



RHAPSODY IN BLUE

by George Gershwin

a CMP plan for 5th and 6th graders by Judy Meyer Hays

GENERAL INFORMATION

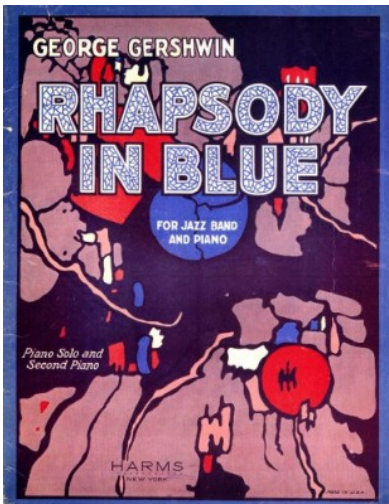
GENRE: This piece is, by definition, a concerto because it is written for solo piano and orchestra but its structure is that of a rhapsody as it is one extended movement instead of three or four separate movements. This “rhapsody” label is also supported because the piece has frequent extreme musical contrasts in texture, timbre, tempo, and dynamics,

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: In January 1924, as George Gershwin and his lyricist friend B.G. DeSylva relaxed at a local pool hall in New York while his brother Ira was reading the New York Herald Tribune. The heading “Whiteman Judges Named, Committee Will Decide ‘What Is American Music’” catches his eye where near the end of the brief article Gershwin’s name appears. Whiteman has advertised that George is at work on a jazz concerto. Surprisingly, George is not! Consumed with the final details of Sweet Little Devil, George has just a few weeks to compose “Rhapsody in Blue,” his first piece in a classical form. While on the train to his musical’s Boston premiere, Gershwin, inspired by the rhythm of the train, decides he will use what he knows to compose what today is considered one of the greatest American classical works.

“It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattlety-bang that is so often stimulating to a composer, that I suddenly heard—even saw on paper—the complete construction of the Rhapsody, from beginning to end. No new themes came to me, but I worked on the thematic material already in my mind and tried to conceive of the composition as a whole. I heard it as sort of a musical kaleidoscope of America—or our vast melting pot, of our incomparable national pep, our blues, our metropolitan madness.”

Originally titled “American Rhapsody,” George changed it at the suggestion of his brother, Ira, who had recently attended an exhibition of artworks by James McNeil Whistler. Whistler’s focus on “art for art’s sake” affected his painting titles. For instance, what we know as “Whistler’s Mother” was actually named “Arrangement in Grey and Black.” “Nocturne in Black and Gold” was the painting title Ira shared with his brother, and “Rhapsody in Blue” was born.

On February 12, 1924 a sold out audience including Sergei Rachmaninoff and John Philip Sousa were ready for An Experiment in Modern Music. Promised compositions by Irving Berlin and Victor Herbert preceded the much anticipated first classical work by Gershwin who would be performing (actually improvising because he hadn’t had the time to write it out) the solo piano part for his concerto which would be followed by Edgar’s “Pomp and Circumstance March No. 1.” Although favorably received by that evening’s audience, the critic’s reviews were not as positive.



Two piano version cover

Even Bernstein’s comments later in the century were mixed:

The Rhapsody is not a composition at all. It's a string of separate paragraphs stuck together. The themes are terrific – 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. “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”.

Nevertheless, in the months following its premiere, Gershwin performed his groundbreaking piece twice at Carnegie Hall and recorded it in June of that year on the Victor label. (Too long for a 12 inch vinyl record, portions were cut and the final piece was divided for each side of the record.)

At age 25 Gershwin did not yet have any experience in orchestration, so his 1924 composition was orchestrated by Ferde Grofé. Grofé worked for Paul Whiteman and his 18 member jazz band. The piece was orchestrated again by Grofé in 1926 for pit orchestra but the full orchestra version, published in 1942 but scored as early as 1937, is the one most used today. A film score version was created in 1930 and in 1938 one for concert band without piano (published also in 1942). In addition Gershwin published a version for piano only as well as one for two pianos. He intended to orchestrate the piece himself having committed to his publisher to do so in 1937, but he died before beginning this project.

