gershwin's concerto enter the picture. Levant's character, initially named Julius, first appears in a step sheet dated 10 April 1947.<sup>118</sup> By May 1947, Julius still had no featured solo piano scene.<sup>119</sup> The first version of the scene that would eventually become Levant's performance of the concerto appears in the 8 August 1947 draft of the script. The draft script indicates that Peggy enters the room wherein Julius plays a recognizable piece, "at least to the more literate members of the audience." The script further describes the music as "a piece whose melancholy beauty is appropriately framed in the dusk and shadow of the empty ballroom."<sup>120</sup> Davies and Moll do not offer any suggestions for what this piece could eventually be. On 3 September 1947, the *Los Angeles Times* announced that Levant would participate in the production of *The Flapper Age*, now under the working title of *The Flaming Age*.<sup>121</sup> With an established concert pianist added to the cast, Darryl Zanuck ordered changes to the script to indicate that Julius, from his introduction, can play the piano.<sup>122</sup> With the final version of the script, dated 11 September, "Julius" became "Oscar." Julius's ballroom scene remains largely as written in the previous script draft. The decision to record the Concerto in F for this moment

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<sup>118</sup> Valentine Davies and Elick Moll, *The Flapper Age*, step sheet, 10 Apr 1947 (USC Cinematic Arts Library, 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox Collection, "You Were Meant for Me" [USCMeant]).

<sup>119</sup> Valentine Davies and Elick Moll, *The Flapper Age*, screenplay, 2 May 1947 (USCMeant).

<sup>120</sup> Valentine Davies and Elick Moll, *The Flapper Age*, temporary script, 8 Aug 1947 (USCMeant).

<sup>121</sup> Philip K. Scheuer, "Drama and Film: Levant in 'Flaming Age;' Carol Bjorkman Signed," *LAT*, 3 Sep 1947.

<sup>122</sup> "Conference with Zanuck on temp script 8 Aug.," internal memo, 8 Sept 1947 (USCMeant).



occurred sometime after mid-September, when shooting began.<sup>123</sup> On 13 October 1947, the *North Hollywood Valley Times* reported that *The Flaming Age* would feature Levant in a performance of Gershwin's Concerto in F.<sup>124</sup>

Levant's condensed solo piano performance of material from all three movements of the Concerto in F can be understood as a medley of highlights that opens with slow and contemplative material from the second movement, followed by quick, virtuosic, and percussive material from the first and third movements. The measure numbers provided in Table 5.3 refer to the score published by Harms in 1942.<sup>125</sup> Levant's condensed version, which lasts for about four minutes, includes several of the memorable themes from the concerto, including two of the blues themes from the second movement and the rondo theme from the third movement. Levant does not include the orchestra's Charleston theme nor the piano's primary theme from the first movement. In all likelihood, this condensed version of the concerto may be the same solo version of the concerto that Levant often included in his "talking recitals."

Levant's solo piano performance opens with the second movement's trumpet melody in D-flat major beginning at m. 6 (Figure 5.13). The piano is first heard as distant music while Peggy, late at night, looks out her hotel room window at the rain-soaked streets of Des Moines. The camera follows her to the bed, where Chuck lies sleeping. She turns toward the sound of the music and walks toward the hotel lobby. The camera follows her, where she finds Oscar seated at the lobby's piano (Figure 5.18). Here, Oscar skips to a fragment of the trumpet theme (m. 123), a passage that modulates to B minor. Peggy slowly walks into the room and sits at a circular lobby

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<sup>123</sup> Valentine Davies and Elick Moll, *The Flaming Age*, final script, 11 Sept 1947 (USCMeant). According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Lloyd Bacon was set to begin directing the film on 15 September. Scheuer, *LAT*, 3 Sep 1947.

<sup>124</sup> Reba and Bonnie Churchill, "Hollywood Diary," *North Hollywood Valley Times*, 13 Oct 1947.

<sup>125</sup> George Gershwin, *Concerto in F for Piano and Orchestra*, ed. F. Campbell-Watson (New York: Harms, 1942).

sofa screen right, while Oscar continues to play, unaware of her presence. He jumps from the trumpet theme to the orchestra's second blues theme from the second movement (Figure 5.14). As the theme continues, the camera cuts first to a medium shot of Peggy (who sits with a transfixed gaze) then to a medium shot of Levant in profile facing screen right (Figure 5.18). Once the theme reaches a C dominant chord (a tritone substitution), Oscar shifts to material from the first movement and his pace accelerates. Passages of unstable transitional material lead to the quirky Poco meno theme in D-flat major with a Charleston rhythm in the left hand (Figure 5.15). Peggy continues to look on in silent wonder. Oscar then jumps to a spritely Animato passage, which leads to a dominant lock on C. This sets up the arrival of the third movement's jackhammer rondo theme in F minor (Figure 5.16), followed by the appearance of the movement's third theme (Figure 5.17) in F major, Bb major, and C major. This leads to the return of the rondo theme in F minor. Oscar concludes his condensed performance of the concerto with a flashy glissando and immediately lights a cigarette.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Bacon, *You Were Meant for Me*, 1 DVD [53:37-57:21].

2nd mvt.		1st mvt.			3rd mvt.		
Trumpet Blues Theme	Second Orchestral Blues Theme	Transitional material	Poco meno	Animato	Rondo Theme	Third Theme	Rondo Theme
6-19, 123-130	141-148	91-94, 113-119	302-326	422-427, 434-439	21-30	175-183, 233-240, 309-322	361-384
Db maj → B min	B min		Db maj	→ V of F	F min	F maj → Bb maj → C maj	F min → F maj

Table 5.3. Formal Analysis of Levant's Truncated Version of Concerto in F, *You Were Meant for Me*.



Figure 5.13. Gershwin, Concerto in F, 2nd mvt., trumpet blues theme.



Figure 5.14. Gershwin, Concerto in F, 2nd mvt., orchestra's second blues theme.



Figure 5.15. Gershwin, Concerto in F, 1st mvt., poco meno theme.



Figure 5.16. Gershwin, Concerto in F, 3rd mvt., rondo theme.



Figure 5.17. Gershwin, Concerto in F, 3rd mvt., third theme.



**Figure 5.18.** Oscar and Peggy's Gaze, *You Were Meant for Me*.

The scene serves several functions. First, narratively, it reveals that Oscar Hoffman is actually an accomplished pianist, capable of playing very moving bluesy music as well as acrobatic, virtuosic passages. At the beginning of the film, during a performance of Chuck Arnold and his Sophisticates, Arnold brings Hoffman onstage to draw a prize-winning number from a fishbowl. As he is blindfolded, the humiliated Hoffman moans: "To think I gave up a concert career for this. What a disgusting way of making a living. My old piano teacher should

see me now. He'd turn over in his Turkish bath."<sup>127</sup> Secondly, the scene invites the audience to identify with and share in Peggy's gaze. The viewers eavesdrop on a private performance and temporarily become witnesses to a Levant recital. Thirdly, the scene capitalizes on Levant's popularity as a pianist, particularly of Gershwin's Concerto in F. Although the film names neither Gershwin nor the piece, announcements and reviews of the film did. For example, the *New York Daily News* said, "You'll no doubt thrill at Oscar Levant's expert fingering of the late George Gershwin's Piano Concerto in F, for Levant has a beguiling way of making a piano sing."<sup>128</sup> Finally, the scene brought Gershwin's concerto back into movie theaters, granting American audiences easy and affordable access to his music.

## **5.6 *An American in Paris* (1951)**

The third film to feature a performance of music from the Concerto in F came several years later and also featured Levant as the star pianist. In early April 1950, Levant signed a contract with Metro Goldwyn Mayer to appear in the Arthur Freed production *An American in Paris*, a colorful motion picture with an all-Gershwin score (arranged by Saul Chaplin) and Gene Kelly as its star. Freed selected Levant to play the role of Adam Cook, an unrecognized American concert pianist living in a pint-sized Paris apartment beneath Jerry Mulligan (Kelly), another American expatriate and struggling painter. Freed based Adam on the American composer David Diamond, who "always got scholarships and went to Europe," and like Levant

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<sup>127</sup> Bacon, *You Were Meant for Me*, 1 DVD [5:44-6:18].

<sup>128</sup> "Long-Absent Star Returns," *New York Daily News*, 25 Jan 1948.

“knew the Gershwins too.”<sup>129</sup> According to Levant’s contract, MGM paid him \$5000 a week (\$54,000 in 2019).<sup>130</sup> According to the MGM time schedules, Levant first reported for rehearsals at MGM on 17 July.

Freed selected Levant as the pianist for his grand Gershwin musical because he sought an authentic “Gershwin sound.” As an artist with personal ties to the composer and years of experience playing his music, Levant butted heads with MGM orchestra conductor Johnny Green and Freed, who had their own ideas about the construction and execution of the “real” Gershwin sound. According to Green, Levant’s voice eventually surmounted theirs:

How do you make a Gershwin sound? I’d have to say, frankly, I think it’s years of experience. Like Oscar, I too was brought up by George Gershwin. Oscar, however, as far as public image was concerned, spoke for Gershwin. In 1950, Oscar was playing several Gershwin concerts with me on the podium. [...] We had some pitched battles, Oscar and I. [...] Now, we get into *An American in Paris*, at the studio, recording the Concerto in F, and again I started being the maestro. Well, Freed hit me with every Sherman tank, every Louisville slugger in the place. Never was there a conductor so put in his place, because Oscar was it.<sup>131</sup>

Although Levant’s big musical moment in the film is a five-minute long dream sequence performance of Gershwin’s Concerto in F, the decision to include this piece occurred after shooting had commenced and at Levant’s request. Freed initially conceived the idea of *An American in Paris* as a vehicle that featured only music from Gershwin’s songs; he did not want any of Gershwin’s music for orchestra in the film. The extended ballet scene at the film’s conclusion, which features music from Gershwin’s tone poem *An American in Paris*, was a late addition. Chaplin explains that Freed discarded static orchestral performances early on because

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<sup>129</sup> Quoted in Donald Knox, *The Magic Factory: How MGM Made An American in Paris* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 38.

<sup>130</sup> Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures, Oscar Levant contract for *An American in Paris*, 17 March 1950 (University of Southern California, Doheny Library, Film and Television Archives, Oscar Levant Papers, box 1, folder 29).

<sup>131</sup> Quoted in Knox, 89.

he wanted each musical number to burst with energy and movement: “If it didn’t have showmanship, the number wasn’t in it. There’s not a single number in that entire picture where somebody just stands by a piano and sings. Everything had showmanship connected with it.”<sup>132</sup> Initially, Freed slated Levant to record the Gershwin song “Liza” on 31 August for a big five-minute number.<sup>133</sup> Director Vincente Minelli later claimed that Freed wanted Levant to play a medley of tunes in the film.<sup>134</sup> In any case, according to Minelli, Levant rebuffed Freed’s ideas for him:

[Levant] came over to my office one night after shooting and said, “Oh God! If I could only convince [Freed] to play the concerto.” A wild thing, [Levant] said, “Maybe I play all the instruments.” And I said, “That’s a marvelous idea!”

Levant pitched to Minelli his idea of a dream sequence that would feature him as the concerto pianist, as well as the conductor, every musician in the orchestra, and an adoring fan from a spectator’s box. The novelty and humor of this concept aligned with the showmanship factor that Freed demanded, elevating an immobile orchestra’s performance with entertaining elements of the impishly unexpected. Levant devised a way to include in a major Hollywood musical the concerto he had been championing for years, guaranteeing the work an audience even broader than concert-hall regulars, the Lewisohn Stadium crowd, and his fans. As Chaplin says, “Had Oscar not come up with that idea, there’s every chance that the concerto might not be in the picture.”<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Quoted in Knox, 54.

<sup>133</sup> Johnny Green, “Pre-Recordings to be Made Prior to July 24th and/or Departure of Company for France,” in *An American in Paris* script (June 1950), Bill Ryan’s copy (USC Cinematic Arts Library, Arthur Freed Papers, “An American in Paris,” box 1, folder 4).

<sup>134</sup> Knox, 53.

<sup>135</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 54.





**Figure 5.19. Raoul Dufy’s *Le Grand Orchestre* (1942), and Levant with the MGM Studio Orchestra in *An American in Paris* (1951).**

Like Levant’s other filmic presentations of piano concertos, Adam Cook’s dream concert of Gershwin’s Concerto in F is a condensed performance. The scene only includes music from the third movement. However, Gershwin introduces variants of themes from both of the preceding movements into his rondo finale. Thus, memorable musical moments from the complete concerto occur during the *An American in Paris* dream sequence. The scene shrinks the third movement from seven minutes to four-and-a-half minutes but contains thematic material from all three movements. In this sense, the reduction is a middlebrow form that simplifies a large piano concerto to its quotable and memorable moments.

The scene begins with a dissolve from Cook’s bedroom to a darkened concert hall, the dissonant strains of a tuning orchestra in the air. Minnelli conceived a stage “all in gold” based on paintings of symphony orchestras by French Fauvist artist Raoul Dufy. In Figure 5.19, compare Dufy’s *Le Grand Orchestre* (1942) to the *mise en scène* of the dream stage. Only Levant’s face is identifiable, while the orchestra sits silhouetted surrounded by a hazy golden glow. The shadows of the string basses loom large and elongated along the back wall. The

performance opens with the jackhammer main theme in F minor (Figure 5.16), followed by an episode with an orchestral variant of the piano's primary theme from the first movement (Figure 5.20). After a brief return to the rondo theme (m. 107), eight measures of the score are cut, leading to a new theme suddenly in the parallel major (Figure 5.21). Here, the camera cuts from Levant at the piano to the conductor, whose face lies in shadow. He suddenly leans forward into the light to reveal Levant's own scowling face (Figure 5.24). The presence of an Adam Cook double verifies that he only imagines his concert debut. Then, six modulating block chords in the winds prepare a fourth theme, a variant of the second blues theme from the second movement heard in the strings (Figure 5.22).<sup>136</sup> The film emphasizes the appearance of this new theme in B-flat major with a special effects shot of five Oscar Levants sawing at their violins against a black background (Figure 5.24). After a brief return of the third theme (m. 225-240), the piano and xylophone (also revealed to be played by Levant) bring back the rondo theme in the key of B-flat minor (m. 257-284). Following a modulation to the mediant key of A-flat major, the strings introduce a fifth and final theme (mm. 285-300), the piano's main theme from the second movement (Figure 5.23). The third theme returns and proceeds to a dominant lock (m. 315-318), followed by eleven block chords that complete the retransition to the original key of F minor. From here, the first and second themes sound a final time in the home key. A modal shift in the coda (m. 385-end) concludes the piece in F major. Pianist Levant and conductor Levant turn to the applauding audience. The camera cuts to yet another Levant wildly applauding and shouting "bravo" from a private box (Figure 5.24).<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> As is the case here, Gershwin often uses a fragment of the rondo theme to introduce a new idea.

<sup>137</sup> Minnelli, *An American in Paris*, 1 DVD [1:05:16-1:10:16].

A	B	A	C	D	C	A	E	C	retrans	B, A
21-74	75-106	107-122	131-138, 175-178, 202-204	205-224	225-240	257-284	285-300	301-308	309-322	337-end
F min			F maj	Bb maj	Bb min → Ab maj		C maj		F min → F maj	

**Table 5.4. Formal Analysis of the Dream Sequence Concerto in F in *An American in Paris*.**

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Piano, Cello, and Double Bass. The score is in 3/4 time and F major. It is divided into two systems. The first system contains measures 75-82. The Piano part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents. The Cello part has a similar rhythmic pattern with a melodic line. The Double Bass part provides a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The second system starts at measure 5 and continues the same patterns.

