

# BOOK REVIEWS by Steven Richman

## Gershwin Remembered and Dismembered

### The Memory of All That: The Life of George Gershwin, by Joan Peyser

319 pp. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1993. \$25.00

### Gershwin Remembered, Edited by Edward Jablonski.

181 pp. Portland: Amadeus Press. 1992. Cloth \$24.95; paper \$12.95

**R**eading Joan Peyser's *The Memory of All That* brought to mind the fact that during World War II in occupied Denmark, Nazi propaganda radio broadcasts were followed by the Danes' surreptitious playing of Gershwin's song, "It Ain't Necessarily So," the meaning of which eluded the Nazis. Peyser's pseudo-biography should more accurately be categorized a unique work of fiction. And it must certainly, after this travesty and her previous hatchet job (*Bernstein: A Biography*), establish her as the Geraldo Rivera of musicology.

The book's press release promised shocking revelations which would "make headlines." Much is made of the questionable existence of an illegitimate son, "Alan C. Gershwin." This issue was raised by the highly literate publication *Confidential* magazine back in the early '60s, and in Charles Schwartz's unpleasant 1973 book on the composer. Author Edward Jablonski, who co-wrote *The Gershwin Years* in 1958, and wrote the definitive *Gershwin* in 1987, interviewed the pretender to the throne some 30 years ago. "Alan C. Gershwin," who said his mother was a showgirl, claimed to have been brought to a performance of "Girl Crazy" in 1930 and introduced to Ethel Merman. Unfortunately, no one, including Merman, remembers seeing Gershwin with a child.

There are also numerous musical "facts" presented, such as erroneously attributing the titles of songs to supposed autobiographical events. One example is Peyser's claim that George's brother Ira's lyrics to the song, "They Can't Take That Away From Me," refers to Gershwin's affair with actress Paulette Goddard, even though Gershwin met her months after the song was published. Peyser invents the term "cryptobiographer" to characterize Ira in this respect.

Another "fact" which is implemented as a crux of Peyser's argument that Gershwin was a frustrated, insecure and unhappy man is the sad-looking, supposed self-portrait on page 2 of the illustrations. Actu-

ally, this is a painting of Steichen's famous photo of the composer, but it's doubtful that it is by Gershwin. His valet, Paul Mueller, attempted to sell the "self-portrait" to author Jablonski and Kay Swift years ago. Mueller was resentful of Gershwin, and had plenty of gossip to tell (but not a word about an illegitimate son even from him).

Peyser begins with a long list of credits, citing, among others, Jablonski. Actually, there was one phone conversation between them. She also claims extensive interviews with George's sister Frances, but the Gershwin family has distanced itself from this smarmy book. Peyser says all biographies of the composer were under the thumb of Ira's difficult wife, Leonore. But Jablonski and Leonore were actually on the outs for years. Ironically, the publisher, Simon & Schuster, published Gershwin's first biography by Isaac Goldberg in 1931, along with the *Songbook*. This is a sad postlude, and without a doubt a cheap attempt at "controversy."

The author's methods are questionable, at best. The phrases "may well have," "no more farfetched than," "probably" and "seems to be" permeate the book. The editing also certainly leaves a great deal to be desired. There is an illustration of the device which the composer used to hopefully cure his baldness. The book lists this head apparatus as having been used by Gershwin in 1939 (Gershwin died in July 1937 of a brain tumor).

Her powers of extrapolation are extraordinary; she says Gershwin was polite, even if insulted. She writes: "Such internalization of hostility and aggression is not good for one's health. Many physicians acknowledge that fact. In Woody Allen's 'Manhattan' the star's girlfriend asks him after he has been insulted why he did not fight back. Allen answers, 'I would never do that. I get a brain tumor instead.'" Aha! Another example of armchair psychology is the statement that Gershwin "frequented whorehouses in Harlem, which may be interpreted as a sign of his low self-esteem." Good lord, Peyser.

On a musical level, her scholarship is equally questionable. For example, she mis-titles Gershwin's early jazz opera "Blue Monday Blues." That is a song from the opera, *Blue Monday*.

