

Quad City Symphony Orchestra
PROGRAM NOTES
Masterworks VI: Rhapsody in Blue

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ANGEL LAM (b. 1978)

Please let there be a paradise...

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, alto flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, tuba, 3 percussion, harp, piano, and strings.

Premiere: April 2024, Kansas City Symphony, Michael Stern, conducting.
QCSO Premiere.

Composer Angel Lam writes:

Back in 2021, during the height of the pandemic and a prolonged travel lockdown and quarantine in Asia, my father passed away alone in Hong Kong. I haven't seen him in years. The summer before the pandemic started, a multi-month-long protest in Hong Kong had made travel difficult.

My father was my muse. He grew up in a city where children were encouraged to pursue careers in finance, medicine, and law - careers

that ensure status and wealth, yet he encouraged me to pursue something different. He told me not to be afraid to walk a path that no one travels.

That January of 2021, my father left the world suddenly, unexpectedly. For a long time, I had suspected he had depression and was quietly taking his own life away. But I could never confirm. I live 8000 miles away from him. He always presented his best self to me because he wanted to be my hero. In the months following his death, I had vivid dreams of

myself searching for him in another world... there were dark valleys, murky waters, and broken roads... And once, he popped up in front of me in his younger self, like how I remembered him in his prime during my teenage years. We hailed a red taxi and caught a fun ride together. During the ride, he talked excitedly about history, the arts, and astronomies... all those fun things he had loved in his lifetime. And



then, he disappeared again... without saying goodbye.

Where is he? Where did he go? Is he happy?

This piece is a spiritual journey in search of my father in the underworld. Please let there be a paradise...I hope there is where he is now.

GEORGE GERSHWIN (1898-1937)

Rhapsody in Blue

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 2 alto saxophones, tenor saxophone, 3 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, percussion, banjo, and strings.

Premiere: February 12, 1924, Paul Whiteman and his Palais Royal Orchestra with the composer as soloist, Aeolian Hall, New York City.

QCSO Performance History: The Tri-City Symphony first performed *Rhapsody in Blue* on a Masterworks concert in 1943, conducted by Oscar Anderson with Jane Anderson as soloist. It then took a long hiatus, reappearing on pops concerts in 1988 (conducted by James Dixon, with David Golub as soloist) and 1995 (with Kim Allen Kluge as conductor and soloist). It returned to Masterworks in 2007 (conducted by guest conductor Andrew Constantine, with William Wolfram as soloist) and was last heard on a Masterworks concert in 2015 (conducted by Mark Russell Smith, with Joel Fan as soloist).

Of all the jobs a Brooklyn high school dropout could aspire to in 1913, the position of "song plugger" was by no means the worst.

Since they had no access to America's *Top 40* nor a count of "streams" on Spotify, sales of sheet music were the main method that music publishers measured the popularity of a song. But lacking any other practical means of playing recordings of their music to potential buyers, publishers needed musicians to sit at a piano in a department store or music shop and demonstrate their songs to the buying public. It was just such a position that George Gershwin took at the age of 15, earning \$15 per week (or, in today's dollars, about \$25,000 per year).

Thus, unlike his European counterparts, George Gershwin's musical gifts were forged not in a conservatory but in the American marketplace. Working as a song plugger gave him direct experience with what music (and manner of performance) connected most directly with the public. When he would eventually take up recording player-piano rolls, songwriting, and eventually composing major classical works including America's most iconic opera, Gershwin proved himself to be tremendously gifted at knowing what "sells", composing every manner of music with extraordinary wit, charm, sentiment, and, yes, mass appeal.

As his most enduring and ubiquitous work, *Rhapsody in Blue* was produced at a major



crossroads in Gershwin's life. At age 26, his songwriting career was on an upward trajectory, but he harbored grand ambitions for even greater success as a classical composer. When dance band director Paul

Whiteman produced a concert at New York's Aeolian Hall in February of 1924, he invited Gershwin to compose a work to perform with his band (Gershwin reportedly received the "invitation" by reading about it in the newspaper). As is common in Jazz and musical theatre, arrangement of the work's accompaniment for Jazz band was entrusted to an arranger, Ferde Grofé (of *Grand Canyon Suite* fame). Grofé would later produce the widely-known version for piano and full orchestra.