**Figure 5.20. Gershwin, Concerto in F, 3rd mvt., mm. 75-82, piano + cello + double bass.**

Figure 5.21 shows a musical score for six instruments: Bass Clarinet, Bassoon, Horn in F, Trumpet in Bb, Violin, and Cello. The score is in 3/4 time and F major. The Bass Clarinet part features a melodic line with a long note in the first measure. The Bassoon part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Horn in F part has a melodic line with a long note. The Trumpet in Bb part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Violin part has a melodic line with a long note. The Cello part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

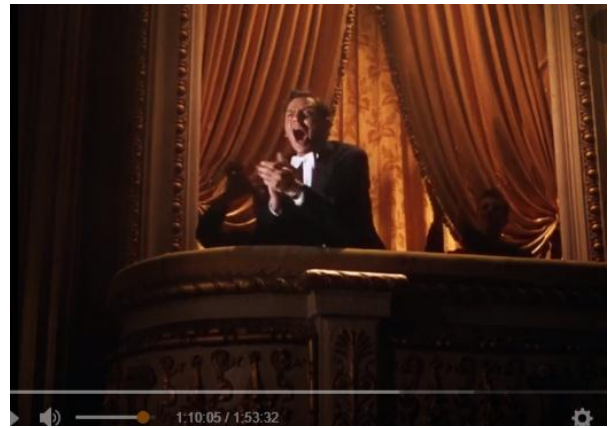
Figure 5.21. Gershwin, Concerto in F, 3rd mvt., mm. 131-134.

Figure 5.22 shows a musical score for piano accompaniment. The score is in 3/4 time and F major. The right hand has a melodic line with a long note in the first measure. The left hand has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

Figure 5.22. Gershwin, Concerto in F, 3rd mvt., mm. 208-213, strings.

Figure 5.23 shows a musical score for four string instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello. The score is in 3/4 time and F major. The Violin I part has a melodic line with a long note in the first measure. The Violin II part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Viola part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Cello part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

Figure 5.23. Gershwin, Concerto in F, 3rd mvt., mm. 284-291, strings.



**Figure 5.24. Doppelgänger Oscar Levants in *An American in Paris*.**

In addition to presenting Gershwin's themes within a short timeframe, the dream sequence serves additional functions. It touches upon the contemporary understanding of Levant as the leading interpreter of the Concerto in F. The scene burlesques Levant's popular association with the work by revealing Levant (in the guise of Adam Cook) as the performer of numerous instruments in the orchestra, as well as the conductor. Many present-day viewers of the film may consider the dream sequence out of place, as it is a presentation of instrumental music that interrupts the narrative of a film that largely features Gershwin's songs. Levant's fame faded once he retired in the mid-1950s, however the average American in the 1950s (the

middlebrow target audience for Freed's musicals) knew who Oscar Levant was. Many of them also knew about his regular performances of the Concerto in F with symphony orchestras, in his recitals, and at the annual Lewisohn Stadium Gershwin Nights. Even if twenty-first century audiences do not remember Levant, the scene still works as a comic interlude. A couple years ago, I attended a screening of *An American in Paris* at St. Louis's Powell Hall, with the score performed live by the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. The audience responded enthusiastically to the dream sequence, laughing at the numerous Levants and even clapping at the end. The audience's laughter redoubled with the appearance of the applauding Levant in the box seat. For a brief, wonderful instant, spectator and cinema, the real and the fictional, had merged.

## 5.7 Conclusion

From the early 1940s to the mid-1950s, Levant appeared in many film musicals and serious melodramas to play characters based on his own real-life persona, the impudent virtuoso. Americans first became acquainted with his extensive musical memory and his sarcastic wit through his regular appearances on the radio show *Information Please* and his 1940 autobiography *A Smattering of Ignorance*. Hollywood producers recognized a lucrative commodity in Levant and placed him in serious and comedic roles that closely paralleled his own popular personality, creating a near indistinguishability between reality and fiction. However, Levant exercised an unusual degree of control over his screen persona, as he frequently improvised his lines and selected much of the music that he performed onscreen. As a film musician, he accompanied vocalists and dancers, sang in humorous duets and ensemble numbers, and even danced a little. Nevertheless, Levant most mightily articulated his musical

star power through the piano, particularly his performances of Gershwin's music. Indeed, Levant was the only concert pianist in the 1940s and early 1950s to play onscreen the *Rhapsody in Blue*, the Concerto in F, and the Piano Preludes. Levant's popular association with these works combined with his control over his film persona ensured that mass audiences accessed this music in movie theaters. First, the finale of Warner Bros' *Rhapsody in Blue* re-imagines the 1937 Lewisohn Stadium Gershwin memorial as a moment when Levant symbolically inherited Gershwin's musical spirit and assumed the responsibility of leading popular performer of his piano works for years to come. In Fox's *You Were Meant for Me*, Levant played a solo-piano reduction of the Concerto in F, an abridgement probably similar to the one he played many times in his talking recitals. Finally, Levant convinced MGM to include music from the concerto in the colorful *An American in Paris*, a musical extravaganza that focused primarily on Gershwin's songs.

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# Appendix A

## Oscar Levant's Songs

This appendix provides the titles of Levant's published and unpublished songs. It also details whether Levant wrote the song for a motion picture or Broadway show. When possible, the songs are listed with their Library of Congress copyright entry numbers. This list does not include the unpublished music that Levant wrote for the opera scenes in *Charlie Chan at the Opera* (1936).

1927. "Keep Sweeping the Cobwebs Off the Moon." Sam Lewis and Joe Young, lyrics. Remick. E pub. 679705.

1928. "Just a Little Way Away From Home." Sam Lewis and Joe Young, lyrics. Remick. E 690996.

1928. "If You Want the Rainbow (You Must Have the Rain)." Billy Rose and Mort Dixon, lyrics. Remick. E 699209.

[1929?]. "It's Gorgeous to Be Graceful." Billy Rose, lyrics.

1929. "Lovable and Sweet" (from *Street Girl*). Sidney Clare, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 8138.

1929. "My Dream Memory" (from *Street Girl*). Sidney Clare, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 8139.

1929. "Broken Up Tune" (from *Street Girl*). Sidney Clare, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 8140.

1929. "To Me You're [She's] Marvelous" (from *Half Marriage*). Sidney Clare, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 9407.

1929. "After the Clouds Roll By" (from *Half Marriage*). Sidney Clare, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 9408.

1929. "Gay Love" (from *The Delightful Rogue*). Sidney Clare, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 9611.

1929. "With You - With Me" (from *Tanned Legs*). Sidney Clare, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 10405.

1929. "You're Responsible" (from *Tanned Legs*). Sidney Clare, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 10406.

1929. "Someone" (from *Jazz Heaven*). Sidney Clare, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 10739.

1929. "Tanned Legs" (from *Tanned Legs*). Sidney Clare, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 11127.

1929. "Come in the Water, the Water is Fine" (from *Tanned Legs*). Sidney Clare, lyrics.

1929. "It's All of Her" (from *Half Marriage*). Sidney Clare, lyrics.

1929. "Love to Take a Lesson from You" (from *Tanned Legs*). Sidney Clare, lyrics.

1929. "Take a Look at Her Now" (from *Side Street*). Sidney Clare, lyrics.

1930. "Until Love Comes Along" (from *Love Comes Along*). Sidney Clare, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 12359.

1930. "Night Winds" (from *Love Comes Along*). Sidney Clare, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 12360.

1930. "Talk With Your [My] Heel and Toe" (from *Ripples*). Irving Caesar, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 13432.

1930. "There's Nothing Wrong With a Kiss" (from *Ripples*). Irving Caesar and Graham John, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 13433.

1930. "Is It Love?" (from *Ripples*). Irving Caesar, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 13434.

1930. "Babykins" (from *Ripples*). Irving Caesar and Graham John, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 13435.

1930. "All My Life" (from *Leathernecker*). Sidney Clare, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 18117.

1930. "Shake It Off and Smile" (from *Leathernecker*). Sidney Clare, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 19012.

1930. "Careless Kisses" (from *Leathernecker*). Sidney Clare, lyrics.

1930. "I'm a Simple Maid" (from *Love Comes Along*).

1930. "Mighty Nice and So Particular" (from *Leathernecker*). Sidney Clare, lyrics.

1930. "Sailor Song" (from *Love Comes Along*).

1930. "Save Your Tears." E. Y. Harburg, lyrics.

1931. "Lady Play Your Mandolin." Irving Caesar, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 20376.



1931. "Say It." E. Y. Harburg. Harms. E pub. 22666.

1931. "It's a Happy World." E. Y. Harburg, lyrics. Famous Music Corp. E pub. 26053.

1932. "We've Got the Moon and Sixpence" (from *Out of the Bottle*). Clifford Grey, lyrics. Chappell. E for. 23444.

1932. "Everything But You" (from *Out of the Bottle*). Clifford Grey, lyrics. Chappell. E for. 23445.

1932. "If It Happened to You" (from *Out of the Bottle*) Vivian Ellis, lyrics. Chappell. E for. 23984.

1932. "Pretty Little Words." E. Y. Harburg, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 28247.

1932. "Don't Go to Sleep." Arthur Freed, lyrics. Remick. E pub. 33277.

1932. "Senorita Save a Dance for Me." Edward Heyman, lyrics. Famous music. E unp. 64233.

1932. "I Doesn't Rhyme With You." Edward Heyman, lyrics. Famous music. E unp. 64763.

1932. "How about a Drinkie?" (from *Out of the Bottle*).

1932. "When the Drum Goes Wham" (from *Out of the Bottle*).

1932. "Please" (from *Out of the Bottle*). Clifford Grey, lyrics.

1933. "You Are My Ideal." Arthur Freed, lyrics. Keit-Engel. E pub. 34573.

1933. "My Dixie Hi-Dee Hideaway." Roy Turk, lyrics. Santly Bros. E unp. 67370.

1933. "My Hill Billy." Roy Turk, lyrics. Feist. E unp. 67818.

1933. "I'd Do It Again." Gus Kahn, lyrics. MGM. E unp. 69939.

1933. "Send a Little Melody Around the World." Gus Kahn, lyrics. MGM. E unp. 69940.

1933. "Life is a Dance." Gus Kahn, lyrics. MGM. E unp. 70638.

1933. "Eight Little Darkies on a Fence." Gus Kahn, lyrics. MGM. E unp. 70645.

1933. "Three Musketeers." Gus Kahn, lyrics. MGM. E unp. 70646.

1934. "Blame it on My Youth." Harms. E pub. 44625.

1935. "Don't Mention Love to Me" (from *In Person*). Dorothy Fields, lyrics. E pub. 20077.

1935. "Pardon My Love." Berlin. E pub. 46946.

1935. "You Wrote Your Name in My Heart." Mitchell Parish, lyrics. Mills. E pub. 48081.

1935. "There's an Eden in Sweden." Jack Meskill, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 48306.

1935. "In Other Words I'm In Love" (from *Black Sheep*). Sidney Clare, lyrics. Movietone. E pub. 49110.

1935. "Steamboat 'Round the Bend" (from *Steamboat 'Round the Bend*). Sidney Clare, lyrics. Movietone. E pub. 50752.

1935. "Out of Sight, Out of Mind" (from *In Person*). Dorothy Fields, lyrics. Berlin. E pub. 50876

1935. "Honey Chile" (from *Music is Magic*). Sidney Clare, lyrics. Movietone. E pub. 51414.

1935. "Love is Smiling at Me" (from *Music is Magic*). Sidney Clare, lyrics. Movietone. E pub. 51652.

1935. "Got a New Lease on Life" (from *In Person*). Dorothy Fields, lyrics. Berlin. E pub. 514612.

1935. "Good Friends, But Strangers at Heart." Don George, lyrics. Berlin. E unpub. 99834.

1935. "Wash Yo' Hands" [unused song for "Steamboat 'Round the Bend"]. Sidney Clare, lyrics. Movietone. E unp. 106500.

1935. "Blue Parade." Bob Rothberg, lyrics. Berlin. E unp. 113820.

1936. "Lazy Weather." Irving Kahal, lyrics. Marlo. E pub. 55222.

1936. "All Dressed Up and No Place to Go." Chappell. Edward Heyman, lyrics. Chappell. E pub. 55351.

1936. "Take Your Time." Joe Young, lyrics. Vogel. E pub. 55597.

1936. "Until Today." Benny Davis and J. Fred Coots, lyrics. Marlo. E pub. 56148.

1936. "That's How Virginia Began." Irving Kahal, lyrics. Words & Music Inc. E pub. 56748.

1938. "Let Me Borrow An Hour of To-Morrow." Stanley Adams, lyrics. Chappell. E pub. 12092.

1938. "After Dinner Speech." Stanley Adams, lyrics. Chappell. E pub. 17150.
1938. "How Much Do You Mean To Me." Stanley Adams, lyrics. Olman. E pub. 23786.
1938. "There's A Strange Little Change in Me." Stanley Adams, lyrics. E pub. 66601.
1938. "Little Pal of the Alley." Stanley Adams, lyrics. Crawford. E pub. 68139.
1938. "You Had an Ev'ning to Spare." Stanley Adams, lyrics. Chappell. E pub. 68209.
1938. "Mirrors Don't Tell Lies." Stanley Adams, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 70071.
1938. "Wacky Dust." Stanley Adams, lyrics. Robbins. E pub. 70385.
1938. "As If I Didn't Know." Stanley Adams, lyrics. E unp. 164068.
1938. "That Girl Named Flo." Charles Tobias, lyrics. Berlin. E unp. 182995.
- [1938]. "Young in Heart." Stanley Adams, lyrics.<sup>1</sup>
1939. "A Fool and His Honey are Soon Parted." Jack Lawrence, lyrics. Larry Spier, Inc. E pub. 73856.
1939. "You Gotta Do Better Than That." Stanley Adams, lyrics. Ager, Yellen & Bornstein. E pub. 73911.
1939. "Last Night a Miracle Happened." Jack Lawrence, lyrics. Larry Spier, Inc. E pub. 73960.
1939. "[We're] Made for Each Other." Harry Tobias, lyrics. Crawford. E pub. 74387.
1939. "Then Came the Rain." Charlie Tobias, lyrics. Harms. E pub. 74836.
1939. "Asleep or Awake." Jack Lawrence, lyrics. Lincoln. E pub. 77430.
1939. "I Have Got Something for You to Sing" (from *Pete Roleum and His Cousins*).

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<sup>1</sup> David O. Selznick asked Levant to write a title song for the film *Young in Heart* (1938). Levant's song went unused. Nathan Platte, *Making Music in Selznick's Hollywood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 140.

## Appendix B

### Listings for *The Hoffman Ginger Ale Hour*, 25 March – 30 December 1932

The *Hoffman Ginger Ale Hour* premiered on New York's WOR at 9 PM on Friday, 25 September 1931. Baritone Nelson Eddy headlined the show with Josef Pasternak leading a full orchestra.<sup>1</sup> The show featured a miscellany of art song, classical music, and extracts from opera, operetta and stage musicals. When Bill Daly took over for Pasternak, Oscar Levant was given his own regular segment of piano music. Other featured artists included sopranos Carol Deis and Margaret Speaks, contralto Veronica Wiggins, and tenor Harold Hansen.

This appendix lists the music performed on each episode of the *Hoffman Ginger Ale Hour* from 25 March 1932 (Daly's first episode) to the finale on 30 December 1932. This information, available in radio listings in various New York and Brooklyn newspapers, helps the reader understand the sort of variety program that regularly featured Gershwin's music alongside excerpts of classical music. Variety programs like *The Hoffman Ginger Ale Hour* helped popularize and canonize Gershwin at a time when Americans used the radio to improve their understanding of art music. Segments featuring Levant, who usually played selections from canonic composers, are bolded below.

