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Mr. Eckerling welcomes Mr. Gershwin



By David Rutter Monday at 5:00 p.m.



George Gershwin

By David Rutter

They are not such strange compatriots. One a Russian immigrant's kid, a ruffian who grew up on the mean streets of Brooklyn, hated school which he forever spurned at 15, loved roller skating and found music almost by accident. The other grew up on the slightly less-mean streets of Skokie, and fell hard for the piano, too.

George, meet Larry. Larry, meet George.

Everyone in Chicago's pop music business knew Larry. Everyone in New York's Tin Pan Alley had shaken hands with George. They shared a passion for the voice of America's music, all of it.

They learned classical music but addictive devotion to syncopation and improv always brought them back to pop music. So, they straddled both worlds comfortably, which made them unusual. They were players. The piano always throws old friends together this way. They can't help it and wouldn't even if they could.

So now they come together again on May 8. Larry Eckerling will simultaneously play the grand piano and also conduct his Evanston Symphony Orchestra. His metaphorical friend died 20 years before Larry was born but that's an inconsequential detail of chronology. Every American kid who grew up playing a hot piano with a cool style has a friend in George Gershwin.

Eckerling is unfurling Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" which makes the capstone of the ESO's 65th anniversary season special on several grounds. Though the Mother's Day event also includes works by Bernstein, Hanson, Grieg, and Copland, the Rhapsody never plays second chair at any American concert.

It is 18 minutes of the most distinctive and essentially American sounds a symphony can play. That has been its unchallenged cultural role since Gershwin revealed it to the world on Feb. 12, 1924.

That night in New York, Gershwin didn't invent American music but, as one critic later said, "He made jazz a lady." He gave American music its American wink.

For a conductor and musical director of a symphony – and Evanston's has been acknowledged as the best community orchestra in Illinois by its peers – the dual duty has a siren lure. Pianists who are Maestros were pianists first. Playing and conducting Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" has a musical resonance that helps define and refine reputations. Leonard Bernstein did it. So did Andre Previn. Michael Tilson Thomas, too.

"I am not doing this as stunt," Eckerling says with a laugh. "It's a challenge, not so much physically as intellectually...I feel I have something to say with the Gershwin, because my whole musical life has been entrenched both in the classical and jazz idioms (as has Gershwin's). So I think I understand the many sides of his music."

And as Eckerling is clear to point out, it's not as simple as it looks. At that, it doesn't even look simple.

“It especially takes a very good orchestra to do this,” he says with some pride because the ESO has been built largely in his image and with his sense of musical standards. “The Rhapsody is hard, not that it’s like the Rachmaninoff Third Concerto or the Tchaikovsky.

“When you hear the Rhapsody,” he added, “you can hear Gershwin take the kind of liberties he took on his recordings and that has given me some license to use jazz idioms. A little grace note. A little swing. If people are familiar with the Rhapsody, they’ll hear it ... The orchestra needs to be intuitive, not because of the piece, but because (they’re) often not playing with a conductor. It requires the orchestra to listen. ..There is probably extra difficulty for the orchestra because as a pianist I’m not necessarily doing the tempi that one often hears.”

Aside from the Rhapsody’s highly charged energy and American youthfulness, Eckerling chose it as the last sound of the 65th season because, well, he just likes it.

“I have an amazing affection for the piece,” he says.

For his own sense of destiny, Gershwin often wondered if his music – even this music – would last much past his life.

Forget?

Forget “I Got Rhythm,” “Porgy and Bess” , “An American in Paris” and a thousand songs that define the nation’s voice?

On May 8, concertgoers on the North Shore will once again affirm why Gershwin needn’t have worried.

Tickets

Where: Pick-Staiger concert hall in Evanston.

When: 2:30 p.m. on May 8.

Price: \$27 for adults, \$22 for seniors, \$5 for students with a student ID and FREE for children 12 and under when accompanied by an adult.

Get them: Tickets are available on-line at www.evanstonsymphony.org or by calling 847.864.8804. Tickets also will be available at the box office on the day of the concert at \$30 for adults and \$25 for seniors, with the prices for student and child tickets unchanged.

About the ESO: Founded in 1945, the Evanston Symphony is the reigning Illinois Council of Orchestra’s “Orchestra of the Year” for 2010. The ESO offers five concerts a year with a mission to provide community members of all ages with convenient, affordable opportunities to perform and hear fine classical music from locally, nationally and internationally renowned artists.