‘Rhapsody in Blue’ at 100

Celebrating and reimagining George Gershwin’s ‘musical kaleidoscope of America’

By Lara Downes

It’s Friday morning, 7 a.m., and I’m passing through O’Hare International Airport for the third time this week—not unusual for me, a touring musician. As I make my way down the corridor that connects United’s B and C concourses, I wonder how many of my fellow travelers know that the music piped through this hallway is a melody from “Rhapsody in Blue,” by George Gershwin. You hear it nearly every time you board a United plane—a familiar tune that welcomes you to the friendly skies.

When I get home this weekend, I’ll land at the piano, preparing for my next performance of “Rhapsody in Blue.” I’ve played this iconic composition countless times, but this time will be different. The piece turns 100 years old this month, and I’ve commissioned the brilliant Puerto Rican composer Edmar Colón to write a new arrangement—one that celebrates its history while bringing it forward into the multicultural, multilayered reality of America today.

Gershwin described “Rhapsody in Blue” as “a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America—of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our metropolitan madness.” At its first performance, on a snowy New York City afternoon in February 1924, the composer’s mix of percussive rhythms, swoonworthy tunes, and Jazz Age exuberance, culminating in a crash-bang ending, brought the audience to its feet. The next summer, Gershwin was featured on the cover of *Time*, and the first recording of the piece sold a million copies.

“Rhapsody in Blue” is a snapshot of its time, that moment when the world roared back to life after a World War and a global pandemic, when the defining inventions of a still-young century—cars, radios, the movies—transformed the pace and possibility of daily life. Skirts were short, jazz was hot, the Charleston was fast, and American life was simply the bee’s knees and the cat’s pajamas.

It’s never really that simple, though. In the 1920s, dark forces emerged to resist all that change and progress. Post-war nationalism took an ugly turn, as the Ku Klux Klan terrorized recent immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe in the North and Midwest. Just three months after Gershwin, himself the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, celebrated the melting pot in his new “Rhapsody,” the U.S.’s open-door policy came to an end with the passing of the Johnson-Reed Act, designed to “preserve the ideal of U.S. homogeneity” by shutting down immigration from Asia and limiting it from parts of Europe. Ironically, an unintended loophole in the new laws had definitive consequences for my own family: Because many of the Caribbean islands were still British colonies, West Indians could enter freely under Great Britain’s generous quota, and my grandparents, Leonard and Ivy, came from Jamaica to Harlem in the mid-1920s.

Over the past century, this country has been transformed by the arrivals of millions of people from all around the globe, who risked long and perilous journeys to this promised land of freedom and opportunity. According to the Census Bureau, more than 350 languages are spoken here. We are a kaleidoscope. Gershwin saw this even back then, although much of our world looks far different from the way it did when he composed “Rhapsody in Blue”: The plane in which I’m flying was still decades in the future; he would hardly recognize his native New York City, dense as it is with skyscrapers now; and what would he make of the phone in my pocket, with the world’s news and its music at my fingertips?

Unfortunately, 2024 holds some other realities that wouldn’t surprise Gershwin. Change keeps coming, and with it so do fear and backlash. We’re still struggling to realize the audacious promise of this country, and the young adulthood of our century is a conflicted, confusing time—as was his.

One thing I know: Gershwin would love our music. After all, he had a big hand in making possible the hybrid mix that we take for granted now as the American sound. When he poured the sounds of the melting pot into his joyful “Rhapsody,” he inspired the musicians of his time and of future generations to do the same: to listen and respond to the ever-changing “musical kaleidoscope of America,” with its ever-shifting explosions of vibrant color and brilliant light.

***Lara Downes**’s new recording of “Rhapsody in Blue” is available on all platforms February 2.*

From top: Lara Downes performs “Rhapsody in Blue” in San Francisco; George Gershwin in the 1920s

Lydia Daniller (Downes and orchestra); Max Barrett (Gershwin)