



Ferde Grofé  
(1892-1972)

# *American Voices – Ferde Grofé*

American composer Ferde Grofé (pronounced FAIR dee Grow-FAY) was born in New York City, March 27, 1892. He grew up in a musical family—his father was a singer/actor; his mother, a cellist and music teacher. Soon the family moved to Los Angeles. Although musically talented, his mom insisted that young Ferde study law, enrolling him at St. Vincent’s College. Unhappy with this situation, Ferde left home for a career in music. At age 17, he was hired by the Los Angeles Symphony as a violist—a position that he maintained for ten years.

While playing with the symphony, Grofé continued to compose his own music, and also formed his own jazz ensemble. In 1923, while playing in local clubs around Los Angeles, he met the famed jazz conductor Paul Whiteman who hired him as pianist and arranger for his orchestra. Grofé produced two hit songs—“Whispering” and “Wonderful One.” The next year, Whiteman commissioned George Gershwin to compose a jazz composition for piano and orchestra. Gershwin submitted a piano score for “Rhapsody in Blue”—Grofé arranged the orchestra parts. On February 12, 1924 at New York’s Aeolian Hall, “Rhapsody in Blue” was premiered, making famous Gershwin, Whiteman, and Grofé.

Ferde Grofé’s music is uniquely American. His *Wheels Suite* was commissioned by Henry Ford for the Ford Motor Corp. *Symphony in Steel* was composed for the American Rolling Mill Corp. His *World’s Fair Suite* was written for the 1964 New York World’s Fair. Grofé also wrote several film scores, including *Strike Up the Band*, *Minstrel Man*, and *The Return of Jesse James*. Throughout his life, he wrote many orchestral suites: *Mississippi Suite*, *The Grand Canyon Suite*, *Kentucky Derby Suite*, *Niagara Falls Suite*, *Death Valley Suite*, *Hudson River Suite* and the *Hollywood Suite*. We will listen to “Production Number” from the *Hollywood Suite*. This music sounds like it is from one of the MGM movie musicals of the 1930’s—Swing Style.

Perhaps Grofé best describes the nature of his American music:

“Many of my compositions, I believe, were born of sight, sound and sensations common to all of us. I think I have spoken of America in this music simply because America spoke to me, just as it has spoken to you and to every one of us. If I have succeeded in capturing some part of the American musical spirit, I am grateful that I was trained to do so. But this music is your music, and mine only in the highly technical sense that a copyright has been filed away with my name on it. Always we must realize that there is much more to hear. Our land is rich in music, and if you listen, you can hear it right now. This is our music you hear, surging forth, singing up to every one of us.”