

**Wild About Wild:
A Tribute to Earl Wild (1915-2010) & George Gershwin (1898-1937)**

With Earl Wild's death on January 23, 2010 at the age of 95, the world lost one of its legendary pianists, famous for his unique style that encompassed many influences both classical and popular. He will be remembered as one of the great interpreters of Liszt, Rachmaninoff, and most significantly, George Gershwin. Nor will his unmatched piano technique be forgotten. This technique persisted through his 85th birthday recital at Carnegie Hall and to his final recital in February 2008, at the age of 95, in the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles. His White House performances for six consecutive presidents, beginning with Herbert Hoover, also point to his long-standing reputation as a pianist and a personality.

Not to be overlooked are Wild's accomplishments as a composer. His *Grand Fantasy on Porgy and Bess*, his *Seven Virtuoso Etudes*, and his *Improvisations on "Someone to Watch over Me,"* all based on the music of George Gershwin, reveal his life-long interest in that American musical idol as well as his own compositional genius. Wild's Piano Sonata (2000) sheds even more light on his remarkable abilities as a composer.

Born on November 26, 1915, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Earl Wild began piano studies at the age of three. Before his twelfth birthday, he was accepted as a pupil of Selmar Janson, whose teachers were Xaver Scharwenka and Eugen d'Albert, a student of Franz Liszt. Mr. Wild went on to study with the great Dutch pianist, Egon Petri. While still in his teens, Wild played piano and celeste in the Pittsburgh Symphony under the baton of Otto Klemperer and Fritz Reiner. With his immense hands, absolute pitch, graceful stage presence, and uncanny facility as a sight-reader and improviser, Earl Wild was well equipped for his lifelong career in music. In 1937, he joined the NBC network as staff pianist and performed in the NBC Symphony under Arturo Toscanini. Two years later, when NBC began to transmit telecasts, Wild was the first artist to perform a piano recital on American television. In 1942, Toscanini made Earl Wild a household name when he invited him to be the soloist in Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. While serving in the Navy during World War II, Wild frequently played the National Anthem as a prelude to speeches by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.

Grand Fantasy on Porgy and Bess (Gershwin/Wild, 1976)

To assign national characteristics to music can be dangerous, but without question George Gershwin represents American music in a singular way well beyond the popular music with which he was associated. Nothing defines this notion more than his opera, *Porgy and Bess*, based on the novel *Porgy* by DuBose Heyward. That Earl Wild should choose to write a fantasy based on that work is no mere accident. Like Gershwin, Wild yearned to be taken more seriously, and his treatment of Gershwin's classic can be seen as accomplishing that for both composers. In Europe there was little need for such concern, since there *Porgy and Bess* was considered a true opera of American origin, and Gershwin earned the respect and friendship of no less serious composers than Maurice Ravel and Alban Berg. While the opera contains some of the best-known Gershwin melodies that we casually classify as "popular songs," the opera is also rich in traditional music forms such as the fugue and passacaglia and techniques such as atonality, polytonality, polyrhythm and even Arnold Schoenberg's famous twelve-tone system. Earl Wild's *Grand Fantasy* manages to encompass both the popular and traditional aspects of *Porgy and Bess* while fully exploring piano technique and sound. It also honors Gershwin as attested by Earl Wild's 1997 statement: "Out of respect for Gershwin's original notation, I have not changed one rhythmic value of the melodies in my transcriptions of the *Seven Virtuoso Etudes* nor in the *Grand Fantasy on Porgy and Bess*."

To grasp the full impact of Wild's *Fantasy*, it might serve us well to consider, first of all, the nature of fantasy form. Although its definition can be as elusive as the form itself, a *fantasy* is generally considered to be a composition in which form is of secondary importance. More significant is the impression the piece gives as it winds freely through an exploration of themes. Wild's *Fantasy* seems to fit that picture as it explores many of the best-known songs from *Porgy and Bess* but in a free-flowing way that ultimately gives the effect of a single work. To simply list the works as they are heard is misleading since they drift in and out with various treatments. For example, phrases from "Summertime" are often used for transition from one section to another. "I Got Plenty of Nuttin'" is offered as a complex and lively march and "Bess, You is My Woman," as a kind of climax. "There's a Boat Dat's Leavin'" becomes a thrilling coda that brings the work to a flashy conclusion.

Since music stretches meaning beyond words, a second consideration might be to view Wild's *Fantasy* as just that.

