

“*Rhapsody in Blue*” From Jazz Orchestral Piece to American Anthem

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This is a Music History course about the creation and performance history of *Rhapsody in Blue* (*RIB*). It is not a Music course, but a History course. Music terms will be used, but any music lover should be able to understand the presentation.

Pre-Course Music Session (1:00-1:30)

- “*Rhapsody in Blue*”, the 5 Browns
- “*Fantasia 2000*”/*Rhapsody in Blue*. Philharmonia Orchestra
- “The Music in George’s Head”, a children’s book by Suzanne Slade. Read by Kurt Elling with the assistance of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Marin Alsop conducting, Jon Kimura Parker on piano, 2020.

Agenda

- 1) Origin of *RIB*: George Gershwin, Paul Whiteman, & Ferde Grofé
- 2) How Gershwin and Grofé crafted *RIB*’s 5 themes and sound
- 3) The performance history of *RIB*
- 4) *RIB*’s place in music

Please print out your hand out or refer to it on the Osher web site. The PowerPoint presentation will note the relevant handout section numbers if you want to follow along and seek more information.

Please wear headphones as they greatly enhance the music.

Q&A’s will be handled via chat at the break and at the end. We will have a break about 60 minutes into the presentation.

1A: Rhapsody in Blue: A Quick Overview

In 1924, the American Classical community looked to Europe for its composers and the 19th Century for its inspiration. In contrast, in 1924 young George Gershwin explained his musical thoughts clearly:

“Music must reflect the thoughts and aspirations of the people and the time. My people are American. My time is today.”

This sums up *RIB* completely. *RIB* was written by, and for, Americans. It was first played in 1924 and reflected the Roaring Twenties. Its subsequent interpretations always reflected the time it was being played. We will hear this in class today.

Rhapsody in Blue (*RIB*) was commissioned by Orchestra leader Paul Whiteman in January 1924. George Gershwin wrote *RIB* in about three weeks while also preparing a Broadway play. Gershwin was assisted on the orchestration and some other musical aspects by Ferde Grof.

It was performed as part of a highly publicized 24 piece concert. Whiteman was the headliner. Gershwin was probably third or fourth on the marquee. But *RIB* overshadowed everything at the concert. The audience loved *RIB*. Rhapsody subsequently became the #1 song in 1924, per *Billboard* Magazine. *RIB* sold over one million records for Whiteman and Gershwin.

Virtually all of the Classical music critics at the debut performance disliked *RIB*. Some gave it scathing reviews. For the next 20 years, *RIB* was generally regarded as a pop tune, not a classical piece. Famous classical musicians and pianists avoided *RIB*, as it was regarded beneath them.

Only after Gershwin's death in 1938 was *RIB* accepted as a Summer Pops piece; played along with John Phillip Sousa marches and show tunes. In the 1980's, many symphonies started playing it in their regular season, though the most prestigious symphonies waited till the end of the 20th Century to do this.

In 1924, *RIB* was an up-tempo piece with intonations of Jazz, Klezmer, and Clave. The orchestra led the piece and the piano offered reflection.

In 1942, a new arrangement was released by Grofe. Conductors had the option to delete/substitute certain instruments if they were not in the orchestra. Most symphonies did not employ jazz/folk musicians such as a banjo, accordion, or saxophone players. These parts were replaced by more string musicians, which orchestras had in abundance. The Jazz instruments were removed, and the Classical instruments were increased.

By the late 1950s, two versions of the 1942 arrangement emerged. The “Pops” and the “Concert” or classical version. The Pops was light and full of pizzazz, though the piano solos may be slower.

The late 50s Concert version of *RIB*'s tempo was slowed by half, and the Jazz, Klezmer, and Clave sounds were muted or cut. The piano dominated *RIB* and the orchestra accompanied the soloist. The piano played what passed for jazzy, while the orchestra sounded classical. *RIB* changed from a daring rhapsody to a romantic rhapsody. America fell in love with this new, slower *RIB*. The late 50's Pops and Concert versions were dominant for at least 20 years.

In the 70s, the original 1924 staged a rebirth. At first, the rediscovered 1924 version was a novelty or an academic exercise. However, by the early 21st Century, younger pianists and conductors adopted the 1924 version and restored *RIB*'s original up tempo and rhythms. Today, both the 1924 and 1942 versions are played and are popular. The choice is jointly determined by the conductor and the pianist.

RIB's popularity continues to grow in the nearly 100 years since its debut. It was one of the 25 most performed songs of the 20th Century (“Happy Birthday” was #1). It was the only instrumental and the only Classical piece to make the list. It is now the most widely performed American composed Classical piece in history.

Along the way, *RIB* began more than a song. It became a symbol of American culture and life. It became an American Anthem.

1B: George Gershwin: 1898-1937

George Gershwin was one of the greatest natural musical geniuses in America and the 20th Century. He was born of Russian Jewish immigrants in New York City. George

was the second of four siblings. All pursued musical careers (despite their parents' lack of interest in music). His older brother Ira was his lyricist from 1924-1937.

His Father's career was starting up and selling small businesses; everything from ladies' shoes, Turkish baths, a pool hall, even a bookmaking venture at Brighton Beach Race Track. His Father wanted to live close to his business. Consequently, the family moved over 30 times, as he bought and sold businesses.

His Mother was extremely interested in material possessions, as opposed to maternal concerns. She reportedly disliked kissing and hugging her children and often beleaguered them. All four of her children spent years in psychotherapy.

1C: George's Musical Education

George's parents bought a second hand piano for Ira (the piano was a status symbol for the Gershwins - Ira was a reader not a pianist). To everyone's surprise, George, the family troublemaker and street urchin, sat down and played several songs on the piano when he was not quite 12. George had already learned the piano by observing a player piano and mimicking its keys. Most old friends and siblings regard that second hand piano not only as key to his true calling, but as his path away from a trouble filled life.

By age 14 (late 1912) he was studying under Charles Hambitzer, who taught him piano technique and harmony, and a foundation in the classics with a crossover into popular tunes. Hambitzer died in 1917. Gershwin also studied composition theory and harmony with Edward Kilenyi from 1915-1920. In 1932, he briefly renewed his composition and orchestration studies under Joseph Schillinger.

All three teachers were well known, but not prestigious. Their training was limited. Gershwin was largely self-taught. He lacked the discipline to be a serious student, and he wanted to play/compose his own music rather than learn how to play from others.

He often asked prominent composers (e.g., George Ravel) or educators (e.g., Nadia Boulanger) to teach him. They all declined, either because they did not regard the request as serious or they did not regard Gershwin as a serious student. George was always in professional demand, and study time was limited. But he recognized his lack of training, and was hurt by the criticisms from the Classical community on this subject.

1D: Gershwin before Rhapsody in Blue

George dropped out of high school by 15 to be the youngest “plugger” or “piano pounder” in Tin Pan Alley (on New York’s 28th street, in the disreputable Tenderloin section) where the music publishing business operated. His \$15 a week job (the average weekly pay in the USA in 1915) was to play a composer’s tune for the publisher, and to arrange the piece instantly upon the publisher’s request by changing the key or tempo. He would also go outside the publishing house and perform new songs at stores as advertising. He quit his job as a plugger in 1917 because ‘the popular song racket began to get definitely on my nerves.’

In September 1917, he landed his first Broadway job position as rehearsal pianist for Jerome Kern’s *Miss 1917*. Jerome Kern was a big composer. Kern helped redefine Broadway shows away from Light Opera and Revues into Musical Comedies.

Gershwin was heavily influenced by Kern and learned a great deal from his compositional craftsmanship. Gershwin would adopt these lessons into his Musical Comedies.

In February 1918, Gershwin was hired as a staff composer for T. B. Harms Publisher, thanks in part to a recommendation from Kern. Gershwin was the youngest composer at the prestigious firm. A year later (1919), Gershwin was hired as composer for his first big Broadway show, *La, La, Lucille!* From 1919 to *Rhapsody in Blue*, Gershwin composed eight largely forgettable Broadway musicals and a one-act opera.

1919 – *La! La! Lucille*

1919 – *Midnight Whirl*

1919 - *Demi-Tasse Revue*

1921 – *The Broadway Whirl*

1922 – *The French Doll*

1922 - *George White's Scandals of 1922* (which briefly included the one-act jazz opera *Blue Monday*)

1923 - *George White's Scandals of 1923*

1924 - *Sweet Little Devil* (opened Jan 1924)

“George White's Scandals of 1922” was the most important musical. It had the biggest hit, “I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise”. The song also was the first in which both George and his brother Ira worked on together. The musical was supported by Paul Whiteman and his Orchestra, which included Ferde Grofe on piano. “

George White's Scandals of 1922” also included the one act jazz opera “Blue Monday”, which was considered the first piece of symphonic jazz, and a forerunner of “Porgy & Bess”. The 20+ minute minstrel jazz opera was completely out of place in the musical revue, and it was dropped after one show. However, it was the genesis of Whiteman’s idea for a Symphonic Jazz concert in early 1924, and thus the spark that led to Rhapsody in Blue. (Whiteman and his Orchestra were the Pit Orchestra for the show).

