

Program Notes

Piano Concerto in F

GEORGE GERSHWIN

Born: September 26, 1898, in Brooklyn, New York

Died: July 11, 1937, in Hollywood, California

Composed: 1925

SF Symphony Performances: First—January 1937.

Pierre Monteux conducted with George Gershwin as soloist. Most recent—July 2011. Michael Francis conducted with Ian Parker as soloist.

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, snare drum, and strings

Duration: About 30 mins



On the afternoon of February 12, 1924, musical New York gathered at Aeolian Hall to witness a concert that bandleader Paul Whiteman was presenting under the intriguing rubric “An Experiment in Modern Music.” Whiteman believed that the future of American concert music would involve a fusion of European symphonic traditions with jazz. Most of the program he presented that day was far from what could honestly be described as “experimental” in 1924, but it did include the premiere of one work that exemplified his vision: George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* for piano and orchestra.

In the audience was conductor Walter Damrosch, one of the city’s leading musical citizens. He was so impressed with *Rhapsody in Blue* that he immediately commissioned a concerto he could introduce with his New York Symphony. Gershwin happily accepted the commission and then—the legend goes—did a bit of study to find out just what a concerto was. He acquired a copy of Cecil Forsyth’s *Orchestration*, a standard textbook at that time, and learned enough from it to write

the whole orchestral score of the Concerto in F on his own, though no doubt with some pointers from colleagues.

Broadway obligations prevented Gershwin from diving into his concerto immediately, and he didn't buckle down to serious work on it until May 1925, while he was in London updating material for the English production of his musical *Tell Me More*. On July 22, back in New York, he started turning his sketches into a manageable score, at the head of which he inscribed the title *New York Concerto*. By the time he had completed the project, the initial title had been replaced simply by Concerto in F—not F major or F minor (though the former would be accurate)—and it has been so identified ever since. Eliminating the referential title was an essential step towards the composer's goal. "I made up my mind to do a piece of absolute music," he wrote. "The *Rhapsody*, as its title implies, was a blues impression. The concerto would be unrelated to any program. And that is exactly how I wrote it."

The premiere at Carnegie Hall was sold out, and the audience cheered rapturously at the conclusion. Two weeks earlier, the *New York Herald-New York Tribune* printed Gershwin's own description of the piece:

The first movement employs the Charleston rhythm. It is quick and pulsating, representing the young enthusiastic spirit of American life. It begins with a rhythmic motif given out by the kettledrums, supported by other percussion instruments, and with a Charleston motif introduced by . . . horns, clarinets and violas. The principal theme is announced by the bassoon. Later, a second theme is introduced by the piano.

The second movement has a poetic nocturnal atmosphere which has come to be referred to as the American blues, but in a purer form than that in which they are usually treated.

The final movement reverts to the style of the first. It is an orgy of rhythms, starting violently and keeping to the same pace throughout.

—James M. Keller

James M. Keller, the longtime Program Annotator of the San Francisco Symphony, is the author of *Chamber Music: A Listener's Guide* (Oxford University Press) and is writing a sequel volume about piano music.

emergency shelter intake form

GABRIEL KAHANE

BORN: July 10, 1981, in Los Angeles

Composed: 2018

First SF Symphony Performances

Instrumentation: Solo mezzo-soprano, trio of amplified singers (alto, tenor, and bass), community chorus, 2 flutes (2nd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes (doubling English horns), 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (almglocken, automobile horn, bass drum, bell, crash cymbal, crotales, cymbals, finger cymbals, floor tom-tom, glockenspiel, guiro, high-hat, kick drum, marimba, medium gong, opera gong, slapstick, sleigh bells, snare drum, splash cymbal, temple blocks, tin cans, triangle, vibraphone, and washboard), harp, piano, celesta, accordion, and strings

Duration: About 53 mins



Gabriel Kahane’s website characterizes him as “a songwriter.” It’s a remarkably modest way to summarize a career that, to date, has entailed writing not just songs but a wide spectrum of compositions and multi-media projects, along with performing as a singer, pianist, and guitarist.

