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ROBERT WYATT

The Seven Jazz Preludes of George Gershwin: A Historical Narrative

In the spring of 1927 the New World Music Corporation, a subsidiary of T. B. Harms, Inc., issued an edition of *Preludes for Piano* by George Gershwin. The three preludes, which have the distinction of being the only concert works for solo piano to be published during Gershwin's lifetime, were premiered by the composer at a joint recital with the Peruvian contralto Marguerite d'Alvarez at the Hotel Roosevelt in New York City on December 4, 1926; the recital was repeated at Symphony Hall in Boston several weeks later. At least two other preludes were included in the set performed at the recitals, however, and the mystery surrounding the "missing preludes" continues to puzzle Gershwin scholars today, more than sixty years after Harms shipped the new editions to music dealers throughout the country.

Although Gershwin is the central figure in this mystery story, the plot is enhanced by a colorful cast of supporting characters—Mme. d'Alvarez, the flamboyant opera star; Dr. Isaac Goldberg, a Harvard scholar and writer; Kay Swift, a talented and beautiful divorcée; Josefa Rosanska, an early sweetheart; and an assortment of New York music critics, who have become, unwittingly, the actual storytellers. But one name seems to appear more than any of the others—Carl Van Vechten (1880–1964), who in his letters, diaries, and articles chronicles the lives of George Gershwin and Gershwin's friends during the years when the piano preludes were composed. His story is fascinating.

D'Alvarez and Gershwin for dinner—Marinoff [Van Vechten's wife] prepares a lovely *goose!*—Mary Ellis sat with us until she had to

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go to the theatre—D'Alvarez sang Gershwin songs—to bed by 1:45.¹

Fania Marinoff, a tempestuous Russian actress and dancer, had married an extremely compulsive man. He saved everything: letters from second cousins, shopping lists, receipts, address books, drafts of his writings, diaries, phone numbers, income tax forms, photographs and their negatives. A passionate collector, he often spent entire afternoons pasting autographs, concert programs, book jackets, and newspaper clippings into bulging scrapbooks. The daily events of his life were faithfully recorded in diaries: the time he awoke; his ailments and their remedies; the weather; what he ate and how much; whom he lunched, dined, and partied with; and in the most detail of all, the quality and amount of his sleep. A love for cats equaled his appreciation of a good bottle of Scotch whiskey, and his West Fifty-Fifth Street apartment housed large numbers of both. His day was not complete without luncheon at the Algonquin with Eugene O'Neill, the Gish sisters, Fannie Hurst, or Walter Winchell, and the nighttime often included trips uptown to Harlem where jazz could be heard drifting down the North River from the Cotton Club. Carl Van Vechten was quite a character.

He had moved to New York City in 1906 to write for the *New York Times*, apprenticing as an assistant music critic from 1906 to 1908 before moving to Europe for a two-year stint as their Paris correspondent. Upon returning to the States, he resumed his previous duties at the *Times* and began writing and editing the program notes for the New York Symphony Society. But in 1914, at the age of 34, he retired to devote his life (or at least a few hours each morning) to writing novels and taking photographs.² His career as a critical essayist had ended, but the relationships created in his association with the *Times* endured. Mary Garden, John McCormack, and Enrico Caruso remained friends, and one young singer was to become an almost constant companion of Van Vechten and his wife.

The three had met in 1909 when Marguerite d'Alvarez (1888–1953) was lured to the United States by Oscar Hammerstein to sing the role of Fides in the Manhattan Opera's production of Meyerbeer's *Le Prophete*. Truly an international diva, she was the daughter of a Peruvian diplomat and a Frenchwoman; she was born in England, trained in Belgium, made her singing debut in France, and eventually settled into a comfortable career as a leading contralto in the Italian Opera. After appearing with the London, Boston, and Chicago operas, she returned to New York in 1919, primarily as a concert soloist. Although a friend, Van Vechten was not timid in pointing out her faults:

Her enormous size limited her stage appearances. . . . As a matter of fact, her "line" was so vast that it actually defeated in many

instances her persistent ambition to sing in opera. It certainly limited the roles she sang. . . . Although she devotes only a few pages of her book to her career on the concert stage, she was much more successful in this branch of her career. However, even here, she exaggerated her emotions; she made unfortunate gestures and forced her voice until she sang sharp. . . . On the stage she lacked true passion and fire, but in the concert hall she lacked restraint and became elemental.³

It was also in 1919 that Van Vechten was introduced to the music of a twenty-year-old pianist and songwriter who had just become a star of Tin Pan Alley. Their friendship, based on mutual admiration, became a close one. "I first became acquainted with Gershwin's music through his 'Swanee,' written in 1919 for the revue which opened the Capitol Theatre. With 'I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise,' written for the fourth of George White's *Scandals*, I completely capitulated to his amazing talent and nominated him to head my list of jazz composers."⁴

