



## Rhapsody in Blue (excerpt) by George Gershwin

### CLASSROOM RESOURCE FOR KS3

For:

- Key Stage 3 in England and Wales
- Third/Fourth Level, S1-S3 in Scotland
- Key Stage 3 in Northern Ireland

*Written by Rachel Leach*

#### *Background*

**The composer:**

**George GERSHWIN (1898–1937)**

- American composer and pianist
- Was a hugely famous songwriter from the age of 19 and, with his brother Ira, wrote some of the most famous songs of the 20th century

**The music:**

**Rhapsody in Blue**

- Written in 1924 for a crossover concert featuring classical music and jazz
- Gershwin was reluctant to write it until the very last minute. It was then orchestrated by his friend Ferde Grofe
- Features a very famous clarinet solo at the beginning which was improvised during rehearsals and a huge solo piano part originally played by Gershwin himself – most of this was improvised during the first performance
- Many of the ideas came to Gershwin during a train journey. His aim was to describe the spirit of 1920s America

**Trailblazer:**

American composer George Gershwin brought the sounds of jazz and blues into the classical music concert hall for the first time!

## *Learning outcomes*

Learners will:

- Listen and reflect on a piece of orchestral music
- create their own piece of music using instruments and voice
- perform as an ensemble
- learn musical language appropriate to the task

Curriculum checklist:

- Listen with increasing discrimination to a wide range of music from great composers and musicians
- Play and perform confidently in a range of solo and ensemble contexts using voice, playing instruments fluently and with accuracy and expression
- Improvise and compose; and extend and develop musical ideas by drawing on a range of musical structures, genres and traditions

Glossary of music terms used:

<b>Blues scale</b>	A scale made up of black and white notes (often a major scale with flattened 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 5 <sup>th</sup> , 7 <sup>th</sup> )
<b>Dynamics</b>	the term used for louds and softs/volume
<b>Glissando</b>	A 'slide' between notes, i.e. when a beater is swiped over the notes of a xylophone
<b>Improvise</b>	create music instantly without preparation
<b>Motif</b>	A very short musical 'idea' – often just a sound or a rhythm
<b>Pitched percussion</b>	percussion instruments that can play different pitches – xylophones, glockenspiels, chime bars, etc.
<b>Pulse</b>	The steady 'beat' under much music made up of notes of the same length (like a ticking clock)
<b>Syncopation</b>	The 'weaker' or less obvious notes are emphasised. The result is unexpected, often 'jazzy' rhythms

*Glossary terms can be found underlined throughout.*

Resources required:

- instruments
- paper and pens

*This scheme of work is plotted out over six lessons. Feel free to adapt it to suit your students and the resources you have available.*

## **The six lessons at a glance**

### **Lesson 1:**

- Activities: Watch the film, listen to the performance  
Collect and describe city sounds
- Curriculum link: Listen with increasing discrimination to a wide range of music from great composers and musicians  
Identify and use the interrelated dimensions of music expressively and with increasing sophistication, including use of tonalities, different types of scales and other musical devices  
Develop a deepening understanding of the music that they perform and to which they listen, and its history

### **Lesson 2:**

- Activities: Create musical motifs and structure them into a piece
- Curriculum link: Play and perform confidently in a range of solo and ensemble contexts using voice, playing instruments fluently and with accuracy and expression  
Improvise and compose; and extend and develop musical ideas by drawing on a range of musical structures, genres and traditions

### **Lesson 3:**

- Activities: Learn and invent rhythms and structure them into a piece
- Curriculum link: Play and perform confidently in a range of solo and ensemble contexts using voice, playing instruments fluently and with accuracy and expression  
Improvise and compose; and extend and develop musical ideas by drawing on a range of musical structures, genres and traditions

### **Lesson 4:**

- Activities: Learn about the blues scale and use it to create melody
- Curriculum link: Play and perform confidently in a range of solo and ensemble contexts using voice, playing instruments fluently and with accuracy and expression  
Improvise and compose; and extend and develop musical ideas by drawing on a range of musical structures, genres and traditions  
Use staff and other relevant notations appropriately accurately in a range of musical styles, genres and traditions

### **Lesson 5:**

- Activities: Improvise using the blues scale  
Use technical terminology where appropriate

Curriculum link: Play and perform confidently in a range of solo and ensemble contexts using voice, playing instruments fluently and with accuracy and expression  
Improvise and compose; and extend and develop musical ideas by drawing on a range of musical structures, genres and traditions  
Use staff and other relevant notations appropriately accurately in a range of musical styles, genres and traditions

## **Lesson 6:**

Activities: Structure sections of music into a bigger piece  
Perform in a concert

Curriculum link: Play and perform confidently in a range of solo and ensemble contexts using voice, playing instruments fluently and with accuracy and expression  
Improvise and compose; and extend and develop musical ideas by drawing on a range of musical structures, genres and traditions

# LESSON 1

## Watching and listening

### 1. Prepare your class

Explain to your class that you are going to begin a six-week music project focusing on a fantastic piece of music by a composer called George Gershwin.