A centennial retrospective by Andy Hollandbeck published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 2024 summarized the piece's polarized critical reception. The *New York Courier's* critic glowingly reported that he observed "many a hardened concertgoer excited with the sensation of a new talent finding its voice", even as the *New York Tribune* panned Gershwin's melodies as "trite and feeble and conventional" and invited his readers to "[w]EEP over the lifelessness of the melody and harmony, so derivative, so stale, so inexpressive!"

Critical reception of Gershwin's classical works would remain mixed for the rest of his career. There were always commentators eager to praise his audacious blending of American popular styles with classical conventions, as well as many detractors, including elites in both the Jazz and classical worlds, who were eager to point out where his work fell short by the standards of either arena. The composer remained self-conscious in the classical circles, blushing seeking approval from the big names in European music, including Nadia Boulanger, Maurice Ravel, and Alban Berg. But the sincere approval of the music-loving public was

never in question, and Gershwin remains the greatest song plugger in American history.

Rhapsody in Blue Listening Guide

♫ INSTRUMENTATION: The Sidney-Bechet-style clarinet solo, with its smeary portamento, is an iconic moment in American music. Unlike trombones and string instruments, the available pitches for clarinets is limited. This particular slide was reportedly improvised by the concerto's premiere clarinetist.

♫ TIMBRE: Being based on an earlier version for Jazz band, the brass parts in *Rhapsody in Blue* obviously include many colors from Jazz, including heavy use of mutes and flutter-tonging, which produces a tremorous, bright and forceful timbre.

♫ FORM: Unlike in his program notes for *An American in Paris*, Gershwin did not articulate the use of a specific classical form in writing *Rhapsody in Blue*. Indeed, one of the features of a rhapsody can be unconstrained "free form", though often European composers utilized classical forms in their rhapsodies. In any case, the driving principle in the form of Gershwin's work seems to be the free response of the piano part to melodic fragments and harmonic progressions introduced first in the orchestra.

SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891-1953)
Symphony No. 5 in B-flat major, Op.
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Instrumentation: Piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, e-flat clarinet, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, piano, harp, and strings.

Premiere: January 13, 1945, USSR State Symphony Orchestra, with the composer conducting.

QCSO Premiere.

The government of the USSR is not remembered today for its kindness toward creative artists. The sad tale of composer Dmitri Shostakovich's multiple persecutions by Party officials is well-known, and there were plenty of others, including Sergei Prokofiev, who suffered the often-arbitrary, often-terrifying wrath of the government under Stalin.

The official state instrument of these artistic crackdowns was the Union of Soviet Composers. Founded in 1932 as part of Stalin's first Five Year Plan, the group was created to abolish independent artistic organizations and exert direct central control over composers and their artistic activities. Its first leadership council, formed in 1939, was headed by well-regarded composers Reinhold Glière and Aram Khachaturian (of *Sabre Dance* fame). Beginning especially in 1946, after the ruthless commissar Andrei Zhdanov became chairman and his

doctrine of ideological purity became official Soviet policy, the Union was instrumental in rewarding composers who trumpeted the Party line and punishing those who failed to do so adequately.

Yet despite its dark role in the persecution of artists, the Union did also provide meaningful material support to composers. In 1943, the Creative House for Composers was founded near the town of Ivanovo. Situated roughly 150 miles from Moscow, the retreat house was a site of respite for composers and their families, providing them a quiet place to compose away from the chaos of World War II. Ivanovo was the birthplace of several Russian orchestral masterworks of the war years, works that were both written extremely rapidly (presumably since residencies at Ivanovo were short) and with intense expressive aims (presumably because the world was at war). Shostakovich's massive Symphony No. 8 was written at Ivanovo in just under two months in the summer of 1943, "an attempt to reflect the terrible tragedy of war." Similarly, Khachaturian's Symphony No. 2 of the same year, described by the composer as "a requiem of wrath, a requiem of protest against war and violence," was also written in two months at Ivanovo.



And a year later, in the summer of 1944, composer Sergei Prokofiev undertook his expansive Symphony No. 5 at the Creative House. As if to outdo his compatriots who composed there

the summer prior, Prokofiev completed his work even faster, reportedly finishing within a single month. Thematically Prokofiev was, like Shostakovich and Khachaturian, influenced by the ongoing war, but he struck a more optimistic tone. The composer's own, oft-quoted words describe the symphony as "a hymn to free and happy Man, to his mighty powers, his pure and noble spirit... I cannot say that I deliberately chose this theme. It was born in me and clamored for expression. The music matured within me. It filled my soul."