By fusing the elements of classical music, the jazz he heard in Harlem, and the popular music of Tin Pan Alley, George Gershwin had assimilated a compositional style that was unique among the composers of the early 1920s. As a result, he was in great demand, both as a composer of Broadway music and as a performer; in 1923 his dual talents were introduced to the classical concert stage. Van Vechten recorded the circumstances surrounding Gershwin's debut:

In the Spring of 1923, in search of novelties to put on her Fall program, Eva Gauthier asked me to suggest additions. "Why not a group of American songs?" I urged. Her face betrayed her lack of interest. "Jazz," I particularized. Her expression brightened. When I met the singer again on her return from Paris, she informed me that Maurice Ravel had offered her the same sapient advice. She had, indeed, adopted the idea and requested me to recommend to her a musician who might serve as her accompanist and guide in this venture. But one name fell from my lips, that of George Gershwin, whose compositions I admired and with whose skill as a pianist I was acquainted.⁵

When Eva Gauthier (1885–1958) asked Gershwin to be her accompanist for a group of American popular songs that would include several of his own tunes, his skepticism, incredibly unprophetic with the premiere of the *Rhapsody in Blue* only fifteen weeks away, was apparent: "I don't think that jazz will ever be suitable to concerts. They won't get it."⁶ But the recital, held at Aeolian Hall on November 1, 1923, was a terrific hit, and Gershwin's playing was singled out by the critics: "He expounded the rhythmic subtleties of the jazz numbers brilliantly

and with exactly the proper atmosphere of impromptu that makes good jazz playing so fascinating. His insertion of a shameless quotation from 'Scheherazade' in the middle of 'Do It Again' quite ruined the decorum of his audience."⁷

If the audience was "ruined" by Gershwin's performance with Gauthier, they must have been "devastated" by his jazz rhapsody that made Lincoln's birthday in 1924 a historic occasion. Van Vechten had watched from Marguerite d'Alvarez's box at Aeolian Hall, invited there by Paul Whiteman to serve as a judge for "An Experiment in Modern Music" along with such notables as Sergei Rachmaninoff, Jascha Heifetz, Leopold Stokowski, Victor Herbert, Fannie Hurst, and Fritz Kreisler. His response to the concert, mailed to Gershwin two days later, has become a classic.

The concert, quite as a matter of course, was a riot, and you crowned it with what, after repeated hearings, I am forced to regard as the foremost serious effort by any American composer. Go straight on and you will knock all Europe silly. Go a little farther in the next one and invent a new *form*. . . . Marguerite d'Alvarez, by the way, was reduced to a state of hysterical enthusiasm by the concert, especially your contribution. She wants to sing at the next one! You might tell Whiteman this: she would certainly give the audience a good time!⁸

The incredible success of the *Rhapsody in Blue* prompted a flurry of composition, and before Gershwin left for England in July to write the music for *Primrose* he had compiled sixteen piano sketches in a notebook titled "March and April, 1924."⁹ The short pieces in the notebook, many of which are dated, are curiously "unGershwin-esque"—sounding rather like a combination of Anton Rubenstein, Rachmaninoff, and early Berg—and only one of them, an early draft of "The Man I Love," is recognizable. Although few Gershwin biographers acknowledge the existence of these numbered miniatures, written in a variety of different keys, their importance is intensified by Van Vechten's next letter to Gershwin.

Dear George Gershwin,

I hear that you have written some jazz preludes. Are these published? . . . I want to talk to you about a number of things. I know that you must be very busy, but if you can spare me an evening next week let me know. I have moved. Note my new address above. The telephone number is 8899. The *Rhapsody in Blue* is on the phonograph constantly.¹⁰

Whether the sixteen sketches in the "March-April" notebook were the jazz preludes Van Vechten was inquiring about is unknown. Perhaps

they were simply ideas for the preludes or exercises written for a composition teacher—the “write-me-five-tunes-a-day” sort of thing composition teachers love to assign. But during the next few months Gershwin and Van Vechten would become frequent companions, drawn together for the discussion of two joint projects: Van Vechten’s article in *Vanity Fair*, the first serious article to be written about the young composer, and a Gershwin opera based on a Van Vechten libretto. The idea of an operatic collaboration was soon scrapped because “it was not at all what George needed or wanted; finding it presented too many problems and was much too complicated.”¹¹ But the article, finished on January 5, 1925, and eventually published in March, would reveal one of Gershwin’s new projects that promised to be an enterprise of epic proportions—the composition of a cycle of twenty-four preludes. “Some of Gershwin’s finest inspirations have not as yet been either published or publically performed. It is probably that the production of his twenty-four preludes and his tone-poem, tentatively entitled *Black Belt*, will award him a still higher rank in the army of contemporary composers.”¹²

The composition of the piano preludes began shortly after the New Year when Gershwin purchased an expensive new manuscript book and titled it “Preludes, Jan. 1925.”¹³ On the opening page he sketched his first prelude (see ex. 1), an eleven-measure fragment in G minor, also dated “Jan. 1925,” but he later tore it, and four other pages, from the manuscript book; the remaining pages contain the first draft of *Rumba* (now known as the *Cuban Overture*), composed in 1932.¹⁴ The G minor *Prelude* would surface again, as the opening theme of the third movement of the *Concerto in F*, but the contents of the four missing pages from the manuscript book remain a mystery.

