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POP/JAZZ

POP/JAZZ; Sounds of Gershwin: A Record Guide

By BARRY SINGER

Correction Appended

Seemingly everyone has recorded something by George Gershwin. To recommend even a handful of recordings as essential is only asking for trouble, but here goes.

The quintessential recording of "Rhapsody in Blue" remains Leonard Bernstein's 1959 performance, as pianist and conductor, with the New York Philharmonic (Sony). The essential urbanity and romance of the Concerto in F is captured by Andre Previn, as both conductor and soloist, in his 1971 recording with the London Symphony (EMI). And Bernstein's radiant "An American in Paris" from 1958 with the New York Philharmonic is unsurpassed (Sony). "Porgy and Bess" is of course best appreciated in its entirety, but an electrifying 1955 recording of excerpts, "Porgy and Bess (Highlights)" (RCA), featuring Leontyne Price, William Warfield and John Bubbles, is, well, essential.

In the realm of jazz and American pop, Ella Fitzgerald's Gershwin Songbook (Verve), her collected Gershwin work with Louis Armstrong (also on Verve), and her single, brief Gershwin session with the pianist Ellis Larkins (Decca) shouldn't be missed. Nor should Lee Wiley's 1939 Liberty Music Shop recordings (Audiophile); Sarah Vaughn's 1956-57 Mercury sessions; Bobby Short's album "K-RA-ZY for Gershwin"(Rhino).

Charlie Parker's masterly be-bop rethinking of "Embraceable You," from 1947, is now part of a set, "Yardbird Suite." (Rhino). Miles Davis and Gil Evans's landmark jazz reinterpretation of "Porgy and Bess" has just been reissued by Sony. And a new Sony compilation entitled "Gershwin Jazz" offers a swell tour of random essentials, including the Benny Goodman Sextet's "I Got Rhythm" and Billie Holiday's "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off."

Finally, there is Gershwin himself, who cut innumerable piano rolls and recorded a handful of piano solos. Two Nonesuch releases ("The Piano Rolls" Vols. I and II) employ computer enhancement with intriguing results. Gershwin's 1924 recording of "Rhapsody in Blue," more or less, as he originally performed with the Paul Whiteman Band is about to be reissued by RCA, along with the first recording of "An American in Paris," featuring Gershwin on celeste.

It is a Music Masters CD entitled "Gershwin Performs Gershwin," however, that merits the designation most essential. A delightful aggregation of Gershwin radio appearances, it also includes two rare examples of Gershwin conducting private "tryouts" of new compositions: his underrated "Second

Rhapsody" in 1931 and "Porgy and Bess" with the original company on

July 19, 1935. To hear these scores taking shape under Gershwin's own hand, poignantly brings George Gershwin and his music to life in a way no other recording quite can.

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Photo: FROM 1955 -- Leontyne Price and William Warfield perform in "Porgy and Bess." (Kasakoff)