ABOUT THE COMPOSER:

Born in 1898, the second of four children, George Gershwin's parents were immigrants from Russia. Growing up in New York City, he loved playing sports and he also enjoyed fist fights! He began his musical training when he was 13 after his talent was "discovered" when a piano was purchased for his older brother Ira. George quit school when he was 15 to work on Tin Pan Alley as a "song plugger" which gave him the opportunity to also "cut" piano rolls and compose. His first song was published when he was 18. He left Tin Pan Alley to work as a rehearsal pianist on Broadway and began getting his song included into shows. When Al Jolson recorded his "Swanee" in 1920 it became his first hit (and biggest in his entire career). He worked with a number of lyricists but was most successful with his brother Ira. The two of them collaborated on his first hit musical "Lady Be Good" and went on to write others including a political satire "Of Thee I Sing" in 1931 which was the first musical to win a Pulitzer Prize for drama.



Self-portrait of George Gershwin

(George was an accomplished artist too—who knew!)

"Rhapsody in Blue" was Gershwin's first attempt at a classical composition and its positive reception is likely what caused him to continue his music education as in 1928 he traveled to Europe to meet and work with a number of prominent classical composers including Maurice Ravel, Sergei Prokofiev and Darius Milhaud. When he returned he composed "An American in Paris." In 1933 he began his work with Ira to create "Porgy and Bess" which today some consider the greatest American opera. It flopped when it opened on Broadway in 1935 running for only 124 performances. George then focused his efforts on films in Hollywood having already scored Delicious earlier in 1931. Working with the RKO studios he was responsible for a number of hits including Shall We Dance in 1936 with Fred Astaire. Initially labeled as a hypochondriac for stomach complaints, his illness was diagnosed in 1937 as a brain tumor. Speculation is that the diagnosis, although accurate may not have been as severe as believed and could have been successfully remedied. Instead, George Gershwin fell into a coma on July 9, 1938 and died two days later after brain surgery.

HEART STATEMENT

The heart of George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" is the journey, expressed in melody, from uncertainty to achievement created by the intermingling of multiple themes as the orchestra and solo piano parts interact.

ANALYSIS



THEME 1 *klezmer band* ("I'm not sure I want to or can do this...")



THEME 2 *blues* ("You can do it!")



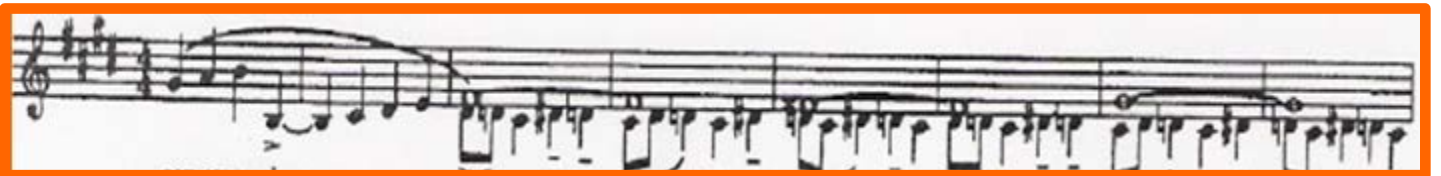
THEME 3 *ragtime* ("Should I? Can I?")



THEME 4 (AABA) *train ride* ("Oh yeah, I've done this before...")



THEME 5 (AABB) *foxtrot* ("I'll take what I know and move on from there...")



THEME 6 *love song* ("I get it, I've got it, I LOVE it!")

The following analysis timeline uses Disney's *Fantasia 2000* soundtrack scored by Bruce Broughton with the London Philharmonia Orchestra (likely conducted by Christoph von Dohnányi although not documented) with Ralph Grierson on piano.

