

"Jazz Nocturne" - American Concertos of the Jazz Age

World premiere recordings of works by George Gershwin,
Dana Suesse, Harry Reser & JP Johnson

Performed by Michael Gurt, Gary Hammond, Peter Mintun,
Tatiana Roitman & Don Vappie

with

National Music Festival Artistic Director & Conductor, Richard Rosenberg
Naxos No. 8.559647



What the critics are saying:

All Music, by V. Vasan

<http://www.allmusic.com/album/jazz-nocturne-american-concertos-of-the-jazz-age-w265293>

This unique album is a wonderful snapshot of American jazz in an orchestral setting. Most classical music aficionados are familiar with George Gershwin and his works such as Rhapsody in Blue, but there are also a number of less-famous composers who wrote around the same time who are no less brilliant. These composers also interacted with and influenced each other. For example, James Price Johnson also wrote a rhapsody, entitled Yamekraw, Negro Rhapsody, which is a sophisticated work full of tempo changes, varied rhythms, and various moods and character. (William Grant Still orchestrated this piece.) Yamekraw swings and is syncopated, giving it a very dancelike feel, and the Festival Symphony Orchestra does an excellent job of bringing the music alive without ever making it rigid. Not only do they play beautifully on this first piece, but also through the rest of the album, where they truly capture all the moods that jazz pieces require while never losing strong classical technique. **It is much to conductor Richard Rosenberg's credit that all of the pieces have energy and good musical taste.** The Suite for Banjo and Orchestra surprisingly showcases the instrument much like a violin, and even a mandolin in the second movement. Two works by Dana Suesse are yet another joy to hear. Her Jazz Nocturne begins with an ethereal feel that conjures up the night, and then a jazz melody enters on the piano. The piece is indeed romantic, with a sweeping melody in the strings (not surprisingly, a popular song was based on one of the melodies in this piece). Suesse's Concerto in Three Rhythms is a complex piece that draws on syncopations, active dialogues between instruments, and long, legato lines in the strings. The third movement is especially exciting, an orchestrally fleshed-out rag that shows the strength of this talented yet relatively unknown composer. Suesse and Gershwin were well acquainted with each other, so it is fitting that the latter's Rhapsody in Blue should also be included on this album. What sets apart this recording of an arguably overplayed piece is its interpretation: it is like a work of jazz that happens to be played by an orchestra, rather than an orchestra trying to play a jazz composition. Pianist Tatiana Roitman's style is clean and bright, accompanied by a sprightly orchestra. The legato lines are never schmaltzy, but crisp. **Highly recommended and highly enjoyable.**

Bob McQuiston, Classical Lost and Found (CLOFO.com, Y110330)

Conductor Richard Rosenberg has a knack for ferreting out undeservedly forgotten symphonic music by nineteenth and early twentieth century American composers. Not too long ago he came up with that terrific Gottschalk (1829-1869) disc we told you about (see the newsletter of 30 June 2007), and now he gives us another equally desirable one. It features five heavily jazz-influenced concertante works (four for piano and one for banjo) dating from 1922 through 1932. Four are world premiere recordings indicated by "WPR" after their titles.

The program begins with a selection by James P. Johnson (1894-1955), who was the father of stride piano and wrote the ever-popular Charleston (1925). His Yamekraw: A Negro Rhapsody (1927) for piano with an orchestral accompaniment by American composer William Grant Still (1895-1978, see the newsletter of 21 December 2009) is presented in its complete final form (WPR). Incidentally it was Johnson's protégé pianist Fats Waller (1904-1943) who gave the premiere.

Incorporating spirituals and blues melodies, it's a musical picture of the Yamekraw Negro community outside Savannah, Georgia. You'll find yourself totally captivated by this brilliantly orchestrated, thoroughly engaging piece. It's full of toe-tapping tunes, and anticipates the boogie-woogie fad of the 1940s and 50s [track-1,

beginning at 06:48]. Make sure to read Maestro Rosenberg's excellent album notes for more details about Johnson and his music.

