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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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## Gershwin, Imagination and the Present Day Culture: Art Review

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, I analyzed George Gershwin's musical works and the role of imagination in his musical compositions. In his case, imagination is a new product of his mind. This is in accordance with his interests, purposes and cultural backgrounds. Efforts to appreciate his works should be done in classical terms rather than using some new criteria. Failure to follow these criteria could culminate to relativism, as a result of the decreased role of imagination in today's art. This bias may lead to imitation.

**Keywords:** Gershwin, imagination, present day culture, musical works, classical terms.

### **Synopsis of Biography**

George Gershwin was born on 26<sup>th</sup> September, 1898, in Brooklyn, New York. Although Gershwin dropped out of school at a tender age, he became one of the famous musicians in America. History has it that, he played professional piano at age 15 and composed opera, jazz, and several popular songs for stage and screen. At age 38, Gershwin died on the 11<sup>th</sup> of July, 1937, after a brain surgery. Nonetheless, his contributions to the music art and industry have lived on (Bio, n.d.).

### **Art Review**

The purpose of this paper is to discuss George Gershwin's works and to illustrate the role of the imagination in his musical compositions. Gershwin's compositions are very eclectic, including popular music, inspired by the Russian-Yiddish culture<sup>i</sup>, European classical music<sup>ii</sup>, jazz and folk opera<sup>iii</sup>. In his case, the life experiences and people he met had a strong association with his imagination. Thus, here it is not just a connection between imagination and art (Bio, n.d.; Mawer, & Cross, 2000; Pollack, 2006).

We have to consider his cultural background, his musical education, the meeting with the lyricist Buddy DeSylva<sup>iv</sup> (they together created the experimental one-act jazz opera *Blue Monday*) and the cultural trend of his times. All these things became a mark of Gershwin's creativity. This is clearly depicted in some of his works like *Rhapsody in Blue*<sup>v</sup>, *An American in Paris*<sup>vi</sup>, the opera *Blue Monday*<sup>vii</sup> or the folk-opera *Porgy and Bess*<sup>viii</sup> (Bio, n.d.; Mawer, & Cross, 2000; Pollack, 2006).

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First of all, I think the eclecticism of Gershwin's works comes from his musical education. He studied piano with Charles Hambitzer, who introduced him to the works of the great classical composers. Then, he had a lot of teachers such as Henry Dixon Cowell, (who studied Asian and Middle Eastern music), and Wallingford Riegger, an early U.S. adaptor of dodecaphonism<sup>ix</sup>. He also had some association with some traditionalists like Edward Kilenyi and Joseph Schillinger (a musical theorist known for his mathematically grounded approach to composition). Hence, Gershwin's experience with different teachers, who trained him on different approaches to music and musical techniques could account for his eclecticism.

Secondly, I think the eclecticism of George Gershwin's musical works comes from his life experiences. He made piano rolls, he played in New York night clubs and he worked as an accompanist and rehearsal pianist on Broadway. These facts improved his dexterity and increased his skills of transposing and improvisation, as well as the knowledge of popular music and jazz. In his early years of creation, Gershwin composed songs such as *Swanee*, *Nobody but You*, *The Best of Everything* or *Lullaby*<sup>x</sup>. In between the same periods, he also composed the one-act jazz opera *Blue Monday*. Though Gershwin's works are considered as masterpiece arts presently, most of these works were not appreciated and recognized in his era. For example, the one-act jazz opera *Blue Monday* was banned on Broadway's show just after one performance in 1922. This was mainly because jazz was perceived to be dangerous, nerve-irritating, degrading and sex-exciting music in those eras (Rimmler, 1991).

Gershwin's musical education as well as his life experiences led to the composition of *Rhapsody in Blue* in 1924, which is maybe his most famous musical-work. The composition is based on a symphonic context, in which we find trademarks of jazz elements, such as syncopated rhythms, blues notes and onomatopoeic instrumental effects.

Reflecting on George Gershwin's life experiences; he made a trip to Paris in 1920, which played a crucial part in his musical career. There, he found sounds, facts and impressions he never found in America. The result of this trip was the release of "*An American in Paris*", which was the second well-known composition of him, where we can find a variety of rhythms as jazz, blues or classical forms<sup>xi</sup>.

Moreover, if we want to appreciate the diametrical relations among Gershwin's compositions, his education and life experiences, it is informative to consider this fact: during 1925's, George Gershwin spent some time in America's rural south, studying the music and lifestyle of impoverished African Americans and then in 1934, he composed the folk-opera *Porgy and Bess*. A part of the white audience was not very enthusiastic, because they believed that "lowly" popular music should not be incorporated into an opera structure. On the other hand, black audiences criticized George Gershwin's musical work for its condescending depiction of stereotyped characters and inauthentic appropriation.