We must pause briefly on the Prokofiev's contention that the symphony's topic was not of his own choosing. While it's certainly true that Prokofiev may have written a stirring and inspirational symphony by pure artistic inspiration, it is also true that the topics and emphases of artistic works were carefully monitored and policed by the Party, and especially the Union of Soviet Composers that was housing Prokofiev at the Creative House. Music, being by nature an abstract art, was viewed as particularly suspect by Stalin's deputy Zhdanov, and the composer may well have considered the theme of "free and happy Man" as political useful for a regime at war. That Prokofiev's symphony was tremendously successful both in the USSR and in the United States is testament to the galvanizing effect of the war on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Of course, in authoritarian regimes, no amount of compliance is enough. In 1948, Zhdanov delivered a harsh critique of contemporary music in the postwar Soviet Union, accusing composers of conducting "a revival of anti-realistic decadent influences calculated to destroy the principles of classical music. These tendencies are peculiar to

the bourgeois movement of the era of imperialism: the rejection of melodiousness in music, neglect of vocal forms, infatuation with rhythmic and orchestral effects, the piling-up of noisy ear-splitting harmonies, intentional illogicality and unemotionality of music. All these tendencies lead in actual fact to the liquidation of music as one of the strongest expressions of human feelings and thoughts."

And the first three composers named as chief offenders? Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and Khachaturian, three composers who wrote their wartime symphonies at Ivanovo. So much for "free and happy Man."

Prokofiev 5 Listening Guide

First movement: Andante

♩ FORM: In symphonic history, a first movement written entirely in a moderately slow tempo ("Andante" meaning "walking tempo") is unusual.

♩ RHYTHM: Though there is little change in printed tempo throughout the first movement, Prokofiev is constantly changing the rhythmic *subdivision*. In other words, the beat stays mostly the same, but the number of notes per beat is constantly fluctuating. This allows Prokofiev to alternate easily between flowing forward and halting.

♩ ORCHESTRATION: Though a few instruments have occasional moments of solo glory, in this movement Prokofiev mainly focuses on orchestrating by *instrumental family*. The strings, winds, and brass often operate as tight-knit groups, sometimes independently from the other families.

♪ **INSTRUMENTATION:** Near the end of the first movement Prokofiev creates a unique instrumental color by combining the bassoon, bass clarinet, harp, and pizzicato violins on an ascending chromatic scale.

Second movement: Allegro marcato

♪ **RHYTHM:** The opening passage of this movement includes a continuous eighth-note accompaniment. This rests primarily in the strings, though Prokofiev also uses the woodwinds to keep this motor rhythm going. When he uses the winds, he carefully divides the figure between multiple players so they can stagger their breaths and maintain a seamless sound.

♪ **FORM:** Attracting our attention by having the cellos climb to their highest register, Prokofiev ushers in a more relaxed, less humorous contrasting section. The motor rhythm, however, is never far from re-emerging.

Third movement: Adagio

♪ **RHYTHM:** This movement's opening accompaniment is in *compound meter*, meaning that each (in this case, very slow) beat is divided into three long parts (think of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*). While the strings maintain this rhythmic basis, the woodwinds enter in *simple meter*, where each beat is instead divided in two. This continuous sense of 2 in the melody against 3 in the accompaniment provides both unity and differentiation between the multiple voices.

♪ **INSTRUMENTATION:** Prokofiev uses the piano and harp sparingly in this movement. Rather than giving bright flourishes or glissandos, he will often use these instruments to *double* a single-line instrument.

Fourth movement: Allegro giocoso

♪ **ORCHESTRATION:** A few moments into his finale, Prokofiev writes a remarkable passage for the cello section, *divisi a 4*. Dividing the section into four different groups, Prokofiev writes four independent, sentimental parts for each group. The "jealous" violas (all playing the same part!) then take the reins.

♪ **INSTRUMENTATION:** The first half of this movement includes a long string of relatively brief woodwind solos and duos, played in contrast to the unified string accompaniment.

♪ **TEXTURE:** As the music intensifies near the movement's close, Prokofiev begins to pile up layer upon layer of musical excitement: driving percussion patterns; harp glissandos; and wild runs in the winds, strings, and piano. When these additive elements seem to reach their limit, Prokofiev brings the symphony to an abrupt and halting close.