#### 25 March 1932<sup>2</sup>

Eddy, Quartet and Orch	"Drums in My Heart" from <i>Through the Years</i> , Youmans
Orch with Vocal Interlude	"I'll See You Again" from <i>Bitter Sweet</i> , Coward
Eddy and Orch	"Toreador Song" from <i>Carmen</i> , Bizet
Orchestra	Largo, Handel
Deis and Orch	"Italian Street Song" from <i>Naughty Marietta</i> , Herbert
Wiggins and Orch	"Chinese Lullaby" from <i>East is West</i> , Bowers
Hansen with Orch	"Because," d'Hardelot
Eddy with Orch	"Boots," Felman
<b>Orchestra and Two Pianos</b> <b>[Levant and Daly]</b>	<b>"Song of the Flame," Gershwin</b>
Ensemble	"Something Goes Ting-A-Ling" from <i>High-Jinks</i> , Friml
	"Song of the Mounties" from <i>Rose Marie</i> , Friml
Hansen with Orch	"Questa o quella" from <i>Rigoletto</i> , Verdi
Deis with Orch	"From the Land of the Sky Blue Water," Cadman
Eddy with Orch	"Song of the Volga Boatmen," Russian Folksong

<sup>1</sup> "Radio Programs," *Brooklyn Times Union*, 25 Sept 1931.

<sup>2</sup> "Radio Programs," *Brooklyn Times Union*, 25 Mar 1932.

**Levant, piano solo**  
Wiggins with Orch  
Hansen with Orch  
Ensemble

**Etude in G-flat major, op. 10 “Black Keys”, Chopin**  
“Agnus Dei,” Bizet  
“Rio Rita” from *Rio Rita*, Tierney  
Quartet from *Rigoletto*, Verdi

**1 Apr 1932**<sup>3</sup>

Ensemble  
Theodore Webb, baritone  
Mary McCoy and Hansen  
Orchestra  
Quartet  
Hansen and Orch  
Orchestra  
McCoy and Orch  
Webb and Orch  
Orchestra  
Wiggins, Hansen and Orch  
Voices and Orch  
Webb, Quartet and Orch  
Orch with Vocal Interlude  
McCoy with Orch  
Hansen with Orch  
Voices and Orch  
String Quartet  
Orchestra  
**Piano [Levant]**  
Orchestra and Ensemble  
Wiggins and Orch  
Webb and Orch  
McCoy, Hansen and Orch  
Orchestra and Voices

Group from *The Desert Song*, Romberg  
“Riff Song”  
“One Alone”  
“The Desert Song”  
“Riff Song”  
“Vesti la giubba” from *Pagliacci*, Leoncavallo  
“Adios,” Madriguera  
“Sweethearts” from *Sweethearts*, Herbert  
“Give a Man a Horse He Can Ride,” O’Hara  
March and Procession of Bacchus from *Sylvia*, Delibes  
“Beautiful Isle of Our Dreams” from *The Red Mill*, Herbert  
Excerpts from *Iolanthe*, Sullivan  
“Goodbye, Little Captain of My Heart” from *Das Lied ist Aus*, Stolz  
“Poor Butterfly,” Hubbell  
“Clavelitos,” Valverde  
“For You Alone,” Geehl  
“Variations on an Old German Folk Song,” Ochs  
“In the styles of Haydn”  
“[In the styles of] Verdi”  
**“[In the styles of] Strauss”**  
“[In the styles of] Wagner”  
“Private Lives,” Coward  
“Come to the Fair,” Martin  
“Make Believe” from *Show Boat*, Kern  
Group from *Wildflower*: “Wildflower,” “April Blossoms,” “Goodbye,  
Little Rosebud,” “Bambalina,” Youmans

**8 Apr 1932**<sup>4</sup>

Webb, Quartet and Orch  
Hansen with Orch  
McCoy with Orch  
Orchestra with Quartet  
Webb with Orch  
Orchestra

“Cheerio” from *Dearest Enemy*, Rodgers  
“Vesti la giubba” from *Pagliacci*, Leoncavallo  
“Who’ll Buy My Lavender,” German  
“Ramona,” Wayne-Daly  
“The Trumpeter,” Dix  
Three Excerpts from *Carnival of the Animals*, Saint-Saëns

<sup>3</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 1 Apr 1932.

<sup>4</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 8 Apr 1932.

Cello solo	“Personages with Long Ears” “The Swan” “The Aquarium”
Wiggins, Hansen and Orch	“L’amour, toujours l’amour,” Friml
Webb, Quartet and Orch	“Old Man River” from <i>Show Boat</i> , Kern-Daly
Orchestra with Voices	“I Love a Parade,” Arien
Wiggins and Orch	“Oh Lovely Night,” Ronald
Hansen with Orch	“Come Back to Sorrento,” Di Padua
McCoy and Orch	“Zigeuner” from <i>Bitter Sweet</i> , Coward-Daly
Orchestra	“Military March” from <i>Pomp and Circumstance</i> , Elgar
Webb and Orch	“Mother O’ Mine,” Tours
McCoy, Hansen, Webb, Orch	“Trio” from <i>Faust</i> , Gounod
Orchestra and Voices	Excerpts from <i>No, No Nanette</i> , Youmans

**15 Apr 1932**<sup>5</sup>

Webb and ensemble	“Song of the Dawn,” Ager
Hansen with Orch	“Celeste Aida” from <i>Aida</i> , Verdi
Speaks with Orch	“Some Day” from <i>The Vagabond King</i> , Friml
Orchestra	“Adios,” Madriguera
Webb and Orch	“Recessional,” DeKoven
Speaks, Hansen and Orch	“We Will Always Be Sweethearts” from <i>One Hour with You</i> , Straus
Wiggins and Orchestra	“My Ain Folk,” Old Scotch
<b>Levant with Orchestra</b>	<b><i>Rhapsody in Blue</i>, Gershwin</b>
Ensemble	“Tramp, Tramp, Tramp,” from <i>Naughty Marietta</i> , Herbert
Hansen with Orch	“I Love Thee,” Grieg
<b>Speaks with Piano [Levant]</b>	<b>“A Song of Gladness,” Speaks</b>
Webb and Orch	“I Want What I Want When I Want It,” from <i>Mlle. Modiste</i> , Herbert
Hansen with Orch	“You Will Remember Vienna,” from <i>Viennese Nights</i> , Romberg
Wiggins and Orch	“Habanera” from <i>Carmen</i> , Bizet
Mixed Quartet	“Sally in Our Alley,” Old English
Orchestra and Voices	Excerpts from <i>A Connecticut Yankee</i> , Rodgers

**22 Apr 1932**<sup>6</sup>

Eddy, Quartet, and Orch	“Stout Hearted Men” from <i>New Moon</i> , Romberg
Hansen with Orch	“Vienna, City of Dreams,” Viennese Song
Eddy with Orch	“The Two Grenadiers,” Schubert
Soprano with Orch	“I’m Falling in Love with Someone,” <i>Naughty Marietta</i> , Herbert
Hansen with Orch	“Harlequin Serenade” from <i>Pagliacci</i> , Leoncavallo
Eddy with Orch	“Gwine to Heab’n,” Wolfe
<b>[Levant and Orch</b>	<b>“Scherzo” from the Piano Sonata No. 3 in B minor, Chopin]</b> <sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 15 Apr 1932.

<sup>6</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 22 Apr 1932.

Hansen, Soprano and Orch Orchestra and voices Ensemble	“Don’t Ask Me Why from <i>Das Lied ist aus</i> , Stolz Excerpts from <i>Gypsy Love</i> , Lehar
Soprano with Orch	“Great Day,” Youmans
Eddy with Orch	“Zigeuner” from <i>Bitter Sweet</i> , Coward
Wiggins and Orch	“Song of the Bow,” Aylward
<b>Levant and Orch</b>	“Through the Years” from <i>Through the Years</i> , Youmans
Hansen with Orch	<b>“Minuet” from <i>L’Arlesienne</i>, Bizet (arr. by Rachmaninoff)</b>
Orchestra with Quartet	“Kathleen Mavourneen,” Crouch
Ensemble	“Dark Eyes,” Russian Air Excerpts from <i>Irene</i> , Tierney

**29 Apr 1932**<sup>8</sup>

Ensemble	“Victory,” Daly
Eddy and Orch	“Ballad of Adamaster” from <i>L’Africaine</i> , Meyerbeer
Soprano and Orch	“The Lass with the Delicate Air,” Arne
Hansen and Orch	“Ah, Moon of My Delight” from <i>In a Persian Garden</i> , Lehmann
Orchestra	“Gypsy Dance,” from <i>Carmen</i> , Bizet
Wiggins, Hansen, Orch	“Home to our Mountains,” from <i>Il Trovatore</i> , Verdi
Eddy and Orch	“When You’re Lying Awake” from <i>Iolanthe</i> , Sullivan
Orchestra and Voices	Excerpts from <i>A Waltz Dream</i> , Straus
Eddy and Orch	“When Yuba Plays the Rumba on the Tuba,” Hupfeld
Soprano with Orch	“Look for the Silver Lining,” from <i>Sally</i> , Kern
<b>Levant and Orch</b>	<b>“Schерzo” from Piano Concerto in G minor, Saint-Saëns</b>
Wiggins and Orch	“Calm as the Night,” Bohm
Eddy and Orch	“Song of the Bow,” Aylward
Hansen and Orch	“Hills of Home,” Fox
Soprano, Eddy and Orch	“My Sunshine is You,” from <i>Sein Liebeslied</i> , Stolz
Voices with Orch	Group from <i>Good Morning, Dearie</i> , Kern

**6 May 1932**<sup>9</sup>

Ensemble	“When the Wedding Bells are Ringing,” Jacobi
Orchestra	“La Seduccion,” Noceti
Eddy and Orch	“An jenem Tag,” Marschner
Soprano and Orch	“Indian Love Call,” Friml
Hansen, Eddy, with Orch	“The Passage Bird’s Farewell,” Hildach
Wiggins	“Aire de Louis XIII,” arr. By Ghys
	“Katisha’s Song” from <i>The Mikado</i> , Sullivan
<b>Eddy and Piano [Levant]</b>	<b>“De Hallelujah Rhythm,” Wolfe</b>

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<sup>7</sup> Listed in *New York Times* days before the show, but the *Brooklyn Times Union* does not list this piece the day of the show. “The Microphone Will Present,” 17 Apr 1932.

<sup>8</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 29 Apr 1932.

<sup>9</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 6 May 1932.

Orchestra	Excerpts from <i>The Count of Luxemborg</i> , Lehár
	“Dance” from <i>La vida breve</i> , DeFalla
Soprano and Hansen	“Auf Wiedersehen,” Romberg
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Etude in C-sharp minor, Chopin</b>
Hansen and Orch	“Flower Song” from <i>Carmen</i> , Bizet
Soprano, Wiggins and Orch	“Waltz” from <i>Boccaccio</i> , Suppé
Eddy and Orch	“Thy Sentinel Am I,” Watson
<b>Quartet with Piano [Levant]</b>	<b>“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” Spiritual</b>

**13 May 1932**<sup>10</sup>

Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>The Mikado</i> , Sullivan
Orchestra	“Japanese Sandman,” Whitting-Daly
Eddy and Orch	“Beating up the Channel,” Sanderson
Speaks, Hansen, with Orch	“When You’re Away,” Herbert
Wiggins and Orch	“Mah Li’l Batteau,” Strickland
Orchestra and Hansen	“I Only Love One” [from <i>The Merry Wives of Vienna</i> ], Stolz
Eddy and Orch	“Porter’s Song” [from <i>Martha</i> ], Flotow
Orchestra	Excerpts from <i>H.M.S. Pinafore</i> , Sullivan
	“Marche Militaire,” Schubert
Hansen and Orch	“I’ll Take You Home Again Kathleen,” Westendorf
Speaks and Orch	“Zigeuner,” from <i>Bitter Sweet</i> , Coward-Daly
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Minuet in G major, Paderewski</b>
Eddy and Orch	“Home on the Range,” Guion
Speaks, Wiggins, Hansen, Eddy	Quartet from <i>Rigoletto</i> , Verdi
Wiggins and Orch	“The Man I Love,” Gershwin-Daly
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>The Pirates of Penzance</i> , Sullivan

**20 May 1932**<sup>11</sup>

Ensemble	“The Belle of New York,” Kerker
Orchestra	“Ay, Mama Inez,” Grenet
Hansen with Orch	“Vesti la giubba” from <i>Pagliacci</i> , Leoncavallo
Speaks and Orch	“Cherry Ripo,” Old English
Violin solo	“Anitra’s Dance,” Grieg
Speaks, Wiggins, Hansen, Orch	“On the Beautiful Blue Danube,” Strauss
Wiggins and harp	“Boat Song,” Ware
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>Princess Pat</i> , Herbert
Orchestra	Overture to <i>Of Thee I Sing</i> , Gershwin
Hansen with Orch	“John Pool,” Old Scotch

<sup>10</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 13 May 1932.

<sup>11</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 20 May 1932.



Wiggins	“Adieu, Forests” from <i>Joanne d’Arc</i> , Tchaikovsky
Speaks and Hansen	“Auf Wiedersehen,” Romberg
Speaks and Orch	“Do You Know My Garden,” Wood
<b>Levant</b>	<b>“Golliwog’s Cakewalk,” Debussy</b>
Speaks, Wiggins, Hansen	“The Old Refrain,” Kreisler
Ensemble	Group from <i>Spring is Here</i> , Rodgers

**27 May 1932**<sup>12</sup>

Ensemble	“Siboney,” Lecuona
Eddy and Orch	“Roadways,” Densmore
Speaks with Orch	“My Hero,” Straus
Orchestra	“Song of India” from <i>Sadko</i> , Rimsky-Korsakov
Speaks, Hansen, Orch	“Softly as in a Morning Sunrise,” Romberg
<b>Wiggins and piano [Levant]</b>	<b>“Ma Curly-Headed Baby,” Clutsam</b>
Eddy and Orch	“The Gypsy Trail,” Galloway
Ensemble	Opening of Act I from <i>Apple Blossoms</i> , Kreisler
Orchestra	“Adios Muchachos,” Sanders
Hansen and Orch	“Serenade,” Drigo
Speaks with Orch	“Micaela’s Air” from <i>Carmen</i> , Bizet
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Etude in F major, op. 10, Chopin</b>
Wiggins, Hansen, Orch	“Bird Songs at Eventide,” Coates
Eddy and Orch	“Song of the Volga Boatmen,” Russian air
Speaks, Wiggins, Hansen, Eddy	“Good Night Quartet” from <i>Marta</i> , Flotow
Ensemble	Group from <i>Funny Face</i> , Gershwin

**3 Jun 1932**<sup>13</sup>

Ensemble	“Live, Laugh and Love” from <i>Congress Dances</i> , Heyman
Eddy with Orch	Recitative and aria of Prince Galitzky, from <i>Prince Igor</i> , Borodin
Speaks, Hansen, Orch	“Song of Love” from <i>Blossom Time</i> , Romberg
String orchestra	“Adagietto” from <i>L’Arlesienne</i> , Bizet
<b>Quartet with piano [Levant]</b>	<b>“Santa Lucia,” Neapolitan song</b>
Wiggins with Orch	“Moonlight and Roses,” Moret
Eddy with Orch	“Tramps at Sea” from <i>Cuban Love Song</i> , Stothart
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>Madame Pompadour</i> , Fall
Orchestra	Finale from the overture to <i>William Tell</i> , Rossini
<b>Speaks with piano [Levant]</b>	<b>“Spain,” Edwards</b>
Wiggins, Eddy, Orch	“Thine Alone” from <i>Eileen</i> , Herbert
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Waltz in A-flat major, op. 42, Chopin</b>
Hansen with harp	“Siciliana” from <i>Cavalleria rusticana</i> , Mascagni

<sup>12</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 27 May 1932.

