

### **George Gershwin (1898-1937) *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924)**

It's hard to overestimate George Gershwin's influence in creating an immediately recognizable *American* sound, one that still resonates today. He composed over 500 popular songs, many with lyrics by his brother, Ira. Many of these songs have outlived the musicals for which they were written, continuously re-recorded and reimagined by jazz and popular artists in nearly every decade since Gershwin's death: "I Got Rhythm," "Embraceable You," and "Summertime" just to name a few. Gershwin's orchestral works, though fewer in number, have been equally influential. *Rhapsody in Blue*, whether you hear it during a pre-flight safety check, in the concert hall, or accompanying your favorite figure skaters at the Olympics, is hard to escape. But why try? For many, it is emblematic of the spirit, optimism, and kaleidoscope of influences that embody the best of the American spirit.

From the beginning, Gershwin was a uniquely American product. Born in Brooklyn, New York, his parents were Jewish immigrants who left Russia because of growing religious persecution. When he was ten years old, his parents bought a piano for his older brother, Ira, but it was George who fell in love with the instrument. Musically, he was inspired by ragtime, the music of the Yiddish theaters in his neighborhood, and the standard classics he learned from his piano teacher. At age 15 he was accomplished enough to score a job as a song plugger. In an age before recorded music became widely available, song pluggers were expert salesmen, singing and performing new songs at the piano for publishing companies located on legendary Tin Pan Alley. They promoted the sale of songs in printed sheet music form. There was no better training for a budding songwriter, and it wasn't long before Gershwin was plugging his own songs, attracting sufficient attention to place them in Broadway musicals and revues.

*Rhapsody in Blue* is so popular today, that it's hard to imagine that the piece might have been controversial when audiences first heard it in 1924. When he wrote it at age 26, Gershwin was already established as a popular songwriter for Broadway. But he was not yet known as a so-called "serious" composer. The idea of the rhapsody originated with Paul Whiteman, a popular dance bandleader, who was known in the popular press as "The King of Jazz." A consummate self-promoter, Whiteman imagined a grand showcase for himself and his band, one not in the usual dance hall venue, but on the concert stage. Rather audaciously, he called the event an "Experiment in Modern Music." His purpose was both educational and promotional. He hoped to raise the reputation of jazz among concert going audiences, as well as the general public. Whiteman promoted the concert in a press release promising the debut of a new jazz piano concerto by George Gershwin. The only problem was that Gershwin hadn't yet committed to the gig. In fact, he said no. However, when his brother Ira read the press release, they both decided it would be damaging to the young composer's reputation if he didn't come through with the music. Gershwin had to write quickly. Finishing a draft in just three weeks, he then sent the score to Whiteman's arranger, Ferde Grofé, who orchestrated the work for Whiteman's dance band for the premiere, and he later completed a version for full orchestra, which we hear today.

So, what was so controversial? Part of it was Whiteman himself. He had popularized a style of dance music often referred to as “sweet jazz,” with catchy rhythms, tight arrangements, and featured solos. To many, this was the antithesis of real jazz—“hot jazz”—which lived on the edge, emphasizing improvisation and more complex rhythms. These styles were also racially coded: hot bands tended to be black; most white bands, sweet. The idea of Whiteman, literally a white man, as “The King of Jazz,” also did not sit well. Additionally, there was the nature of the concert’s program. In his autobiography, Whiteman wrote that his intention was to illustrate “the advance which had been made in popular music from the day of the discordant early jazz to the melodious form of the present.” In other words, he wanted to show the musical evolution and development of jazz from a “primitive” folk music to a serious art. The concert opened with an arrangement of “Livery Stable Blues,” a tune popularized by the Original Dixieland Jass Band, in which instruments imitated barnyard animals, and it ended with Gershwin’s symphonic jazz concerto, *Rhapsody in Blue*—as well as a considerably less successful jazz arrangement of Elgar’s *Pomp and Circumstance*! Conspicuously absent from the concert were any contributions by black musicians or composers. As musicologist, Esther Morgan-Ellis, has noted, “in order to make jazz acceptable... Whiteman understood that he needed to make it white.”

Stylistically, *Rhapsody in Blue* integrates jazz and blues idioms within a symphonic context in a manner similar to the way Brahms and Liszt did in their so-called Hungarian rhapsodies, which were variations on themes inspired by the music and performance style of the *Romani*. Although pre-composed, such works were meant to sound as if improvised in the moment, much like Gershwin’s work. Perhaps above all, a rhapsody offers the opportunity to show off the virtuosity of the soloist. Gershwin himself played the piano part at the premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue* and audiences were dazzled. On the inspiration for the music, Gershwin writes:

It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattle-ty bang, that is so often so stimulating to a composer – I frequently hear music in the very heart of the 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 in 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.