

Symphonic Jazz and Syncretism Connotations in George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue"

CĂTĂLINA CONSTANTINOVICI¹, Phd student; Dr. LAURA VASILIU²

Musicology Department
"George Enescu" University of Arts Iasi
Iași, str. Cuza - Vodă, nr. 29
ROMANIA

¹ catalina_narcisa@yahoo.com, <http://catalinaconstantinovici.wordpress.com/>

² otiliastrug@yahoo.com

Abstract: Jazz, as a representative type of music for the Americans, was rapidly spread, conquering the sphere of academic music through the contribution of composer George Gershwin. "Rhapsody in blue", one of his outstanding works, is the most eloquent example to capture the integration of jazz into academic music. An interpretation of the work's title with reference to visual art, literature and music, towards a theme associating Russian creation, blues scale or even R&B, determining the concerto style out of the fusion between rhapsody, fantasy and concertino – these are a few of the instances dealt with in the present paper.

Key-Words: Gershwin, entertainment, rhapsody, jazz, blue, experiment, syncretism

1 Foreword

Jazz is the musical art that can be entirely associated with Americans. Being a synthesis between the Black Americans' music and the European musical technique, jazz initially pervaded in the musical area through ragtime, a syncopated chant that used to keep pace for the Black Americans in the European dance music [1]. This type of music made composers identify resources in the American "popular music".

The composer that later introduced elements specific to jazz in academic creation was George Gershwin, real name Jacob Gershowitz, one of the most popular American composers from the first half of the 20th century

Influenced by the songs composed by Irving Berlin, whom he was admiring, and Jerome Kern, Gershwin put his own talent in personal compositions, using simple melodic lines, which were easy to understand and reproduce. "Rhapsody in blue" is the work that introduced jazz, as a form of entertainment, in academic music, making him famous across the world.

2 Form and Musical Meaning

After a trip that he made in Europe in 1923, the composer concentrated upon promoting jazz music elements in the contemporary symphonic music structures, combining jazz with the melodic

character of European academic music, and achieving new combinations of sound, full of expression and rhythm. Composed for piano in 1924 and orchestrated by composer Ferde Grofe for a special American music concert held in New York by Paul Whiteman's orchestra [2] – the man who sought to promote American music – "Rhapsody in Blue" is built as a fusion between rhapsody, fantasy for piano and orchestra and concertino [3]. It has a free, authentic form and it includes a series of contrasting episodes of predominant virtuosity. Alternance and contrast of themes impose their variation and progressive development, in dynamic plan, emphasizing the role of instrumental virtuosity. Juxtaposition, alternance and variation thus become the three principles included in the free form of the rhapsody. "Rhapsodic works in the creation of composers from the beginning of the century continue the tradition of free forms, from the piano and symphony creation of the late Romanticism" [3].

Various elements used in blues, spiritual, ragtime, jazz highlight the melodic talent of the composer. In the symphonic structure of the whole there can be found piano virtuosity impregnated interventions uncovering various dance elements like rumba, habanera, Charleston [4].

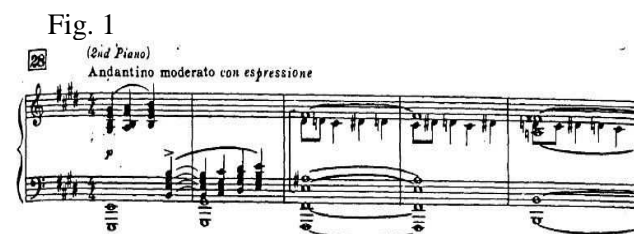
The piano solos alternate with the orchestra's developed sections, which are generally slow, the same way as jazz elements interfere with the musical content, which is classical and

contemporary. Ragtime rhythms are predominant, as well as Cuban clave rhythm, which is taken for a dancing rhythm in Charleston.

