

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

George Gershwin was eleven when his family first brought a piano into their apartment. Four years later, after some lessons in classical repertoire including Chopin and Debussy, Gershwin dropped out of high school and found work as a “song plugger” on Tin Pan Alley, New York’s row of music publishing firms. He began to write his own songs, signed on with a publisher, and gravitated toward Broadway, finding work as a rehearsal pianist on a Jerome Kern show. Gershwin’s first Broadway production opened in 1919, and the influential performer Al Jolson added Gershwin’s *Swanee* to a revue that year. Jolson’s recording of *Swanee* sold millions of copies in 1920 and put the 22-year-old Gershwin on the map as a top songwriter.

He reached a new milestone with the show *Lady, Be Good* in 1924, his first full show with his brother Ira as lyricist, and also his first collaboration with Fred Astaire. The same year, Gershwin made his debut as a “serious” composer with *Rhapsody in Blue*, a free-ranging fantasy for piano and ensemble commissioned by the popular bandleader Paul Whiteman. Gershwin only began the work five weeks before the premiere, but he soon delivered sketches to Ferde Grofé, Whiteman’s orchestrator, who prepared both the original version for Whiteman’s jazz orchestra and a later setting for full orchestra.

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. It was only the first of Gershwin’s forays into “classical” music, and he soon proved that he could also excel at orchestration and grand opera in later works including *An American in Paris* and *Porgy and Bess*, but *Rhapsody in Blue* stands as a perfect snapshot of a brash, confident young New Yorker who truly made the world his oyster.

***An Atlas of Deep Time* [2021]**

JOHN LUTHER ADAMS

Born January 23, 1953 in Meridian, Mississippi

Currently resides in New York, New York

Composer John Luther Adams spent a long stretch of his career living and working in Alaska, where he honed a musical language that is as spacious and sensitive as the

environment that surrounded him. He has always had his champions within the new music community, but to a broader public he was at best known as the “other” John Adams, differentiating him from his much-performed peer from the Bay Area. All that changed for JLA when the Seattle Symphony commissioned and premiered *Become Ocean*, a 42-minute meditation for large orchestra. Covering the Seattle premiere for *The New Yorker*, critic Alex Ross declared, “It may be the loveliest apocalypse in musical history.” In 2014, just before the Seattle Symphony brought *Become Ocean* to Carnegie Hall, the work received the Pulitzer Prize. After the Seattle Symphony released a recording in 2014 (in stereo and surround sound), it earned Adams the 2015 Grammy Award for Best Contemporary Classical Composition.

An Atlas of Deep Time, Adams’ 46-minute meditation for large orchestra that he composed in 2021 for the centennial of the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra, shares with *Become Ocean* a similarly immersive and sensory-rich treatment that, says Adams, “is grounded in my desire, amid the turbulence of human affairs, to hear the older, deeper resonances of the earth.”

“I am walking through a desert, on the bottom of the sea,” Adams wrote in a characteristically poetic program note. “A glint catches my eye. I stop and pick it up. White coral, a shard of a colony of creatures that lived here some 300 to 500 million years ago. I can’t comprehend how long ago that was. Yet by that time, 80 to 90 percent of earth’s history was already written in stone. This place where I’m standing now wasn’t here at all. The earth beneath my feet was much closer to the equator, rotated 90 degrees on the north-south axis, and submerged under warm tropical waters. I am walking in deep time. ... The earth is 4 billion 570 million years old. *An Atlas of Deep Time* lasts roughly 46 minutes, which equates to about 100 million years per minute. At that tempo, the entire history of the human family is represented in the dying reverberations of the last 25 milliseconds of this music.”

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