

“Taking any one genre since c. 1600, show how it develops through the work of one composer”

Without Scott Joplin’s Ingenious Musical Imagination, it is doubtful that Ragtime would have become a Universally Recognised, Expressive Popular Music Form.

Scott Joplin was a quiet, well-mannered man, born around 1868 in a poor family derived from slavery. As a child Joplin had no formal musical training. He had access to a piano through a family friend and taught himself the rudiments of music. A German-born teacher called Julius Weiss, noticed the youngster’s talents and offered him free music lessons exposing the young Joplin to European classical music forms including opera. As a teenager, Joplin left home to find his way in the world. He wandered round Texas and Louisiana, up and down the Mississippi, where he played in black clubs and brothels. Here he heard a plethora of styles such as plantation melodies, Minstrel show dance music, work-songs (such as blues) and “more sophisticated” songs of the whites, while other pianists around him played improvised folkly, syncopated tunes based on banjo music.

Joplin ended up in St Louis (which later became the ‘centre of ragtime’). Here there was a great demand for pianists as entertainment for the many black labourers working on the river. The main ‘unofficial’ meeting place for ‘up-and-coming’ pianists was Tom Turpin’s Silver Dollar Saloon. Here pianists would share ideas and find out what venues were available to play in. Most venues were very poor and the atmosphere was alive with the sound of out of tune pianos playing a popular type of music known as ‘jig-piano’. It featured bouncing bass and syncopated melody lines later referred to as ‘ragged time’, or ‘ragtime’ for short.

Many of the other pianists lacked even the limited formal musical training Joplin had received, and so ragtime compositions before Joplin’s first published music in the genre were less sophisticated and had often been transcribed by someone else. What Joplin brought to ragtime was formality and order. Scott Joplin’s rags were lyrical and supple. He turned ragtime from honky-tonk piano music into a truly expressive American art form. Peter Gammond in *‘Scott Joplin and the Ragtime Era’* describes Joplin as “Ragtime’s Mozart appearing out of the confused ragtime baroque period”.

The first Ragtime piece Joplin managed to get published was ‘Original Rags’ (1899). This was a happy ‘dance’ piece obviously written with cakewalking possibilities. (The cakewalk was a popular Black-American dance / ‘silly walk’ of the time). As in most of Joplin’s rags, the tempo is a consistent 2/4. It has a distinctive enough melody but is more about syncopation, with the fourth and fifth quavers in a bar characteristically tied. Because Joplin was forced to share credit for this piece with a staff arranger called Charles N. Daniels, it has been suggested that Joplin didn’t compose it himself but merely suggested themes already in use for Daniels to arrange. However, Joplin’s next published Rag, the ‘Maple Leaf Rag’ (published by John Stark in 1899) was credited to Joplin and no one else.

Like Johann Strauss and John Phillip Sousa (two composers which would have been particularly inspirational to Joplin at the time), Scott Joplin created a formal structure in his writing. His style became known as ‘classical piano ragtime’. This form

was basically four 16-bar sections with the structure: - AABBACCDD. The music consisted of a syncopated melody over a straight moving, duple-rhythm bass line (also called boom-chick). Now Joplin had created a set pattern for ragtime composers to follow, the style became much more clear-cut and ordered.

The 'Maple Leaf Rag' exhibits a firm grasp and representation of the form:

Sheet Music from www.mfiles.co.uk

Maple Leaf Rag

Section A is played twice:

A Tempo di marcia Scott Joplin

The musical score for Section A of 'Maple Leaf Rag' is presented in four systems. The first system (measures 1-6) features a piano (*f*) dynamic. The second system (measures 7-11) includes piano (*p*) and mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamics. The third system (measures 12-16) continues the piece. The fourth system (measures 17-18) shows a first and second ending. The score is in 2/4 time with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat).

