

SOMM  
RECORDINGS



# FUSIONS

NIKOLAI KAPUSTIN  
GEORGE GERSHWIN  
EARL WILD

NIKOLAY MEDVEDEV

The delayed entry of the United States into the European conflict of World War I, following the German navy's sinking of the British passenger liner *Lusitania* in May 1915, saw a return to the broad European homelands of millions of fresh young soldiers and a long-hoped-for resolution of the conflict, following which the USA became a world power for the first time.

The young Americans brought with them their music. It was not just popular songs, epitomised by Enrico Caruso's million-selling disc of the song "Over There!", whose universal language was at once apparent, but the underlying vernacular of jazz – an evolved musical language irrigated from the country's African American population, occasionally fused with Hispanic dance rhythms – music refracted further by a wider fusion of a Russian Jewish klezmer style from the many migrants who had fled persecution from the regimes of Tsar Alexander III and his son Nicholas II.

The concurrent collapse of classical tonality at the dawn of the 20th century arose from the problem faced by all composers: is the existing language of music suitable for their needs? Is it possible – or even desirable – to create a new way of saying what has to be said entirely from scratch, or can one use the existing language in a new manner? In Stravinsky's case, he first sought revivification from the music of earlier periods; others from folk music, Debussy from new scales and – occasionally, as did Ravel – from then recent non-classical developments: jazz and popular music, as exemplified through the work of American composers, members of Russian émigré families – Irving Berlin and George Gershwin, especially.

The Russian heritage in jazz music cannot be entirely gainsaid; the languages of uprooted peoples – be they Jewish or Black – found an extraordinary fusion in the United States, and in Soviet Russia jazz was not condemned out of hand. Nikolai Kapustin was a pupil of Alexander Goldenweiser at the Moscow Conservatoire and became one of the most admired jazz pianist-composers in Russia. What is unusual in Kapustin's case is that although his music inhabits jazz idioms naturally, everything in it is written out, carefully notated on the page.

On considering the vernacular of 20th-century American popular music, it may be surprising to find a rich thread of Russian ethnicity in such music: Irving Berlin, for example, whose "Alexander's Ragtime Band" was among the very first examples of international popular jazz, was actually born in Russia, and the families of such archetypical American figures as George Gershwin, Aaron Copland, Richard Rodgers, Leonard Bernstein and Philip Glass can trace their deep Russian roots – spurred further by the fall-out of the wide emigration from that country's Revolution in 1918 in a search for safety and a new life in the Land of the Free.

Not that there is anything specifically "Russian" in the music they wrote in the United States, but fusions with growing African American jazz influences – both in the southern states and in northern urban conurbations – fed into the more freely available cosmopolitan life of the country: a paradoxically more subtle, original and more universal language, both spoken and sung, and at times heard literally cheek-by-jowl in theatre and dance music meant a welcoming, indeed unique, vernacular that chimed with the social demographics of the burgeoning United States.

It was not solely musicians in Western Europe that welcomed the fresh irrigation of the music from peoples of the New World: in the Russia of the then new Soviet Union there was much popularity in urban jazz, which swept away the music of the destroyed Romanov Empire. Apart from a brief spell when it was disapproved of as being “capitalist music”, both up to the 1930s and after World War II, jazz was popular among the proletariat and within the regime.

The popular vernacular was embraced briefly by Shostakovich, whose Second Suite for Jazz Orchestra was part of his attempt at ingratiation, concurrent with the Fifth Symphony, following Stalin’s attack on his opera *Lady MacBeth of Mtsensk* in 1936.

Thankfully, in that context Stalin also enjoyed jazz (in so far as he “enjoyed” any kind of music), and the joining of Russia with the USA and Great Britain in the struggle against Nazism brought a welcome degree of popular international musical fusion. The USSR State Jazz Band (under Sviatoslav Knushevitsky), for which Shostakovich had written music, among other such groups, performed and broadcast frequently. The international success of the theme “Midnight in Moscow” – from Shostakovich’s musical comedy *Moscow, Cheryomushki* – was a 1961 world-wide instrumental hit for the British jazz trumpeter Kenny Ball.

If the occasional adoption of jazz-inflected material by Western and Eastern European composers, including Milhaud, Kurt Weill, Hindemith and Khachaturian – led by Stravinsky’s *Ragtime* of 1918 – reached relatively wider audiences, including such later stylisations as the early 1960s “Third Stream” school and followers

of Dave and Howard Brubeck, it is wholly exceptional to encounter the music of a Russian composer – Nikolai Kapustin, born in Ukraine in 1937 – whose entire compositional output, written in modern jazz styles, remained virtually unknown in the West until the early decades of post-Soviet Perestroika.

