George Gershwin: His Life and Work
by Howard Pollack

The Gershwin Study

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.

My Personal Review:
Gershwin buffs, run, don't walk to get this book. Pollack has written the definitive study of both "The Life" and "The Work," as per his two fat sections.

Pollack's book is, for one, the first Gershwin bio that takes advantage of the discovery of mountains of original orchestra parts for Golden Age musical theatre scores in a Secaucus warehouse in the early eighties. As such, Pollack analyzes Gershwin's theatre scores closely just as classical music scholars can attend to Mozart or Haydn's works.
Earlier bios could only address the scores largely on the basis of the songs from each score that happened to be published as sheet music, with only a handful of the scores then existing as full piano-vocal scores or as latter-day abridged and heavily adapted recordings. But over the past two decades, most of Gershwin's significant scores have been recorded in full from the discovered materials, such that via these recordings as well as examining the original materials himself, Pollack can address the work as it was presented when it was new, i.e. chorus numbers, character songs not published as sheets, incidental music, etc. Given that musicals constituted the bulk of Gershwin's output in his short life, this alone makes Pollack's book invaluable.

In addition, some Gershwin bios have been written by people focused on pulling him down, devoted to revealing him as an undereducated, boorish parvenu (i.e. the ones by Charles Schwartz and Joan Peyser). Pollack's sleuthing and interviews conclusively demonstrate that these evaluations were incorrect: Gershwin pursued serious musical training throughout his life, it shows in his work, and socially, he was a beloved, charming person who was deeply mourned at his death.

Pollack has truly done his homework, such that just about any question one might have about Gershwin is exhaustively answered. For each show he chronicles not only the score and its critical reception in New York, but also its London and even Australian versions if there were any, all of the revivals across the US, and its recordings -- and he does this even starting with the obscure early efforts. He is equally thorough re Gershwin's concert music.

It should be said that those seeking further engagement with the raison d'être of Joan Peyser's THE MEMORY OF ALL THAT, the story that Gershwin fathered a love child with a chorus girl and paid him and his mother off to keep it quiet, will not be satisfied. Pollack briefly addresses objections to that thesis from some quarters since Peyser's book was published -- but, in my view, neglects the rather damning facts that 1) said love child looks exactly like Gershwin and 2) was supported in his claim to have made regular visits to Gershwin's apartment by none other than Gershwin's valet. As such, one must consult various sources pre- and post-Peyser to come to conclusions about that issue. One suspects that Pollack, having been granted interviews from surviving keepers of the Gershwin flame, opted on that particular subject to step around giving offense. He is not to be faulted for this.

It should also be said, however, that inevitably of a work so dazzlingly complete, this book is not one most people would want to read from front to back. It is, in its way, a reference book set in prose. There are times when Pollack seems almost obsessive -- such as bringing vast study to bear upon locating the purchase by Gershwin's parents of a piano in precisely late 1910, or letting us know (based on a chance message from abroad) that OH, KAY played in translation in Sweden, or informing us via
close examination of the original arrangement of RHAPSODY IN BLUE -- not later arrangements, but the original one, mind you -- that one player doubled on bass and tuba.

But this degree of obsession is what real scholarship is, and though for most it will be a book to jump around in than to read page for page, Pollack has given us an authoritative masterpiece. I am in awe of the man, and happy to have this one on my shelves forever.

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