

WORDS WITHOUT MUSIC

The Ira Gershwin Newsletter



No. 4, Fall 2009

The Firebrand of Florence Lights Up New York



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Letter from Michael Strunsky

I am delighted to draw your attention to two articles by guest writers in this issue of *Words Without Music*. Susan Elliott, the editor of MusicalAmerica.com, writes frequently about musical theater. Her report on the impressive Broadway orchestrators and orchestration symposium at the Library of Congress this past spring, excerpted here courtesy of MusicalAmerica.com, begins on page three. Among the distinguished participants at the symposium was our other contributor, Ted Sperling. A much-in-demand Broadway music director, Ted conducted the critically acclaimed concert performance in New York earlier this year of Ira and Kurt Weill's *The Firebrand of Florence*. You will find Ted's story of his long-standing involvement with *Firebrand*, written at the invitation of WWM's editors, on page eight.

The report on the Broadway orchestrators symposium is one of several articles in this issue highlighting the close, decades-long relationship between the Gershwins and the Library of Congress. The Library of Congress's vast archive of Gershwin material, overseen by its Music Division, dates back to 1939, when Ira and his mother, Rose, gave the Library a musical sketch by George from *Porgy and Bess*. Ira, and his wife, Leonore, and other family members continued donating items over the years, with Ira's accompanying detailed descriptive notes adding valuable information. In 1998 the Library opened a separate Gershwin Room to display memorabilia from its holdings. The Ira and Leonore Gershwin Trust for the benefit of the Library of Congress was established by Leonore Gershwin "to perpetuate the name and works of Ira and his brother, George, and to provide support for worthy related music and literary projects." The Library honored the brothers by naming the Library of Congress Gershwin Prize for Popular Song after them; its first recipient was Paul Simon in 2007. Stevie Wonder was honored in February of this year as the second recipient of the prize. In the following pages, you can read about the two concerts saluting Stevie Wonder as the award winner as well as the concert celebrating the Library's acquisition of ASCAP's archives and the Library's upcoming *Life Begins at 8:40* recording project. The Gershwin Trust is proud to have supported all these endeavors as well as the orchestrators symposium (and also Steven Suskin's research at the Library of Congress for his new book on orchestrators).

Cover: A scene from *The Firebrand of Florence*, New York City, March 12, 2009. Photo by Erin Baiano.

A CRASH COURSE IN BROADWAY ORCHESTRATION



PHOTO BY JEFF MALET WWW.MALET.PHOTO.COM

Panelists (from left) Rob Fisher, Jonathan Tunick, Larry Blank, Marion Evans, and Donald Pippin

By Susan Elliott

WASHINGTON, D.C. — In conjunction with the release of Steven Suskin's new book, *The Sound of Broadway Music: A Book of Orchestrators and Orchestrations*, the Library of Congress sponsored a two-day symposium on May 6 and 7, moderated by Suskin and co-hosted by musical theater historian and artistic advisor to the Ira and Leonore Gershwin Trusts, Robert Kimball.

The list of participants was a Who's Who of Broadway music men. Among them: Jonathan Tunick, Tony-Award winning orchestrator for most of Stephen Sondheim's shows, including *A Little Night Music*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Follies* and *Into the Woods*; Larry Blank, orchestrator for *The Drowsy Chaperone* and the Broadway revival of *La Cage aux Folles* and music director for countless shows and artists; Ted Sperling, music director for the recent Broadway revival of *Guys and Dolls* and the current *South Pacific* revival and Tony-award-winning orchestrator for *The Light in the Piazza*; Sid Ramin, Academy-, Emmy- and Grammy-award winning orchestrator of *West Side Story* (the original orchestrations of which are being used for the current Broadway run), *Gypsy* and *Wonderful Town*, and artistic advisor to the Leonard Bernstein estate; Rob Fisher, founding music director and conductor of the multiple-award-winning Broadway musical revival series Encores! at New York's City Center and an active symphonic and pops conductor, particularly of vintage musical scores.

With its rich intermingling of technical, historical and practical information, the symposium offered a crash course in

orchestration — then and now, and where it fits in the mix of blood, sweat and tears that creates a Broadway musical. The general consensus seemed to be that while economics have dictated smaller and smaller orchestras, the orchestrator is still an essential part of the equation — even if he “don't get no respect,” as Rodney Dangerfield used to say.

Several definitions emerged. Suskin noted that the late Don Walker (*The Pajama Game*, *Carousel*, *The Most Happy Fella*, among 100 or so other shows) used to refer to orchestration as “the clothing of a musical thought,” the “missing part” of the composer. “We decide what instrument plays what color,” offered Ramin. “We clean up everybody else's mess,” said Tunick. “We reharmonize, modulate, sew up the seams when cuts are made, compose endings and introductions ... We are the most anonymous of the 100 or so people who put together a show.”

One session each was devoted to Tunick and Ramin, with Suskin serving as interviewer. Ramin, a youthful 92 and a composer in his own right, talked about his boyhood friendship with “Lenny,” who taught him how to play piano, by rote. He learned to orchestrate in the Army through trial and error, writing charts for the Army Band. He orchestrated *West Side Story* with the late Irwin “Irv” Kostal, although to this day the credit reads, inaccurately, “orchestrated by Leonard Bernstein with” Kostal and Ramin. He receives no royalties from that show or any others, including *Gypsy*, despite the innumerable times they have been revived. “If I knew then what I know now ...,” said Ramin wryly. Royalties for orchestrators these

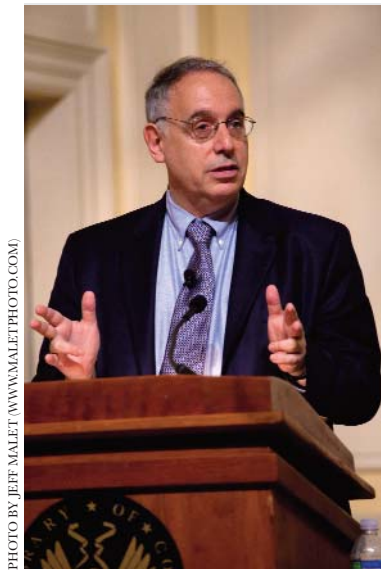


PHOTO BY JEFF MALET (WWW.MALETPHOTO.COM)

Moderator Steven Suskin

days still apply only to first-run performances.