Gershwin’s biggest career hit came in 1920 when he convinced Al Jolson to use his composition, “Swanee”. Irving Caesar was the lyricist (George composed music and relied on lyricists for the words). The song became the biggest career hit for both Gershwin and Jolson, selling over two million records. It gave Gershwin the financial freedom he needed to compose full time.

1E: Gershwin the Piano Player

Gershwin was dazzling on the piano. He improvised at the keyboard who played his (and other people’s songs) depending on the way he felt at the time. He also changed a piece on to reflect the mood of his audience. George was also quick to add the latest styles and innovations, and was not bound by the notes on the music sheet.

Gershwin started playing just as recording technology emerged. Consequently, many of his recordings are scratchy. But Gershwin was a master pianist based on first-hand accounts, his surviving recordings, and about 140 piano rolls he created.

The songs he wrote and initially played were styled to the tastes of the 1920’s or 1930’s, or the needs of a Broadway play. Since then, his songs were converted into Pop or Jazz standards. We are more familiar with the Pop/Jazz arrangements, not the versions George initially played in the 1920s. As a result, it is difficult to appreciate his piano skills when listening to his early scratchy recordings.

Regardless, it was a great social advantage for a young man to play the piano in the 1920s. It was roughly akin to playing the electric guitar in the 1960s (and you could place Gershwin on the same level social buzz level as Jimi Hendrix). George played the piano for business, pleasure, and social purposes. He greatly elevated his social status through playing at parties and small gatherings. Here are some quotes about George's playing:

“When George sat down at the piano, there was no one who could move you as George could...” - Irving Caesar: Lyricist

“The fact is that in the Gershwin years there was nothing more thrilling than to hear George play the piano. It heightened the sense of being alive.”
- S. N. Behrman: Writer

George played throughout the day and at all social engagements. He rushed to the piano and refused to give up the keyboard, to the chagrin of other performers.

“I'd bet on George anytime in a 100-yard dash to the piano”
- George Kaufman: Playwright, Producer, Director

His standard evening would be to take a pretty woman to a party, then ignore her and play the piano all night to the delight of everyone, except his date:

‘If I had wanted to hear you play, I would have stayed at home and listened to one of your records’
- One of George's dates

“You see, the trouble is, when I don't play, I don't have a good time.”
- George Gershwin

1F: Gershwin: Songwriting and Jazz

Tunes and melodies came naturally to George. Gershwin's creativity was phenomenal. He said music flowed from his fingers when he played. He would play and write down his best themes in a notebook. “I have more tunes in my head than I could put down on paper in 100 years,” he said. Once when he checked out of a hotel and

realized he had left behind sketch-books containing about forty song ideas, he shrugged it off: ‘There are plenty more where those came from.’

He once said he liked to write six tunes a day to get the bad ones out of his system. But writing a song (as opposed to a tune) was work. This required discipline and craft, and partnership with a lyricist.

He had listened to ragtime pianists in Harlem as a boy, assimilating their styles and mannerisms along with the blues-laden soulfulness and rhythmic ingenuity of African-American Blues and Jazz. He knew and played with early jazz/blues pianist such as James P. Johnson and Willie “The Lion” Smtih. He wanted to extend the potential of Blues and Jazz into larger forms.

In a 1933 article called ‘The Relation of Jazz to American Music’, Gershwin defined his fundamental creed behind his concert works (to include Rhapsody):

“Jazz, I regard as an American folk music; not the only one, but a very powerful one which is probably in the blood and feeling of the American people more than any other style of music. I believe that it can be made the basis of serious symphonic works of lasting value, in the hands of a composer with talent for both jazz and symphonic music.”

1G: Jazz in 1924

The Jazz Community was initially quiet in regard to Gershwin and Rhapsody. This is in large part because Jazz was not defined in 1924. There really wasn't a Jazz Community in February 1924.

In many parts of America, Jazz was a simple reference to non-Western music. This included any music with the Blues Scale (which included Blues, Jazz, Gospel, Klezmer, Eastern European Jewish, Gaelic, and many Tin Pan Alley tunes).

Ragtime is today considered a precursor to Jazz. Ragtime's peak was from about 1895 - 1919. Ragtime was precise in its structure (no improvisation), and people listened to it; they did not dance to it.

Stride Piano was gaining popularity in New York, Baltimore and other eastern cities. Stride piano is highly rhythmic because of the alternating bass note and chord action of the left hand, while the right hand plays syncopated melody lines. Early Stride pianists included Willie “The Lion” Smith, James P Johnson, Fats Waller, and Luckey Roberts. Gershwin knew and sometimes played with Johnson and Roberts. In 1924, Stride style was the Jazz music played in New York by young Duke Ellington and Fletcher Henderson .

Improvisational based Jazz (which we now regard as “Jazz”) was created largely by Louie Armstrong and his peers. In early 1924, Armstrong and his peers were a small group largely confined to New Orleans and Chicago. In late 1924, Armstrong would move to New York. His influence would spread to other Jazz pioneers already based in the city.

Jazz, in the 1920s through the 1940s, was open to all races, especially in the Swing Jazz era which began in the mid-1930s. But even in the 1920s, the Stride Piano or Hot Jazz (typified by Armstrong) was dominated by African Americans while the lighter, Sweet Jazz (played by Paul Whiteman) was more popular among White musicians.

Over time, the Hot Jazz strain of music was accepted by Jazz aficionados and musicologists as the “true” Jazz, and Sweet Jazz regarded as a commercialized and watered down substitute. These distinctions only came about after Jazz stopped being the most popular form of music around 1945.

George and his brother Ira wrote music primarily for Broadway or the movies. The songs as written for Broadway sound different from what we are used to. Their songs were adopted and restyled by Jazz and Pop performers because the beautiful melodies, harmonies, and lyrics were appealing to later interpreters. Most of our appreciation for the Gershwin music comes from these Jazz and Pop interpreters.

Gershwin was associated with Whiteman and the Sweet Music (because of Rhapsody in Blue), even though Gershwin knew and played with Stride Pianists. Gershwin never really thought of himself as a Jazz composer. In many ways, Jazz criticism was slower to start, but more unforgiving, of Gershwin than the Classic critics. The decline of Jazz’s popularity led to an elitism that exceeded Classical music’s own elitism.

Gershwin died of an undiagnosed brain tumor; 11 weeks short of his 39th birthday.

1/H A Timeline of George Gershwin's Best-Known Works
The Year the Song was Written - 1921-1937

- 1921 – Swanee
- 1922 – Do it Again, Stairway to Paradise
- 1924 – Rhapsody in Blue, Oh Lady be Good!, Fascinating Rhythm, The Half of It Dearie Blues, The Man I Love
- 1925 - Looking for a Boy, Concerto in F
- 1926 – Someone to Watch Over Me, S' Wonderful, Clap Yo' Hands, Three Preludes for Solo Piano
- 1927 – How Long Has This Been Going On?
- 1928 - An American in Paris, I Got a Crush on You, Embraceable You
- 1929 - Liza
- 1930 – I Got Rhythm, But Not For Me, Bidin' My Time
- 1931 – Of Thee I Sing, Second Rhapsody
- 1932 – Cuban Overture
- 1935 – Porgy and Bess
- 1937 – I Was Doing All Right, Love Walked In, Nice Work If You Can Get It, They Can't Take That Away From Me, Let's Call the Whole Thing Off, A Foggy Day, Love is Here to Stay

1J: Paul Whiteman: 1890 – 1967

Paul Whiteman was the leader of America's most popular orchestra/band in the 1920s. He was also a composer and a classically trained violinist who began his career with the Denver Symphony. However, he left classical music to create a large touring band that alternated between concert and dance music depending on the venue.

Their skills must include the ability to play many kinds of music and many instruments, particular new types of instruments. His orchestra was among the first to use a trap set, which we now call a drum set (snare, base, cymbal, tom-tom). His reed players had to play clarinet, multiple saxophones, oboe, bassoon, and new instruments no longer known to us such as the sopranino, octavin and the heckelphone. These new instruments created a distinctive sound for the orchestra.

Whiteman emerged as America's most popular orchestra just as America was acquiring record players and radios. Typically, there was no more than one of these modern technologies in a home. Thus, the choice of music was often a compromise in the family. Whiteman wanted to play progressive sounds that people might dance to, but not too innovative that might scare off some customers in the household.

1K: Whiteman's Orchestra

Whiteman led an unusually large ensemble and explored many styles of music, by blending symphonic orchestra, fox trots, and early jazz/blues. He hired top musicians from symphonies or other bands and paid them 3-4 times the market rates, if their skills warranted it. Some of his most famous musicians and singers included Bix Beiderbecke, Jack Teagarden, Bunny Berigan, the Dorsey Brothers, Bing Crosby and Mildred Bailey.

The Orchestra (which operated under various names over the years) worked hard to earn their high pay. For example, in January 1924, Whiteman and his orchestra had a nightly gig at the Palais Royale Theater. Located on W 48th Street between Broadway and Seventh Avenue, the Palais Royal was the city's first true nightclub (not a speakeasy). It was known for its exclusivity, unaffordable prices, VIP rooms, dancing, and evening clothes dress code. Whiteman decided to call his Orchestra the "Palais Royal" while doing this long running gig.