Soon after the first entry was composed, the project was abandoned. Between January 1925 and the premiere of the piano preludes on December 4, 1926, Gershwin published *Short Story*, a short piece for violin and piano; he also continued work on two other projects, *Black Belt* and *Harlem Serenade*, which, like the proposed cycle of preludes, were never completed. During the same period he also traveled twice to Europe for extended visits, composed the scores of four Broadway shows, wrote the *Concerto in F* and performed it six times with the New York Symphony, and composed the three *Preludes for Piano*, which were published in 1927.

Although the exact dates of their composition are not known, the three preludes that Gershwin chose for publication were probably written shortly before the recital. The Gershwin Collection at the Library of Congress houses the only extant holograph manuscripts of the published *Preludes*, including two versions of the *Prelude III* in E-flat minor, which unfortunately are undated. Copyist manuscripts pre-

Example 1. First four bars of "Prelude" in G minor.

pared for the Harms edition of the *Preludes for Piano*, found several years ago in the Warner Brothers warehouse in Secaucus, New Jersey, are also included in the Gershwin Collection. Although they are fascinating because of Gershwin's penciled-in corrections and additions, they do not specify dates. However, several clues pertaining to the chronology of composition are revealed by Gershwin and two of his friends: Dr. Isaac Goldberg (1887–1938), whose biography, *George Gershwin: A Study in American Music* (1931), was the first and only biography published during the composer's lifetime, and Kay Swift, the excellent songwriter ("Fine and Dandy" and "Can't We Be Friends?") who was the nearest to being a great love in Gershwin's life. In a brief article published before his concert, Gershwin commented, "In the very dignified and sedate program which I shall give with Mme. d'Alvarez in the Hotel Roosevelt recital series this fall, my own part will consist of selections from the 'Rhapsody in Blue,' supplemented by two or three jazz 'Preludes' on which I am now working and which will come before the public for the first time on that occasion."¹⁵

In his biography of Gershwin, Goldberg notes, "Of the *Preludes* but three were printed; perhaps of all Gershwin's compositions they are the least known. Much of the writing, prepared hurriedly so as to provide a feature for the program with Mme. D'Alvarez, was patently derivative."¹⁶ And during a recent interview, Kay Swift remarked that

George composed the first *Prelude* [she hummed the theme] in one sitting; I scored it while he played and he made a finished copy from that. It was not just an improvisation; he already had it worked out in his head. The other two came a little later—I can't remember when, but this one, the one he called his "Spanish" prelude because of the rhythms, I think came first. I don't know why he published only three; there were others. But he loved to

play the three preludes and included them, whenever he could, on programs that were just a little bit too short! They're easy to ruin, you know. Most people play the fast ones too fast and the slow one too slow.¹⁷

As the recital date drew closer, Gershwin must have realized that his three new preludes, which took less than eight minutes to play, would be too short and insubstantial as the conclusion to the first half of the program. To supplement the set he decided to use some old material, but as late as November 28, 1926, only six days before the Hotel Roosevelt recital, Gershwin was still undecided about the number of preludes he would play. The previewed program from the entertainment page of the *New York Times* promised six (see fig. 1).¹⁸

Six preludes were also mentioned in a seemingly contradictory description by Isaac Goldberg in his book *Tin Pan Alley: A Chronicle of the American Popular Music Racket*, published in 1930, only one year before his Gershwin biography: "Some three years after the Gauthier concert, Gershwin repeated the vocal experiment in the company of Mme. Marguerite D'Alvarez. . . . It was for this program that Gershwin composed six Preludes founded upon jazz motifs, thus proving, especially in the second, that jazz was adaptable to the consecrated forms of the classics."¹⁹

Most other Gershwin biographers also attribute six preludes to the Gershwin-d'Alvarez recitals, but reviews of the repeat performance of the Hotel Roosevelt program in Boston's Symphony Hall on January 16, 1927, seem to contradict that number.²⁰ Of the "missing preludes" there is apparent agreement on three pieces that Gershwin had composed several years earlier: the two Novelettes on which *Short Story* was based and a lovely thirty-two bar "blues" piece that George Gershwin composed in 1924 for *Harlem Serenade*—a piece his brother, Ira, called "Sleepless Night."²¹

On December 26, 1924, Van Vechten made this notation in his diary: "At 2:00 George Gershwin comes in and talks to me about his life—in preparation for my paper in Vanity Fair. He plays the themes of his prospective *Harlem Serenade*."²²