Composer Jule Styne was so enamored of Ramin's work on *Gypsy* that he wanted to make him his exclusive orchestrator. Ramin demurred. His partner on that show and several others was Robert "Red" Ginzler, who was left-handed; when the two were in a hurry, Ramin said, he would take the top of the score, Ginzler the lower portion and they'd orchestrate simultaneously.

A panel of all-stars weighed in on the "Great Broadway Orchestrators," many of whom they had known personally. The most famous orchestrator of all time, and arguably the best, was Robert Russell Bennett, whose work can be heard on hundreds of scores, by Richard Rodgers, Jerome Kern, and George Gershwin, among others. According to Suskin, neither Kern nor Rodgers was particularly keen for people to know that they couldn't orchestrate, which may be one reason most of the listening public is unaware that orchestrators even exist.

All but a few of the participants knew or had worked with Bennett and the stories they recounted about him were priceless. He was, they recalled, a gentleman, a true aristocrat. He always worked in ink and wrote one instrumental line at a time rather than working vertically. He could orchestrate, carry on a conversation and listen to a baseball game on the radio all at the same time. His orchestrations were "always beautiful," said Fisher; "brilliant," said Tunick. Yet he was opposed to the idea of orchestrators receiving royalties. Don Walker, one of the first to advocate for orchestrator royalties, was also among the busiest in the field; over a 14-day period, he had three shows open. So consummate was his craft that his orchestrations could work even if instruments were eliminated on the fly (something Jerome Robbins was known to demand).

Another legendary figure discussed was Philip Lang, whom Bennett called upon to orchestrate "On the Street Where You Live" when he ran out of time working on *My Fair Lady*; Lang was apparently Mr. Nice Guy and was often taken for granted. Donald Pippin, who worked with Lang, commented that Lang "scared everybody" by not doubling the melody in his charts. Most agreed that with scores like *Hello, Dolly!* and *Mame*, Lang

set the precedent for what became the brass-dominated "Broadway sound."

One of the reasons composers of musicals historically use orchestrators is that, in the run up to opening night and/or on the road, songs get discarded, rewritten and added with such frequency, there simply isn't time for them to orchestrate. Victor Herbert, Kurt Weill, Marc Blitzstein, Arthur Sullivan and Jerome Moross wrote their own orchestrations, but they were the exception rather than the rule. At the other end of the spectrum are more than a few of today's show composers, who don't know how to orchestrate or how to read or write music and rely on others to transcribe, arrange and orchestrate their work. Some of those composers, by the way, have won the Tony Award for Best Musical Score.

While today's Broadway shows still use orchestras, the good old days of 30-plus pieces in the pit are long gone. Even revivals – with the noble and notable exception of the current *South Pacific* – are not exempt from the small-band syndrome. Producers don't want to spend much money on musicians; plus, in these days of electronic keyboards and assorted synthesizers, who needs live music? In New York, the American Federation of Musicians has managed to maintain specific minimums for specific theaters, but it hasn't been easy.

Most seminar panelists bemoaned the current state of affairs. Ramin phased himself out of the theater after 1963, partly because he figured out he could make more money composing commercials and television themes (the *Candid Camera* and *Patty Duke Show* themes were both his), but also, he said, "as orchestras got smaller, I just couldn't think that way. I can't write for 12 pieces." Tunick is occasionally asked to re-work his original orchestration for a show. "Reorchestrating your score for a smaller band is like shooting your horse with the broken leg," he quipped. "But if it's got to be done, better you than someone else." He is currently reorchestrating the



PHOTO BY JEFF MALET (WWW.MALETPHOTO.COM)

Broadway music men Sid Ramin and Jonathan Tunick

original score for *Bye Bye Birdie*, set to open on Broadway in the fall, down to 14 pieces. “I’ll be careful,” he promised.

Defenders of re-orchestration will occasionally argue that it is necessary not so much to reduce the number of instruments – although producers are always happy for that – as for a change in mood, direction or interpretation when a show is revived.

Another reason is, simply, space. Most of the theater pits have been filled with seats (there’s that money issue again); musicians are now found under the stage, on the stage (but behind the performers), in the basement of the theater, or even across the street, watching the conductor through a monitor. So much for live theater. “When the orchestra is working blind and deaf, the musicians are not part of the show,” said Tunick. “All the musicianship goes through the sound man, whose main qualification is a union card.” (Conductor Paul Gemignani, perhaps the king of Broadway music directors, wasn’t present at the symposium but has said he won’t do a show unless he has all the musicians in front of him, live. But he is the exception to the prevailing rule.)

Panelist Seymour Red Press, a musician and still active contractor whose credits range from the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra to pit bands playing charts by Tunick, Michael Starobin and other modern orchestrators, recalled how, in the old days, “we used to think that if we were having a good time playing, the show would be a hit.” Now, however, since musicians are so far removed from the show’s heartbeat, Press thinks many orchestrators write to keep the players interested in what they’re doing night after night. But, Ramin observed, “Orchestrating can’t be an ego-trip. We’re supposed to be an extension of the composer – you can’t just go write anything you want.”

Tunick was not alone in his opinion that over the last two decades the director and the choreographer – often the same person – have come to dominate musicals. “It used to be the composer,” said Tunick, “but nowadays music is the least important. And yet they still call it a musical.” There was some discussion about dance music, with most of the panel agreeing that choreographers seem to want every step emphasized by the orchestra. “They want everything highlighted, everything loud,” offered Sperling, “which wears out the brass section.” And if everything is loud and highlighted, then nothing stands out at all.

(Apropos of dance music, Ramin recalled re-orchestrating the same Jerome Robbins dance segment three nights in a row. He would go home thinking the number was set, orchestrate it and bring it in the next morning, only to discover that Robbins had re-choreographed it and neglected to tell him. Ramin’s advice: Don’t begin orchestrating until all aspects of a show are set.)