In the afternoons of January 1924, he and the Palais Royal musicians served eight performances a week as the pit orchestra for the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1923*. Every morning, Whiteman and the Orchestra would rehearse. In January 1924, they were rehearsing for the February 12 show, "An Experiment in Modern Music".

1L: Whiteman and Symphonic Jazz

Whiteman championed the idea of “Symphonic Jazz”, which blended the sounds of Classical, early Jazz/Blues, and Pop music. He probably created the term. He regarded it as music for all if people would give it a try. In short, he was an early champion of the crossover sound.

Whiteman worked with George Gershwin in 1922 and 1923 and thought Gershwin might fit into his vision of Symphonic Jazz. Whiteman attended an Eva Gauthier recital in November 1923. She was an opera star who, on this occasion, sang both Opera pieces and American tunes (by Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin and George Gershwin – Gershwin was her accompanist).

Whiteman conceived of a similar concert led by his orchestra. He booked a major classical auditorium to perform both new/old Jazz, Pop, and Classical music. Whiteman booked Aeolian Hall for February 14, 1924.

1M: Whiteman convinces Gershwin to Compose *RIB*

Sometime in 1923 (probably in November), following the Gauthier recital), Some historians suggest Whiteman asked George Gershwin to compose a piece for the 1924 concert date. If so, Gershwin begged off, was non-committal, or had forgotten about Whiteman’s request for a Concerto.

According to Gershwin, he learned about Whiteman’s concert, and his supposed contribution on January 3, 1924, while playing billiards with lyricist, Buddy DeSylva.

George’s brother Ira read a notice in the Tribune announcing upcoming George’s concerto. Gershwin was amazed. He was busy on a new Broadway musical, “Sweet Little Devil” It was scheduled to open January 21, 1924. He could not agree to concurrently writing a concerto in five weeks.

Gershwin asked Whiteman why he issued a press release without talking to Gershwin first. The band leader explained:

- (1) Whiteman outlined his concept of Symphonic Jazz and desire to play in a Concert Hall.
- (2) Whiteman said he was in competition with rival Vincent Lopez, who was planning to steal his idea and had already booked a similar venue later that Spring.
- (3) In order to beat out Lopez, Whiteman booked Aeolian Hall for President's Day at \$7,000 (\$114K in today's dollars).
- (4) Victor Herbert, America's leading Light Opera composer and a founding board member of the influential American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP), agreed to contribute an original piece. (The four "*Serenade of Suites*" would be the last Herbert wrote – he died three months later at age 65). This implied ASCAP supported a Symphonic Jazz performance at a Concert Hall.
- (5) The evening would be deemed educational to explore what is modern music (i.e., Jazz) in America, as opposed to a simple concert. This allowed for risk taking.
- (6) Twenty-three pieces would be performed followed by a panel of experts to discuss the educational topic.
- (7) A list of patrons was assembled to back the idea and to lend overall prestige. In theory, they would discuss the educational topic afterwards. The patrons reportedly included composer-pianist Sergei Rachmaninoff, violinists Jascha Heifetz and Efrem Zimbalist, and soprano Alma Gluck (no record exists if this discussion ever took place).
- (8) Critics would be invited to open rehearsals to familiarize them with the contemporary music, generate publicity, and facilitate favorable reviews.
- (9) Whiteman's publicist would create a robust program/brochure for the patrons.
- (10) Gershwin did not have to write a concerto. He could choose any format he wanted.
- (11) Gershwin could utilize Ferde Grofé as an orchestrator. Grofé was Whiteman's piano player and arranger. Gershwin had previously worked with Whiteman and Grofé Gershwin finally agreed.

"It took me three weeks to write "Rhapsody in Blue". I had always wanted to write something blue, and Paul Whiteman inspired."

- George Gershwin

1N: Why a Rhapsody?

He chose a Rhapsody format, which gave him considerable flexibility. A Rhapsody is a single classical piece with interwoven solos called cadenzas. A concerto has three distinct movements with pauses between them, and solos by one of more musicians.

However, *Rhapsody in Blue* adopts many features of a Concerto. Some scholars say it has four sections (similar to a Concerto):

- I. Mold Moderato – Introductory *Ritornello* section
- II. Scherzo – The *Train, Stride, Shuffle* trio
- III. Andante moderato – the *Love* theme
- IV. Finale – *Love, Shuffle* and *Ritornello* plus a big finish

The title Rhapsody in Blue comes from Brother Ira. George originally called it American Rhapsody. But Ira recently saw an exhibition of James Whistler's art, and the paintings inspired him to think of the new name.

1O: Whiteman's Impact on Rhapsody in Blue

... If I'd been willing to wait a few centuries for a verdict on my work, I wouldn't have been so wrought up over the Aeolian Hall concert. But here I saw the common people of America taking all the jazz they could get and mad to get more, yet not having the courage to admit that they took it seriously. I believed that jazz was beginning a new movement in the world's art of music. I wanted it to be recognized as such. I knew it never would be in my lifetime until the recognized authorities on music gave it their approval.

-- Paul Whiteman, 1926

Having Paul Whiteman's Orchestra first perform and popularize "Rhapsody in Blue" was a dual edged sword. The positive aspects:

(1) The Whiteman Orchestra was very capable of performing the piece with little rehearsal.

(2) The Orchestra was also open to Gershwin's innovative style, which would not be true for a major orchestra (this was a honest concern - Gershwin would face passive aggressive behavior from the NY Symphony musicians on the 1926 debut of his *Concerto B*).

(3) They were the most popular band in America, and their name could make Rhapsody a hit (and Gershwin famous).

The negative aspect was that Rhapsody was played by a jazz orchestra, not a symphony orchestra. Any piece written by a "Broadway tunesmith" and performed by a "Pop/Jazz Orchestra" was certain to be rejected by the Classical community, even if it was played at Aeolian Hall.

After February 12, 1924, the Whiteman Orchestra travelled around America and performed Rhapsody 85 times in one year. They sold over a million of records of Rhapsody. Rhapsody was wildly popular in America. Whiteman used Rhapsody in Blue as his Orchestra's theme song. According to some anecdotes, he played Rhapsody over 10,000 times in his career.

However, Rhapsody could not be regarded as a serious classical work if Paul Whiteman and his Orchestra were its musical personification. Whiteman semi-retired from music in the 1940's. After World War II, he made a brief comeback as a personality. He appeared as himself in the 1946 movie "Rhapsody in Blue" and hosted a TV show from 1949-1952.

1P: Ferdinand (Ferde) Grofé: 1892: 1972

Ferde Grofé was an accomplished musician, composer, arranger, and orchestrator. He Orchestrated the 1924 version of Rhapsody in Blue, and the arranged several versions that followed.

Grofé was born in New York in 1892. He came from a musical family. His Father was an actor and singer of light opera. His Mother was a professional cellist. Her father

Bernard Bierlich played cello in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. His Uncle was the concert master of the Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra. Shortly after Ferde's birth, the family moved to Los Angeles, where his Grandfather became the principal cellist in LA Symphony.

Ferde studied music in America and to Germany, but dropped out of normal school at age 14. At age 15, he became a professional musician, mostly piano and violin, but also alto horn in brass bands. He also began to write songs. At age 16 (1909), he joined the Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra, where he remained for ten years. He also played on film sets and in vaudeville houses, cabarets, etc. all over the American Southwest.

During that time, Grofé became pianist and arranger first for some of the earliest jazz bands in Los Angeles. He first met Paul Whiteman in 1917. Whiteman hired him as arranger and pianist in 1920. His first arrangement for Whiteman, "Whispering," became the Band's biggest hit prior to 1924. It became the Band's theme song till 1924. The instrumental record sold a million copies and reached number one on the charts.

Grofé was the first Jazz arranger to use European orchestral techniques. Before his arrangements became well known, some critics regarded Jazz as vulgar entertainment. Grofé's skill and imagination as arranger helped make Whiteman's band the most successful and respected Jazz band in the 1920s.

His most famous piece was "Grand Canyon Suite", written in 1932 and first performed by Whiteman's Orchestra. It was popular in the Pops summer concert community from the 1940-1970s. It was also used in TV shows and movies. His other well regarded pieces include "Mississippi Suite" and "Death Valley Suite".

Grofé left Whiteman in 1932 to become a conductor, and chief arranger for Radio City Music Hall. He composed many film scores. He influenced radio arranging and film scoring as profoundly as he had influenced jazz bands.

1Q: Grofé Working with Gershwin on Rhapsody

Grofé served as Orchestrator for Rhapsody in Blue. Gershwin wrote a two piano score for the piece. This means he wrote the piano solo (Gershwin's part) on one line, and

the Orchestra's part on another line. The Orchestra's part (listed on the sheet music as "Jazz Band" or "JB") was written in piano music format.

Grofé then Orchestrated the "Jazz Band - JB" music. He converted the JB single line into parts for twenty-three musicians who were playing 34 instrument parts. He apparently decided what instruments and musicians were playing the JB part.