Sometime late in 1924 Gershwin made an entry on the third and fourth pages of his "Themes" notebook, titled it *Harlem Serenade*, and penciled in suggestions for rhythm and instrumentation.²³ The fourteen-measure fragment, tucked between sketches for the *Rhapsody in Blue* and the *Concerto in F*, is written in A-flat major and the melody is most definitely vocal, a little "blues" aria accompanied by a chromatic inner voice and a sparse, chordal bass. Ira Gershwin labeled the sketch as the "start of either a prelude or song. . . . Full 32-bar development exists. If written up as a song, title will probably be 'Sleepless Night'" (see ex. 2a–2c).²⁴

George Gershwin and Marguerite d'Alvarez, afternoon, Hotel Roosevelt.
 Last of this series, with program including a group of Gershwin's jazz songs, with the composer at the piano.
 Mr. Gershwin is to play his "Six New Piano Preludes" and, with William Daly, a two-piano arrangement of the "Rhapsody in Blue." He will accompany a closing group of "jazz" songs for Mme. d'Alvarez, who also has groups of French and Spanish airs.

Figure 1. *New York Times* notice (Nov. 29, 1926) of the upcoming Dec. 4 d'Alvarez-Gershwin recital, to include "Six New Piano Preludes" by Gershwin.

Before his death in 1983, Ira had envisioned one final Gershwin collaboration: a spectacular musical comedy or revue that would feature the best of George's unpublished compositions set to his own lyrics. "Sleepless Night" was one of the "top-drawer" pieces saved for this project. But the production never materialized, and the score was left crated in the basement of Ira's Beverly Hills home. Although he had enjoyed "Sleepless Night" as a piano solo, Ira also saw its potential as a song hit, but never decided in which genre to publish it.

George himself never found the perfect place for "Sleepless Night," although he brought it out for consideration in 1936 during his final stay in Hollywood. The two other versions written then are unmistakably the finished products of the 1924 *Harlem Serenade* fragment, for although the bridge, texture, voice-leading, and some rhythms have been slightly altered, the haunting melody is unchanged. Perhaps if he had lived to write the ballet for *Goldwyn Follies* we might know the "Sleepless Night" tune as we know the "blues" tunes from *An American in Paris*. Kay Swift expressed these feelings about the song: "Oh, 'Sleepless Night!' Of all of his piano pieces that was my favorite—Ira's too; [George] played it for me all the time. . . . I believe he also played it as a prelude."²⁵

In December of 1924, about the same time that he was composing "Sleepless Night," Gershwin and the violinist Samuel Dushkin (1891–1976) collaborated on a transcription for violin and piano of two of Gershwin's little piano novelettes that they called *Short Story*, a title that appropriately acknowledges its literary heritage. The scores to the two novelettes were eventually given to one of Gershwin's girlfriends, the pianist Josepha Rosanska (1904–1986), whom he had known since 1919 when they studied composition with Edward Kilenyi, Sr. Josie was an ambitious pianist, a student of Ernest Hutcheson, and had hopes of becoming a concert artist; in her private life she was one of the "gang" of Gershwin's young friends.

Numerous references to Josie appear in Ira Gershwin's diary, espe-

Example 2a. Beginning of *Harlem Serenade* (1924).

Example 2b. Beginning of "Sleepless Night" lead sheet.



Example 2c. Beginning of "Sleepless Night" (1936).



cially in 1928 when the two Gershwin brothers, their sister, Frankie, and Ira's wife, Leonore, took a European vacation. While in Berlin they attended one of Josie's recitals: "At 8 o'clock we (George, Lee and I) walked a few blocks to Bechstein Salle where Josie was to play. . . . She played Bach, Chopin, Alban Berg, De Falla, Ravel and Stravinsky. . . . I thought, and so did George, that she played exceptionally well and her program was most interesting."²⁶

Rosanska had moved to Germany in the mid-1920s to study and concertize. It was there that she met and eventually married an Austrian violinist, Rudolph Kolisch (1896–1978), who was forced to bow with his left hand as the result of an injury sustained in World War I. The Kolisch Quartet premiered works of Bartok, Schoenberg (Kolisch's brother-in-law), Webern, and Berg; Josie played with the quartet when a piano part was required. Rosanska returned to New York in 1935 and continued to pursue her career as a concert pianist, appearing both in recital as a specialist in "modern" music and as a soloist with symphony orchestras. After divorcing Kolisch in 1937, she lived in Manhattan as a recluse, protective of her privacy and her most prized possessions, the only known manuscripts of the two Gershwin novettes.

These manuscripts, unknown for over sixty years, may be the key to unraveling the mystery and controversy that surround the piano preludes. Although no writer has offered any concrete evidence sub-

Example 3. Beginning of the G major Novelette.

stantiating the transformation of these novelettes into the jazz preludes performed in 1926 and 1927, the emergence of the manuscripts (the most recent Gershwin scores to be unearthed) has allowed scholars to evaluate the novelettes as piano solos.

