

George Gershwin (1898 – 1937) FAME III – December 2006

(Docent should dress in Blue – blouse, slacks and/or jacket).

Today we are going to talk about an American composer who wrote all kinds of music – popular songs, musical comedy songs for stage and movies. If he were alive today, he would probably write for another entertainment form. What might that be? *(TV)* But today's composer is most famous for the music that you are going to hear today. Some consider it as not a single composition, but a string of separate paragraphs stuck together with glue. You can remove any of these sections without affecting the whole composition and you can even interchange these sections and it would still work. The composition we are talking about is called "Rhapsody in Blue" and the composer is George Gershwin. *(Show his picture).*

(Play Rhapsody in Blue, track 1). Listen to this music. Does this sound familiar to anyone? *(Ask where they have heard it. Maybe some recall hearing it from United Airlines' TV commercials).* George didn't have a name for the music, so his older brother, Ira, made up "Rhapsody in Blue". *(Let the music play softly in background if it doesn't distract you – it's over 16 minutes long).*

In the 1920s, Jazz was sweeping the nation and reshaped the styles and fired the imaginations of musicians and songwriters, creating new musical ideas. In late 1923, the bandleader Paul Whiteman, who was known as "the King of Jazz," asked Gershwin to think about a jazz piece for a concert in New York. His purpose was to give jazz respectability, and he felt the concert hall setting was the only way to demonstrate "that jazz was beginning a new movement in the world's art of music" and that jazz "had come to stay, and deserved recognition." Gershwin gave Whiteman's idea some thought, even sketched some possible themes, and left it at that.

On January 4, 1924, to Gershwin's surprise, a report appeared in New York, announcing that he was at work on a "jazz concerto" to be premiered by the Whiteman Band in New York on Feb. 12, in a concert to be called "An Experiment in Modern Music". At that time, Gershwin was very busy with his Broadway commitments, but his genius rose to the occasion. Gershwin was an innovator and he wanted to change the misconception that Jazz had to cling to dance rhythms. With this in mind, he started composing this piece of music. It was on a train ride to Boston for the premiere of "Sweet Little Devil", a musical comedy he had composed, that he suddenly heard and even saw on paper the complete construction of the rhapsody from beginning to end.

On Feb. 12, at the appointed time, which was toward the end of the program, he delivered his first large-scale work to an audience that included a large number of renowned musicians. George had written the music for piano, but someone else we have talked about before wrote in all the arrangements for the orchestra. He had a funny name and he wrote the "Grand Canyon Suite". Who remembers? *(Ferde Grofe)*. George was going to play the solo part of the piano at the concert. When Gershwin's piece began, it began with a very strange sound, a sound that audiences had not heard in a concert hall before.

It kind of shocked everyone, but in an exciting way. Listen to the very beginning. (*Play the clarinet slide at the beginning of Track 1 again*). This is called a ‘glissando’, or slide. Can you tell me what instrument is playing it? (*Clarinet*). The Clarinetist and Grofe played this as a joke on George during rehearsal, but George loved it and kept it in. George called this piece a kaleidoscope (constantly changing picture) of American life. When Gershwin wrote “Rhapsody in Blue”, he tried to make it sound like our country. He thought about how America is always busy, what its city life is like, and the many different kinds of people we have living here, and the kind of music we like. Then he tried to blend all those feelings into his music. Does “Rhapsody in Blue” remind you of the American way of life? How?

Biography

George Gershwin was born Jacob Gershowitz on September 26, 1898, to Morris and Rose Gershowitz. Later, his name was changed to Gershwin. His parents had emigrated to New York from Russia in the late 1800s. He had two brothers, Arthur and Ira, and one sister, Frances. They were not wealthy and George had few toys as a child. His father moved quickly from one job to another. His father undertook various business ventures, which included a restaurant, bakery, summer hotel, boarding house, cigar store and Russian and Turkish baths. George lived in 28 houses before he was 18. The family did not trust banks, a typical attitude of that period. They kept their money in Rose’s diamond ring. When the cash was low, one of the boys would take the ring to the pawnshop and later buy it back.

When George was young, he was a typical street kid. He and his friends felt music was for sissies. He loved and excelled in sports. He even had a broken nose as a symbol of his active participation. When he was six years old, he heard Rubenstein’s *Melody in F* outside a penny arcade and it had a profound impact on him. At the age of 10, he heard student Maxie Rosenweig playing Dvorak’s *Humoresque* on the violin, while he was playing ball outside his school. It made such an impression on him that he waited outside in the rain to meet the performer. He could not meet Maxie then, but he went to his house to congratulate him. Later they became friends.

In 1910 the Gershwins bought a second hand piano for their son Ira. As soon as the piano had been hoisted in through the window, it was George who sat down and amazed his family by playing a few popular tunes that he had learned by ear. George’s listening skills were so keen that he could listen to a piece and then play it by memory. He started taking music lessons with a 50 cent-per-lesson teacher, then moved on to a more knowledgeable teacher who taught George the classics. He loved the classics – Bach, Beethoven, and Chopin. His teacher insisted that George was a genius so he didn’t charge for the lessons. The teacher wanted him to be a concert pianist, but George was crazy about popular music, especially jazz.

At the age of 15, a family friend got him a job as a song-plugger (demonstrated songs that other composers were trying to sell to producers and singers) at Remicks in Tin Pan Alley. The street was named after the tinny sounds from the cheap music from publishers’ pianos in the offices which lined the streets. He quit Remicks after a few

years and went to work as a rehearsal pianist at one of the theatres. At the age of 19, he started working for Max Dreyfus, the head of the most important publishing house in Tin Pan Alley for \$35 per week. His first big hit was “Swanee,” which sold over two million copies. It took George 10 minutes to write Swanee and he earned \$10,000 in royalties. In 1919 George wrote his first complete Broadway score “La La Lucille”. After “Rhapsody in Blue”, George split his time between composing concert music and theater music. He teamed with his brother Ira, who wrote the lyrics to George’s music. George continued to write serious compositions, which included “Concerto in F”, “An American in Paris”, and the opera “Porgy and Bess”.

During a performance in 1937, George experienced a blackout, which caused him to momentarily stumble. The doctors suggested a spinal tap, which would have revealed the presence of a brain tumor, but George refused to get it done, since it was a long and painful procedure. On the morning of July 9, 1937, he lapsed into a coma and was rushed to the hospital, where tests showed he had a brain tumor. George never gained consciousness. He died on July 11, 1937 at only 38 years old.

“Rhapsody” was important, in that despite its Jazz background or feel, it attracted a new kind of audience to the concert hall. Gershwin’s music is still popular today. In 1984 at the opening ceremony of the L.A. Olympics, “Rhapsody” was played on 84 grand pianos. United Airlines used this composition for years as its theme. In “Mr. Holland’s Opus”, a young student sings the love ballad “Someone to watch over me” while her mentor conducts her performance. Students in grade school as well as graduate students study his music. His tales are still gracing the world and his memory lives on through his fans and admirers worldwide.