

## ASO Program Notes

# An American in Paris

George Gershwin (1898 - 1937)

George Gershwin, whose life was tragically cut short by a brain tumor at the age of 38, was born in Brooklyn, New York. He was probably at the prime of his composing career when he composed *An American in Paris* in 1928. He had completed the *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Piano Concerto in F* and was on his way to Paris to seek further training. While there he conceived the idea for a new composition, intending to capture the impression of an American in a new city “as he strolls about, listens to the various street noises and absorbs the French atmosphere.” His initial sketches were coming together well, and when he heard Parisian taxi horns on the Avenue de la Grande Armee, he felt he must include their sound. He described his work as a “rhapsodic ballet, written very freely,” and called it “the most modern music I’ve yet attempted....I have not endeavored to present any definite scenes in this music. The rhapsody is programmatic in a general impressionistic sort of way, so that the individual listener can read into the music such episodes as his imagination pictures for him.”

*An American in Paris* opens with music describing a man strolling throughout Paris. Gershwin says, “Our American friend, perhaps after strolling into a café and having a couple of drinks, has succumbed to a spasm of homesickness.” But then “the homesick American, having left the café and reached the open air, has disowned his spell of the blues and once again is an alert spectator of Parisian life.”

Gershwin enjoyed his time living in Europe. He worked on his score for *An American in Paris* at his leisure, enjoying other projects and an active social life, hobnobbing with his contemporaries in the music world. When he returned to New York in late June, he discovered that the New York Symphony had placed the premiere of his new work on the schedule for their upcoming season. He completed it in time for its first performance at Carnegie Hall on December 13, 1928, and Gershwin went to considerable time and expense to find authentic French taxi horns for this premiere. As with many of his other works, it was met with skepticism by the critics, but the public loved it, and it has become a standard in the repertoire of American music.

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