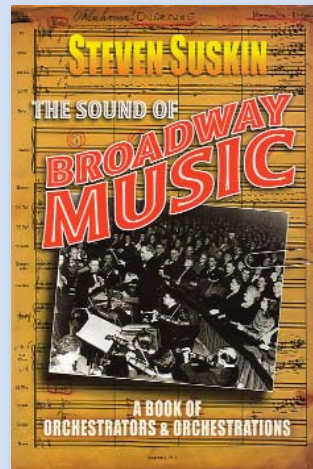
During the segment devoted to the “Secaucus discovery,” Robert Kimball told the story behind the treasure trove of musical

READ ALL ABOUT IT

Steven Suskin, *The Sound of Broadway Music: A Book of Orchestrators and Orchestrations*

Oxford University Press, \$55.00, 664 pages

This comprehensive, first-ever book on the behind-the-scenes musical wizards of Broadway details the life and work of twelve major orchestrators, explains what orchestrators do, and includes priceless who-orchestrated-what information for 700 shows. Engagingly anecdotal and scrupulously researched, it should appeal to all musical theater fans, musicians and non-musicians alike.



theater manuscripts and scores found in 1982 in the Warner Music warehouse in Secaucus, New Jersey. In retrospect, until that time, knowledge of the history of the American musical theater was incomplete. The 80 cartons that turned up contained hundreds of unpublished songs, some previously unknown, by the Gershwins, Jerome Kern, Victor Herbert, Richard Rodgers and others, along with complete scores, lost and/or forgotten manuscripts, and orchestrations and parts. The material included 30 minutes of music cut from Kern and Hammerstein’s *Show Boat*, the manuscript for its most famous number, “Ol’ Man River;” and complete scores for Kern’s *Sitting Pretty* (1924) and *Very Good Eddie* (1915) and the Gershwins’ *Tip-Toes* (1925) and *Pardon My English* (1933).

In a page A-1 New York Times article about the items discovered in Secaucus, the late H. Wiley Hitchcock, co-editor of *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music* and founding director of the Institute for Studies in American Music at Brooklyn College, was quoted as saying, “Besides jazz and concert music, the musical is probably the most significant genre of American music in the 20th century. These are the major figures in the field. And, leaving aside Irving Berlin and Frederick Loewe, they’re all here.”

If the American musical is one of this country’s most significant musical genres, then the art of orchestration has played no small part in making it so. As the Library of Congress’s symposium made clear, Suskin’s book is a welcome resource and a long overdue acknowledgment of Broadway’s orchestrators and their invaluable contributions. 🎵

GERSHWIN PRIZE SIGNED, SEALED, DELIVERED

On February 25, 2009, singers and musicians encompassing a wide range of musical styles paid homage to Stevie Wonder before a select audience in the East Room of the White House. This once-in-a-lifetime occasion was in celebration of the awarding of the second Library of Congress Gershwin Prize for Popular Song to Mr. Wonder by President Barack Obama. After performances by the guest artists, Wonder and his full band closed the evening with a set of their own, including his classic songs “Signed, Sealed, Delivered” and “Superstition.”

The event, broadcast nationwide the next night as part of the PBS series *In Performance at the White House*, featured Tony Bennett, Anita Johnson, Diana Krall, Mary Mary, Martina McBride, Esperanza Spalding and Paul Simon, the recipient of the first Gershwin Prize in 2007. PBS has made the entire concert, including additional performances by India.Arie, Wayne Brady, and will.i.am, available on its website, at <http://www.pbs.org/inperformanceatthewhitehouse/>.

Accompanied by a 21-piece chamber orchestra, Wonder premiered his “Sketches of a Life,” a classical-pop composition commissioned by the Library of Congress as part of the Gershwin



PHOTOS BY PETE SOUZA



President Barack Obama presents Gershwin Prize to Stevie Wonder (above); Wonder's music brings smiles to the faces of Vice President and Mrs. Biden, the Obamas, and Librarian of Congress James Billington and his wife, Marjorie

Prize, in the Library's Coolidge Auditorium on February 23. A webcast of this performance can be viewed at www.loc.gov/webcasts/.

The honoree was chosen by the Librarian of Congress, James H. Billington, with advice from a committee consisting of Michael Feinstein, Lorne Michaels, Phil Ramone, Paul Simon and Allen Toussaint. Further information on the Gershwin Prize for Popular Song can be found at www.loc.gov/about/awards-honors/gershwin/.

“DESTINED TO COME TOGETHER”

Politicians and songwriters joined forces on May 5 for “We Write the Songs,” a concert celebrating the recent donation of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers archives to the Library of Congress. The Library was already the long-time repository of the papers of Victor Herbert, Irving Berlin, John Philip Sousa, and Jerome Kern, who had been among the founding fathers of ASCAP in 1914. Welcoming the audience in the Library's Coolidge Auditorium, Susan Vita, Chief of the Music Division, noted that “these giants figured out early on that there is an important common purpose between the record of their creativity – which ASCAP represents – and the Library of Congress's mission of preserving material and making it accessible for the future . . . So, one might say we are two organizations destined to come together.”

While the evening's spotlight was on some of ASCAP's best-known current creators, the surprise attraction turned out to be the nine members of Congress who introduced them – and spoke movingly of the role music played in their own lives. The participating ASCAP songwriters, representing the musical spectrum, reminisced about and performed a couple of their biggest hits. Speaker Nancy Pelosi got things underway with her presentation of Paul Williams, the new president and chairman of ASCAP, who played and sang “We've Only Just Begun” and “The Rainbow Connection.”

Other pairings included Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA) and Hal David; Representative Lamar Smith (R-TX) and Jimmy Webb; Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) and Alan Bergman; and Representative James Clyburn (D-SC) and Ashford & Simpson.

Anne Brown

On March 13, 2009, Anne Brown, the original Bess from the 1935 world premiere production of *Porgy and Bess*, died at the age of 96 in Oslo, Norway. The last surviving major figure to have worked with George Gershwin, she was a graduate student at Juilliard when she sent him a letter requesting an audi-

George Gershwin not only chose her for the role, but also expanded it for her and change the title of the opera from Porgy to Porgy and Bess.

tion for his upcoming opera. He not only chose her for the role but also expanded it for her and changed the title of the opera from *Porgy* to *Porgy and Bess*. Brown was born in Baltimore, the daughter of a physician. In 1948, “fed up” with racial prejudice in the United States, she moved to Norway, where she married an Olympic ski jumper, raised a family and was active as a voice teacher and director. Her last visit to the United States was in 1998, when she took part in the George Gershwin centennial celebrations at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., marking the opening of the Library’s Gershwin Room.

