

Lied lands Gershwin music

George, Ira's influence is ever present in today's society

Concert Preview

BY LIZA HOLTMEIER
Staff writer

George and Ira Gershwin are as familiar to the American public as a Toyota commercial.

If you've ever heard "Who could ask for anything more?" resonate from your television, then you've heard the Gershwins' song "I've Got Rhythm."

But the Gershwins' music pervades more than just commercials. Theater and film also have capitalized on the melodies and lyrics of the two brothers. As a result, most people can hum the melody to songs like "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off" and "They Can't Take That Away From Me."

Thanks to songs like these, the music of the Gershwins has become an integral part of the American musical fabric.

"There's a not a person alive who doesn't know a Gershwin song," says Maureen McGovern, a vocalist who performs Gershwin tunes around the world.

McGovern, in collaboration with the Lincoln Symphony, will perform this Saturday in an all-Gershwin show. The concert is a celebration of what would have been George Gershwin's 100th birthday on Sept. 26.

George and Ira Gershwin grew up in Brooklyn, N.Y., in the early 1900s. Although Ira was originally the studious one interested in music, that all changed when the family bought a piano. At 15, George dropped out of high school to become a song plugger in Tin Pan Alley. His job consisted of playing other people's songs to increase their popularity.

In 1919, George became a sensation when Al Jolson played the songwriter's first hit, "Swanee." Gershwin was then hired to write for musical revues.

Eventually, George went on to collaborate with his brother on numerous works. George composed the music and Ira wrote the lyrics. After George's death in 1937, Ira continued to write lyrics and collaborate with artists such as Jerome Kern and Harold Arlen.

The brothers' major contribution was the creation of an original American music form.

Jeth Mills, the executive director of the Lincoln Symphony, said George Gershwin accomplished this by synthesizing Broadway, classical, popular and ethnic music forms.

"He created something purely American," Mill said. "He comes from Russian immigrant stock and, as such, absorbs so much including the African-American rhythms. These were so significant to American popular music, particularly in the 1920s, and have real-



ly been the hallmark of the development of American music in the 20th century."

Mills said this synthesis gave George's music a timeless, classic quality, even though he was known mainly as a popular music composer in his day.

McGovern, who has performed the Gershwins' music around the world, said the classic nature of their music can be seen by the ability of audiences everywhere to sing along to their songs.

"I don't think 50 years from now, we'll be sitting around campfires singing rap songs," McGovern said.

Considering the immensity of George Gershwin's legacy, it's important to note that the composer died in 1937 at the age of 38 from a brain tumor.

"Can you imagine the potential of what the man would have done?" McGovern asked.

This weekend's show explores what the man did accomplish in his relatively short lifetime.

The first half of the program will feature the Lincoln Symphony conducted by McGovern's music conductor, Lee Musiker. The symphony will play a variety of Gershwin orchestrations including selections from "Girl Crazy" and "An American in Paris." The first half will also include a trio playing jazz improvisations of Gershwin songs and Musiker playing variations on "I Got Rhythm" on piano.

McGovern will take the helm for the

second part of the show, accompanied by the symphony in a tribute to George and Ira Gershwin. McGovern will devote her first numbers to Ira Gershwin.

"Ira is the unsung hero of the duo. As a lyricist, he was literate, funny and romantic. It's my chance to give due tribute to his genius beyond George," McGovern said.

After that, she will sing some of the duo's best known songs — such as "How Long Has This Been Going On," "Fascinating Rhythm" and "They Can't Take That Away From Me."

McGovern, whose musical career has spanned recordings, concerts, Broadway, film, television and radio, has a lengthy history with the Gershwins' music. In 1987, she performed George Gershwin's music on the PBS-BBC special "Celebrating Gershwin," which marked the 50th anniversary of the composer's death. One of her four albums, "Naughty Baby," was a live, in-studio concert of Gershwin classics. Currently, McGovern has eight to 10 Gershwin shows that she performs around the world.

The Maureen McGovern/Lincoln Symphony concert runs Saturday at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$35, \$31, \$27 for adults and half-price for students. For tickets, call the Lied Center Box Office at (402) 472-4747.

MTV affords student writers new chance

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about following her dream.

"The thing about writing when you get older is that it's kind of a scary thing to admit that you want to write because so many other people are doing it," Troy said in a phone interview from Colorado.

Despite the fact that MTV may be the worst of culprits when it comes to distracting would-be readers, Troy claims its attempts to publish younger, unknown fiction-writers is a good step.

"I think it's a fantastic opportunity for people my age, because it's hard to forgo a secure career to follow something just because it's your dream," Troy said. "What I see this contest doing is telling young writers that it's a good thing for you to write and not to just go get a more secure job right away."

Anxiety of influence

In their quest to justify their profession, many writers seem to be not only questioning whether to write or not, but also what to write. According to Riley, answering this question is of utmost

importance.

"Writing was destined to be hard because you're going to have a large amount of competition," Riley said.

"The downside is that some writers are manipulating their style to better suit the new audience. You get a beautiful product if you don't consider what the audience wants."

Writing for an audience weaned on moving pictures and catchy sound creates a host of problems, once someone has decided he has the will to write.

The struggle between remaining true to your art and the desire for an audience divides hopeful writers.

For Mallory and others, an author's livelihood depends on his ability to adapt to the times.

"It's powerfully shaped me and to a certain extent, it's just the way I think — get it said quickly and strip it down to the bare essentials," Mallory said.

He said writers need to create compelling stories, ones that are interesting to young audiences in both style and substance.

He said there was a difference

between writers who churn out popular novels and those who are more interested in the literary aspects of the written word.

According to Riley, those writers will have to consider the competition they face in order to avoid being drowned out by the zooming distractions of the information superhighway.

"For more literary writers to carve out their niche, I think (literature) will have to find a new place for itself," Riley said. "It can't compete with the narrative of film, and I think writers will have to rethink what they have to offer that's unique from film."

Despite this somewhat gloomy message, writers continue to write. They write poems, they write novels, they write short stories, and they write screenplays. They write because, according to Riley, "It's just something that's in my blood." And no matter where society goes, writers will keep writing.

"Even if I'm not succeeding, I'll still be doing it because it's important to me," Mallory said. "In 10 years if I'm still not successful, I'll just keep telling myself 'I'm just a late bloomer.'"

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