The next selection is a real rarity originally penned between 1922 and 1930 by one of the greatest banjoists of all time, Harry F. Reser (1896-1965). Later orchestrated and performed here by one of his equally talented younger colleague Don Vappie, it's a suite for banjo and orchestra. In three movements, the plucky first, folk-sounding second, and virtuosic helter-skelter third explore every facet of the banjo, proving it's a compelling solo instrument.

And now for the centerpiece of this release, a recording of George Gershwin's (1898-1937) Rhapsody in Blue (WPR) quite unlike any you've ever heard. But to understand why, a few words are in order about the history of this piece.

It all started in 1923 when legendary bandleader Paul Whiteman (1890-1967, see the newsletter of 10 March 2007) commissioned Gershwin to write a concerto-like work for an all-jazz concert he was scheduled to give early the following year. George accepted, starting on it only five weeks before the scheduled event. Fearing he wouldn't finish in time, he asked Whiteman to loan him his arranger, Ferde Grofé (1892-1972, see the newsletter of 20 November 2006), for some help with the orchestration.

Paul agreed and the two produced an arrangement for Whiteman's twenty-four member jazz band plus violins. But time constraints related to the planned concert forced them to shorten it, and it's either this or one of Grofé's later arrangements enlarging it for pit (1926) and then full orchestra (1942, see the newsletter of 22 November 2010) that you hear today.

Fortunately George's older brother Ira (1896-1983) had kept the original unabridged manuscript and parts, giving copies of them to Rosenberg back in 1978. The arrangement on this CD is based on these, and you'll find a big difference between it and later versions. In addition to a couple of places that will be completely new to you, there's a spontaneity, jauntiness and abandon which make this a more infectious jazzy piece. With just a handful of instrumentalists, Grofé produced a highly colorful arrangement with an intimacy many may find preferable to what they grew up with.

Ever heard of Nadine Dana Suesse (1909-1987)? Probably not, but she was an accomplished songwriter-composer back in the 1930s whom *The New Yorker* magazine once dubbed "Girl Gershwin." Two of her creations, *Jazz Nocturne* of 1931 (WPR) and *Concerto in Three Rhythms* from 1932 (WPR), conclude this enterprising disc. The former is a winsome instrumental with a familiar episodic melody (FE) [track-6, beginning at 01:20] that lyricist Edward Heyman (1907-1981) would later set to words as the hit song "My Silent Love" (1932).

Like *Rhapsody...*, the concerto was written in response to a commission by Paul Whiteman, who considered Suesse, George's female counterpart. Also orchestrated by Grofé, it's in three movements and opens with an allegro that's a hip fantasia with a foxtrot beat. There are moments when you may experience feelings of déjà vu recalling FE in the preceding piece.

The adagio is a skillfully written, melancholy study in the blues, but the mood shifts with the exuberant concluding presto based on an insistent ragtime riff. With this concerto Ms. Suesse turned to more classically oriented pursuits, eventually spending three years during the 1940s studying with Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979, see the Copland recommendation above) in Paris.

Pianists Gary Hammond, Tatiana Roitman, Peter Mintun and Michael Gurt are the respective soloists in the four piano selections, while banjoist Don Vappie is featured in the Gershwin and Reser pieces. All are in top form, and along with Richard Rosenberg conducting the Festival Symphony Orchestra with an assist from the Créole Serenaders in the Gershwin, make a strong case for this music.

Recorded on four different occasions between 2005 and 2009 in Arkansas, the sonics are amazingly consistent. The soundstage projected is of just the right proportions and in a lush venue, which enriches these colorful scores without obscuring their detail.

The balance between the soloists and orchestra is ideal with the banjo and bass drum deftly highlighted in tutti passages, giving the music all the more rhythmic punch. The orchestral timbre is very natural, and the piano well rounded to the point where it may occasionally sound recessed. But better than those "digital nasties" frequently associated with this instrument.

