

THE GEORGE AND IRA GERSHWIN CRITICAL EDITION  
Series II, Volume 1A B

# RHAPSODY IN BLUE

for Solo Piano and Jazz Band  
1924

music by  
**GEORGE GERSHWIN**

orchestrated by  
**FERDE GROFÉ**

TWO-PIANO SCORE

edited by  
RYAN RAUL BAÑAGALE



SCHOOL OF MUSIC, THEATRE & DANCE  
GERSHWIN INITIATIVE  
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

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**The Paul Whiteman Orchestra, February 1924.**

Photo courtesy of the Whiteman Collection, Williams College Archives and Special Collections.

# CONTENTS

x	APPRECIATIONS
xi	CREATING <i>RHAPSODY IN BLUE</i>
xi	RECREATING <i>RHAPSODY IN BLUE</i> OR: MAKING GERSHWIN MODERN
xiv	IDENTIFYING THE THEMES
xv	PERFORMANCE NOTES
xvi	DIGITAL RESOURCES
xvii	PLATES FROM THE MAIN SOURCES
xxvi	INSTRUMENTATION

## 1 Rhapsody in Blue

55	EDITORIAL APPARATUS
55	SOURCES
56	CRITICAL NOTES
79	APPENDIX A: COMPARISON CHART OF REHEARSAL NUMBERS
80	APPENDIX B: CUT MATERIAL FROM GERSHWIN'S HOLOGRAPH TWO-PIANO SCORE ( <b>Sh</b> )
82	ABBREVIATIONS

## CREATING *RHAPSODY IN BLUE*

*Rhapsody in Blue* has always been a collaborative endeavor. Paul Whiteman—the self-proclaimed “King of Jazz”—commissioned the work sometime in the fall or early winter of 1923 for his *Experiment in Modern Music* concert, to take place the following February on Abraham Lincoln’s birthday. As the story goes, George Gershwin forgot about this commission until his older brother Ira spotted a brief news item about Whiteman’s concert in the *New York Tribune*, announcing that “George Gershwin is at work on a Jazz Concerto.”<sup>1</sup> That was on January 4, 1924. Three days later—as gleaned from the date given at the top of his manuscript (see **PLATE III**, p. xix)—Gershwin began writing *Rhapsody in Blue*. Five weeks later the work had its triumphant premiere on February 12, 1924 at Aeolian Hall in New York City.

However, as the archival materials document, the creative history of the piece is a bit more complicated and collaborative than typically understood. One conclusion indicates that Gershwin may have only dedicated about ten days total to its creation. Another conclusion suggests that performers have more freedom in realizing the score than is generally assumed. The manuscript (**Sh**), dated January 7, is notated in pencil by Gershwin. But it is just one of three central documents needed to tell the full origin of the piece. The other manuscripts include a fair-copy score in ink (**Sm**), prepared by various copyists, and Ferde Grofé’s full jazz band arrangement for the Whiteman Orchestra (**Fh**). For the purposes of the new edition (from which this two-piano score has been prepared), Grofé’s score (**Fh**) is the primary source—though the information contained within this document only can be understood fully when triangulated with the other pencil and ink manuscripts.

Gershwin may or may not have forgotten about his commission from Whiteman. By early 1924, his status as a musical theatre composer was on the rise. He had recently completed the score for *George White’s Scandals of 1923* and was in the midst of completing and revising the stage show *Sweet Little Devil*. It is likely that the first two pages of the *Rhapsody* represent work begun in late 1923 and not continued until at least January 7—possibly later. They are the cleanest of the 56-page pencil manuscript (**Sh**), with clear accents and other articulation, dynamic markings for individual parts, and suggestions for instrumentation (see **PLATE III**). Such careful outlay ends as the manuscript

transitions into the full orchestral statement of the Ritornello theme that begins in measure 21 (for each musical theme mentioned in this essay, see **IDENTIFYING THE THEMES**, p. xiv). The first piano cadenza commences soon thereafter, providing the first hint of what would become a central compositional motivation for the piece: the race against time. The continual return to solo piano passages, one of the hallmarks of the *Rhapsody*, appears to be a practical decision rather than an aesthetic one. It seems that whenever Gershwin felt pressure to quickly compose additional sections, he defaulted to piano solo.

But such moments only emerge from a comparison of the pencil manuscript (**Sh**) with the ink fair copy (**Sm**). This latter manuscript was used by arranger Ferde Grofé to prepare the full instrumental score for the Paul Whiteman Orchestra (**Fh**).<sup>2</sup> The ink manuscript captures the *Rhapsody* in the midst of composition, recording a layer of the process otherwise obscured by the additional changes Gershwin made to his pencil score both before and after the premiere performance. Furthermore, the individual pages of the ink manuscript fall into seven distinct gatherings—groups of individual folded sheets of music paper, often nested within each other, that demarcate a particular portion of the larger manuscript as Gershwin sent it Grofé.<sup>3</sup>