<sup>13</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 3 Jun 1932.

Eddy with Orch	“Punchinello,” Molloy
Orchestra	Prelude in C-sharp minor, Rachmaninoff
Ensemble	Group from <i>Tip Toes</i> , Gershwin

**10 Jun 1932**<sup>14</sup>

Ensemble	“Here’s to the Land We Love” from <i>The Only Girl</i> , Herbert
Eddy with Orch	“Roadways,” Densmore
Speaks, Hansen, Orch	“Garden Duet” from <i>Boris Godunoff</i> , Mussorgsky
Michel Gusikoff (violin)	Waltz in A-flat major, Brahms
Orchestra and voices	Two songs from <i>Of Thee I Sing</i> , Gershwin: Opening of Act 2 “Love is Sweeping the Country”
Wiggins with Orch	“Oh, Lucindy,” Deppen
Eddy with Orch	“The Gypsy Trail,” Galloway
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>Chimes of Normandy</i> , Planquette
Orchestra	“Los Toros” from <i>La Feria</i> , Lacombe
Hansen with Orch	“Invictus,” Huhn
Speaks with Orch	“Micaela’s Air” from <i>Carmen</i> , Bizet
<b>Daly and Levant</b>	<b>“Waltz” from Suite of Two Pianos, op. 15, Arensky</b>
Eddy with Orch	“Eili, Eili,” Hebrew Air
Orchestra	“Sal-O-May,” Stolz
Speaks, Wiggins, Hansen, Eddy with Orch	“Good Night Quartet” from <i>Marta</i> , Flotow
Ensemble	Group from <i>Hit the Deck</i> , Youmans

**17 Jun 1932**<sup>15</sup>

Eddy with Orch	“Goodbye, Little Captain of My Heart” from <i>Das Lied ist Aus</i> , Stolz
Speaks with Orch	“Ballad of Queen Mab” from <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> , Gounod
Wiggins with Orch	“One Kiss” from <i>New Moon</i> , Romberg
Hansen with Orch	“Dancing in the Dark” from <i>The Band Wagon</i> , Schwartz
<b>Eddy with Piano [Levant]</b>	<b>“When I Think upon the Maidens,” Head</b>
Ensemble	Group from <i>Delicious</i> , Gershwin
Orchestra	“On the Riviera”
Hansen, Eddy and Orch	“Solenne in quest’ ora” from <i>La forza del destino</i> , Verdi
Wiggins with Orch	“Life is a Dream” from <i>The Prodigal</i> , Straus
<b>Levant</b>	<b>“Butterfly,” Grieg</b>
Eddy with Orch	“Mother Carey” from <i>Three Salt Water Ballads</i> , Keel
Speaks, Hansen, with Orch	“Why Do I Love You” from <i>Show Boat</i> , Kern
Orchestra	“Dance of the Comedians” from <i>The Bartered Bride</i> , Smetana

<sup>14</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 10 Jun 1932.

<sup>15</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 17 Jun 1932.

Wiggins  
Speaks, Hansen  
Eddy and Ensemble

Group from *Through the Years*, [Youmans]  
“Kinda Like You”  
“You’re Everything”  
“Drums in My Heart”

**24 Jun 1932**<sup>16</sup>

Ensemble  
Eddy with Orch  
Speaks, Hansen, Orch  
Orchestra  
Speaks, Wiggins, Orch  
Hansen with Orch

“The Love Parade” from *The Love Parade*, Schertzinger  
“Bedouin Love Song,” Pinsuti  
“You Are Love” from *Show Boat*, Kern  
Intermezzo (before Act 3) from *Jewels of the Madonna*, Wolf-Ferrari  
Waltz from *Boccaccio*, Suppé  
“Tell Me Why You Smile, Mona Lisa” from *Der Raub der Mona Lisa*, Stolz

Eddy with Orch  
Ensemble  
Orchestra  
Speaks, Hansen, Orch

**Levant**

Wiggins with Orch  
Eddy with Orch  
Speaks with Orch  
Ensemble

“Le Cor,” Flegier  
Group from *The Yankee Princess*, Kalman  
“Wedding March” from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Mendelssohn  
“Don’t Be Afraid of Love,” Gross  
**“The Music Box,” Friedman**  
“Träume,” Wagner  
“Shortnin’ Bread,” Wolfe  
“Siren’s Song” from *Leave it to Jane*, Kern  
Group from *Lady Be Good*, Gershwin

**1 Jul 1932**<sup>17</sup>

Ensemble  
Eddy with Orch  
Speaks, Hansen, Orch  
Wiggins with Orch  
Hansen with Orch

**Speaks, celesta,**  
**piano [Levant]**

Eddy with Orch  
Ensemble

Orchestra  
Speaks, Hansen, Orch  
**[Levant]**

“Your Land and My Land” from *My Maryland*, Romberg  
“Promesse de mon avenir” from *Le roi de Lahore*, Massenet  
“The Sun About to Rise” from *Sweet Adeline*, Kern  
“Chinese Lullaby” from *East is West*, Bowers-Daly  
“I’ll Sing Thee Songs of Araby,” Clay  
**“Pastorale,” Carey**

“Go Down, Moses,” spiritual  
Group from *The Music Box Revue*, Berlin:  
“Say it with Music”  
“Crinoline Days”  
“Lady of the Evening”  
“Say it with Music”

“Triumphal March” from *Aida*, Verdi  
“Where My Caravan Has Rested,” Lohr  
**“Witches’ Dance,” MacDowell**

<sup>16</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 24 Jun 1932.

<sup>17</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 1 Jul 1932.

Wiggins with Orch	“In the Luxembourg Gardens” from <i>Sketches of Paris</i> , Manning
Eddy with Orch	“Tally-Ho,” Leoni
Speaks, Wiggins, Hansen, Eddy with Orch	Sextet from <i>Lucia</i> , Donizetti
Ensemble	Medley of George M. Cohen Favorites

**8 Jul 1932**<sup>18</sup>

Ensemble	“Goodbye, Little Captain of My Heart” from <i>Das Lied ist Aus</i> , Stolz
Eddy with Orch	“Quand la flamme de l’amour” from <i>La Jolie fille de Perth</i> , Bizet
Wiggins, Hansen	“The Desert Song,” Romberg
Orchestra	Prelude in C-sharp minor, Rachmaninoff
Speaks with Orch	“I Love You So” from <i>The Merry Widow</i> , Lehar
	Three Excerpts from <i>In a Persian Garden</i> , Lehmann:
Eddy	“Myself when Young”
Hansen	“Ah, Moon of My Delight”
Quartet	“Come, Fill the Cup”
Orchestra	“Parade of the Wooden Soldiers,” Jessel
Wiggins with Orch	“Hark, Hark, the Lark,” Schubert
Speaks, Hansen	“Wouldn’t It Be Wonderful” from <i>Hey, Nonny, Nonny</i> , Hupfeld
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Fantasy-Impromptu, Chopin</b>
Eddy with Orch	“Tomasso Rotundo (the Basso Profundo),” O’Hara
Speaks, Wiggins, Hansen	“Spinning Wheel Quartet” from <i>Marta</i> , Flotow
Eddy, Orch	
Ensemble	Group from <i>Rosalie</i> , Gershwin-Romberg:
	“Oh Gee, Oh Joy”
	“How Long Has This Been Going On”
	“West Point Song”

**15 Jul 1932**<sup>19</sup>

Ensemble	“Fine and Dandy,” Swift
Eddy with Orch	“Glorious Devon,” German
Speaks, Hansen with Orch	“One Hour with You,” Whiting
Gusikoff with Orch	Finale from Violin Concerto in E minor, Mendelssohn
Speaks with Orch	“The Spirit Flower,” Campbell-Tipton
<b>Eddy with piano [Levant]</b>	<b>“Shepherd, See Thy Horse’s Foaming Mane”</b>
Hansen with Orch	“Masquerade,” Loeb
	Gay Nineties Medley:
Ensemble	“The Bowery,” Gaunt
Speaks	“My Sweetheart’s the Man in the Moon,” Thornton
Orchestra	“The Mosquito’s Parade,” Whitney

<sup>18</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 8 Jul 1932.

<sup>19</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 15 Jul 1932.

Eddy	“Picture Eighty-Four,” Davis
Ensemble	“At a Georgia Camp Meeting,” Mills
Orchestra	Prelude to Act 3 of <i>Lohengrin</i> , Wagner
Speaks, Eddy with Orch	“Beautiful Lady” from <i>The Pink Lady</i> , Caryl
Hansen with Orch	“Onaway, Awake, Beloved,” Coleridge-Taylor
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Rondo in C major, Weber</b>
Eddy with Orch	“Where’er You Walk,” Handel
Speaks, Hansen, Eddy with Orch	Trio from <i>Faust</i> , Gounod
Ensemble	Group from <i>Oh Boy!</i> , Kern

22 Jul 1932<sup>20</sup>

Ensemble	“Hosanna”
Eddy with Orch	“Per me giunto” from <i>Don Carlos</i> , Skhumbuzo
Speaks, Hansen, Orch	“Wanting You” from <i>New Moon</i> , Romberg
Eddy with Orch	“Cargoes,” Masfield
Hansen with Orch	“A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody,” Berlin
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>The Dollar Princess</i> , Fall and Kern
Orchestra	“Polonaise,” Glazunov
Speaks, Eddy and Orch	“When It’s Apple Blossom Time in Normandy,” [Gifford & Trevor]
Hansen with Orch	“Prize Song” [from <i>Meistersinger</i> , Wagner]
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Valse-Impromptu, [Liszt?]</b>
Eddy with Orch	“Guns,” [O’Hara]
[Speaks] with Orch	“On Miami Shore,” [Jacobi]
Ensemble	Group from <i>Strike up the Band</i> , [Gershwin]:
	“I Mean to Say,” “Soon,” “Strike up the Band”

29 Jul 1932<sup>21</sup>

Eddy with Orch	“See the Sun,” Massenet
Speaks, Hansen with Orch	“Viscone Veneziana, While We Danced at the Mardi-Gras,” Opler
<b>Gusikoff, Pilzer with two pianos [Daly, Levant]</b>	<b>Allegro from Concerto for Two Violins in D minor, Bach</b>
Hansen with Orch	“Liebestraum,” Liszt-Schipa
[No performers listed]	“The High Barbaree,” Armbruster
Flute and Orch	“Poupée valsante,” Herbert
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>Tom Jones</i> , German
Orchestra	March from <i>Tannhauser</i> , Wagner
[No performers listed]	“Boots,” Felman
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Hungarian Rhapsody No. 10, Liszt</b>

<sup>20</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 22 Jul 1932.

<sup>21</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 29 Jul 1932.

Speaks with Orch  
Hansen with Orch  
[No performers listed]

“Seguidilla,” Bizet  
Fantasy on *Cuban Love Song*, Stothart-Savino  
Group from *Face the Music*, Berlin

**5 August 1932**<sup>22</sup>

Ensemble  
Eddy with Orch  
Speaks, Hansen, Orch  
Gusikoff with Orch  
Hansen with Orch  
Wiggins with Orch  
**Eddy with piano [Levant]**  
Ensemble  
Orchestra  
Speaks, Hansen, Orch  
Eddy with Orch  
Wiggins with Orch  
**Levant**  
Speaks, Eddy, Orch  
Ensemble

“Great Day”[Youmans]  
Hopak [from *The Fair at Sorotchinsky*, Mussorgsky]  
Romance  
“Spanish Serenade”  
“Rose of the World” [from *The Rose of Algeria*, Herbert]  
“Chinese Lullaby” [Bowers?]  
**“Love Went A-riding,” [Bridge]**  
Group from *Very Good, Eddie*, [Kern]  
Fandango  
“While We Were Waltzing,” [Hupfeld?]  
“Route Marchin’,” [Stock]  
“I Will Not Say Goodbye”  
**Concert Etude in C minor [Chopin’s “Revolutionary”?]**  
“La ci darem la mano” [from *Don Giovanni*, Mozart]  
Group from *Girl Crazy*, Gershwin

**12 August 1932**<sup>23</sup>

Ensemble  
Eddy with Orch  
Speaks, Hansen, orch  
**String qt & piano [Levant]**  
Speaks with Orch  
**Eddy, piano**  
Wiggins and Orch  
Ensemble  
Orch  
Hansen and Orch  
**Levant**  
Wiggins and Orch  
Eddy and Orch  
Speaks, Quartet, Orch  
Ensemble

March from *A Connecticut Yankee*, Rodgers  
“Per me giunto” from *Don Carlos*, Verdi  
“When Hearts Are Young,” Romberg  
**Dance, Borodin**  
“Princessita,” Padilla  
**“Red Bombay,” Reddick**  
“More Than You Know,” Youmans-Daly  
Excerpts from *Chin Chin*, Caryl  
“Green Eyes, Rumba,” [Menendez]  
Lohengrin’s Narrative, Wagner  
**“Au bord d’une source,” Liszt**  
“Rose in the Bud,” Forster  
“The Rainbow Trail,” Eddy  
Polonaise, Mussorgsky  
Two excerpts from *Of Thee I Sing* (Daly’s arr), Gershwin  
Opening of Act 2  
“Love is Sweeping the Country”

<sup>22</sup> “Today’s Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 5 Aug 1932.

<sup>23</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 12 Aug 1932.

**19 August 1932**<sup>24</sup>

Ensemble	“Fine and Dandy,” Swift
Eddy and Orch	Aria of Prince Galitzky from <i>Prince Igor</i> , Borodin
Speaks, Hansen	“The Sun about to Rise” [from <i>Sweet Adeline</i> ], Kern
<b>Hansen [with Levant]</b>	<b>“The Garden Where the Praties Grow,” Liddle</b>
Eddy and Orch	Nocturne, Curran
Wiggins and Orch	“Whispering,” Schonberg[er]
Ensemble	Group from <i>Dearest Enemy</i> , Rodgers
Orch	Intermezzo before Act 3 of <i>Jewels of the Madonna</i> , Wolf-Ferrari
Speaks, Wiggins	“By the Bend of the River,” Edwards
Eddy and Orch	“Rolling down to Rio,” German
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Danse d’Olaf [from 2 <i>Lunaires</i>, op. 33], Pick-Mangiagalli</b>
Hansen and Orch	“Kathleen Mine” [from <i>Through the Years</i> ], Youmans
<b>Quartet with piano [Levant]</b>	<b>“The Sleigh,” Kountz</b>
Wiggins and Orch	“Bill” from <i>Show Boat</i> , Kern
Ensemble	Group from <i>For Goodness Sake</i> , Daly

**26 August 1932**<sup>25</sup>

Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>The Sho-Gun</i> , Laders?
Tenor [Hansen]	“Vesta la giubba” from <i>Pagliacci</i> , Leoncavallo
Soprano [Speaks]	“The Lass with the Delicate Air,” Arno
Violin quartet with harp	Slavonic Dance in E minor, Dvořák
[Speaks and Hansen]	“Sometime” from <i>Sometime</i> , Friml
Wiggins and Orch	“What is This Thing Called Love?” [from <i>Wake up and Dream</i> ], Porter-Daly
Woodwind choir	Aragonaise from <i>Le Cid</i> , Bizet
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>The Gondoliers</i> , Sullivan
Orch	“March of the Toys” [from <i>Babes in Toyland</i> ], Herbert
[Speaks and Hansen]	Garden Duet from <i>Boris Godunov</i> , Mussorgsky
<b>Pianist [Levant]</b>	<b>Waltz in E minor, Chopin</b>
[Hansen] with Brass Orch	“John Peel”
Contralto [Wiggins]	“Nur wer die Sehnsucht Kennt,” Tchaikovsky
Orch	“Dance of the Comedians” [from <i>The Bartered Bride</i> ], Smetana
Soprano, contralto, tenor	“The Old Refrain,” Kreisler
Ensemble	Group from <i>Tell Me More</i> , Gershwin

**2 September 1932**<sup>26</sup>

Ensemble	“Paris” [from <i>Paris</i> ] Porter
Eddy with Orch	“Song of the Flea,” Mussorgsky

<sup>24</sup> “Evening Post’s Radio Time-Table,” *New York Evening Post*, 19 Aug 1932.

