

Introduction

Rhapsody in Blue was composed in 1924 by George Gershwin. It is an irregular sectional form that really has hardly any form at all. Instead it is a rhapsody. Rhapsody derives from the Greek word “to sew”. This piece is a constant composition of stitched together themes creating a more free form to allow flexibility concerning expression and enthusiasm. It consists of frequent tempo changes, especially during the piano solo passages. The whole song is mainly conjunct, chromatic and full of improvisation.

Its instrumentation is composed of: clarinet (doubling on several sizes); soprano sax; alto sax; tenor sax; baritone sax; 2 French horns; 2 trombones; tuba; 8 violins; double bass; timpani; banjo; celesta; and the piano. Rhapsody in Blue was meant to have a full but small orchestra against a number of piano solos.

Listening Chart: Rhapsody in Blue

By: George Gershwin

- 0:05** Introduction: This piece begins with a solo clarinet portraying a sound famous “yawn” sound; this is when a clarinet slurs a low note to a higher note. This action consists of about 4 octaves which also creates a type of blues sound.
- 00:07** The solo clarinet ends this glissando by gently flowing into the main theme of this piece (song A). At this time it is accompanied by a trombones playing a slowly descending scale.
- 00:21** By slow increments the trombones play ascending unattached chords.
- 00:33** The French horns join in the monody the trombones continue to play.
- 00:42** The French horns take over the melody that is meant to introduce the first song, A; the drums play at the same time, a duple meter.
- 00:51** the string section slips in with a chromatic scale of 4 allowing the next transition to take place.
- 00:53** the clarinet leads in this transition by repeating the glissando it did in the beginning of the piece, only this time playing about 3 octaves before settling into a steady melody.
- 00:57** the trumpet portrays the main melody of this piece once again, still keeping its blues feeling.
- 1:06** the piano plays a solo somewhat climactic transition allowing the full orchestra to join the piece giving a more full and intense feeling for the audience.
- 1:13** The orchestra joins and plays the song A in a much more forceful way. This sudden shift in tone and mood permits the piece’s irregular form to feel more comforting.
- 1:22** the piano now plays a solo part. The tempo does not stay the same (as you may notice through-out the piece); this piano solo emphasizes this fact and shows that only with this “trick” Gershwin was able to free the rhythm a little more adding the rhapsodic environment. It also shows the great improvisation skill Gershwin had by combining many different types of rhythms and dynamics into familiar yet unique moods.
- 2:10** The orchestra enters with a quicker repetition of strings and a low clarinet in the background.
- 2:16** The orchestra cuts out allowing the piano to play solo.

- 2:24** The orchestra returns repeating the same quick repetitive notes as before with the string instruments.
- 2:29** The orchestra fades out with a melodic note, concerning the piano, giving way for the piano to perform solo.
- 2:41** The piano becomes a little harsher on dynamics than before.
- 2:52** the piano begins what seems to be a separate section with-in the piece, perhaps a little bit of improvisation, a very new and distinct melody with some disjunct figures.
- 3:10** the piano begins to build this part of the piece into another climactic transition
- 3:24** then at this moment the full orchestra springs in the full version of song A, the brass at the lead of this great moment with the strong timpani playing a duple meter. Song A is played in an AABA form from 3:24- 3:59.
- 3:30** The flute section gets a turn at a solo part leading to the next high moment.
- 3:34** the full orchestra jumps back in repeating Song A; form A.
- 3:42** The whole mood of the piece changes gears to being more settled. The piano repeats the simple chords after the strings play them.
- 3:51** The brass section carry the melody with a strong focus in the direction of the next song, song B. The rest of the orchestra play alongside them with disjunct figures.
- 3:59** A trumpet holds a note creating an approaching train feeling giving an intense feeling. This becomes the short transition to the "Train" theme in jazz.
- 4:03** The "Train" theme in jazz rhythm (a rhythm of 3+3+2) begins the song B which is also in AABA form. The piano plays a very disjunct dissonance as the background to portray a feeling of business.
- 4:16** clarinets (some wind instrument) comes in and ties the two "A's" together
- 4:23** song B; form A is repeated.
- 4:30** The orchestra seems to release all its energy turning to the clarinet solo..
- 4:33** The piano and orchestra come in again attempting to finish their part
- 4:36** The orchestra seems to collapse again turning to the clarinet to show them which part will be next
- 4:45** the trombones begin by slurring descending notes leading the orchestra into the usual introduction for song A
- 5:01** the piano leads in a sort of bridge; the string section partner up with the piano taking over this short melody.
- 5:15** the clarinet leads in a short decending melody
- 5:19** the trumpet repeats the decending melody the clarinet just played
- 5:26** the flutes play and hold one note while 1 second after another lower sounding wind instrument repeats the decending melody the clarinet and trumpet just played.
- 5:31** the flutes release the note they were holding into a gradually descending scale.
- 5:35** a transition to Song C is made by a harsh strikes to several notes
- 5:38** song C begins and is staccato based with all the orchestra and syncopated block chords on the piano. The style is AABA form.
- 6:05** Brass come in, slowly leading into the next climactic moment
- 6:10** The whole orchestra comes in again repeating the song C; form A 5 times with 2 chromatic melodies (from song C; form A) after the second repetition.

- 6:39** the piano goes off on a huge solo playing and improvising most of the different songs played already within the piece.
- 8:50** The clarinets come in on the improvisation taking place on the piano; they carry the melody along playing song A
- 9:24** The piano sneaks a solo again by improvisations of song C
- 11:28** the strings come in, beginning song D; the romance theme. This song is also AABA form.
- 11:34** the French horns join in with a different unattached chords in the background creating a more romantic, calming scene.
- 11:49** the romantic theme begins to carry a brighter, lighter feeling portrayed by the orchestra, lead by the French horns.
- 11:56** the brass bring out their sound fuller in this section of song D.
- 12:15** a transition begins to occur that will lead to a greater feeling of light and happiness
- 12:25** the whole orchestra softly but strongly enter the climactic part of song D.
- 12:52** song D hits an even higher point in its climb to its climax
- 13:06** the piano slowly begins a solo part by using repetitive chords. A triangle chimes in the background, creating a light feeling.
- 13:14** the piano creates a very gradual ascending scale and ends it by transitioning into the improvisation of song D.
- 14:18** Piano transitions and then at 14:29 introduces a short bridge
- 15:32** the brass section join in with the piano creating an inspirational forward feeling. They are headed towards song A
- 16:28** song A finally has returned!!
- 17:09** the song has come to its climax using the song A
- 17:20** the piece comes to its end and is emphasized by the fading in and out and in and out again of the orchestra.
- 17:37** the piece ends

Vocabulary: Used

Chromatic: involving a modification of the normal scale by the use of accidentals.

Glissando: performed with a gliding effect by sliding one or more fingers rapidly over the keys of a piano or strings of a harp.

Rhapsody: Greek word “to sew”, single, uninterrupted composition of stitched together themes suggesting free form but with continuity, and with an expression of extravagant enthusiasm.

Monody: a vocal technique that gives the soloist liberal expression to portray the emotion of the text with simple, harmonic accompaniment.

Disjunct: a description of an uneven melody that has large intervallic movement or wide leaps.

Duple Meter: a meter where the first of two beats or every other beat is emphasized.

Dissonance: harmony that creates tension, discomfort or is in disagreement.

Syncopation: an overall shift to emphasize the unaccented beats instead of the regularly accented beats. For example, regularly accented beats in the time signature 4/4 are 1 and 3, syncopation would shift the emphasis to beats 2 and 4.

References:

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