

Program Notes
"Under the Lights"
September 4, 2009

By Richard McGee, Music Director

Peter Gunn Theme

Nevada Pops continues its practice of opening its concerts with "spy music" by selecting this Henry Mancini classic. *Peter Gunn* ran for three seasons, from 1958-1961, and virtually invented the television spy drama. Mancini's cool, bluesy score embodies the trendy, suave secret agent perfectly. Rock-and-roll was still fairly new in the late 1950s, and the relentless drive of the beat sets this theme apart. Big band jazz meets rock-and-roll here, quite possibly for the first time ever.

South Rampart Street Parade

This tune is a Dixieland classic, programmed in this concert for two reasons: first, it is good, solid, *fun* Dixieland, and second, this tune is perfect for adaptation by a studio orchestra. I must give credit here for the real inspiration for this arrangement: Harry Zimmerman, who led bands on both the Dinah Shore and Carol Burnett variety shows, released an album several decades ago entitled *Big Dixie*. On the album, Harry's big band performed arrangements of popular Dixieland tunes, and the results were enormously exciting, at least for me, a young junior high school kid just learning about jazz. One musical note: this tune is "through-composed," meaning that melodies are introduced, but never repeated or developed. As you listen, notice that each melody naturally follows the one before, as though you are traveling on the street and seeing the sights, but not going back the same way. It's great fun!

Do I Do

I am a big fan of Stevie Wonder. In addition to being a brilliant singer, keyboardist, and master of the harmonica, he is simply a great composer. His songs are engaging, pretty when they need to be, and always, always catchy. *Do I Do* may not be his biggest commercial hit, but it is very clever music, both melodically and harmonically. I wrote this arrangement just a few weeks ago for performance at the Grand Teton Music Festival; its addition to tonight's program is designed to illustrate the versatility of the studio orchestra, which seamlessly goes from Dixieland to contemporary pop music without breaking a sweat.

Hot Club of Las Vegas

I will let Mundo introduce the five selections that comprise this portion of the program, but it is worth noting that the "hot club" genre is a growing popular phenomenon around the United States. The spiritual leader of this style of music is Django Reinhardt, who blends traditional and newly-composed songs with a combination of jazz, gypsy, and Latin influences to create something completely unique. This is music that is both intimate and outgoing. It speaks on a very personal level at times, and at other times, simply sets your toes tapping. As represented throughout this concert, the Hot Club of Las Vegas is a delightful blending of the old and the new.

Thoughts about George Gershwin:

The second half of tonight's program is a salute to an American icon, George Gershwin (1898-1937). During his short lifetime, Gershwin (with his lyricist, brother Ira) composed hundreds of hit tunes and more than a dozen Broadway musicals. His success was spectacular, yet he longed for more. He wanted to be taken seriously in the concert hall as well as in the world of popular music. So, during the latter years of his life, Gershwin set about the task of becoming successful as a "serious" composer. It was surprisingly difficult for him to gain that acceptance, in spite of composing *Porgy and Bess* (1935), a full-scale opera and the first serious work to deal directly with the African-American experience. Several works contributed to his eventual triumph; *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), the tone poem *An American in Paris* (1928), and his magnificent *Piano Concerto in F* (1925). He tried unsuccessfully to take composition lessons with both Nadia Boulanger and Maurice Ravel. Ravel asked Gershwin (who was already world-famous), how much money he made, and when Gershwin revealed the amount, Ravel reputedly said, "Maybe I should take lessons from you!"

At the time of Gershwin's death in 1937 from a brain tumor, he had seen his reputation grow and broaden. He was believed to be the wealthiest musician ever (to that point). He had composed several Hollywood film scores, one of which would lead to his only Academy Award nomination (posthumous). Best of all, he lived long enough to know that his orchestral works were being performed to enthusiastic audiences all over the world.

Strike Up the Band

This familiar tune came from the 1927 musical of the same name. After a dismal opening run, the show was revised and produced again in 1930 with more success. The original story was believed to be too satirical, as it centered on a wealthy cheese producer who convinced the United States to declare war on Switzerland, so that he could maintain his own control of the cheese market. Either way, the title tune *Strike Up the Band* became something of a phenomenon itself, becoming so popular that it was even adopted by UCLA as one of its own fight songs.

Tonight's arrangement of *Strike Up the Band* was brilliantly penned by John Moss, written originally for the John Haig Orchestra. Haig's orchestra was the house band in Caesar's Palace's Circus Maximus showroom during the 1990s.

Embraceable You

Calvin Custer's wonderful string writing is evident in this lovely arrangement of one of Gershwin's most popular tunes. Interestingly, *Embraceable You* had a hard time finding a home, first being composed in 1928 for an operetta entitled *East is West*, which was never published or produced. In 1930, the same tune was incorporated into *Girl Crazy*, one of Gershwin's most successful musicals.

Summertime

This beautiful melody has been recorded and performed countless times, not only by vocalists, but also by jazz musicians who consider it a classic standard. *Summertime* was originally an aria from the opera *Porgy and Bess*, first produced in 1935. This arrangement was written for the Grand Teton Music Festival in 1999.

Rhapsody in Blue

Gershwin was confident enough about his ability to write music and to perform it, but was somewhat less confident about his ability to orchestrate music

for a large ensemble. Thus, when *Rhapsody in Blue* was first conceived, Gershwin knew he would need help preparing it for orchestral performance. The Paul Whiteman Orchestra, a popular dance band of the day, commissioned Gershwin to write a "jazz concerto." Because of Gershwin's insecurities as an arranger, he enlisted the assistance of Ferde Grofe, Whiteman's chief arranger, to help with the orchestration. The collaboration was a fortuitous one; Grofe was a brilliant musician who would later distinguish himself with his own composition *Grand Canyon Suite*. He arranged *Rhapsody in Blue* for Paul Whiteman's small dance orchestra, and the performances were wildly successful. Later, the *Rhapsody* was re-scored for full symphony orchestra with piano. Tonight's performance is of the original Grofe orchestration, as it was presented by Gershwin and Whiteman in 1924. It is interesting to note that the title of that first concert in New York was "An Experiment in Modern Music." Certainly, the blending of jazz and classical elements was a bold venture for that time. What stands out though, are the remarkable melodies that Gershwin spliced together to create the *Rhapsody*. His melodic gift was extraordinary; virtually every moment in the piece is a memorable tune. Certainly Gershwin's sense of melody is his lasting legacy, and *Rhapsody in Blue* stands as one of that legacy's greatest examples.