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Jack Gibbons: Though he heard *Rhapsody in Blue* as a child, he grew up with the view that its composer was "risqué"

By George, by way of Jack

**Clive Davis meets a
British musician who
recreates Gershwin's
piano improvisations**

If the concert pianist Jack Gibbons could be granted one wish, he knows exactly what he would choose to do — travel back in time to sit and listen to George Gershwin play for an evening. And rather than performing the whole of his repertoire, Gershwin would play the same piece — "Fascinating Rhythm", say — over and over, spinning new variations on the melody each time around.

Gershwin's talent for improvisation, already apparent in the years he spent as a teenager plugging other people's songs on Tin Pan Alley, later made him the toast of New York's salons. No society party was complete without him hunched over the keyboard for hours on end. Since then, amidst the revivals of stage works, attention has inevitably shifted away from his pianistic skills. Jack Gibbons's reproductions of Gershwin's ornate technique constitute one of the more unorthodox offshoots of the "authentic" music movement.

For the past three summers Gibbons has mounted successful all-Gershwin recitals at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. He has now embarked on a series of solo recordings, *The Authentic George Gershwin*, the first volume of which (released on the ASV label: CDWHL-2074) covers the years 1918-1925, from the first hit "Swanee" to a version of the slow movement of the Concerto in F. The centrepiece, naturally, is *Rhapsody in Blue* adapted from the composer's own four-handed arrangement for piano roll.

As he admits, Gibbons makes an

unlikely Gershwin scholar. A prodigiously gifted classical pianist, he made his London recital debut at 17 with a programme of pieces by Chopin's contemporary, Alkan, whose output includes some of the most technically demanding works in the repertoire. In 1982, at the age of 20, Gibbons won first prize at the Newport International (Pianoforte) Competition.

Though he had heard *Rhapsody in Blue* as a child, he had grown up with the traditionalist view that its composer was somehow "risqué" and not worthy of serious attention. But a few years ago Gibbons heard a vintage recording of Gershwin improvising on his own songs.

Fascinated by the sheer virtuosity, Gibbons began transcribing the pieces and performed them at parties. Using them in concerts followed at a QEH recital in July 1990. After he played "Do, Do, Do" (from the 1926 show *Oh, Kay!*) the burst of applause told him he was on the right track.

The recital contained more than a dozen concert premieres of improvisations, taken from such songs as "Someone To Watch Over Me". Gibbons has continued to produce transcriptions and Gershwin's biographer, Edward Jablonski, has passed on newly discovered tunes

from the archives in America.

Isn't the idea of copying an improvisation note for note almost a contradiction in terms? Gibbons thinks not. "A lot of pianists would think 'Well, why don't you just play them in your own style?' But the thing is, these are almost little compositions in themselves. They're very intricate." "S Wonderful", especially, has so much going on inside it.

"After the first concerts I heard some comments in classical circles about the music being 'crude'. Since then I've been giving more explanations during performances, because people often aren't aware of the wealth of technical detail in the tunes."

Work has already begun on the second volume of recordings up to 1930, which will include the "Three Preludes" and *An American in Paris* as well as more transcriptions of show tunes. A projected third album will cover the last seven years of Gershwin's life, and will also feature his piano roll improvisations on songs by such peers as Jerome Kern and Irving Berlin.

As for Gibbons's career in "straight" music, that has not been totally neglected. He can in fact be heard, alongside the English Northern Philharmonia and mezzo soprano Sally Burgess, on an acclaimed recording of Constant Lambert's *The Rio Grande*, recently released on Hyperion.

Lambert was a confirmed Gershwin-basher. But who knows, Jack Gibbons's tireless efforts might just have won him over in the end.