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## Gershwin: Rhapsody In Blue/An American In Paris – Leonard Bernstein – Vinyl, Speakers Corner

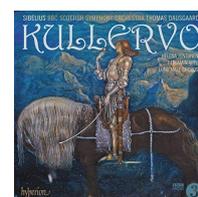
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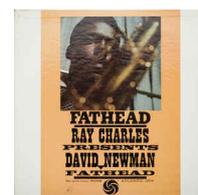
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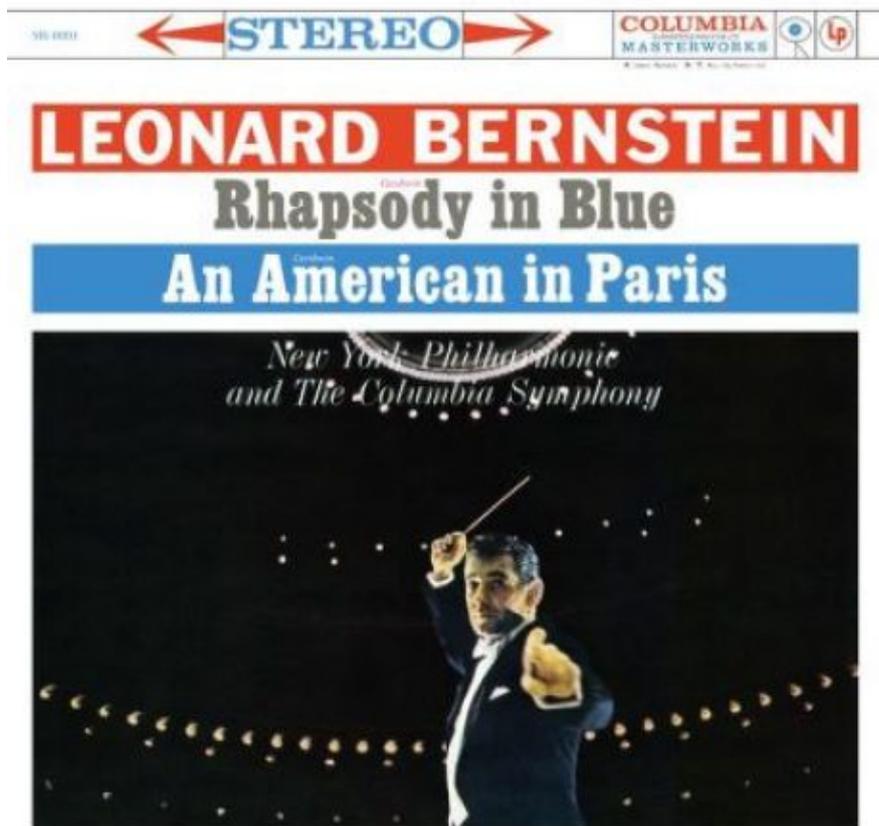


Pure Pleasure / Speakers Corner



Cedille





Gershwin: Rhapsody In Blue/An American In Paris – Leonard Bernstein At The Piano And Conducting – Columbia Masterworks MS 6091 (1959)/Speakers Corner Records (2014) 180-gram stereo vinyl \*\*\*\*\*:

(Leonard Bernstein – piano; conducting the Columbia Symphony Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic)

It is difficult to compare George Gershwin to other composer. Perhaps the greatest American composer of the 20th century, he came to fame with orchestral works *Rhapsody In Blue* (1924) and *An American In Paris* (1928). Later he composed the opera *Porgy And Bess*. He incorporated many elements of classical, jazz, blues and pop music into a new type of *Americana*. Gershwin achieved considerable fame and fortune writing for the Broadway stage and films. His career started as a *song plugger* at the age of 15. His musical sophistication, complexity and mass commercial appeal was unlike any of his contemporaries. His life was cut short at the age of 37, forever enshrining his iconic stature. It is no coincidence that the award given to a lifetime of contribution to popular music is called the *Gershwin Prize*.