Moments of revision emerge from the ink fair-copy manuscript (**Sm**), which result in rediscovered musical moments in the present edition. The various copyists include at least three people, one known—Fred Combattente—and two anonymous. However, at one point, Gershwin’s handwriting suddenly and unexpectedly appears. The three copyists did not introduce any revisions—but Gershwin did, at least in this section. One of the most notable changes occurs at measure 145, one bar before Rehearsal 13. In the pencil manuscript, the transition consists only of an eighth-note, D<sup>7</sup> dominant chord in the treble clef on the first beat, followed by an ascending eighth-note scale in the bass clef. In the ink score, however, Gershwin added three ascending quarter-note dyads to the treble clef. Although these notes subsequently became brief trumpet soli in Grofé’s full score (demonstrating that Grofé depended on the ink score), they have long been omitted from published versions of the *Rhapsody* that relied on Gershwin’s pencil manuscript as the sole authority. These notes have been restored here.

## RECREATING *RHAPSODY IN BLUE* OR: MAKING GERSHWIN MODERN

The collaborative endeavor that led to the creation of *Rhapsody in Blue* extends into performances of the piece in the present. The *Rhapsody* remains in motion, as it did throughout its preparation, its early performances, and its ongoing life since its debut a century ago. Countless musicians have forwarded their own interpretations of the piece, sometimes re-envisioning the work in ways that neither Gershwin nor Grofé could have ever imagined. Ultimately, no definitive or “authentic”

version of the piece exists. This edition attempts to be as true to the original intentions of the creators as possible, but it also provides opportunities for interpreters to make informed choices about the various performance possibilities that emerge from a cumulative interpretation of the manuscript and recorded sources. These written and sonic documents play an important role in recreating the *Rhapsody*, and remain valuable resources for those preparing a performance of the work.

<sup>1</sup> “Whiteman Judges Named: Committee Will Decide ‘What Is American Music,’” *New York Tribune*, January 4, 1924, 11. Reprinted in Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson, eds., *The George Gershwin Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 44–45.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed consideration of how Grofé’s arranging choices made the *Rhapsody* a coherent work, see Ryan Raul Bañagale, *Arranging Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue and the Creation of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 34–46.

<sup>3</sup> For details on these gatherings, see Bañagale, *Arranging Gershwin*, 25.

Other portions of the solo piano also disappeared as Harms prepared the *Rhapsody* for publication. Little information surrounds the editorial process undertaken in this first edition of the sheet music (Pe1), though clues emerge from the manuscripts themselves. As published, the piano's transition out of the Love theme—using the theme's countermelody—unfolds over the course of ten bars starting at measure 361. However, as it appears in Gershwin's pencil manuscript, this transition originally took twenty bars. On pages 35–36 of that score a blue pencil identifies the ten bars ultimately included in the published sheet music. Not by coincidence, this edited passage conforms to the way that Gershwin played it on the 1924 (R1) and 1927 (R2) recordings with the Whiteman ensemble—another abridgment undertaken in service of the space limitations of the 78 RPM technology, which in this case Gershwin also made in his 1925 piano roll (R3). The original twenty-bar transition sounds bloated in comparison to that first published and recorded, a result of the harmonies shifting only half as frequently. Although this technological pressure may have led to a more compelling passage, the transition appears in this edition as it does in the original manuscripts.

Two additional passages may have been cut from the originally published sheet music for purposes of distribution, but also perhaps as a result of the fact that they did not conform to expectations—that is, they are more chromatic and percussive than the others, a bit more modern. The first appears in measures 407–422, providing a tempestuous introduction to the piano cadenza that commences at measure 427.

## IDENTIFYING THE THEMES

In his foundational study on *Rhapsody in Blue*, David Schiff devised a thematic vocabulary for the piece and assigned each of its five separate themes a memorable, programmatic title: Ritornello, Train, Stride, Shuffle, and Love.<sup>12</sup> The incipit for each theme, as well as a “tag” motif based on the once-ubiquitous vaudeville melody “Good evening, friends,” appears in **Figure 1**. Although the names Schiff assigned each theme are his own invention and, with the possible exception of Train, have no historical origin or significance, they have become common parlance in scholarly considerations of the *Rhapsody*.<sup>13</sup> They are used throughout this edition to facilitate quick identification of the musical material under discussion. The Ritornello theme is so named because it returns multiple times over the course of the piece, seven iterations in total. The designation Train has been drawn from the recurrent rhythmic pattern encountered in this theme, which suggests the sound of a locomotive moving at full speed. Stride recalls the “oom-pah,” Harlem stride-piano style in its accompaniment. Shuffle, too, derives its name from its rhythmic contour—although the term itself was not used regularly for such a rhythm until the end of the 1920s. Finally, Schiff dubbed the Love theme—the grand *Andantino* melody that emerges midway through the piece—as such because of its similarities to the Love theme found in Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*.

<sup>12</sup> Schiff, *Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Bañagale, *Arranging Gershwin*; John Howland, *Ellington Uptown* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); Evan Rapport, “Bill Finegan's Gershwin Arrangements and the American Concept of Hybridity,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2, no. 4 (November 2008): 507–530; Crawford and Hamberlin, *An Introduction to America's Music*, 318–323.

