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Classic Ragtime: An Overlooked American Art Form

Daniel Stephens

As Nancy Ping-Robbins observed, “Ragtime as a topic of real scholarly pursuit [was] mostly ignored until the 1980s,” and most sources published prior to that “were originally designed for a general audience.”¹ Since Ping-Robbins wrote almost two decades ago, scholarly interest in ragtime has lessened again. This decline is unfortunate, since classic ragtime contains a high degree of complexity, blending the traditions of African American folk songs with the practices of nineteenth-century European music—seen especially in pieces composed by Scott Joplin, inventor and master of the genre—making it a topic rich for critical commentary. However, the genre was poorly received by the classical audiences, due both to its ties to popular music and its roots in African American culture, and it consequently did not receive the attention it deserved. As a result, Joplin’s ragtime compositions have largely been overlooked by academic musicologists of the past century.

An exact date of the invention of ragtime, classic or otherwise, is nearly impossible to pin down. Some scholars claim that the style was established at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, when many black musicians came together and heard each other “ragging” African American folk songs.² Others point to

1 Nancy R. Ping-Robbins, *Scott Joplin: A Guide to Research* (New York: Garland, 1998), 3.

2 John Edward Hasse, *Ragtime: Its History, Composers, and Music* (New York: Schirmer, 1985), 7-8.

Tom Turpin's publication of "Harlem Rag" in 1892, the first published composition to bear the title "rag."³ Still others claim that it began two decades earlier, even though the term "ragtime" had not yet been applied to any compositions or performances.⁴ This disagreement is largely due to the fact that ragtime began as an improvisational genre, rather than being notated music.⁵

At first, this music was played largely by untrained performers in low-brow African American saloons.⁶ Music scores, if the performer could read notated music, were used as a basis of improvisation.⁷ As mentioned before, performers would "rag" a tune, often taken from African American folk music, ornamenting it with the characteristic syncopation of ragtime. This is a clear parallel to the early days of European keyboard music, where the performer was expected to use his training to ornament the music the composer had notated. Of course, the main difference here is that the European keyboardists received a formal training, whereas the performers of ragtime were usually the children of freedmen.

Scott Joplin was a child of such freedmen, and he was also, quite fortunately, born into a musical family.⁸ As a child, Joplin received formal music lessons from a German immigrant, who exposed him to the European composers and music.⁹ Later, in his teenage years and early twenties, Joplin worked in St. Louis and Sedalia, Missouri, both of which maintained a healthy ragtime tradition.¹⁰ Noted ragtime scholar Edward A. Berlin claims that, due to this background in both African American and European music, Joplin composed "highly sophisticated" works compared to his fellow ragtime musicians, combining the African American tradition with the European style.¹¹ Beginning with the publication and wild commercial success of *Maple Leaf Rag*, Joplin began to expand and develop the complexity of the ragtime genre, resulting in what is today called "classic ragtime." Composed mostly by Joplin and his students, works in this genre are typically more refined than the improvisational folk ragtime and the commercial "popular" ragtime produced by Tin Pan Alley.¹²

Since it is a traditionally African American genre, research on ragtime has

3 Edward A. Berlin, *King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and his Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 8.

4 Hasse, *Ragtime*, 6.

5 Ingeborg Harer, "Defining Ragtime Music: Historical and Typological Research," *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 38 (1997): 410.

6 David A. Jasen and Trebor Jay Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime: A Musical History* (New York: Dover, 1978), 2.

7 Jasen and Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime*, 1.

8 Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 6-7.

9 Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 7.

10 Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 8 and 13.

11 Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 29.

12 Jasen and Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime*, 137.



Figure 1. Chopin, Frederic. "Etude in A Minor," *Zwölf Etuden für das Pianoforte*. Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1879. mm. 4-7



Figure 2. Joplin, Scott. *Pineapple Rag*. New York: Seminary Music Co., 1908. mm. 9-12.

tended to focus on the African American elements present in the rhythm and melodic content of Joplin's music. While certainly valuable, this approach has the potential to obscure the important role of the European influence on the form and harmonic language of his pieces. To more fully understand Joplin's work, as we will now see, it is crucial to keep both of these traditions in view.

