

Rhapsody Reimagined
April 23-24, 2027

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Notes on the Program
By Aaron Grad

Rhapsody in Blue [1924]

GEORGE GERSHWIN

Born September 26, 1898 in Brooklyn, New York

Died July 11, 1937 in Hollywood, California

Born in Brooklyn into a family of Russian-Jewish immigrants, George Gershwin used the piano lessons he took as a teenager to get himself a job demonstrating songs in New York's music publishing district known as "Tin Pan Alley." By 21 he had written a hit song himself ("Swanee," popularized by Al Jolson), and by 25 he was at the top of the field, teaming up with his lyricist brother Ira to write a Broadway show starring Fred Astaire.

Meanwhile the popular bandleader Paul Whiteman had managed to position himself as "the king of jazz" by tidying up the rough and unpredictable sounds of early improvised jazz and presenting it in the grandest possible way, with a large and impeccably polished dance band. In his efforts to "legitimize" jazz and bring it the same respect as European art music, he sought to fuse jazz and classical styles together—and he saw in Gershwin just the partner he needed. Using a bit of chicanery to overcome Gershwin's resistance (by planting a story in a newspaper that the piece was already being written for a concert five weeks away), Whiteman secured the commission of the century, with Gershwin rushing to compose the jazz concerto he titled *Rhapsody in Blue*. Whiteman's orchestrator Ferde Grofé made quick work of the original arrangement for his boss' touring band, and he also created the orchestral version.

Rhapsody in Blue borrows many elements from jazz, starting with a sultry clarinet melody that leans heavily on the flattened-seventh tone of the scale, a quintessential "blue note." The lyrical theme that makes a grand entrance some nine minutes into the work would be gorgeous in any setting, but it is the syncopated counter-line that drives home its emotional impact. As the first of Gershwin's forays into "classical" music, *Rhapsody in Blue* captures the moment that this brash, confident young New Yorker truly made the world his oyster.

