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an excerpt from

Listening to Gershwin

I. Russia

My favorite nursery rhyme was not about spiders or stars. Wordless, its melody still arrested my ear. As a small child I sat underneath the piano in our living room, listening—the record’s faded jacket propped on my lap, the wood floor cool beneath my legs, the air shadowed by the dark curve of the instrument over my head. If music has color then this song was iridescent, a flash of trilling piccolo and spangled climbing scale. Its high registers rang out with the radiance of sun on water or the trackless luster of gleaming ice.

“L’oiseau de feu,” Stravinsky called his *Firebird Suite*, in the language spoken by the Russian intelligentsia before their own 1919 funeral pyre burned away all traces of the grand manner. While it played I stared at the phoenix reproduced on the album cover. The illustration was too muted to match the music’s vibrancy, but as the tones flitted in the corners of the room, the firebird hovered for a moment in my mind’s eye. Incandescent, the creature was too brilliant to look at directly. Its wings scattered light across the wall, each feather a prism. Its heat created small turbulences in the surrounding air, and as its call rushed through Kashchei the Immortal’s garden, I imagined I saw sound waves resolved to form in the flowers nodding in the great bird’s wake.

Grown, I still listen to this music. When I hear it I am transported to the suburban Boston home of my childhood. I remember the circle of rose-colored light cast by my bedside lamp, the lisp of tree branches against the side of the house in the windy dark, the umber piano resting in silent majesty down the hall. And then I travel outward from these sheltering walls to the gilded halls of the Paris Opera, where the 1910 première of Stravinsky’s avant-garde composition turned him into a household name overnight. Struck as a teenager by the

novel rhythms of the *Firebird Suite*, a Brooklyn-born musician adapted their hesitations and suspensions some years later in the first of his own classical compositions. When we hear *Rhapsody in Blue* today, most of us recognize by the music's third bar the hurried pace Jacob Gershovitz announces. The *Rhapsody's* first performance in 1924 transformed George Gershwin from a Tin Pan Alley upstart into a classical composer whose drawing power superseded the Russian's own, but the twenty-six-year-old was quick to claim Stravinsky as rhythmic model. In "Jazz Is the Voice of the American Soul," an essay he contributed to *Theater Magazine* in 1927, Gershwin linked the *Rhapsody's* meter to the "ever accelerando" tempo of American life. Yet his indigenous music was created by a young man whose parents had left St. Petersburg only five years before his birth. No surprise the pianist-composer would look to Stravinsky as mentor: the familial conversation he listened to as a boy was conducted in a lively, accented English punctuated by Russian phrasings and the rhetorical questions his parents shrugged off in untranslatable Yiddish. In the brash elegance of the *Rhapsody* I hear the same mixture of pragmatism and poetry that must have characterized that domestic speech, and as the music plays on my stereo I wonder whether in creating it Gershwin was not momentarily returned to the sound-world of St. Petersburg, that city of pogrom and pleasure his parents had forsaken with eagerness and regret.