The most apparent influence of African American folk music on classic ragtime is the characteristic syncopation. Ragtime syncopation is derived from African American folk tradition, although it is distinct from its predecessors. Ragtime composers David Jasen and Trebor Jay Tichenor point out that, while syncopation in African American folk music was often improvised ornamentation on an existing melody, classic ragtime's melodies and syncopations are inherently intertwined.¹³ Obviously, syncopation is not exclusive to African American music: it is used extensively in European music as well. But there are certain characteristic differences that must be considered. In Figure 1, for example, an excerpt from Chopin's "Etude in A Minor" (op. 25, no. 4), we see an exclusively syncopated right hand, pounded out as parts of the chord on the off beats. In Figure 2, an excerpt from *Joplin's Pineapple Rag*, the syncopation and the melody are intertwined, reliant on each other. Syncopation is not

13 Jasen and Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime*, 5.



Figure 3. Joplin, Scott. *Elite Syncopations*. St. Louis: John Stark & Son, 1902. mm.

merely functioning to provide rhythmic interest, but rather it is an integral part of the melodic composition. There are certainly similarities between the two styles, particularly with the bass line. Chopin uses the “boom-chk” pattern throughout the etude (bass note followed by a chord), one of the trademarks of ragtime.¹⁴ However, Joplin’s composition allows the melody to be smoother without losing the syncopated feel of the music, at the same time being completely independent of the left hand. In Figure 2, the meter of the right hand appears to be 3/16, rather than the notated 2/4. Some scholars have suggested that this would indicate that classic ragtime is technically not syncopated at all, but rather multiple meters sounding at once.¹⁵

Ragtime’s characteristic use of the pentatonic scale is also derived from African American folk music traditions. The fourth and seventh scale degrees are certainly present in the melody, but they are often deemphasized, used largely as passing tones.¹⁶ In Joplin’s *Elite Syncopations*, for example, we see the pentatonic quality present in the melody (Fig. 3). Scale degrees seven and four do appear in the third measure of the excerpt, but they are placed on weak parts of the beat and overall serve to smooth the melody.

Insofar as ragtime originated as an African American genre and was developed by black composers, it is essential to examine and analyze the African American folk elements used in classic ragtime. The rhythmic complexity is certainly developed from syncopation used in African American music. The melody based on the pentatonic scale also has its roots in this tradition. However, examining the melodic embellishments of the compositions indicates European influence as well.¹⁷ Looking again at Figure 3, the first measure contains a lower chromatic neighbor tone, while the third measure utilizes the raised

14 Hildred Roach, *Black American Music: Past and Present* (Boston: Crescendo, 1973), 69.

15 Samuel A. Floyd and Marsha J Reisser, “The Sources and Resources of Classic Ragtime Music,” *Black Music Research Journal* 4 (1984): 42.

16 A. R. Danburg Charters, “Negro Folk Elements in Classic Ragtime,” *Ethnomusicology* 5 (1961): 177.

17 Floyd and Reisser, “Sources and Resources,” 51.



Figure 4. Joplin, Scott. *Weeping Willow*. St. Louis: Val A. Reis Music Co., 1903. mm.



Figure 5. Joplin, Scott. *Gladiolus Rag*. New York: Joseph W. Stern & Co., 1907. mm. 1-3

fourth scale degree to emphasize the melody's arrival on the fifth scale degree.¹⁸ This chromaticism, and particularly the lower neighbor, is common throughout Joplin's works, usually embellishing the third and fifth scale degrees. This is seen again in m. 6 of *Weeping Willow* (Fig. 4), where this chromatic melodic embellishment, a distinctly European trait, reminds us of Joplin's formal training.