The work is constructed by sequencing and alternation of five musical ideas structured in three parts, bounded by terms of movement **Molto moderato** (B flat major), **Con moto** (G major) and **Andantino moderato con espressione** (E major). Although it is an open free form, which can hardly be framed in any classical pattern, but gets near it through the variation technique which is characteristic to rhapsody.

The five themes [5] overlap. Themes **A** and **B** are already introduced by mark 3, as well as the pattern which accompanies them. Four of the five themes (**A, B, D, E**) appear throughout the work both in their form for orchestra and piano. Theme **C** is only presented by the orchestra, in the first part of the work. There are several melody transfers from the orchestra to the solo piano, keeping the same idea and achieving different states in various sound spaces. Theme **B** and the pattern, marked with “*m*”, are included in each of the 3 parts, underlining the role of theme **A** in the first part, that of theme **D** in the second part and theme **E** in the last one.

The title of the work can be interpreted as a highlight for one of the themes, the only one close to classic, noted as Theme **E**,



that bears correspondence to the theme in Eighteenth Variation, *Andante cantabile*, from “*Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*”, op. 43, by Sergei Rachmaninoff, perceived as a state:



Both composers, who are great melodist, also find similarities in the deeply orchestral timbre

expression, the tempo indications – *Andantino moderato con espressione* as well as *Andante cantabile*, as well as the intonation structure – the ascending trichordia is the pulse of the two themes. Nevertheless, the title of the work also leads us to other interpretations: having the term “*blue*” as a starting point, it is an obvious reference to the blues scale, with a lowered seventh gear and the mobile M-m third.

Fig. 3 B-flat blues scale [6]



The relatedness of the five themes is based on the blues scale; each of them containing the three note-cells propelled by the famous song „*The Man I love*” [7], here bearing the role of an idea generating 5 states.

Fig. 4



Judging on the initials “*R*” of “*B*” used in the work’s title, one can perceive a link to R&B, as a state, ranging from jazz to ecstasy [8]. Catalogued as a genre based on specific rhythm in an expansive manner of interpretation, R&B is the starting point for the Negro spirituality. Initiated as dance music for the Afro-Americans, “*Rhythm and Blues*” is characterized by expressivity and dynamism in interpretation, with predominant rhythm and abounding in accents [9].

Fig. 5



Rhythm has a typical jazz character, not only through the accents on 2nd and 4th on beats or the accent on off beat, but also through the predilection for ternary rhythm (triolets),

Fig. 6



- syncopated rhythm (another technique used in jazz music)

Fig. 7



- ragtime rhythm abundant in **A, D, E themes:**

Fig. 8



A

Fig. 9



D

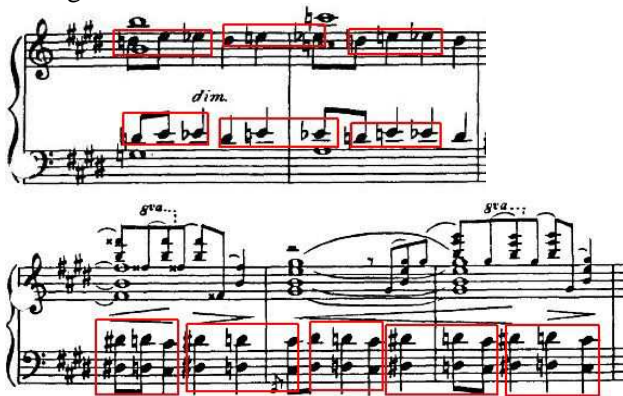
Fig. 10

E in augmented form



Rhythmic inventiveness is noticeable thanks to jazz specific elements and rhythm particularities: syncopation, accent, ragtime rhythm pattern, rhythm decrease, exceptional divisions. Isorhythm is present in part of the moment, as the composer chooses this procedure in order to emphasize the melody. Rhythmic melodic rotations are used, placing the same melody pattern on different beats.

Fig. 11



The composer uses continuous motion effect by sequencing, as it can be noticed in the exposure of **D** theme in different keys, and the frequent repetition of **D** theme in different harmonic levels, producing an effect of acceleration through reducing, and thus interpretation is essential.