The first is an untitled, single-page holograph of seventeen measures dated "August 30, 1923."²⁷ Signed by the composer in the upper right-hand corner, the short piece is written in the key of G major with the simple tempo designation of "Rubato" common to much of Gershwin's early music (see ex. 3). The melody, rhythm, and harmonization of this novelette are identical to the opening of *Short Story*, although the transcription contains added ornamentation, a denser texture, and a short cadenza for the violin. The Novelette in G Major is dance music, a foxtrot similar in many ways to an instrumental interlude called *Walking the Dog* (published as a piano solo titled *Promenade*) that Gershwin wrote for the film *Shall We Dance* in 1937.

The second score, a copyist's manuscript titled "Novelette in Fourths" (ex. 4),²⁸ is really a piano "rag" in the style of Scott Joplin or Joseph F. Lamb. Although undated, the music is written on British manuscript paper and may have been composed during or just after Gershwin's first trip abroad in March 1923 to write for the London revue *The Rainbow*. Written in E-flat major and marked "Tempo Rubato," "Novelette in Fourths" is perhaps Gershwin's most compulsorily detailed piano score, containing numerous tempo alterations (*tenuto*, *rallentando*, *morendo*), frequent pedal indications, and phrasing and articulation instructions. Although Gershwin and Dushkin chose to transpose this novelette into C major to facilitate violin technique, it is difficult to understand why they failed to include the bridge material, for this delightful music is unquestionably more interesting than the rehashed opening theme that appears in the transcription.

Example 4. Beginning of the "Novelette in Fourths."

If the two novelettes and "Sleepless Night" can be included as possible choices to be played on the recitals, then the number of Gershwin preludes would reach seven:²⁹

1. *Prelude I* in B-flat major—Allegro Ben Ritmato E Deciso (1926)
2. *Prelude II* in C-sharp minor—Andante Con Moto E Poco Rubato (1926)
3. *Prelude III* in E-flat minor—Allegro Ben Ritmato E Deciso (1926)
4. "Prelude" in G minor (Jan. 1925)—theme of *Concerto in F*
5. "Sleepless Night" in A-flat major (1924)
6. Novelette in G major—Rubato (August 1923)
7. "Novelette in Fourths" in E-flat major—Tempo Rubato (19??)

Van Vechten would probably have been familiar with all seven of the compositions, but which "preludes" did Gershwin choose to play that Saturday afternoon in 1926? Van Vechten's diary records the following on the date of the recital:

Up at 8:30. Rain—Hangover—My cold is better.—Before noon Marinoff and I start downtown. Going to Schweff's to leave my watch, to bank and finally to Altman's. Then on to Eddie Wasserman's for lunch. Then to Gershwin-d'Alvarez concert at Hotel Roosevelt. d'Alvarez sings some of his songs and he plays for the first time his five preludes. Marinoff and I sit next to Rita Romilly and as they had quarrelled, they didn't speak. Backstage to see George and Marguerite. The latter I kiss for the first time since I insulted her.³⁰

The first snow of the year had fallen the previous day, and the sidewalks along Madison Avenue were treacherous. But almost seven hundred brave souls—jazzophiles, classical buffs, music critics, and

family and friends of the performers—gathered in the elegant ballroom of the newly built Hotel Roosevelt to attend the last concert of the prestigious Roosevelt Recitals series in 1926. Among them were Carl Van Vechten and his wife, who must have been elated to read the names of their two friends, appearing together in recital at last, on the program (see fig. 2).³¹

At 2:30 George Gershwin and Isidore Gorn walked onto the stage of the grand ballroom to begin the recital with an assured crowd-pleaser: a new two-piano arrangement of the *Rhapsody in Blue*. It was Gershwin's third arrangement of the rhapsody, and F. D. Perkins of the New York *Herald Tribune* noticed that "the slow movement seemed to have been transferred to later in the work and a new cadenza to have been inserted."³² Fifteen minutes later, with the crowd alive and involved, d'Alvarez made her grand entrance with her favorite accompanist, Edward Hart, in tow. The group of French songs she performed made a favorable impression on the audience and at least one music critic: "Sometimes one would have thought her a lyric soprano, so light and airy were her notes, and so sweet; and sometimes she was again a dramatic contralto with a voice as rich as organ pipes, somber, strangely moving."³³ But the highlight of the program was the premiere performance of Gershwin's five preludes, which were heard just before the intermission. Unfortunately, the program did not list the key of each piece, but at least seven music critics sat in the audience, pencils in hand, listening while Gershwin played. A myriad of interesting clues are included in their descriptions:

The fourth piece was a little languid and mostly French post-romantic in atmosphere. The fifth brought in a theme seemingly derived from the *Rhapsody in Blue* with a basic rhythm of Spanish flavor in an interesting combination.³⁴

The first prelude, in spite of an injection of a jazz rhythm in the accompaniment, was distinctly reminiscent of Chopin, and another one came dangerously near Mr. Gershwin's own song "My Little Duckie."³⁵