For it is only since the dawn of the present century that Kapustin's music has come to be recognised globally. His exceptional language and technical demands show him to have been a wholly remarkable figure, in that the freedom and spontaneity of jazz-improvisation phraseology in his music was fully notated, revealing occasional influences from several notable jazz-pianist contemporaries whilst always remaining germane to the inherent musical argument.

Kapustin's Second Piano Sonata dates from 1989, a crucial year in Soviet history, in that the final collapse of the USSR was at that time becoming more apparent. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, for any artist to have remained indifferent to such seismic changes, but – given Kapustin's earlier personal reflections – in this work especially, we find him essentially in optimistic mood – outward-looking, as the brilliant opening movement demonstrates. Here is almost youthful exuberance, vividly uplifting – music, as it were, of a latter-day Prokofiev in his most communicative vein, yet never backward-looking to an ephemeral age. The inner forward momentum of this music is undeniable. It is bright, spontaneous and wholly original in technique of compositional skill and pianistic demands. Only in the emotionally very different extended coda does Kapustin acknowledge contemplation, as if pausing for reflection whilst remaining ultimately positive.

A *Scherzo* follows, in which the rhythmic drive is supported by strong harmonic movement – subtle, inherently muscular. Here is maturity, able to veer off at any point whilst remaining true to its essential strengths. The *Largo* slow movement is calm emotionally, reflectively acknowledging a deeper contemplative mood, directly and simply expressed, and permitting the pulsating rhythmic subtleties of the finale to exert a constant revivifying influence, which has technically and emotionally driven the entire work – now by way of a *perpetuum mobile* – to its wholly positive conclusion.

Following the instantaneous success of the premiere performance and subsequent recording of his *Rhapsody in Blue* in 1924, George Gershwin found himself on the cusp of realising his dream of writing music both for the popular theatre and the serious concert hall. As a greatly gifted pianist he had harboured a long-held – but as it transpired unfulfilled – ambition of writing a set of 24 preludes for solo piano, along the lines of his classical predecessors. In the event, he was to compose eight such preludes, from which the initial three were first published as a group in 1927, following their premiere by Gershwin himself as part of a song recital in New York by Marguerite D'Alvarez, whom he accompanied. The first Prelude is in B flat major, encapsulating a chiaroscuro-like jazz figuration of no little intensity; the second, in C sharp minor, “a sort of blues-lullaby” (Gershwin’s own words), is tripartite in structure; the third – in E flat minor – revisits the dance-like vigour of the first, tension aroused by a major–minor dichotomy driving the music throughout.

Unlike Gershwin’s *3 Preludes*, Kapustin’s *8 Concert Études* of 1984 are not intended to be played together as a set; in this recital we hear five of them, opening with

the ebullient First, simply titled *Prelude*. This thrillingly evocative atmospheric stylisation of South American carnival time is irresistible in its uplifting Latin intensity. The contrasted, contemplative, Second Étude is, perhaps, closer to Kapustin's personal ethnicity, the finely threaded melodic lines unafraid to visit the composer's aesthetic nationality. The following *Reverie*, the Sixth Étude, has shades of Joplinesque ragtime riding above the powerful left-hand stride stylisation, and further refreshing expressive contrast is found in the qualities of the Seventh Étude before the impetuous drive of the last of the set – a true *Finale* – carries all before it with almost unstoppable energy.

We may forever regret that Gershwin never completed his plan of 24 solo piano preludes, but his natural creative genius was often heard during his lifetime on the many occasions he was asked to play at a reception, party, or a friend's home. He rarely refused such invitations, and those spontaneous occasions remained vivid memories for those fortunate enough to be present.

In 1932, Gershwin was persuaded to publish *The George Gershwin Songbook* – solo piano stylisations of 18 of his most popular songs – and in the 1950s the American pianist Earl Wild, who had studied with Selmar Janson, a pupil of Eugen d'Albert (himself a pupil of Liszt), and later with Egon Petri and Marguerite Long, released two collections of his own virtuoso stylisations of Gershwin songs – recreating those occasions when Gershwin would entertain his friends at the piano.

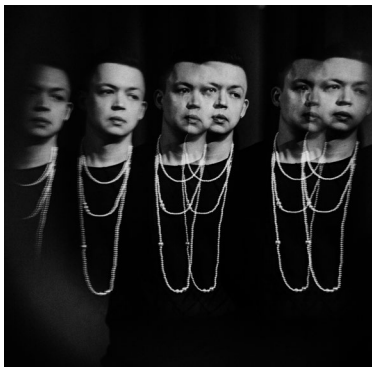
Earl Wild was one of the greatest American pianists of the 20th century. He made his unscheduled concerto debut at the age of 15 with the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra under Dmitri Mitropoulos in Liszt's Piano Concerto No.1

(without orchestral rehearsal!). Wild had heard Gershwin play *Rhapsody in Blue* and Concerto in F on several occasions, and in 1942 he was chosen by Toscanini to play *Rhapsody in Blue* himself: a recording exists of that performance. Three years later, Wild was invited by Paul Whiteman to make the first complete recording of *Rhapsody*; his *7 Virtuoso Etudes after George Gershwin* from the following decade sit fully within that tradition, raising the composer's inherent genius to concert standards.

