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February 12<sup>th</sup> of this year marked 100 years of one of the first and most influential classical/jazz fusion piano pieces ever written, *Rhapsody in Blue*. Commissioned by Paul Whiteman and written by George Gershwin, *Rhapsody In Blue* first premiered in the 1,100-seat Aeolian Hall, home of the piano manufacturing conglomerate, the Aeolian Company, on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1924. The piece, consisting of piano solo and orchestra/jazz band, is a jazz concerto combining themes and forms of classical music with the harmonies and character of jazz music. The opening clarinet glissando, a technique not often found in classical music, was first played by clarinetist Ross Gorman during a rehearsal; Gershwin heard it and demanded it be repeated during the performance. This glissando is now as recognizable as the opening to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

Let's dive a little bit into the life of George Gershwin and how he came to compose such a masterpiece. He was born Jacob Gershwine on September 26, 1898, celebrating 126 years of Gershwin just last month. He grew up around the Yiddish Theatre District in NYC and frequented the shows there with his brother. He started out as a song plugger, someone who would station themselves in a department store or music store and preview new sheet music for potential buyers before recordings of the pieces were available. Obtaining significant experience from this work, he partnered with his brother Ira, a lyricist, and began composing Broadway shows. He moved to Paris with hopes that he could study with Nadia Boulanger and Maurice Ravel, but was turned down as they believed their teachings would affect his jazz style negatively. He wrote *An American In Paris*, then moved back to the States and wrote *Porgy and Bess*, an opera drawing from jazz and other traditional black music styles and mixing it with classical formulas, such as arias, while featuring a classically trained black cast.



Unfortunately *Porgy and Bess* was not a commercial success at the time, so Gershwin decided to move to Hollywood and compose film score. He was commissioned to write the music for *Shall We Dance*, a musical comedy. In this work, he again made his mark by combining traditional ballet themes with jazz influences. Some other popular Gershwin tunes include *Summertime* (from *Porgy and Bess*), *I Got Rhythm*, *Fascinating Rhythm*, *Swanee*, and *Embraceable You*. He also composed the famous *Three Preludes* for piano which continued to combine jazz and classical music like only Gershwin could. He died at the age of 38 on July 11, 1937 from a brain tumor.

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*Rhapsody In Blue* has been absorbed by American culture over the last century. It has been used in film scores, instructional videos, ambiance music and many other places. It has been related mostly to Jay Gatsby of *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Subsequently, it was used as Gatsby's theme in the 2013 film based on the book. Modern pianists and others have likened the music to the NYC skyline, saying the piece invokes feelings of Manhattan and Times Square.

I myself am no stranger to this work or to Gershwin, having discovered the piece in high school and instantly falling in love with it. While in college, I learned the opening clarinet glissando and following solo and some of the piano solo for my own enjoyment. I played bass clarinet in a performance of it for a jazz piano major while at college. I was also lucky enough to have my orchestration of Gershwin's Second Piano Prelude performed by the Ithaca College Wind Ensemble during a playing of orchestrations from a class on orchestration.

If you have not heard *Rhapsody In Blue* before, I strongly suggest taking ten minutes and giving it a listen. Here is a link to the Paul Whiteman Band Recording [https://youtu.be/VGvuUOtHGkk?si=7ndY\\_EjusGWWzC1m](https://youtu.be/VGvuUOtHGkk?si=7ndY_EjusGWWzC1m)