Gershwin created the melody and apparently the harmony (some of Gershwin's original surviving music sheets do not have harmony on them, and some authors suggest Grofé either created the harmony in these sections or Gershwin verbally relayed his thoughts to Grofé).

Grofé part in the creation of Rhapsody is key. He decided which instruments would play the notes. For example, he picked the clarinet for the opening notes. This is based perhaps on the skill of the clarinetist as well as the sound of the clarinet. He also added musical intonations such as the volume needed on a note, or special techniques such as a "wah-wah" sound by the trumpet or mutes in the horns.

Grofé crafted other arrangements of Rhapsody in Blue. An Orchestrator does not change the melody or Harmony. The Orchestrator takes the composers score and writes notes for each instrument.

1R: The Musicians and Instruments at the 1924 Concert

Below is a list of the Whiteman Orchestra's musicians and the instruments they played, based on Grofé's 1924 score:

Woodwinds

Ross Gorman: Sopranino, E-flat & B-flat soprano saxophones, alto saxophone, B-flat clarinet, E-flat soprano clarinet, alto & bass octavin clarinets, oboe, heckelphone

Hale Byers: B-flat soprano saxophone, tenor saxophone, baritone saxophone, flute

Donald Clark: B-flat soprano saxophone, alto saxophone, baritone saxophone

Brass

Henry Busse: trumpet and flugelhorn
Frank Siegrist: : trumpet and flugelhorn
Roy Maxon: trombone and euphonium
James Cassidy: trombone and bass trombone
Gus Helleburg: tuba

Keyboard

Ferde Grofe: piano
Henry Lange: piano and celeste

Rhythm

Michael Pingatore: banjo
George Marsh: trap set, drums, timpani

Strings

Albert Armer: string bass
Alex Drasein: violin (concert master)
George Torde: violin
Robert Berchad: violin
Kurt Dieterle: violin
Joseph Streisof: violin
Jacl Eaton: violin
Bert Hirsh: violin
Mario Perry: violin, accordion

2A: Part II – How Gershwin and Grofé crafted *RIB*'s 5 themes and sound

George Gershwin composed Rhapsody using tunes he had previously played and wrote in his note book. Sometime on a train ride (believed to be a train to Boston around January 7), the overall framework and layout of Rhapsody came to him while he listened to the background noise of travel. He once said, “I frequently hear music in the very heart of noise”.

George was not hearing new music when he composed Rhapsody. He had many tunes in notebooks and in his head. “When I am in my normal mood, music drips from my fingers.”

George decided to use music already in his head, and weave it into a Rhapsody. But music and tunes were far from a Rhapsody. There was work to be done. “Writing music is not so much inspiration as hard work.”

2B: The Five Themes and the Tag Tune

George built his Rhapsody from 5 existing themes and a “tag tune” (a repeating tune that serves to connect other parts of the music). The themes were strengthened by a variety of inspirations including Jazz, Blues, Klezmer, Clave and Romantic Classical music. The five themes are:

- I. *Ritornello* (Italian music word for “return”, this a short musical theme that keeps returning)
- II. *Train* theme
- III. *Stride* theme
- IV. *Shuffle* theme
- V. *Love* theme

The tag tune is called “*Good Evening, Friends*” (*GEF*). Later in 1924, the Gershwin brothers would convert *GEF* into the song “*The Man I love*”

2C: Observations on the 1924 Recording of *Rhapsody in Blue* (*RIB*)

- The recording shortens *RIB* to 9 minutes 10 seconds, to fit onto both sides of a 78 RPM.
- The cuts the Shuffle theme, Gershwin’s log piano solo, and part of the Finale.
- Grofe was the Arranger of the shortened version.
- The recording is more up-tempo than later versions.
- Recorded by Victor Records in June 1924. Victor recorded the music by running three conical tubes from the piano and band to a single carbon microphone. A

carbon microphone may also record background noise, or may be distorted with crackle.

- Victor recorded at a slightly higher RPM rate in order to capture more of *RIB* onto both sides of the 76 RPM – this may account for some of the faster tempo.
- But *RIB*, as played in the 1920s, was more up tempo than played today – we know this from the *RIB* piano rolls Gershwin created in 1924. Gershwin was contracted to play a piano device which mechanically created a piano roll of *RIB* for sale.
- In this recorded version, the Orchestra carries the themes. This is necessary, in part, because Gershwin’s piano solo was cut out.
- The Piano foreshadows the themes, or provides reflection and counterpoint
- The Orchestra is “jazzy”, the Piano is “classy”.
- Klezmer is more prominent than in later recordings (especially in the *Train* section)
- The Love Theme uses a Foxtrot, which is not heard in recordings past 1930.
- The caesuras / breaks are pronounced than modern versions.
- Horns and reeds provide the harmonies; the percussion is restrained.

2D: The February 12, 1924 - Audience and their Reaction to *RIB*

The 1100 seat Aeolian Hall was packed for the 3:00 PM start. Demand for the tickets exceeded seats. Paul Whiteman was nervous about the show and his financial stake. Before the show, he looked around the front of the Hall and saw people lining up for the few remaining tickets. This eased his financial worries, but increased his musical worries, as he feared a deficient performance and criticism.

“An Experiment in Modern Music” featured twenty-three pieces by 18 composers. (Some historians count 26 pieces, but this difference is traced to whether you count Victor Herbert’s “A Suite of Serenades” as one suite or four separate serenades) .

The music opened with the first recorded Jazz piece, “Livery Stable Blues”, which was picked to show how far Jazz had progressed since its 1917 recording. The concert moved through a variety of modern and semi-classical composers such as Jerome Kern, comedic jazz composer Zez Confrey (who performed), Irving Berlin, and light opera

great Victor Herbert, who provided his last composition before passing away three months later. After song number 22, some audience members started to leave as the show had dragged on and the concert hall's ventilation system had its problems.

Then a tall, handsome man strode to the piano. He nodded to the conductor, who in turn pointed at the clarinet player. Ross Gorman trilled his B flat clarinet and unleashed something between a wail and whoop over a 17 note crescendo that is known as a glissando.

Nothing like it had ever been heard before.

The room was transfixed. Departing patrons returned to their seats.

Within seconds after the clarinet introduction, a muted trumpet followed with a similar note pattern, but with a "wah-wah" sound. Other instruments followed, but the Rhapsody changed keys and altered tempos, making the tune sound fresh, different and familiar.

Then George Gershwin joined in. Gershwin, the young piano player that people heard about, but few actually heard. His playing was invigorating and intoxicating. He did not follow any pre-established styles. He crossed over and captured many styles at once.

The piece dashed forward and enthralled the crowd. This was radically different than Classical music, Ragtime, early Jazz, and Tin Pan Alley music. It blended them all in and made a new style.

Whiteman, who was extremely nervous before the show, started to cry during Rhapsody. The piece ended and the audience insisted on three long ovations for Gershwin and the Orchestra before the moving on to the final piece: a seemingly out-of-place "Pomp and Circumstance No. 1" by Elgar.

The concert achieved everything Whiteman and Gershwin hoped for. The audience loved it. New York, and later the world, fell in love with it. Only the critics hated it.

Ah, critics.

2E: Criticism from Classical Media

Twenty-three of Twenty-five critics panned the February 12, 1924 performance. Some made only a passing reference to *Rhapsody*. Those that did, noted the glissando introduction and catchy melodies. Virtually all regarded it as an unstructured piece by an unknown composer with no training.

Once Gershwin made the connection between jazz and the concert-hall (beginning with *Rhapsody in Blue*), he led to a dual career of popular music (mostly Broadway Shows) and concert works such as. After *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924) Gershwin composed the Classical pieces *Concerto in F* (1925), *Three Preludes for Piano Solo* (1926), *An American in Paris* (1928), *Second Rhapsody* (1931), *Cuban Overture* (1932) and *Variations on 'I Got Rhythm'* (1934), *Porgy and Bess* (1935) and *Catfish Row* (1936) .

All of these pieces came under attack from Classical critics eager to pounce on structural deficiencies. Gershwin was well aware of his situation. He was admittedly weak on counterpoint, orchestration, compositional structure, and other areas that composers paid their dues on. He was largely self-taught song-plugger now putting works called 'Rhapsody' or 'Concerto' before the public. "When my critics tell me now and then I betray a structural weakness," he said, "they are not telling me anything I don't know."

Gershwin's did not study at a Conservatory, nor under a great teacher. In January 1924, he had no experience composing or performing Classical works. One typical criticism came from publisher, journalist and critic Isaac Goldberg (who received a BA, MA and PhD from Harvard and spoke six languages), who wrote that Gershwin in January 1924 was a musical simpleton who "knew no more about music theory that could be found in a ten-cent manual."

Also implied, or sometimes bluntly stated, was that he was from a Jewish immigrant family or of modest means. Critics were indirectly scornful that he worked as a youth and soon became successful at Tin Pan Alley and Broadway.