SECTION 1: 4'56"

- ♪ 00:00 Clarinet plays an upward glissando to **Theme 1** (*"I'm not sure I want to or can do this..."*) (The "slide" to the top was played first by Whiteman's clarinetist Ross Gorman as a joke but Gershwin loved it and it remains.)
- ♪ 00:38 Brass plays **Theme 2** (*"you can do it..."*) under **Theme 1**
- ♪ 00:52 **Theme 1** played again with muted trumpet
- ♪ 0:59 Piano enters with **Theme 3** (*"Should I? Can I?"*)
- ♪ 1:04 Full orchestra plays **Theme 1** with cymbals
- ♪ 1:12 Piano extends **Theme 3** then cadenzas with repeated notes and upward glissando
- ♪ 1:49 Piano plays **Theme 1** with soft orchestra accompaniment fluctuating tempo
- ♪ 2:32 Tempo increases as solo piano moves through **Theme 3** to another cadenza
- ♪ 3:06 Full orchestra plays **Theme 1** faster and fortissimo with piano echoing
- ♪ 3:27 Trombones take over **Theme 1**
- ♪ 3:37 Trumpets fluttering lead to **Theme 4** (*"Oh yeah, I've done this before..."*) fortissimo accompanied by percussion and piano on chords
- ♪ 4:03 Clarinet solos on **Theme 2**
- ♪ 4:17 **Theme 2** is picked up by full orchestra fortissimo with drum rolls
- ♪ 4:30 Piano answers woodwinds on the B phrase
- ♪ 4:37 Full orchestra finishes **Theme 2** with the A phrase
- ♪ 4:42 Blues-y solos played by clarinet, muted trumpet and finally muted trombone.

SECTION 2: 2'32"

- ♪ 4:56 Full orchestra plays four syncopated notes leading to baritone sax plays **Theme 5** while percussion softly plays the beat
- ♪ 5:23 Brass plays one phrase rubato
- ♪ 5:28 Orchestra crescendos resumes **Theme 5** (*"I'll take what I know and move on from there..."*) piano adds incidental high octave ideas
- ♪ 5:55 Piano cadenza upward
- ♪ 6:04 Piano plays **Theme 1** forte with full chords then **Theme 3** softly
- ♪ 6:16 Woodwinds gently take **Theme 1** with piano adding interest while percussion keeps a quiet beat
- ♪ 6:46 Piano takes the lead extending **Theme 1** dramatically slowing tempo and softening dynamics

SECTION 3: 3'08"

- ♪ 7:28 Saxophones and cellos introduce **Theme 6** (*"I get it, I've got it, I LOVE it!"*) accompanied by brass and glockenspiel accents
- ♪ 8:17 slow violin solo with triangle accents
- ♪ 8:33 **Theme 6** returns with full orchestra and snare drum rolls while piano & trumpet repeat answer played earlier by the brass
- ♪ 9:17 Glockenspiel leads to next section finishing **Theme 6** with syncopated rhythm on piano
- ♪ 9:25 Slow & soft piano interlude transitions to repeated notes which change the mood
- ♪ 10:16 piano briefly visits **Theme 3**
- ♪ 10:23 piano continues alone with another repeated note transition ending with upward glissando

SECTION 4: 1'41"

- ♪ 10:36 trombone quotes **Theme 6** in cut time joined a second time with lower brass
- ♪ 10:43 Brass play **Theme 6** twice as fast with crescendos on each long note while piano accompanies
- ♪ 11:04 Full Orchestra plays fortissimo dissonant chord then frantically builds with the piano
- ♪ 11:23 Full orchestra plays upward chromatic scale
- ♪ 11:31 Lower brass leads into piano loudly playing **Theme 2** embellishing the B phrase with strings providing syncopated response throughout the theme
- ♪ 12:05 Full orchestra plays **Theme 1** with cymbals reminiscent of the opening
- ♪ 12:17 Piano plays **Theme 3** accompanied by sforzando orchestra with a reassuring final downbeat

INTRODUCING THE PIECE

Read **Harold and the Purple Crayon** by **Crockett Johnson** (*Consider projecting with a document camera or creating a slideshow of the scanned book and/or sharing again in a later lesson using the Scholastic DVD.*)

- Why did Harold draw? What did Harold need besides his purple crayon?
- How many of you like to draw? Why do you draw?
- Why do you think people who call themselves visual artists draw?