<sup>25</sup> “Evening Post’s Radio Time-Table,” *New York Evening Post*, 26 Aug 1932.

<sup>26</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 2 Sep 1932.

[Speaks and Hansen]	“A Tree in the Park” [from <i>Peggy-Ann</i> ], Rodgers
Harp [Arthur Jones]	Arabesque, Debussy
Speaks and Orch	“Kiss Me” [from <i>Bitter Sweet</i> ], Coward
Eddy, Hansen and Orch	“Si Pei Ciel” from <i>Otello</i> , Verdi
Wiggins and Orch	“Underneath the Stars,” Spencer-Daly
Ensemble	Group from <i>Present Arms</i> , Rodgers
Orch	March, “Morena y Sevillana,” Maduro
<b>Eddy and [Levant]</b>	<b>“The Garden Where the Praties Grow,” Liddle</b>
Eddy and Orch	“Guns,” O’Hara
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Waltzes from <i>Madame Pompadour</i>, [Leo Fall]</b>
Wiggins and Orch	“Connais-tu le pays” [from <i>Mignon</i> ], Thomas
Speaks, Hansen and Orch	“Gypsy,” Malneck-Daly
Ensemble	Group from <i>Good News</i> , Henderson

**9 September 1932**<sup>27</sup>

Ensemble	“Rain or Shine,” Swift
Eddy	“Brindisi” from <i>Hamlet</i> , Thomas
Speaks, Hansen	“Because You’re You” [from <i>The Red Mill</i> ], Herbert
[Orch]	Minuet from <i>The Toy Symphony</i> , Haydn
Hansen	“Sunrise and You,” Penn
<b>Eddy with piano [Levant]</b>	<b>“Kangaroo and Dingo” [from <i>Just So Songs</i>], German</b>
Wiggins and Orch	“When Day is Done,” Katscher-Daly
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>The Yeomen of the Guard</i> , Sullivan
Orch	“Procession of the Sardar,” Ippolitoff-Ivanoff
Speaks, Hansen	“Chalita” [from <i>The Climax</i> ], Schertzinger
Wiggins	“A Little Love, A Little Kiss,” Silesu
<b>Levant</b>	<b>“Hark, Hark, the Lark,” Schubert-Liszt</b>
Eddy	“Through the Years” [from <i>Through the Years</i> ], Youmans
Orch	“Punch and Judy” [from <i>The Fall of a Nation</i> ], Herbert
Ensemble	Group from <i>Oh, Boy!</i> , Kern

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<sup>27</sup> “Evening Post’s Radio Time-Table,” *New York Evening Post*, 9 Sep 1932.



**16 September 1932**<sup>28</sup>

Ensemble	“Join the Navy” from <i>Hit the Deck</i> , Youmans
Eddy	“Vision fugitives” from <i>Herodiade</i> , Massenet
Speaks, Hansen	“Isn’t it Romantic?” from <i>Love Me Tonight</i> , Rodgers
<b>Celesta [Levant?] and Orch</b>	<b>“The Musical Snuff Box,” Liadoff</b>
<b>Speaks with [Levant]</b>	<b>“It Was a Lover and His Lass,” Quilter</b>
Eddy	“I Want What I Want When I Want It” from <i>Mlle. Modiste</i> , Herbert
Hansen and Orch	“Vienna, City of Dreams,” Slyesinski
	Victor Herbert group
[Not listed]	“Every day is Ladies Day with Me” from <i>The Red Mill</i>
Wiggins	“A Kiss in the Dark” from <i>Orange Blossoms</i>
Duet	“Falling in Love with Some One” from <i>Naughty Marietta</i>
Ensemble	“The Mascot of the Troop” from <i>Mlle. Modiste</i>
Orch	Tarantella, Chopin-Glasounoff
Wiggins	“Connais-tu le pays” from <i>Mignon</i> , Thomas
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Etude in A flat, op. 10, Chopin</b>
Hansen	“Give Me One Hour,” from <i>The White Eagle</i> , Friml
Wiggins, Speaks, Hansen	“Spinning Wheel Quartet” from <i>Marta</i>
Eddy	
Eddy	“Guns,” O’Hara
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>The Lady in Ermine</i> , Romberg

**23 September 1932**<sup>29</sup>

Ensemble	“Regimental Song” from <i>The White Eagle</i> , Friml
Eddy	“Largo ad factotum” from <i>The Barber of Seville</i> , Rossini
Wiggins, Hansen	“Love Me Tonight” from <i>Love Me Tonight</i> , Rodgers
	“Variations on an Old German Folk Song,” Ochs
String Quartet	in the style of Haydn
Orchestra	[...] Verdi
Orch and ensemble	[...] Wagner
Hansen	“Neapolitan Love Song” from <i>Princess Pat</i> , Herbert
Speaks	“Laughing Song,” from <i>Die Fledermaus</i> , Strauss
Eddy	“Tramps at Sea” from <i>Cuban Love Song</i> , Stothart
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>The Student Prince</i> , Romberg
Orch	Hopak from <i>The Fair at Sorotchinsky</i> , Mussorgsky
Speaks, Eddy	“You Are Free” from <i>Apple Blossoms</i> , Jacobi
Wiggins	“Habanera” from <i>Carmen</i> , Bizet
<b>Levant</b>	<b>“La campanella,” Paganini-Liszt</b>
Eddy	“Song of the Bow,” Aylward
<b>Quartet with piano</b>	<b>“Fill Every Glass” from <i>The Beggar’s Opera</i>, Gay</b>

<sup>28</sup> “Evening Post’s Radio Time-Table,” *New York Evening Post*, 16 Sep 1932.

<sup>29</sup> “Evening Post’s Radio Time-Table,” *New York Evening Post*, 23 Sep 1932.

Orch "Underneath the Stars," Spencer-Daly  
 Ensemble Group from *Magic Night*, Proford  
 "Just Heaven"  
 "Good Night, Vienna"  
 "Marching Song"

**30 September 1932**<sup>30</sup>

Ensemble "Valparian," Blue  
 Eddy "Glorious Devon," German  
 Wiggins, Hansen "Teach Me to Dance Like Grandma" from *This Year of Grace*, Coward  
 Gusikoff Scherzo Tarantelle, Wieslawski  
 Speaks "Voi lo sapete," from *Cavalleria Rusticana*, Mascagni  
**Eddy with piano [Levant]** **"Sailormen," Wolfe**  
 Hansen and Orch "Rio Rita" from *Rio Rita*, Tierney-Daly  
 Ensemble Excerpts from *Florodora*, Stuart  
 Orch "Cavalry Trot," Rubinstein  
 Wiggins Lullaby, Brahms  
 Eddy "Ballad of Adamastor," from *L'Africaine*, Meyerbeer  
**Levant, Daly** **Waltz from the Suite for Two Pianos, Arensky**  
 Hansen "In the Silence of the Night," Rachmaninoff  
 Speaks and Orch "Exactly Like You," McHugh-Daly  
 Ensemble Four Songs by Robert Stolz  
 "I Only Love You" from *The Merry Wives of Vienna*  
 "My Sunshine is You" from *Sein Liebeslied*  
 "Don't Ask Me Why" from *Das Lied ist aus*  
 "Two Hearts in Three Quarter Time" from *Zwei Herzen*

**7 October 1932**<sup>31</sup>

Ensemble "West Point March" from *Rosalie*, Romberg  
 Eddy "My Song is of the Sturdy North," German  
 Speaks, Hansen Duet of Micaela and Joss from *Carmen* (act 1), Bizet  
 Flute solo Waltz in D flat (Minute walse), Chopin  
 Wiggins Star of love (Tango in D), Albernig-Oliver?  
 Speaks "I Want to Marry a Male Quartet" from *Katinka*, Friml  
**Eddy with piano [Levant]** **Nocturne, Curran**  
 Ensemble Excerpts from *Chu Chin Chow*, Norton  
 Orch "Russian Dance," Friml  
 Hansen "Lindy Lou," Strickland  
 Speaks, Wiggins "Daydreams" from *The Spring Maid*  
 Eddy "Kill, Kill"

<sup>30</sup> "Evening Post's Radio Time-Table," *New York Evening Post*, 30 Sep 1932.

<sup>31</sup> "Evening Post's Radio Time-Table," *New York Evening Post*, 7 Oct 1932.

<b>Levant</b>	<b>Etude, op. 25, no. 2 in F minor, Chopin</b>
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Etude, op. 25, no. 3 in F major, Chopin</b>
Wiggins	“The Glow Worm,” Linke
Ensemble	Excerpt from <i>The Three Musketeers</i> , Friml

**14 October 1932**<sup>32</sup>

Ensemble	“Wild Rose” from <i>Sally</i> , Kern
Eddy	“Jerum! Jerum!” from <i>Die Meistersinger</i> , Wagner
Wiggins and Hansen	“Can This Be Love?,” Swift
Gusikoff	Minuet, Boccherini
Speaks	“Someday” [from <i>The Vagabond King</i> ], Friml
Hansen	“Love, I Have Won You,” Ronald
Eddy	“Estrellita” [aka “Little Star”], Ponce
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>Patience</i> , Sullivan
Orch	“O Ya Ya,” De Markoff
Wiggins	“Sing Me to Sleep,” Greene
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Allegro appassionato, [op. 70], Saint-Saens</b>
Speaks	“Miserere” from <i>Il trovatore</i> , Verdi
Eddy	“Narrative of the Shirt” from <i>The Rogue Song</i> , Stothart
Orch	“Chansonette,” Friml
Ensemble	Group from <i>Hitchy-Koo</i> [of 1917], Goetz

**21 October 1932**<sup>33</sup>

Ensemble	“The Rogue Song” [from <i>The Rogue Song</i> ], Stothart
[Eddy]	“An jenem Tag” [from <i>Hans Heiling</i> ], Marschner
[Speaks]	“Amapola,” Lacalle
Orch	“The Little Tin Soldier,” Cui
[Wiggins]	“Roses for Remembrance,” Curtis
[Eddy]	“Tommy Lad,” Margetson
[Hansen] and Orch	“Gypsy,” Malneck-Daly
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>Fantana</i> , Hubbell
Orch	Czardas from <i>Coppella</i> , Delibes
[Hansen]	“Una furtiva lagrima,” [from <i>L’elisir d’amore</i> ], Donizetti
Soprano	“Letter Song” from <i>Apple Blossoms</i> , Kreisler
<b>[Levant]</b>	<b>“La campanella,” Paganini-Liszt</b>
[Eddy]	“That’s Why Darkies Were Born,” Henderson
Quartet	“Moonbeams” [from <i>The Red Mill</i> ], Herbert
Ensemble	Group from <i>Two Little Girls in Blue</i> , Youmans

<sup>32</sup> “Evening Post’s Radio Time-Table,” *New York Evening Post*, 14 Oct 1932.

<sup>33</sup> “Evening Post’s Radio Time-Table,” *New York Evening Post*, 21 Oct 1932.

**28 Oct 1932**<sup>34</sup>

Ensemble	“Victory,” Daly
[Eddy]	“La partida,” Alvares
[Speaks and Hansen]	“We Will Always Be Sweethearts,” Strauss
Violinist [Gusikoff]	Scherzo-Tarantelle, Wienlawski
[Wiggins]	“Do You Know My Garden?,” Wood
Tenor quartet	“A Wandering Minstrel” [from <i>The Mikado</i> ], Sullivan
<b>[Eddy and Levant]</b>	<b>“Pilgrim’s Song,” Tchaikovsky</b>
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>The Golden Dawn</i> , Kalman
Orch	Peasant Dance from <i>Kukishka</i> , Lehar
[Speaks]	“To You,” Speaks
[Speaks]	“Morning”
<b>Pianist [Levant]</b>	<b>Waltz from <i>Naila [La source]</i>, Delibes-Dohnanyi</b>
[Hansen]	Aubade from <i>Le roi d’Ys</i> , Lalo
[Eddy]	“Tramps at Sea” [from <i>The Cuban Love Song</i> ], Stothart
Quartet	“The Lion and the Lizard,” Lehmann
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>The Fortune Teller</i> , Herbert

**4 November 1932**<sup>35</sup>

Ensemble	“Wintergreen for President” [from <i>Of Thee I Sing</i> ], Gershwin
Orch	Polka, Smetana
Eddy	“Eri Tu [chi Macchiavi]” from <i>The Masked Ball</i> , Verdi
Speaks, Wiggins	Waltz from <i>Boccaccio</i> , Suppé
Hansen	“Then You’ll Remember Me” [from <i>The Bohemian Girl</i> , Balfe]
Emil Stark (cello)	Hungarian Dance, Brahms
Wiggins	“Oh, Lovely Night,” Ronald
Eddy	“Shortnin’ Bread,” Wolfe
Ensemble	Czardas, Kalman
Orch	“Merrymakers’ Dance,” German
Speaks	Passepied, Delibes
Wiggins, Hansen	“Bird Songs at Eventide,” Coates
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Sparks [Étincelles, op. 36, no. 6], Moszkowski</b>
Eddy	“Nichavo,” Mans-Zucca
Quartet	Madrigal [from <i>The Mikado</i> ], Sullivan
Ensemble	Group from <i>Wildflower</i> , Youmans
	“Wildflower”
	“April Blossoms”
	“Goodbye, Little Rosebud”
	“Bambalina”

<sup>34</sup> “Evening Post’s Radio Time-Table,” *New York Evening Post*, 28 Oct 1932.

<sup>35</sup> “Evening Post’s Radio Time-Table,” *New York Evening Post*, 4 Nov 1932.

**11 November 1932**<sup>36</sup>

Eddy	“Drums in My Heart” [from <i>Through the Years</i> ], Youmans-Daly
Speaks, Hansen	“Say Not Love is a Dream” [from <i>The Count of Luxembourg</i> .] Lehar
Eddy	“The Two Grenadiers,” [Heine]-Schumann
Wiggins	“Roses of Picardy,” Wood
Brass quartet	Bourrée from <i>Water Music</i> , Handel
Speaks	“Jola,” De Falla
Eddy	“Tomorrow,” [Masefield]-Keel
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>The Wizard of Oz</i> , Tietjens
Orch	Irish Dance no. 3, Ansell
Speaks, Eddy	“Will You Remember” [from <i>Maytime</i> ], Romberg
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Allegro scherzando [from Piano Concerto in G minor], Saint-Saens</b>
Hansen	“Mattinata,” Leoncavallo
Eddy	“The Rainbow Trail,” Eddy
Quartet	“In Flanders Fields,” Merwin
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>The Riviera Girl</i> , Kalman

**18 November 1932**<sup>37</sup>

Eddy	“My Sword and I” from <i>The Three Musketeers</i> , Friml
Speaks, Hansen	“Vilia” from <i>The Merry Widow</i> , Lehar
Eddy	“Beating up the Channel,” Sanderson
Wiggins	Elegie, Massenet
Orch	“Badinage,” Herbert
Speaks	“Lilacs,” Rachmaninoff
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Lilacs transcription for piano, Rachmaninoff</b>
Eddy	“Tally Ho,” Leoni
Ensemble	Group from <i>Apple Blossoms</i> , Kreisler-Jacob
Orch	“Furiant” From <i>The Bartered Bride</i> , Smetana
Hansen	“Le donna a mobile” from <i>Rigoletto</i> , Verdi
Wiggins	“Oh Dear, What Can the Matter Be!,” arr. Bax
Eddy	Canzonetta from <i>The Love Letter</i> , Jacobi
<b>Levant</b>	<b>“Gnomenreigen,” Liszt</b>
Speaks	“La Violetera,” Padilla
Quartet	“Jeannie With the Light Brown Hair,” Foster
Ensemble	Group from <i>The Yankee Princess</i> , Kalman

<sup>36</sup> “Evening Post’s Radio Time-Table,” *New York Evening Post*, 11 Nov 1932.

