

Celenza, Anna. Gershwin's Rhapsody In Blue. Watertown, Massachusetts: Charlesbridge, 2006.

Reading Level: 6.0

Interest Level: 3-6

Genre

Historical Fiction

Annotation

Anna Harwell Celenza tells the story behind the music in this fictionalized account of the creation of George Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue. Every elementary music teacher will want to thank her for creating an interesting exciting resource to use in his or her classrooms. While based on actual events, the author recreates conversations that may have taken place. George Gershwin reads in the paper that he is to perform a new composition at a concert at Aeolian Hall in five weeks. The problem is that he has not started writing it yet! George goes to Harlem to tell his friend Paul Whiteman that he can't do it. Paul gives him a pep talk and convinces George that he can compose a concerto in five weeks.

Being a musical genius, George tries to compose the concerto but he has no ideas. He listens to the great composers of the past and he tries to improvise, but still, nothing. Finally, on his way to Boston for rehearsals of his new musical, George is inspired by the sounds around him. He remembers the music of his youth and decides to use the music that is already in his head! Klezmer, foxtrot, ragtime and blues are incorporated into his new concerto. Still, George feels that something is still missing. Buddy invites George to join he and Ira at a swanky party on Madison Avenue. While at the party, George begins to improvise on the grand piano. Inspired by the lights of New York City, he creates his missing theme for his concerto. Originally George named the piece, *American Rhapsody* but his brother Ira suggested that it needed more pep and the title was changed to *Rhapsody in Blue*.

The sold out concert takes place on February 12. The audience is bored with the same old fare and they begin to get restless and start to heckle the orchestra. Others begin to leave, Paul rushes George to the stage and the orchestra starts to perform the new concerto. The music stops the fleeing audience in their tracks.

I can feel the electricity of the moment in the author's words. I can hear each note as she describes the scene. The accompanying cd is still in its case in the back of the book.

Perhaps it is because I remember this music so well. Or perhaps it is because I am fan of Gershwin's music. It has been years since I listened to this concerto, but I can hum the tune and I remembered this from my childhood. I am so glad that it is included just in case you do not know this American classic. After all this is why it was created, so that our children will know the music of our great composers.

Booktalk

Do you have a tune that sticks in your head and you hum it all the time? Some days I hear a song on the radio and it plays over and over again. I have a favorite tune that I would like to share with you today. But before we listen to the music, I want you to know the story behind its creation. George Gershwin was a musical genius that created a lot of music we still sing today. (This is probably where I would break into a few bars of

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Summertime. Or “Bess, you is my woman now.” Or “I got plenty of nothing, nothing’s plenty for me.” Pick your favorite tune to sing. Kids always get a kick out of this!) The music I am sharing today has no words to it. It is a concerto called, *Rhapsody in Blue*. Play the cd. It is almost 14 minutes long so you could just play a part of it.

About the Author

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Author Website

<http://www.charlesbridge.com/contributorinfo.cfm?ContribID=26>

Our author grew up on a farm in Pleasant Garden, North Carolina. Music and the arts have always played an important part of her life. In high school she played drums in the jazz band and in the marching band. She also plays the cello. Anna Harwell Celenza holds a B.A. in art history from the University of North Carolina, and a MA and a Ph.D. in musicology from Duke University. Anna began writing children’s books in order to make classical music more accessible to young people. A list of her additional books and their awards follow:

Bach’s Goldberg Variations

A Notable Social Studies trade Book

The Farewell Symphony

Independent Publisher Book Awards

Bank Street College of Education's Best Books of the Year

The Heroic Symphony

Parents’ Choice Silver Award Winner

Anna and her husband Chris live in Baltimore. She is the Caestecker Professor in Music and Director of the Music Program at Georgetown University.

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Summary

Using a true story, the author recreates conversations that may have taken place when George Gershwin created the American classic, *Rhapsody in Blue*. Gershwin reads in the paper that he is to perform a new composition at a concert at Aeolian Hall in five weeks. The problem is that he has not started writing it yet! George goes to Harlem to tell his friend Paul Whiteman that he can't do it. Paul gives him a pep talk and convinces George that he can compose a concerto in five weeks.

