

George Gershwin: *Rhapsody in Blue*

Many times, when George Gershwin (1898-1937) met a famous classical composer he admired, he would ask them for composition lessons. It wasn't that Gershwin needed extra help with his harmonies and melodies—he had already secured an international reputation as a preeminent songwriter—but rather he was constantly seeking out new sounds and styles that he could incorporate into his music. When he met French composer Maurice Ravel—a great admirer of jazz, ragtime, not to mention Gershwin's musical *Funny Face*—Gershwin hit the master up for some lessons. Ravel gave this request serious consideration, but in the end declined. His response: “Why become a second-rate Ravel when you're already a first-rate Gershwin?”

On a trip to Paris in 1928, Gershwin sought lessons from other established classical composers, including the great Igor Stravinsky. Stravinsky didn't care so much for Gershwin's tunes, but was aware of his enormous commercial success, and so he asked him how much money he made. When Gershwin informed Stravinsky of his yearly income from all the performances, recordings, rental fees, royalties, etc., Stravinsky quipped, “Well then, in that case perhaps it is I who ought to study under you!”

Gershwin grew up in Manhattan's lower east side to Russian immigrant parents. His father was a capable businessman, and this financial acuity covered the cost of a new piano, purchased for George's older brother Ira. But it was young George who commandeered the instrument, and one of the neighborhood piano teachers, recognizing his gifts, took him to classical performances. By the time he finished ninth grade, he had had enough of school, so he went to work full time as a “song plugger”: a music publishing company salesman who promotes the songs by singing and performing them for potential customers. He also began writing his own songs, and by the time he was 20 years old, had composed the music for a full Broadway show.

Although his star was rising quickly as a songwriter, Gershwin aspired to compose larger-scale classical compositions. He took this first big step with his *Rhapsody in Blue* for piano and orchestra. This piece would be part of a program that was billed as “An Experiment in Modern Music,” with the intent to fuse the dance rhythms of jazz with the seriousness of the orchestral concert hall.

It turns out there is not one, but five different versions of *Rhapsody in Blue*. The version that is most widely recognized is the full-orchestra version that was licensed by United Airlines from 1987 until 2001 (when a United Airlines plane struck the World Trade Center's south tower.) And to this day, there are many folks who would identify this work as the airline orchestra song.

So, what are these other four versions, and which one will we hear in tonight's performance? The original version is for solo piano, with no accompanying band or other instruments. (Gershwin himself recorded this for a player piano roll that one can easily find and listen to online.) Composer and orchestrator Ferde Grofé brought the second version to life for the world premiere performance, adding in an ensemble of woodwinds (with lots of saxophones), brass, percussion, banjo, and violins. It is this jazz band version that you will hear in tonight's concert.

Gershwin created a third version for two pianos—one pianist plays the solo piano part, while the other pianist serves as the orchestra. And not long after the premiere, Grofé beefed up the instrumentation for a larger Broadway pit orchestra in a fourth version, adding more woodwinds, strings, and percussion. And after Gershwin's death, Grofé once again orchestrated the work for full symphony orchestra, this fifth version becoming the most celebrated by conductors and audiences around the world.

Regardless of which arrangement you hear, it cannot be denied that Gershwin's music is a timeless American melting pot of pulsing syncopation, bendy blues notes, sweeping melody, and catchy tunes. *Rhapsody in Blue*, with its improvisatory feel and building energy, may even remind you to purchase those airline tickets.

--David H. Johnson

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