<sup>37</sup> “Radio Programs,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 18 Nov 1932.

**25 November 1932**<sup>38</sup>

Ensemble	The Love Parade [from <i>The Love Parade</i> ], Schertzinger
Eddy	“The Toreador Song” from <i>Carmen</i> , Bizet
Speaks, Hansen	“Don’t Ever Leave Me” [from <i>Sweet Adeline</i> ], Kern
Gusikoff	Scherzo, Tarantella, Wieniawski
Hansen	“Hills of Home,” Fox
Wiggins	“Comin Through the Rye”
Eddy	“Captain Mac,” Sanderson
Ensemble	“Hymn of Thanksgiving,” arr. Kremser
Orch and voices	Group from <i>Monte Carlo</i> , Whiting
Speaks	Ballatella [from <i>Pagliacci</i> ], Leoncavallo
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Liebesleid, Kreisler [arr. Rachmaninoff]</b>
Eddy	“The Worship of God in Nature,” Beethoven
Orch	Polka, Smetana
<b>Quartet with [Levant]</b>	<b>“Thanksgiving Song,” Morton</b>
Ensemble	Group from <i>Music in the Air</i> , Kern

**2 December 1932**<sup>39</sup>

Ensemble	“Valencia,” Padilla
Orch	Marche miniature, Tchaikovsky
Eddy	“Le veau d’or” from <i>Faust</i> , Gounod
Speaks, Wiggins	Barcarolle from <i>Tales of Hoffman</i> , Offenbach
Hansen	“The Open Road,” Stickle
Flute and clarinet duet	“Butterfly,” Bendix
Eddy	“Duna” [aka “Little Stars of Duna”], McGill
	Group of Scotch songs
Orch	“The Campbells are Comin’”
Quartet	“Loch Lamond”
Hansen	“Annie Laurie”
Speaks	“Blue Bells of Scotland”
Wiggins	“John Anderson My Jo”
Quartet	“Scots wha hae wi Wallace bled”
Orch	Slavonic Dance in G minor, Dvořák
Speaks, Hansen	“Sympathy,” Strauss
Wiggins	“Du bist die Ruh,” Schubert
<b>Levant</b>	<b>“Au bord d’une source,” Liszt</b>
Eddy	“Captain Stratton’s Fancy” [from <i>Old Bold Mate of Henry Morgan</i> ], Taylor
Quartet	“La Paloma,” Yradler
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>Rose Marie</i> , Friml

<sup>38</sup> “Evening Post’s Radio Time-Table,” *New York Evening Post*, 25 Nov 1932.

<sup>39</sup> “Evening Post’s Radio Time-Table,” *New York Evening Post*, 2 Dec 1932.

**9 December 1932<sup>40</sup>**

Ensemble	“Little Captain of My Heart” [from <i>Das Lied ist aus</i> ], Stolz
Orch	“Shepherd’s Hey,” Grainger
Eddy	“Il balen” from <i>Il Trovatore</i> , Verdi
Speaks, Hansen	“I Only Love One” from <i>The Merry Wives of Vienna</i> , Stolz
<b>[Levant] &amp; violin trio</b>	<b>Schoen Rosemarie, Kreisler</b>
Wiggins	“Oh, Promise Me,” DeKoven
Eddy	“Captain Mac,” Sanderson
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>The Gondoliers</i> , Sullivan
Orch	French Military March, Saint Saëns
Speaks	“Who’ll Buy My Lavender,” German
Hansen	Harlequin Serenade [from <i>Pagliacci</i> ], Leoncavallo
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Bohemian Dance, Smetana</b>
Eddy	“Goin’ Home,” Dvořák
<b>Quartet, with Levant</b>	<b>“Fill Every Glass” [from <i>The Beggar’s Opera</i>], Gay</b>
Wiggins, Hansen	“Brown Bird Singing,” Wood
Ensemble	Group from <i>Love Me Tonight</i> , Rodgers

**16 December 1932<sup>41</sup>**

Ensemble	“El Relicario,” Padilla
Orch	Hopak [from <i>The Fair at Sorotchinsky</i> ] Mussorgsky
Eddy	“Credo” from <i>Otello</i> , Verdi
Wiggins, Hansen	“You Too” from <i>Zwei Herzen</i> , Stolz
Speaks	“Italian Street Song,” Herbert
Flute with orch	Serenade (“La Reja”) from <i>La Fera</i> , Lacombe
Eddy	“Sally in Our Alley”
Ensemble	Group from <i>Blossom Time</i> , Romberg
Orch	Malagueña, Mouskowski
Hansen	“Prize Song” from <i>Die Meistersinger</i> , Wagner
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Waltz in G flat, Chopin</b>
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Etude in G flat [“Black Key”], Chopin</b>
Wiggins	“A Kiss in the Dark,” Herbert
Eddy	“My Song is of the Sturdy North,” German
Quartet	Sextet from <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> , Donizetti
Ensemble	Group from <i>The Dubarry</i> , Millocker
	“I Give My Heart”
	“Without Your Love”
	“The Dubarry”

<sup>40</sup> “Evening Post’s Radio Time-Table,” *New York Evening Post*, 9 Dec 1932.

<sup>41</sup> “Evening Post’s Radio Time-Table,” *New York Evening Post*, 16 Dec 1932.

**23 December 1932**<sup>42</sup>

Ensemble	“Joy to the World”
Ensemble	“The First Noel”
Ensemble	“Holy Night”
Ensemble	“Hail Ye Tyme of Holie-Days”
Orch	“March of the Little Lead Soldiers,” Pierné
Eddy	Prologue from <i>Pagliacci</i> , Leoncavallo
Wiggins and Hansen	“Toyland” from <i>Babes in Toyland</i> , Herbert
Speaks	“Christmas Carol of the Birds,” Chaminade
Gusikoff	Ave Maria, Schubert-Wilhelmj
Eddy	“Peter’s Song” from <i>Hansel and Gretel</i> , Humperdinck
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>The Merry Widow</i> , Lehar
Orch	“Farandois” from <i>L’Arlésienne</i> , Bizet
Hansen	“Cantique de Noel,” Adam
<b>Levant and Daly</b>	<b>Three variations from <i>Thirty Variations</i>, two pianos, Bach-Reger</b>
Eddy	“Good King Wenceslas”
Quartet	“The Sleigh,” Kountz
Wiggins	“Maria Wiegenlied,” Reger
Woodwinds	“Dance of the Toy Pipes” [from <i>The Nutcracker</i> ], Tchaikovsky
Ensemble	“Adeste Fideles”

**30 December 1932**<sup>43</sup>

Ensemble	“The Second Violin,” from <i>Apple Blossoms</i> , Kreisler
Orch	Turkish March from <i>The Ruins of Athens</i> , Beethoven
Eddy	“De Glory Road,” Wolfe
Speaks, Hansen	“Duet of Dmitri and Marian” (Garden Scene) from <i>Boris Godunov</i> , Mussorgsky
Wiggins	“Through the Years” [from <i>Through the Years</i> ], Youmans
Gusikoff	“Liebesfreud,” Kreisler
<b>Eddy with [Levant]</b>	<b>“Ein Traum,” Grieg</b>
Ensemble	Excerpts from <i>The Pirates of Penzance</i> , Sullivan
Orch	“O Ya Ya,” De Markoff
Speaks	“They Didn’t Believe Me” from <i>The Girl from Utah</i> , Kern-Daly
<b>Levant</b>	<b>Allegro scherzando from Piano Concerto in G minor, op. 22, Saint-Saëns</b>

<sup>42</sup> “Evening Post’s Radio Time-Table,” *New York Evening Post*, 23 Dec 1932.

<sup>43</sup> “Evening Post’s Radio Time-Table,” *New York Evening Post*, 23 Dec 1932.



Hansen  
Eddy  
Speaks, Wiggins, Hansen  
and Eddy  
Ensemble

La r ve from *Manon*, Massenet  
“Song of the Bow,” Aylward  
Quartet from *Rigoletto*, Verdi  
Group from *Of Thee I Sing*, Gershwin  
“Love is Sweeping the Country”  
Opening of Act 2

## Appendix C

### Format of *The Swift Hour*, 6 October – 3 November 1934

*The Swift Hour*, sponsored by Swift Meats, premiered on NBC radio on 6 October 1934, and featured Sigmund Romberg and his Orchestra. It aired on Saturdays at 8 PM. The show featured new music by Romberg for radio, by other composers, and sketches with Romberg's music. Yale professor William Lyon Phelps provided educational monologues and served as master of ceremonies. Very briefly, Oscar Levant played piano in Romberg's orchestra.<sup>1</sup> This appendix lists the format for each episode that featured Levant as a pianist.

#### 6 October 1934<sup>2</sup>

Playlets with originally composed music by Romberg.  
An incident from the life of Alfredo Benelli.  
A sketch in a cafe with Johann Strauss as the central figure.  
Phelps, "As I Like It"

#### 13 October 1934<sup>3</sup>

A short sketch on the life of Jules Offenbach, with the *Barcarolle* from *Tales of Hoffmann*  
*Via Radio*, a playlet.  
Medley of music from *Die Bajadere*, *Die Zigeunerprimas*, *Die Csardasfuerstin* and *Countess Maritza*  
(Kalman)  
Excerpts from *The Desert Song*, including the Military March and "One Alone" (Romberg)  
Ballet music (Romberg)  
Several original compositions (Romberg)

#### 20 October 1934<sup>4</sup>

"One night in Detroit" and "Secret Service" sketches with original Romberg music.  
"Havana" a new rumba for the broadcast by Romberg.  
Phelps in dialogue with Romberg and soprano Helen Marshall

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<sup>1</sup> "Radio Selections," *Courier-Post* (Camden, NJ), 6 Oct 1934.

<sup>2</sup> "Two New Programs – WIBA Tonight," *Madison Capital Times*, 6 Oct 1934.

<sup>3</sup> "The Microphone will Present," NYT, 7 Oct 1934; "What's on the Air," *Boston Globe*, 13 Oct 1934.

<sup>4</sup> "What's on the Air?," *Daily Boston Globe*, 20 Oct 1934.

**27 October 1934**<sup>5</sup>

“Two Little Girls in Love are We,” sketch

“Devil in Disguise,” two Romberg originals in the sketch

“Save My Heart”

“Never Had an Education”

Excerpts from Oscar Straus operettas, orchestra: *Waltz Dream* and *The Chocolate Soldier*

**3 November 1934**<sup>6</sup>

Romberg’s version of the legend of how Beethoven composed the “Moonlight Sonata” (dramatic sketch)

“The Piano Tuner,” dramatic sketch, with music by Romberg.

A gypsy melody by Romberg for the radiocast

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<sup>5</sup> “Navy Day, Swift Hour, and Others: Outstanding Radio Programs on WIBA,” *Madison Capital Times*, 27 Oct 1934; “Today’s Radio Programs,” *Shreveport Times*, 27 Oct 1934; “Radio Features,” *Santa Ana Register*, 27 Oct 1934.

<sup>6</sup> “The Radio Parade,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 28 Oct 1934.

## Appendix D

### Oscar Levant's *Kraft Music Hall* Segments

This table lists the selections from popular and classical music that Oscar Levant presented during his featured segments on *Kraft Music Hall*. In order to fit the selection within the time allotted for his segment, most of Levant's presentations of classical music on this radio program were condensed versions of the larger works.<sup>1</sup>

Date	Composer	Selection
9 Oct 1947	DeFalla	Ritual Fire Dance
16 Oct 1947	Tchaikovsky	First Piano Concerto
23 Oct 1947	Debussy	Clair de lune
6 Nov 1947	Gershwin	Second Prelude
13 Nov 1947	Unknown	Unknown
20 Nov 1947	Gershwin	Concerto in F: 2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> mvts
27 Nov 1947	Chopin	Nocturne No. 5 in F-sharp minor
4 Dec 1947	Khachaturian	Sabre Dance
18 Dec 1947 <sup>2</sup>	DeFalla ; Grieg	Miller's Dance ; Piano Concerto: 1 <sup>st</sup> mvt
25 Dec 1947	Grieg	Piano Concerto: 2 <sup>nd</sup> mvt
1 Jan 1948	Khachaturian	Sabre Dance
8 Jan 1948	Debussy	Clair de lune
15 Jan 1948	Lecuona	Malagueña
22 Jan 1948	Brahms	Waltz in A-flat major, op. 39/15

<sup>1</sup> For listings of what Al Jolson sang on each episode, see James Fisher, *Al Jolson: A Bio-Bibliography*, Bio-Bibliographies in the Performing Arts (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994), 160-165.

<sup>2</sup> Levant did not perform on the 11 December 1947 episode of *Kraft Music Hall*. On that day he presented Gershwin's Concerto in F at Carnegie Hall. Olin Downes, "Mahler Symphony Introduced Here," *New York Times*, 12 Dec 1947.

29 Jan 1948	Rachmaninoff	Second Piano Concerto: 1 <sup>st</sup> mvt
5 Feb 1948	Chopin	Polonaise No. 3 in A major
12 Feb 1948	Liszt	Hungarian Rhapsody No. 10
19 Feb 1948	Khachaturian	Sabre Dance
26 Feb 1948	DeFalla	Ritual Fire Dance
4 Mar 1948	Chopin	Polonaise No. 3 in A major
11 Mar 1948	Khachaturian	Lullaby
18 Mar 1948	Beethoven	Moonlight Sonata: 1st mvt
25 Mar 1948	Godowsky	“Alt Wien”
1 Apr 1948	Chopin	Etude in C minor, op 10/12 “Revolutionary”
8 Apr 1948	Gershwin	Concerto in F: 2 <sup>nd</sup> mvt
15 Apr 1948	Chopin	Nocturne in E-flat major, op. 9/2
22 Apr 1948	Tchaikovsky	First Piano Concerto: 2 <sup>nd</sup> mvt
29 Apr 1948	Debussy	Golliwog’s Cakewalk
2 May 1948	Khachaturian	Sabre Dance
6 May 1948	Khachaturian	Sabre Dance
13 May 1948	Grieg	Piano Concerto: 1 <sup>st</sup> mvt
20 May 1948	Rachmaninoff	Second Piano Concerto: 1 <sup>st</sup> mvt
27 May 1948	Lecuona	Malagueña
3 Jun 1948	Rachmaninoff	Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini: Variation 18
10 Jun 1948	Rachmaninoff	Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini: 1st-3rd Variations
30 Sep 1948	Tchaikovsky	First Piano Concerto: 1 <sup>st</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> mvts
7 Oct 1948	Rachmaninoff	Second Piano Concerto: 1 <sup>st</sup> mvt
14 Oct 1948	Grieg	Piano Concerto: 1 <sup>st</sup> mvt

21 Oct 1948	Gershwin	Rhapsody in Blue
28 Oct 1948	Massenet	Thaïs: Meditation
4 Nov 1948	Rachmaninoff	Second Piano Concerto: 3 <sup>rd</sup> mvt
11 Nov 1948	Rachmaninoff	Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini: Variation 18 + conclusion
18 Nov 1948	Tchaikovsky	First Piano Concerto: 2 <sup>nd</sup> mvt
25 Nov 1948	Tchaikovsky	First Piano Concerto: 3 <sup>rd</sup> mvt
2 Dec 1948	Grieg	Piano Concerto: 2 <sup>nd</sup> mvt
9 Dec 1948	Debussy	Clair de lune
16 Dec 1948	Lecuona	Malagueña
23 Dec 1948	Rachmaninoff	Second Piano Concerto: 2 <sup>nd</sup> mvt
30 Dec 1948	Khachaturian	Sabre Dance
6 Jan 1949	DeFalla	Ritual Fire Dance
13 Jan 1949	Gershwin	Concerto in F: 2 <sup>nd</sup> mvt
20 Jan 1949	Rachmaninoff	Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini: Excerpts
27 Jan 1949	Rachmaninoff	Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini: Var. 18
3 Feb 1949	Chopin	E-flat Nocturne
10 Feb 1949	Chopin	Polonaise in A major
17 Feb 1949	Gershwin	Second Prelude
24 Feb 1949	Beethoven	Moonlight Sonata: 1 <sup>st</sup> mvt
3 Mar 1949	Rachmaninoff	Second Piano Concerto: 1 <sup>st</sup> mvt
10 Mar 1949	Chopin	Revolutionary Etude

17 Mar 1949	Lecuona	Malegueña
24 Mar 1949	Grieg	Piano Concerto: 1 <sup>st</sup> mvt
7 Apr 1949	Tchaikovsky	First Piano Concerto: 2 <sup>nd</sup> mvt
14 Apr 1949	Debussy	Clair de lune
21 Apr 1949	Grieg	Piano Concerto: 2 <sup>nd</sup> mvt
28 Apr 1949	Rachmaninoff	Second Piano Concerto: 3 <sup>rd</sup> mvt
5 May 1949	Rachmaninoff	Second Piano Concerto: 2 <sup>nd</sup> mvt
12 May 1949	Khachaturian	Piano Concerto
19 May 1949	Tchaikovsky	First Piano Concerto: 1 <sup>st</sup> mvt
26 May 1949	Grieg	Piano Concerto: 2 <sup>nd</sup> mvt

## Appendix E

### Oscar Levant's Concert and Recital Dates, 1931-1958

This appendix is a list of Oscar Levant's appearances live or on radio as a performing pianist between 1931 and 1958. This list only includes those appearances that I could confirm through sources that I was able to access. This list does not include radio shows that featured Levant as an orchestra musician, co-host or regular panelist, like *Hoffman Ginger Ale Hour*, *Information Please*, and *Kraft Music Hall*.

