

# The Music in George's Head

GEORGE  
Gershwin  
CREATES  
*Rhapsody  
in  
Blue*

Suzanne Slade  
Illustrated by Stacy Innerst



# AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO

Common Core State Standards for first and second grades are referenced for each activity.  
Common Core abbreviations used in this guide:

RI – Reading: Informational Text  
RL – Reading: Literature  
SL – Speaking and Listening  
W – Writing



## Introduction

We can think of no better way to combine history, culture, and music appreciation in your classroom than with *The Music in George's Head* by Suzanne Slade, illustrated by Stacy Innerst. The book and the activities in this guide will immerse your students in the music and life of an American genius: George Gershwin.

## Before Reading

In the early 1900s, the piano was the centerpiece of entertainment in middle-class homes. At the same time, the emergence of Tin Pan Alley and the boom in sheet music provided immigrants with a means to assimilate into American culture.

From the time he was fifteen and throughout his early twenties, George Gershwin worked at Remick's Music Shop, plugging, arranging, and transposing composers' tunes onto piano rolls for the player piano. In all, he made about one hundred and thirty piano rolls of other composers' songs and some of his own. Your students can listen to George playing some of his own compositions:

"Sweet and Lowdown"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BX9MCyO6smk>

and  
"Limehouse Nights," which they can see played on a player piano at:  
<http://zulko.github.io/blog/2014/02/12/transcribing-piano-rolls/>

If you scroll down the page a bit your students can see what a piano roll looks like.

After listening to and viewing the video, tell your class that they are going to learn about George Gershwin, a great American composer who brought together many forms of music.

## Language Arts: Reading Comprehension

These questions offer you a way to be sure your students are understanding and retaining some of the facts presented in *The Music in George's Head*.

1. How was Anton Rubinstein's "Melody in F" important to George Gershwin's life story?
2. How did George's family react when George sat down at the piano and started to play?
3. What was George's first hit song? With whom did he write it? How did this change George's life?
4. What are four musical styles that influenced George's composing?
5. What is the Gershwin Prize for Popular Music?

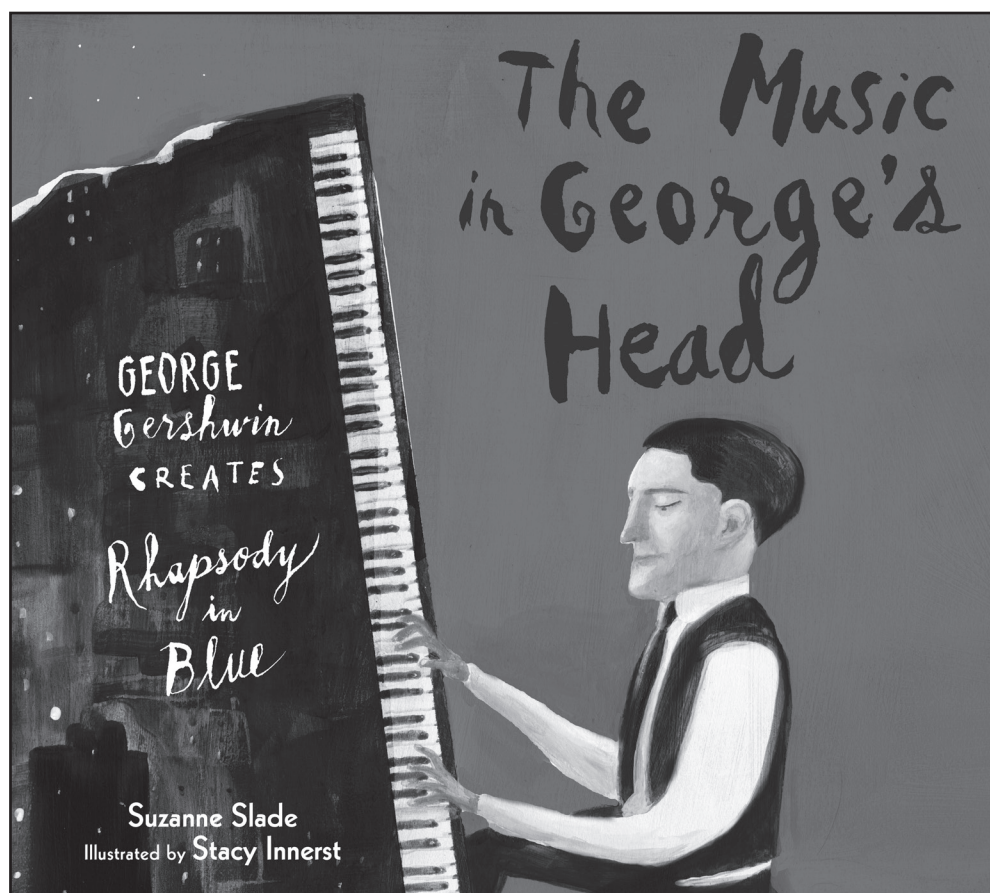
RI 3.1, 3.2, 3.7

## Music, Cooperative Learning

"I frequently hear music in the very heart of noise." —George Gershwin

George listened to the sounds of everyday life: car horns, feet on the sidewalk, the rattling of trains, the clatter and noise of New York's bustling streets, to name a few. In that noise he heard the elements of music—rhythm, tempo, melody, harmony, and texture—and he incorporated that into the music he wrote.