Being a musical genius, George tries to compose the concerto but he has no ideas. He listens to the great composers of the past and he tries to improvise, but still, nothing. Finally, on his way to Boston for rehearsals of his new musical, George is inspired by the sounds around him. He remembers the music of his youth and decides to use the music that is already in his head! Klezmer, foxtrot, ragtime and blues are incorporated into his new concerto. Still, George feels that something is still missing. Buddy invites George to join he and Ira at a swanky party on Madison Avenue. While at the party, George begins to improvise on the grand piano. Inspired by the lights of New York City, he creates his missing theme for his concerto. Originally George named the piece, *American Rhapsody* but his brother Ira suggested that it needed more pep and the title was changed to *Rhapsody in Blue*.

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Point of View

Third person narrator

Setting

1924 in New York City

Theme

You never know what you can do until you try to do it.

Inspiration comes from all sources.

Composers-fiction

Conflict

George Gershwin needs to compose a new concerto to perform in only five weeks.

Conflict Resolution

George tries to back out without trying because he needs more time to compose a concerto. His friend encourages him and inspired by sounds and music around him, he creates a masterpiece.

Characters

George Gershwin- American composer

Ira Gershwin- brother and partner

B.G."Buddy" DeSylva- friend and lyricist

Paul Whiteman-friend and orchestra leader

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Discussion Questions

What did Paul mean when he asked George, “Are you going to sit in with the band?”
Explain what Paul means when he tells George, “Just imagine you’re Rachmaninov and then jazz it up a little.”
Who is Rachmaninov?
Have you ever been stumped for a new idea? What kinds of things did you do to stimulate your creativity? What did George do?
George remembers the music he listened to as a kid. What kind of music do you listen to and describe it?
Why did the audience get restless? How did the audience feel at the end of the show?

Anticipation Statements

Agree	Disagree		Agree	Disagree
		Talented people don’t have to work very hard.		
		Classical music is boring.		
		Inspiration comes from everywhere.		
		Music is everywhere.		
		Jazz is for my parents.		

Vocabulary Page

Elite	1	a small group of people within a larger group who have more Social standing, wealth or talent
Concerto	2	an instrumental work that highlights a soloist or group of soloists
Composers	2	someone who creates music
Gig	3	a musical performance or job
Premiering	4	appearing on stage for the first time
Classical	5	serious or intellectual music composed in 18 th and 19 th century in Europe
Vaudeville	7	a satirical popular song performed in cabarets in the 19 th and 20 th centuries
Enthusiasm	8	passionate interest or eagerness to do something
Phonograph	8	a record player
Improvise	8	to compose without a text to follow
Klezmer	11	
Bar Mitzvah	11	the ritual ceremony that marks the 13 th birthday of a Jewish boy
Syncopated	11	modified musical rhythm that shifts the accent to a weak beat of the bar
Foxtrot	12	a ballroom dance
Intoxicating	12	capable of making someone intensely excited or overjoyed
Kaleidoscope	13	a complex, colorful and shifting pattern or scene
Swanky	16	very stylish
Nocturnal	19	occurring at night
Heckle	20	to shout remarks or insults at a person giving a performance

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Sultry	22	suggesting passion
Virtuosity	23	great skill or technique shown by a performer
Masterpiece	25	an exceptionally good piece of creative work

Read Alikes

Non-fiction books about composers

The Life and Times of George Gershwin by Jim Whiting

Fictional Stories about composers

Bach's Goldberg Variations by Anna Celenza

The Farewell Symphony by Anna Celenza

The Heroic Symphony by Anna Celenza

Pictures at an Exhibition by Anna Celenza

Read Aloud

Pages 1-2

This sets up the premise for the story. It's how George found out he was to perform a new piece in five weeks.

Pages 25-28

These pages describe the performance of *Rhapsody in Blue*. It is electrifying. I can't decide if you should play the music first and then read the book or read the book and then play the music. You decide.