The Classical Community in the 1920s was in search of the first Great American Born Classical Composer (a vacant position at that time). They envisioned a man from an

upper class background, who studied at a prestigious conservatory, and did not need the money. They wanted the composer to be inspired by then popular 19th Century European Classical music.

Gershwin was from a petite bourgeoisie first immigrant family, who left school at 15, made lots of money, and was known for writing *Swanee*, a minstrel tune song by Al Jolson.

Some critics were unsure about the bold new direction of Gershwin's work, and the wonderful melodies beloved by the audience. Gershwin was inspired by American music of his time. He tried to mix modern American music with Classical music. He was a crossover artist. Many critics disliked the innovation and the popular response to his music. Most critics were appalled at the idea of crossover music.

During his lifetime, Gershwin's popularity peaked in 1932. But after 1932, classical music critics were pummeling him, Broadway (his primary employer) was falling victim to the Depression, and the movie industry was slow to use his talents. However, Jazz/Swing/Pop artists were starting to give his songs a new life. He produced music that later became jazz/pop/classical greats. This rebirth would last decades after his death, and make the Gershwin Songbook one of the most valuable in history.

Intermission: Music and Chat Q&A

- *Rhapsody in Blue*, Performed by Duke Ellington and his Orchestra in 1963. Arranged by Billy Strayhorn. (4.5 minutes)
 - Chat Q&A
 - Please put your headphones for the second half – *lots of music!*
-

Part III – The Performance History of Rhapsody in Blue (RIB)

3A: New Arrangements and Changes to RIB

An Arranger may change any part of the piece (tempo, harmony, etc.) as long as the melody is preserved (this is true except for jazz – anything goes in jazz). Ferde Grofé made several arrangements of *Rhapsody in Blue (RIB)*. Grofé most important arrangements of Rhapsody were:

- (a) 1924 and 1926 – shortened versions for 78 RPM recordings
- (b) 1926 – for a “pit orchestra” with less “folk instruments”
- (c) 1942 - for a band without piano
- (d) 1942 – the Pops/Orchestral, which is the version most of us are familiar with.

3B: Comparing the Instruments used in the 1924 and 1942 Versions

The following compares the instrumentation between the 1924 (Original), and 1942 (Pops/Orchestra) as scored for each version. (The number after the instrument indicate how many parts there were for each instrument – for example, 2 trumpets means a 1st trumpet and a 2nd trumpet part.):

1924 Original (Jazz Band) Version

Woodwinds (all played by 3 musicians in Whiteman’s orchestra): flute, oboe, clarinet in E-flat, clarinet in B-flat, alto clarinet in E-flat, bass clarinet in B-flat, heckelphone, sopranino saxophone in E-flat, soprano saxophone in B-flat, alto saxophone in E-flat, tenor saxophone in B-flat, baritone saxophone in E-flat, alto & bass octavins.

Brass: 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 flugelhorns, 2 trombones, euphonium, tuba.

Rhythm: banjo, drums, timpani, trap set.

Keyboards: 2 pianos, celesta, accordion.

Strings violins and string bass.

1942 Pops/Orchestra Version

Woodwinds: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets in B-flat and A, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 2 alto saxophones in E-flat, tenor saxophone in B-flat.

Brass: 3 horns in F, 3 trumpets in B-flat, 3 trombones, tuba.

Rhythm/percussion: banjo (optional), timpani, crash cymbal, snare drum, bass drum, gong, triangle, glockenspiel and cymbals.

Stings: first and second violins, violas, violoncellos and double basses.

Keyboard: Soloist plus a second piano as a substitution for other instruments.

The 1942 orchestral version (vice the 1924 version) reduced the number and variety of reed instruments. Conductors often went further and used strings with a second piano in lieu of the saxophones and banjo. This changed key passages, such as the beginning of the *Love Theme*, which was led by saxophones in 1924. In the 1942 version, the celesta and accordion were replaced by glockenspiel and a triangle. Individual percussion instruments replaced the trap set (i.e., the standard drum set). Most symphonies chose the 1942 version, and made the instrument changes noted in this paragraph.

3C: Classical Interpretations of Rhapsody

From 1920's - 1990s, prominent Classical pianists were often discouraged from performing *Rhapsody*. The most prestigious pianists of the 1930s-1960s, such as Rachmaninoff, Gould, Horowitz, Rubinstein, and Van Cliburn did not record or perform his works. They were told by their managers or recording executives it would damage their careers to do so.

Those who did record it were either pianists who did not attend conservatories (such as Oscar Levant) and became known as Gershwin specialist, or were Pianists/Conductors who also needed to sell albums for their orchestras (such as Leonard Bernstein, Andre Previn, or James Levine).

3D: The 1942 Arrangement: Pops versus Classic Versions

Conductors and pianists provided their own interpretation on the 1942 orchestral version of *RIB*. At first, most stayed with the faster tempo, Jazzy style played by George

Gershwin and adopted by Oscar Levant. However, this up tempo original style faded as two distinct paths emerged in the late 1950s:

1. The lively, upbeat “Pops” version associated with Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops (BPO). His style kept the tempo up, but scaled back on the Jazz. It was peppy, fun, and fast. The BPO interpretation became synonymous with summer outdoor concerts.
2. Alternatively, was the slower “Classic” version found in concert halls. This was championed by Leonard Bernstein. His piano solo added over three minutes to RIB, even after cutting out some of the orchestra’s Jazzy parts (the *Shuffle* theme and the *Kittens on Keys* section). It was slow, bluesy and romantic.

There is no correct way to play RIB. It is up to the performer or listener to make their own choice on the best version.

3E: How Challenging is Rhapsody in Blue for a Pianist?

As a piano piece, *RIB* is rated Licentiate (LTCL) by Trinity College in England. Trinity divided classical piano pieces into three categories. LTCL is regarded as mid-level of technical difficulty. Trinity believes *RIB* can be performed by a pianist who completed full-time study at a conservatoire or British university “Level 6”). See the link for a list of piano pieces in the three categories:

<https://www.trinitycollege.com/resource/?id=8546>

3F: Oscar Levant / Eugene Ormandy

Oscar Levant was the first person to record Rhapsody in Blue after Gershwin. In 1925, Brunswick Records scheduled a recording session. However, the planned pianist did not show up. Levant, then a struggling pianist mostly working at night clubs, stepped in.

Shortly after this, Levant visited Gershwin at his apartment. George critiqued his performance. Oscar was quick to admit George's was better. But they became friends as they had similar backgrounds, and Levant's quick wit made for good company.

Levant often served as second piano to Gershwin in many concerts, and went on to be a lasting Gershwin champion after his death. Levant was recognized as the premier Gershwin performer and champion in the 1940's.

Levant's 1945 recording with the Philadelphia Orchestra is regarded as his best Rhapsody. The recording is considered true to Gershwin's original version: very up-tempo and jazz influenced. Ormandy adopted the original 1924 sound, if not the 1924 arrangement. This interpretation was the dominant version until Fiedler and Bernstein's 1959 version.

3G: Earl Wild / Arturo Toscanini/Arthur Fiedler

Earl Wild was a popular pianist who was highly regarded by his peers. Born in Pittsburgh in 1915, he was a child prodigy who played for Herbert Hoover at age 15 (and every subsequent President through LBJ). But he could not financially afford to compete in contests or tour concert events. He needed a steady job during the Depression, and he learned his craft (performing, arranging and orchestrating) working at radio studios. He was the also first pianist to play live on television and internet.

In 1937, Wild became the staff pianist for NBC radio. In 1942, Wild performed Rhapsody in Blue on short notice, with the NBC Radio Orchestra on an "All American Music night". Conductor Arturo Toscanini was unfamiliar with Jazz, and perhaps Gershwin. His interpretation was slow and drags by comparison to the original. The tempo seems too constant. To the listening public in 1942, Toscanini was the star, and the featured attraction was clarinetist Benny Goodman (who flubbed some notes). Toscanini's slow tempo with little jazz influence (and no klezmer) became the alternate interpretation to Levant/Ormandy's version.

Fortunately, the young Wild provided a memorable and celebrated interpretation to the nationwide audience. The next day, Wild became viewed, in his own words, "as a great authority" on Rhapsody, even though he had played it less than a week in his life.

This performance linked Wild to Gershwin throughout the pianists long, celebrated career.

Wild became a famous pianist on the concert/recording circuit. He played *Rhapsody in Blue* several times with Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops Orchestra (BPO). Their 1959 recording was a top seller. Wild played *RIB* like a classic concerto, with great variances in intonation and touch for dramatic effect. The BSO played a complete *RIB* (i.e., no cuts) at a pace close to Whiteman's. But BSO scaled back the Jazz, Klezmer and Clave sounds.

The Wild/Fiedler recording became the benchmark for many Pops orchestras. Here is the link for the 1959 Wild/Fiedler recording:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJoeufw0bA0>

3H: Leonard Bernstein

Leonard Bernstein also recorded *Rhapsody* in 1959. Bernstein was the Conductor of the New York Philharmonic, which was the first of the Big Five American Symphonies (New York, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and Cleveland) to play *Rhapsody* on its Season Subscription as opposed to the Summer Pops Schedule. He was also the first American born to be the music director of a big five orchestra. He lived a considerable portion of his life in New York City.