Mr. Gershwin played five new piano preludes for the first time, two of which at least are as fine as anything he has done in the idiom of modern American music, which bears no deep or vital relation to jazz, although it is still called by that somewhat doubtful name. The second prelude in particular has a great deal more than mere technical brilliance. . . . It is full of feeling and should find its way to the programs of pianists who are not afraid of something new. The fourth is more directly in the blues tradition, a thoroughly fascinating bit.³⁶

Roosevelt Recitals
 Grand Ballroom
 THE HOTEL ROOSEVELT
 Saturday Afternoon, December Fourth
 at 2:30 '72.
Program

<p>I.</p> <p>Rhapsody in Blue MR. GERSHWIN</p> <p>Chanson Triste La Chevelure Invocation MARGUERITE D'ALVAREZ</p>	<p>Gershwin</p> <p>Duparc Debussy Moret</p>
<p>III.</p> <p>Five Piano Preludes (first performance) MR. GERSHWIN</p> <p>INTERMISSION</p>	
<p>IV.</p> <p>La Zagalina Mi Pobre Reja Mira la Bien MARGUERITE D'ALVAREZ</p>	<p>Tabayo Alvarez Pedrell</p>
<p>V.</p> <p>Babes in the Wood The Nashville Nightingale The Man I Love Clap Yo' Hands MME. D'ALVAREZ and MR. GERSHWIN</p>	
<p>Edward Hart, accompanist Chickering Piano used by Mme. D'Alvarez Mr. Gershwin uses the Steinway Piano</p>	

Figure 2. Program of the d'Alvarez-Gershwin recital.

One was a frank salute to Chopin; one criticizes the crudity of the ragtime in Debussy's Golliwog's Cakewalk in just the way a clog-dancer would choose to criticize another's step; one was built on a theme written but not used for the famous blues movement in the Concerto in F; one might be a song deprived of its words; one started on the docks in New Orleans to find itself shortly joyously footing it in Madrid.³⁷

On Saturday afternoon the musical smart set clustered at the Hotel Roosevelt to hear George Gershwin play his five new preludes for the piano. It was the first public performance of these pieces, which are still in manuscript and which are to be joined with others still unwritten in a series called "Melting Pot." They proved brief and glowing vignettes of New York life. The first was a vigorous bit of syncopation; the second, lyrical in vein, resembled a nocturne; the third combined a jazz melody with a rolling, Chopinesque bass; the fourth was of the "blues" variety; and the fifth stirred together a Charleston for the left hand and a Spanish melody for the right.³⁸

By combining the various descriptions offered in the reviews, one can outline a more precise characterization of each prelude:

- Prelude 1—vigorous, syncopated, jazz rhythm in the left hand
- Prelude 2—lyrical in vein resembling a nocturne, full of feeling
- Prelude 3—jazz melody with rolling Chopinesque bass
- Prelude 4—in the blues tradition, languid, French postromantic in atmosphere, "blues" variety
- Prelude 5—theme seemingly derived from the *Rhapsody in Blue*, basic rhythm of Spanish savor, Charleston for the left hand and a Spanish melody for the right

We know that Gershwin wrote seven piano compositions that qualify as "prelude" candidates; he advertised six in the *New York Times*, and five were listed in the concert program. Abbe Niles's random narrative ("frank salute to Chopin, ragtime, theme written for but not used in the blues movement of the *Concerto in F*, song without words, docks of New Orleans and footing it in Madrid") describes five of the seven compositions. But which are they?

One of the candidates, the "Prelude" in G minor, which was used as the opening theme of the third movement of the *Concerto in F*, can be eliminated from the list of solo preludes immediately. Although Gershwin included it in the program, it was not played with the set of five preludes but as an encore. A review printed the next day in the *New York Times* ended thus: "Mr. Gershwin took a recall with the third movement of his *Concerto in F*, composed for the New York

Symphony Society last year."³⁹ With the elimination of this "Prelude" fragment the list is reduced to six.

Three of the five pieces played that day were definitely the soon-to-be-published *Preludes for Piano*—as Isaac Goldberg learned from Gershwin, "prepared hurriedly so as to provide a feature for the program." The last of the five preludes premiered on the recital was, without doubt, the first of the published three, *Prelude I* in B-flat major. Kay Swift stated that Gershwin referred to it as his Spanish prelude, and the rhythmic motif of the left hand is consistent with the reported Charleston accompaniment. Whether the opening theme of this prelude was derived from the *Rhapsody in Blue* is debatable; the declamatory opening with the flatted seventh and the choice of B-flat major as the tonic key makes Perkins's observation an interesting one.

Conversely, the first prelude on the recital was the last of the published preludes, *Prelude III* in E-flat minor. Besides the fact that it matches precisely the critics' descriptions ("vigorous, syncopated, jazz rhythm in the left hand"), it is delegated to the opening slot by process of elimination—the critics have sketched the second, third, and fourth preludes as slower, less rhythmically oriented pieces.

