Pre-U topic C4: Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*

KS5

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Introduction

Rhapsody in Blue was an instant audience hit at its first performance in 1924, and has remained a programming favourite ever since. It has instant appeal, but at the same time is difficult to pin down. It defies categorisation, and even, to some extent, evades analysis. Leonard Bernstein stated that he loved it, but that it is 'not a real composition'.

In this resource, we'll look at *Rhapsody in Blue*'s origins, its stylistic influences, its musical features, and its array of chameleon-like, shapeshifting versions.

Gershwin and Tin Pan Alley

George Gershwin was born in Brooklyn in 1898 to parents who had emigrated from Eastern Europe because of increasing persecution of Jews. His father had anglicised his name from Gershowitz to Gershwine: George further refined this to Gershwin around the time he became a professional musician. He had grown up in the Yiddish theatre district of Brooklyn, and at 15 left school to become a song plugger at Tin Pan Alley in Manhattan.

Students today will find the world of popular music more than a century ago rather alien, as for so long the concept of a 'hit song' has revolved around recordings: it's the performance of the song, almost more than the song itself, that is the hit. However, in the 1910s, it was sheet music sales that determined whether a song was a hit or a miss. In the days before radio, getting a song 'out there' and known by the public was an industry in itself.

Tin Pan Alley was an area around West 28th Street in Manhattan where a variety of music publishers had their headquarters, and which by the mid-1890s had become the centre of American popular music. Established songwriters were employed by the publishing companies. Aspiring songwriters could approach publishers to see if they could get their songs published. If accepted, an established composer would often be added as a co-writer to boost sales. Other musicians – pianists and singers – were employed as song-pluggers, who boosted sheet music sales by demonstrating songs in the music shops. Some who started as song-pluggers ended up being successful songwriters. Sometimes teams of pluggers would be sent out to big sporting events to 'boom' – repeatedly perform one song until the whole crowd was singing it.

A staggering proportion of the songwriters and pluggers working in Tin Pan Alley were Ashkenazi Jews: among them were Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Harold Arlen, Richard Rodgers and of course Gershwin himself. Perhaps because of their second-generation immigrant status, they were attuned to developments in musical style. What started out as a popular music industry based on sentimental parlour songs such as those by Stephen Foster quickly assimilated new styles such as cakewalk and ragtime, and, later, blues and jazz.

George Gershwin

32-bar song form

32-bar song form, where there are four phrases of 8 bars arranged in an AABA structure, became the dominant song form of the first half of the 20th century. The B section, usually in a different key, can be referred to as the 'middle 8' or the 'bridge'. Songs using the 32-bar form often had an introductory verse before the AABA structure started, which is often omitted from modern performances. There are numerous examples of famous songs with this structure: 'Over the Rainbow' and 'I Got Rhythm' are two from the 1930s, and even many Beatles songs from the 1960s have it.

The Tin Pan Alley songwriters had adopted 32-bar form as their structure of choice by the mid-1920s. Earlier examples are quite difficult to find. That we can see evidence of it in *Rhapsody in Blue* in early 1924 shows us that Gershwin was at the forefront of fashionable musical thinking.

The commissioning of *Rhapsody in Blue*

From 1920, Paul Whiteman was an important figure in popular music on the New York scene, running an immensely popular dance band that combined popular songs and waltzes with new ideas from jazz and blues. Whiteman was, as well as a performer and arranger, an impresario who organised concerts and championed the work of other musicians. He was arranging a concert to be performed in the Aeolian Hall in Manhattan on 12 February 1924 entitled 'An Experiment in Modern Music'. He had encountered Gershwin previously when working on a Broadway revue in 1922 which contained his one-act 'jazz opera' *Blue Monday*, and asked him to contribute a concerto-like piece. Initially, Gershwin declined because he was so busy, but he was eventually persuaded, and *Rhapsody in Blue* was written in the space of five weeks.