Prior Knowledge: Students have completed a general unit about jazz including styles (ragtime, blues, swing, Dixieland, bebop) and jazz artists (Ellington, Fitzgerald, Basie, Miller, Armstrong, Parker, Goodman). The Story of Jazz by Langston Hughes as used during the jazz unit.

SKILL OUTCOME

Students will apply the same parameters used in the creation of a given artwork to a new individual or group creation.

STRATEGIES

1. What's the Story? (Trying out Harold and Al's technique)

- ☺ Review Bernstein's critique of "Rhapsody in Blue" and suggest we give it a try.
- ☺ Divide the class in to 4 groups—one for each section of the song. Each group listens to their section and comes up with a story that might fit with that section. (headphones, jacks, mp3 players & listening guides for small groups) Students create a rough draft storyboard which may or may not include words for their idea but the final product is a line drawing using only one crayon
- ☺ At a later class play the piece in its entirety while each rough draft storyboard and line drawing is projected with a document camera or scanned and placed in a PowerPoint for projection.
- ☺ If time allows, students can critique the stories imagined for each section of the piece

2. Connecting the Lines continued (*see affective outcome*) "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"

- ☺ Project the poem and allow students to first read it to themselves. Play recording of Langston Hughes reading his poem.
- ☺ Perform the poem as a choral reading.
- ☺ As a class brainstorm a subject—could be serious or silly. Together write the A section and project as a reference for the next activity.
- ☺ In small groups students create one sentence that supports the A statement. Regroup as a class and share lines determining the order in which they should be performed. Together write the different statement for the ending A statement.
- ☺ Perform this new poem as a choral reading.

3. Writing the Blues

- ☺ Review the form of the blues and the rules for the lyrics. Use this site to facilitate a composition activity <http://outsidethebox93.org/Projects/Blues>

4. Keyboard and/or Harmonica Improvisation

- ☺ Compare and contrast a full orchestra section with a solo piano section that precedes or follows it leading students to notation vs. improvisation.
- ☺ Review the blues scale in the key of C and allow students to improvise beginning with C alone, then C-D-Eb, then Eb-F-Gb, then Bb-C and any combination over a 12-bar blues accompaniment in the key of G played aloud while they work with headphones.
- ☺ Divide the class—half playing the 12-bar blues chord progression on keyboard or root notes on xylophones and the other half improvising on keyboards, orff instruments or harmonica.

ASSESSMENT

1. Summative: Individual Composition

☞ See Writing the Blues above or D54 Design Composition Common Assessment

2. Formative: Group Composition

☞ See Connecting the Lines or Keyboard/Harmonica Improvisation above

3. Formative: Bruce's Wonderball Activity

☞ Contrast group “performance” of Wonderball chant with individual’s improvising on Orff instrument in the middle of the circle mirroring Gershwin’s incorporating orchestra alternating with piano solo

KNOWLEDGE OUTCOME

Students will analyze and describe devices that create repetition and contrast in works of art.

STRATEGIES



1. **View Fantasia 2000 one minute clip of “Rhapsody in Blue” introduction which uses a single blue line (Al Hirschfeld).**
 - ☺ Ask “How was this clip the same and/or different from Harold and the Purple Crayon? What do you think is going to happen next?”
 - ☺ How many of you like to write music? Why do you compose?”
 - ☺ Why do you think composers write music?”
2. **Review “I Got Rhythm” (learned in previous year).**
 - ☺ Use videoclip of Gershwin performing it on piano.
 - ☺ Determine its design (AABA).
3. **Introduce & reinforce the “Rhapsody in Blue” themes**
 - ☺ Celenza book beginning on the page that matches the cover (pages aren’t numbered!) reading the next 3 pages stopping at

“My concerto will be a tuneful kaleidoscope—a rhapsody about the music that surrounds me!”

