

Adrian Symphony Orchestra Program Notes

Rhapsody in Blue

George Gershwin (1898 - 1937)

The *Rhapsody in Blue* was written at one of the busiest points in George Gershwin's career, at the request of Paul Whiteman, an orchestra leader and major figure on the contemporary jazz scene in the 1920's. He had heard Gershwin's music many times – everyone had by that time - and in 1926 was planning a jazz concert in a serious concert auditorium. He had decided to present a panorama of America's best popular music and was determined that Gershwin should be included as a contributor. Gershwin considered himself much too busy to undertake a new project, and put Whiteman off by telling him he would think about it. Without really intending to, Gershwin found ideas coming to mind, and while improvising at the piano at a party, he found his fingers outlining the theme of what would become the *Rhapsody in Blue*. He put it out of his mind, still too absorbed by other projects. One day a brief item appeared in the New York *Herald Tribune* announcing that Gershwin was composing a Jazz concerto for the up-coming Whiteman concert, scheduled for a few weeks later. His brother Ira showed him the item, and George jumped into the project, composing the first draft of his famous Rhapsody in about three weeks. It was Ira who named it Rhapsody in Blue.

George said, "There had been so much chatter about the limitations of jazz....Jazz, they said, had to be in strict time. It had to cling to dance rhythms. I resolved, if possible, to kill that misconception with one sturdy blow." He considered jazz a form of American folk music and, rather than actually composing "jazz", incorporated blues harmonies and syncopated rhythmic patterns into something uniquely and recognizably American.

The Whiteman concert was a long one, and the Rhapsody came almost at the end. Fatigue and boredom had overtaken many listeners. Upon hearing the opening wail of the clarinet, however, the audience was galvanized into attention, then held in the grip of the music until the final coda. The spontaneous ovation lasted several minutes. Gershwin was given credit for the first real invasion of the serious concert hall by an American composer. It has been described as a great tragedy that, while Gershwin's music lives on, the composer himself did not live longer to play it himself. George Gershwin died of an undiagnosed brain tumor just short of his 39th birthday. His *Rhapsody in Blue* has reportedly been performed more times than any other contemporary work. It is part of the repertory of every major American orchestra and directed by the foremost conductors of the contemporary world.

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