

Rhapsody in Blue (arranged & orchestrated by Ferde Grofé)

George Gershwin (1898-1937)

Several composers have attempted to cross the barrier between so-called serious music and jazz. European composers including Stravinsky, Milhaud and Ravel had succumbed to the influence of what was for them an exotic, intoxicating musical style. Few of their works have been as successful or as lasting, however, as one of the earliest: George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*.

The composer would no doubt have been skeptical had someone suggested to him in early 1924 that his next composition was destined to become widely admired as a prime instance of "symphonic jazz." He would, in fact, have been incredulous, because—up until five weeks before its premiere—he was not even sure he would compose the piece. Even once he finally agreed to write a concert piece for piano and jazz band, he was unsure of his abilities to compose symphonic music. He continually sought advice from his harmony teacher.

One evening in January Gershwin was playing pool. His brother Ira sat nearby, reading a newspaper. Ira found a small item that caught his attention: "Whiteman Judges Named; Committee Will Decide 'What Is American Music.'" The article described a concert scheduled five weeks later, on Lincoln's Birthday, in which bandleader Paul Whiteman would present several jazz compositions to demonstrate the vitality of that indigenous American musical genre. The "committee" that was supposed to pass judgement on this new American music consisted of distinguished foreign musicians (unlikely to have much jazz expertise): composer-pianist Sergei Rachmaninoff, violinists Jascha Heifetz and Efrem Zimbalist and soprano Alma Gluck.

The final sentence of the newspaper story particularly surprised Ira: "George Gershwin is at work on a jazz concerto." George had known about Whiteman's projected "Experiment in Modern Music" for some time, but had steadfastly declined to become involved. "I'd rather write songs," the Tin Pan Alley tunesmith had repeatedly told the bandleader. But Whiteman would not accept refusal. He had his press agent place the newspaper story, hoping that a public announcement would force Gershwin to write a jazz concerto.

The next morning the composer phoned Whiteman, intending to refuse to participate. The bandleader, however, managed to convince Gershwin to compose a piece—not a full-blown concerto, but a shorter, freer work. Since there was not much time and since Gershwin had never before written for large ensemble, he happily agreed to entrust to Whiteman's staff composer and arranger, Ferde Grofé, the task of transforming his two-piano score into a piece for piano and jazz band (and, a few years later, into the work for piano and symphony orchestra that is heard at these concerts).

Gershwin worked quickly. He later recalled:

"I was summoned to Boston for the premiere of Sweet Little Devil. I had already done some work on the rhapsody. It was on that train, with its steely rhythms, its rattley-bang that is so often stimulating to a composer—I frequently hear music in the heart of noise—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 musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our national pep, of our blues, our metropolitan madness. By the time I reached Boston, I had a definite plot of the piece, as distinguished from its actual substance."

Whiteman's concert was not so much an experiment in modern music as an experiment in self-promotion. Whiteman had crowned himself "King of Jazz," yet he knew very little about what jazz really was. His music was only tangentially related to the African-American tradition from which true jazz had sprung. Whiteman's ignorance and arrogance combined to produce a questionable aesthetic philosophy for the concert. His manager wrote:

The experiment is purely educational. Mr. Whiteman intends to point out, with the assistance of the orchestra and associates, the tremendous strides which have been made in popular music from the day of the discordant jazz, which sprang into existence about ten years ago from nowhere in particular, to the really melodious music of today which—for no good reason—is still being called jazz.

The newspaper article announced not only Gershwin's participation but also that "Irving Berlin is writing a syncopated tone poem, and Victor Herbert is working on an American suite." Since Berlin could not read music, it was highly unlikely that he could produce any music for jazz orchestra. In fact, Grofé orchestrated three well-known Berlin tunes for the concert. Victor Herbert, near the end of a distinguished career as both a classical and a show composer, did write a composition for Whiteman. And there were several other works presented on the overly long, somewhat pedantic concert.

The "committee" of experts who were supposed to pass judgement on Whiteman's "experiment" was apparently a publicity ploy: their reactions were never reported. But they did inadvertently lend a high degree of respectability to the concert, so that many other famous people attended, including luminaries from the art, music, literary, social, cultural and financial worlds.

The premiere took place on February 12, 1924, New York's Aeolian Hall, Paul Whiteman conducting his jazz band, with Gershwin as the piano soloist.

Grofé's score called for solo piano, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 alto saxophones, tenor saxophone, 2 bassoons, 3 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, cymbals a2, triangle, glockenspiel, bass drum, suspended cymbals, tam-tam, banjo, and strings.

This audience of glitterati sat through a rambling, uneven concert before hearing the work of a 24-year-old composer who had previously been known for his songs and musical shows but who was all but unknown in the classical music world. The afternoon began with what Whiteman, in blatant disregard of history, billed as "the earliest jazz composition." The piece in question, "Livery Stable Blues," had actually become popular only a few years before, in a recording by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, not an African-American band but a group of five white performers. One of the musicians in Whiteman's rendition was clarinetist Ross Gorman, who subsequently stole the show with Grofé's arrangement of "Carnival of Venice." As long as Gorman was on stage, the "experimental" concert was a delight. But it sagged when he was not playing.

Late in the afternoon Gorman returned to play in the *Rhapsody in Blue* band. It was he who performed the famous opening clarinet solo, with its glissando (a continuous smear across several notes). Clarinetists, at least symphonic players, were not supposed to be able to play glissandos. Grofé had not written this wonderful gesture into his original score, but Gorman had whimsically added it during the first rehearsal. Gershwin liked it, and so was born one of the most famous clarinet solos in the orchestral literature.

Even the title *Rhapsody in Blue* was not an integral part of its conception. Ira Gershwin suggested replacing George's original title *American Rhapsody* with one that had occurred to him while visiting an exhibit of Whistler paintings, which included "Nocturne in Black and Gold," "Harmony in Grey and Green," and "Arrangement in Gray and Black" (better known as "Whistler's Mother").

The original title, while less striking, may actually be more reflective of the composer's intent:

"In the rhapsody I tried to express our manner of living, the tempo of our modern life with its speed and chaos and vitality. I didn't try to paint definite descriptive pictures in sound. Composers assimilate influences and suggestions from various sources and even borrow from one another's works. That's why I consider the rhapsody as embodying an assimilation of feeling rather than presenting specific scenes of American life in music."

If *Rhapsody in Blue* is neither symphonic nor jazz nor blues, what is it? It is one of the earliest and most convincing examples of crossover music. It has the infectious melodies and engaging rhythms of the best American popular music of the '20s, and it has the scope and sweep of a romantic concerto. Yet it is neither. It is a true original, rooted in two traditions but belonging to none. Thus it fully deserves its enormous popularity, but for itself, not for its participation in Whiteman's experimental concert nor for its marriage of disparate idioms.

—*Stephen Larmore*