- ☺ Project the 6 themes playing each for students both single melody on piano and clips of the orchestra version
- ☺ Assign each student a color and group them so that each is responsible for one theme—practice recognizing their theme by teacher playing and group standing. Consider having students describe the melodic direction, rhythm or articulation of their theme to help them recognize it
- ☺ Use the listening timeline to play excerpts asking students to listen for their theme and stand whenever they hear it playing.
- ☺ Share United Airlines commercials to reinforce the themes

4. Move It!

- ☺ Select any track from this John Feierabend DVD for students to mimic the movement choreographed to the design of the music. Following the experience students determine with a partner what the form of the piece was writing it on a post-it. Post-its are exchanged and the movement repeated to confirm or modify answers.

5. What's the Story? continued (see skill outcome)

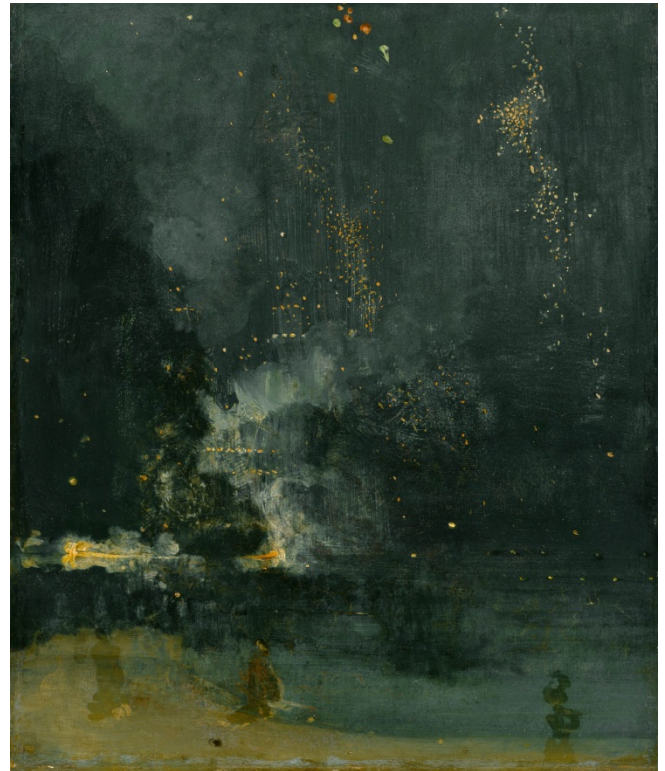
- ☺ Review Bernstein's critique of "Rhapsody in Blue" and suggest we give it a try.
- ☺ Display the group stories created earlier in different orders and as a class determine which makes the most sense.

6. Another Storyboard

- ☺ Provide an opportunity for students to see the "Rhapsody in Blue" segment from Disney's Fantasia 2000 (in class or prior to at home) noting that the Disney animators also created 4 stories but they intermingled them throughout the piece just as Gershwin intermingled his 6 themes.
- ☺ Class discussion about Disney's story vs. ours

7. Making Connections

- ☺ Play "Chelsea Bridge" by Billy Strayhorn while displaying Whistler's "Nocturne in Black and Gold." Facilitate discussion answering "What's the same about the music you hear and this painting?" "Can Strayhorn's Chelsea Bridge stand alone without Whistler's painting?" Also ask "What style of music is this?" and "How many styles of jazz can you name?"
- ☺ Display the painting "Rhapsody in Blue" by Miguel Covarrubias asking "Which jazz style do you think best fits this artwork and why?" (Play clips of different styles to enable the discussion.



Nocturne in Black and Gold (1875)

ASSESSMENT

1. Pre-Unit Check: Jazzy Mind Map

- ☞ D54 Design Jazzy Mind Map Common Assessment

2. Formative: Poison Pattern

- ☞ Each of five small groups creates a movement that fits the musical qualities of one of the melodic themes of "Rhapsody in Blue." The pattern for which no movement has been created requires students to freeze or melt to the floor but for all other patterns either the group who choreographed that theme or the entire class does the movement.

