

# Innovative Use of Blues as the Core Element of Symphonic Jazz: Taking *Rhapsody in Blue* as an example

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## ABSTRACT

*Rhapsody in Blue* is a typical work of the famous American composer George Gershwin's Symphonic jazz, Blues is the core element of *Rhapsody in Blue*. With the help of the innovative Use of Blues segments, *Rhapsody in blue* not only has a positive, lively and energetic rhythm, with many typical and living jazz music materials and styles, but also has a free, cordial and tactful melody, with a strong blues style. It has achieved a breakthrough in the perfect combination of classical music style with jazz and blues style.

**Keywords:** Gershwin; Symphonic Jazz; Blues; *Rhapsody in blue*

## 1. PREFACE

In the 20th century, American music culture developed rapidly, partly because its relatively stable political and social environment provided a good atmosphere for artists to compose, and partly because the political and historical reasons in Europe prompted many excellent European musicians to come to the United States, which greatly enriched the diversity of American music. In the period between the two world wars, American music emerged and its position in the world music scene was established, musicians began to realize the importance of national music, and many composers began to experiment with American-style music. George Gershwin's (1898-1937) *Rhapsody in Blue* (also known as *Rhapsody in Blues*) is an exemplary piece of symphonic jazz. *Rhapsody in Blue* is an organic blend of popular music and serious music, based on the characteristics of Jazz, which in turn is the basis of Blues, and the varied blues elements bring different colors to jazz.

## 2. BASIC CONCEPTS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Symphonic Jazz

Symphonic jazz emerged in the 1920s as an attempt to fuse Western art music with jazz, championed by

American musician Paul Whiteman (1890-1967), and its emergence heralded a third trend 30 years later. Symphonic music belongs to the category of serious music, while jazz belongs to the category of popular music. The two genres differed in style. Jazz is about improvisation, based on shuffle rhythms with swing characteristics, and is a combination of black African culture and white European culture. With the continuous development of the times and the gradual renewal of musical concepts, by the first half of the 20th century, jazz music developed mainly from black American music began to gradually merge with symphonic music and other elegant music, and symphonic jazz emerged. [1]American composer Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* is a representative work of symphonic jazz.

### 2.2 Blues

*Rhapsody in Blue*, also known as *Rhapsody in the Blues*. One of the main sources of the musical roots of Jazz (Jazz) is the blues, and to understand the characteristics of symphonic jazz, one should first understand the blues. The blues is a folk music that arose among black Americans in the early 20th century, and of all the folk song forms, it is one of the most interesting to musicologists. In English, blue means sadly, melancholy. [2] In blues music, the linguistic meaning of the word is linked to the musical character. In the era when the blues was created, for black Americans, melancholy and sadness were like the

ghosts of life that could not be chased away, always hanging over people's hearts and inevitably dissolving into the songs that came from the heart. Because of this characteristic, many people believe that the blues performer is expressing his "blues" through his instrument or song.

**2.3 Literature Review**

Several scholars have conducted research on the innovative Use of the blues as a core element of symphonic jazz. Among them, Yi Lijun points out in his article Oral Cultural Tradition in African-American Literature: A Musical Analysis of "Sonny's Blues" that jazz, developed on the basis of blues and ragtime music, is a musical form created by African-American people in the early 20th century by combining blues and European musical traditions, which inherited and enriched the blues, making it popular in the United States and even the world. In Peng Zhimin's article The Blues Style System Based on the Principle of Tonal Mobility - A Description and Insight into Some Unique Phenomena in Blues and Related Music, the author emphasized that in blues music, the tonal character depends on the various types of American jazz, and in the compositions of Gershwin's generation of American composers, a unique stylistic phenomenon often emerges, the material basis for which is the use of "movable" levels to form a diverse blues palette. [3]

**3. BLUES: THE CORE ELEMENT BLUES OF RHAPSODY IN BLUE**

The old "standard blues" is generally based on the seven natural major keys. It can be formed in different forms according to specific situations: The first is "blues tuning". The III, V, VI, VII grades in the tone scale can be freely lowered by the minor second. They not only have independent tone grade status, but also can be paired and combined with the corresponding in-situ tone grade, thus forming a seven-tone natural major scale. The basic nine-to-eleven-tone special mode scale, which is called the "blues mode". The second is the "blues scale" (also known as "blues inflection"). The eponymous semitone based on the natural scale and lowered by a minor second is called "blues scale" or "blues variation". The third is the "blues group" (also called "blues pair"). A pair of chromatic tones with the same name, synthesized by a natural tone and a blues variant, is called a "blues group" or a "blues pair". The fourth is "blues interval". The intervals containing blues levels are called "blues intervals" (they can be composed of all blues levels, or a blues level and a natural level. Fifth is the "blues cluster" (also called "blues interval pair"). The combination of a natural level and a blues level that may appear above or below it at the same time (including equal tones) is called a "blues cluster" or "blues interval pair" (e.g., ascending

D/descending E -E - up E/F, up G / down A - A - up A / down B, etc.). Sixth is the "blues chord". The chords containing blues intervals are called "blues chords". Seventh is the "blues progression" (also called "blues progression"). A downward progression of the scale containing a blues step (or a blues step replacing the corresponding natural step) is called a "blues progression" or "blues progression" (e.g. C - descending B - descending A -G or C-B- descending B- A- descending A-G, etc.). In the first theme of Rhapsody in Blue (bars 1-5), almost all of these related concepts are covered.