Explain further that Gershwin was American and writing music at the start of the 20th century during a time when jazz was becoming popular. His piece, 'Rhapsody in Blue' is said to sound like his home town of New York City.

### 2. Watch, or listen, to the very famous opening (just the clarinet slide, about 20 secs).

Explain that although this glissando was improvised by a bored clarinetist in rehearsal, Gershwin recognised it as one of the sounds of Manhattan – perhaps a screeching train or a wailing siren – and so it was kept in the score. It is now iconic.

### 3. Listening task

Listen or watch the full orchestra performance. Ask your students to list what they think the music is describing (ideally this should be a list of sounds from a bustling city). This BBC Ten Pieces version of the piece lasts about six minutes so you could listen two or three times back to back.

### 4. Feedback

Discuss their ideas and draw up a list of similarities and differences.

### 5. Go for a walk!

Take your class on a walk near school or ask them to find a sound-rich environment within school. Ask them to be quiet and really listen to the sounds around them – the sounds of their 'city'.

Encourage them to jot down the sounds they hear in this table:

Sound	Location	Volume	Length	Description

*This could be a homework task – students could list the sounds on their journey to or from school. Or they could do this in groups, choosing their own location near school.*

### 6. Discuss their findings and keep the lists safe for use in the next lesson.

### 7. FINALLY, watch the full BBC Ten Pieces Trailblazers film for more background on Gershwin's piece.

## LESSON 2

### City soundscape

1. **Split the class into small composing groups** and ask them to collate their findings from last week to make one big list.
2. **Ask each group to choose** up to six sounds from their list (ideally, one sound for each group member) and challenge them to find a way to represent their chosen sound using either voices, classroom percussion instruments or any other instruments/resources you might have. Encourage them to think carefully about what sort of instrumental/vocal sound or combination of sounds is best for what they are describing.
3. **When they have created the motifs**, they must combine them into a piece with a definite structure that represents the place they are describing.
4. After a short time\*, ask each group to perform their work-in-progress to the rest of the class and gather constructive feedback on each one.

*\*When working on musical activities in groups, don't allow too long for each task. If time is restricted students have to get on with it and with each other! There is less opportunity to chat/argue/over-think etc.*

5. **Appoint a composer/conductor** to create a piece by combining all the group pieces together. S/he can do this by signaling to them or by creating a list of events on the board that everyone follows. Encourage everyone to think carefully about dynamics to ensure that all motifs can be heard. You may have time to try out several conductors and ideas.
6. **FINALLY**, fix the structure and perform it one last time. Write this up or record it. This is your '**City Soundscape**' – you will need it later in the project.

*This task can be achieved by recording the real sounds during the sound walk and then editing a soundscape using software such as Garage Band, Logic or Audacity.*

## LESSON 3

### Syncopated 'train' rhythms

1. **Explain**

Gershwin's piece came to him while he was on a train. The rhythms of the train gave him all of his ideas and you can hear some of those rhythms within his music.

2. **Start with a simple pulse.** Choose one player to play a steady pulse – not too fast!

3. **Demonstrate this rhythm:**



*(Saying the words might help with the rhythm)*

4. **Choose another player** to select an instrument to play this. If they choose a pitched instrument challenge them to use just three pitches and create a version that falls from high to low like this:



*This is a typical Gershwin pattern – using three pitches over a rhythm in four creates syncopation – i.e. the lesser parts of the beat are emphasised.*

5. **Play this rhythm with the steady pulse.**

6. **Add in this third, syncopated, rhythm:**



7. **Split back into your groups from last lesson** and ask each group to practise these train rhythms on instruments and add in some more of their own.

Here are two quick methods for creating interesting rhythms:

- **Use words** – turn a sentence into a rhythm, the more interesting the sentence, the better the rhythm. Foods make great rhythms for example:



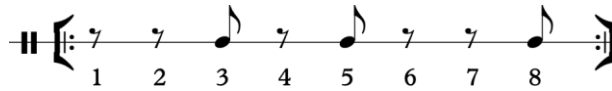
- **Count and emphasise quavers** – count (or play) all eight quavers in a bar of four:



...then choose three numbers between one and eight to emphasise:



...finally take out all the other beats except your chosen numbers and play that:



*This makes a great warm-up with everyone clapping different rhythms at once.*

*If your students have pitched instruments, for now, ask them to stick to a C major scale only. It might be best to stick to unpitched percussion at this stage.*

8. FINALLY, bring the class back together and hear each group one by one. Ask them to work out how to layer up the groups to create one big piece and write down the order/structure of this. End the session by playing this new 'train' piece and recording it.