3. Summative: Masterworks Reflection

- ☞ D54 Masterworks Reflection Common Assessment

AFFECTIVE OUTCOME

- a. *Students will explore how individuals rise above self-doubt and reflect on the personal strategies they use to move beyond their own lack of confidence.*
- b. *Students will explore the idea of why artists create and articulate their opinion about the value of works of art. (over-arching outcome for this unit—not reflected in these strategies or assessments.)*

STRATEGIES

1. Read Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue by Anna Harwell Celenza

- ☺ Read only through his conversation with Paul Whiteman ending with “*If you think I can do it, then I’ll give it a shot.*”
- ☺ “Why did George Gershwin compose “Rhapsody in Blue?” (project the actual article then pair & share)
- ☺ Return to Celenza book reading only page that answers this question.

2. Introduce James McNeil Whistler & “Nocturne in Black and Gold”

- ☺ He was moody, short tempered and often sick. His parents found that drawing settled him down. At 9, he moved to Russia where his father worked on the railroad. He had formal art lessons and at 15 knew he wanted to be an artist. When his father died, his family returned to the U.S. where he studied to be a minister but he liked his art classes best. He learned to draw maps and got a job doing that but he kept drawing pictures on the edges and finally decided to be a full time artist.
- ☺ You may recognize his most famous painting, nicknamed “Whistler’s Mother” but it’s actual title was “An Arrangement in Grey and Black.” He liked to give his paintings music titles. Early in his career, people thought his drawings were telling a story but for him it was all about how he used the color and lines. He believed Art is for Art’s sake and that’s why he named his paintings that way.
- ☺ Ask volunteers what they see. Then ask, “Do you think people in 1875 liked this painting? Why or why not?” Share art critic John Ruskin’s comment.
- ☺ Have students divide themselves in to two groups: those that agree with Ruskin and those that do not. In each group come to a consensus as to why they have that opinion. Each group shares their discussion with the class.
- ☺ “If you were James Whistler, would you give up?” Students join a group again based on their own answer to this question.
- ☺ “If you were James Whistler, would you give up?” Students join a group again based on their own answer to this question.

3. Share critics reviews of “Rhapsody in Blue.”

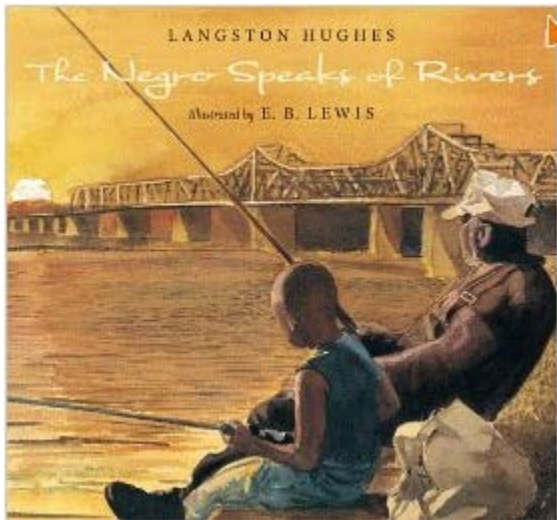
- ☺ Start by singing “I Got Rhythm” Ask for a show of hands: “How many of you like this piece?” “How many of you don’t?” Then: “What do you call a person who writes about their opinion on a piece of music or visual art?”
- ☺ Which of these critics liked the music? How do you know? (include Bernstein)

4. Another Storyboard continued (see knowledge outcome)

- ☺ Divide into four groups (different than those used in the first storyboard activity) assigning each group one of Disney’s character stories for their version of “Rhapsody In Blue.” Ask students to review the plot and characters and then answer these questions.
 - Why was the main character of the story discouraged?
 - What strategies did they discover to become confident in their situation?

5. Connecting the Lines

☺ Project the picture of the Mississippi River and ask students



“What kind of line is this?” Share that just as Harold used a purple line to draw an adventure and George used a melody line on a clarinet to compose a song, this line inspired Langston Hughes to write his first published poem.

