An American Legacy:
Celebrating George Gershwin with Broadway stars, opera soprano and piano prodigy
May 2, 3, 4

John DeMain and the Madison Symphony Orchestra will close out the 2013-2014 season with a rousing musical sampling of the famous American composer George Gershwin and his unique blend of Broadway, American popular song, and classical forms. The concerts, May 2, 3, 4, 2014, will also explore cherished composers - Leonard Bernstein, Harold Arlen, and Stephen Sondheim - who carried on the musical theater tradition of Gershwin.

Broadway stars Karen Olivo, mezzo soprano, and Ron Raines, baritone, will take center stage along with rising opera star Emily Birsan, soprano, who trained at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. And, Madison’s own piano prodigy, Garrick Olsen, will perform the virtuosic solo piano part in Gershwin’s Variations on I Got Rhythm.

DeMain is no stranger to bringing American music to life. He is a Grammy award winner for his conducting of Gershwin’s opera, Porgy and Bess. Selections from it will be performed in an orchestral suite entitled Catfish Row. DeMain said,

“For me, [Gershwin] embodies what it means to be an American musician. Trained in the classics, but deeply connected to the music of his country, Gershwin fused American folk music and jazz into a concert format that continues to thrill and resonate with audiences all over the world to this present day.”

The concerts are Fri., May 2, at 7:30 p.m.; Sat., May 3, at 8 p.m.; and Sun. May 4, at 2:30 p.m. in Overture Hall, 201 State Street.

Born in Brooklyn, Gershwin was largely self-taught in piano and composition. By age sixteen he had quit school, and was working in Tin Pan Alley. He began to make a name for himself as a Broadway composer, scoring his first huge hit in 1919 with Swanee. He frequently collaborated with his brother, Ira, and the two sides of his long career (stage works for Broadway and Hollywood, and “serious” concert music) continued to influence each other through his final masterpiece, Porgy and Bess, in 1935.

The MSO’s program will open with Overture to Strike up the Band, from the 1927 Gershwin musical. Interestingly, this deeply satirical take on America’s taste for war was a flop with audiences that by the peak of the roaring 20’s preferred fluffier fare. A revision three years later, now resonating with
the post-stock market crash culture, became a landmark, showing that musicals could indeed deal with serious topics.

Emily Birsan, Karen Olivo, and Ron Raines will delight the audience with a series of Gershwin’s memorable songs for the stage: *They Can’t Take That Away From Me, Our Love is Here to Stay, By Strauss, Embraceable You, S’Wonderful, and Somebody Loves Me.* The first half will close with selections from Gershwin’s operatic masterpiece, *Porgy and Bess*, an innovative and sympathetic look into the lives of African Americans living in a fictionalized version of Cabbage Row (a cluster of shabby tenements in Charleston, South Carolina). The suite, entitled *Catfish Row*, provides a stunning overview of his famous “folk opera”.

Following intermission, the program moves to some of Gershwin’s famous successors. **Leonard Bernstein**’s operatic take on the 1759 Voltaire play, *Candide*, is a satire of the parochialism of 1950’s America. The May concert will feature both the *Overture to Candide* and the song *Glitter and Be Gay*, sung by Ms. Birsan.

The audience will also sample Bernstein’s music from *West Side Story*, the modern Broadway adaptation of Romeo and Juliet set in New York City. Ms. Birsan and Ms. Olivo will sing the duet *A Boy Like That/I Have a Love* and the orchestra will perform *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story*, an instrumental survey of the memorable tunes from this show.

**Harold Arlen** was a contemporary of Gershwin, and easily stands alongside him as one of America’s great songwriters. He wrote over 500 songs, perhaps most famously *Over the Rainbow* for *The Wizard of Oz* in 1939. Mr. Raines will sing the lead in *That Old Black Magic*, a 1942 hit that appeared in Paramount’s wartime morale-booster, *Star Spangled Rhythm*.

**Stephen Sondheim** is arguably our most famous living Broadway composer, whose first big break was his collaboration on *West Side Story*. His musical, *Follies* (1971), centers on the reunion of aging Broadway performers whose heyday was the 1920’s. Ms. Olivo will sing *Losing My Mind*, a melancholy song about love that has crossed into obsession.

**Tickets** are $16.50 to $82.50 each, available at [www.madisonsymphony.org/singletickets](http://www.madisonsymphony.org/singletickets) and through the Overture Center Box Office at 201 State Street or call the Box Office at (608) 258-4141.

**Student** rush tickets can be purchased in person on the day of the concert at the Overture Box Office at 201 State Street. Full-time students must show a valid student ID and can receive up to two $12 or $15 tickets. More information is at: [www.madisonsymphony.org/studentrush](http://www.madisonsymphony.org/studentrush)

The Madison Symphony Orchestra marks its 88th concert season in 2013-2014 by celebrating John DeMain’s 20th anniversary as music director. The Symphony engages audiences of all ages and backgrounds in live classical music through a full season of concerts with established and emerging soloists of international renown, an organ series that includes free concerts, and widely respected education and community engagement programs. Find more information at [www.madisonsymphony.org](http://www.madisonsymphony.org).

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