

Jonathan Lowry

Stephanie Berg

Music Appreciation

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### George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue"

In 1923, Paul Whiteman commissioned a new piece of music from George Gershwin to be played at Whiteman's concert in February of 1924. Gershwin didn't realize that Whiteman had asked for a "new" piece of music, and he put off the composition until six weeks before Whiteman's concert. When Gershwin finally finished the hurried composition, "Rhapsody in Blue" was created, and remains an American classic to this day. The three recordings I chose to listen to were a piano solo of his own piece by George Gershwin; an orchestral playing by the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Leonard Slatkin; and another orchestral piece played by the Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Libor Pesek. The reason for listening to more than one performance of a piece is that while one recording may sound more professional or "perfect," personal preference is the most important aspect of what someone chooses to listen to. I may like a certain recording while someone else may prefer another selection. I have heard bits and pieces of this selection in many movies, as well as in music class.

The first recording I listened to was performed by Gershwin himself, but on a piano instead of a full orchestra. The name of the CD that this selection was on is *Gershwin Plays Gershwin: The Piano Rolls*. The piece starts off relatively fast-paced, around a *vivace* tempo. The piano makes the piece very easy to listen to and shows

off Gershwin's virtuosity at the instrument. The tempo changes rapidly, being a rhapsody (a piece of music that has an irregular composition and varying degrees of style), but never falls below *moderato*, and when the tempo is that low, that section doesn't last long. For most of the piece, the tempo is almost always *presto*. The meter is duple, and during most of the song, is easily noticed by the left hand playing the lower notes at a set interval. Gershwin seems to be having a great, enjoyable time with this piece, and one can just picture him playing very enthusiastically and smiling during the entirety of it. The piece on the piano is mostly homophonic, and with the exception of a few moments here and there, I completely overlooked the left hand, focusing on the short runs and brightness of the right hand. At some points, the piece seems to be very busy, and one can imagine Gershwin showing off his virtuosity, but the busyness never turned me away from this piece. The piece is in a major mode, and stays that way the entire time. I really enjoyed this piece, as Gershwin was playing his own composition, and was playing with a different instrument than the piece is normally played in an orchestra.

The next selection I listened to was performed by the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra. The beginning timbre is mostly brass. There is minor percussion during the beginning, and the string sections come in shortly after the intro. The piano also has a number of solos, being the main instrument throughout the selection. The dynamics range from *piano* during some of the solos to *fortissimo* during some of the entire orchestra sections. Like the first recording, the tempo is relatively upbeat, never falling below *moderato*, with most of the piece being at a *vivace* tempo level, and seems to stray away from any feelings of sadness. The busyness of the piece

seems to follow into this selection, but with different instruments. The sounds are very discernible and seem to not coincide with each other as often as in the first selection. The mode of this piece is duple, as “Rhapsody in Blue” was written in a duple/quadruple meter, and no conductor can change that aspect of the composition. During the song, the main timbre changes from brass to piano, but neither timbre is featured at the same time. The main timbre of the full orchestra sections of the piece is brass, and drumsticks being hit together provide a discernible beat during some sections. The tuba section seems to be keeping beat most of the time, and the left hand of the piano keeps beat when the pianist is playing a solo, akin to the first piano performance by Gershwin himself. Featuring a full orchestra makes this piece seem a little more professional, and the image of the pianist enjoying him or herself as immensely as Gershwin’s piano-only version seems to be a less likely. The other instruments take away from the personal touch, as many people have a piano in their homes, but very few have full orchestras. During many of the piano solos, the other instruments drop out completely, but the majority of the song is homophonic, as the accompaniment doesn’t seem to take away from the main melody. This performance seems to feature more tempo changes than the first. During parts where both selections slowed down, this interpretation slowed more than the first.

The Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra performed the last performance I listened to. Right off the bat, the entire orchestra seemed to be performing at a *mezzoforte* level, and seemed to be more conservative in dynamics even than the piano-only version. For some reason, the entire piece seemed less recognizable

than the other two performances. However, the smaller dynamic levels made this piece more attractive than the last orchestral performance; the entire piece seemed easier on the ears and less "busy." Again, the mode was major, the meter was duple, but the piece never seemed to rise above forte. As for tempo, this was similar to the piano-only version, never falling below *adagio*. This selection seemed to follow the same *rubato* as some of the piano's phrases. This piece was again homophonic, but the piano seemed to be performed with more virtuosity than the other orchestral performance. The dynamics seemed to be lower compared to the other two pieces, and even went down as low as *pianissimo* during some of the piano's solos. During the piano solos, the pianist's virtuosity was easily recognized, especially during some of the longer runs. This piece was easiest on the ears, skipping the busyness of Gershwin's piano-only version, and playing at a lower, more ambient level of sound than the other orchestral version. This version, however, took the tempo low enough that some parts of the piece seemed to be sadder, or more nostalgic, than either of the other pieces. I liked this piece the best of all because, while not showing the "famousness" of the piece like the other two performances did, this piece was the easiest to listen to. Though the other two were not displeasing, the seemingly slower pace and lower dynamics made this piece the most enjoyable. This performance also seemed the most professional of them all.

While the first two performances highlighted the popularity of the composition, the last piece didn't steal away from it, but the entire performance seemed much more easy-going and no one was trying to steal the spotlight, even the piano during its solos. The piano version highlighted the piano for which the piece

was originally written, and the second performance seemed to fall back on the piano to keep the piece moving; while the piano is the key instrument in the composition, the second piece seemed to rely much too heavily on it. The third performance was my favorite because the piano was still the highlight, but the pianist didn't seem to be fawning for attention. The third performance also was played at a generally softer dynamic, and for me, that was the cherry on top. The Slovak Philharmonic performance seemed the most professional, as they didn't highlight only the piano, but still left it in the spotlight, and kept tempo and dynamic changes to the point where the entire composition seemed to sit easier with my ears than even the personal Gershwin piano performance.

## Works Cited

“Gershwin Plays Gershwin: The Piano Rolls.” George Gershwin, Piano, George Gershwin. 1993; 14:25.

“The 50 Most Essential Pieces of Classical Music.” Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra, George Gershwin. 2008; 17:57.

“The 100 Most Essential Pieces of Classical Music.” Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra, Orchestra, George Gershwin. 2010; 16:33.