Notwithstanding these political and racial issues, the music of George Gershwin was appreciated at its real value. This is so because after his death in 1937, the U.S. Department selected the folk-opera *Porgy and Bess* to represent the United States on an international tour during which it became the first opera by an American composer to be performed at *La Scala* opera house from Milan.

Furthermore, Gershwin's musical works were influenced by French composers of the early twentieth century, as Maurice Ravel or Claude Debussy. This fact led to the belief that his symphonic orchestrations were similar to those of Ravel or that of Gershwin's *Concerto in F* or. However, George Gershwin was not influenced only by French composers. His compositions and his musical style were also influenced by Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Stravinsky, Alban Berg or Dmitri Shostakovich. But, these influences would not strike any worth without Gershwin's imagination and ability to manipulate different musical forms and techniques in order to create his own unique style.

His creativity and contribution in music were recognized after his death. Thus, in 1985 *The Congressional Gold Medal* was awarded to George and Ira Gershwin<sup>xii</sup>, in 1998, a special *Pulitzer Prize* was awarded to George Gershwin and in 2006 he was inducted into the *Long Island Music Hall of Fame*. Also, University of California, Los Angeles established *The George and Ira Gershwin Lifetime Musical Achievement Award* to honor the brothers for their contributions to music.

So, upon a reflection of Gershwin's work, it is not about the taxonomy of several kinds of imagination, but the "imagination" itself which comes to us in different ways, as a new product of

our minds, according to our interests, purposes or to our cultural and civil backgrounds. However, this fact was not studied enough and most people concluded that imagination is equivalent to art.

### Conclusion

In my opinion, even the art challenges imagination in new and uncharted ways in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It should be appreciated by the classical terms, instead of using some new criteria, which will lead to relativism.

If So, George Gershwin contribution in music, according to imagination and the present day culture is key for consideration and not referring to political or social contexts.

It is apparent that the role of imagination decreased in the art of today, going to imitation. But, for a return to the *imagino*, - *are* (*lat.* to reflect; to represent; to enliven), the imagination will play the main role in all kinds of art and, maybe it will go to a unifying of arts, which was in its early days.

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<sup>i</sup> George Gershwin was born in a Russian Jewish family, so he knew a lot about the Russian-Yiddish culture;

<sup>ii</sup> Gershwin studied piano and European classical music with Charles Hambitzer. Later, he studied classical music with the classical composer Rubin Goldmark and also with the avant-garde composer Henry Cowell;

<sup>iii</sup> In my opinion, Gershwin's orientation to folk-opera is related to the fact that he grew-up around the Yiddish Theatre District. Also, he frequented the Yiddish Theatre, where, sometimes, he appeared as an extra;

<sup>iv</sup> George Gard "Buddy" DeSylva was an American song-writer, film producer and record executive. He founded *Capital Records*. In 1920's, George Gershwin frequently worked with him;

<sup>v</sup> *Rhapsody in Blue*, for piano and orchestra was composed in 1924 and this is considered his major classical work and it proved to be his most popular work;

<sup>vi</sup> *An American in Paris* is a jazz influenced symphonic poem, written in 1928;

<sup>vii</sup> *Blue Monday*, also called *Opera a la Afro-American* is an one act jazz-opera, with the libretto written by Buddy DeSylva;

<sup>viii</sup> The folk-opera *Porgy and Bess* was written in 1934 and it was performed in New York, in 1935, featuring an entire cast of classically trained African-Americans singers. The most well-known song from this opera is *summertime*, which had a great popularity. *Summertime* is considered a jazz standard, so it was sung by a lot of notorious singers, such as Billie Holiday, Sam Cooke, Billy Stewart, Janis Joplin and Annie Lennox;

<sup>ix</sup> The dodecaphonism or the 12-tone technique was created by the Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951);

<sup>x</sup> *Lullaby* is a composition for a string quartet, a study in harmony composed as an exercise for Edward Kilenyi. This musical work was published after the death of George Gershwin, by his brother, Ira Gershwin;

<sup>xi</sup> 23 years after its premiere, (in 1951), it was made the musical by an *American in Paris*, starring Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron, directed by Vincent Minelli. This musical was a great success;

<sup>xii</sup> Ira Gershwin, George Gershwin's brother, wrote the lyrics for some well-known songs like *I Got Rhythm* or *The Man I Love*.