John McGlinn

The musical theater community lost conductor and musical historian John McGlinn to a heart attack on February 14, 2009 at his home in Manhattan. He will be remembered for his restoration of some of the classic musicals of the 1920s and 1930s and for his recording of the overtures to a number of Gershwin musicals, released on EMI-Angel Records in 1987. At the time of his death, he was working on the restoration of the 1954 Moose Charlap/Jule Styne musical *Peter Pan*. McGlinn – like Anne Brown – was a panelist at the 1998 Library of Congress Gershwin centennial symposium.



Todd Duncan and Anne Brown as Porgy and Bess in the original 1935 production

Helen Dalrymple

A third participant in the Library of Congress Gershwin centennial celebrations was Helen Dalrymple, chief spokeswoman for the Library of Congress from 1985 to 2005, who passed away at the age of 68 in Arlington, Virginia, on February 13, 2009. She was the co-author of several books about the Library and was one of the leading authorities on its holdings and history. Dalrymple played a vital part in making the events surrounding both the George and Ira centennials a great success.

We extend our condolences to the Brown, McGlinn and Dalrymple families.

... A DREAM COMES TRUE

*Ira Gershwin and Kurt Weill's collaboration got off to an auspicious start with *Lady in the Dark* (1941), their hit musical about psychoanalysis. Starring Gertrude Lawrence and benefiting from a book by Moss Hart, the show ran for 467 performances on Broadway. They didn't fare so well in 1945 with their second Broadway offering, *The Firebrand of Florence*, an operetta about the romantic and political adventures – and misadventures – of Benvenuto Cellini, the famed 16th century sculptor and philanderer, closed after 43 performances. There was a lot of blame to go around – including the overblown production, the weak singing and acting of the leads (among them, Weill's wife, Lotte Lenya), the ponderous direction by John Murray Anderson, and the disappointing book by Edwin Justus Mayer, which was based on his successful 1924 play *The Firebrand* but lacked its wit and bite. And perhaps because the time hadn't been right for an operetta complete with*

extended musical numbers, a fine score by two celebrated creators wound up neglected for decades (with the exception of the number "Sing Me Not a Ballad").

*On March 12, 2009, 64 years after it bowed on Broadway, Firebrand returned to New York for a one-night stand under the auspices of *The Collegiate Chorale*. The pared-down concert version with almost no book, just brief connecting narrative adapted and delivered by Roger Rees, an outstanding cast of opera (Nathan Gunn, Anna Christy, Krysty Swann) and Broadway (Victoria Clark, Terrence Mann, David Pittu) singer-actors backed by the *The Collegiate Chorale* and the *New York City Opera Orchestra*, received glowing reviews from the critics.*

*Ted Sperling (pictured below), who conducted the performance, shares his personal 25-year-plus journey with *Firebrand* in the following piece.*

The members of the audience who came to hear *The Firebrand of Florence* at Alice Tully Hall in March knew they were in for a special evening – the first hearing of this Kurt Weill/Ira Gershwin score in New York since the original production in 1945. What they didn't know was that for me it would be the fulfillment of a more than 25-year-old dream that I had almost given up on.

I became interested in Broadway shows gradually, during my later teen years and my first years of college, but it was through the influence of two people at Yale that I became truly hooked. My classmate and close friend—and now Tony Award-winning actress—Victoria Clark invited me to conduct the student shows she was directing. And Robert Kimball, musical theater historian par excellence, taught me in seminars on Cole Porter and Irving Berlin and in the process gave me a hunger to learn more on my own. I devoured the books at the Yale Drama School library, reading encyclopedias as if they were novels. My family had already introduced me to the music of Kurt Weill – Teresa Stratas's then-new album, *The Unknown Kurt Weill*, was a big hit with my aunt and cousins. And we also loved operettas, both the Viennese sort and the Gilbert and Sullivan canon. So, when I came across mentions in 1982 of an obscure operetta by Ira Gershwin and Kurt Weill, my ears perked up. Investigating further, I found that the only recordings were demos that Gershwin and Weill performed



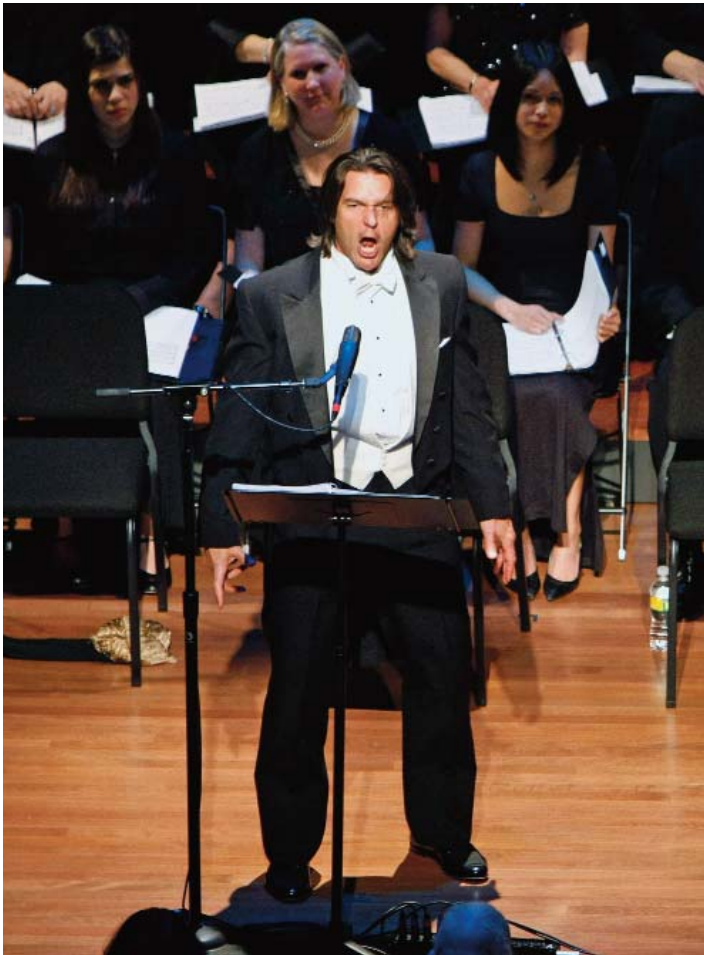
PHOTO BY LAURAMARIE DUNCAN

themselves; these became my introduction to the score. I loved the juxtaposition of Ira's New York lyrics (and delivery of them) and the sophisticated European lushness of the Weill score. The ambition of the writing impressed me – the opening sequence alone was twenty minutes of continual music, combining rousing instrumentals, recitative, arias, comic business and dance music; there were also extended

finales to both acts in the style of the great operettas, where all sorts of confusions get sorted out (or not) in reprises and clever juxtapositions. I had a feeling that somehow this piece would be part of my future.