Critica Classica, by Marco del Vaglio

<http://criticaclassica.wordpress.com/2011/04/10/jazz-nocturne/>

During the period from 1919 to 1933, the American artistic life was characterized by great turmoil to the point that the writer Francis Scott Fitzgerald in his novel "The Great Gatsby," called this period "The Jazz Age".

The phenomenon also involved more niche areas, such as classical music, where several composers tried to combine Afro-American with Western sounds. An example is provided to us with the recent CD from Naxos (distributed in Italy by the Duke), entitled "Jazz Nocturne", referring to songs, for the most part released for the very first time, of almost all of the little-known composers. The disc opens with Yamekraw, A Negro Rhapsody for piano and orchestra, written in 1927 by James Price Johnson (1894-1955), a key figure in the transition from ragtime to jazz, as is clear from this piece that, if one part winks at Gershwin, the other was still heavily anchored in Joplin and his style. The next Suite for banjo and orchestra by Harry Reser (1896-1965) turned his attention to an instrument of African origin, that was part of most New Orleans jazz ensembles. The third piece in the program, the famous Rhapsody in Blue by George Gershwin (1898-1937), in a very particular version, draws directly from the original manuscript, once owned by Ira, elder brother of the composer. The work then underwent some cuts and modifications, from the arrangement suggested by Ferde Grofé, who softened the sounds in part, arranged first for jazz band and, later, for a real orchestra. The CD closes with two compositions by Dana Suesse (1909-1987), who achieved such a reputation to be known as "Girl Gershwin." This is Jazz Nocturne and Concerto in Three Rhythms, in versions for piano and orchestra, edited respectively by Craig Huxley and Ferde Grofé. Now we come to the interpreters, all very good, starting from the four pianists who are, in order of execution, Gary Hammond, Tatiana Roitman Mann, Peter Mintun and Michael Gurt. Appearing on the second work as the Reser soloist, Vappie, the formidable Don, as in the Gershwin, the CD features the added presence of the Creole Jazz Serenaders, all complemented by the splendid performance of the Festival Symphony Orchestra, **excellently directed by Richard Rosenberg. As for the latter, one of the greatest connoisseurs of American music of these past two centuries, we dedicate a final note of merit.** The album, recently arrived on the European market, as in other previous recordings (always with Naxos) in which Rosenberg, lavishing a lot of energy, has regained their former glory and brought to the attention of the general public—often after long and elaborate research—American composers who fell into obscurity such as Louis Moreau Gottschalk, Edmond Dédé, Lucien Lambert and Jerome Moross. And this latest effort is confirmation of great interest, opening a window on a particular period in the history of American music, for further exploration, evidence of the activity surrounding Gershwin, composers of considerable worth.

[Cinemusical, Maestro Steve](#)

Jazz Nocturne: American Concertos of the Jazz Age

Soloists, Festival Symphony Orchestra/Richard Rosenberg

Naxos 8.559647

Total Time: 70:43

Recording: ****/****

Performance: ****/****

The melding of classical and jazz musical forms was of high interest in the early 20th century. The lines were not as blurry around serious or popular music but it was soon to get a bit murkier as composers like Gershwin connected with the likes of Paul Whiteman. Whiteman's concerts might be categorized today more like pops concerts but they grew out of a similar band tradition of the turn of the century where classical and popular pieces could be found on the same program. It would not be out of place to hear say "A Bicycle Built for Two" in a popular arrangement next to a brand new march by Sousa, but for Whiteman, there was more experimentation with the latest craze over "jazz" and the many syncopated rhythmic potentials. Gershwin was tapped to write what became the Rhapsody in Blue for the first "Experiment in Modern Music" concert that Whiteman was putting together. That concert had contemporary jazz music alongside more serious works by the likes of Victor Herbert (though one might say Herbert's operettas were more the stuff of popular music).