The position of the second published prelude, *Prelude II* in C-sharp minor, is more difficult to discern. Because of the similarities in mood and tempo between it and "Sleepless Night," a decision based on the critics' impressions is virtually impossible. Both pieces are to be played freely, and the absence of syncopation and severe dissonance creates a tranquil atmosphere. Similarly, both pieces contain "blues" melodies, with an abundance of flatted sevenths and thirds. So whether the *Prelude II* appeared second on the program ("lyrical in vein resembling a Nocturne," "full of feeling") or fourth ("languid, French post-romantic in atmosphere, 'blues' variety") may never be known. But whichever slot it filled, "Sleepless Night" ("built on a theme written but not used for the famous blues movement of the Concerto in F") was surely the other.

The most important clue in identifying the third premiered prelude is Richard Stokes's description of a "combined jazz melody with a rolling, Chopinesque bass." Although no theorist has attempted to define a "jazz melody" or "Chopinesque bass," "rolling" probably refers to the use of arpeggios in the left hand. The only prelude candidate with a similar technique is the Novelette in G Major. Similar devices are used in several of Chopin's *Etudes*, *Preludes*, and *Nocturnes*, and it may be that the reviewers were reminded of Chopin's romantic style when Gershwin played the third prelude of the set. It does seem unlikely, however, that he would have played a piece of only seventeen measures. Since Gershwin had originally advertised "Six New Piano Preludes" in the *New York Times*, it is possible that a middle section

to the short rubato novelette was not finished in time for the recital and that he elided the two novelettes, presenting them in a version similar to the *Short Story* transcription.

This is, of course, only one scenario; many other combinations of five preludes are possible. But there is a distinct possibility that six preludes were performed: the two novelette preludes combined as they were in *Short Story*, "Sleepless Night," and the three published preludes. This gains some support from Carl Van Vechten's copy of the program of the Hotel Roosevelt recital (see fig. 2). Here beneath the listing of "Five Piano Preludes" we can see Van Vechten's notation of "16." Perhaps Gershwin had asked Van Vechten to time his new jazz preludes; perhaps Van Vechten, compulsively time-conscious, had taken it on himself to note the duration of the set. It is most likely that the notation is a timing and that to perform all six preludes takes exactly sixteen minutes. I believe that the "five preludes" were in fact six—preludes 1–3 and 5–7 of the previously cited list.

How unfortunate that Isaac Goldberg's biography did not identify the specific preludes premiered at the Hotel Roosevelt recital; one descriptive sentence would have been enough. He cannot be faulted, however, for his research was quite thorough. George Gershwin was the real culprit who created the confusion surrounding the piano preludes: "The violin piece *Short Story* that you asked about is, I believe, published by Carl Fisher in New York, but I really don't know what you want with it. But if you are very anxious about it, I am sure we can get a copy from the publishers. . . . I may have written one or two novelettes which you ask about, but they have never been published and are not worth bringing up."⁴⁰

Goldberg's curiosity ended with the letter. Neither *Short Story* nor the two novelettes are mentioned in his book, and the pieces *Black Belt*, *Harlem Serenade*, and "Sleepless Night" are excluded as well. Goldberg had planned to update the biography after Gershwin died in 1937, but with his own death the following year the puzzle remained unsolved. However, the search goes on, and perhaps a trunk filled with old Gershwin manuscripts will be found someday, or a letter describing the "missing preludes" in greater detail than the accounts the music critics have left us. Short of such a discovery, the controversial set of piano preludes will remain an enigma.

The grand ballroom on the mezzanine of the Roosevelt Hotel is now used for the meetings and banquets of conventioners. The stage has been dismantled, and the heavy curtain of rich purple velvet opens to reveal a projection screen. In one corner sits a battered Steinway grand piano; the keys are yellowed and cracked, and the wood is scarred with cigarette burns and marks left by careless waiters who used it as a serving tray. Except for Kay Swift, the characters in the original cast,

many of whom gathered there to hear George Gershwin and Marguerite d'Alvarez perform, are gone: Carl Van Vechten, Fania Marinoff, Eva Gauthier, Samuel Dushkin, Josefa Rosanska, Paul Whiteman, Edward Kilenyi, Sr., and Ira Gershwin. Kay Swift is healthy and witty and still very beautiful—and she remembers well the wintry afternoon of December 4, 1926, when she sat in the audience listening to her friend delight the crowd: “They are swell pieces and he played them beautifully, with a lot of spirit and determination.”⁴¹

NOTES

Excerpts from the Gershwin Collection at the Library of Congress, including the “Novellette in Fourths” (piano solo), an untitled piano composition dated “August 30, 1923,” the “Prelude in G Minor,” and two manuscript versions of “Sleepless Night,” are unpublished and are used with the permission of the Gershwin family.

1. Van Vechten, Diaries, Dec. 3, 1924. The Van Vechten diaries are found in Box 36 of the Carl Van Vechten Collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division of the New York Public Library.

