

Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue"

The Story of a Composition

George Gershwin was born in Brooklyn, New York on September 26, 1898. He taught himself to play the piano at a friend's house by following how the keys moved on a player piano. When the Gershwins finally got their own piano, George surprised everyone by sitting down and playing the songs he had learned by himself.

George liked to compose both classical and popular music, and found a unique way to combine the two. He composed his most famous work, "Rhapsody in Blue", in 1924, the same year he also had a hit show on Broadway. Gershwin also wrote the opera *Porgy and Bess*. He is considered one of the greatest American composers.

"Rhapsody in Blue" shook up conventional music forms. By 1923, the bandleader Paul Whiteman wanted to do something different with jazz- something that would take it out of the bars and speakeasies and into the broader public. He wanted to turn the American dance band into something a bit more prestigious which would be considered worthy of a concert hall.

So Whiteman invited George Gershwin to perform in his "Experiment in Modern Music" show with his Palais Royal Orchestra, slated for February 12, 1924. George's brother, Ira Gershwin, recalled reading an article in the New York Herald on January 4 about the upcoming Jazz concerto, which said that George would be performing. This was news to Ira.

George reports that he had started to consider the idea of writing something that pushed "the limitations of Jazz" the previous December. When working out the theme, he heard it as "a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America." "American Rhapsody" became "Rhapsody in Blue" at Ira's suggestion. Gershwin conceived his famous piano concerto while on a train to Boston. He said at the beginning of 1924: "I had already done some work on the rhapsody. It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattle-ty bang that is often so stimulating for a composer."

Whiteman's show began in the afternoon and carried into the evening. The packed house had already enjoyed a full program of some of the America's finest Jazz. A critic for *Theatre Magazine* wrote, "Mr. Whiteman's jazz concert was often vulgar, but it was never dull." However, it was Gershwin's piece that was the star of the show.

THE GLISSANDO

In music, a glissando (plural: glissandi, abbreviated gliss.) is a glide from one pitch to another. It is an Italianized musical term derived from the French *glisser*, to glide. Some colloquial equivalents are slide, sweep (referring to the 'discrete glissando' effects on guitar & harp respectively), bend, or 'smear'.

Can you hear the glissando in this piece? At what time interval does it occur?



A glissando notation in music.

The two-and-a-half-octave clarinet *glissando* is instantly recognizable today, but was not like much that the crowd had ever heard before. "Rhapsody in Blue" commanded three curtain calls,

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despite the fact that Gershwin had been so rushed to complete the score, he improvised his own piano solo. His manuscript of the music contained blank pages in place of his piano parts. In addition to Gershwin, 18 musicians played a total of 23 instruments at the concert.

Jazz or Not?

Is this Jazz? Critics have been divided on that. Some have suggested that it is a series of songs strung together that can easily be broken up. Maybe that was, to a degree, the point. Gershwin wanted to write something that exemplified America as a melting pot, not to mention to prove his own worth as a serious composer. He did both.

Respected writer William Saroyan said of the piece, it is "an American in New York City; at the same time it is an American in any city... It is also an American in a small town, on a farm, at work in a factory, in a mine or a mill, a forest or a field." New York critic Olin Downes said of Gershwin after the show, "This is no mere dance-tune set for piano and other instruments. This composition shows extraordinary talent, just as it also shows a young composer with aims that go far beyond those of his ilk."

By the end of the year, Whiteman and his orchestra had performed "Rhapsody in Blue" more than 80 times and their recording had sold over a million copies. The success of the song was not lost on Gershwin. Legend has it that when he was speaking with composer John Ireland, Gershwin asked him how often Ireland's rhapsody, "Mai-Dun," was played per year. When Ireland replied, "Three," Gershwin said, "Three. Ah, Mine gets played two or three times per day!"



COMMERCIALIZATION

This song was adopted as the signature music of United Airlines, which used it in commercials and on board their planes starting in 1987. United paid a fee of \$300,000 per year to license the piece. For United, the recognizable and elegant song helped brand the airline as trustworthy while soothing passengers in potentially stressful circumstances. It was a major change from their "fly the friendly skies" campaign which they used pre-"Rhapsody," and remains one of the most iconic uses of music in corporate branding. United was the first company to use the song in commercials.

Some of the media uses of this song include the TV shows *The Simpsons* (in the 2010 episode "Elementary School Musical" and again in 2012 in "The D'oh-cial Network") and *Glee*, and the movies *Poetic Justice* and *Fantasia/2000*. Many older movies featured the song as well, including *St. Louis Blues* (1929), *King of Jazz* (1930), and *The Great Ziegfeld* (1936).

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Your Turn: Read and Answer

Answer the following questions in complete sentences on a separate sheet of paper.

#1

Paul Whiteman often expressed the desire to "make an honest woman out of jazz". By this, he meant to bring jazz to the mainstream. In 1927, Whiteman said about jazz: "I never questioned her honesty. I simply thought she needed a new dress." What did he mean by this? What did the "new dress" symbolize? Did jazz get her new dress? Why or why not?

#2

How did the "Rhapsody in Blue" get its name? What did Gershwin originally plan to name it?

#3

Many critics have suggested that this piece represents critical parts of the American experience. Explain what they mean by this. Be specific. Do you agree? Why or why not?

#4

What is a glissando and what was revolutionary about the way in which Gershwin used it?

#5

What is a "recording" and where does it get its name?

#6

Try to watch the part of the movie "Fantasia" (2000) that includes the "Rhapsody". Do you agree with the way it is portrayed or do you imagine a better way of acting or making a cartoon of this piece? Explain and provide detail.

#7

What most impresses you about Gershwin's life and music? Why?

What difference does a "recording" make?

The piece was originally recorded as an acoustic recording, not an electric one. The original 1924 performance of this song was recorded, and it was released on June 10, 1924. Running a total of 8:59, it took up both sides of a 78-rpm record, and much of the middle section was omitted.

Listen to both parts of the original 1924 acoustic recording online at Internet Archive at <http://archive.org/details/rhapblue1924> and <http://archive.org/details/rhapblue21924>. Use the space below to jot down a few notes on how it sounds and what stands out or what doesn't.

The record was released soon after the piece was first performed and was soon replaced by a much more common electrically recorded record. In 1927, Ferde Grofé re-orchestrated the song, and Gershwin again recorded it with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra. With a slower tempo

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and much better sound quality, this became the most popular version of the song.

Listen to the electric recording at <http://archive.org/details/GershwinRhapsodyInBlue1927> and jot down a few notes on how it sounds to you.

Now compare the two recordings. How do they sound different? Which one do you prefer? Why? Use complete sentences to explain your opinions and reasoning.
