

Rhapsody in Blue

George Gershwin

George Gershwin, his brother Ira, and the songwriter “Buddy” DeSylva were killing time in a pool hall on January 3, 1924, when Ira, engrossed in the *New-York Tribune*, happened on an article announcing that the bandleader Paul Whiteman, a one-time violist with the Denver and San Francisco Symphonies who was now a leading light of popular music, would shortly present a concert in New York that promised to broaden concertgoers’ conceptions of what serious American music could be. Neither Ira nor his brother was prepared for the article’s revelation that “George Gershwin is at work on a jazz concerto, Irving Berlin is writing a syn-copated tone poem, and Victor Herbert is working on an American suite.” A new Gershwin jazz concerto was news to Gershwin.

A phone call to Whiteman the next day elicited the explanation that the bandleader had been planning such a concert for some time in the future; but a rival conductor had suddenly announced plans for a similar program of pieces drawing on both the classical and jazz styles, forcing Whiteman to move up his schedule. Whiteman also reminded Gershwin that he had broached the idea of such a work a year and a half earlier, when his orchestra had unveiled Gershwin’s song “I’ll Build a Stairway to Paradise” in *George White’s Scandals of 1922*. Later, Gershwin would come around to allowing that there was at least some connection between the two projects, when he wrote of the *Scandals*:

My association with Whiteman in this show I am sure had something to do with Paul’s asking me to write a composition for his first jazz concert. As you may know, I wrote the *Rhapsody in Blue* for that occa-

sion, and there is no doubt that this was my start in the field of more serious music.

He rose to the challenge, although not without extracting certain concessions from Whiteman. Given the short lead time (not to mention the novelty of such a piece), a full-length concerto was out of the question. But Gershwin would commit to a free-form work, a rhapsody of some sort, that would spotlight him as the soloist backed by the Whiteman band, which was to be expanded for the occasion by quite a few instruments. Furthermore, Gershwin was uneasy about the prospect of orchestrating his piece; in his Broadway work, he had always followed the customary practice of simply writing the tunes and leaving the instrumentation to an

IN SHORT

Born: September 26, 1898, in Brooklyn, New York

Died: July 11, 1937, in Hollywood, California

Work composed: January 7–February 3, 1924, with Ferde Grofé (1892–1972) creating the work’s original scoring for solo piano with jazz band; followed in 1926 with the version for solo piano and full symphony orchestra heard in these performances

World premiere: February 12, 1924, at New York’s Aeolian Hall, with Paul Whiteman leading his orchestra, the composer as soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: July 25, 1927, Willem von Hoogstraten, conductor, the composer as soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: April 22, 2014, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Makoto Ozone, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 22 minutes

arranger. “No problem,” Whiteman responded — and promptly informed Ferde Grofé, his staff arranger since 1920, to clear his desk for a new project.

On January 7, Gershwin began setting down notes for his rhapsody, in a score for two pianos — one representing the solo part, the other the orchestra (including certain suggestions about possible instrumentation). Grofé later recalled:

I practically lived too in their uptown Amsterdam and 100th Street apartment, for I called there daily for more pages He

and his brother Ira had a back room where there was an upright piano, and that is where *Rhapsody in Blue* grew into being.

It was Ira, the family wordsmith, who came up with the title, inspired by a visit to a gallery showing an exhibit of paintings by James Abbot McNeill Whistler. Whistler was drawn to titling his paintings — no matter how representational — with completely abstract titles, such as the famous “Arrangement in Gray and Black” (popularly nicknamed “Whistler’s Mother”). The Gershwin brothers took a shine to the concept and

Listen for ... the Clarinet’s *Glissando*



The famous ascending *glissando* with which the clarinet launches *Rhapsody in Blue* is one of the most instantly identifiable sounds in all of music. It is said to have been essentially the invention of Ross Gorman, clarinetist of the Paul Whiteman Orchestra. Gershwin had written the opening measure as a low trill followed by a scale rising rapidly through 17 notes. The tale is told that Gorman, growing either exhausted or bored as the piece began yet again in the course of a long rehearsal, simply elided the disparate notes into a sweeping, rather suggestive ribbon of uninterrupted pitches — after which there was no turning back to Gershwin’s original scale.

A photograph of a handwritten musical score for the opening of "Rhapsody in Blue". The title "RHAPSODY IN BLUE." is written in large, bold, capital letters at the top. Below it, in smaller capital letters, is "FOR JAZZ BAND AND PIANO." To the right, the name "George Gershwin" is written in cursive, with "Jan 7, 1924" written below it. The score itself consists of two staves. The upper staff is for the clarinet, starting with the instruction "slowly" and a "C" time signature. It shows a low trill followed by a rapid ascending scale of 17 notes, indicated by a large slur and the number "17". The lower staff is for the piano, showing chords and accompaniment. There are some handwritten annotations and markings throughout the score, including "Jazz Band" and "red" on the left side.

From top: Ross Gorman, ca. 1920; the opening as notated in Gershwin’s manuscript of *Rhapsody in Blue*

found a musical equivalent in the title *Rhapsody in Blue*. The word “blue” naturally evokes “the Blues,” and, by extension, jazz.

Various aspects of jazz vocabulary certainly are prominent in the *Rhapsody in Blue* — which was the point of the repertoire Whiteman programmed in his “Experiment in Modern Music” — but at heart this is a symphonic work, and its ancestry lies more in the direction of Rachmaninoff,

Tchaikovsky, and Liszt more than Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, or W.C. Handy.

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, two alto saxophones, tenor saxophone, three horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, snare drum, triangle, gong, banjo, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.

In the Composer’s Words

The composition of *Rhapsody in Blue* occupied Gershwin for nearly a month, but it wasn’t his only obligation during that span of time. He wrote:



I was summoned to Boston for the première of [my musical] *Sweet Little Devil*. I had already done some work on the *Rhapsody*. It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattlety-bang that is often so stimulating to a composer ... I frequently hear music in the very heart of noise. And there I suddenly heard — and even saw on paper — the complete construction of the rhapsody, from beginning to end. No new themes came to me, but I worked on the thematic material already on my mind, and tried to conceive the composition as a whole. I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America — of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our metropolitan madness. By the time I reached Boston I had a definite plot of the piece, as distinguished from its actual substance.

Gershwin, ca. 1924