

Ferde Grofé (1892-1972)



FAST FACTS

- Born into four generations of musicians
- Studied piano, viola & composition in Germany
- Arranged jazz and popular compositions for dance and jazz big bands
- Inspired to write *Grand Canyon Suite* after watching the sunrise over the Grand Canyon

Born: 1892 (New York City, NY)
Died: 1972 (Santa Monica, CA)

Ferdinand Rudolph von Grofé, or just “Ferde”, was born into four generations of talented musicians. He was born in New York, but his mother later took him to Germany to study piano, viola, and composition. In addition to these, he mastered other string and brass instruments and actually played viola in the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Ferde’s talent on many different instruments led him to try to arrange famous works for the jazz and dance bands he performed with. His successful arrangement of Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* caused him to be noticed by Paul Whiteman, a popular jazz bandleader in the 1920s. In addition to the pieces he arranged, Ferde wrote some of his own. *Mississippi: A Journey in Tones*, *Metropolis: A Fantasia in Blue*, and the *Grand Canyon Suite* paint portraits of the American landscape, much like what Aaron Copland sought to do.

Grand Canyon Suite is Ferde’s best-known work. He shared many years after it was written that it was inspired by a road trip he and his friends took from California to Arizona to watch the sun rise over the Grand Canyon. At first, he described, the scenery was very calm and quiet. As the sun began to come up, however, he began to hear all of the noises of nature around him. Finally, as the sunlight spilled across the landscape and into the canyon, Ferde was so overcome by the beauty of the vision before him that he could not possibly use words to describe it. Some of the sections of the Suite include “Sunrise,” “Cloudburst,” and “On the Trail,” which features the clip-clop sound of donkeys’ hooves. Even though Ferde observed the magnificent sunrise in 1916, he completed the *Grand Canyon Suite* in 1931. It was first performed by Paul Whiteman’s band in Chicago.

Ferde Grofé’s compositions, especially the *Grand Canyon Suite*, remind us that we are forever grateful to music to express emotions and experiences where words are simply not enough.



Let’s Listen!

- The Texas Medical Center Orchestra performs *Grand Canyon Suite*: [click here](#).
- Watch a rarely-seen interview with Ferde Grofé from the 1950s or 60s about how he arranged Gershwin’s music! [click here](#).