## LESSON 4

### Bluesy tune

1. **Begin by putting your train piece back together from last week.** You might also want to remember the city soundscape at this point too.
2. **Explain**  
In 'Rhapsody in Blue', Gershwin was trying to join together classical music and jazz music. To do this he used syncopated rhythms (above) and the 'blues scale'.

Here is the classic blues scale starting on C:



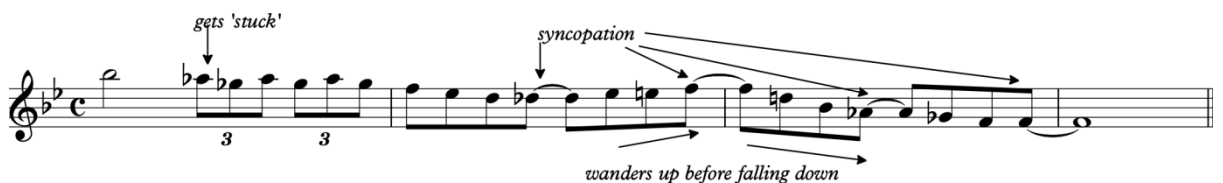
*(Gershwin often adds in Ab too)*

3. **Split back into your composing groups** and ask each group to use this scale in their train piece and perhaps also invent a 'bluesy' melody using some of these rules from George Gershwin:

Gershwin's tune:

- Starts high and moves downwards (i.e. move from top C to bottom C)
- Gets 'stuck' and alternates between two pitches
- Wanders up before falling down
- Uses syncopation (notes are tied over the strong beats) and the blues scale

The main theme of Rhapsody in Blue follows these rules:



4. **FINALLY**, end the session by hearing all of the groups and structuring them into one big piece. Write this down or record it!

*Working towards a full class composition encourages teamwork from everyone involved. However if you want to keep the groups separate and have each one follow the scheme on their own, that will work too.*

# LESSON 5

## Improvisation

1. **Remind your class** of the lengthy piano solos in Rhapsody in Blue (the BBC Ten Pieces version is just six minutes long but the full version is much longer with much more showing off from the pianist).
2. **Set up a groove** by layering up some of the 'train' rhythms from lesson 3.
3. **As this groove plays** ask everyone with a pitched instrument to try improvising using the classic blues scale above. At first, encourage all the improvisers to practise at the same time – this won't sound very good but it will allow students to try things out without embarrassment. You can split back into groups to do this also.
4. **Start the groove again** and choose one player to improvise a solo on top. When they have finished they simply nod to the next player. There are no rules for this, improvisors can do whatever they want. Continue in this way until everyone who wants to has had a go.
5. **Fix the order and length.** Decide on the length of each solo by counting bars of the looping train rhythms. You might also want to add an audible signal into the music such as a cymbal crash. Decide the order of the soloists and rehearse the piece again.
6. **FINALLY**, finish this session with a chat through all of the elements you have made so far and make a list. You should have the following:
  - Cityscape motifs
  - Train rhythms and possibly a bluesy tune
  - Improvisations

You will be putting them together into one big piece next week so encourage your students to think about how this might work during the gap between lessons.

## LESSON 6

### Performance time!

1. **Prepare your class**  
Talk through the list of elements above and remember any specifics such as rhythms, order, signals, etc.
2. **Split back into groups** and allow just five minutes to put the music back together – all three elements.
3. **Hear each group and put the sections back together.**
4. **Ask the class how to structure these three sections into one piece.** Time is short so you want the simplest answer here.
5. **Practise** this structure, your full piece, until it is neat and everyone knows what they are doing.
6. **FINALLY**, end your lesson and this project with a performance of the finished piece. You might want to record this or invite another class to listen.

# TAKING IT FURTHER

## Cross-curricular activities

- **MUSIC:** Gershwin influenced many other composers including Copland and Bernstein – both have pieces featured on BBC Ten Pieces. Gershwin’s next big orchestral piece was ‘An American in Paris’ which is similarly about a city and features the sounds of actual Paris taxi cabs.
- **TRAILBLAZE:** ‘Rhapsody in Blue’ was premiered at a legendary concert in 1924, and put together as an experiment between jazz and classical music. Create a piece that combines classical music with your favourite modern genre. Perhaps use Gabriel Prokofiev’s [‘Concerto for Turntables and Orchestra’](#) as further inspiration.
- **CURATE** your own concert bringing together music from two different genres. Which artists would you hire? What would be the set list?
- **UPLOAD:** Show us what you’ve created! Submit your creative responses using our [Uploader](#) for a chance to be featured on the Ten Pieces website.