Further European influence is found in Joplin's harmonic language. All of his ragtime compositions follow the basic harmonic structure I-V-I.¹⁹ Within this structure, Joplin uses sophisticated chromatic harmonies, echoing the practices of Europe. Joplin will often employ secondary dominant and seventh chords, particularly at the ends of phrases to emphasize the cadence.²⁰ Figure 5, the opening to *Gladiolus Rag*, shows Joplin utilizing a $vii^{\circ}7/V$, one of his favorite harmonic embellishments. There is also the occasional use of embellishing common-tone diminished chords, as well as augmented sixth chords, as seen in Figure 6.

18 Floyd and Reisser, "Sources and Resources," 41.

19 Charters, "Folk Elements," 179.

20 Floyd and Reisser, "Sources and Resources," 41.



Figure 6. Joplin, *Elite Syncopations*, mm. 84-86

The overall form of the majority of Joplin's works can also be attributed to European influences, specifically the march. The most common organization of a classic ragtime composition is $\parallel: A : \parallel: B : \parallel: A : \parallel: C : \parallel: D : \parallel$, directly taken from the march form.²¹ Section C ("the trio") normally modulates to the subdominant key, as was customary for march music. Beyond the form, some of the aesthetic elements of his compositions overall are evocative of European romanticism. Joplin's ragtime works often explore several emotions within the same piece, a romantic trait.²² Using the harmonic language of the Europeans, Joplin would often modulate into the minor mode to invoke a melancholy character.²³ This was strikingly different from the earlier folk ragtime pieces, which almost exclusively used the major key that complemented the pentatonic melody. With the elements of European form and harmonic/melodic embellishments, combined with African American rhythmic complexity and melodies, Joplin successfully created an original genre of American music.

Clearly, the level of complexity in classic ragtime rewards analysis by music scholars—so why, then, has the study of ragtime been so limited? Ping-Robbin's bio-bibliography, *Scott Joplin: A Guide to Research*, shows a significant decrease in sources after the early 1990s. In my own research, I was hard-pressed to uncover any information about Joplin or ragtime in general published after 1995. Aside from a brief spike in articles and books written during the seventies and eighties (which began about the same time Joplin's *The Entertainer* was featured in the movie *Sting*), academic interest in Joplin's ragtime compositions has remained low.

21 Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 46.

22 Jasen and Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime*, 84.

23 Jasen and Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime*, 85.

Historically, the musicology's disinterest in ragtime is not altogether unexpected. In Joplin-specific research, a great deal of his early life and career is unrecorded. In regards to the genre in general, classic ragtime's roots in popular music have hindered it from being taken seriously by educated music circles since its beginnings.²⁴ Indeed, the prevalence of popular ragtime—"simple ragtime pieces of the Tin Pan Alley Hacks"—probably prevented academic scholars from devoting time for anything related to them. Then, of course, there is the racial aspect to consider.²⁵ To put it mildly, America has had a very poor history with race relations, and classic ragtime's roots in African American folk music and performance tradition was a major obstacle for the composers of classic ragtime.²⁶ In the earlier days of ragtime, the genre was controversial and the white community was rather split. The audiences of popular music definitely loved ragtime, especially the popular ragtime produced by Tin Pan Alley.²⁷ The younger generation of the time particularly enjoyed this form of dance music, and ragtime was certainly America's popular music of choice by 1910, regardless of race.²⁸ However, the older and more classically- and academically-inclined white listeners were decidedly against ragtime. At least in part, this was caused by ragtime's aforementioned role as popular music, but, as with jazz, there was a racial aspect as well. Again, this music originated in the low-class black saloons, performed almost exclusively by African American musicians.²⁹ As such, the more cultured white listeners rejected it as "lower art," not only because it was performed by black musicians, but also because it was formed outside of European art music.

Classical white audiences were annoyed that these untrained African American artists were receiving more recognition than "properly trained" white composers from the younger generation.³⁰ Listening to ragtime, they worried, would harm the young people's ability to appreciate highly cultivated (i.e. European) music.³¹ The "ragged" rhythms and syncopations also disenchanting many: the piano ragtime players in Sedalia (where Joplin lived and worked during his early career) were deemed "piano thumpers."³² Some have speculated that this is just another extension of white America rejecting anything produced by African Americans. The black music critic Nora Douglas Holt noted that white audiences readily accepted syncopation in European music

24 Jasen and Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime*, 3.

25 Charters, "Folk Elements," 175.

26 Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 88.