In Gershwin's case, using wind instruments creates a specific timbre. Jazz sound effects can be noticed, such as introducing the clarinet in the ascending glissando, soft wa-wa trumpet effects. The timbre structure is formed of piano and orchestra, and the tremolo is the timbre effect indicated in the score.

Multiple voice writing techniques are used – accompanying monodies being accessible and suggesting simplicity; homophony as well as polyphonic instances (sequencing replies) and jazz symphony or “*symphonic jazz*”, as established by Gershwin. Counting on an intellectual rather than an emotional perception [10], the way that the American phenomenon was perceived in Europa lead to the elaboration of creations where the symphonic flexibly accepts the infiltration of jazz in its contents. “*Symphonic jazz*”, a frequently used phrase, more or less accepted, is found in the works of Gershwin, Bernstein, G. Schuller, leading to the insertion of jazz elements in works signed by Copland, Stravinsky, Rachmaninoff, Ravel, Prokofiev, Milhaud.

Harmony sets the bases for formal drama. The specific harmony of jazz is noticed, based on a typically classical functionality and enlarged through the chromaticism intake. Melodic or harmonic progressions are designed by changing the mode – to the homonymous C-Cm or through chromatic passages. Harmonic progressions on small third intervals are repeatedly used in order to create the impression of movement. Among the particularities there are: writing-language (chromaticism, parallel fifths, virtuosity), harmony (trichordes, chromaticism, modulation inflexions, ascending sequences, pedals, gradual octaves).

3 Syncretic area

At the beginnings of jazz, one of the best known and most played works was “*Alexander's Ragtime Band*”, composed by Irving Berlin [11] in 1911. Starting from the idea of this composer, which was also a lyricist, the work acquired several states in time, being performed by various well-known interpreters like Bessie Smith (1927), Louis Armstrong (1937), Ella Fitzgerald (1958), Ray Charles (1959), Bee Gees (1974). On the other hand, art fusion, which was characteristic to the 20th

century, allowed the creation of the movie bearing the same name, in 1938 [12]. The composition had various interpretations over the years:

- Soloist (+band)
- 1. 1927 "*Alexander's Ragtime Band*"
performed by : Bessie Smith (vocals), Joe Smith (Cornet), Jimmy Harrison (Tb), Coleman Hawkins (clarinet), Fletcher Henderson (piano), Charlie Dixon (Banjo).
- 2. 1973 - Bee Gees
- Chorals (+choreographic)
- 3. 2008 – The Delkalb Girls' Choir, USA, directed by Shelley Johnson, choreography by Mark Myers
- Orchestral
- 4. Egon Kaiser [13] Orchester.

Under Irving Berlin's influence, Gershwin creates "*Rhapsody in blue*", the title of the work having extended connotations in the area of arts, underlining the "blue" spirit.

- In visual arts – through paintings, photographs bearing the same title – "*Rhapsody in blue*" [14],
- In the world of cinema, a certain association could be made with the "*melancholic and romantic vagabond*", the well known Charlie Chaplin. [15]. But most of all through the movie bearing the same title released in 1945, which presents George Gershwin's biography, starring Paul Whiteman as himself [16].

In Romania, the word "*blue*" makes us think of a song for "*blue hearts*". We can find a link between blues and Romanian "*doina*", most of all since it is very well known that Nicolae Iorga referred to "*doina*" as "*the song of lonely melancholy*" [17]. Moreover, "*what other people besides the Romanians have blue-hearted songs that are more close to the blue feeling of the Afro-American ballads?*" [18]. The relationship idea-state [19] is obvious here, determined by the text-music ratio.

On the other hand, various forms of rhapsody that can be found in art [20] through syncretism, as a natural characteristic of the concept, envisage another instance of relatedness between entertainment and the academic:

- Either found in cinematography – "*Rhapsody*" movie - 1954, directed by Charles Vidor, with Elizabeth Taylor and Vittorio Gassman playing the leading parts, music composed by Debussy, Liszt, Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky;
- in music, in the whole range of composers attracted by the rhapsodic genre extending to the 20th century [21] -

it is interesting, for instance, to study "*Bohemian Rhapsody*", written by Freddy Mercury and recorded by Queen band on the album "*A Night at the Opera*" from 1975, it is built as a genuine rhapsody, with contrasting episodes [22], where improvisation is not missing;

- Or in literature where, at least in Romania, where The "*Rhapsodies*" published by Toparceanu culminate by depicting the vegetal and animal universe in "*Autumn Rhapsodies*" [23].

The evolution of Gershwin, the composer, in the social and cultural context of those times is contoured starting from the fact that jazz music is more than danceable, thus he gets to include it into symphonic music, against all critics – such as the one in Munich, when, in 1938, J. Goebbels described jazz as "*degenerate music*" and would not accept Gershwin, Schonberg, Stravinsky [24].

4 Conclusions

Jazz is a representative phenomenon for the 20th century music and some of its constitutive elements can be found in the contexts of the work hereby. Ragtime, a varying rhythm, bearing syncopé within a binary measure, associated with the offbeat accents attributed the jazz pattern to the Rhapsody.

"*Rhapsody in Blue*" knew a great success, which led other composers to introduce jazz in the academic creation, such a Ravel [25], Stravinsky and Milhaud. Moreover, Ravel initially named his famous "*Bolero*" – Fandango, considering his work to be an "*experiment*" (the same as "*Rhapsody in Blue*" was considered), determined by an idea he had conceived as an accompanying piece which, to his own surprise, has a huge success [26]. Similarly to other famous works, some of which were already mentioned, Ravel's "*Bolero*" led to the creation of the homonymous movie, released in Hollywood in 1934, starring Carole Lombard and George Raft.

The Rhapsody was initially composed for a semi-symphonic band, with solo clarinet and trumpet, but it was later re-orchestrated and became a work for orchestra and piano [27]. Constituted of a single move, structured on three parts, "*Rhapsody in Blue*" sounds more like a concertino [28] for orchestra and piano, its style being a concerting one, characterized by a dialogue between soloist and orchestra, while the solo cadence has technical virtuosity character and scope. Piano can be considered as a linking bridge between jazz and classical music, being a solo instrument, with a

substantial role, usually used both in European music and jazz. Progressions, used ever since the Baroque and up to Romanticism in the theme developments, sometimes appear in the Rhapsody as jazz progressions, including improvisatory aspect.

In order to fight the idea that jazz is practiced exclusively as dance music, Gershwin introduced it in this rhapsody by using very large tempos, which allow the access for the rubato.

“*Rhapsody in Blue*” is characterized by cantability, by elements which are specific to blues and syncopated rhythm [29], taking some of the open character of jazz; its freedom of expression, the conducting particularities being significant in rendering and grasping the work.

“George Gershwin is the natural image of the American: enthusiasm, color, feeling, spontaneity, a strong feeling of vitality” [30]. He creates simplicity and naturalness through the means he uses, thus fitting into the essential aesthetics conception of the 20th century, allowing the access of entertainment in academic music, through original elements of language, harmony, timbre, which strengthen the importance of inserting jazz into the classical music. He expresses jazz by using the symphonic orchestra, the state that jazz induces being generated by the idea of its academic content. The classical territory hosting the jazz texture offers the composition force for the transmission of feelings. Gershwin was a self-taught, having various influences in the present work; he is innovating through rhythm, harmony, melody, for his unique style [31].

George Gershwin’s style impregnates jazz images and is defined by melodism, specific rhythms, special timbre, and improvisatory aspect leading to an interactive music. An original fact is that he succeeded to bring jazz inside the concert hall, the same way as, ahead of time, there had been a passage from the aristocratic salons to concert halls, and he succeeded in expressing such music with the help of the symphonic orchestra [32]. It was an “*experiment*”, such as he called it, and as any such procedure, it brought novelty to the field.

“*Rhapsody in blue*” par George Gershwin, *oeuvre de reelle imagination, qui denotait un gout sur, mais qui s’arretait a une solution de compromis entre la facilite de la musique de music-hall et la severite de la musique de concert*” [33].

References:

[1] George Pascu, Melania Boțocan – *Book of music history, vol II*, Editura Vasiliana’98, Iași, 2003, p. 598.

[2] *Whiteman concert enjoyable affair; City club musical* in the newspaper “The Pittsburgh Press” of 18 of May 1924.

[3] Laura Vasiliu – *Articulation and drama of the musical form in the modern era (1900-1920)*, Editura Artes, Iași, 2002, p. 196.

[4] Grigore Constantinescu; Irina Boga – *A voyage through music history*, Editura didactică și pedagogică, R.A., București, 2008, p. 244.

[5] Presenting themese: **A**: bars 1-5, **B**: bars 12-15, **C**: bars 91-93, **D**: bars 138-141, **E**: bars 303-310, Pattern: bars 19-20.

[6] <http://www.jacmuse.com/blues/bluesscale/newpage17a.htm>

[7] David Schiff – *Gershwin: Rhapsody in blue*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 13.

[8] Extasy = ek+stasis (state); jazz-extasy, association by Ioana Pârvulescu and Valentina Sandu Dediu – *Literature and music. Coursebook (2008)*, Tipografia Universitatii Nationale de Muzică din Bucuresti, 2009.

[9] Daniela Caraman Fotea, Florian Lungu – *Disco Guide– Rock*, Editura Muzicală, Bucuresti, 1979, p. 11.

[10] Tudor Vianu – *Works; Aesthetics Studies*, vol. VI, Ed. Minerva, Bucuresti, 1976, p. 254.

[11] Composer born in Russia, then settled in New York.

[12] The leading parts are played by actors Alice Faye (1915 - 1998) and Tyrone Power (1913 - 1958), in the movie “*Alexander Ragtime Band*”, screened on the music composed by Irving Berlin. A photography of this movie can be seen on the website

<http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/51317811/Hulton-Archive>

[13] Egon Kaiser – 1901-1982, Berlin, violonist, conductor, orchestrator from Germany.

[14] *Rapsodie in blau*, 2007, Carl-W. Roehrig (b. 12 XI 1953); Miri Peer, b. Bulgaria; Israel Rubinstein, b. 1944 Israel; Dorit Levi, n. 1952 Tel Aviv, Israel; Vilmo Gibello, b. Italia; John Wenger, 1887 – 1976, SUA; Svetlana Valueva, b. Rusia.

[15] A series of similarities lead to the idea of supporting this typically American image regarding the entrepreneurship spirit, the discoverer laying the base of the said community: both contemporaries and immigrants succeeding by their own means to uncover such a world in an artistic universe in full development.

[16] <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0038026/>

[17] Doru Popovici – *Romanian Masters and Folklore. Nicolae Iorga and the euphony of*

missing”, in “România Mare” no. 1049, 31 of August 2010.

[18] George Sbârcea in Alexandru Sipa – *Jazz, between Agony and Extasy. 30 yeaqrs of jazz & blues in Romania 1972-2002*, Editura Paralela 45, Bucuresti, 2002, p. 178.

[19] Starting from the opinion stipulated by Valentin Petculescu:

<http://no14plusminus.ro/2010/05/25/valentin-petculescu-de-la-stare-la-idee/>

[20] References to the 20th century.

[21] Selection of: Albéniz, Isaac – *Rapsodia Cubana, Op. 66; Rapsodia Española, Op. 70*; Bartók, Béla – *Rhapsody No. 1, 2 for Violin and Piano, Rhapsody, Op. 1*; Brahms, Johannes – *Alto Rhapsody, op. 53, 2 Rhapsodies, Op. 79*; Constantinescu, Paul – *Rapsodia a II-a pentru orchestră 1949, Rapsodia oltenească pentru orchestră 1956, Înfrățire – rapsodie coregrafică 1959*; Debussy, Claude – *Première rapsodie, Rapsodie for Orchestra and Saxophone*; Dvorak, Antonin – *3 Rapsodii slave op. 45*; Elenescu, Emanuel – *Rapsodia română pentru vioară și orchestră 1937*; Enescu, George – *2 Romanian Rhapsodies, Op. 11 –1901*; Gershwin, George – *Rhapsody in Blue*; Glazunov, Alexander – *Rhapsodie Orientale, Op. 29*; Lalo, Edouard – *Rapsodie norvégienne*; Liszt, Franz – *19 Hungarian Rhapsody, Rhapsodie espagnole, Rapsodia română pentru pian*; Martinů, Bohuslav - *Rhapsody-Concerto*; Negrea, Marțian – *Rapsodia română nr. 1 op. 14 pentru orchestră, 1938, Rapsodia pentru orchestră nr. 2 op. 18, 1950*; Porumbescu, Ciprian – *Rapsodia română pentru pian 1882*; Rachmaninoff, Sergei – *Russian Rhapsody, Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op.43*; Ravel, Maurice – *Rapsodie espagnole, Tzigane*; Saint-Saëns, Camille – *Rhapsodie d'Auvergne, Op. 73, 3 Rhapsodies, Op. 7*; Stoia, Achim – *Rapsodia I pentru orchestră 1963*; Vancea, Zeno – *Rapsodia bănațeană nr. 1 pentru orchestră 1928, Rapsodia bănațeană nr. 2 pentru orchestră 1950*.

[22] *Bohemian Rhapsody* includes six episodes: Introduction, ballad, guitar solo, opera, hard rock, conclusion and can be compared to the poem *An Evening at the Opera* by Mircea Cărtărescu (1983),

which has six parts written “in the language of Romanian literature and in the sounds of rock music”, see *Literature and music. Coursebook (2008)* by Ioana Pârvulescu and Valentina Sandu Dediu, Tipografia Universitatii Nationale de Muzica din Bucuresti, 2009.

[23] Written in the magazine “Viata romaneasca”, 1914-1915 – George Toparceanu – *Balade vesele si triste*, Editura Albatros, Bucuresti, 1986, p. XVIII.

[24] <http://www.cluj4all.com/jazz/14m> - Iosif Viehmann, *Jazzul simfonic*.

[25] Ravel composed the concert for piano after Gershwin, as well as the blues part in the Sonata for violin in 1925 - David Schiff – *Misunderstanding Gershwin; Volume 282, No. 4; pages 100 – 105*, in “The Atlantic Monthly”; October, 1998; <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/98oct/gersh2.htm>

[26] Burnett James (1987). *Ravel. Omnibus Press*. <http://books.google.com/books?id=JaOpHQyYEHkC>, p. 121

[27] George Pascu, Melania Botocan – *op. cit.*, p. 599.

[28] A. Doljanski. – *Small Music Dictionary*, translation from Russian by Rostislav Donici, Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor din R.P.R., 1960, p. 111.

[29] George Pascu; Melania Botocan – *op.cit.*, p. 599.

[30] Grigore Constantinescu, Irina Boga – *op.cit.*, p. 243.

[31] Andre Gauthier – *Que sais-je? La musique americaine*, Presses Universitaires de Frances, 108, Boulevard Saint-Germain, Paris, 1972, p. 71.

[32] In the same manner, Brahms became famous for his waltzes and Hungarian dances, being an admirer of Strauss’ work, and later Schoenberg orchestrated Strauss’ waltzes for a fundraiser - David Schiff - *Misunderstanding Gershwin; Volume 282, No. 4; pages 100 – 105*, in “The Atlantic Monthly”; October, 1998; <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/98oct/gersh2.htm>

[33] Paul Collaer – *La musique moderne*, Editions Meddens SA, Paris-Bruxelles, 1963, p. 243.