LEONARD BERNSTEIN (August 25, 1918- October 14, 1990) was a world-renowned musician throughout his entire adult life. He was Music Director of the New York Philharmonic and conducted the world’s major orchestras recording hundreds of these performances. His books and the televised Young People’s Concerts with the New York Philharmonic established him as a leading educator. His compositions include Jeremiah, The Age of Anxiety, Kaddish, Serenade, Five Anniversaries, Mass, Chichester Psalms, Slava!, Songfest, Divertimento for Orchestra, Missa Brevis, Arias and Barcarolles, Concerto for Orchestra and A Quiet Place. Bernstein composed for the Broadway musical stage, including On the Town, Wonderful Town, Candide and the immensely popular West Side Story. In addition to the West Side Story collaboration, Mr. Bernstein worked with choreographer Jerome Robbins on three major ballets, Fancy Free, Facsimile and Dybbk. Mr. Bernstein was the recipient of many honors, including, the Antoinette Perry Tony Award for Distinguished Achievement in the Theater, eleven Emmy Award, the Lifetime Achievement Grammy Award and the Kennedy Center Honors.
Gershwin began Rhapsody in Blue on January 7 as dated on the original manuscript for two pianos. The piece was titled "American Rhapsody" during composition. The title Rhapsody in Blue was suggested by Ira Gershwin after his visit to Whitman’s concert. After a few weeks, Gershwin finished his composition and passed the score to Whitman’s associate Ferde Grofé, who orchestrated the piece, finishing it on February 4, only eight days before the premiere.

Rhapsody in Blue premiered in an afternoon concert on February 12, 1924, held by Paul Whiteman and his band Palais Royal Orchestra, entitled An Experiment in Modern Music, which took place in Aeolian Hall in New York City.[10] Many important and influential composers of the time such as John Philip Sousa and Sergei Rachmaninoff were present. The event has since become historic specifically because of its premiere of the Rhapsody.

The piece was held by Whitman in a pre-concert lecture, as told by Whitman in a pre-concert lecture in front of many classical music critics and highbrows, to "be purely educational". It would "at least provide a stepping stone which will make it very simple for the masses to understand, and therefore, enjoy symphony and opera". The program was long, including 26 separate musical movements, divided into 2 parts and 11 sections, bearing titles such as "True form of jazz" and "Contrast: legitimate scoring vs. jazzing". Gershwin's latest composition was the second to last piece (before Elgar's Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1). Many of the numbers sounded similar and the ventilation system in the concert hall was broken. People in the audience were losing their patience, until the clarinet glissando that opened Rhapsody in Blue was heard.

The Rhapsody was performed by Whiteman's band, with an added section of string players, and George Gershwin on piano. Gershwin decided to keep his options open as to when Whiteman would bring in the orchestra and he did not write down one of the pages for solo piano, with only the words "Wait for nod" scrawled by Grofé on the band score. Gershwin improvised some of what he was playing, and he did not write out the piano part until after the performance, so it is unknown exactly how the original Rhapsody sounded.

The opening clarinet glissando came into being during rehearsal when: "... as a joke on Gershwin, [Ross] Gorman (Whiteman’s virtuoso clarinettist) played the opening measure with a noticeable glissando, adding what he considered a humorous touch to the passage. Reacting favourably to Gorman’s whimsey, Gershwin asked him to perform the opening measure that way at the concert and to add as much of a ‘wait as possible.”

Response[edit]

By the end of 1927, Whiteman’s band had played the Rhapsody eighty-four times, and its recording sold a million copies. To get the whole piece onto two sides of a 12" record it had to be played at a faster speed than it would usually have in concert, which gave it a hurried feel and some rubato was lost. Whitman later adopted the piece as his band’s theme song, and opened his radio programs with the slogan 'Everything new but the Rhapsody in Blue.' The piece received mixed reviews from mainstream critics. Olin Downes, reviewing the concert in The New York Times:

This composition shows extraordinary talent, as it shows a young composer with aims that go far beyond those of his ilk, struggling with a form of which he is far from being master.... In spite of all this, he has expressed himself in a significant and, on the whole, highly original form.... His first theme.... is no mere dance-tune..... it is an idea, or several ideas, correlated and combined in varying and contrasting rhythms that immediately intrigue the listener. The second theme is more of the manner of some of Mr. Gershwin’s colleagues. Tuttis are too long, cadenzas are too long, the peroration at the end loses a large measure of the wildness and magnificence it could easily have if it were more broadly prepared, and, for all that, the audience was stirred and many a hardened concertgoer excited with the sensation of a new talent finding its voice..... There was tumultuous applause for Gershwin’s composition.

Another reviewer, Lawrence Gilman, a Richard Wagner specialist who later wrote a devastating review of Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess, commenting on the Rhapsody in the New York Tribune on February 13, 1924, said: How trite, feeble and conventional the tunes are; how sentimental and vapid the harmonic treatment, under its disguise of fuzzy and futile counterpoint!... Weep over the lifelessness of the melody and harmony, so derivative, so stale, so inexpensive!

Some critics described the piece as formless, and claimed that Gershwin only glued his melodic segments together into one piece. Pitts Sanborn wrote that the music “runs off into empty passage—work and meaningless repetition”. In an article in Atlantic Monthly in 1955, Leonard Bernstein, who nevertheless admitted that he loved the piece, wrote: The Rhapsody is not a composition at all. It’s a string of separate paragraphs stuck together. The themes are tenebrous, inspired, God—given. I don’t think there has been such an inspired melodist on this earth since Tchaikovsky. But if you want to speak of a composer, that’s another matter. Your Rhapsody in Blue is not a real composition in the sense that whatever happens in it must seem inevitable. You can cut parts of it without affecting the whole. You can remove any of these stuck-together sections and the piece still goes on as bravely as before. It can be a five-minute piece or a twelve-minute piece. And in fact, all these things are being done to it every day. And it’s still the Rhapsody in Blue.

An American in Paris is a jazz-influenced symphonic poem by the American composer George Gershwin, written in 1928. Inspired by the time Gershwin had spent in Paris, it evokes the sights and energy of the French capital in the 1920s and is one of his best-known compositions.

Gershwin composed An American in Paris on commission from the conductor Walter Damrosch. He scored the piece for the standard instruments of the symphony orchestra plus celesta, saxophones, and automobile horns. He brought back some Parisian taxi horns for the New York premiere of the composition, which took place on December 13, 1928 in Carnegie Hall, with Damrosch conducting the New York Philharmonic.Gershwin completed the orchestra on November 18, less than four weeks before the work’s premiere.

Gershwin collaborated on the original program notes with the critic and composer Deems Taylor, noting that: ‘My purpose here is to portray the impression of an American visitor in Paris as he strolls about the city and listens to various street noises and absorbs the French atmosphere.’ When the tone poem moves into the blues, ‘our American friend... has succumbed to a spasm of homesickness.’ But, ‘nostalgia is not a fatal disease.’ The American visitor ‘once again is an alert spectator of Parisian life’ and ‘the street noises and French atmosphere are triumphant.’

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