The five works on Jazz Nocturne are all separated by no more than one degree of connection. At the center is Gershwin's now famous work from 1924. The performance here is the complete original jazz band version with its orchestration credited to Ferde Grofé. The other works were in some way or another connected to that work through Paul Whiteman's own request, or as a result of a performers work with the band. The disc opens with Yamekraw, A Negro Rhapsody by James P. Johnson. Johnson's more well known for popular songs ("The Charleston" perhaps his most familiar) and for developing the stride piano style. His music is a crucial connector to the sound of ragtime piano and what would become jazz piano style. The orchestral version receives its premiere recording here in an arrangement by William Grant Still. The piece was written in 1927 as a sort of response to Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue and was heard at a Carnegie Hall concert performed by Fats Waller. It had future appearances as film music for a short bearing the same title and Orson Welles used it as the overture for his Macbeth in the 1930s. The work has some resemblance to Gershwin's free fantasy form but Still's orchestration

gives it a slightly more rich sound. To hear this piece for the first time is a pure joy. Engaging thematic ideas are melded into this hybrid classical-jazz piece that allows one to hear both those early ragtime piano styles with something closer to a Liszt Hungarian Rhapsody. This work alone would be worth adding another version of the Gershwin to your musical library. Gary Hammond's committed performance makes this a convincing work and he is admirably accompanied by the players.

The most surprising work on the release though has to be Harry Reser's Suite for Banjo and Orchestra. Banjo players will be familiar with Reser's name as the author behind most of the standard method books for the instrument as well as for guitar and ukulele. The banjo's connection to dance halls, coming out of 19th century Minstrel theater, might make the average classical enthusiast sniff in dismissal. They would be missing out on what must be one of the most difficult pieces for the instrument. The work was composed between 1922-1930 and is cast in 3 fascinating movements that explore the instrument in ways you would never think possible. Reser's work is essentially a jazzy guitar concerto requiring a few interesting effects. A common one is to slide up the string chromatically making one forget that we are hearing a banjo. There are times when it could be a handful of people playing the solo as there is so much going on in its part. But Reser's work, even with its fanciful subtitles indicating particular moods, still manages to explore the banjo without using cliché gestures. This is no "hillbilly" work, but one that takes the instrument seriously. The great jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt comes to mind as one listens to this piece and marvels at how great an artist Reser was as Don Vappie, who arranged the work for performance, plays the piece with amazing skill.

Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue has many fine performances. There were versions of Gershwin's "original" orchestration of this piece in the 1980s and 1990s culminating in a recording by Michael Tilson Thomas which is a now a classic. Another popular release attempted to recreate the Whiteman concert and featured all the music from that program. The Naxos release has a few things going for it which has more to do with what is accompanying the work. The performance here does a good job of recreating the Whiteman sound a bit and it is helped by some clear acoustic presentation. Tatiana Roitman is in some heady company as the soloist but approaches the musical text with sensitivity and a few extra interpretive touches that some will notice are informed by period performances transcribed on piano rolls. Rosenberg approaches the work trying to strip away some of the more overwrought moments that tend to be overemphasized along the lines of a Romantic concerto than the jazzy intent of the work. That allows for things to be a bit tighter and for ensemble sections to move a bit quicker than some may be accustomed to from years of big orchestral versions. The bottom line is that there is a balance between trying to recreate a classic moment in time and providing some interpretation. Heard against the backdrop of the other works on the disc, one is prepared for how the piece sounds. The disc needs this work in order for it to have broader context for the listener to appreciate the music. Most fun will be hearing the clarity of the orchestra that even lets you hear the strumming banjo lines. Fun slides in the music are well-done too. This won't replace your favorite Rhapsody recording, but you will be listening to this disc a lot anyway and you will eventually become quite comfortable with the performance. The recording provides good detail, though the gong/cymbal crash near the end could be louder for better impact.

