

Program Notes – *Rhapsody in Blue*

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Rhapsody in Blue

GEORGE GERSHWIN

George Gershwin was born in Brooklyn, New York, on September 28, 1898, and died in Beverly Hills, California, on July 11, 1937. He composed *Rhapsody in Blue* in early 1924, and it was premiered on February 12 of that year at New York's Aeolian Hall, with Paul Whiteman conducting his orchestra of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two alto saxophones and tenor saxophone, two bassoons, three horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, banjo, and strings.

Gershwin almost failed to write his most famous work, *Rhapsody in Blue*, because he didn't quite have the courage. It took a lot of persuasion by Paul Whiteman, who had invited Gershwin to compose a serious "jazz concerto," to convince the young man that he not was not merely capable of producing such a work but that he could do it in less than a month—in time to rehearse and perform it himself at a concert already announced for February 12, 1924. When Gershwin objected that he didn't even know how to orchestrate, Whiteman told him that all he needed to do was to sketch the orchestral part and Ferde Grofé would do the instrumentation for him.

Gershwin was busy with the final stages of preparing his songs for a musical comedy, *Sweet Little Devil*, which was about to begin its Boston try-out. But he liked the idea of a "jazz concerto," for he had always had an ambition to write serious music that would incorporate jazz elements. Themes for the concerto began to run through his head, and he seems to have put them together for the first time during the train trip to Boston for the premiere of *Sweet Little Devil*. He recounted:

It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattley-bang that is often so stimulating to a composer. . . . I frequently hear music in the very heart of 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 blues, our metropolitan madness. By the time I reached Boston I had a definite plot of the piece, as distinguished from its actual substance.



Gershwin recalled that he completed the *Rhapsody in Blue* a week after his return from Boston, except for a few of the solo piano figurations, which he simply left out. “I was so pressed for time,” he wrote, “that I left them to be improvised at the first concert. I could do that as I was to be the pianist.” Ferde Grofé completed the orchestration on February 4, and eight days later the concert took place as planned. Aeolian Hall was jammed with famous performers, including Rachmaninoff and Heifetz, with managers, critics from New York and out of town, and composers from Tin Pan Alley and the world of “serious” music. The *Rhapsody* was an overwhelming success and was just controversial enough to generate a tidal wave of publicity.

—Edward Downes

