

'S WONDERFUL: THE MUSIC OF GEORGE GERSHWIN

with Teddy Abrams and Morgan James

APRIL 14, 2022 | Cobb Great Hall

Overture to *Porgy and Bess*

Summertime from *Porgy and Bess*

It Ain't Necessarily So from *Porgy and Bess*

My Man's Gone Now from *Porgy and Bess*

Rhapsody in Blue

-INTERMISSION-

'S Wonderful from *Funny Face*

I've Got a Crush on You from *Strike Up the Band*

Nice Work If You Can Get It from *A Damsel in Distress*

Overture to *Of Thee I Sing*

Embraceable You from *Girl Crazy*

I Got Rhythm from *Girl Crazy*

This performance will run approximately an hour and a half,
with a 15-minute intermission.

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BIOS

TEDDY ABRAMS

An unusually versatile musician, Teddy Abrams is the widely acclaimed music director of the Louisville Orchestra, where he has fostered interdisciplinary collaborations across the city, including as leader of Louisville's cultural response to the pandemic with the Lift Up Lou initiative. Among other works, the 2021-22 season includes the world premieres of Teddy's new piano concerto written for Yuja Wang and a concerto for timba band and orchestra composed by Grammy winner Dafnis Prieto. His rap-opera, *The Greatest: Muhammad Ali*, premiered in 2017, celebrating Louisville's hometown hero with an all-star cast that included Rhiannon Giddens and Jubilant Sykes, as well as Jecorey "1200" Arthur, with whom he started the Louisville Orchestra Rap School. Abrams' work with the Louisville Orchestra has been profiled on *CBS Sunday Morning*, NPR, *The Wall Street Journal*, PBS's *Articulate*, and the *PBS NewsHour*. In recognition of his groundbreaking work, Teddy Abrams is *Musical America's* 2022 Conductor of the Year.

Teddy Abrams is the music director and conductor of the Britt Festival Orchestra where, in addition to an annual three-week festival of concerts, he has taken the orchestra across the region in the creation of new work, including: Michael Gordon's *Natural History*, which was premiered on the edge of Crater Lake National Park in partnership with the National Parks Service, and was the subject of the PBS documentary *Symphony for Nature*; and Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Caroline Shaw's *Brush*, an experiential work written to be performed on the Jacksonville Woodlands Trail system.

As a guest conductor, Teddy has worked with such distinguished ensembles as the Los Angeles Philharmonic; the Chicago, San Francisco, National, Houston, Pacific, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, Vancouver, Colorado, Utah, and Phoenix symphonies; Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra; and the Sarasota and Florida orchestras. Internationally, he has worked with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Orchestre Philharmonique du Luxembourg, and the Malaysia Philharmonic. He served as assistant conductor of the Detroit Symphony from 2012 to 2014. From 2008 to 2011, Abrams was the conducting fellow and assistant conductor of the New World Symphony.

MORGAN JAMES

"A phenomenal talent whose feel for classic soul music is bone deep...This woman is on fire." —*The New York Times*

Morgan James is a Juilliard-trained singer, actress, songwriter and recording artist in New York City.

As a soloist with orchestras around the world, Morgan has appeared with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, Malaysian Philharmonic, Colorado Symphony, San Diego Symphony, Chicago Symphony at Ravinia Festival, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Cincinnati Pops, Louisville Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra and many more.

Her most recent studio albums, *A Very Magnetic Christmas* and *Memphis Magnetic*, are full of classic and original soul music recorded to analog tape in Memphis, TN. Other releases include *Reckless Abandon*, covers of The Beatles' iconic *White Album* and Joni Mitchell's seminal *Blue*, and two full-length

albums with Epic Records: *Hunter* and *Morgan James Live*, a celebration of Nina Simone. Morgan also produced and starred in an all-female concept album of *Jesus Christ Superstar* entitled *She Is Risen*. Her music is available on all streaming platforms.