Despite his American and New York City background, Bernstein seemed to disparage Gershwin and *Rhapsody* as serious Classical piece. Bernstein wrote a 1955 article about Gershwin and *Rhapsody* for *The Atlantic Monthly*. He said:

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. "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".

This was, and is true. Rhapsody is often cut into smaller parts to make shorter songs or for commercial use (e.g., United Airlines ads). But the same could be said for music by Tchaikovsky or Copeland. Good music invites this. From an academic standpoint it is not clear why Bernstein wrote this. It was very unkind to say it. Perhaps he was trying to protect his reputation before recording Gershwin. Some people note that Gershwin's career at age 37 exceeded Bernstein's at age 37 (in 1955 Bernstein had yet to be appointed to the NYPO position, nor write *West Side Story* or *Mass*).

Bernstein's interpretations of Rhapsody are noted for their slower pace and rich rubato. Bernstein's 1959 version (on which he plays piano and conducts the CBS Orchestra – mostly NYPO musicians) is more than three minutes longer than the Levant/Ormandy recording. This extra time is after Bernstein deleted the *Shuffle* and *Kitten on Keys* segments (about 75 seconds of music), which are some of the most Jazz influenced parts of *RIB*.

Where did Bernstein add the extra time? In his piano solos, which are typically 50% longer than Levant or Gershwin's. Bernstein's solos do not add notes; they add pauses and rubato to extend the notes. A comparison on the pace of Levant/Ormandy versus Bernstein's recordings:

Levant's piano solo (following the *Train/Stride/Shuffle*) is two minutes ten seconds; Bernstein's is three minutes six seconds.

Levant/Ormandy's *Love Theme* section is two minutes five seconds; Bernstein's is three minutes six seconds.

Levant/Ormandy's total time for *Rhapsody* is twelve minutes thirty-five seconds (with some minor trims). Bernstein's (with two significant cuts) is sixteen minutes thirty-five seconds

Some music experts, such as David Schiff, suggest Bernstein removed the 1920's energy and pulse, and imposed his own personal stamp onto the piece – making it Bernstein's *Rhapsody*, not Gershwin's.

This criticism of Bernstein's interpretation came from some purists in the late 1950s (a small group) and from academicians/critics years later. At the time, Bernstein was the definition of Classical music for the part of America who bought *RIB* albums. Bernstein's slow, bluesy rubato sound was more attune with the late 1950s romantic/Pop music than Gershwin's Roaring 1920s, which was more fast paced. America loved this version in 1959 and for years to come.

There is no right or wrong way to play *RIB*. It's sound changes with the time and tastes. Bernstein produced a beautiful interpretation in 1959. The key point here is Bernstein's stature and the success of the 1959 recording led others to adopt his slower, less Jazzy version of Rhapsody.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jVh5cZ_ZvM

Bernstein's 1958: Accompanying notes (timed to the music)

- 0:00- The Clarinet glissando intro to *Ritornello*, a chromatic melody with triplets. The theme is repeated with new instruments playing in different keys, with beautiful harmony: Key change from B flat Major to E Flat Major, a hint of the *Stride* theme from the French Horns.
- 0:55 - The muted trumpet repeats the *Ritornello* after another key change to A Flat Major.
- 1:04 Piano opens with *Good Evening Friends (GEF)* in D Flat
- 1:14 - A key change by the orchestra to G Flat Major as the *Ritornello* returns.

- 1:29 - Followed by a *Ritornello* piano solo with *GEF* at varying tempos...the piano and orchestra mix *Ritornello* and *GEF* ...serving as a transition to another theme
- The *Ritornello* piano solo undertakes two harmonic changes in its first minute, making the piece sound dynamic, even if it is the same melody.
- 2:26 – The Baritone Clarinet provides counterpoint to the piano.
- 3:07 – Themes never end; they simply transition into another theme. At this point, the piano transitions from *Ritornello* to a 30 second accelerating prelude to the *Train* Theme.
- 3:43 - The Orchestra thunderously returns back to *Ritornello*. At this point in time, Bernstein's romantic, laconic phrasing results in a *RIB* that is almost a minute slower than Gershwin and Lovant's versions.
- 4:10 –*Train* theme led by the trumpets signaling the noise of the city. The orchestra still shows influences of Jazz/Blue on melody, though the Clave rhythm and Klezmer tones are very faint. The New York City images come to life with the trumpets and soaring clarinet conveying the hustle and excitement of nightlife. The strings (as opposed to the saxophones in 1924) play the city's street noises in the background. The novelty piano shows complex syncopation and harmony.
- 4:36 - The *Train* fades away with an ascending scale by piano, to a clarinet and piano led *Ritornello*
- 4:54 – *Stride* Theme melody bursts forward, led by brass with piano block chords
- 5:20 - but the *Stride* theme ends “early” with the clarinet, muted trumpet, and muted trombone playing the *Ritornello* theme
- (Bernstein cuts from *RIP* the 70 second *Shuffle* theme)
- 5:39 – *Stride* Theme Piano solo begins. The pace is slower and tone softer than used by the orchestra on 3 minutes earlier; it seems different but familiar. The Good Evening Friends tag is used to alter theme
- 6:35 – French horns provide 30 seconds of harmony to the piano solo
- (Bernstein cuts from *RIP* a 35 second Orchestra/piano interplay on *Ritornello*, in a comic style (kitten on keys) with Sax providing Klezmer sounds)
- 7:29 – Piano quietly completes *Ritornello* and performs a glissando

- 7:56 – Piano plays a slow *Shuffle* as a transition. The pace is very slow. The piano solo adds many reflective passages.
- 9:00 – The piano performs a half step slide to move to a higher key and *Shuffle* picks up a speed quickly.
- 9:37 – Climax reached on the *Shuffle* piano theme. Transition to the next theme, with a pause at 10:08.
- 10:11 – *Love* Theme begins. Strings, horns, and reeds have the melody and harmony. French horns provide the counterpoint theme. The theme is rich in romantic tones, and slow graceful movements. The fox-trot of 1924 is gone.
- 11:00 - *Love* Theme continues with a 14-second Violin duet solo
- 11:15 – *Love* Theme continues with trumpets, horns, and strings on melody; the piano leads the counterpoint.
- 12:01 - *Love* Theme fades away as the orchestra's pace picks up with the plucking of strings.
- 12:10 – Piano drifts into a rich, romantic *Love* Theme solo
- 12:59 – The *Love* Theme pace speeds up and the *Love* Theme evaporates
- 13:15 – Novelty piano playing teletype sounds, intermixed with the *Good Evening Friends* tag
- 14:10 – the piano glissando (reminiscent of the clarinet's opening of Rhapsody) marks the return of the orchestra led by the brass, as it plays the *Ritornello*. At the same time, the piano continues with its Novelty play. The Orchestra and piano eventually unite for a climax.
- 15:10 – the *Stride* Theme returns with block chords by piano and orchestra
- 15:53– *Ritornello*, *Good Evening Friends*, and the closing chords finish the Rhapsody

3I: Andre Previn

Andre Previn had four successful musical careers after fleeing Nazi Germany at age 8 in 1938.

In 1946, he started work in the film industry, composing music and becoming a music director. He worked on fifty films and won four Oscars.

In the mid 1950's he decided to become a jazz musician (or as he described himself – a musician who plays jazz). He was successful at this, too (while occasionally working in films). He formed his own touring trio, recorded records and accompanied many famous jazz singers.

In the early 1960s, he became a Classical concert pianist. Once again, he was successful. His jazz background and general notoriety made him an attractive recording and concert attraction.

Starting in 1967, he pursued conducting. He was music director of the Houston Symphony Orchestra, the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and the Oslo Philharmonic, as well as the principal conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. He also composed classical music.

Previn had two notable recordings of Rhapsody in Blue. Both were praised for his reintroduction of jazz flavorings into the piano playing, as well as their slightly faster tempo. They offered a slight variant to the Fiedler/Bernstein interpretations. In 1960, he recorded with Andre Kostelanetz “and his Orchestra” (the New York Philharmonic). In 1971, he recorded with the London Symphony, where Previn was both Conductor and Pianist. Below is the link to the 1971 recording with the London Symphony:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcmIZpodNX0>

3J: Gary Graffman / Zubin Mehta

Gary Graffman was among America's greatest pianists in the 1940s through the 1970s. He graduated from the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music at age 17, and immediately became a soloist for the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy. He also studied under Rudolf Sorkin and Vladimir Horowitz. He won competitions and made celebrated recordings.

Unfortunately, a hand injury forced him into retirement in 1980 at age 51. He turned to teaching at the Curtis Institute, and eventually became President of the Institute.

Shortly before his retirement, Graffman recorded *Rhapsody* with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra (NYPO) under the direction of Zubin Mahta in 1979. The recording was for the Soundtrack Album for the film “Manhattan” (the Album employed Graffman; the film employed pianist Paul Jacobs, who was official pianist for the NYPO from 1961 - 1983). Stanley Drucker is on clarinet. Here is a link to the recording:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzLxgWfCVOY>

Mehta/Graffman were one of the first performers to record the complete *Rhapsody*. Other performers made cuts to fit *Rhapsody* onto the 76 RPM record, to squeeze other pieces onto the album (and hopefully boost album sales), or to allow for their own interpretation of *RIB*. The Mehta/Graffman interpretation is often considered the best recording of a 1942 version.