In 1983 I moved to New York, where I played keyboards for Broadway shows as I started to work my way towards conducting professionally. Two years later I had the great fortune to participate in the concert presentation of Stephen Sondheim's *Follies* with the New York Philharmonic (I was one of the two tenors in the chorus!), and I began to think about putting together a concert version of *Firebrand*. It seemed to me that a concert would be the best way to revisit this show, as everyone who knew *Firebrand* agreed that the script was the weak link preventing it from being more of a success.

My first hurdle was to get the Kurt Weill Foundation's blessing, as I didn't have a reputation yet as a conductor. This involved auditioning for Kurt Weill's longtime musical secretary and



“You couldn’t ask for a more dashing hero than Nathan Gunn, who plays Cellini ... He sings magnificently, acts convincingly and of course certainly looks the part of the romantic, audacious artist.”



“Anna Christy brings a rich soprano voice and a winning presence to the role of [Cellini’s] model and true love Angela.”

—Howard Kissel, *The Cultural Tourist*
nydailynews.com

assistant, Lys Symonette. *Firebrand* was the first show on which Lys had worked for Weill; she sang the role of the pageboy from offstage as a very young Billy Dee Williams lip-synched on stage! The show clearly meant a lot to her, and she was understandably protective. I sat down at the piano and proceeded to play and sing the opening sequence of *Firebrand*. When I got to the Hangman’s phrase, “one man’s death is another man’s living,” Lys stopped me and asked me why Weill had set that lyric to these Bach-like cadences. When I hesitated, thinking she wanted a theoretical analysis, she leapt in impatiently, and said, “Because it’s funny, that’s why!” (Lys later married bass-baritone Randolph Symonette, who played the hangman in *Firebrand*.) I knew she and I would get along from then on, and she encouraged me to see if I could pull the concert together. With my friends

Andrew Caploe and Stephen Cole, I worked up a budget, tried to attract some stars to participate (I wanted Billy Dee Williams to narrate the evening; Earl Wrightson, the original *Firebrand*, to play the Duke; and Madeline Kahn to play the Duchess), made my own demo recordings of numbers that were missing from the originals, and generally did everything I could think of to make it happen. But we were too young and inexperienced at the time to raise the kind of money necessary, and the Encores! series at City Center was not even a glimmer in anyone’s eye, so we put the project on the shelf and moved on.

In 1996 John McGlinn recorded excerpts of the score with Thomas Hampson singing the title role, and then in 2004 there was a concert of the full score performed in London, with Rodney Gilfry as the *Firebrand*, which was recorded and released as a CD.



PHOTO BY ERIN BAIANO

“Victoria Clark portrayed the man-eating Duchess with flair and apt comic timing.”
 —Vivien Schweitzer, *The New York Times*

“The Weill–Gershwin score glistened in a gloriously sung performance that vibrantly celebrated the vanished world of operetta, spiced up with a bit of more modern musical comedy sass ... The score remains a remarkable achievement.”
 —Michael Kuchwara, *Associated Press*

“Weill composed a lush pastiche of chorales, madrigals, arias and duets. Gershwin gave them ingenious rhymes and scintillating wordplay.”
 —Jeremy Gerard, *Bloomberg.com*

“Under conductor Ted Sperling’s simultaneously sensitive and spirited direction, the New York City Opera Orchestra delivered the ambitiously diverse score with panache, and once the performers began delivering Gershwin’s delectable lyrics, it was almost impossible not to be swept along by this dizzyingly daffy tale.”
 —Andy Propst, *Backstage.com*

How exciting to hear the orchestrations for the first time! While I enjoyed both recordings, and was grateful to hear the show brought to life, I was still hungry to have my crack at the piece: there were elements I had come to love about the original demo recordings that hadn’t come through in either of the very polished recent recordings, particularly a real New York, almost Borscht Belt comedic delivery that I considered crucial to the success of the show. I was eager to bring both my experience in musical theater and the best of the theater and opera worlds to Ira and Weill’s operetta.

Then last year, I saw an advertisement in the paper for The Collegiate Chorale’s season, including a concert performance of *Firebrand* to be conducted by Paul Gemignani, Stephen Sondheim’s musical director and my mentor when I first came to New York to work in the theater. The Chorale’s choice of this work made a lot of sense. There are extensive choral numbers throughout the show, and this organization had started to explore the fascinating juncture where opera meets music theater in previous concerts of Scott Joplin’s *Treemonisha* and the infamous Bernstein/Lerner *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*. I was disappointed I wouldn’t be leading the performance, but I was very happy to see that it was in

Paul's capable hands, and that I could attend as an enthusiastic audience member. The ad didn't mention any casting, but a few months later my still-close friend Victoria Clark mentioned to me that she had been asked to play the comic role of the Duchess and that Nathan Gunn and Anna Christy would be playing the romantic leads – perfect! She also said that our mutual friend, Roger Rees, would be directing the event. The very next morning, I ran into Roger in a deli on 42nd Street. I told him how exciting it was that he was doing *Firebrand*, and that I was very familiar with and fond of the work. He stared at me, and said, "Funny, we just lost our conductor!" It turned out that Paul had withdrawn for personal reasons. "I'd love to fill in," I said. "Wouldn't that be lovely," he replied. And that was pretty much how this project became mine to conduct, with a brilliant cast and orchestra, and a terrific producing team to handle all the things I had earlier been unable to do.

So, how did it feel after 25-plus years of ruminating about *Firebrand*? Thrilling, of course, and gratifying to see my enthusiasm for the piece echoed by the performers and audience. Roger deftly streamlined the script for this presentation, eliminating many of its flaws, while the humor of the lyrics shone through and the rhapsodic music was as gorgeous as I had remembered. The orchestrations, by Weill himself, were full of surprises and treats. Weill is famously one of the very few Broadway composers who insisted on doing their own orchestrations. Even a musical genius like Leonard Bernstein felt the need to entrust most of this work to expert Broadway hands. There are those who criticize Weill's work as being inexpert, but that was not my impression. Instead, I marveled at how well Weill used the relatively small Broadway-size orchestra to create such a rich sound, and how only the composer himself would have come up with countermelodies and fills that were so imaginative.