**Figure 1 Blues Tunes**

**4. ANALYSIS OF BLUES' INNOVATIVE USE IN RHAPSODY IN BLUE**

Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue is a work that combines jazzy musical themes with symphonic development and a structural "collage" of passages, and it has thus become synonymous with Gershwin and his "symphonic jazz". It has become synonymous with Gershwin and his "symphonic jazz". The innovative use of the blues as a core element of symphonic jazz is manifested in many aspects:

**4.1 Innovative Use of Blues Sections**

The blues section is an important form, closely related to the blues pitch characteristic. The blues or blues-based theme archetype is usually composed in a triple phrase section (e.g. the lyrical theme of the fifth part of Rhapsody in Blue, when it first appears in bar 303, consists of a triple phrase of 8+6+4). The basic length of a complete blues (or of a complete work based on a blues) often depends on the number of improvised variations made on this triplet theme. Between the repetition of the theme and its variations, or at long pauses at the end of the phrase, there may often be "insertions" (break, one of the typical terms for Blues or Jazz) of characteristic temporary fragments (bar 153 of Rhapsody in Blue is a typical insertion in a very exciting musical progression), which they often allow the music to form a structural "proposed pirouette" and a "collage" of materials. [4]It is an important principle of the blues and its stylistic system to use a variety of short ideas as the basis for a variety of variations, thus filling up short gaps in time and mosaicking specific and diverse material to form a series of imaginative sequences.

#### **4.2 Innovative Use of the Blues Seventh Chord**

The innovative application of Blues seventh chord is shown as follows: the seventh chord in blues harmony can not only be used for a long time and in large quantities like the triads in classical music, but also can become a termination chord. This use not only gives character, strength and unity to the music in terms of acoustic style, but also expresses the "Negro spirit of resistance". The continuous use of the seventh chord constitutes a unique feature: the blues seventh (or all sevenths), when "resolved" normally, produces a downward vocal line similar to that produced by the continuous progression of the seventh chord in classical harmony. When the root note of a successive seventh chord shows an upward fourth relationship, the seventh note of the former chord resolves downward to the third of the latter chord, and the fifth of the former chord becomes the seventh note of the latter chord. If the odd position is a complete seventh chord, the even position must be an incomplete (i.e., omitting the fifth) seventh chord, which leads to three successive downward voices in addition to the root voice, thus creating a "blues progression" or "blues progression". [5]

#### **4.3 Innovative Use of the Blues Scale**

The innovative application of blues scale is shown as follows: firstly, it is that the more blues steps there are in a tune, the stronger the independence. Secondly, the more varied and free the rise and fall is, the larger the proportion of the sum of pitches is. The third is that, together with other characteristics, the blues becomes more distinctive and the style more prominent. [6] The "standard blues mode" (eleven), which is based on the seven-note natural major key, is called the "level" blues mode, which is formed by adding three or four blues levels to the natural mode. In this tuning, the blues step is generated only a minor second below the natural step (this type of generation can be called "one-way-low" generation). On the basis of the eleven-tone "level blues modulation", the "movable" feature of the blues level is used to raise or lower each natural level by a minor second, so that more "blues levels" can be obtained. This way, more "blues steps" are obtained, resulting in a fourteen-voice blues mode. In this mode, there are several ways of generation: one is low generation. The blues levels are generated in one direction (e.g. III, VI, VII). The second is the high generation. The blues level is generated in high position in one direction (e.g. level I, II, IV, V). The seven natural levels and the seven blues levels can be paired accordingly to form seven pairs of blues groups, so it can be called the "group" of blues modulation. Any type of chord can be built on any level (natural or blues) of the characteristic harmonic mode of Rhapsody in Blue, using it as a root note. These chords essentially maintain the structure of the

superposition of thirds corresponding to the major and minor harmonies.

### **5. ENERGETIC RHYTHM: THE BLUES' INNOVATIVE USE EFFECT OF RHAPSODY IN BLUE**

The Rhapsody in Blue uses blues levels, groups and clusters to "replace" the intervals of the natural tone chords, or adds blues levels, groups and clusters to the natural tone chords in large numbers, making the nature of the natural tone chords seem ambiguous and the sound more peculiar. In the polyphonic weaving, the blues groups and clusters, the natural and blues levels in the tuning are relatively separated and used in layers, and reinforced in an appropriate way, so that each of them can gain more independence and make the blues style prominent. The blues levels, groups and blues progressions separated by Gershwin in terms of timbre and rhythm are obvious at a glance. Melodically, the most important element is the three-note motive of "down B- down A- down G", in which down B is the tonic dominant and down A and down G are the two blues steps that appear at one end of the theme, giving it a distinctly three-part melody. More importantly, it is not so much the blues character they embody when they are isolated, but the fact that they are also used as a "structural" element, a force that controls the structure. It is on the basis of these innovative uses of the blues that Rhapsody in Blue becomes a vibrant and dynamic piece of music. [7]

#### **5.1. Triplets: Amplification of Rhythm and Melody**

The triplet rhythm occupies an important place in Rhapsody in Blue. Firstly, it forms the rhythmic framework of the theme. Secondly, it often fills the rhythmic gaps created by notes of longer duration, thus driving the music forward. The triplet rhythm becomes a powerful way to imitate percussion playing and to create percussive rhythmic effects in the flamboyant passages of the piece. The limitations of the piano in imitating vocal singing or the glissando effect of stringed instruments stem from the shape of the instrument. To compensate for this limitation and to create this particular stylistic effect in jazz, Gershwin cleverly used triplet rhythms to simulate it, which is like an "amplification" of the ornamental notes in the melody. [8]

#### **5.2. Slit: Construction of Rhythm Framework**

The syncopated rhythm appears in Rhapsody in Blue in various forms, and each of these syncopated forms assumes a different function. Firstly, it forms the rhythmic framework of the theme of the piece, and secondly, the small syncopated rhythm is often used

together with the rhythm, which is the main rhythm of the ragtime rhythm. In addition, the continuous syncopated rhythmic lines are used several times in the piece, giving the music a sense of instability and impetus. The syncopated rhythm, which is used in the "interlude", rests on the long "dotted quarter note", which subtly creates a pause in the music, as if simulating the dragging steps of a dancer.

### ***5.3. Accent: Simulation of Percussion Instruments***

In order to seek a strong sense of rhythm, to create a joyful and almost carnival-like atmosphere, and to simulate the effect of percussion instruments, it is indispensable to use a lot of accents. Thus, in Rhapsody in Blue, accents are found everywhere, and they have different functions: first, to emphasize the "high points" in the melodic line, second, to emphasize the accent of the beat or rhythm, and third, to increase the intensity of the performance (these three are the conventional functions of accents). In addition, the accents in Rhapsody in Blue serve two specific purposes: to create a syncopated effect, and to outline the "skeleton tone" of the florid passages. [9]

### ***5.4. Connections: Changeable Rhythm***

In music legato usually conveys two kinds of information: one is to divide the phrase and the other implies a coherent performance. In Rhapsody in Blue, the continuo is used in a special way, to break up the regular meter and to create new accents in the phrases, thus enhancing the sense of rhythmic instability and irregularity. The legato line is often aided in this function by accent marks.

### ***5.5. Rests: Silent Art of Music Language***

Gershwin wrote Rhapsody in Blue with a large number of rests, which are a silent musical language. In addition to creating the usual "weak rhythms" and short, lively chords, the rests have two specific uses here: one is to form a ragtime rhythm, and the other is to rest on the strong beat or strong position to emphasize the "weak beat" or the other is to rest the note on the strong beat or strong position to emphasize the "weak beat" or "weak position", thus creating the characteristic rhythmic feeling of jazz.

In short, Gershwin exploits the functions of triplets, syncopations, accents, legato, and rests to flexibly and skillfully arrange the rhythm of Rhapsody in Blue, portraying the typical rhythmic image of jazz and thus giving the piece endless vitality.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Based on jazz music, Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue is flexible and innovative in terms of composition, melody, rhythm and harmony. Its success also fully demonstrates that classical music and pop music can be fused together. The charm of the work itself and its positive meaning make it worthy of the reputation of "one of the wonders of the musical treasury". Rhapsody in Blue is an outstanding representative of "symphonic jazz", which has taken jazz to an unprecedented level, expanding its influence in all fields of music and making it a music that can be honored. Rhapsody in Blue is a landmark work in the history of jazz music, which opened up a new path for the development of jazz. With Gershwin's symphonic jazz work Rhapsody in Blue as the representative of the emerging Western music in the 20th century, it shows a different musical concept from the inside out in terms of melody, structure and musical culture and spiritual value, which has an important significance for the development of world music and even the promotion of the spiritual value of Chinese popular music culture, and at the same time provides a real reference for the construction of a strategy of globalization and internationalization of national music and spiritual value export. [10] This is an important reference for the development of world music and even the promotion of the spiritual values of Chinese pop music culture, as well as a real reference for the construction of a strategy for the export of the spiritual values of globalized and internationalized national music.

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