Book Activities

Book Activity 1 with **Across the Curriculum Suggestions**

Composers Research

This title makes a great collaboration project. Student groups can complete the research on each of the composers in the media center. They can hear and study the music in music classes. In the art class they can create illustrations to go along with the music and in our Media Tech classes they can use their research to create a PowerPoint, Keynote or iMovie presentation to show over the air on the school news broadcast. There may be a chance to dance in the combined physical education and music class. This is how I could use this book at my school. I am sure that others could adapt sections that would meet their student population's need.

This project can be as simple or as complicated as you want it to be. Each year our students complete a research project for music. They study composers and their music and they make a presentation during their music class. With a rigid schedule I have been unable to utilize many of our previous successful collaborations and without open periods for research so this unit was dropped. The key to this unit is to keep things going in the order of the class schedules. Students begin the unit in the media center with the sharing of the book. They hear the music in their music class. They are assigned composers to research by the music teacher. Students create their artwork in their art class. They come to the media center the next week and gather information about their composers. They

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will take notes to make sure they have enough information to use in their Media Tech classes. They will use two media tech sessions and two media center sessions to complete their projects. After the projects are completed students will present them in their music class for a grade. Finished projects will be broadcast on the morning news show. This activity could be expanded to include more than American composers so that each student has their individual presentation. Pairing up students or having small groups provides a cooperative environment that allows each child to contribute.

Suggested composers are as follows:

American

Leonard Bernstein
Aaron Copeland
Duke Ellington
Stephen Foster
George Gershwin
Scott Joplin
John Phillip Sousa
William Grant Still

Classical

Johann Sebastian Bach
Ludwig van Beethoven
Johannes Brahms
Frederic Chopin
Antonin Dvorak
George Handel
Joseph Hayden
Franz Liszt
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Sergei Prokofiev
Franz Schubert
Robert Schumann
Piotr Ilyitch Tchaikovsky
Giuseppe Verdi
Antonio Vivaldi

Dallas Symphony Kids

This website provides a brief biography of composers divided by historical periods.

<http://www.dsokids.com/2001/composerperiods.htm>

Use the Inspire databases to search for composers.

<http://login.inspire.net/>

Use books from your library media center on individual composers.

Book Activity 2

Listening Appreciation

Materials:

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CD of *Rhapsody in Blue*

You could do this as a whole class activity. Students could work individually if you use this as a center or find a way to have each student listen to the music by going to the Gershwin website so that several students can use this at the same time.

Play the concerto with the following directions.

Listen for the components of the concerto.

Can you hear the train?

Do you hear the blues?

Can you hear the ragtime?

Can you pick out the foxtrot?

Can you hear the klezmer influence?

Which part of the concerto captures the spirit of Manhattan?

What section has the theme?

Students need to listen and find the part of the concerto that demonstrate each of the parts discussed in the book.

Book Activity 3

Sound Harvesting

Materials:

Portable tape recorders and microphones

Flip Video Cameras

Digital Video Cameras

Take students on a walking tour of your building. Listen for sounds that could inspire a musical composition. Record the sounds and bring them back to the classroom. Create a soundtrack of the sounds and see if your next class can tell you what the sounds are.

How can you use these sounds to create your own composition? Take it to the next level and have students create their own compositions. Garage Band would be great.

(Suggestions to record include but are not limited to the bell, the fire alarm, the ropes hitting the flag pole, the ventilation system, the door closing, the aquarium, the coolers in the cafeteria, the cash register, the toilet flushing, water running, trash tossed, vacuum cleaner running, water fountain, vending machine noise, computer sounds, etc...)

Music

Standard 6

RESPONDING TO MUSIC: Listening to, analyzing, and describing music

Students identify musical elements, forms, voices, and instruments from aural examples. They describe what they hear through movement, writing, and illustration.

4.6.1 Describe tempo, dynamics, articulation, and rhythmic and melodic elements through movement, or illustration, including how these elements might convey an expressive mood.

