

Preface

The genesis of the song “I Got Rhythm” began with *Treasure Girl* (1928) as a slow number and ultimately found its way into *Girl Crazy* (1930) as the song we know today.

George Gershwin was rich and successful and two years away from his goal of finding a composition teacher who would help him expand his compositional skills. Over a period of time, he had been turned down by Nadia Boulanger, Maurice Ravel, and Alexander Glazunov, respectively. According to Edward Jablonski in his book *George Gershwin: A Biography* (Doubleday 1987), Gershwin finally connected with Josef Schillinger in 1932 and studied with him until 1936. In Mr. Jablonski’s words: “In short, the [Schillinger] system was strong on technique, weak on originality (or that elusive thing, ‘inspiration’; if the gift is missing, not all the mathematics in the world is a substitute).”

George Gershwin, however, lacked neither inspiration nor originality, but Schillinger’s methodology of creating a mathematical grid as the basis of composition seemed to satisfy Gershwin’s desire to formalize his creative genius within a structured framework. He was clearly preparing himself for a future in serious modern composition. “Cuban Overture,” “I Got Rhythm Variations,” “Second Rhapsody,” *Porgy and Bess*, and his final shows, including the movie score for *Shall We Dance*, were all composed during this period.

Sometime in 1933, Gershwin had begun clearing his schedule in anticipation of his forthcoming opera *Porgy and Bess*. He concurrently signed a contract for a weekly radio broadcast he would host, and also arranged for a cross-country concert tour in celebration of the tenth anniversary of his “Rhapsody in Blue.” His notion of creating for himself a window of time seems remarkable, but intense schedules were nothing new for Gershwin and this spate of activity was no exception, save a brief respite in Palm Beach, Florida. There he dashed off his “I Got Rhythm Variations” (almost as an afterthought). Perhaps he had realized there was a dearth of his own classical material for his concert tour. How fortuitous for us!

In one of his radio broadcasts, on February 19, 1934, Gershwin unassumingly describes his marvelous new piece. He relates to his radio audience that the work begins quietly, with the orchestra artlessly introducing the four-note theme. When the piano finally enters, it, too, articulates the theme simply. He goes on to say that in the first variation, the piano plays a complicated rhythmic pattern while the orchestra plays the theme. This variation is perky and quirky. Next comes “Valse Triste” (Gershwin’s title in his manuscript). It moves along at a waltz tempo, but it is devoid of the romantic elements found in most waltzes and is rather dissonant as the violins squeal with glissandos, forging a certain ersatz pathos. The third variation imitates Chinese flutes played out of tune “as they always are” according to George. In describing his fourth variation, Gershwin does not refer to it during the radio broadcast as a jazz variation. He tells us that the melody is played upside down by the left hand while the right hand plays it straight “on the theory: never let one hand know what the other is doing.” The finale follows. It is complicated and energetic, and interestingly, within its closing moments one hears for the first time a new voice inhabiting the end of the piece. It appears twice, gently escorting the departing tune in its final iterations. This secondary theme provides a quasi-poignant goodbye to the listener before it runs away from us with a wink and a bang!

The task of transcribing a piece as complex as “I Got Rhythm Variations” was enormous. I felt obliged to maintain the integrity of the interrelated group of variations with their individual ideas as they formed an integrated whole. In order to reduce successfully the thousands of notes an entire orchestra plays in this work to two hands, I had to develop a deep understanding of the intricate and elegant weaving of Gershwin’s harmonies as he continually reworked four little notes. I determined that I would preserve as many chordal, verbal, and dynamic directives as ten fingers would allow. To succeed at this, I turned to three sources: “I Got Rhythm Variations” for two pianos, four hands, arranged in 1935 by Gregory Stone, and published in *The Complete Gershwin® Keyboard Works* (Warner Bros. Publications), and of critical importance, Gershwin’s two manuscripts in his own hand, dated January 6, 1934. The first is a piano sketch of the entire piece. It contains valuable information. The second is the full orchestration of the work. My extensive study of these two manuscripts yielded harmonies and rhythmic motifs that lent themselves extremely well to the fulfillment of a richly textured piano solo transcription, in which certain tempos and dynamics had to be dealt with given the confines of the solo piano.

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"I GOT RHYTHM" VARIATIONS

for Piano Solo

Based on a work by
GEORGE GERSHWIN and IRA GERSHWIN
Transcribed and Edited by ALICIA ZIZZO

Moderato ♩ = 80 (*not strictly in tempo*)

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