27 Jasen and Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime*, 137.

28 Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 86.

29 Jasen and Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime*, 2.

30 Hasse, *Ragtime*, 2.

31 Hasse, *Ragtime*, 85.

32 Hasse, *Ragtime*, 21.

while denouncing syncopation found in African American folk.³³ To be fair, as mentioned above, syncopation in ragtime was certainly distinct from European syncopation. Yet musical emphasis on off-beats was not new to American audiences, and it does not stand to reason that the rhythmic complexity would discourage new listeners—it certainly was not troubling to the average American listener. Holt is probably accurate in saying that white academic audiences disliked much of African American rhythmic style because of its connections to the African American community. The preference for European music over anything the African American community could produce effectively barred Joplin’s compositions from acceptance into white classical music circles.

That being said, there were a few individuals in the white classical music community that actively accepted and praised ragtime. Charles Ives, for instance, used ragtime elements in his compositions.³⁴ John Philip Sousa is believed to be the first to have brought ragtime music to Europe by 1900.³⁵ Of course, it is not surprising that these two composers would be more accepting of ragtime music than most. Sousa composed marches, the genre from which classic ragtime borrows its structure and form. Ives thoroughly enjoyed sounds that his contemporaries typically avoided, so it makes sense that he would readily accept music that was so unpopular.

In addition to these composers, others in the period believed that ragtime would come to define the “American style” of classical music. This combination of European and African American music was distinctly American, both in its origin and its optimistic, lively character. Certainly, some were willing to accept that “the quintessential American music ... had come from African American sources,” but, sadly, other critics rejected ragtime as a basis for national style, and largely on racial reasons.³⁶ The music critic W. S. B. Matthews, for one, objected to using African American sources for American music, as the style was “completely foreign to the average American.”³⁷ Others took this view as well, arguing that this African American music “cannot be considered American, for the negro is a product of Africa, and not of America.”³⁸

We have seen this same rejection of African American music repeated over and over in American history. Styles of music that come out of the black community are consistently met with suspicion and hostility by white listeners. We heard how jazz was destroying music, how rock and roll was corrupting our

33 Lawrence Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music: 1878-1943* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 187.

34 Arnold Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America* (New York: Schirmer, 1986), 56.

35 Hasse, *Ragtime*, 29-32.

36 Susan Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man’s Tune: A Life of Scott Joplin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 163-64.

37 Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man’s Tune*, 166.

38 Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 87.

souls, and, even today, the older white communities can be found regularly decrying how hip hop is destroying the younger generation's ability to appreciate "real music." Even though popular music readily accepted ragtime, Joplin would never be accepted by classical circles despite his clear talent and sophistication. Ragtime faced an uphill battle from the start, primarily due to the color of the performer's skin.

Intriguingly, however, white audiences were not the only ones to reject ragtime musicians. Again, as ragtime was associated with the low-class black saloons, African Americans that sought the same dignity and respect granted to the white community distanced themselves from and decried ragtime.³⁹ It further aggravated matters once white composers started writing commercial ragtime music. The black community was, in general, offended, citing how African American folk music had been taken and used to insult them in the infamous minstrel shows. As mainstream white ragtime grew, African Americans began to view ragtime as an offensive caricature.⁴⁰ Even though Joplin's and other composers' classic ragtime compositions were sophisticated, the educated African American community denounced them for the connection with the Tin Pan Alley works.

Scott Joplin worked all his life to prove to educated musicians that African American artists were capable of producing great works of art.⁴¹ In *School of Ragtime*, he argues, "That real ragtime of the higher class is rather difficult to play is a painful truth which most pianists have discovered. Syncopations are no indication of light or trashy music, and to shy bricks at 'hateful ragtime' no longer passes for musical culture."⁴² However, knowing that his piano ragtime works were looked down upon due to their origins in the saloons, Joplin worked to show that he was capable of producing more sophisticated, accepted genres of art as well. To this end, Joplin wrote other, overtly classical forms of music. In his mind, as in the minds of many in the African American community, works for musical theatre were inherently sophisticated and intellectual.⁴³ In 1906, Joplin composed a ballet titled *The Ragtime Dance*, and wrote two operas, *A Guest of Honor* (1903) and *Treemonisha* (1911).⁴⁴ Sadly, these works were underperformed during Joplin's lifetime. Composers like Joplin were barred from educated and cultured circles, whether white or black.⁴⁵

39 Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 88.