Leonard Bernstein had a specific music education, studying at Harvard in 1939 and then enrolling at the prestigious *Curtis Institute of Music In*



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*Philadelphia*. His breakthrough came in 1943 as an assistant conductor to The New York Philharmonic. He was forced to take over for the ailing maestro, at that night's classical works. He went on to appear in 53 televised episodes of *Young People's Concerts For CBS*. This would be the first popular educational program of musical appreciation. After being appointed musical director of *The New York Philharmonic*, he composed the music for the *operetta Candide* and wrote the score for the transcendental Broadway show, *West Side Story* (he collaborated with choreographer Jerome Robbins, writer Arthur Laurents and lyricist Stephen Sondheim.) In late 1958 and mid 1959, Bernstein recorded *Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue/An American In Paris – Leonard Bernstein At The Piano and Conducting*. Two 20th Century game changers would finally collaborate (albeit it 50% posthumously at the posh St.George Hotel in New York, a well-suited environment.)

Speakers Corner has released a re-mastered 180-gram of *Gershwin: Rhapsody In Blue/An American In Paris – Leonard Bernstein At The Piano And Conducting*. The legacy of *Rhapsody In Blue* is as interesting as the composition itself. Commissioned by bandleader Paul Whitman, it was written by Gershwin in a three week period. Ferde Grofe (Whitman's pianist and arranger) scored the piece (originally written for two pianos) for an orchestra. With descending sub-dominant chord modulation (Bb, Eb, Ab, Db, Gb, B, E and A major, before returning to Bb), Gershwin's complex *rhapsody* relies on blues scales, with *Ragtime* and *Caribbean* undercurrents. Bernstein's interpretation (and nearly all versions differ in one way or another) is compelling and the instrumental vibrancy of the orchestra shines. From the opening clarinet *glissando* (allegedly improvised by Ross Gorman in rehearsal), the rhapsodic flow includes jazzy chord changes, string/horn flourishes and saucy muted trumpets, adding to the overall texture. There is a steady rhythmic pulse. Bernstein's piano is at times lyrical with forceful chords and a delicate right hand. Small touches like a bassoon accent are perfect. As the tempo increases (like a moving train), the piano cascades and the full orchestra adds muscle. At approximately ten-and-a-half minutes, the signature "Broad Theme" sweeps over the listener. No matter how many times or versions there are of "Rhapsody In Blue", the introduction of this theme is sudden



**George Gershwin, 1937**

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and thrilling. Bernstein distills the *Americana* chord progressions of Gershwin with nuance and feeling. As his solo intensifies, the *classical* intonation is evident. The orchestra maneuvers through the key modulations and the listener is swept away. A return to the opening motif brings the performance full circle. It is 15+ minutes of musical bliss.

As described in the liner notes, *An American In Paris* is a “rhapsodic ballet” (in Gershwin’s words) that expresses the reflections of the composer’s stay in Paris. Gershwin was an avid fan of Maurice Ravel and other 20th Century classical composers. In conducting the orchestra, Bernstein captures the various moods of an American visitor enthralled with the vivacious sights and street life of the City Of Lights, but also homesick. The opening movement (which most people recognize, even if they have never seen Gene Kelly dance) is gliding, up tempo *and* formulated with horns, strings and percussion. This first melody theme is lively and is repeated with different counterpoints and tempos. The use of reed instruments as a slower, pensive resonant tool is compelling. Brass punctuation generally signals an uptick in rhythm. There are numerous interludes, one with a lone violin tenderly caressing notes. Another is more classical with violin and French horn. As a second theme is introduced, it has a lilting, bluesy roll, almost like 12-bar blues. The tapestry of romantic and whimsical imagery is colored by the intricate orchestration. There are swing accents and even “hot jazz” dance aesthetics. Gershwin was noted for his compositional precision and it’s utilization for big bands and orchestras which emphasized dancing. He has an innate feel for the pulse of an urban environment. Additionally, his music has elements of stage panache and vitality. Ninety years after its inception, *An American In Paris* is still exhilarating.

Speakers Corner has done justice to this historical recording. They have maintained the Columbia Masterworks high technical level of recording fidelity. The mic levels on “Rhapsody In Blue” are perfectly even. The piano never overtakes the orchestra. Every minute detail (reed, violin, percussion) is mixed adroitly. and sounds crystalline This remastered vinyl is flawless with no hisses, pops or skipping. This is why vinyl is enjoying a renaissance.

**TrackList:**

Side 1: Rhapsody In Blue

Side 2: An American In Paris

—Robbie Gerson

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