Another composer whose copious creativity is inextricably linked to the art of songwriting is Franz Schubert. Kahane himself has pointed to an affinity with his Austrian predecessor; he similarly bridges the realms of self-standing song and long-form composition. Kahane’s string quartet *Bradbury Studies* from 2014, for example, reconsiders one of the songs from his album/song collection *The Ambassador* in instrumental terms alone. (Think of Schubert elaborating his song *Death and the Maiden* into the slow movement of his late string quartet of the same name.) And both composers are brilliant storytellers, guided by a gift for instilling compassion for the subjects of their songs.

Kahane is thus able to transform a source as soulless and bureaucratic as a questionnaire required to be completed to enter a homeless shelter into the basis for the work we hear on this program. Whether you prefer to call it an oratorio or a song cycle—genre classifications are beside the point—*emergency shelter intake form* reimagines the potential contained within the song format to craft a narrative about the precarity of contemporary daily life and the condition of inequality —“not only the kind that results from ruthless, unregulated capitalism,” as Kahane put it, “but also the sort that manifests when we close our hearts to other human beings, treating them as if they exist in some discrete universe of misfortune distant from our own.”

Heirloom from 2021 similarly offers a fresh take on the piano concerto (written for his father, Jeffrey Kahane, and premiered by the Kansas City Symphony). Even when forgoing the elements of text and voice that typically figure in his musical language, Kahane conceived that piece as “an aural family scrapbook,” weaving together a narrative spanning four generations. His String Quartet No. 1, also premiered in 2021 and composed for the adventurous Attacca Quartet, fuses this inherently abstract instrumental genre with an implicit story threaded together by the five Paul Klee paintings from the Phillips Collection, in Washington, DC, that inspired it.

Written on a commission from the Oregon Symphony, *emergency shelter intake form* is Kahane’s first large-scale composition for full orchestra and voices. He subsequently embarked on a three-year position as creative chair with the Portland-based orchestra. In that capacity, Kahane received three additional commissions, including the recently premiered “folk opera” *The Right To Be Forgotten*, and served as a curator of contemporary programming.

Even as Kahane has been breaking new ground for himself with these ambitious projects for the concert hall—he refers to *emergency shelter intake form* as “a career highlight”—they continue to develop some of the core ideas and aesthetic approaches that run through his work in general. The concept albums/song cycles *The Ambassador* (2014) and *Book of Travelers* (2018) present externally focused portraits of the conflicting perspectives that define contemporary American culture. His 2011 album *Where Are the Arms* and *Magnificent Bird*, the song cycle he produced during the pandemic, take a more introspective turn as they reflect on the ambiguous messages or epiphanies that lie half-hidden in the details and rituals of everyday life.

Underlying all of these efforts is Kahane’s ability to oscillate comfortably yet unpredictably among popular, vernacular, and classical languages. They erase barriers and distinctions, in their place initiating implicit dialogues with artists past and present, from classical and popular traditions alike. Schubert and Robert Schumann would be right at home at a dinner party hosted by Kahane, alongside such guests as Kurt Weill, Sufjan Stevens, Stephen Sondheim, Benjamin Britten, and Randy Newman.

The libretto that Kahane constructed for *emergency shelter intake form* is another example of his skill in working with found texts to shape musical ideas. Drawing from personal ads that appeared on the eponymous website, *craigslistlieder* (2006) for voice and piano—the earliest piece he includes on his official list of works—re-envisioned the legacy of the art song for a quirky, early-21st-century sensibility; a more recent manifestation can be found in Kahane’s settings of tweets as witty musical haikus.

In *emergency shelter intake form*, Kahane combines all the wisdom he has accumulated as a songwriter with his

more recent forays into writing for orchestra. The solo vocal parts characteristically ignore genre distinctions and introduce a leavening humor rooted in the theater savvy that is an important component of Kahane's artistic outlook. "One thing that I've brought from my life in the theater is that something that is emotionally honest has an emotional range," he explained in an interview with the Portland-based critic James Bash. "When I volunteer at the shelter, these guys are laughing and there is humor and good-naturedness right smack up against despair. I wanted to write a piece that plumbs the depths of despair but also has a comic element to it. That is how life works."

—Thomas May

Thomas May is a Contributing Writer to the San Francisco Symphony program book. He blogs at memeteria.com.