Gershwin declared that he wanted *Rhapsody in Blue* to be 'a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting-pot.' In order to understand what he meant by this, the musical scene in the USA, and especially in New York, at the time must be considered. In the 1900s and 1910s, there was still racial segregation. However, ideas from African-American music such as syncopation and polyrhythm were becoming a feature of musical styles popular with white audiences, for example cakewalk and ragtime. In the 1910s, blues was just about filtering through into popular consciousness, and in the early 20s, the birth of jazz began. New York was about as liberated a place as could be found anywhere, having long been the entry point for immigrants, and with people from a variety of cultures living and working relatively closely, particularly in Harlem and Brooklyn. African-American and white musicians could still not work freely together, but there was much crossover of stylistic ideas. Gershwin, with his upbringing in the Harlem theatre district, and his work in Tin Pan Alley and in Broadway revues, would have had a very good handle on the ingredients found in the 'vast melting-pot' of American musical ideas of the time.

There are many different versions of *Rhapsody in Blue*: this is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to pin down and categorise. Gershwin's original manuscript is for two pianos, and for the first performance, it was orchestrated for Paul Whiteman's band by Ferde Grofé. The solo piano part was not fully notated: as Gershwin was to play it in the first performance, there was no need to write it out. Whiteman's band had a very particular lineup, with the reed players in particular playing multiple instruments. Here is what it entailed:

- Reed 1 (Ross Gorman): E flat and B flat soprano saxophones, alto sax, oboe, heckelphone (bass oboe: an octave lower than an oboe), E flat clarinet, B flat clarinet, alto clarinet, bass clarinet
- Reed 2: soprano, tenor, and baritone saxophones; flute
- Reed 3: soprano, alto, and baritone saxophones
- Two trumpet/flugelhorn players
- Two French horns
- Two trombonists, one doubling bass trombone, and one doubling euphonium
- Tuba
- String bass
- Two pianists (in the orchestra, as opposed to the solo pianist), one of whom doubles celeste
- Banjo
- A percussionist playing drums and timpani
- A violin section, with one violinist doubling accordion

An interesting side note is that the opening clarinet run is written as a glissando. In rehearsal, Ross Gorman put in a portamento at the top of the run. Gershwin loved it and told him to leave it in – and it has now become a much-loved feature of every performance, and a challenge for every clarinettist to take on. There is an interesting YouTube video here (**https://youtu.be/45XeZOfuc9c**) explaining exactly how the 'slide' is played.

Rhapsody in Blue was to be the penultimate piece in the concert, played, bizarrely, directly before Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance* March No. 1. In the audience was a dazzling line-up of the prominent musicians of the day, including Igor Stravinsky, Fritz Kreisler, Leopold Stokowski, JP Sousa and Sergei Rachmaninov. The ventilation system malfunctioned, and the hot and cross audience did not respond particularly enthusiastically to the music until *Rhapsody in Blue*, which was met with a rapturous response.

Although it was a hit with the audience, *Rhapsody in Blue* did not impress the critics: one described it as 'derivative', 'stale' and 'inexpressive'. However, it was a massive success in terms of its popularity in concerts, and by the end of 1927 the Paul Whiteman band had performed it 84 times.

Different versions of the piece

Ferde Grofé orchestrated *Rhapsody in Blue* twice more: once in 1926 for a small 'pit' (theatre) orchestra, and again in 1942 (after Gershwin's death) for a full symphony orchestra. There is also a published solo piano version, and a piano duo version based on Gershwin's original score. There also shortened solo piano versions of the main themes from the *Rhapsody*. This is not the extent of the different versions, however: there are authorised cuts marked in different versions of the score. The piece can last anything from five to 16 minutes. We also have two recordings of Gershwin himself playing the *Rhapsody* in the 1920s, and also a piano roll of Gershwin's own performance.

A rhapsody is a free-flowing piece in one movement, usually with contrasting sections. In order to understand this particular rhapsody, we need to abandon notions of 'authenticity' to some extent. The idea of authenticity is something of a modern construct anyhow, starting in the mid-20th century with the historically informed performance movement. There simply is no 'authentic' version of *Rhapsody in Blue*: Gershwin clearly felt happy to let the piece out into the wild to be interpreted in a multitude of different ways. Pretty much anything containing these musical themes *is Rhapsody in Blue*.