40 Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift*, 187.

41 William J. Schafer and Johannes Riedel, *The Art of Ragtime: Form and Meaning of an Original Black American Art* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 52.

42 Scott Joplin, *School of Ragtime* (New York: Scott Joplin, 1908).

43 Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 75-76.

44 Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America*, 49.

45 Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 88.

Despite its success in the popular market, classic ragtime was never fully accepted by American classical musicians. Some European musicians, however, readily accepted ragtime and incorporated it into their own compositions. Joplin famously met with Alfred Ernst, a German immigrant and the leader of the St. Louis Choral Symphony Society in 1901.⁴⁶ Ernst is said to have immediately recognized Joplin's musical ability and praised him as a musician. There were rumors that Ernst planned to take Joplin and his music to Europe—if this is true, there is no evidence that it ever happened.⁴⁷ Across the Atlantic, some composers actively composed their own interpretations of the style. Igor Stravinsky composed *Piano Rag Music* in 1919, and Claude Debussy composed pieces influenced by ragtime, including “Golliwog’s Cakewalk” from *Children’s Corner Suite* in 1906.⁴⁸ Yet it is doubtful that either of these composers were directly influenced by the classic ragtime in the style of Joplin. With regard to Stravinsky’s work, ragtime in 1919 was not particularly recognizable as the same genre as that in which Joplin composed, since at that point in history ragtime was beginning to transition into jazz music.⁴⁹ The title of Debussy’s composition is problematic, as it is less than respectful of the African American community. (A golliwog is a children’s doll designed after an offensive caricature of black people.) Nevertheless, Europeans were distinctly more accepting of the ragtime style, recognizing it early on as the American style of classical music.⁵⁰ Of course, their perception of its place in American music was not shared by American classical composers, who as a group were unwilling to accept this genre out of the African American community.

It is important to consider the European reaction to ragtime music when deciding whether or not ragtime “qualifies” as classical. American musicologists of the time had their opinions of the genre tinted by the racial implications, and therefore were not willing to accept ragtime composers as legitimate artists. The European community, on the other hand, did not have the same racial history as academic American audiences, and so they were often more accepting of the ragtime style.⁵¹ Perhaps they recognized the common elements between this African American genre and their own styles, or perhaps they were excited that America was producing its own brand of sophisticated music. Whatever the reason, the European perspective, removed from American race relations, must be taken into consideration in studying ragtime’s qualities as sophisticated art.

46 Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 94.

47 Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 96.

48 Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America*, 55.

49 Harer, “Defining Ragtime,” 414.

50 Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History* (London: University of California Press, 1980), 50.

51 Berlin, *Ragtime*, 44.

Classic ragtime's racial and popular origins were the main obstacles to it being accepted by America's classical musicians. As the years went on and music developed, ragtime fell out of memory for most musicians, remembered vaguely as a precursor to jazz. As a result, it received little study from musicologists during the early and mid-twentieth century, despite a brief spike in interest during the nineteen seventies and eighties. To date, the majority of scholarly research on ragtime has been conducted by professors of African American studies—and rightly so, as ragtime played a huge part in the developing black culture of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the classic ragtime of Scott Joplin shows a high degree of complexity and musical talent that it would surely repay further study by musicologists. As a distinct genre of American music, more music scholars should examine the sophistication and musical techniques present in the classic ragtime of Scott Joplin.

Daniel Stephens is a senior majoring in choral music education. He prepared this essay as part of Dr. Carl Leafstedt's class, Music History II: Beethoven to Present (MUSC 3342, Spring 2016).