Seven Virtuoso Études (Gershwin/Wild, 1976)

In contrast to Wild's *Fantasy on Porgy and Bess* which uses a number of Gershwin melodies but within one work, the *Seven Virtuoso Etudes* does exactly the opposite. Here seven Gershwin songs are treated separately as *études*, a form we most closely associate with Chopin. Strictly speaking, an *étude* can be defined as a study addressing some particular technical difficulty. As Chopin's *Études* go well beyond that definition in their effect, so do Wild's treatments of the seven Gershwin songs transcend any mere technical achievement. That said, the virtuosic demands made in the Wild's *Études* are incredible, as suggested by their governing title, and address almost every piano technique known to the best players. Beyond their technical demands, they are delicious pieces to savor.

"The Man I Love" brings an extensive use of difficult polyrhythm as does "I Got Rhythm" but with an added jazz effect. Demanding scales and arpeggios govern "Embraceable You" but not at the expense of melodic interest. Staccato playing, scales in thirds, and syncopation mark the breathtaking "Fascinatin' Rhythm," while "Somebody Loves

Me” offers a contrasting use of legato to give us a colorful but dreamy mood. “Liza,” a true show-piece, illustrates simultaneous opposing techniques in the right and left hands with the melody somehow singing through. As if he knew anything more might border on excess, Wild chose to end his display with a relatively simple but expressive take on “Lady Be Good” that honors the jazz rhythms of George Gershwin.

Improvisations on "Someone to Watch Over Me" (Gershwin/Wild, 1990)

Unlike the Etudes which treat a variety of Gershwin melodies, the Improvisations focus on only one, the famous song from his 1926 play *Ob, Kay*, first sung by Gertrude Lawrence but treated thereafter by everyone from Frank Sinatra to Ella Fitzgerald. In the play, Lawrence stands alone on stage singing Ira Gershwin’s plaintive lyrics to a rag doll. Earl Wild’s treatment of the famous song is another meeting of genius that is brilliant in both concept and execution. Somehow Wild manages to put a classical stamp on the work without damaging its popular imprint.

The first movement opens with a clear statement of the song theme but variations soon kick in with counter melodies, complex rhythmic patterns, and subtle harmonic changes. With all that, the theme is lovingly treated and never lost.

In the second movement, Wild ingeniously uses the *barcarolle* form to make his point. By definition, a *barcarolle* is a piece imitating the 6/8 meter of the songs sung by Venetian gondoliers, but its other famous treatments include those by none other than Chopin and Brahms. Wild’s colorful use of it includes a virtuosic employment of trills and repeated notes that transports Gershwin to Venice and beyond.

The Brazilian Dance of the third movement is just as its title implies but with virtuosity again an important factor in the lively staccato playing. A lyrical interlude with interesting harmonic changes contrasts the lively Latin rhythms before the conclusion of this wonderful movement.

In the final movement, Wild takes us to Argentina, the birthplace of the famous tango. More so than in the other movements, Wild moves away from the theme of “Someone to Watch Over Me,” yet it remains under the sultry pulse of the tango. He gives us a brilliant conclusion to his explorations of Gershwin’s great tune. Interestingly, Wild has noted, “In the *Tango* I was able to weave the *Sarabande* of Bach’s *Second Partita in C Minor* throughout as well as his *C Minor Fugue* from the *Well-Tempered Clavier* (Book I).”

Earl Wild never performed his *Improvisations on ‘Someone to Watch Over Me’* in public.

Piano Sonata (2000)

Still within classical form, the Piano Sonata (2000) is marked by jazz influences immediately evident in the opening *Allegro (March)*. We hear strong imprints of classic jazz but also blues, rag, and even American folk music reminiscent of Charles Ives’ treatment of it in his famous *Concord Sonata*. Comparison, however, is not to suggest imitation since Wild leaves his own imprint that transcends any one reference. A persistent march rhythm marks the movement as well as fugue-like passages. The effect is a clear exploration of the vertical and horizontal in music.

The second movement *Adagio* gives us a haunting lyricism and an improvisational sense. The right hand offers a lovely melody while the left hand keeps a steady pulse. The melody, Wild notes, is a reference to a song his grandmother sang. The melancholy of the movement Wild attributes to his references to popular music of the 1920’s. This writer kept hearing strains of the famous 1945 Johnny Mercer song, “Laura,” but that should be confirmed by individual listeners. Some of you may hear a bit of Bill Evans, too.

The last movement *Toccata (a la Ricky Martin)* Wild explains as “a Latin American rhythm which then led me to the *toccata* form” that, he notes, “contains 100 consecutive B’s in the left hand.” Wild admired the Puerto Rican pop singer and actor Ricky Martin for his style and the “total ease and charm with which he carries himself (both on and off stage)” and thus named him as the inspiration for the movement. The truth is that no style is better expressed than Wild’s own in this remarkable movement with its virtuosic and percussive fugue, lyricism, and bang-up conclusion.

Wild describes the Sonata as “neither pretentious nor overly intellectual,” but “an expression of a few moments in my long life.”

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