We were working from a brand-new, scholarly edition that restored elements of the orchestration, which had been thinned out for the original Broadway production; I tried using these fuller versions for the concert, but as I learned during our first sing-through with the cast and orchestra, the reductions were necessary to allow the solo voices to be heard. We struggled during our dress rehearsal at Alice Tully to get the balances right, as we were using the shallow pit there for the first time since the hall's stunning recent renovation; I asked the orchestra to play as softly as was humanly possible, but even so I was worried that no one would be able to hear the singers. During our first break, we lowered the fabric sound-absorbing panels that the designers had cleverly incorporated into the design, and, voilà – problem solved. Phew!

I only wish our concert had been recorded. The soloists and The Collegiate Chorale were superb, as was the New York City



PHOTO BY ERIN BALANO

"Krysty Swann sings the role of a Florentine wench elegantly, and David Pittu is delicious in a series of comic roles."

—Howard Kissel, *The Cultural Tourist*, nydailynews.com

Opera Orchestra in the pit. I hope our performance encourages an American opera company to consider mounting a full production of *Firebrand*. The script turned out to include some very funny writing, for the Duke in particular; a few tweaks, especially in the last scene, where the original team seems to have run out of steam, and a revival of this work could be immensely rewarding. I'd love to see the show reach a larger audience. Perhaps we can now appreciate the piece for what it is, and certainly new productions can be designed and cast to show it off at its best.

Thanks to an ideal group of collaborators, including my buddy Victoria, and the experience I had gained over the years as a conductor, I know that the long, circuitous road to fulfilling my dream was worth the wait. 🎭

A NEW LEASE ON LIFE

The Ira and Leonore Gershwin Trusts and the Music Division of the Library of Congress have launched a project to restore and record the score of the 1934 Harold Arlen-Ira Gershwin-E. Y. Harburg revue *Life Begins at 8:40*.

Starring Bert Lahr, Luella Gear, Ray Bolger and Frances Williams, *Life Begins at 8:40* opened on August 27, 1934 at New York's Winter Garden, ran for 237 performances and then toured. On September 1, 2009, the musical score from the show was performed for the first time in nearly seventy-five years at a reading by a Washington, D.C.-based orchestra conducted by Aaron Gandy. The original scores and parts had been preserved at the Shubert Archive in New York and were supplemented by material from the Ira Gershwin archives in San Francisco and items discovered in 1982 in Warner Music's Secaucus, New Jersey, warehouse. Larry Moore, Curtis Moore (no relation) and a team of copyists supervised the elaborate checking and correction of the music.

Elizabeth Auman of the Library of Congress's Music Division, who coordinated the reading, is spearheading plans to present the score next year at a concert in the Library's Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Auditorium, with a follow-up recording by PS Classics.



Warner Music warehouse, 1982: Robert Kimball with *Life Begins at 8:40* material

Among *Life Begins*' best-known songs are "Fun to Be Fooled," "You're a Builder-Upper," and "Let's Take a Walk Around the Block."

GERSHWIN EVENING RAISES FUNDS FOR FIGHT AGAINST AIDS

This year's AIDS Project Los Angeles (A.P.L.A.) benefit, a two-evening salute to George and Ira Gershwin, commemorated the group's 25th anniversary of providing support for those suffering from HIV/AIDS throughout Southern California. Held at the Wilshire Theatre in Beverly Hills on March 22 and 23 and titled *The Brothers Gershwin: George & Ira*, the event was organized, as it has been every year since 1984, by S.T.A.G.E. (Southland Theatre Artists Goodwill Event).

The evenings' noteworthy lineup included wisecracking writer/actor Bruce Vilanch in a medley of George and Ira's comedic "I Love to Rhyme" and "Blah, Blah, Blah"; *Jersey Boys* star John Lloyd Young crooning "They Can't Take That Away from Me"; Patricia Morison, star of the original production of Cole Porter's *Kiss Me, Kate* in 1948, in a touching performance of "Embraceable You" before the entire cast came onstage to

sing "Happy Birthday" on the occasion of her 94th birthday; Betty Garrett and Ian Abercrombie dueting on "I'm a Poached Egg"; tart-tongued Carole Cook in a rollicking performance of "Strike Up the Band"; and Vicki Lewis strutting her way through "Treat Me Rough" and "Slap That Bass."

Among the many donated items for the benefit's auction were two contributions from the Ira and Leonore Gershwin Trusts: original checks signed by George and Ira mounted in a frame as a wall hanging and a collection of the Roxbury Recordings restorations of Gershwin musicals.

In 1994, MCA Records released *George & Ira Gershwin: A Musical Celebration*, a 2-CD set of the first all-Gershwin evening benefiting A.P.L.A. A number of the stars from that concert appeared again this year, underscoring the ongoing support of Hollywood's entertainment community in the fight against AIDS.



IRA WITHOUT GEORGE



PHOTO © RICHARD TERMINE, WWW.RICHARDTERMINE.COM

Lucie Arnaz singing “Island in the West Indies” from Ziegfeld Follies of 1936, accompanied by the show’s music director, Tedd Firth

New York City’s popular Lyricists and Lyricists series presented five performances of *The Man That Got Away*, featuring lyrics Ira Gershwin wrote without George, on May 9, 10 and 11. The program was conceived and hosted by its artistic director, film critic

Rex Reed, and included a number of lesser-known Ira lyrics. The New York Times reviewer, Stephen Holden, had high praise for “Ira’s irrepressible verbal playfulness,” “Mr. Reed’s exuberant storytelling,” and the cast – singers Lucie Arnaz, Polly Bergen, Linda Purl, Kurt Reichenbach, Tom Wopat and a pop-jazz quintet led by Tedd Firth. Among the songs offered were “It’s a New World” and “The Man That Got Away,” both with music by Harold Arlen and sung by Judy Garland in *A Star Is Born*; the comic “A Rhyme for Angela” from Ira and Kurt Weill’s 1945 operetta *The Firebrand of Florence*; “Spring Again” from the 1938 film *The Goldwyn Follies*, music by Vernon Duke, and “Goodbye to All That” from Ira and Arthur Schwartz’s score for the 1946 musical *Park Avenue*.



