

George Gershwin (1898-1937)



Born: 1898 (Brooklyn, New York)
Died: 1937 (Los Angeles, California)

FAST FACTS

- Tried to recreate the orchestra music he heard in concerts on piano
- wrote around 100 piano rolls for player piano
- wrote *Rhapsody in Blue*, an internationally famous jazz piano concerto
- Kept a musical joke that the clarinetist made in a rehearsal in the permanent score

George Gershwin was first introduced to music when he attended his friend's violin recital. Gershwin was so inspired and fascinated by the sounds he heard coming from the violin that he began to practice on the piano his parents had originally bought for his brother. Throughout his childhood, Gershwin studied with many different and important teachers. He also attended orchestra concerts, and tried to recreate the music he heard in the concerts on piano.

When he was 15, Gershwin left school and worked for a publishing company, where he played piano music to entice customers to buy the compositions that were for sale in the company's store. Gershwin was able to get many of the pieces he was writing on the side into the music world through that publishing company, which meant that he could make a profit from them. A few years later, he worked for a company that produced piano rolls, which are long scrolls of music with perforations, and are played with player pianos. Gershwin recorded and arranged close to one hundred of these.

In the early 1920s, when jazz was becoming an international phenomenon, Gershwin collaborated with a few different lyricists, including his brother Ira, to write musicals. His musical *Of Thee I Sing* even won the first Pulitzer Prize for Drama! Around the same time Gershwin composed *Rhapsody in Blue* for piano and orchestra, his most famous piece. *Rhapsody* is essentially a jazz-style concerto, and was premiered by the famous jazz bandleader Paul Whiteman in a concert entitled *An Experiment in Modern Music*. One of the most recognizable parts of the entire piece is the opening glissando (a glide between two notes, usually a wide distance apart), which is played by the clarinet. Gershwin did not write a glissando in the original music, but the clarinetist played a joke on him by humorously "wailing" on his instrument during the dress rehearsal. Gershwin loved it so much that he told the clarinetist to play the opening music that way in the performance, and the music has not changed since!

Gershwin sadly died young, but helped establish jazz as the idiomatic American genre of music in the early 20th century. The impact of jazz music throughout the world today is impossible to estimate!



Let's Listen!

- Leonard Bernstein performs *Rhapsody in Blue*: [click here](#).
- Watch rare footage of Gershwin himself play "I Got Rhythm" from his musical *Girl Crazy*: [click here](#).