The purpose of this appendix is to showcase how often Levant performed Gershwin's music on stage and on radio for over twenty years. In the columns labeled "Rhapsody", "Concerto", and "Preludes", I have placed a check mark (✓) if I found a source that confirmed Levant performed that Gershwin piece on that particular day. In the column labeled "Other," concertos by composers other than Gershwin will be indicated by the following letters: Levant's Piano Concerto ('L'), Tchaikovsky's B-flat Piano Concerto ('T'), Grieg's A minor Piano Concerto ('G'), Khachaturian's Piano Concerto ('K'), Rubinstein's Fourth Piano Concerto ('R'), Honegger's Concertino ('H'), Shostakovich's Second Piano Concerto ('S'), and Saint-Saëns' Second Piano Concerto ('SS').

Date	City	Recital or Host Orchestra	Rhapsody	Concerto	Preludes	Other
18 Feb 1931	New York	New York Sinfonietta				Bennett's <i>Charleston Rhapsody</i>
30 Apr 1932	Saratoga Springs	Yaddo Festival				Levant's <i>Sonatina</i>
16 Aug 1932	New York	Lewisohn Stadium		✓		
11 May 1934	New York	<i>Voice of Firestone</i>		1 <sup>st</sup> mvt		
8 Sep 1937	Los Angeles	Hollywood Bowl Orchestra		✓		
2 Oct 1938	New York	<i>Magic Key of RCA</i>		3 <sup>rd</sup> mvt		
9 Jan 1939	New York	<i>Voice of Firestone</i>		3 <sup>rd</sup> mvt		
10 Jul 1939	New York	Lewisohn Stadium	✓	✓		
16 Jul 1939	New York	<i>Magic Key of RCA</i>		✓		
12 Nov 1939	New York	Recital (with Roman Totenberg)				
24 Nov 1939	Pittsburgh	Pittsburgh Symphony		✓		



26 Nov 1939	Pittsburgh	Pittsburgh Symphony		✓		
10 Dec 1939	Detroit	Detroit Symphony ( <i>Ford Sunday Evening Hour</i> )	✓			
4 Jan 1940	Cleveland	Cleveland Orchestra		✓		
5 Jan 1940	Cleveland	Cleveland Orchestra		✓		
24 Mar 1940	San Francisco	San Francisco Symphony		✓		
28 Mar 1940	Los Angeles	<i>Kraft Music Hall</i>			2 <sup>nd</sup>	
24 Apr 1940	Boston	Boston Symphony Orchestra?	✓	3 <sup>rd</sup> mvt	✓	
28 Apr 1940	Rochester	Rochester Civic Orchestra	✓	a mvt		
15 Jun 1940	Toronto	Percy Faith's Orchestra	✓			
17 Jun 1940	Newark	Essex County Symphony		✓		
1 Jul 1940	Philadelphia	Robin Hood Dell	✓	✓		
11 Jul 1940	New York	Lewisohn Stadium	✓	✓		
16 Jul 1940	Los Angeles	Hollywood Bowl Orchestra	✓	✓		
18 Jul 1940	Los Angeles	<i>Kraft Music Hall</i>				"Fascinatin' Rhythm"
31 Jul 1940	Washington DC	National Symphony Orchestra	✓			
27 Aug 1940	San Francisco	San Francisco Symphony	✓	✓		
17 Nov 1940	Chicago	Women's Symphony Orchestra of Chicago (radio)				Levant's Sonatina; SS (2 <sup>nd</sup> mvt)
1 Dec 1940	Chicago	Frank Black, conductor	✓	✓		
22 Dec 1940	New York	<i>Robert Russell Bennett's Notebook</i>				Levant's Poem for Piano
20 Apr 1941	Rochester	Rochester Civic Orchestra		✓		
10 Jul 1941	New York	Lewisohn Stadium	✓	✓		
3 Sep 1941	New York	"Millions for Defense" (radio)	✓			
11 Oct 1941	Washington DC	National Symphony Orchestra	✓	✓		
3 Nov 1941	Toledo	[Cancelled?]				
16 Nov 1941	St. Louis	St. Louis Symphony	✓	✓	✓	

18 Nov 1941	Pittsburgh	Pittsburgh Symphony	✓	✓		
23 Nov 1941	New York	NBC Symphony Orchestra				L
11 Jan 1942	New York	"Salute to Negro Troops"				
22 Jan 1942	Richmond, Indiana	Recital			✓	
23 Jan 1942	Chicago	Recital			✓	
25 Jan 1942	Little Rock	Recital				
27 Jan 1942	Kansas City	Recital				
6 Feb 1942	White Plains	Cleveland Orchestra		✓		
8 Feb 1942	Indianapolis	Recital [Cancelled]				
17 Feb 1942	New York	NBC Symphony Orchestra				L
28 Feb 1942	Detroit	Detroit Symphony		✓		
5 Mar 1942	San Francisco	Recital [Cancelled?]				
8 Mar 1942	San Francisco	San Francisco Symphony [Cancelled?]				
13 Mar 1942	New York	New York Philharmonic [Cancelled]				
29 Mar 1942	New York	<i>Command Performance</i>	✓			
8 Apr 1942	Bridgeport	Recital				
15 Apr 1942	Minneapolis	Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra	✓			L
15 Apr 1942	Grand Forks	Recital				
30 Jul 1942	Philadelphia	Robin Hood Dell	✓	✓		G (1 <sup>st</sup> mvt)
10 Aug 1942	New York	Lewisohn Stadium		✓		
11 Aug 1942	New York	Lewisohn Stadium	✓	✓	✓	
31 Aug 1942	New York	<i>Bell Telephone Hour</i>		2 <sup>nd</sup> mvt		
8 Sep 1942	Montreal	Montreal Symphony	✓	✓		
20 Sep 1942	New York	<i>Pause That Refreshes</i>	✓		✓	
25 Oct 1942	New York	WQXR war bond concert			2 <sup>nd</sup> ?	
31 Oct 1942	New York	<i>Saturday Night Bondwagon</i>			2 <sup>nd</sup>	
18 Nov 1942	Cincinnati	Cincinnati Symphony	✓	✓		
30 Nov 1942	New York	<i>Bell Telephone Hour</i>				SS (2 <sup>nd</sup> mvt)

13 Jan 1943	New York	<i>Cresta Blanca Carnival</i>	✓			
26 Jan 1943	Baltimore	National Symphony Orchestra	✓	✓	✓	
27 Jan 1943	Washington DC	National Symphony Orchestra	✓	✓		
31 Jan 1943	New York	<i>Fred Allen Show (Radio)</i>				<i>El Rinso White</i> ("symphonic jingle")
3 Feb 1943	New York	<i>Cresta Blanca Carnival</i>		3 <sup>rd</sup> mvt		
9 Mar 1943	Philadelphia	Recital	✓		✓	
2 May 1943	Rochester	Rochester Civic Orchestra	✓	✓		G (1 <sup>st</sup> mvt)
9 May 1943	New York	<i>Pause That Refreshes</i>		2 <sup>nd</sup> mvt		
13 May 1943	Detroit	Detroit Symphony	✓	✓	✓	
9 Jul 1943	Los Angeles	Hollywood Bowl Orchestra	✓	✓		G (1 <sup>st</sup> mvt)
10 Jul 1943	Los Angeles	Hollywood Bowl Orchestra	✓	✓		G (1 <sup>st</sup> mvt)
3 Oct 1943	New York	<i>Pause That Refreshes</i>				G (1 <sup>st</sup> mvt)
21 Oct 1943	Dayton	Recital	✓		✓	
22 Oct 1943	Columbus, Ohio	Recital				
31 Oct 1943	New York	<i>Chamber Music Society of Lower Basin Street</i>	✓			
7 Nov 1943	New York	<i>Treasury Star Parade</i>		1 <sup>st</sup> mvt		
10 Nov 1943	Omaha	Omaha Symphony	✓			G (1 <sup>st</sup> mvt)
11 Nov 1943	Omaha	Omaha Symphony	✓			G (1 <sup>st</sup> mvt)
14 Nov 1943	Cleveland	Cleveland Orchestra	✓	✓		
12 Dec 1943	New York	<i>Pause That Refreshes</i>	✓			
13 Dec 1943	Philadelphia	Philadelphia Orchestra	✓			L
14 Dec 1943	New York	Philadelphia Orchestra	✓			L
17 Dec 1943	Philadelphia	Philadelphia Orchestra	✓			L
18 Dec 1943	Philadelphia	Philadelphia Orchestra	✓			L
28 Dec 1943	Washington DC	Philadelphia Orchestra	✓			L
29 Dec 1943	Baltimore	Philadelphia Orchestra	✓			L

6 Jan 1944	Oklahoma City	Recital				
8 Jan 1944	San Antonio	San Antonio Symphony		✓		
10 Jan 1944	Houston	Houston Symphony	✓ (encore)	✓	two of them	
11 Jan 1944	Galveston	Houston Symphony		[✓]		
12 Jan 1944	Beaumont, Tex.	Houston Symphony		[✓]		
19 Jan 1944	Knoxville	Recital	✓		✓	
21 Jan 1944	Cincinnati	Cincinnati Symphony		✓		
22 Jan 1944	Cincinnati	Cincinnati Symphony		✓		
23 Jan 1944	Chicago	Chicago Symphony		✓		G (1 <sup>st</sup> mvt)
24 Jan 1944	Louisville	Cincinnati Symphony		✓		
27 Jan 1944	Memphis	Recital				
19 Feb 1944	Kansas City	Kansas City Philharmonic	✓	✓		
20 Feb 1944	Kansas City	Kansas City Philharmonic	✓	✓		
28 Feb 1944	New York	<i>Bell Telephone Hour</i>	✓			
1 Mar 1944	Camden, NJ	Recital				
19 Mar 1944	New York	<i>Pause That Refreshes</i>				
2 Apr 1944	New York	<i>NBC Symphony Hour</i>		✓		
12 Apr 1944	Atlanta	Recital	✓			
9 Jun 1944	Boston	<i>Rhapsody in Khaki</i> (Radio)	✓	1 <sup>st</sup> mvt		
14 Jun 1944	Pittsburgh	Parade of Stars War Bond Show	✓			
15 Jun 1944	Philadelphia	War Bond stage show	✓			
16 Jun 1944	Brooklyn	War Bond stage show	[✓]			
17 Jun 1944	Camden, NJ	War Bond stage show	[✓]			
20 Jun 1944	Chicago	War Bond stage show	[✓]			
28 Jun 1944	Detroit	Detroit Symphony		✓	two of them	
2 Jul 1944	New York	<i>Chamber Music Society of Lower Basin Street</i>				

6 Jul 1944	New York	Lewisohn Stadium	✓	✓		
26 Aug 1944	Los Angeles	Hollywood Bowl	✓	✓		
18 Sep 1944	New York	<i>Bell Telephone Hour</i>				G (1 <sup>st</sup> mvt)
28 Oct 1944	Kansas City	Kansas City Philharmonic				
16 Nov 1944	Indianapolis	Indianapolis Symphony	✓	✓	two of them	
16 Dec 1944	Chicago	Chicago Symphony	✓			
23 Jan 1945	Baltimore	National Symphony Orchestra				G
25 Jan 1945	Washington DC	National Symphony Orchestra				G
29 Jan 1945	Louisville	Cincinnati Symphony	✓			G
18 Feb 1945	Des Moines	Recital	✓		✓	
23 Feb 1945	Wichita	Recital				
15 Mar 1945	Chicago	Chicago Symphony		✓		
16 Mar 1945	Chicago	Chicago Symphony		✓		
17 Mar 1945	Memphis	Recital?				
2 Apr 1945	New York	<i>Bell Telephone Hour</i>				G
6 Apr 1945	Houston	Houston Symphony	✓	1 <sup>st</sup> mvt		
7 Apr 1945	Dallas	Houston Symphony	[✓]	[1 <sup>st</sup> mvt]		
7 Apr 1945	Waco	Houston Symphony	[✓]	[1 <sup>st</sup> mvt]		
8 Apr 1945	Camp Wolters	Houston Symphony	✓	[1 <sup>st</sup> mvt]		
8 Apr 1945	Fort Worth	Houston Symphony	✓	1 <sup>st</sup> mvt	2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup>	
10 Apr 1945	Austin (Bergstrom Field)	Recital				
10 Apr 1945	Austin	Houston Symphony	✓	1 <sup>st</sup> mvt		
4 May 1945	Ann Arbor	Philadelphia Orchestra	✓	✓		
16 May 1945	Albany	Recital				
1 Jun 1945	Philadelphia	Philadelphia Orchestra	✓			
25 Jun 1945	New York	<i>Bell Telephone Hour (Radio)</i>		2 <sup>nd</sup> mvt	✓	