PHOTO © RICHARD TERMINE, WWW.RICHARDTERMINE.COM

Guest star, Polly Bergen singing “My Ship” from *Lady in the Dark*

AND HIS LOVELY WIFE . . .

Taking his title from an on-the-air error by a since forgotten British radio broadcaster, New York-based cabaret performer Mark Nadler (right) brought his new Ira Gershwin show, *His Lovely Wife, Ira*, to San Francisco’s Rrazz Room this past July. Premiered at New York’s Metropolitan Room in June, it is an entertaining and moving evening that focuses on Ira Gershwin’s lyrics, in song settings by his brother George as well as other composers he worked with during his long career.



PHOTO BY HEATHER SULLIVAN

A highlight of *His Lovely Wife, Ira* is Nadler’s performance of some of Ira’s attempts to set words to the Jerome Kern tune that ultimately became “Long Ago (and Far Away).” Though the melody was familiar to many in the audience, the lines “Midnight shadows brought the fear / The witching hour is here” and “Midnight shadows, dark and weird, / Completely disappeared” took everyone by surprise. At the show’s end, Nadler performed the final version of the song and described how Ira achieved his results.

Asked by WWM Managing Editor Michael Owen to describe what he hears in Ira’s lyrics, Nadler said, “Ira Gershwin’s words

not only scan perfectly to the music, but actually inform the music – and are informed by the music. For example, in the refrain of ‘Embraceable You,’ there are two eighth-note rests following the first two syllables of the triple-rhymed word, ‘...my sweet embrace (rest rest) able you...’ At first glance this seems reprehensible. You wouldn’t dare ask a singer to breathe in the middle of a word! But when you see that the last line of the verse is ‘Lady, listen to the rhythm of my heartbeat and you’ll get just what I mean,’ you realize that those rests are the rhythm of the singer’s heartbeat. In other words, Ira is saying, ‘you make my heart skip a beat,’ but instead of just stating that outright, the song demonstrates it. When I sing his songs I am wittier, smarter, more tender and more expressive than I otherwise am.”

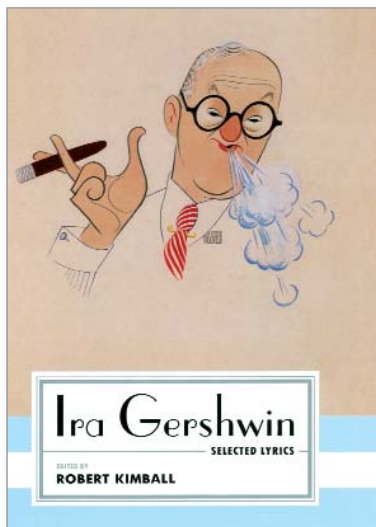
Nadler is currently preparing an audio recording of the show, which may incorporate Ira Gershwin songs not in his performance. More details on Nadler and his schedule, including performances of his other Ira-based program, *Tschaikowsky (and Other Russians)*, can be found at his website, www.marknadler.com.

AN AMERICAN POET

Ira Gershwin may not have believed his lyrics were poetry, or that they had a life apart from the music for which they were written, but many of his admirers find much that is poetic in his artistry.

The latest evidence can be found in *Ira Gershwin: Selected Lyrics*, the most recent volume in the American Poets Project, published by the Library of America. Compiled and edited by Robert Kimball, Artistic Advisor to the Ira and Leonore Gershwin Trusts, this pocket-size edition follows his 2006 collection of Cole Porter lyrics in the same series.

From Ira's first published lyric, "You May Throw All the Rice



You Desire" (1917) to 1954's "The Man That Got Away," *Ira Gershwin: Selected Lyrics* showcases more than 80 lyrics that "can stand best on their own as verse" and display the author's work in "all [its] wit, romance, and dazzling virtuosity."

Ira Gershwin: Selected Lyrics is available at your favorite bookstore or online at www.loa.org.

IRA, GEORGE, AND ALFRED

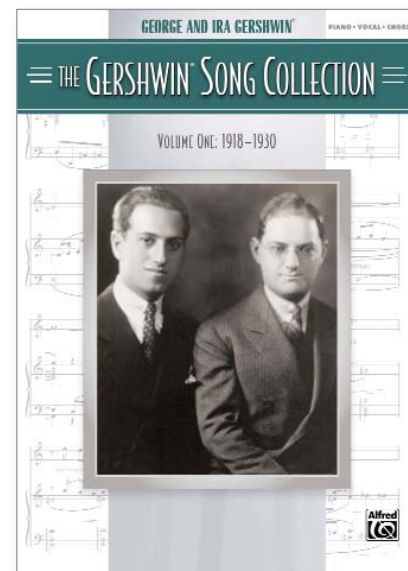
In an effort to revitalize the Gershwin sheet music catalogue, Alfred Publishing has released a number of newly engraved editions: the two-volume *George and Ira Gershwin Collection* (1918-1930 and 1931-1954); the vocal score for *Blue Monday* (George Gershwin / B. G. De Sylva, 1922); and *Porgy and Bess: Vocal Selections*.

The music and lyrics have all been reengraved for easier reading, and the new essays by Alfred's Popular Music Editor, Cary Ginell, provide historical information about the songs and the shows or films in which they appeared. The attractive graphics include rare photographs and sheet music covers, some made available by the Ira Gershwin archives.

In 2005, George and Ira Gershwin's long-time publisher, Warner Music, sold its sheet music and educational materials division to Alfred Publishing, founded in New York in 1922 by composer and musician Alfred Piantodosi. Since 1928, the firm has been owned by members of the Manus family and is now based in Van Nuys, California.

See www.alfred.com

for further information on the new songbook and other Gershwin titles.



