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## Scott Joplin, the King of Ragtime

Music is loved on a global scale and is created and used in various ways. It is sometimes used to express events taking place in society, or ironically, used to express what one would want society to be. Scott Joplin used his musical prowess to portray his thoughts on society through his many compositions as he did in his famous ragtime piece, *The Entertainer*, composed in 1902.

Often called the king of ragtime writers, Scott Joplin was born to the first post-slavery generation. He was an African-American that believed he could "overcome the obstacles of background, class and race through hard work and education" (Berlin, 3). Joplin was proclaimed a genius and admired for his music by many musicians when he composed his first publications in 1899 (Berlin, 3). While his widow, Lottie Joplin, was submitting information to the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP), she had given faulty information and so Joplin's exact birth and death dates are unknown. His birth date was narrowed down after some research to November 1868 in Texarkana, Texas where his family lived. Joplin was influenced musically by both parents as his father was a violinist and his mother played the banjo and sang, despite their separation in his youth (Reed, 47). In addition to going to school Joplin would study with several music teachers who recognized his talents.

Julius Weiss was one of many who gave free lessons to young Joplin. Weiss had a significant impact on Joplin and helped him shape his impressive musical prowess and ambitions toward high artistic goals (Berlin, 7). Joplin's use of syncopated patterns, blue notes and melodies were influenced by the black heritage reminiscent of banjo and fiddle tunes. His development resulted in great improvisational ability and growing popularity while still in his teens (Reed, 47). As Joplin excelled, he began to teach music; he was inspired to make his initial efforts of composition when he formed and led an organization with a community of people with similar interests (Reed, 49).

Joplin met with another rag pianist while performing in Chicago, Otis Saunders. Otis became more conscious of Joplin's genius while watching him perform in various places. He persuaded Joplin to write down, publish and think seriously of the compositions he had been improvising (Reed, 50). Joplin settled in Sedalia, Missouri in 1896 and began to receive benefits from his compositions. Joplin's first successful and most popular rag was named after the club he joined in Sedalia, Maple Leaf Club, "and it was there that the publisher of the piece, John Stark, first heard Joplin play" (Reed, 269). Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag* was rejected several times by many publishers despite the great deal of popularity it achieved (Reed, 270). John Stark's son, Will, joined Joplin's personal show for the Stark's and danced along to his *Maple Leaf Rag* which supposedly "influenced the Starks to accept the piece for publication" (Reed, 270). The publication of his piece marked "the beginning of a five-year contractual agreement between Scott and John and catapulted the composer to eventual worldwide fame" (Reed, 271). The piece was the first popular sheet music to sell over a million copies in America. The success of *Maple Leaf Rag* resulted in Joplin not only having financial security but also a great deal of personal fame. It was during this period that he was dubbed "The King of Ragtime" (Reed, 271). Although somewhat successful, Joplin never got to taste the full fruits of success due to his background and prophesied that recognition would come after his death (Berlin, 4). In 1916

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Joplin was committed to the Manhattan State Hospital, and according to the certificate "died on April 1, 1917, the cause attributed to 'dementia paralytica-cerebral'" (Reed, 276). Twenty-seven years after his supposed death, in 1944 Joplin was finally being recognized for his ingeniousness as a rag pianist.

Joplin created an ever so cheerful compositional style, although some considered it to be an ironic one and that "Joplin is 'feigning happiness while masking underlying misery'" (Rabinowitz, 167). His style guaranteed the preservation of black rhythm by choosing ragtime as a musical standard. Joplin often used contrasting sections to engage rhythmic relationships and used call-and-response as essentials when structuring his melodies (Stewart, 96). Later to be called the blues scale in the 20th century, Joplin combined pentatonic scale and hexatonic scale in his breakthrough rag, Maple Leaf Rag. (Stewart, 97). Joplin was very active in all areas of his career; he had a small ensemble which consisted of the cornet, clarinet, and tuba baritone instruments. *Treemonisha* was the second opera that Joplin published himself with no spoken parts and is the culminating achievement of Joplin's life. Although no producers were ever found during his lifetime, his opera was produced several times after his death and given its world premiere in 1972 in Atlanta Georgia. *Treemonisha* was Joplin's final extended work inspired by his mother, "the theme of which is 'education for the salvation of the negro race'" (Reed, 48). The music comprises twenty-seven numbers – "recitatives, arias, and ensembles" (Reed, 276). The overall theme of the opera was that through education, the ex-slaves can free themselves and can be the salvation of black people in America, which was what Joplin was known for. He had a serious attitude toward ragtime and knew that its charm would be ruined if not performed correctly, like the fast tempo of other ragtime players (Reed, 273). Joplin thought that above all "the correct tempo should always be observed" (Reed, 273). For an African-American to taste success in the musical world they had to implement 'white' standards. Joplin would not accept this which is why he is known for heightening their social stature. Generally, music performed by the accepted black groups was "that in the European tradition, not the folk-music styles of the blacks" (Reed, 277). Joplin never got to experience the full extent of his success due to the presence of discrimination in his lifetime. His compositional style was a product of his love for music, as well as his reaction to the discrimination that was still present in America post-emancipation period.