12 Jul 1945	New York	Lewisohn Stadium	✓	✓		
11 Sep 1945	New York	<i>Johnny Presents</i>			one of them	
17 Sep 1945	New York	<i>Bell Telephone Hour</i> CANCELLED				
11 Oct 1945	New York	<i>Pause That Refreshes</i>	✓			
23 Oct 1945	New York	<i>Hildegarde's Radio Room</i>				
6 Nov 1945	Akron	Recital	✓			
11 Nov 1945	New York	<i>Radio Hall of Fame</i>	✓			
?? Jan 1946	Boston	Indianapolis Symphony [Cancelled]				
26 Jan 1946	Cincinnati	Cincinnati Symphony [Cancelled]				
27 Jan 1946	Cincinnati	Cincinnati Symphony [Cancelled]				
3 Feb 1946	Burbank	<i>The Electric Hour</i>	✓	✓	✓	
27 Mar 1946	Philadelphia	Philadelphia Orchestra	✓		✓	
9 Apr 1946	Pittsburgh	Pittsburgh Symphony	✓	✓		
18 Apr 1946	New York	New York Philharmonic	✓	✓		
22 Apr 1946	New York	<i>Percy Faith Orchestra Show</i>			✓	
20 May 1946	New York	<i>Bell Telephone Hour</i>				G (2 <sup>nd</sup> mvt) ; T (3 <sup>rd</sup> mvt)
23 Jun 1946	New York	<i>Fred Allen Show</i>				
27 Jun 1946	Philadelphia	Robin Hood Dell	✓	✓	✓	
11 Jul 1946	New York	Lewisohn Stadium	✓	✓		
13 Aug 1946	Louisville	Louisville Philharmonic	✓		✓	
14 Aug 1946	Louisville	Louisville Philharmonic	✓		✓	
15 Aug 1946	Louisville	Louisville Philharmonic	✓		✓	
12 Oct 1946	New York	<i>Vaughn Monroe Show</i>				
20 Oct 1946	New York	<i>Family Hour</i>		✓		
2 Nov 1946	Cincinnati	Cincinnati Symphony		✓		
3 Nov 1946	Cincinnati	Cincinnati Symphony		✓		
16 Nov 1946	New York	<i>Veteran's Jamboree</i>				

29 Dec 1946	New York	<i>Fred Allen Show</i>					“The Eighth Veil”
12 Jan 1947	New York	<i>Hildegarde's Radio Room</i>					
14 Jan 1947	Washington DC	Recital (for Truman)	✓				
12 Apr 1947	St. Louis	Recital	✓				
14 Apr 1947	Minneapolis	Recital	✓?				
22 Apr 1947	Pittsburgh	Pittsburgh Symphony					G
25 Apr 1947	Washington DC	Recital	✓			✓	
30 Jul 1947	Los Angeles	Hollywood Bowl Orchestra				✓	G T
6 Nov 1947	Los Angeles	<i>Kraft Music Hall</i>				2 <sup>nd</sup>	
20 Nov 1947	Los Angeles	<i>Kraft Music Hall</i>			Excerpts (2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> )		
11 Dec 1947	New York	New York Philharmonic			✓		
14 Dec 1947	New York	New York Philharmonic			✓		
11 Feb 1948	Los Angeles	<i>Kraft Music Hall</i>				3 <sup>rd</sup>	
8 Apr 1948	Los Angeles	<i>Kraft Music Hall</i>			excerpts (2 <sup>nd</sup> )		
17 Jul 1948	Los Angeles	Hollywood Bowl Orchestra	✓	✓	✓		
31 Aug 1948	Los Angeles	Hollywood Bowl Orchestra				✓	
30 Nov 1948	Los Angeles	Banquet (solo)					
11 Jan 1949	San Francisco	San Francisco Symphony			✓	2 of them	
15 Jan 1949	San Diego	Recital					
22 Jan 1949	Phoenix	Recital					
23 Jan 1949	Phoenix	Recital					
29 Jan 1949	Portland	Recital					
7 Feb 1949	San Jose	Recital					
12 Feb 1949	Fresno	Recital					
13 Feb 1949	Sacramento	Recital	✓	✓	✓		
3 Jul 1949	New York	NBC Symphony Orchestra (radio)					G ; and I Got Rhythm Variations

7 Jul 1949	New York	Lewisohn Stadium	✓	✓	2 of them	Second Rhapsody
11 Jul 1949	Philadelphia	Robin Hood Dell	✓	✓	✓	
26 Jul 1949	Los Angeles	Hollywood Bowl Orchestra				Second Rhapsody H and K
29 Dec 1949	New York	New York Philharmonic				H and K
30 Dec 1949	New York	New York Philharmonic				H and K
1 Jan 1950	New York	New York Philharmonic				K
10 Jan 1950	Pittsburgh	Pittsburgh Symphony		✓	2 of them	K
14 Jan 1950	Baltimore	Baltimore Symphony Orchestra	✓	✓		
15 Jan 1950	Washington DC	National Symphony Orchestra	✓			K
16 Jan 1950	Richmond, Virginia	Recital	✓		✓	
21 Jan 1950	Louisville	Recital	✓	✓		
22 Jan 1950	Cincinnati	Recital				
23 Jan 1950	Bluefield, WV	Recital				
26 Jan 1950	Orlando	Recital				
29 Jan 1950	Atlanta	Atlanta Symphony	✓	✓		
31 Jan 1950	Raleigh, NC	Recital				
4 Feb 1950	Washington DC	<i>Who Said That?</i>				IGR Variations
5 Feb 1950	Cleveland	Recital				
6 Feb 1950	Detroit	Recital		✓		
13 Feb 1950	New York	<i>Bell Telephone Hour</i>		2 <sup>nd</sup> mvt		IGR Variations ; 2nd Rhapsody
15 Feb 1950	Kansas City	Kansas City Philharmonic	✓	✓		
16 Feb 1950	Kansas City	Kansas City Philharmonic	✓	✓		
18 Feb 1950	Rochester, Minnesota	Recital				
19 Feb 1950	Minneapolis	Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra	✓	✓		
20 Feb 1950	La Crosse, Wis.	La Crosse Symphony Orchestra	✓			G
23 Feb 1950	Bloomington, Ill.	Bloomington-Normal Symphony	✓	✓		



24 Feb 1950	Bloomington, Ill.	Bloomington-Normal Symphony	✓	✓		
26 Feb 1950	St. Louis	St. Louis Symphony	✓			K
1 Mar 1950	Springfield, Ill.	Recital				
2 Mar 1950	Davenport	Recital	✓	✓		
3 Mar 1950	Des Moines	Recital	✓	✓	✓	
4 Mar 1950	Chicago	Chicago Symphony		✓		K
2 Apr 1950	San Francisco	San Francisco Symphony	✓			K
6 Jul 1950	New York	Lewisohn Stadium	✓	✓		
10 Jul 1950	Philadelphia	Robin Hood Dell	✓		✓	K
17 Jul 1950	New York	<i>Bell Telephone Hour</i>				IGR Variations
25 Jul 1950	Los Angeles	Hollywood Bowl Orchestra		✓		
10 Jan 1951	Pasadena	LA Philharmonic				T
11 Jan 1951	Los Angeles	LA Philharmonic				T
12 Jan 1951	Los Angeles	LA Philharmonic				T
15 Jan 1951	Portland	Portland Symphony Orchestra	✓			T
Mid-Jan 1951	Seattle					
17 Jan 1951	Vancouver	Recital	✓	✓	✓	
23 Jan 1951	San Francisco	San Francisco Symphony Orchestra				T
25 Jan 1951	San Francisco	San Francisco Symphony Orchestra				G
29 Jan 1951	El Paso	El Paso Symphony Orchestra				
1 Feb 1951	College Station	Recital [Rescheduled]				
2 Feb 1951	Austin	San Antonio Symphony Orchestra [Cancelled]				
3 Feb 1951	San Antonio	San Antonio Symphony Orchestra [Cancelled]				
4 Feb 1951	Dallas	[Cancelled]				
6 Feb 1951	Shreveport	[Cancelled]				

9 Feb 1951	Daytona	Recital				
11 Feb 1951	Miami	University of Miami Symphony		✓		
12 Feb 1951	Miami	University of Miami Symphony		✓		
13 Feb 1951	Palm Beach	Recital	✓			
15 Feb 1951	Gainesville	Recital				
25 Feb 1951	Atlanta	Atlanta Symphony [Cancelled]				
26 Feb 1951	Knoxville	Atlanta Symphony [Rescheduled]				
27 Feb 1951	Asheville	Recital [Cancelled]				
28 Feb 1951	Charlotte	Atlanta Symphony [Cancelled]				
1 Mar 1951	Columbia, SC	Recital [Cancelled]				
2 Mar 1951	Savannah	Recital [Cancelled]				
3 Mar 1951	Augusta	Atlanta Symphony [Cancelled]				
5 Mar 1951	Clemson	Recital [Rescheduled]				
7 Mar 1951	Atlanta	Atlanta Symphony Orchestra	✓			
8 Mar 1951	Birmingham	Houston Symphony Orchestra	✓			G
10 Mar 1951	New Orleans	New Orleans Symphony Orchestra	✓			G
12 Mar 1951	Chattanooga	Recital				
13 Mar 1951	Knoxville	Atlanta Symphony	✓	✓		
14 Mar 1951	Clemson	Recital				
16 Mar 1951	Baltimore	Baltimore Symphony Orchestra	✓			G
18 Mar 1951	Buffalo	Buffalo Philharmonic	✓	✓		
20 Mar 1951	Buffalo	Buffalo Philharmonic	✓	✓		
1 Apr 1951	Washington DC	National Symphony	✓	✓		
2 April 1951	Greenville, NC	Recital				

3 April 1951	Chapel Hill	Recital	✓?			
6 Apr 1951	Kansas City	Recital				
7 Apr 1951	Emporia	Recital	✓	✓		
9 Apr 1951	Wichita	Wichita Symphony	✓	✓		
10 Apr 1951	Wichita	Wichita Symphony	✓	✓		
11 Apr 1951	Stillwater, Okla.	Recital	✓	✓		
12 Apr 1951	Oklahoma City	Oklahoma City Symphony	✓	✓		
13 Apr 1951	College Station	Recital				
14 Apr 1951	San Antonio	Concert or Recital				
17 Apr 1951	Lansing	Recital				
22 Apr 1951	Fort Wayne	Recital				
12 July 1951	New York	Lewisohn Stadium	✓	✓		
16 July 1951	Philadelphia	Robin Hood Dell	✓	✓		
4 Aug 1951	Los Angeles	Hollywood Bowl Orchestra	✓	✓		
27 Aug 1951	New York	<i>Bell Telephone Hour</i>		2 <sup>nd</sup> mvt		
26 Nov 1951	New York	<i>Bell Telephone Hour</i>				R (1 <sup>st</sup> mvt)
4 Dec 1951	Albany	Rochester Symphony				T
7 Dec 1951	Philadelphia	Philadelphia Symphony	✓			T
8 Dec 1951	Philadelphia	Philadelphia Symphony	✓			T
10 Dec 1951	Philadelphia	Philadelphia Symphony		✓		
11 Dec 1951	New York	Philadelphia Symphony				T
9 Jan 1952	Salt Lake City	Utah Symphony	✓	✓		
18 Jan 1952	Ann Arbor	Recital				
22 Jan 1952	Lansing	Recital	✓	✓	✓	
25 Jan 1952	Canton, Ohio	Recital				
27 Jan 1952	Cincinnati	Cincinnati Orchestra		✓		
29 Jan 1952	Cincinnati	Cincinnati Orchestra		✓		
26 Feb 1952	Kansas City	Kansas City Philharmonic				K
27 Feb 1952	Kansas City	Kansas City Philharmonic				K

2 Mar 1952	Indianapolis	Indianapolis Symphony		✓		
3 Mar 1952	Indianapolis	Indianapolis Symphony		✓		
5 Mar 1952	Lexington	Recital				
9 Mar 1952	St. Louis	St. Louis Symphony	✓	✓		
19 Mar 1952	Fort Wayne	Recital				
21 Mar 1952	Sioux City	Sioux City Symphony Orchestra	✓	✓		
23 Mar 1952	Minneapolis	Minneapolis Symphony [Rescheduled]				
29 Mar 1952	New York	New York Philharmonic				R
30 Mar 1952	New York	New York Philharmonic				R
2 Apr 1952	Utica	Recital				
3 Apr 1952	Rochester	Rochester Philharmonic	✓			T
4 Apr 1952	Syracuse	Rochester Philharmonic	✓			T
7 Apr 1952	Harrisburg, Pa.	Recital				
13 Apr 1952	Minneapolis	Minneapolis Symphony				T
14 Apr 1952	Fargo	Recital				
1 July 1952	Philadelphia	Robin Hood Dell				R
3 July 1952	New York	Lewisohn Stadium	✓	✓		
5 July 1952	Fairfield, Conn.	Connecticut "Pops"				T
15 July 1952	Milwaukee	Washington Park [Cancelled]				
26 July 1952	Los Angeles	Hollywood Bowl [Cancelled]				
21 Jan 1953	Lubbock	Lubbock Symphony Orchestra	✓ (solo)			
22 Jan 1953	Lubbock	Lubbock Symphony Orchestra	✓ (solo)			
24 Jan 1953	San Antonio	San Antonio Symphony	✓	✓		
26 Jan 1953	Corpus Christi	Corpus Christi Symphony	✓	✓		
31 Jan 1953	Tampa	Recital [Cancelled]				
20 Feb 1953	Fayetteville	University of Arkansas Symphony	✓			T (1 <sup>st</sup> mvt)
28 Feb 1953	Detroit	Detroit Symphony	✓			T (1 <sup>st</sup> mvt)

4 Mar 1953	Ames, Iowa	Recital				
5 Mar 1953	Sheboygan	Recital	✓	✓	✓	
7 Mar 1953	Chicago	Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra				T
8 Mar 1953	Chicago	Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra		✓		
~14 Mar 1953	Toronto	Recital				
15 Mar 1953	Buffalo	Buffalo Philharmonic		✓		
17 Mar 1953	Buffalo	Buffalo Philharmonic		✓		
18 Mar 1953	Hartford	Hartford Symphony Orchestra		✓		
21 Mar 1953	WashingtonDC	National Symphony	✓	✓		
7 Apr 1953	Winnipeg	[Cancelled]				
8 Apr 1953	Regina	[Cancelled]				
9 Apr 1953	Saskatoon	[Cancelled]				
10 Apr 1953	unknown city	[Cancelled]				
11 Apr 1953	Edmonton	[Cancelled]				
12 Apr 1953	Calgary	[Cancelled]				
13 Apr 1953	Seattle	[Cancelled]				
15 Apr 1953	Los Angeles?	Women's Symphony Association [Cancelled]				
17 Apr 1953	Portland	Portland Symphony Orchestra				
18 Apr 1953	Corvallis, Oregon	Recital	✓	✓		
16 Jul 1953	New York	Lewisohn Stadium	✓	✓		
6 Feb 1954	Pittsburgh	Pittsburgh Symphony [Cancelled]				
1 April 1954	Washington DC	National Symphony [Cancelled]				
2 April 1954	Baltimore	National Symphony [Cancelled]				
3 April 1954	Washington DC	National Symphony [Cancelled]				
27 Nov 1955	Washington DC	National Symphony [Cancelled]				
2 Dec 1955	Hartford	Hartford Symphony [Cancelled]				

19 June 1955	Los Angeles	<i>Remember 1938</i> - television		✓		
24 June 1955	Washington DC	National Symphony	✓	✓		
16 July 1955	Los Angeles	Hollywood Bowl Symphony	✓	✓		
2 Aug 1955	New Haven	New Haven Symphony	✓	✓		
11 Aug 1955	Milwaukee	Milwaukee Symphony		1 <sup>st</sup> mvt	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Second Rhapsody (excerpts)
16 Aug 1955	Buffalo	Buffalo Pops Orchestra [Cancelled]				
17 Oct 1955	Philadelphia	Philadelphia Symphony - [Cancelled] (replaced by two students)				
5 Nov 1955	Richmond, Virginia	National Symphony [Cancelled]				
8 Nov 1955	Baltimore	National Symphony - [Cancelled] (replaced by Earl Wild)				
10 Nov 1955	College Park, Md	National Symphony [Cancelled] (replaced by Earl Wild)				
2 June 1958	Los Angeles	Los Angeles Music Festival Symphony Orchestra				S
2 Aug 1958	Los Angeles	Hollywood Bowl Symphony		✓	2 <sup>nd</sup>	