IRA ON CD

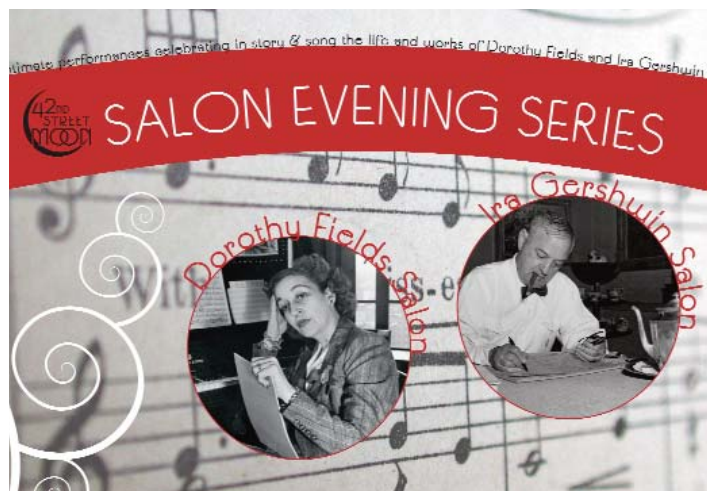
Harbinger Records, the New York-based record label that has reissued a number of the American songbook sessions recorded in the 1950s by Gershwin biographer Edward Jablonski, recently reissued *Lyrics by Ira Gershwin: The 1952 Walden Sessions*, a collection of rarely recorded Ira Gershwin lyrics, featuring the late singer/comedienne Nancy Walker.

The CD expands the original ten tracks with a previously-unreleased series of recordings by Walker and her husband, David Craig, which they had sent as a Christmas present to writer Burt Shevelove in 1951.

Rarely-heard songs on the CD include "Younger Generation" (music by Aaron Copland, from the Samuel Goldwyn film *North Star*), "Put Me to the Test" (music by Jerome Kern, from the film *Cover Girl*), "Don't Be a Woman If You Can" (music by Arthur Schwartz, from the musical *Park Avenue*), "The Simple Life" (music by George Gershwin, from *A Dangerous Maid*, which closed in 1921 before it reached Broadway), "Sing Me Not a Ballad" (music by Kurt Weill, from *The Firebrand of Florence*) and "Oh, So Nice!" (music by George Gershwin, from 1928's *Treasure Girl*). Harbinger's reissues, including *Gershwin Rarities*, another release from the Walden sessions, are available at www.harbinger.com.

SAN FRANCISCO'S 42ND STREET MOON TO HONOR IRA

In the wake of its successful November 2008 production of the Gershwins' 1930 *Girl Crazy*, San Francisco's 42nd Street Moon recently announced plans for a multi-year festival of Ira Gershwin musicals. A salon evening spanning Ira's entire career is scheduled for January 28, 2010, at the Alcazar Theatre and will serve as a prelude. George and Ira's 1924 *Lady, Be Good!* will be the first staged production; it opens on March 21, 2010 at the Eureka Theatre. (The show was previously presented by 42nd Street Moon in 1996.) Rare back-to-back productions of the Gershwins' political satires *Of Thee I Sing* and *Let 'Em Eat Cake* are in the works, with the remaining shows to be determined. Artistic director Greg MacKellan and producing director Stephanie Rhoads said that possibilities include *Life Begins at 8:40* (Harold Arlen and E. Y. Harburg), *Ziegfeld Follies of 1936* (Vernon Duke), *Park Avenue* (Arthur Schwartz), and *Tip-Toes* and *Tell Me More* (both with George Gershwin). Further



information can be found by visiting the company website at www.42ndstreetmoon.org.

EAST TO MEET WEST AT ENCORES!



Ginger Rogers and The Foursome (1930)

The original production of *Girl Crazy* opened on October 14, 1930 at New York's Alvin Theater and ran for 272 performances; it starred, in addition to Rogers and Merman, Willie Howard and Allen Kearns. The book, by Guy Bolton and John McGowan, is being adapted by playwright David Ives, a frequent Encores! collaborator. Noted Gershwin expert – and original Encores! musical director – Rob Fisher will conduct the orchestra.

Casting has not been completed as of this writing. Additional information on *Girl Crazy* and other productions at Encores! can be found at the New York City Center website, www.nycitycenter.org.

George and Ira Gershwin's *Girl Crazy*, the iconic 1930 musical that made stars of Ginger Rogers and Ethel Merman, returns to New York this November as the opening production of the 2009/2010 City Center Encores! season. It will be presented for five performances beginning on November 19. Jerry Zaks, Tony-Award winner for the 1992 Broadway revival of *Gypsies and Dolls* and 1989's *Lend Me a Tenor*, will direct.

A merry tale of East meets West in the wilds of Arizona, *Girl Crazy* boasts what is probably the most consistently melodious score ever written by the Gershwins. Among its songs that have become universally known and loved are "I Got Rhythm," "Embraceable You" and "But Not for Me."

NEVER SAY NEVER

"A musical set in Dresden? And this, written by one of the most successful musical composers of all time? Hard to believe but true. In [1933], George Gershwin and his brother Ira surprised audiences on Broadway with a musical set in Dresden. [More than] seventy-five years later, *Pardon My English* is finally receiving its European premiere at the State Operetta."

– From the website of the Staatsoperette Dresden, which will present 11 performances of *Pardon My English*, in German translation, between November 27, 2009, and May 19, 2010

IRA AND LEONORE GERSHWIN TRUSTS

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San Francisco, CA 94105-3703

AROUND THE WORLD WITH *PORGY AND BESS*

A calendar of recent and upcoming productions

New York Harlem Productions

Las Palmas, Spain

9/30/09-10/3/09

Cape Town Opera

Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff, Wales

10/20/09-10/24/09

Royal Festival Hall, London, England

10/26/09-10/27/09 (concert performances)

Edinburgh Festival Theatre, Edinburgh, Scotland

10/30/09-10/31/09

Symphony Silicon Valley, San Jose, California

3/13/10-3/21/10 (concert performances)

The Washington National Opera,

Washington, DC

3/20/10-4/3/10

North Carolina Central University,

Durham, North Carolina

4/7/10

Virginia Opera Association

Norfolk: 4/10-14-16-18/10

Fairfax: 4/23/10 and 4/25/10

Richmond: 4/30/10 and 5/2/10

Newport News: 5/7/10 and 5/8/10

Opera Grand Rapids, Grand Rapids, Michigan

4/30/10 and 5/1/10

New Jersey State Opera

Newark Symphony Hall, Newark: 5/14/10 and 5/16/10

Edinburgh International Festival Society, Edinburgh, Scotland

8/14-16-17/10

University of Kentucky Opera Theatre, Lexington, Kentucky

10/1/10-10/8/10