To top things off, she retells a Fannie Hurst story that Kay Swift and Gershwin sublet an apartment, where she would tie the composer up and hang him from the ceiling and whip him. Supposedly the tenants complained about the noises and had them evicted. Peyser admits that Hurst was "capable of imagining such scenarios." I was a close friend of Miss Swift, who passed away recently. She was kind and gentle, one of the most remarkable and positive people I have ever met. She must be turning over in her grave over this libelous remark.

What is most disturbing about this book is that it reflects the sorry state of journalism and music criticism today. There seems to be a tabloid mentality per-



vading our culture, which seeks to drag everything down to the lowest possible level. Any idol or hero must be smashed and reduced to pure gossip, be it Kennedy, Toscanini or Gershwin. But enough arm-chair psychology — I'll leave that approach to our author in her untruthful book, full of sleaze.

In contradistinction, Edward Jablonski's *Gershwin Remembered* is a distinguished and probing look at the composer, in the words of those who knew him best — many of whom are quoted below. Jablonski portrays a multi-talented, life-loving, curious, vital and creative man, who had an enormous effect on American music. Gershwin's audiences included and continue to include a diverse spectrum of listeners. His appearance on the musical scene was timely, when the "cliches of Tin Pan Alley were becoming stereotypes...harmonies, dance patterns, sirupy [sic] melodies....listeners, without realizing it, wanted 'pep,' and he had it" (according to biographer Isaac Goldberg, 1931).

On the occasion of the first performance of the composer's early (1922) work, *Blue Monday*, a prescient critic, identified only as "W.S." said, "'Blue Monday' was, in spite of its faults, the first real American opera." Gershwin appeared as accompanist with the singer Eva Gauthier, performing works by Bartók, Schoenberg and his own "I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise" at Town Hall on November 1, 1923, a few months before "Rhapsody in Blue." This already established him as a young man to be reckoned with, linking the "classical" and "popular" music worlds in his own way.

Kay Swift, in a 1974 television interview, said, "George was exactly like his work...He was rather typically of New York...He was busy, quick, and moved fast...And he had curiosity, was always going on a new tack." Gershwin described himself as a "modern romantic," and quite accurately. This perhaps accounts in part for his great popularity with both musical sophisticates and innumerable listeners worldwide. Ira Gershwin wrote, "I wish some of those who think they knew him, wouldn't write stories about him. As great a composer as he was, George was never brassy, never hard to get along with. He was shy, reserved, a sweet guy. His real friends, of which there were many, know him this way too." This from a gentler, kinder era, certainly. Alexander Woolcott, in *Cosmopolitan* in 1933, spoke of Gershwin's "marked personal radiance," and characterized him at the piano as "a dazzling incandescence."

According to editor Jablonski, Gershwin "was never bothered by negative appraisals of his works — he was already on to the next project." But Merle Armitage wrote "It is a commonplace that during his lifetime his music had little discerning critical appraisal....George confused both camps because he was unique.

Gershwin had qualities of heart and mind which were extremely ingratiating. He was entirely sincere...He always seemed to be in balance. He had a very definite idea of his place in the world and his importance as an artist — yet he was modest....he had one supreme quality....he had style."

Band leader Paul Whiteman, who commissioned the "Rhapsody," said, "Gershwin was the highest type of character. He is gone — but his music is his enduring monument." Walter Damrosch was conductor of the Symphony Society of New York (predecessor of the New York Philharmonic) and commissioned the Concerto in F. He wrote of the composer's "originality both of melodic invention and harmonic progression...an almost child-like affection and pride for his own music....a man of infinite charm....his all too early death was a real tragedy for American music."

To see evidence of Gershwin's lasting influence on American music, one has only to look to a recent issue of the *New Yorker* magazine, devoted to the 100th anniversary of the Broadway theater. Comprising historical writings from the '20s to the present, the very first article, written by S.N. Behrman, is devoted to Gershwin.

George Gershwin's work has life, humor, sophistication and true genius, and he should be remembered for what he is, a national treasure. Jablonski's new book is a fitting tribute. Along with his 1987 biography *Gershwin*, these are the books to read on this fascinating subject. □



**Gershwin works on the score of "Porgy and Bess" in a scene from "George Gershwin Remembered" from WNET/New York's American Masters series**