3K: The Rebirth of the 1924 Version

The 1924 version slowly emerged again, starting in the early 1970s. Most of the initial interest was academic, or as a novelty performance piece. Major symphonies or recording companies stayed with the 1942 version. It was the version American audiences regarded as the true *Rhapsody*, and they were not going to change success.

As the Twentieth Century ended, the 1924 version shifted from an academic/novelty piece into an attractive performance piece. Much of the change was championed by new artists who were not encumbered by old perceptions of *RIB* status as ‘not quite classical music’. Some of these artists were from overseas, new to their positions, or just younger.

Regardless, the 1924 version brought back saxophones and banjos, and sometimes smaller orchestras (though conductors still loved their string sections). Some orchestras

played RIB at a faster pace, while other pianists stayed with Bernstein's slow piano solos, which were now called jazzy/blue. Some orchestras played the 1924 version, but with full orchestras operating at a slower pace which made their interpretation sound like a 1942 version.

3L: The Gershwin Piano Rolls and Michael Tilson Thomas

George Gershwin had a weekend job when he was young. Gershwin made 140 piano rolls of published music from 1915-1921 and 1925-1927. He would travel to New Jersey on Saturdays and produce seven rolls for \$35, which equates to ~\$700 in 2021 dollars.

Most piano rolls produce an odd performance sound which was largely defined by how the piano was powered (foot power versus electrical mechanical). Most mechanical pianos operated at a constant tempo.

Gershwin would enliven the piano roll song (whoever wrote it) with his own interpretations. He might change the key or add some syncopation, even if that was not in the composer's score. These Gershwin touches added flair, and made his piano rolls more popular (and earned him more pay).

In 1925, Gershwin recorded a piano roll of *Rhapsody in Blue*. He played it solo piano - both the piano and Orchestra sections. These rolls were remastered in the early 1970's.

Michael Tilson Thomas is an innovative and accomplished the Conductor associated at various times with the Boston Symphony, Buffalo Philharmonic, New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, London Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, and the New World Symphony. He has won 11 Grammy awards, a Peabody Award, a National Medal of Arts, and a Kennedy Center Honor.

In 1976, he conducted a Gershwin classical album, but adopted the long forgotten 1924 version for *Rhapsody in Blue*. His approach was to use Gershwin's piano roll recording of *RIB* and support it with a modern orchestra. Thus, the piece was

“performed” by George Gershwin, and accompanied by Michael Tilson Thomas and the Columbia Jazz Band (a studio orchestra created by Columbia Records).

Gershwin’s roll recordings were rather fast paced and jazzy by comparison to the standard Pops interpretations of the day. His recording, which included the entire RIB, came in at 13 minutes, 43 seconds. By comparison, Bernstein’s version, which had at least 75 seconds worth of cuts, came in at 16 minutes 20 seconds. The faster pace was a landmark change, or a restoration if you prefer. But no one would argue against a Gershwin performance.

Thomas’ challenge was adopting Gershwin’s pace with an Orchestra. The result is an intriguing recording with a “new” interpretation on Rhapsody. The novelty of the recording spurred interest in the 1924 recording, and led to an emerging pianists and orchestras recording the 1924 version.

Some major orchestras, such as James Levine and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1991, started using the 1924 version. But some of the orchestras retained the slower pace that became popular in the 1960s. America had fallen in love with *RIB* played a certain way, and most Classical music was now fixed in its interpretation.

3M: Maurice Peress & Ivan Davis’ recreation of the 1924 Concert

Both Maurice Peress and Ivan Davis had accomplished Classical performance careers in conducting and piano respectively. However, by the early 1980’s, both had accepted positions as Professors of Music. Peress at Queens College and Davis at the University of Miami.

Peress research interests included studying how music had transition from its original performance to the present day. He was interested in restoring the lost sound of the music.

He painstakingly researched the original performance by Whiteman’s orchestra at Aeolian Hall in 1924, looking at all the pieces performed that night. With a true academician’s intent, he wanted to establish each song’s tempo, instrumentation, style and sound as played at the performance.

Subsequently, he captured the results in a two compact disc collection released in 1987. In all probability, he exceeded the original performance because the musicians of 1987 grew up understanding Jazz, while those in 1924 were just experimenting in the music. It must have been easier for the 1987 musicians to apply the swagger and beat of Jazz onto the Classical Rhapsody than it was for Whiteman's crew who had about five rehearsal sessions on the piece.

The recording was not a major commercial influence on *Rhapsody in Blue*. Record producers who wanted to make a profit stayed with the 1942 version at the slower pace. However, the CD was influential among serious musicians, teachers, students, and lovers of Rhapsody. It had an impact over the long run as the next generation of *RIB* musicians were stepping forward.

Here is a link for the 1987 Peress/Davis recording of *RIB*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=khegfG2B2FA>

3N: Jean-Yves Thibaudet

Jean-Yves Thibaudet is a French born pianist who trained at conservatories and won numerous competitive prizes in Europe. He toured internationally, and performed with the great orchestras and teamed with famous musicians and singers. He made more than fifty recordings. He is well known for his interpretations of French classical music but has also made forays into the world of jazz.

When he first came to America to perform, he was advised to avoid playing Gershwin as it might negatively impact his career. He was shocked. In France, he studied Gershwin just as he would study Debussy, Chopin, or Liszt. He was incredulous that Americans would reject their own composer.

He set out to perform and record Gershwin, with a special eye on the 1924 version, as it appealed to his Jazz tastes. He has performed it with many prominent orchestras in the last twenty plus years. His first recording was in 2010 with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra (BSO) under the baton of Marin Alsop.

Thibaudet and Alsop use the 1924 version and adopt the “less is more” philosophy. Less strings and less musicians. It almost sounds like a chamber orchestra. This is in accord with the original Whiteman performance of 23 musicians and thirty-four parts. Moreover, the BSO’s saxophones and reeds come forward as key players again. Thibaudet adds swagger and style. The only criticism is the pace is slower than Gershwin and Whiteman played it.

Here is a YouTube recording of Thibaudet, Alsop and the BSO:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_ds6M6gekQ

Thibaudet performed the 1924 Rhapsody with many orchestras. For this class, I selected a video of Thibaudet playing Rhapsody with the LA Symphony. It was performed before an empty Hollywood Bowl during 2020 (Covid) summer. However, the emptiness allowed a camera crew to get on stage during the performance. It is (in my opinion) the best Rhapsody video from a sound standpoint. He, and the LA Symphony under Gustavo Dudamel, play an excellent 1924 version. Watch the entire performance yourself:

<https://vimeo.com/473801962>

3P: Yuja Wang

Yuja Wang was born in Beijing and completed her conservatory training at Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, studying under Gary Graffman, who praised both her technique and the passion she brought to her music. By age 21, she was an internationally recognized pianist. She has recorded 19 albums and performed with all the major US and foreign symphonies. She is known for playing Russian and German composers.

However, she is an admirer of Gershwin and has played his works with many major orchestras. The link below is, from a 2016 performance with Camerata Salzburg conducted by Lionel Bringuier. It is the 1924 version of *RIB*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ce3OERuCY0E>

3Q: Gerald Schwarz and the All Star Orchestra with Lola Astanova on Piano

The All Star Orchestra assembled the best musicians from various American symphonies to record eight television concerts for PBS in 2014-2015. Each concert had a theme such as “Russian Treasures” or “Northern Lights”. The eight shows won nine Emmys. Gerard Schwarz was the Music Director and Conductor for the series.

Schwarz was the founding Music Director of the New York Chamber Symphony, the Music Director at the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, and the Mostly Mozart Festival (several of these were held concurrently). From 1985-2011 he was the Music Director and Principle Conductor of the Seattle Symphony.

Since 2019, Schwarz serves as the Artistic and Music Director of Palm Beach Symphony, and the Director of Orchestral Activities and Music Director of the Frost Symphony Orchestra at the University of Miami. As a music director, he is known for featuring American composers.

Lola Astanova was born in the Soviet Union, in present day Uzbekistan. She was a child prodigy who studied at prominent Soviet music conservatories and was touring internationally as a teenager. She emigrated to the US in 2003 (age 21) and performed at galas with regional orchestras.

This video was selected because it provides the best teaching example of the 1924 *Rhapsody* version. The audience was television public (the video won an Emmy in 2009). The camera crew and TV Director did an excellent job capturing the Orchestra’s musicians as they play their solos or harmonies. The Jazz and Klesmer sounds are in full bloom. The tempo is up. This version is remarkably close to the Whiteman/Gershwin 1924 version.

Your Zoom video may appear choppy. This is due to the data transmission from my PC, through Zoom, the WIFI, Cox cable, to your home WIFI, Zoom and laptop. Relax.