On Broadway, Morgan was in five back-to-back original companies: *The Addams Family*, *Wonderland*, *Godspell* and *Motown: The Musical*, and Kristin Chenoweth's *For The Girls*.

With Postmodern Jukebox and with her own channel, Morgan's music videos have accumulated more than 250 million views. For information and updates, please visit morganjamesonline.com.

PROGRAM NOTES

George Gershwin was born in 1898 in Brooklyn, New York, the second son of Russian Jewish immigrants. As a youngster, he was enthralled by the popular music he heard around him, and later was equally impressed by the more "serious" music to which he was exposed. The family acquired a piano when he was 12. By age 15, he quit school to become a "song-pusher" in Tin Pan Alley, playing the many new tunes that were churned out for a music-loving populace. Soon, he was paid the whopping sum of \$35 per week to compose his own music. He wrote his first musical in 1919. That year, Al Jolson popularized George Gershwin's song "Swanee," with lyrics by Ira Caesar (1895-1996). It quickly sold over a million copies and set the young Gershwin on his way to a major career.

Porgy and Bess, Gershwin's last work, is now considered a classic, but it generated much debate in its early years. Was it an opera? Its text consisted of sung recitative and arias, with no spoken dialogue. It required classically-trained singers and a large orchestra. Was it a musical? It premiered on Broadway in 1935, not in an opera house. It lacked the "glamour" of traditional opera, yet it dealt with operatic themes of love, jealousy, and other strong emotions. The setting was controversial, too, with its main male protagonist, Porgy, a disabled, poor Black man living in a fishing community amidst poverty, drug abuse, and squalid conditions. Its main female character, Bess, struggled with drugs and relationships. These topics were unconventional at best, and the social commentary of the opera was polarizing.

The novel *Porgy*, on which the opera is based, was written in 1925 by DuBose Heyward (1885-1940), then turned into a play by Heyward and his wife Dorothy (1890-1961). Gershwin approached the Heywards about creating a large-scale musical work based on the book. To set the proper atmosphere, George and Dubose went to Charleston, South Carolina, the setting for the story, where George absorbed musical elements of Black culture: folk song, spirituals, jazz, blues, gospel. Ira Gershwin (1896-1983), George's brother, and Heyward wrote the libretto. George referred to the work as an American folk opera, and the Gershwin brothers stipulated that only Black singers should perform it.

"Summertime" is a lullaby in folk-song style, sung at the beginning of the opera as Clara lulls her baby to sleep. Lyrics are by Dubose Heyward. "It Ain't Necessarily So" is sung by

drug dealer Sportin' Life as he refutes some Biblical teachings that are held dear by the community. The lyrics are by Ira Gershwin. "My Man's Gone Now," with lyrics by Heyward, is sung by Serena after her husband drowns in a hurricane. The overall success of *Porgy and Bess* led other composers to create operatic works with social commentary and to incorporate the influence of the music of the "common people" in their compositions.

Gershwin was steeped in every aspect of the popular idioms of his day but was amazed when orchestra leader Paul Whiteman (1890-1967) commissioned a piece for piano and orchestra that would combine elements of jazz, blues, popular music, and traditional concert music. Gershwin had little formal training and was not sure he could provide such a piece, yet the result was the sensationally successful *Rhapsody in Blue*. He struggled at first to find a theme but eventually, on a train trip, found his inspiration in the rhythms generated by the train rumbling along the tracks. George himself played the piano solo when Whiteman premiered the piece in 1924. Ferde Grofé (1892-1972) orchestrated the composition from Gershwin's two-piano score. Its success prompted more commissions of a similar nature for Gershwin and influenced many of his contemporaries to synthesize elements of popular and "serious" music.

The Gershwin brothers were prolific collaborators, with twelve musicals and four films to their credit. Ira was the librettist for each of the songs featured in tonight's program.

