

Tampa Bay Times Masterworks

# Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue

Jan 4 - 6

**WILLIAM GRANT STILL (1895-1978)**

**SYMPHONY NO. 1, AFRO-AMERICAN**

Duration: ca. 23 minutes

The year was 1931, and a new door in American music swung open: the first symphony by an African-American composer to be played by a major orchestra. He later became the first African-American to conduct the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and the first American to have an opera, *Troubled Island*, produced by the New York City Opera.

Not a bad record of firsts for a humble, soft-spoken man from Woodville, Miss., who thought the world of classical music just might suit his dream. William Grant Still lived that dream, creating more than 150 works until his death in 1978 and giving the African-American composer a voice in what historically had been an insular, often racist profession.

Still's father was a musician and his mother a school teacher, so the combination seemed ideal for nourishment in the liberal arts. After his father died when Still 3 months old, an astute stepfather encouraged exposure to music, art, and literature in the household. Soon, the young Still was absorbing his stepfather's collection of opera and symphony recordings, and in high school he learned the rudiments of music by joining a band. In Ohio, he met blues pioneer W.C. Handy, who published Still's first musical arrangement, *Hesitation Blues*.

But Still wanted to evolve as a serious musician – he played the violin and oboe – so he enrolled in Oberlin College to study theory and counterpoint, then went off to join the Navy during World War I. Handy later offered him a job in New York, where he stayed for 15 years. As radio orchestras became popular in the 1920s, Still made a number of arrangements, and impressed such prominent figures as Paul Whiteman and Artie Shaw. Still contributed to what was known as the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural awakening of black culture in the 1920s and '30s.

Then came a major change in his career. He began studying with the French avant-garde composer Edgar Varese, who helped shape the sound of new music. Still learned to compose with more lyric freedom, and with the help of Varese, his music made its way onto concert programs sponsored by the International Composers' Guild.

Still knew that to be taken seriously as a composer, he needed to write two large-scale works: a symphony and an opera. One would feed the other; while composing the *First Symphony*, he kept a notebook of themes and ideas for an opera he hoped to write, which he called *Rashana*.

"I knew that I wanted to write a symphony," he said. "And I knew that it had to be an American work, and I wanted to demonstrate how the blues, so often considered a lowly expression, could be elevated to the highest musical level."

Composed in 1930, the *Afro-American Symphony* received its premiere a year later with the Rochester Philharmonic. Transparent and accessible, it enjoyed immediate success, with performances by more than 35 orchestras during the 1930s.

Still built the symphony's four sections around poems by Paul Laurence Dunbar, decided on a tonal approach, and drew inspiration from the plight of his brethren: "I seek in the *Afro-American Symphony* to portray not the higher type of colored American," he wrote in his journal, "but the sons of the soil, who still retain so many of the traits peculiar to their African forebears, who have not responded completely to the transforming effect of progress."

The first movement, marked *moderato assai*, makes use of a traditional blues-based progression over 12 bars. In his notebook on the symphony, Still called the opening movement *Longing*. He called the second movement *Sorrow*, and wrote a number of spiritual-like passages between harp and oboe.

*Humor*, the animated third movement, fits the bill as a traditional scherzo by providing comic relief through rollicking dance rhythms and the first-ever use of the banjo in a symphony. But it also has become controversial in its use of a tune — *I've Got Rhythm* — commonly attributed to George Gershwin. However, both composers worked in the same musical circles and were complimentary of each other, so any borrowing on Gershwin's part might be considered a tip of the hat.

The symphony concludes with a *lento* called *Aspiration*, which weaves together themes heard earlier, beginning with a hymn and concluding the 30-minute work with a riveting flourish for full orchestra.

"What I like about Still's music is its honesty," said Thomas Wilkins, former resident conductor for TFO and guest conductor for tonight's program. "He's comfortable in his own skin. That's always the first thing that comes to mind with Still: He tells you who he is and who is people are and what they wrestle with."

Listeners who want to hear more of Still's music are in luck. TFO will perform his *Poem for Orchestra* during its next Masterworks program, Jan. 18-20.

## **GEORGE GERSHWIN (1898-1937)**

### **RHAPSODY IN BLUE**

Duration: ca. 16 minutes

Igor Stravinsky and his *Rite of Spring* took Paris by storm in 1913, and the music world never heard rhythm the same way again. A decade later, without rioting, America would hear a work for the first time and keep it as something truly homegrown.