3R: All Star Orchestra / Schwarz as Conducting & Astanova on Piano / 2015

Accompanying Notes to follow the music (timed to the music)

- 0:08- The clarinet glissando intro to *Ritornello*, a chromatic melody with triplets. The theme is repeated with brass and reeds playing in different keys, with beautiful harmony
- 0:40 - Key change from B flat to E Flat, a hint of the *Stride* theme with the French Horn
- 0:56 – The clarinet trill signals the key change to A Flat Major and the muted trumpet joins in with a “wah-wah” version of *Ritornello*.
- 1:05 Piano opens with *Good Evening Friends (GEF)* in D Flat...then a key change to G Flat Major and *Ritornello* piano solo with *GEF* at varying tempos...the piano and orchestra (the strings finally join in at 1:14) mix *GEF* and *Ritornello*...serving as a transition to another song
- 1:40 – The piano solo begins with ascending and descending scales
- 2:03 - The *Ritornello* piano solo opens with a quiet glissando.
- 2:13 – The baritone clarinet provides counterpoint to the piano. After each baritone clarinet counterpoint, the piano changes the key to make the *Ritornello* sound different.
- 2:54 – Themes never end; they simply transition into another theme. At this point, the piano transitions from *Ritornello* to give a thirty second fast paced prelude to the *Train* Theme
- 3:31 - The orchestra thunderously returns back to *Ritornello*, with the oboe and piano teaming to provide counterpoint.
- 3:47 – Saxes play the bridge part to the *Ritornello*. The sax part is a feature of the 1924 version.
- 4:02 –*Train* theme led by the orchestra, showing the influences of Jazz/Blue on melody, with a strong Clave rhythm. The New York City images come to life with the trumpets and wailing clarinet conveying the jazzy hustle and excitement of nightlife. The saxophones play the city’s street noises in the background. Listen

and look for the novelty piano showing complex syncopation and harmony (with Klezmer by the clarinet and sax).

- 4:23 The *Train* fades away with an ascending scale to a clarinet led *Ritornello*
- 4:45 – *Stride* Theme melody bursts forward, led by strings, reeds (including the soprano sax), brass and piano with block chords
- 5:09 – but the *Stride* theme ends “early” with the Soprano Sax, muted Trumpet, and muted Trombone sequentially playing the *Ritornello* theme once again with a “wah-wah”.
- 5:23 – The drummer hits the cymbal and muffles its crash, and the first caesura (pause) of the song follows
- 5:26 - *Shuffle* theme opens with rhythms between the Orchestra and a “back and forth” Piano. The strings, saxophones, horns, and percussion drive the orchestra. The deeper instruments (baritone sax, euphonium, bass trombone) pound the *Shuffle* melody out.
- The *Shuffle* Theme is the best section to tell if it is a 1924 or 1942 version. Look at 1924 version choice of instruments (more reeds and less strings), more dynamics and accents on the syncopation, a faster pace and a clave rhythm. You shuffle and sway in your chair.
- 5:46 – A slow half step slide takes the *Shuffle* Theme up a key, and the pace picks up when the trumpets join in.
- 6:07 – The piano joins in as counterpoint as the Orchestra rises to a climax that is never reached.
- 6:18 - The piano takes over and quiets the Rhapsody.
- 6:43 – *Stride* Theme piano solo begins. The pace is slower, the tone is softer, and the inflection alters between light and rubato. This is the same theme, but dramatically different, than the *Stride* played by the orchestra only minutes earlier. It seems different but familiar.
- 7:35 – the *Good Evening Friends* tag is used to alter theme
- 7:28 – French horns provide 30 seconds of harmony to the *Stride* piano solo and quietly completes the theme.

- 8:31 – The piano pounds out the *Ritornello* as if to signal the Rhapsody is done with *Stride*; for now. A quick *Good Evening Friends* closes out the Trio section of *Train, Stride* and *Shuffle*.
- 8:47 - Orchestra/piano playing *Ritornello* in a comic style. The piano plays kitten on keys with the sopranino and baritone sax providing amusing Klezmer sounds (a 1924 trait). They are supported by percussion and plucking strings.
- 9:10 – The comic music *Ritornello* ends, and the piano regains control with reflective a *Ritornello*.
- 9:44 – The piano drops down a key and the *Shuffle* Piano solo begins slowly, gradually picks up speed.
- 10:36 – The Piano pauses, takes a half step slide to change to higher key. The piano then moves out quickly. The piano solo adds many reflective passages.
- 11:42 – The piano solo ends, with a gentle transition to the next theme and a dramatic pause.
- 11:54 – *Love* Theme begins. The strings, trombones, and saxes have the melody and harmony. French horns provide the counterpoint theme. The 1924 version uses less strings and more horns and saxophones than the 1942 version.
- 12:32 - *Love* Theme continues with a 14-second violin duet.
- 12:46 – *Love* Theme continues with horns and strings on melody; the piano leads the counterpoint.
- 13:16 - *Love* Theme fades away as the piano and orchestra play a staccato escape
- 13:21 – Piano drifts into a rich, romantic *Love* Theme solo intermixed with *Good Evening Friends*
- 14:16 – The *Love* Theme pace speeds up with a trace of *Stride* piano and the Theme fades away
- 14:39 – Novelty Piano playing teletype sounds, intermixed with the *Good Evening Friends* tag
- 15:34 – a piano glissando brings brass and reeds back-in, who start playing the *Ritornello*. We are at the beginning again – a glissando opening up to the *Ritornello*. But this time, the piano continues with its Novelty play. The Orchestra and piano eventually merge, and the brass signal the climax.

- 16:26 – the *Stride* Theme returns with block chords by Piano and Orchestra. The bass (Euphonium/Trombones/Timpani) and treble (Violins) instruments create a sing-song back and forth call to each other on alternating beats to drive the rhythm. Meanwhile, the piano carries the Theme with help from the reeds and horns.
- 16:56 – The Finale: *Ritornello*, *Good Evening Friends*, and the closing chords finish the Rhapsody

3S: Marcus Roberts and the Return of Symphonic Jazz

RIB symphonic jazz made a rebirth mostly due to Marcus Roberts, though other smaller groups tried it as well. Marcus Roberts is a Jazz pianist with over twenty-five recordings. He is influenced by Duke Ellington, Jelly Roll Morton, and Fats Waller, with an emphasis on stride piano and ragtime.

He is also a Classical musician, with Jazz influences. He composed a concerto for the Atlanta Symphony. He and his musical group, the Modern Jazz Generation (MJG) have performed with the Orchestra of St. Luke, Baltimore Symphony and the Berlin Philharmonic.

Roberts developed his own Jazz interpretation of *Rhapsody in Blue (RIB)*. He recognizes that *RIB* was written in the early days of Jazz. He ponders what *RIB* would sound like if after the emergence of Louie Armstrong or Count Basie?

Roberts uses the 1924 version as a foundation and then incorporates a 1930s swing. The MJG play the *Train*, *Stride* and *Shuffle* themes with a Big Band swing feel, while Roberts' solos blend many piano styles: Classical, Stride, Ragtime, West Coast Cool and others. Below is a link for an extremely innovative performance by Roberts and the MJG performing *Rhapsody in Blue* with the Berlin Philharmonic, conducted by Siji Ozawa in 2003.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0eF5n3eTJqA>

3T: Istvan Koman and a clarinet version of *RIB*

Another champion of Symphonic Jazz is Istvan Koman. He is a Hungarian born and Tokyo based clarinet player with a wide interest across Classical and Jazz music. He also combines Klezmer and folk music.

Below is a video of him playing *RIB* with a piano player. Please note the transition from Ragtime to Rhapsody at about 1 minute into the video. This represents *RIB*'s impact as it moved from Ragtime to Early Jazz:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRbyJM54xag>

The copyright for 1924 version of *RIB* ended. It is now in the public domain for use and interpretation. As a result, it may become more popular among smaller orchestras and jazz groups

4A: Legacy aspects of *Rhapsody in Blue*

- First use of Blues Scale in the Classical format
- A fusion/crossover of 1924 Jazz, Blues, Popular music in a standard Classical form
- A bold step for American Classical Music when Classical musical was largely European music
- Impacted the way Classical Music was composed (allowing for new styles of music) and performed (incorporating new instruments)
- It is recognized as a musical portrait of New York City
- American symphonies routinely include it in their performances when travelling overseas as it is an Anthem for American Music in the World

Recommended Reading

Crawford, Richard. "Summertime: George Gershwin's Life in Music" (New York: Norton & Co, 2019). (A complete 500 page biography of his life, with twelve pages devoted to Rhapsody. It makes you appreciate all the other work and accomplishments he did.)

Hyland, William G. "George Gershwin, A New Biography" (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003) (The bio is strong on Gershwin's place in musical history and why Classical peers and critics scorned him until the 1990s).

Peyser, Joan. "The Memory of All That, The Life of George Gershwin" (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corp, 2006) (This bio included details on personal and family relations and how it apparently impacted Gershwin's moods and motivations)

Schiff, David. "Gershwin, Rhapsody in Blue" (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997). This is the definitive scholarly book on Rhapsody in Blue, written in a tidy 100 pages