Wild's choice of seven Gershwin songs for his *Virtuoso Etudes* (published in two volumes in 1954 and 1973, both revised in 1975) spans the gamut of emotion. From "Fascinatin' Rhythm" to the haunting "The Man I Love" (originally transcribed for the left hand alone in 1954, later revised for two hands, with an added counter-melody), Wild's selection is indeed wide-ranging, respecting and demonstrating the inherent genius of Gershwin refracted through the modern concert-grand keyboard, and revealing the latter's melodic and harmonic inspiration as pure music whilst remaining emotionally direct.

The final work in this recital is Kapustin's Variations, his Opus 41, composed in 1984. This brilliant score encapsulates the composer's creativity admirably, ranging from reminiscences of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps* through a lengthy (seemingly never-ending) theme, mused over by way of refracted, brilliant, subtly amusing and stunningly original music of undoubtedly uplifting genius.

Robert Matthew-Walker © 2026



**Nikolay Medvedev**, born in 1986, is a distinguished pianist celebrated for his technical prowess and emotive performances. His musical education began at the Rimsky-Korsakov Music College in Krasnodar. He continued his advanced studies at the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music in Moscow under the guidance of world-renowned professor Tatiana Zelikman. His exceptional talent has earned him scholarships from the A. Glazunov Foundation (Germany), the New Names Foundation and the Russian

Performing Arts Foundation. In 2010, he was awarded the very prestigious Triumph Youth Prize in Russia.

Medvedev has performed at major venues in various countries including Ukraine, France, Austria, Germany, Denmark, Norway, South Africa, the USA and China. He is also a sought-after accompanist for soloists from the most prestigious opera houses.

Nikolay Medvedev achieved notable success in several international piano competitions, and from 2016 to 2022, he served as a faculty member in solo piano and chamber music at the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music.

In Moscow he recorded two solo albums, *Rachmaninoff, Medtner, Tchaikovsky* (2021) and *Glazunov Piano Sonatas* (2022), working then as now with engineer Mikhail Spassky.

In July 2022, Medvedev moved to Berlin. He has since been active on the German concert scene, performing extensively throughout the country and abroad. Highlights have included debuts at the Konzerthaus Berlin and the Brucknerhaus Linz (Austria), appearances at the Palermo Piano Festival (Sicily) and the Rachmaninoff Piano Festival (Ibagué, Colombia). Alongside his concert activity, Medvedev is also regularly involved in charitable projects, using his artistry to support social and cultural initiatives.

Nikolay Medvedev continues to captivate audiences with his profound musical expertise, transforming each performance into a remarkable event that blends technical brilliance with deep emotional resonance.

“High-octane virtuosity and cultivation of a long singing line are not enough on their own, though the beauty, colouring and, above all, depth of tone might have persuaded me” – Jeremy Nicholas, *Gramophone*

“There’s something wonderfully unshowy about Medvedev’s performance here, despite the glittering quality” – Michael Beek, *BBC Music Magazine*

“Nikolay Medvedev’s performances are a mesmerizing combination of technical mastery and emotive depth” – Mario-Felix Vogt, *Berliner Morgenpost*



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# FUSIONS

## NIKOLAY MEDVEDEV

Nikolai Kapustin 1937–2020

### Piano Sonata No.2, Op.54

1	I. Allegro molto	9:37
2	II. Scherzo	4:16
3	III. Largo	5:34
4	IV. Perpetuum mobile	3:45

George Gershwin 1898–1937

### 3 Preludes

5	I. Allegro ben ritmato e deciso	1:37
6	II. Andante con moto e poco rubato	3:09
7	III. Allegro ben ritmato e deciso	1:12

Nikolai Kapustin  
from 8 Concert Études, Op.40

8	I. Prelude	1:58
9	II. Reverie	3:13
10	VI. Pastorale	2:42
11	VII. Intermezzo	3:32
12	VIII. Finale	2:28

Earl Wild 1915–2010

### 7 Virtuoso Etudes after George Gershwin

13	"Liza"	3:10
14	"Somebody Loves Me"	3:03
15	"The Man I Love"	2:49
16	"Embraceable You"	3:26
17	"Lady Be Good"	3:29
18	"I Got Rhythm"	2:17
19	"Fascinatin' Rhythm"	1:36

Nikolai Kapustin

20	Variations for piano, Op.41	6:53
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**Total Duration**

**70:17**

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