

Analysis of Rhapsody in Blue

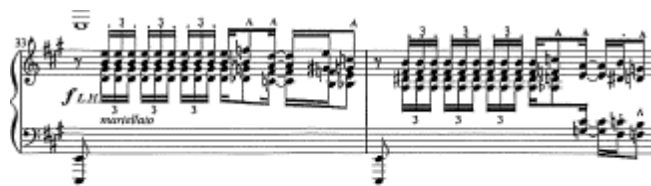
Melody

Melody is very important in Rhapsody in Blue. Perhaps the most notable feature regarding melody is that there are five distinct themes throughout the piece. Naming the work a “rhapsody” allowed Gershwin to have many themes played in succession. **The themes are strongly influenced by the blues scale (flattened 3rd and 7th notes) found in jazz, giving the rhapsody a distinctive 1920's feel.**

1

Some of these themes are used throughout the piece while some are only played once or twice. Each theme has a distinct programmatic feel. For example, Theme 3 has the feel of a train chugging along, which is where Gershwin found his inspiration for the piece, while Theme 5 has a romantic feel to it. Each different theme also appears to be played within the piano solo as well as played by the orchestra. **Gershwin uses sequence frequently to extend the melodies within themes.** Sequence is the repetition of musical ideas played either or lower. This serves as a technique of creating suspense and tension. (Below is an example from the solo piano)

2



Chromaticism is also a main feature of the music in Rhapsody in Blue. The use of chromatic notes is when the notes slide up and down by semitone. **This is also a feature of jazz music from the 1920's.** (Clarinet part above)

3

Call and response is also a main feature of the melodies in Rhapsody in Blue, it is also a distinctive feature of early jazz and blues. This originates from the time of slavery when a lead voice sings/'calls' a phrase and others would sing back, as if they were responding. It is the same in instrumental music. This is heard throughout the piece but is most notable in the opening section where bars 4-5 of the musical statement by the clarinet are answered in bars 6-7 by the horns and trombones.

4

The many themes perhaps can be said to represent the many different aspects of 1920's America together with the emergence and blend of international cultures, particularly in Gershwin's own New York City.

5

The themes of the rhapsody can change relatively drastically and with much surprise to the listener. In the beginning of the music, theme one begins on the clarinet with a grand glissando crescendo. Also found are features of tied notes, staccato and chromatic notes, all jazz features, and which add a sense of excitement to begin the music. The blues scale is also used, creating a semi laid back feel. Chromatic notes are again heard in the second theme. Theme 3 is extended once again using sequence. In Theme 4, Gershwin extends his melody using expansion which is the expanding of intervals. Each time it is played, the intervals become wider, creating the effect of reaching higher, creating excitement, and leading to the reappearance of Theme 2.

The 3rd theme can be known as the 'Train' theme. Muted trumpets announced the theme and depict a train whistle. The 4th theme uses many blues notes and features of jazz which contrasts with the previous theme. And lastly, the 5th theme known as the Romantic theme, demonstrates Gershwin's mastery in creating unforgettable melodies as he did many times in his popular songs and opera 'Porgy and Bess'. The 5th theme also uses syncopation and chromaticism; however, it is far more classical in nature with reference to Rachmaninov (2nd piano concerto) and Kreisler in the featured violin solo.

Gershwin uses melody to create feelings of surprise and the unexpected. The melodies and themes of Rhapsody in Blue are very diverse, as was the American Society in the 1920's which was the initial inspiration for the piece. I believe the diverse and rhapsodic use of melody throughout the work is an exact representation of what the piece was meant to reflect.

6