Gershwin revealed his one-movement "jazz concerto" on Feb. 12, 1924 in New York's Aeolian Hall. Paul Whiteman led the proceedings, billed as an "Experiment in Modern Music" that drew many of the city's most prominent critics and socialites. The lineup included *Limehouse Blues* and *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, along with pieces by Victor Herbert, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern and the English classical composer Edward Elgar. On the program's second half, a slim, well-dressed, 20-something Jewish man walked on stage and sat at the piano. Suddenly, the sound of a bluesy clarinet snaked through the air, and the orchestra — and audience — exploded. Nobody had heard anything like it before.

Today, *Rhapsody in Blue* is etched into the cultural landscape as arguably the single most-played work by an American composer. It resides in the repertoire of every orchestra, sells plane tickets on television ads, and inspired Woody Allen to create the film *Manhattan*. So successful was *Rhapsody* that Gershwin could have lived the rest of his life off rental fees from the score alone.

While Gershwin may have lacked the polished training for idiomatic orchestral pieces, he molded the orchestra to suit his personal voice. The French composer Maurice Ravel once commented that Gershwin's voice was unique and intriguing. When Gershwin approached Ravel for private lessons, the Frenchman turned the table, imploring the American - albeit sarcastically - for tips on composing jazz.

"There can be no doubt that Gershwin was an extraordinarily fertile songwriter," noted the American critic, Tim Page. "He made ripe, luscious melodies as an apple tree makes apples - melodies that sound equally at home in a jazz club and a concert hall, melodies characterized by driving energy, near-magical immediacy and a seemingly inevitable vector."

Gershwin told a biographer in 1931 that *Rhapsody* came to him on a train ride to Boston, and by the time he arrived he had a definite musical plan. "I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America," he said, "of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our metropolitan madness."

*Rhapsody* is the first major American work to incorporate jazz into an orchestra, but it was not intended as a formal concerto in the sense of Beethoven or Tchaikovsky. In fact, the piece doesn't follow traditional classical forms at all; rather, it unfolds like a bluesy improvisation. Gershwin was a fine pianist but knew little of orchestration - of getting all those instruments to jive.

So he gave the two-piano score to Whiteman's arranger, Ferde Grofe, who would become famous for his *Grand Canyon Suite*. Whiteman promoted the concert heavily and at great expense - he lost \$7,000 on that one day - but believed in his investment. He would stage the work nearly a hundred times over the next two years, adopted it as his band's theme song, enjoying the royalties of a 1927 recording that sold a million copies.

*Rhapsody* is really an impression of any city in America, but it most likely belongs to New York, notes Howard Pollack in his book *George Gershwin: His Life and Work*. This quintessential American piece, he writes, evokes "the hurdy-gurdies of the Lower East Side, the calliopes of Coney Island, the player pianos of Harlem, the chugging of trains leaving Grand Central Station, the noisy construction of midtown skyscrapers."

**ANTONIN DVORAK (1841-1904)**  
**SYMPHONY NO. 7 IN D MINOR, OP. 70**  
Duration: ca. 35 minutes

"So, how would you describe the music of Dvorak?" a friend once asked. "Simple," I said. "Put a cup of Tchaikovsky in a blender, add a cup of Brahms, and hit puree. There you have it - a Dvorak smoothie."

If only describing music was that easy. Dvorak does borrow the flavors of his Russian and German contemporaries, but simmers them into a style firmly rooted in the soil of his native Bohemia. Certainly, Dvorak is easy to digest. His music is engaging, earthy, folksy. Dark moods always seem to come up sunny.

Dvorak had an innate feel for a good tune, how to send it into a rhythmic whirlwind, and keep listeners in suspense over where things will go. These qualities can be found in his nine

symphonies, dozen operas, three concertos, 50 chamber pieces, and choral works and songs. He became close friends with Johannes Brahms, whom he deeply admired, and who praised and promoted his music.

Had Dvorak followed his father's wishes, he may well have been a butcher, cutting up meat for a living in Prague. Lucky for us, Dvorak chose another path and left us such gems as the *New World Symphony* and the *Cello Concerto*.

Dvorak took great pride in composing his *Seventh Symphony*, which some call his finest work in the form, although the *Eighth* and *Ninth* are more popular. London's Philharmonic Society, of which Dvorak was an honorary member, commissioned the work and in 1884 the composer sat down to write a symphony "capable of moving the world" through its nobility, melancholy and muscular strength.

Following its premiere in 1885, the *Seventh* took on momentum and soon became part of every professional orchestra's playlist. The opening movement is full of dark, concentrated ideas and an almost electrical energy. The adagio, with the woodwinds playing over pizzicato strings, offers a quote from the *Third Symphony* of Brahms — a work Dvorak revered. An energetic scherzo follows, making use of a Czech dance called the *furiant*, and the finale delivers an epic struggle between the keys of D minor and D major. Given Dvorak's agreeable nature, listeners can only guess how it ends.

***Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.***