The Entertainer is a beautiful ragtime piece composed by Scott Joplin that is well worthy of its stature. A ragtime piece is composed using the rhythmic relationships between contrasting sections. It characterizes the open theme, "opening motif is identical in all three phases, the second motif is written in chords rather than single lines and has different character" (Stewart, 97). It uses the combination of two staves, the upper with a treble clef and the lower with a bass clef, making it a grand staff.

The beautiful syncopation and tempo in *The Entertainer* is created by the combination of rhythm and melody and is what Joplin had been portraying throughout his life. Analyzing 40 bars, bars 30-69, allow to understand the fundamentals of *The Entertainer*. This could be made easy with the checklist of musical characteristics: time, melody, instruments, tonality, texture, dynamics.

The piece is composed in the most common key of C major on the piano, which is considered a percussion instrument despite its strings. The time signature of the entire piece has a time signature of 2/4 which is also known as march time. This means that there are two quarter note beats per measure. The texture of this piece is evidently homophonic with the obvious single melody and the accompanied chord through the bass. The piece also has a varying volume and

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is acoustic throughout.

Bars 30 to 40 of this piece have a soft volume level as denoted by the *p* meaning pianissimo. Bar 30 has a *allegro* tempo with a conjunct melody and a high register. It also has a narrow range of chords that ascend and descend with a few accidentals, so it is not dull. Bar 30 has a rapid and slight change in pitch making it a vibrato aspect. There appears to be C-C-G-E-G in bar 30 making it a C-E-G major triad in the root position. Bar 31 is somewhat similar to 30 in that it has a *allegro* tempo with half being a conjunct melody and then transitioning to a disjunct with a descending melodic contour. It has a narrow range of chords with a gradual change in dynamics. Bar 31 has a G-C-E-A-E-A making it a A-C-E-G minor seventh chord in the third position. Bar 32 is also like bars 30 and 31. Bar 32 has a A-C-F-C making it a F-A-C major triad in the first position. Bar 33 is mostly disjunct but more of an *adagio* tempo than that of bar 30 and has a slightly wider range that goes from C to F. You can find another C-E-G major triad like bar 30, but in the second position. Accents are placed on the weak points of the meter which proves a syncopated rhythmic structure and an elegant temporal relationship. Bar 34 begins with a *moderato* tempo along with a narrow conjunct moving between C and A, minor third intervals, which reflect a glissando aspect. We can find F-A-C-D-C here making it a D-F-A-C minor seventh triad in the first position. Bar 35 has a disjunct motion with an ascending and descending melodic contour like a pyramid. This bar has a C-E-G major triad in the second position which is repeated from bar 30. Bar 36 is moderately slow which is an *andante* melody. It also has a varying volume and a D-A-F-C making it a D-F-A-C minor seventh chord in the root position. Bar 37 maintains the same tempo and melody as before with a narrower range. The melody ascends while the accompanied bass descends which reflects the contrasting sections complimenting each other in the ragtime genre. In bar 38 slows down to an *adagio* tempo with a disjunct and narrow melody with a level contour. It has a constant volume with no chords visible. Bar 39 continues from bar 38 with an *adagio* tempo and a disjunct melody with a wide range. It consists of a varying volume with sudden change in dynamics and slides up and down between two notes, a glissando. We can observe a G-B-C-E which makes a C-E-G-B major seventh chord in the second position. Bar 40 picks up to an *allegretto* tempo with a narrow range with a mostly level contour with accidentals. It also has a gradual change in dynamics.

Bars 41 and 42 have a loud volume level as denoted by the *f* which means forte. