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"We're trying ... to be true to his intention, but give it space to breathe in today's world," Lara Downes says about her and Edmar Colon's reimagining of Gershwin's classic piece.

Lara Downes: Not Your Daddy's *Rhapsody In Blue*

WHAT SINGLE CLASSICAL WORK HAS PERMEATED our lives more deeply than George Gershwin's (and orchestrator Ferde Grofé's) *Rhapsody In Blue*? The likely answer is none.

Commissioned by Paul Whiteman and written 100 years ago, it defined the Jazz Age, captured its zeitgeist, but never became captive to its clichés. It's been everywhere, done everything, won everybody. My father even took me to see Whiteman himself conduct it in 1958. It's been reinterpreted, reimagined, reinvented. There isn't one *Rhapsody In Blue* anymore. There are many.

The Tom Lord Jazz Discography currently lists 194 recordings of the piece by the likes of Harry James, Eddie South, Benny Goodman, Wild Bill Davison, Art Blakey, Earl Hines, Duke Ellington, Stan Kenton, Teddy Wilson, Dick Hyman, Deodato and Sun Ra. That barely scratches the surface. It doesn't include the two original recordings made in 1924 and 1927 by Gershwin himself. It was quoted in Bessie Smith's 1929 short film *St. Louis Blues*. Herbie Hancock has done it with Lang Lang. Leonard Bernstein

put the stamp of the New York Philharmonic upon it; Oscar Levant did the same with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Zubin Mehta's version became the overture to the movie *Manhattan*, Woody Allen's love letter to contemporary New York. And have you ever waited on the phone for a United Airlines agent?

So many *Rhapsodys* — more are on the way.

Among the millions who grew up with the piece, classical pianist and media personality Lara Downes, who was born in 1978, taught herself *Rhapsody In Blue* during her teens while studying in the cloistered music monasteries of Vienna. "American music was very much looked down upon in European circles when I was there," she recalls, "and the *Rhapsody* and Gershwin were not part of any serious canon. Only music that was very cerebral and modern had any respect."

It made *Rhapsody In Blue* seem all the more urgent when she returned to the U.S. But Downes would grow up seeing it in a very different context from that of its first 50 years. Its second half-century would be a period of increasing

agitation in America. In a curious way, the early history of *Rhapsody In Blue* converged with her personal activism and family history. The result is a modern reimagining of the work from Downes and Puerto Rican composer and orchestrator Edmar Colon — a 100th anniversary gift sent to the 20th century from the 21st.

It's not your daddy's *Rhapsody In Blue*. You hear the essential signposts of Grofé's original orchestration, but you will also hear unexpected interpolations and extensions. You will also hear the main outlines of Gershwin's piano parts, but with an interpretative latitude that seems fresh.

"It's important to me that Gershwin, in his original piano version of the piece, and Grofé in his subsequent orchestration, were trying to capture the America of 1924," Downes said. "But looking at the score today, we see it in the context of a very different America, 100 years later. Gershwin's inspiration was to celebrate what he called the 'musical kaleidoscope of America' — the melting pot. That vision was that central thing for me, and that's where my idea was born. What is that kaleidoscope of America in 2024? The reality of the melting pot is so different now. We're trying to give back to him what he started in the first place — to be true to his intention, but give it space to breathe in today's world."

Downes further explains its historical and social context: "Gershwin was intentionally inspired by our American diversity. Yet, just three months after its premier in February the Johnson-Reed Act was passed that was this incredibly restrictive immigration law aimed at Eastern Europe, Asia and other areas. So the *Rhapsody* debuts in a country where there are these forces at work that are negating its essential message. I hadn't known that, and so it took on a very different and celebratory meaning."

In reimagining *Rhapsody In Blue*, Downes and Colon have maintained and extended its metaphorical expression of freedom and diversity by adding other cultural colors: Caribbean percussion, several soprano saxophone interludes and, most unexpectedly, in a version performed for San Francisco audiences, an Asian chamber ensemble.

Downes' *Rhapsody In Blue* is not merely diverse. It's flexible. "The piece is site specific," she explains. "The performance where you hear the Chinese ensemble premiered in San Francisco, where that history of immigration is so essential to that region. When we travel the piece and it goes to Austin, it will have a totally different formation in that section of the piece. In Boston it will reflect local issues and history there."

"The reason this anniversary feels important to me comes down to a question," she reflects. "Does a piece go into a museum? Maybe. But *Rhapsody In Blue* isn't asking for that. It's asking for interpretation and looseness. It originally came together in a matter of weeks and was an experiment. So I don't think we should lock it down and let it collect dust." —John McDonough