Rhapsody in Blue

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 3 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, saxophones, strings

Duration: 16 minutes.

THE COMPOSER – GEORGE GERSHWIN (1898-1937) – From the earliest days of his life as a musician, Gershwin wanted to make his mark as a ‘serious’ composer. Sadly however, his first attempts to present traditionally ‘classical’ music through the lens of contemporary innovation often failed to convince his audiences. Blue Monday was conceived as a jazz opera in 1922 and, though it was not a success for Gershwin, it did signal an important way forward for him.

THE HISTORY – Bandleader Paul Whiteman was so excited by the revolutionary potential of the Blue Monday experiment he commissioned Gershwin to compose a concert piece using the same conceptual ingredients. Gershwin was reluctant at first and perhaps a little gun shy after his opera did so poorly, but he didn’t say no, at least not loudly enough to keep Whiteman from advertising the collaboration later as part of an American music program. It’s a good thing too, because Gershwin was reminded about the commitment when he read it in the paper just like everyone else, one month before the premiere date in 1924. He was busy putting the finishing touches on Sweet Little Devil when he read the article and had either been confused about the timing of the new project or had completely forgotten about his conversation with Whiteman. The description of the unwritten work as a ‘jazz concerto’ was also a surprise to Gershwin, but it was an idea he came around to after the shock wore off. Like Mozart, luckily, he seemed to possess the gift of divining a fully formed work in his head before ever picking up the pen. In his own words, “It was on a train…that I suddenly heard – and even saw on paper – the complete construction of the Rhapsody in Blue, from beginning to end.” The fate of Blue Monday was not revisited, and Rhapsody in Blue still stands among the greatest utterances in the artistic history of our country.

THE WORLD – Vladimir Lenin died in 1924. Also that year, MGM was founded in the United States, George Mallory vanished on Mount Everest, E. M. Forster published A Passage to India and Greece proclaimed the Second Hellenic Republic.