

George Gershwin: His Life and Work

By Howard Pollack

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This comprehensive biography of George Gershwin (1898-1937) unravels the myths surrounding one of America's most celebrated composers and establishes the enduring value of his music. Gershwin created some of the most beloved music of the twentieth century and, along with Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, and Cole Porter, helped make the golden age of Broadway golden. Howard Pollack draws from a wealth of sketches, manuscripts, letters, interviews, books, articles, recordings, films, and other materials—including a large cache of Gershwin scores discovered in a Warner Brothers warehouse in 1982—to create an expansive chronicle of Gershwin’s meteoric rise to fame. He also traces Gershwin’s powerful presence that, even today, extends from Broadway, jazz clubs, and film scores to symphony halls and opera houses.

Pollack’s lively narrative describes Gershwin’s family, childhood, and education; his early career as a pianist; his friendships and romantic life; his relation to various musical trends; his writings on music; his working methods; and his tragic death at the age of 38. Unlike Kern, Berlin, and Porter, who mostly worked within the confines of Broadway and Hollywood, Gershwin actively sought to cross the boundaries between high and low, and wrote works that crossed over into a realm where art music, jazz, and Broadway met and merged. The author surveys Gershwin’s entire oeuvre, from his first surviving compositions to the melodies that his brother and principal collaborator, Ira Gershwin, lyricized after his death. Pollack concludes with an exploration of the performances and critical reception of Gershwin's music over the years, from his time to ours.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
Starred Review. University of Houston music professor Pollack (*Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man*) offers a look at Gershwin so exhaustive and comprehensive that it stands as a definitive statement. Bibliographic notes filling 100 pages indicate the extent of this in-depth re-examination. Scholarly yet entertaining, Pollack's survey is not chronological; it's divided into two book-length sections. In part one, a study of popular music trends serves as an overture to Gershwin's musical influences, his childhood and Tin Pan Alley years, followed by a look at Gershwin as a pianist and conductor through his death from a brain tumor at the age of 38. The book's second half, titled "Work," is an ambitious attempt to document Gershwin's entire output, from orchestral works to theater, radio and films, including the role of lyricist Ira Gershwin in reworking his brother's tunes, as he did for Billy Wilder's 1964 film *Kiss Me, Stupid*. The creation of *Porgy and Bess* and subsequent revivals, films, concerts, recordings and jazz interpretations (notably by Miles Davis) fill several chapters with fascinating details. Gershwin's innovative synthesis of classical, blues and jazz into a "glorious body of work" is illuminated by Pollack's insightful analysis. 51 b&w photos. *(Dec.)*
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From Booklist
Starred Review Pollack's preface indicates his book builds on the work of many chroniclers of composer George Gershwin's life and work, and he names 10 of them. However, their books largely predated not only the appearance of a number of important publications, dissertations, recordings, and performances but also the availability of a variety of archival materials, including a large cache of Gershwin manuscripts discovered in 1982 in a Warner Brothers warehouse in Secaucus, New Jersey. This biography is organized along partly thematic, partly chronological lines. Part 1, "Life," contains chapters depicting Gershwin's childhood and family and his musical education, early relation to popular music, achievement as a pianist, youthful activities on Broadway, friendships and love affairs, involvement with serious music, and lifestyle and character. Part 2, "Work," surveys Gershwin's output from his earliest compositions to those pieces that his brother, Ira, lyricized after Gershwin's death, in 1937. Pollack examines many of the composer's films, recordings, and critical writings; he provides, for each of Gershwin's shows, a synopsis of the story, details about the cast, and other aspects of its first production. With 51 black-and-white photographs, this engaging biography is also a tour de force of scholarship. *George Cohen*
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Review

“Pollack presents a fresh stance on the legendary composer in a monumental biography. . . . A fascinating narrative of Gershwin’s life.”
(Stephanie Poxon, Center for the Arts, Richmond, Virginia *Opera Journal* 2009-09-01)

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