Whether it's a bell ringing, a ruler slapping a desk, a baby crying, a phone's ringtone, or a computer beeping, the noises that surround us today would have found their way into his music. Your students can do just what George did and create their own symphony, a symphony of common sounds and other noises.



THE MUSIC IN GEORGE'S HEAD George Gershwin Creates Rhapsody in Blue  
Suzanne Slade • Illustrated by Stacy Innerst  
Hardcover • 978-1-62979-099-2 • \$17.95 U.S. / \$23.50 CAN  
Ages 9–11 • Grades 4–6 • 48 pages • 10 x 9

Assign each student to find a noise that they want to contribute to the symphony. Each student should decide the loudness or softness of the sound, the pitch, and the number of beats or repetitions of the sound. Then, with your help, they should orchestrate the symphony. Their sounds can be played one at a time or in concert with another sound. They can be repeated more than once, creating patterns. As a finale, all of the sounds should come together at once.

Your students should rehearse their composition and perform it for other classes.  
Allow audience members to get involved by suggesting a name for the symphony.  
SL 3.1, 3.2; W 3.2, 3.6

## Language Arts: Writing, Research; Music Appreciation: The Orchestra

After reading *The Music in George's Head*, your class should listen to a performance of *Rhapsody in Blue*. At the link below, they can hear and watch Leonard Bernstein conduct the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and play the piano solos recorded in 1976 at the Royal Albert Hall in London, England. It's just seventeen minutes long. Enjoy!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cH2PH0auTUU>

Now it's time to dig into the music and learn about the instruments in the orchestra. The camera operator was diligent about showing many of the instruments individually and being sure all the instruments were captured on film in the context of the whole orchestra.

Invite the school's music teacher, or another musician in your community, to visit your classroom and help the children identify the various instruments as they are shown. As you view the performance of *Rhapsody in Blue* a second time, have the students look carefully at the orchestra and raise their hands when they see an instrument they can name. You and the musician should shout out the names of the instruments as they come into view.

The class, with your help and the music teacher's guidance, should see:

Piano	Oboes	Violins
Bass Clarinet	Cellos	Tubas
Clarinets	Bassoons	Trumpets
Saxophone	Violas	Xylophone
Trombones	French Horns	Cymbals
Bass Drum	Double Bases	

Each student should select two instruments on the list to research. They will find photographs and recordings for each instrument at:

<http://dsokids.com/listen/by-instrument>.

Here they'll find a list of instruments organized by musical family. They will also be able to hear a small solo of each instrument selected. Students should draw each of the instruments they have chosen and write a short paragraph or poem about how each of their instruments sounds and how it makes them feel. Organize the drawings and short reports into a virtual orchestra to display in your George Gershwin corner.

RL 3.4; RI 3.7; W 3.6, 3.7; SL 3.1

## Language Arts: Vocabulary, Research, Writing, Speaking and Listening; Art

There are music-related words in *The Music in George's Head*, some of which your students may be familiar with, others which may be new. Make a class list of these words as you read the book with your students. The list should include but not be limited to:

- Classical
- Ragtime
- Jazz
- Blues
- Rhapsody
- Concerto
- Syncopated
- Staccato

Divide your class into teams of three. Assign each team one word. They should research its meaning (including listening to music of the genre or form) and then present the word as a small poster, using the kind of stylish lettering that the book uses. The choice of style, color, format of the poster, etc., should also be part of the way the team defines its word. Each team should do a three-minute presentation to the class about what they've learned about their word and why they chose to present it in the way they did.

RL 3.4; RI 3.2, 3.7, W 3.2, 3.7; SL 3.1, 3.2, 3.4

## Language Arts: Research; Music; Art

Besides composing *Rhapsody in Blue*, George, along with his brother Ira, wrote the opera *Porgy and Bess* and over a dozen Broadway shows with countless numbers of popular songs that are mainstays of the *Great American Songbook*. Those songs include "I Got Rhythm," "Fascinating Rhythm," "'S Wonderful," "Embraceable You," and "Oh, Lady Be Good!"

When a popular song was published, the sheet music had an attractive illustrated cover. Have your students research the popular tunes of George and Ira Gershwin. Each student should pick one of their songs and create an illustrated cover for the sheet music that reflects the song's title and lyrics. Create a George Gershwin corner in your room and display the illustrated sheet music.

RI 3.2, 3.6, 3.7; W 3.3, 3.7; SL 3.2

## Language Arts: Vocabulary; Social Studies: History; Culture

Author Suzanne Slade tells us that when George finished his concerto, "It was just as he'd planned—daring, and razzmatazz dazzling! It was a musical kaleidoscope of America's melting pot . . ."

Discuss with the class what the term "melting pot" means. At home, students should discuss with their parents what cultures are in their backgrounds. Students can then report their findings to the class, and you can keep a list of all the varied countries and cultures that are represented in your class's melting pot.

Invite parents to help celebrate your diversity day by bringing in foods, songs, and objects that reflect the origins and backgrounds of your students' families. Celebrate them all with a feast.  
RL 3.4; RI 3.1, 3.2; W 3.2, 3.7, SL 3.1, 3.2, 3.4

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