

Discover *Rhapsody in Blue*

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

George Gershwin: *Rhapsody in Blue*

Rhapsody in Blue evolved from Gershwin's collaboration with jazz band leader Paul Whiteman. Gershwin was 25, ambitious, and talented. He also had solid commercial instincts, and recognized the new piece's potential. *Rhapsody in Blue* had an extraordinary impact on American music. Although some critics objected to Gershwin's lack of traditional formal discipline, audiences loved the piece. Even the harshest detractors acknowledged the freshness of the musical ideas, beginning with the fabulous soaring clarinet glissando, which sets the work's sultry tone.

Gershwin later told a biographer, "I heard it as a musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our national pep, of our blues, our metropolitan madness." Rhythmic ideas dominate the first half, which is peppered with improvisatory solo cadenzas. The E-major section with the *Rhapsody's* most famous melody is the emotional heart of the work, but gives way to a showy and virtuosic close.

Aaron Copland: Suite from *Billy the Kid*

Aaron Copland's three early ballets, *Billy the Kid* (1938), *Rodeo* (1942), and *Appalachian Spring* (1944), capture the spirit of pioneer America, expressing optimism, grit, and folk culture. *Billy the Kid* was a joint project with ballet impresario Lincoln Kirstein, who wrote the scenario. The story focuses first on the pivotal incident of Billy's youth, when he sees his mother killed by a stray bullet. Incensed by fury and grief, he slays one of her assailants with a knife, and his fugitive life begins.

Copland's opening evokes the prairie's solitude and loneliness. The folksy atmosphere of a frontier town is emphasized by his adaptation of the tunes from "Git along little doggies" and "Oh bury me not on the lone prairie." He also alludes to the cowboy songs "Come Wrangle yer Bronco" and "Goodbye Old Paint." The rough-and-tumble scenes of violence spring vividly to life via muted trumpets and side drum; gentler and more humorous sides of Billy's character also come through in this down-to-earth, likeable score.

George Gershwin: *Rhapsody in Blue*

George Gershwin

Born: September 26, 1898, in Brooklyn, New York

Died: July 11, 1937, in Beverly Hills, California

Composed: January 7–February 4, 1924

World Premiere: November 12, 1924, in New York City

Duration: 16 minutes

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, three horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, two alto saxophones, tenor saxophone, banjo, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, gong, snare drum, triangle), solo piano, and strings

In January 1924, the *New York Tribune* announced a concert of American music, at which a committee of judges would decide what American music *is*. For the occasion, Irving Berlin, Victor Herbert, and George Gershwin would introduce new compositions. The paper reported:

“George Gershwin is at work on a jazz concerto, Irving Berlin is writing a syncopated tone poem, and Victor Herbert is working on an American Suite.”

It was news to Gershwin. He had planned a collaboration with jazz band leader Paul Whiteman, but they hadn’t discussed details.

Gershwin was 25, ambitious, and talented. Though unschooled, he had solid commercial instincts. Recognizing the professional potential of the American music event, he and Whiteman decided to make the new piece happen. The result was *Rhapsody in Blue*, which has become an iconic American work.

Whiteman suggested that Ferde Grofé orchestrate the *Rhapsody*, since Gershwin had no background in orchestration. Grofé’s accomplishment was masterly, and contributed greatly to *Rhapsody in Blue*’s success.

The work has had an extraordinary impact on American music. Although some critics objected to Gershwin’s lack of traditional formal discipline, the audience loved the piece. Even the harshest detractors acknowledged the freshness of the musical ideas, beginning with the fabulous clarinet glissando that soars upward at the start, setting the whole sultry tone of the work.

Gershwin later told his first biographer, Isaac Goldberg:

“I heard it as a musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our national pep, of our blues, our metropolitan madness.”

That description helps to explain the capriciousness and vivid snapshots in the *Rhapsody*. Its two large sections are peppered with improvisatory solo piano cadenzas. Rhythmic ideas dominate the first half, with extensive,

non-traditional development. The E-major section with the *Rhapsody's* most famous melody is the emotional heart of the work, but gives way to a showy and virtuosic close.

Aaron Copland: Suite from *Billy the Kid*

Aaron Copland

Born: November 14, 1900 in Brooklyn, New York

Died: December 2, 1990, in Tarrytown, New York

Composed: 1938

World Premiere: October 16, 1938, in Chicago.

Duration: 22 minutes

Instrumentation: piccolo, two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (xylophone, snare drum, wood block, glockenspiel, cymbals, sleigh bells, guïro, whip, suspended cymbal, bass drum, tin whistle, triangle), harp, piano, and strings

The ballets of Aaron Copland hold a special place in the hearts of Americans. With his three early dance scores, *Billy the Kid* (1938), *Rodeo* (1942), and *Appalachian Spring* (1944), Copland caught the spirit of pioneer America, expressing this nation's optimism, grit, and folk culture. Music from these three scores seems as American as apple pie, yet Copland's voice shines through, flavoring the wholesome melodies of his ballet music with 20th-century spice.

The first of those three popular ballets, *Billy the Kid*, was written on the heels of Copland's hit orchestral piece, *El Salón México* (1936), in which he first used folk material. *Billy* grew out of a suggestion by Lincoln Kirstein, then director of the American Ballet Caravan. Kirstein wrote the scenario, romanticizing the outlaw's life. The story focuses first on the pivotal incident of Billy's youth, when he sees his mother killed by a stray bullet. Incensed by fury and grief, he slays one of her assailants with a knife, and his fugitive life begins.

Copland's concert suite consists of seven movements, or about two-thirds of the complete ballet. We hear the opening, which evokes the solitude and loneliness of the open prairie. The folksy atmosphere of a frontier town is emphasized by Copland's adaptation of the tunes from "Git along little doggies" and "Oh bury me not on the lone prairie." He also alludes to the cowboy songs "Come Wrangle yer Bronco" and "Goodbye Old Paint." The rough-and-tumble scenes of violence spring vividly to life through Copland's use of muted trumpets and side drum; gentler and more humorous sides of Billy's character also come through in this down-to-earth, likeable score.

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