Then section B is played twice:

B



... And A is then played once:

A³⁶



The penultimate section, C (In the subdominant) is played twice:

Musical score for section C, measures 52-63. The score is written for piano in 2/4 time, featuring a treble and bass clef. A red 'C' is placed above measure 52. The music consists of a series of chords and melodic lines in the subdominant key. A first and second ending bracket is shown above measures 62 and 63.

...And section D (returning to the tonic to round of in the home key) is played twice to end:


Musical score for section D, measures 69-80. The score is written for piano in 2/4 time, featuring a treble and bass clef. A red 'D' is placed above measure 69. The music returns to the tonic key and consists of a series of chords and melodic lines. A first and second ending bracket is shown above measures 79 and 80. The copyright notice '© Jim Paterson' is visible at the bottom left, and the website 'www.mfiles.co.uk' is at the bottom right.

The Maple Leaf Rag was a phenomenal success and, over the coming years, sold well over a million copies. Not only did it set the standard form for future 'classical ragtime' compositions. It set a lot of 'ragtime clichés'. For example the B section of this


piece is one of the most copied pieces in all ragtime. The following example is taken from the 'B section' of Scott's 'Frogs Legs Rag', published in 1906:



In this example Scott has used these ideas from Joplin's B section of 'Maple Leaf Rag':

Bar 18 →  (Similar to bar two of the example)

This block contains a musical notation snippet for Bar 18. It shows a two-measure phrase in the treble clef staff with a complex, syncopated melody. The bass clef staff provides a simple harmonic accompaniment. To the right of the notation is the text "(Similar to bar two of the example)".

Bar 22 →  (Similar to bars one and three of the example)

This block contains a musical notation snippet for Bar 22. It shows a two-measure phrase in the treble clef staff with a complex, syncopated melody. The bass clef staff provides a simple harmonic accompaniment. To the right of the notation is the text "(Similar to bars one and three of the example)".

Joplin made a lot of money from the 'Maple Leaf Rag' and the record-breaking number of copies sold were a source of steady income his whole life. It was unusual for Black-American composers to get royalties for their published works, as white publishers tended to take advantage of their talents. However, Joplin had obtained the services of a lawyer after getting a poor deal with his 'Original Rags' and was given a one-cent royalty for each copy of his 'Maple Leaf Rag' sold and ten free copies for his own use. This was another turning point for composers and publishers alike, as Ragtime was now taken more seriously as a profitable industry. Black people became aware that they too could be successful American composers, and there was a boom in published ragtime pieces as publishers capitalized on the new trend.

Joplin added to his fame and success with rags such as 'Easy Winners' (1901), 'Elite Syncopations' (1902), 'The Entertainer' (1902) and 'The Strenuous Life' (1902), a tribute to President Theodore Roosevelt. Each of Joplin's compositions possessed all the traits that crowned him 'King Of Ragtime'. His music was emotive. Sometimes one rag could evoke several human emotions. Joplin's 'Magnetic rag' (1914) was very powerful in this respect. At the start it reflects Joplin's happiness in his ragtime music with retrospective 'classic rag' figures but then it also portrays a melancholy mood with its 'blues' and 'Jewish' type figures. Another great thing about Joplin's ragtime music was that it was accessible to everyone. His compositions were written in such sophisticated

and clear ways that, though they were difficult pieces to master, they could be mastered and played by any good pianist from any musical background. As well as this, Joplin's musical notation of the form inspired future classically-trained composers (including Gershwin, Ives and Debussy) to adopt the style in some of their works.

Because Joplin made money early on in his Ragtime career, he gave up performing and dedicated his whole life to composing and teaching. He helped younger composers to get works published including James Scott, Scott Hayden and the only white ragtime composer to be considered as good as the best black composers, Joseph Lamb. Without Joplin's help, such composers may never have made their mark on the ragtime music scene.