Finally, there are two works by Dana Suesse (1909-1987). Suesse moved to New York City from Kansas City, Missouri, and had a career as a pianist and composer in vaudeville and radio. Her most popular song was "Syncopated Love Song" first heard in 1928. Two additional international hits began to get the attention she deserved and Paul Whiteman soon commissioned her to provide a piece for his Fourth Experiment in Modern Music. Suesse was often referred to as the "Girl Gershwin" and this disc brings to light a short and a concerto. The "Jazz Nocturne" from 1931 would become the song "My Silent Love" sung by Bing Crosby in the short film *Blue of the Night*. What makes this little piece interesting is the simplistic left-hand accompaniment that shifts from a more classically staid chordal approach to one that begins to take on jazz influences. The melody is of course simply beautiful and the arrangement by Carroll Huxley is simply superb.

Suesse's Concerto in Three Rhythms (1932; incidentally orchestrated by Grofe) is in three movements with dance implications: Fox Trot, Blues, and Rag. The work shared a program with Gershwin's Second Rhapsody, and *I Got Rhythm* as well as Grofe's Grand Canyon Suite and a fox trot version of Ravel's *Bolero* (!). Unlike Gershwin's Piano Concerto which aspired for a concert hall life, Suesse's work is still firmly rooted in popular musical style with a more through-composed or song-like structure that gives each idea a more rhapsodic-like sound. The first movement has an episodic quality that allows the soloists plenty of melodic ideas and virtuosic displays of which one finds parallels in Rachmaninoff. The ideas move along at quite a pace as she explores the rhythms of these dances in what amounts to a fascinating work when all is said and done. Michael Gurt's performance helps make the work engaging with the second blues movement being a particular highlight.

It is perhaps too soon to tell, but *Jazz Nocturne* may be one of the best classical releases of the year. The music is all engaging and top-notch. These are not just simple curiosities that can now be checked off the recorded American music list. Each of these works provides a fascinating window into a decade of orchestral music that flirted with popular forms. They may not have the more formal structure classical concerti have, but then again there are plenty of concert concerti of the period that were experimenting formally as well. The Festival Orchestra really gets the style of these works and performs them with an exuberance and **high quality of musicianship under the apt direction of Richard Rosenberg**. The sound of the recording is well-matched given that the performances were recorded over the course of five years. Here's to more from this festival! **Highly recommended.**

[INFODAD.COM: Family-Focused Reviews](#)

March 17, 2011

It is unfashionable nowadays to imply that the music of a particular country has specific characteristics – it smacks of typecasting and thus of bias. No such political correctness affected composers of the past, though – Arnold Schoenberg, for example, developed 12-tone music in part to guarantee what he saw as the pre-eminence of German music into the future. And fashionable or not, there are certain musical elements that seem to characterize works from particular countries more often than not, both in their older music and their newer. In the case of music by American composers, there is frequently some surface glitz, an attractive veneer characterized by skillful orchestration or instrumental disposition, a certain amount of superficiality, and (often but certainly not always) a desire to please potential audiences with accessibility and interesting gestures. Certainly many of these characteristics appear in the works on a new Naxos CD entitled “*Jazz Nocturne: American Concertos of the Jazz Age*.”

The only household-name composer here is, of course, George Gershwin, whose *Rhapsody in Blue* has been heard innumerable times. But this CD offers something not experienced before: the work in its full original 1924 version for jazz band, in which form it was orchestrated by Ferde Grofé (now remembered mostly for his *Grand Canyon Suite*). This first complete and unabridged recording from the manuscript proves a salutary experience: Grofé keeps the music bright and free-flowing, and the familiar melodies sound, well, jazzier here than as usually heard when played by a full symphony orchestra. And the Gershwin is accompanied on the disc by some genuinely interesting and entirely neglected works of the same period. Dana Suesse (1909-1987) was actually called the “*Girl Gershwin*” by no less than *The New Yorker*, and proves to have a fine sense of style and rhythm in her 1932 *Concerto in Three Rhythms* – whose three movements are a fox trot, blues and rag and whose orchestration, interestingly, was also done by Grofé. Suesse’s *Jazz Nocturne*, which gives this CD its title, is a short work from 1931 that contains a theme that became the song “*My Silent Love*,” a hit for famed crooner Bing Crosby. James Price Johnson (1894-1955) was an African-American composer whose 1927 *Yamekraw* (the title comes from an African-American area outside Savannah, Georgia) is steeped in the sensibility of the blues – and featured none other than Fats Waller as pianist at its first performance. And Harry Reser (1896-1965), a master banjo player, not surprisingly requires masterful solo work in his *Suite for Banjo and Orchestra* (1922-30), whose three short movements leave an overall impression of bright, forthright enjoyment, if little subtlety or significant musical substance.

[David Denton’s Review Corner, March 2011](#)

‘First complete, unabridged recording of the manuscript’ proclaims the booklet describing Gershwin’s *A Rhapsody in Blue*. It explains that the manuscript that the orchestrator, Ferde Grofé, had produced for piano and jazz band was cut and changed before its first performance. That original document had been given to the disc’s conductor, Richard Rosenberg, by George’s brother, Ira, and it was he who gave that versions first public performance in 1978. Whether the additional music is worth preserving is debatable, but for the inquisitive here it is. I would add that the version for jazz band is very different to the big orchestral backing we hear nowadays. The remainder of the disc offers some seldom heard music under the title, ‘*American Concertos from the Jazz Age*’. James Price Johnson was an Afro-American jazz pianist who today would be described as a ‘crossover composer’, *A Negro Rhapsody*, coming to popular attention in the film *Yamekraw*, is here receiving its first recording in the orchestral garb by William Grant Still. Fragmented in nature, it is a pleasing novelty. Harry Reser was the leading banjoist in the 1920’s and 30’s, later becoming a well-known bandleader, his *Suite for Banjo and Orchestra* being fiendishly difficult and would have been used to show his virtuosity. Pleasing music here stunningly performed by Dan Vappie. From Kansas City, Nadine Dana Suesse, was viewed as the successor to Gershwin, her song *Have You*

Forgotten giving her international fame. From the two works included here, she would appear immensely gifted, her sound being a mix of jazz and the sophisticated smoochy era that followed. Though the sleeve does not make clear, it appears a period piano is being used to good effect, the four agile and idiomatic soloists accompanied by a very capable orchestra formed for the festival by professionals and students. Recordings from 2005 and 2009 in a tight acoustic.

[New Classics](#)

Jazz Nocturne, Naxos 8.559647

Early in the twentieth century, many classical composers were attracted and inspired by the exotic and exciting world of jazz. American composers were particularly quick to latch on to the native jazz form. The Burlesque movement of Aaron Copland's 'Music for the Theatre' is an early example and perhaps the best known jazz-inspired work was George Gershwin's A Rhapsody in Blue from 1924. Gershwin was already hugely successful as a popular music composer so it was no surprise to find him crossing musical boundaries. His immortal Rhapsody in Blue is included here in its complete original version for jazz band, orchestrated by Ferde Grofé (a first recording of the unabridged concerto). This fantastic selection of concertos from the American Jazz Age also includes Grofé's orchestrated version of the Concerto in Three Rhythms by Dana Suesse (dubbed 'Girl Gershwin' by The New Yorker) as well as Suesse's Jazz Nocturne, the second theme from which was a hit as a Bing Crosby song under the title My Silent Love. The album is completed by two more exciting though little known pieces from the jazz age - African-American jazz pianist James P Johnson's, 'Yamekraw: A Negro Rhapsody', orchestrated by William Grant Still, and Harry F Reser's joyous Suite for Banjo and Orchestra, orchestrated by Don Vappie. Harry Reser was one of the greatest banjoists of all time, possessed of an extraordinary technique that often created the impression of playing on two banjos at the same time. The excellent Festival Symphony Orchestra is conducted by Richard Rosenberg, with pianists Tatiana Roitman, Gary Hammond, Peter Mintun and Michael Gurt, and Don Vappie (banjo).