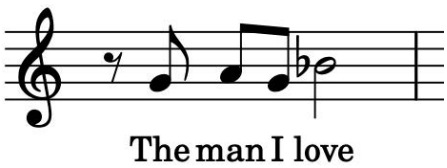
What we can do, however, is to look at the overarching musical ideas that can be found in *Rhapsody in Blue*, see the interconnectedness of the themes, ponder the influences that we can see on display, and marvel at what Leonard Bernstein described as Gershwin's 'God-given' melodies.

I am using the Warner Brothers edition of the Grofé's 1946 symphonic arrangement. This is also available as a Eulenberg study score.

The themes of *Rhapsody in Blue*

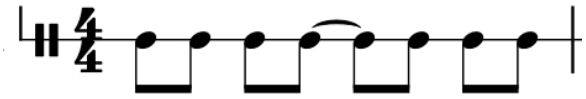
To appreciate the elements of *Rhapsody in Blue* that give it cohesion in the face of a profusion of varying structures and interpretations, it could be effective to get students to spot a couple of predominant motifs *before* going into the nitty-gritty of the themes.

On first listen – preferably with a score – ask students to spot the occurrence of this motif, which originates in Gershwin's song 'The Man I Love', originally written in 1924 for the musical comedy *Lady, Be Good*:They should be able to spot many occurrences of this all over the score, as part of melodies



and as an accompanying figure. Given that *Rhapsody in Blue* was composed in a hurry, it's likely that Gershwin took all its themes from an existing collection of ideas. This explains how the same motif turns up in the *Rhapsody* as well as a musical from the same year.

The second thing to find is this rhythm:

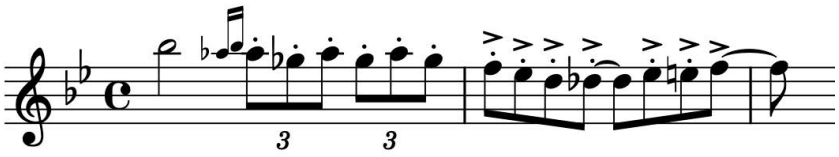


Sometimes it appears in rhythmic augmentation. Again, it's absolutely everywhere in the piece, and appears in many of the five main themes. For the sake of identification, we will call it the 'signature rhythm'.

The other element of musical glue that sticks the whole *Rhapsody* together is the blues scale, with its flat 7th degree and tension between the major and minor 3rd degree.

Having understood these three overarching ideas, we can then look in more detail at each of the five main themes. The names given to the themes here come from David Schiff's analysis in his book *Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue* (Cambridge University Press).

The ritornello theme

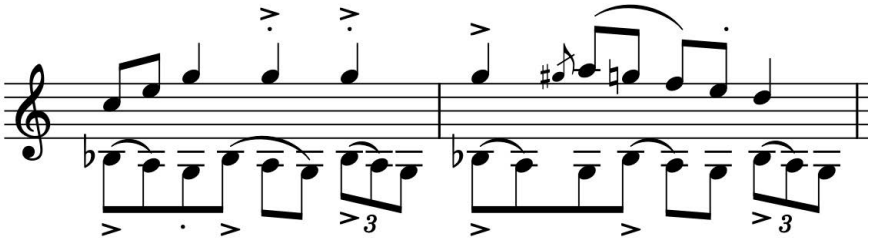


This appears at the beginning of the *Rhapsody*, straight after the famous clarinet glissando. Notice that it includes the signature rhythm in its second bar, and gives us the distinctive flattened 7th and major and minor 3rds from the blues scale. Interestingly, we do not hear it in full until later: Gershwin instead opts to give us the theme in a fragmented form first. This is at the heart of what makes the *Rhapsody* work, and helps us to understand Gershwin's intentions at to what it actually *is*. Whereas in a classical symphony you're likely to hear a theme in full first, and then fragment it later, probably in the development section of sonata form, Gershwin turns this idea on its head by giving us the fragments first, so that he can put them together later. It is what makes the *Rhapsody* rhapsodic.

The first statement of the ritornello theme, played by the clarinet, is in the key of B flat. It does not finish, or even have a definite cadence, before its second statement begins in the trumpet, this time in the key of A flat. The next statement is from the whole orchestra (rehearsal fig. 3) and is in the key of G flat. The lack of clear cadences or a feeling of settling in a key are characteristic of the whole piece: the absence of clear endings allows Gershwin freedom to slot ideas together in a multitude of different ways.

