

LIVE FROM LINCOLN CENTER
December 31, 2002, 8:00 p.m. on PBS
New York Philharmonic
All-Gershwin New Year's Eve Concert

Lorin Maazel, an icon among present-day conductors, will make his long anticipated Live From Lincoln Center debut conducting the New York Philharmonic's gala New Year's Eve concert on Tuesday evening, December 31. Maazel began his tenure as the Philharmonic's new Music Director in September, and already has put his stamp of authority on the playing of the orchestra. Indeed he and the Philharmonic were rapturously received wherever they performed on a recent tour of the Far East. Lorin Maazel, an icon among present-day conductors, will make his long anticipated Live From Lincoln Center debut conducting the New York Philharmonic's gala New Year's Eve concert on Tuesday evening, December 31. Maazel began his tenure as the Philharmonic's new Music Director in September, and already has put his stamp of authority on the playing of the orchestra. Indeed he and the Philharmonic were rapturously received wherever they performed on a recent tour of the Far East.

Celebrating the New Year with music is nothing new for Maazel: he holds the modern record for most appearances as conductor of the celebrated New Year's Day concerts in Vienna by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. There, of course, the fare is made up mostly of music by the waltzing Johann Strauss family, father and sons. For his New Year's Eve concert with the New York Philharmonic Maazel has chosen quintessentially American music by the composer considered by many to be America's closest equivalent to the Strausses, George Gershwin.

And the music of Gershwin is nothing new for Maazel. Some 50 years ago an enterprising concert management put together a program of Gershwin's music that toured the length and breadth of the United States. The conductor was the 21-year old Lorin Maazel, then fresh from activities as a conducting fellow at the Boston Symphony Orchestra's Berkshire Music Center (now Tanglewood Music Center). When Maazel was Music Director of the Cleveland Orchestra in the 1970s, one of his first recordings there was the first-ever complete recording of Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess." Significantly, the second half of Maazel's approaching New Year's Eve concert will be devoted to extensive excerpts from "Porgy and Bess."

The program will begin with Gershwin's "Cuban Overture." If he had not earlier used the title "An American in Paris" for an orchestral work (which figures next on our program), Gershwin might easily have titled this piece "An American in Havana." The "Cuban Overture" was the result of a holiday Gershwin spent in Cuba early in 1932. There he became fascinated with Cuban rhythms and the many native Cuban percussion instruments. In three weeks time he completed his homage to this music, and his score was performed for the first time, under the

title “Rhumba,” at an all-Gershwin concert (the first all-Gershwin concert ever played anywhere) by the New York Philharmonic at its one-time summer home, now defunct, Lewisohn Stadium.

Some three months later there was a repeat performance at a benefit concert at the Metropolitan Opera House, this time under the title “Cuban Overture.” Explaining the new title Gershwin wrote: “When people read ‘Rhumba,’ they expect ‘The Peanut Vendor’ or a like piece of music. ‘Cuban Overture’ gives a more just idea of the character and intent of the music.”

Four years earlier Gershwin took a holiday in Paris. A famous anecdote has it that Gershwin visited Ravel, hoping the French master would take him on as a short-time pupil. When the two compared their incomes, Ravel is said to have exclaimed: “It is I who should take lessons from YOU.” Gershwin went on to compose one of his most endearing works while under the spell of Paris: “An American in Paris.” The work was sketched in Paris, orchestrated in Vienna, and then completed on the composer’s return to Paris. Here, too, it was the New York Philharmonic that played the first performance, in December 1928, under the direction of Walter Damrosch. In an interview prior to that premiere Gershwin said: “This new piece, really a rhapsodic ballet, is written very freely and is the most modern music I’ve yet attempted. The opening part will be developed in typical French style, in the manner of Debussy and The Six, though the themes are all original. My purpose here is to portray the impression of an American visitor in Paris, as he strolls about the city, listens to the various street noises, and absorbs the French atmosphere. As in my other orchestral compositions I’ve not endeavored to represent any definite scenes in this music. The rhapsody is programmatic only in a general impressionistic way, so that the individual listener can read into the music such episodes as his imagination pictures for him.” One unmistakable street noise is the sound of Parisian taxi horns: Gershwin’s score calls for four actual taxi horns!

And finally, after the intermission, we come to those extended excerpts from “Porgy and Bess,” Gershwin’s operatic masterpiece of 1935. Three stalwart artists will sing the principle roles: Willard White, a veteran Porgy, and the Porgy in the aforementioned Maazel-Cleveland Orchestra recording, will sing Porgy once again. Our Bess will be Indra Thomas, an Atlanta native and a winner of the Southeast Region Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions. And tenor Lawrence Brownlee will be Sportin’ Life. Mr. Brownlee, too, is a winner of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions. All three of these performers will be making their New York Philharmonic debuts.

The chorus has as prominent a role in “Porgy and Bess” as it does in Moussorgsky’s “Boris Godunov.” Here the chorus will be the Ebony Ecumenical Ensemble, founded and directed by Bettye F. Forbes and based at New York City’s Riverside Church.

There you have it! An exciting prospect for welcoming in the New Year on New Year's Eve, December 31. I hope you'll join us then by tuning in to your favorite PBS station. Again, I urge you to consult your local listings for the exact time in your area. See you then!