☺ Read aloud an excerpt from Langston’s Train Ride beginning on the “red” page which begins “*Clackety clack clack clack.*” and read through the next “red” page that ends “*The car sways gently on and on...*”

☺ Ask students to tell you what they know about Langston Hughes’ life from the story. Ask “What question was Langston asking himself near the end of the story?” “Do you ever question who you are?”

ASSESSMENT

1. Formative: Student responses to pointed questions

☞ Following the introduction of each art work and the circumstance under which it was created, students will answer questions such as “If you were James Whistler would you give up?” “If you were George Gershwin, would you compose the classical piece?” or “Do you think Langston Hughes ever questioned whether he should be a poet?”

2. Summative: Individual written reflection

☞ As “Rhapsody in Blue” is played in its entirety students complete their answer to the following question “Write about a time when you have been or anticipate you will be unsure of yourself and what tools you could use to help you.”

THE SEQUENCE

1. Harold & the Purple Crayon
2. James McNeil Whistler
3. George Gershwin (the man & the situation)
4. Rhapsody in Blue (the music)
5. Langston Hughes
6. Chelsea Bridge (Billy Strayhorn)
7. Individual Composition



He got in it and he drew up the covers.

ADDITIONAL DIRECTIONS TO CONSIDER

- ♪ Ferde Grofé—Compare and Contrast “Grand Canyon Suite” with “Rhapsody in Blue” or Copland’s “Appalachian Spring” What makes it sound American?
- ♪ Copyright Law—United Airlines uses “Rhapsody In Blue” for advertising—how are they able to do that?
- ♪ The Great Depression—New York City in the 1920’s & 1930’s
- ♪ Compare and contrast different art works with the same name such as Miguel Covarrubias (1925); Arthur Dove (1927--one of America’s first abstract painters); Earl Horter (1928); Diana Ong—Blue Rhapsody (Not exactly the same title but interesting artwork); Michael Humphries 2001
- ♪ Why Do We Create? Allow visual artist Michael Humphries to “speak for himself” and follow this by allowing students to share why they think artists, composers and writers create.
- ♪ AB forms—“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is ABA, “Chelsea Bridge” and “I’ve Got Rhythm” are AABA, Blues lyrics are AAB
- ♪ Grofé & Strayhorn—How does their music “paint” a specific scene (jazzstandards.com)
“If you stretch your imagination a little bit you can almost see Chelsea Bridge in his music the same way you can see the Grand Canyon when you hear the ‘Grand Canyon Suite.’”
- ♪ Orchestration and common or uncommon orchestral instruments (like the banjo in original performance)
- ♪ Improvisation vs. Notation—Gershwin performed the piano part on February 12, 1924 partly because he hadn’t yet had time to write it down, some of it was improvised that evening.
Gershwin himself was the soloist that evening at the Aeolian Hall. He did this out of necessity because he had not completed the solo piano part and had to improvise on the spot. Before he could acknowledge the thunderous applause that greeted his performance, he had to run backstage to have his hands bandaged. He had pounced so hard on the piano that there was actually blood on the keys.
- ♪ Al Hirschfeld, caricaturist and his concept of line (animated-features.tripod.com)
“The fascinating thing about Hirschfeld's figures is the economy and fluidity of that line: one S-curve can describe a whole body; ordinarily in animation, we break a figure down into a series of body parts that move in individual ways. When you're dealing with a Hirschfeld design, everything follows one main rhythm. It forces you to think very clearly and directly, and in a more graphic way.” (Andreas Deja, animator)
- ♪ Advertising and its use of classical music
- ♪ Use Billy Strayhorn as another model for overcoming self doubt
- ♪ Transitions: Gershwin’s music pivotal in public acceptance of jazz vs. classical; Whistler’s series of the Battlesea Bridge shows the transition from concrete to abstract; Langston’s blues as poetry
- ♪ Role of an Arts Critic
- ♪ What is American music?