The second emerges towards the conclusion of that rapid-fire cadenza in measures 455–462. Both bear the markings of the editorial blue colored pencil encountered throughout the score. Here, crosshair indications delineate cuts that conform to the more extensive cuts heard on Gershwin's 1924 (R1) and 1927 (R2) recordings. It remains unclear whether they were instructions added for the recording or a documentation of what is heard there for the purposes of editing the original published score. Strikingly, both of these excised passages conclude with extended octave tremolos in the upper register (mm. 419–421 and 461–462).

Including these previously excised piano passages in the midst of the crisp instrumental timbres of the Whiteman Orchestra—and its faster overall tempo (see **PERFORMANCE NOTES: TEMPO AND STYLE**, pp. xv–xvi)—heightens the modernism of the original 1924 *Rhapsody in Blue*. This certainly does not negate the work's connections to earlier Romantic-era styles. Even so, this modernism deserves to be explored further, as does the work's fluid status as an “arrangement”—as opposed to a more static “composition.” Because it was an arrangement from the start, the piece has been more open to subsequent arrangements over time. Likewise, because the modernist impulse was at play in the original creation of the *Rhapsody*, it has perhaps inspired the ongoing modernization process of the piece over time as well. Recreating the vitality of that original impetus reminds us that Gershwin's music itself was modern long before we ever tried to make it so ourselves—be that in conception, scholarship, or performance.

**Figure 1.** Themes from Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*

Handwritten musical score for *Rhapsody in Blue*, page 17. The score is written on five systems of staves. The first system is for Piano solo, with a circled "17." in the top right corner. The second system is for Piano solo, with a circled "16" in the top right corner. The third system is for Piano solo. The fourth system is for Jazz Band (J.B.), with a circled "16" in the top right corner. The fifth system is for Piano (P.). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like "Piano solo", "P", and "R". A logo for T.B.H. No. 2 is visible in the bottom left corner.

PLATE V: Page 17 (mm. 165–175) of the fair-copy manuscript of *Rhapsody in Blue* (Sm). Ferde Grofé Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress. Image courtesy of the Ferde Grofé Family. Note the piano fill in mm. 165 and 169, added into the staves for the jazz band in a passage notated by Gershwin.

## INSTRUMENTATION

### Wind Book 1<sup>1</sup>

Oboe  
Clarinet in B $\flat$   
Bass Clarinet in B $\flat$   
Sopranino Saxophone in E $\flat$   
Alto Saxophone in E $\flat$

### Wind Book 2<sup>1</sup>

Soprano Saxophone in B $\flat$   
Alto Saxophone in E $\flat$   
Baritone Saxophone in E $\flat$

### Wind Book 3

Soprano Saxophone in B $\flat$   
Tenor Saxophone in B $\flat$

2 Horns in F  
2 Trumpets in B $\flat$   
2 Trombones  
Tuba/Contrabass (i.e., String Bass)<sup>2</sup>

Timpani  
Percussion (Drum Kit)<sup>3</sup>  
    Bass Drum, Snare Drum, Crash Cymbal,  
    Turkish Cymbal, Gong, Triangle, Glockenspiel

Banjo  
Celesta  
Piano (Orchestral)

Solo Piano

Violin 1 (2 stands)<sup>4</sup>  
Violin 2 (2 stands)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The accompanying performance materials include parts for more practical alternate distribution of Wind Books 1 and 2, as detailed in the instrumentation list of the full score.

<sup>2</sup> The Tuba and Contrabass parts were played by one performer at the premiere (the Tuba presumably on sousaphone; see *FRONTISPIECE*, p. viii). The accompanying performance materials include separate Tuba and Contrabass parts.

<sup>3</sup> The Percussion can be performed by one player on kit. In the first performance, George Marsh played both the Timpani and Percussion parts.

<sup>4</sup> In the 1924 recording with George Gershwin at the piano (R1), only two Violins were used on each line.

The George and Ira Gershwin Critical Edition

# RHAPSODY IN BLUE

for Solo Piano and Jazz Band (1924)

Composed by George Gershwin  
Orchestrated by Ferde Grofé

Edited by Ryan Raul Bañagale

Slowly

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system shows the Solo Piano part (treble and bass clefs) and the Orchestra (II) part (treble and bass clefs). The Solo Piano part is mostly rests. The Orchestra part begins with a Clarinet (Cl.) playing a trill (tr) at a piano (*p*) dynamic. This is followed by a 17-measure ascending scale. The music then continues with Horns/Trombones (Hns./Tbns.) and Timpani/Orchestra Piano (Timp./Orch. Pno.) playing at a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The second system starts at measure 4, featuring a second Horns/Trombones part with trills (tr<sup>b</sup>) and a Tuba. The piano part continues with chords. The third system starts at measure 7, featuring a second Horns/Saxes part with trills (tr<sup>b</sup>) and a piano (*p*) dynamic. The piano part continues with chords.