

“Rhapsody in Blue”--George Gershwin, piano; Paul Whiteman Orchestra (1924)

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Essay by Jim Farrington (guest post)*



George Gershwin



Original label



Paul Whiteman

On January 4, 1924, the “New York Tribune” published a small news article announcing that George Gershwin was writing a “jazz concerto.” Ira, George’s brother, brought this news to George’s attention while they were playing pool (according to legend). Months before, Paul Whiteman—the biggest name in popular music at that time—had approached George about writing a work that would feature Gershwin and the band for a concert Whiteman was planning. The concert, “An Experiment in Modern Music,” was to take place on February 12. The commission had completely slipped Gershwin’s mind as he was preoccupied with his latest musical, “Sweet Little Devil,” which was set to open on Broadway later in January. Of course, that concerto ultimately became “Rhapsody in Blue,” which has become arguably the most famous piece of American classical music ever written, and certainly one of the most often recorded.

The “*Rhapsody*” has a complicated musical history. The rushed schedule between the outset of composition and the first performance dictated that Gershwin would need some help. Having never created a concert work such as this before, combined with the unique instrumentation of Whiteman’s ensemble, necessitated that Gershwin leave the work’s orchestration to Whiteman’s chief arranger, Ferde Grofé. Born into a musical family, and having worked with Whiteman’s ever-expanding band for more than four years, Grofé was intimately familiar with each player’s strengths, and how to blend them into interesting textures. Gershwin would compose the work in a two piano score—one for the piano solo, the other representing the band—which Grofé would take, page-by-page as it was finished, and flesh out the individual parts. The challenges for Grofé were significant, and his deft handling of the material in no small way have contributed to the work’s lasting success. Even Gershwin himself had reservations about its publication, believing that the piano part was too difficult for the average player.

The concert itself was held at one of New York City's venerable concert venues, Aeolian Hall. The stated purpose of the exhibition was to show how far "jazz" had progressed, starting with numbers made popular by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band in 1917 (their "Tiger Rag" was inducted into the National Recordings Register in 2002) and progressing through Whiteman's brand of dance band music, culminating with the world premiere of Gershwin's new opus. The concert was widely reviewed in the New York press, with predictably mixed results. Even the "Rhapsody" was not universally loved. Lawrence Gilman of the "Tribune" (who also assailed Gershwin's later works) stated:

How trite, feeble and conventional the tunes are; how sentimental and vapid the harmonic treatment, under its disguise of fussy and futile counterpoint! ... Recall the ambitious piece on yesterday's program and weep over the lifelessness of its melody and harmony, so derivative, so stale, so inexpressive. And then recall, for contrast, the rich inventiveness of the rhythms, the saliency and vividness of the orchestral color.

As a piece of music, the "*Rhapsody*" has had its champions and critics. Some find that the formlessness of the work—which should be evident from the title—weakens it. They find it to comprise random motifs and tunes strung together. Others marvel at the brashness of a young tunesmith—whose claim to fame was composing three to four minute pop songs—successfully crossing into the world of large scale composition. They note that Gershwin's melodic and harmonic prowess is on full display, and that the work's quirky structure does not detract from an otherwise completely enjoyable fifteen musical excursion. Indeed, 31 years after the work's premiere, Leonard Bernstein wrote about it:

The "Rhapsody" is not a composition at all. It's a string of separate paragraphs stuck together. The themes are terrific, inspired, God-given. I don't think there has been such an inspired melodist on this earth since Tchaikovsky. But if you want to speak of a composer, that's another matter. Your "Rhapsody in Blue" is not a real composition in the sense that whatever happens in it must seem inevitable. You can cut parts of it without affecting the whole. You can remove any of these stuck-together sections and the piece still goes on as bravely as before. It can be a five-minute piece or a twelve-minute piece. And in fact, all these things are being done to it every day. And it's still the "Rhapsody in Blue."

On June 10, 1924, Whiteman, his orchestra, and Gershwin made the first recording, captured acoustically, of the "Rhapsody." Victor Records (Whiteman's label) released it as a 12-inch disc on the prestigious blue label. The recording cuts out about a third of the score in order to fit it onto two sides. As if to make Bernstein's point, if one does not follow the score, the absent sections are not necessarily missed. The record opens with perhaps the most recognizable sound in American music: Ross Gorman's low trill followed by a riveting clarinet glissando up to the high concert B-flat. Originally notated by Gershwin as a scalar run, the gliss was improvised by Gorman during a rehearsal, to Gershwin's delight. Indeed, Gorman's clarinet playing throughout is very different from recordings of other clarinetists. The same can be said of Henry Busse's trumpet playing, representing a very different style than heard today.

Many Gershwin biographers have pointed to this recording as being widely distributed, indeed a million-seller. However, as no reliable sales figures exist from that time, this does not seem likely, nor do the royalty statements back up that statement. Three years later, Victor brought Gershwin and Whiteman together again to record the work electrically. That record sold significantly more copies, but again fell far short of the million copies widely touted. It is also interesting that by the time of that recording Gershwin was not happy with the way Whiteman conducted certain sections, and ultimately it was conducted by Nathaniel Shilkret. The later recording also featured Grofé's slightly expanded orchestration. Another historical oddity is that the 1924 recording required only four takes for side one, of which the second was the take released, and the first take for side two was acceptable. The 1927 recording required nine takes for side one and six takes for side two, of which takes eight (side one) and six (side two) were finally deemed acceptable to release.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.