

Rhapsody in Blue, for Piano and Orchestra

George Gershwin

George Gershwin, his brother Ira, and the songwriter “Buddy” De Sylva 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 Symphony orchestras but now a leading light of popular music — would shortly present a concert in New York that promised to broaden concertgoers’ conception of serious American music. Neither Ira nor his brother were prepared for the article’s revelation that “George Gershwin is at work on a jazz concerto, Irving Berlin is writing a syncopated 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, a development that forced 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*. Gershwin would later allow that there was at least some connection between the two projects, when he wrote of the *George White’s 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 occasion, and there is no doubt that this was my start in the field of more serious music.

Gershwin 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 he 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 arranger. “No problem,” Whiteman responded — and promptly informed Ferde

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. In 1926 Grofé followed up with the version for solo piano and full symphony orchestra heard in this performance.

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

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

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 21, 2018, at Bravo! Vail in Colorado, with Bramwell Tovey as conductor and soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 17 minutes

Grofé, his own staff arranger since 1920, to clear his desk for a new project.

On January 7, Gershwin began setting down his rhapsody, notated 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 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 Abbott McNeill Whistler. Whistler was drawn to titling his paintings — no matter how representational — with completely abstract titles, such as the famous *Arrange-*

ment in Grey and Black (popularly nicknamed “Whistler’s Mother”). The Gershwin brothers took a shine to the concept and 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* — this 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 than Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, and W.C. Handy.

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, two alto saxophones and one 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.

Listen for . . . the Clarinet’s Glissando

The famous ascending glissando with which the clarinet launches this piece 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.



The opening notation in Gershwin’s manuscript