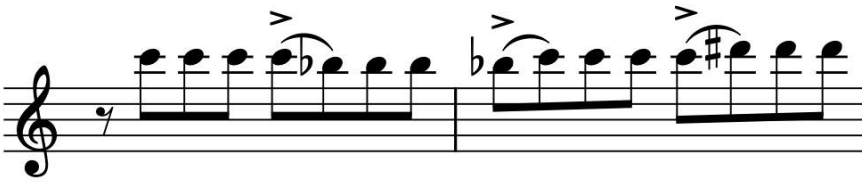
All of these partial statements of the ritornello theme are subject to numerous interruptions and diversions. We do not hear the complete theme until rehearsal figure 22, when we discover that it is in fact in 32-bar song form, condensed to 16 bars (4 x 4-bar phrases, AABA). The harmony is sophisticated, with many added 9th chords, and much chromatic voice-leading.

The train theme



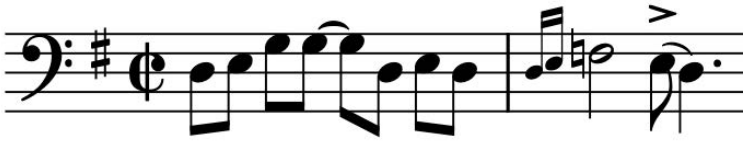
This first appears at rehearsal fig. 9, and again has a 16-bar AABA structure. Notice the 3+3+2 grouping of the quavers in the accompaniment, a syncopated idea that could be said to be characteristically jazzy borrowed from the Cuban clave rhythm, or could be borrowed from eastern European folk styles. The hand-crossing in the piano at this point is a great example of the 'novelty piano' style popularised in the 1910s and 20s by Zez Confrey. Listen to 'Coaxing the Piano' (**https://youtu.be/FBQ1G5WGUgk**) to hear the style.

The stride theme



First heard in full at rehearsal fig. 12, although fragments are heard as interruptions from fig. 1. When heard in full, this theme also has an AABA' structure and modulates at the end, again giving us the feeling that there is no real ending. Stride piano was a style that grew out of ragtime, and is characterised by a leaping left hand. Listen to 'Honeysuckle Rose' by Fats Waller (**https://youtu.be/oPxsQ1I_HKw**) to hear the effect. While Gershwin does not actually use a stride pattern in the piano part for this theme, the orchestra creates a heavy bass-chord pattern that has the same effect. The parallel chords that harmonise this melody are not typical of the stride style, however, and are more of an early 20th-century art music characteristic.

The shuffle theme

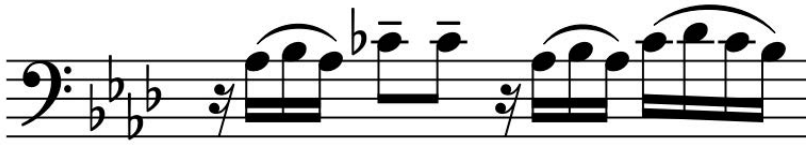


This appears for the first time at rehearsal fig. 14, not having been heard in fragments first, and a significant passage is devoted to it. The theme itself contains the signature rhythm in its first bar and the 'Man I Love' motif across the bar line. Gershwin's treatment of the theme from fig. 14 is typical of his bold approach to tonality. It starts off in G major, and we hear the theme itself and an answering phrase. Four bars before fig. 15, he puts the theme into a rising sequence, moving up by a minor 3rd each time, through B flat to D flat – a tritone above where it started. By repeating this process from fig. 17, he goes through E and back to G, a clever circular trip through tertiary modulations. Gershwin repeats this whole process in the piano solo from fig .25.

The love theme

This theme, first heard at fig. 28, is the heart of the *Rhapsody*, and is unashamedly Romantic in the same vein as Tchaikovsky or Rachmaninov. Its rhythm is an augmentation of the signature rhythm. Its countermelody (heard two bars after fig. 28) is an important feature, and an interesting one from an interpretation point of view. It is almost never performed as written: sometimes there is extensive rubato with an accelerando and ritardando through the countermelody, and sometimes the countermelody is more or less double the speed of the first two bars of the melody. Listen to some different performances to hear this in action.