2. Although Van Vechten was moderately successful as an essayist and novelist—*Peter Whiffle*, *The Tattooed Countess*, and *Nigger Heaven* were popular during the 1920s—it was in photography that his artistic gifts were most convincingly revealed. A complete list of the thousands of his photographs collected in museums and libraries throughout the United States can be found in Bruce Kellner, *A Bibliography of the Work of Carl Van Vechten* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980).

3. Carl Van Vechten, “The Voice and the Temperament,” *Saturday Review* (Feb. 26, 1955): 43.

4. Carl Van Vechten, “George Gershwin: An American Composer Who Is Writing Notable Music in the Jazz Idiom,” *Vanity Fair* (March 1925): 78.

5. Edward Jablonski and Lawrence D. Stewart, *The Gershwin Years* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973), 22.

6. Eva Gauthier, “Some Memories of Famous Musicians I Have Known,” *The Musical Forecast* (Oct. 1929): 1.

7. Deems Taylor, “Music,” *New York World*, Nov. 2, 1923, p. 13.

8. Letter of Feb. 14, 1924, in “The Gershwin Collection,” Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Box 17, Item 11.

9. “The Gershwin Collection,” Box 1, Item 6.

10. Letter of Oct. 7, 1924, in “The Gershwin Collection,” Box 17, Item 11.

11. Jablonski and Stewart, *Gershwin Years*, 25.

12. Van Vechten, *Vanity Fair* (Mar. 1925): 78.

13. “The Gershwin Collection,” Box 8, Item 2.

14. *Ibid.*, Box 11, Item 5.

15. George Gershwin, “Does Jazz Belong to Art?” *Singing* (July 1926): 17–18.

16. Isaac Goldberg, *George Gershwin: A Study in American Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), 223.

17. Interview with Kay Swift, Jan. 10, 1987.

18. *New York Times*, Nov. 29, 1926, sec. 10, p. 9.

19. Goldberg, *Tin Pan Alley: A Chronicle of the American Popular Music Racket* (New York: John Day, 1930), 256.

20. If Gershwin did include a different prelude on the Boston recital, it would have been a substitution for one of the preludes premiered on the New York recital since, as was true in New York, the newspaper critics mention only five preludes on the program. Paul Rosenfeld writes in the *Boston Globe*, Jan. 17, 1927, that "the five preludes are brief and sketchy, failing to establish a mood." The critic for the *Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 17, 1927, confirms Rosenfeld's arithmetic: "Later he played five of his own preludes, hitherto unheard in Boston."

21. Very little is known about the *Harlem Serenade* (not to be confused with a song of the same name Gershwin wrote for the Ziegfeld production, *Show Girl*, in 1929), but since Van Vechten always uses the plural "themes" in his diary, it must have been conceived as an extended work, perhaps even the opera that Gershwin was eager to compose in 1924. It is also possible that *Harlem Serenade* was Gershwin's original title for his unfinished symphonic tone poem, *Black Belt*, which is mentioned in Van Vechten's introduction to *The Gershwin Years* and in his diaries. Because Van Vechten confirms that much of the material composed for *Black Belt* was eventually used in the *Concerto in F*, this theme for *Harlem Serenade* might have been considered for use in the concerto, discarded, and revived as a piano prelude.

22. Van Vechten, *Diaries*, Dec. 26, 1924.

23. "The Gershwin Collection," Box 2, Item 2.

24. *Ibid.*, Ira Gershwin's addendum.

25. Interview with Kay Swift, Jan. 10, 1987.

26. Ira Gershwin as cited in Robert Kimball and Alfred Simon, *The Gershwins* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), 96.

27. "The Gershwin Collection," Box 11, Item 17.

28. *Ibid.*, Box 11, Item 16.

29. There may have been additional pieces, if one accepts the possibility that others were sketched on the four missing pages of the "Preludes, Jan. 1925" manuscript book.

30. Van Vechten, *Diaries*, Dec. 4, 1926.

31. Carl Van Vechten Scrapbooks, vol. 18, p. 15, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

32. F. D. Perkins, "Gershwin Gives His First Public Recital of the Year," *New York Herald Tribune*, Dec. 5, 1926, sec. 1.

33. H. B., "Mme. d'Alvarez and George Gershwin," *New York Evening Post*, Dec. 5, 1926, sec. 2.

34. Perkins, *New York Herald Tribune*, Dec. 5, 1926, sec. 1.

35. Samuel Chotzinoff, "Gershwin and D'Alvarez," *New York World*, Dec. 5, 1926, sports sec.

36. H. B., *New York Evening Post*, Dec. 5, 1926, sec. 2.

37. Abbe Niles, "The Ewe Lamb of Widow Jazz," *New Republic*, Dec. 6, 1926, p. 28.

38. Richard Stokes, "Realm of Music," *New York Evening World*, Dec. 6, 1926.

39. "Final Roosevelt Recital," *New York Times*, Dec. 5, 1926, sec. 1.

40. Letter from George Gershwin to Isaac Goldberg, July 30, 1931, Isaac Goldberg Collection, Pusey Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

41. Interview with Kay Swift, Jan. 10, 1987.