Standard 8

RESPONDING TO MUSIC: Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts

Students identify musical elements that relate to other disciplines and interpret aural examples through various means. They use music to describe literature and discover musical examples that support content of other disciplines.

4.8.2 Interpret aural musical examples using dance, drama, art, or writing.

Standard 6

RESPONDING TO MUSIC: Listening to, analyzing, and describing music

Students recognize, identify, and describe musical elements, styles, and representative works from

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various periods and cultures.

5.6.2 Identify and use appropriate terminology to describe various musical styles such as gospel, jazz, musical theater, folk, classical, and popular.

5.6.4 Recognize the works of representative historic and contemporary composers.

5.9.3 Recognize and experience styles and genres of American music such as blues, jazz, and musical theatre and identify their role in history and society.

Standards for Art

CREATING ART: Production

Standard 7

Students observe, select, and utilize a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas in their work.

4.7.2 Create a work that communicates personal ideas, experiences, or emotions.

Standard 14

Students understand the integrative nature of art forms including dance, theater, music, visual art, and media art.

4.14.1 Begin to distinguish between products and subject matter of visual art and other art forms.

4.14.2 Create an artwork using processes and sign systems (imagery, movement, sound, words) of two art forms.

Standard 14

Students understand the connections between many art forms including dance, theater, music, visual arts, and media arts.

5.14.1 Compare characteristics of a theme, historical period, or event through the multiple perspectives of different art forms.

5.14.2 Create products or performances (debates, critiques, papers, artwork) that communicate in-depth knowledge gained through integrated study of a theme, historical period, or event.

Information Skills Correlations

Analysis of Grade-Level-Appropriate Nonfiction and Informational Text

4.2.2. Use appropriate strategies when reading for different purposes.

Research Process and Technology

4.4.5 Quote or paraphrase information sources, citing them appropriately.

4.4.6 Locate information in reference texts by using organizational features, such as prefaces and appendices.

4.4.7 Use multiple reference materials and online information (the Internet) as aids to writing

4.4.8 Understand the organization of almanacs, newspapers, and periodicals and how to use those print materials.

4.4.9 Use a computer to draft, revise, and publish writing, demonstrating basic keyboarding skills and familiarity with common computer terminology.

Evaluation and Revision

4.4.10 Review, evaluate, and revise writing for meaning and clarity

4.4.11 Proofread one's own writing, as well as that of others, using an editing checklist or set of rules, with specific examples of corrections of frequent errors.

Research Application

4.5.3 Write or deliver a research report that has been developed using a systematic research process (defines the topic, gathers information, determines credibility, reports findings) and that: includes information from a variety of sources (books, technology, multimedia) and documents sources (titles and authors). demonstrates that information that has been gathered has been summarized. organizes information by categorizing it into multiple categories

Research Process and Technology

5.4.4 Use organizational features of printed text, such as citations, end notes, and bibliographic references, to locate relevant information

5.4.5 Use note-taking skills when completing research for writing.

5.4.6 Create simple documents using a computer and employing organizational features, such as passwords,

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entry and pull-down menus, searches, the thesaurus, and spell check.

Research Application

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Indiana Academic Standards met by the Hoosier Book Award Program

4.2.2 Use appropriate strategies when reading for different purposes

5.3.4 Understand that theme refers to the central idea or meaning of a selection and recognize themes whether they are implied or stated directly

6.3.5 Identify the speaker and recognize the difference between first-person (the narrator tells the story from the "I" perspective) and third-person (the narrator tells the story from an outside perspective) narration.

6.3.7 Explain the effects of common literary devices, such as symbolism, imagery, or metaphor, in a variety of fictional and nonfictional text.

Bibliography

Indiana Academic Standards

<http://www.doe.state.in.us/standards/welcome.html>

Official Website of Ira And George Gershwin

<http://www.gershwin.com/>

Download the author's activities

http://www.charlesbridge.com/client/client_pdfs/downloadables/Guide_to_the_Symphonies.pdf

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