Funny Face, a musical from 1927, featured the song "'S Wonderful," which was an immediate hit with its sophisticated use of "'s" in the opening lines. *Strike Up the Band* also premiered in 1927, with George conducting. The improbable story centers on a cheese maker who wanted to sue Switzerland in a dispute over cheese. "I've Got a Crush on You" was one of its most popular songs. *A Damsel in Distress* was a film based on a story by P.G. Wodehouse. Ira's lyrics for "Nice Work If You Can Get It" were highlighted in a dance routine by Fred Astaire. George died during the filming, but production went ahead, and the film was released four months after his death. The musical *Of Thee I Sing* premiered in 1930. It is a satire about U.S. presidential campaigns. The title song is actually dedicated to the fiancée of one of the candidates, not to the nation. The work won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1931 for Ira Gershwin and his two co-librettists, which was the first time a Pulitzer was awarded for drama. *Girl Crazy* also premiered in 1930. George conducted the orchestra, which included many of the most prominent musicians of the day, who were eager to be a part of another Gershwin success. Ginger Rogers was featured in "Embraceable You," and Ethel Merman made her stage debut with "I Got Rhythm," an appearance which launched her career.

In addition to his musical talents, George was an avid and expert painter, who said that painting was almost as important to him as composition. He painted for relaxation, especially during the composition of *Porgy and Bess*. A talented raconteur, he was always welcome at musical and social gatherings in New York and Hollywood. The good times

ended in early 1937, when he collapsed in concert while playing the solo part of his piano concerto. Seven months later, he died of a brain tumor. Ira continued to work as a composer, author, librettist, and guardian of his brother's legacy. Today, the George and Ira Gershwin Collection is housed at the Library of Congress.

—Mary Black Junttonen, MSU Music Librarian Emerita

These local musicians are featured tonight:

Violin 1

Yvonne Lam, Concertmaster

Takeshi Abo

Tigran Shiganyan

Yunghsuan Lo

Tatiana Zueva

Alirna Korieva

Wen-Yi Lo

Uri Abt

Violin 2

JiHyun Kim, Principal

Hsin-Ju Yu

Daniel Winnick

Ching-Wen Tseng

Xinyu Zhu

Yu Xin

Susanne Garber

Farangiz Takhirova

Viola

Samuel Koeppe, Principal

Gafur Nartadjiev

David Schultz

Yi-Pei Lin

Hui-Yi Wendy Kao

Christine Beamer

Alicia Valoti

Cello

Jinhyun Kim, Principal

Igor Cetkovic

David Peshlakai

Mira Cheng

Willis Koa

Jennifer Pittman

Bass

Matthew Boothe, Principal

Albert Daschle

Wen Peng

Robert Johnson

Flute

Richard Sherman, Principal

Nicholas Buonanni

Mady Steffen, Piccolo

Oboe

Stephanie Shapiro, Principal

Sarah Southard, English Horn

Clarinet

Georgiy Borisov, Principal

Garret Jones

Tasha Warren

Mingzhe Wang, Bass Clarinet

Bassoon

Michael Kroth, Principal

Wei-Tzu Wang

Saxophone

Joseph Lulloff, Alto

Henning Schroeder, Alto

John Nichol, Tenor

Horn

Corbin Wagner, Principal

Paul Clifton-O'Donnell

Kurt Civilette

Elliott Mihelic

Trumpet

Michael Williams, Principal

Matthew Kay

Derek Lockhart

Trombone

Denis Jiron, Principal

Jamey Morgan

Bryan Pokorney, Bass

Tuba

Philip Sinder

Timpani

Colin McCall

Percussion

Matthew Beck, Principal

Brendan Betyan

Harp

Margot Bingham

Piano/Celeste

Patrick Johnson

Guitar

Luke Sittard

Drum Set

Steven Wulff

Local Musicians Contractor

Richard Sherman

Librarian

Nicholas Buonanni

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