The tag



This appears throughout the *Rhapsody* in a wide variety of different forms, the first being hidden inside the ritornello theme at bar 6. We then hear it more overtly in the piano's very first entrance in the fourth bar after fig. 2, and it's given some development from fig. 4. It's often used in link passages or as an interruption. The only time we hear it with a cadence to finish it off is right at the end of the piece.

Overall structure

It's been suggested that *Rhapsody in Blue* is structured like a one-movement symphony, with four clear sections akin to the four movements of a symphony:

1	Beginning to fig. 9	Molto moderato, mostly based on the ritornello theme, with interruptions
2	Fig. 9 to fig. 28	Scherzo
3	Fig. 28 to fig. 33	Andantino moderato: the love theme
4	Fig. 33 to end	Finale: progressive compression of the love theme followed by development of the tag theme (from fig. 37) leading to climactic statement of the stride theme at fig. 39. Coda from fig. 40 with final statement of ritornello theme, with the piano giving the tag theme the last word.

Key structures in *Rhapsody in Blue*

We've already seen the way that Gershwin uses tertiary modulations in his treatment of the shuffle theme. Although he begins and ends the *Rhapsody* in the key of B flat, his approach to key overall is quite unconventional, and certainly not in line with classical expectations of modulation primarily to the dominant.

In the opening section, he modulates downwards through a cycle of 5ths in a perpetual shift to the subdominant: B flat, E flat (fig. 1), A flat (fig. 2), D flat (two before fig. 3), G flat (fig. 3), B (fig. 4), E (rehearsal mark A), and finally A (three bars before fig. 5). From fig. 9 the train theme is in C major, as is the stride theme at fig. 12. We are set up by two bars of a D7 chord for a modulation to G major at fig. 14; we then have our chain of tertiary modulations going up a minor 3rd each time to come full circle back to G at fig. 18. We hear the stride theme in A major at fig. 19, and then the ritornello theme in G major five bars before fig. 22. We are back to C major at fig. 22. The love theme at fig. 28 is in E major. The climactic statement of the stride theme at fig. 29 is in E flat, and it looks like it might end there. However the coda swerves back to B flat, so that we end in the same key in which we began.

Aside from the sections where there is an internal system to the modulations (the cycle of 5ths in the opening; the tertiary modulations of the shuffle theme), and the fact that the piece starts and ends in the same key, there is no overarching key structure to *Rhapsody in Blue*. It is thematic unity rather than a coherent key system that makes it hang together.

Is it jazz?

This is not an easy question to answer. In February 1924, jazz was in its infancy. It was beginning to spread from its origins in New Orleans, but certain key events did not bring jazz directly to New York until later in 1924, when Louis Armstrong arrived to play in the Fletcher Henderson Band, and Bix Beiderbecke brought the new Chicago style of jazz to town. Recordings of King Oliver's band from New Orleans had been available since 1923, but they did not play live in New York until 1927.

However, African-American music had been prevalent in New York for a while, particularly in musical theatre and in dance music. Musicians were more integrated racially in New York than anywhere else (although there was still officially segregation) and Gershwin knew African-American musicians such as Fats Waller from his work in clubs and in musicals. His work as a song plugger meant that he was literally surrounded by the latest musical trends.

While the characteristics of jazz are easy to identify with the benefit of hindsight, writers at the time were feeling their way with describing the features of emerging musical styles. However, we could identify the following characteristics of *Rhapsody in Blue* as being features of jazz:

- Glissandos
- Use of mutes
- Juxtaposition of major and minor 3rds
- Flattened 7ths
- Use of added-note chords
- Syncopated rhythms including groupings such as 3+3+2

When Paul Whiteman commissioned the *Rhapsody*, his vision was to fuse the nascent jazz style with symphonic music. Gershwin had already attempted larger-scale pieces with his one act 'jazz opera' *Blue Monday*. In its original 1924 orchestration, it was as though the piano was bringing the classical element to the jazz provided by Whiteman's band. However, in the 1942 symphonic orchestration, it feels as though the roles have been reversed, with the piano bringing the jazz to the orchestra.