

Approaching *Rhapsody in Blue*

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Arguably the most famous piece in the jazz-influenced genre, *Rhapsody in Blue* was commissioned by Paul Whiteman for a concert entitled 'An Experiment in Modern Music' on 12th February 1924. The orchestration was made by Ferde Grofé, who was one of Whiteman's arrangers, and drew on the multi-instrumental capabilities of Whiteman's reed players. The piece was later re-orchestrated for symphony orchestra, but it is the original band version that concerns us here. For more detail on all aspects of the piece, I highly recommend David Schiff's book published in the Cambridge Music Handbooks series

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Due to the rapid speed with which *Rhapsody in Blue* was composed and orchestrated (Gershwin apparently only began work on the commission having read a newspaper report announcing it in January), the original manuscript score of the band version of *Rhapsody in Blue* is rather sketchy. A facsimile of the score is published by Warner Brothers, and shows Grofé's use of shorthand rather than writing out repeated passages, indicating that this was a working document rather than a fair copy. Also notable is that the score is dated 4th February, just over a week before the first performance. The piano part, which was probably partially improvised by Gershwin at the first performance, is only roughly represented in the score. The details that we now expect as part of the piece are often missing and one entire cadenza (before the central slow section) is not written out at all, merely giving the direction to the conductor to 'wait for nod'.

The subsequent number of printed versions in which the *Rhapsody* exists causes problems when trying to define the precise identity of the piece, and has given importance to various recordings in preserving the detail and sense of the work. Recording has always played an important role in preserving and disseminating performance practice in jazz, an orally based and improvisational

art form. In the case of *Rhapsody in Blue* recording has played a vital part in the ongoing development of the work in performance, to the extent that certain features of the work seem to have originated almost entirely from recorded rather than notated sources. A famous example of this is the opening, which was performed by clarinetist Ross Gorman as a glissando as a joke in rehearsal. Gershwin, however, liked the sound and instructed Gorman to perform the theme with as much of a wail as possible at the première (Schiff, 1992:102). The glissando is not indicated on the score produced by Grofé but is present in the early recordings of the piece.

Similarly, recordings have clearly influenced the progressive standardisation of interpretations of the central slow section (*Andante moderato*) of the piece, described by Schiff as 'the most famous melody in twentieth century concert music' (1992:22), which is rarely

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played as written today. The piano rolls that Gershwin made of the piece, in which he performed both the solo and ensemble parts (issued in 1927 but probably made in 1925 and now available as CD transfers) demonstrate free use of *rubato* where the tempo varies constantly and widely. However, in most modern performances the first two bars of the theme are usually performed at half the speed of the following six bars in which the counter-melody appears, a practice that Schiff suggests appears to have resulted from crude mechanisation of the *rubato* in Gershwin's performances (1997:22).

The recording of the *Rhapsody* made by Michael Tilson Thomas in which Gershwin 'performs' the solo piano part through a playback of the piano roll using a modern pianola equivalent may be regarded as the most 'authentic' modern recording of the piece. But even here, there is a typical 'mechanised' interpretation of

the initial part of the *Andante moderato* section performed by the ensemble alone (not following the way in which Gershwin performed this *tutti* section on the original piano roll). Hence, when 'Gershwin' enters in the repetition of the melody the tempo almost doubles and the band has to conform to his flamboyant *rubato*. This performance can sound uncomfortable in the *tutti* sections with piano, as the band races to keep up with Gershwin, and the concept has the inherent flaw that a solo recording has been transported into an ensemble context.

Indeed, recordings made by Gershwin with the Paul Whiteman Band provide evidence that Gershwin performed the piece differently with a band accompaniment. Such performances suggest that the slow section should be interpreted as a foxtrot (a popular dance of the day) in 2/2 (Schiff, 1997:23), albeit with some flexibility in recognition that the *Rhapsody* is a jazz-influenced concert piece rather than *actual* dance music. This is an important distinction, as in the 1920s the very nomenclature of the decade - the 'jazz age' - indicates that jazz was not only popular music but also an aesthetic movement that permeated to the core of society. As jazz rose to prominence and extreme universal popularity in the 'jazz age' of the 1920s, it became the soundtrack not only to the underground clubs and bars of America, but also in Europe and as an important influence on both high art and mainstream culture. It is this atmosphere that I believe Gershwin's *Rhapsody* expresses so wonderfully. It is clearly not an accurate representation of jazz of the period, and does not preserve history like a photograph or recording. It

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does, however, clearly express the spirit of the 'jazz age' seen through the eyes of this composer and as such is fundamentally authentic as a personal expression.

Often, additional contextual research is

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necessary to provide greater depth of understanding of the performance style that we might encounter on recordings in which composers perform or conduct their own music. The development of recording technology in the twentieth century has allowed us unprecedented access to many composers performing and conducting their own work. It is tempting to give such documentary evidence unequivocal importance as the 'authentic' readings of the work to which we should aspire in our own performances. However, although it is possible to replicate the details of a recording exactly ('authentically') this does not necessarily ensure a convincing performance – it may be historically accurate but dull!

In addition, it may be argued that since time has elapsed since the original performance, whilst it may be re-performed physically it is actually impossible to replicate aesthetically, as it will be tainted by our new knowledge and experiences as performers and audience. Interestingly Tilson Thomas, in a later recording of *Rhapsody in Blue* with orchestra in which he performs the piano part himself, reverts wholesale to a typical romantic interpretation. As Schiff points out, 'it seems hard for any performers, no matter how historically informed, to give up the full-blown romantic approach to the theme in favour of a more authentic rendition that usually sounds saccharine' (1992:68). It seems that Tilson Thomas' later interpretation, although it may be criticised for a lack of historical authenticity is arguably *more* authentic emotionally. Thus, it seems that the most sensible approach is to use 'authentic' sources such as composer's recordings in our preparation for performances to help us to produce an interpretation that is faithful to the score and the composer's intention (as far as this can be determined) but yet we must remain true to our own creativity and integrity as musicians.

In jazz, the phenomenon of performer/composer is extremely common, as many musicians compose their own material and improvisation, which may be regarded as a form of composing, is inherent in the style. As a result, recordings and, of course, live performances are obviously extremely useful sources when learning about jazz. Although the practice of 'sitting in' jazz bands and learning from other musicians on the job is less common today, jazz musicians continue to copy other musicians, often to the extent of transcribing and learning improvised

solos from recordings. Ideally, these various influences should be absorbed into a musician's personal style. For musicians beginning to play in jazz and popular styles, listening is an important aspect of the learning process. Through using jazz recordings to absorb stylistic elements, musicians are already engaged in responding to aural stimuli that is a basis for successful jazz performances. Recordings allow easy access to the largely un-notatable aspects of the music, particularly the various different 'feels' and 'grooves' and analysis of improvised material can yield melodic ideas and structural concepts for creating solos.

I have found recordings invaluable when working with Dr Jazz and the Cheshire Cats, both as a stimulus for improvisation and familiarity with various styles, but also more directly as an insight into the pieces that are currently being rehearsed. Publishers such as Warner Bros provide a recording of the

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piece when the set of parts is purchased. I have found that it is useful, particularly for the rhythm section, to be able to hear the piece prior to the rehearsal. This goes against the traditional method of a conductor forming an interpretation through working with the score, which is then communicated to the players in rehearsal. However, I believe that with the quality and quantity of recordings available today, recordings in all genres, but particularly popular genres, often become part of the history of that work and critical evaluation of recorded performances can be important in helping us to find our own reading of a piece. In addition, the big band conductor, and to an extent the community ensemble conductor, is more accurately a director, providing the necessary resources and guidance to facilitate the performances of the group, and this may well include recordings as a supplement to rehearsal time.

Whilst the big band is the most

conventional ensemble format for jazz, and as indicated earlier, is easy to form from within a pre-existing wind ensemble, it has been criticised for the lack of creative improvisation possibilities and stylistic variation. For this reason, it may be desirable for big band players to listen to recordings from other areas of the genre to broaden their knowledge and awareness. Jazz has evolved into a musical style in which eclecticism is itself a significant feature, hence jazz may be considered more as an approach to the handling of these materials. Indeed, attempts to define jazz precisely as a musical style can be extremely problematic to the point of being a pointless exercise. Jazz has a peculiar history in which a conventional linear view fails to acknowledge the continuation of forms even though new ones have evolved. For example, the bebop movement pioneered by musicians such as Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie failed to entirely wipe out the big bands popular in the 1930s and 1940s; and traditional or 'Dixieland' jazz remains popular all over the world almost a hundred years since its formation. Modern big band and jazz-influenced wind ensemble compositions may draw on any and many aspects of the relatively brief but yet continually evolving history of jazz, and hence an understanding and acquaintance with these different forms of jazz is clearly desirable.

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Sony SMK 61697

Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue etc
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Sony SMK 60028