Lamb, unlike most other ragtime composers, learned ragtime from music notation and theory, and found improvising confusing. He would have learned from books such as Scott Joplin's instruction book, *The School Of Ragtime*. In this book Joplin outlined his complex bass patterns, sporadic syncopation, stop-time breaks, and harmonic ideas. These are the elements Joplin considered most important in his music, and these are the elements of Joplin's music that were widely imitated by others.

Scott Joplin was very passionate about his music and had great ambitions. Unlike most other ragtime composers, Joplin's opinion was that ragtime was much more than popular piano music. He felt it should become part of America's musical heritage, like Europe with its piano sonatas and classical operas. He set out composing larger scale works, such as an opera called 'A Guest Of Honor' which was the first ragtime opera ever written. A great deal of time, effort and money went into the opera but in the end it was abandoned due to lack of finances having only been performed once as a lame open rehearsal. Unfortunately the score was lost, probably at the copyright office. This was a major setback for Joplin but he didn't give up.

Samuel B. Carters wrote in *Jazz: A History of the New York Scene*: "The tragedy for Joplin was that the Negro musicians with whom he associated in New York rejected him even more completely than the white audiences did.... They felt that ragtime music was low-class, and as members of an insecure middle-class they seemed too afraid to associate with the music in any more than a superficial manor."

Perhaps if the ragtime era had occurred a few decades later in American history, Joplin, as a Black-American musician, would have been taken more seriously. Who knows what amazing works 'A Guest Of Honour' could have lead on to if it had been successful and not lost. Joplin's final attempt at 'greatness' was his opera 'Treemonisha' which he composed six years after his first opera. He had great trouble in finding a publisher willing to risk such a work and so he published 'Treemonisha' at his own expense. In June 1911, the *American Musician and Art Journal* praised Joplin's opera saying: "It is far more American in character than Horatio Parker's 'Mona', which had just won a \$10,000 prize for American opera from the Metropolitan Opera Company. Joplin then spent the rest of his life trying, in vein, to stage his opera. He died a poor man in a mental hospital with 'Treemonisha' never having been performed in full.

Both Joplin and ragtime were mostly forgotten by the time he died in 1917. Joplin was aware that his music was not appreciated by the audiences of the time, but estimated a revival in interest in the genre would come about a quarter of a century later. This was an astonishingly close prediction, for a brief revival began in 1941. A second revival peaked in the 1970's. This ragtime craze reached many people this time for a number of

reasons. Media was more advanced – Joplin’s music appeared in the film ‘The Sting’, which featured Joplin’s ‘The Entertainer’ and won an academy award for its film score. Records were more accessible and cheap, as was sheet music, and Joplin’s notated rags were reprinted in collections. Joplin’s music was produced for the first time on classical labels and set classical sales records. Joplin is one of few composers to have reached high rungs on both classical and popular music charts in America. Another reason for Joplin’s new success was that the social values in America had changed. Black-Americans were now seen as equal citizens, and their achievements in America’s history were more significant and exposed.

Joplin was now a respected composer. His opera, ‘Treemonisha’, was premiered in 1972. In 1976, nearly sixty years after his death, it won him the coveted Pulitzer Prize. Today Joplin’s rags are probably the most famous of all ragtime pieces throughout the world.

In conclusion, without Joplin’s contribution to the ragtime genre, it is doubtful that it would have reached such widespread popularity. Joplin set the scene for ‘classical ragtime’. He notated the improvised, free piano music to be played as written, making it accessible to everyone from all musical backgrounds. With his exceptional musical imagination, he created many of ragtime’s best-loved themes and syncopations. Had the social circumstances of the times been different, and Joplin had been taken as seriously as the top white composers, the ragtime genre could have been allowed to change and develop to unknown levels. It is a great shame that the world missed out on what ragtime’s potential could have been. However, even though Joplin’s creativity was stifled by racial and financial difficulties, he still did a lot for the ragtime genre. Joplin created inspiring music that is still loved and played today. Thanks to Scott Joplin, ragtime is now an important, permanent part of the American musical landscape.

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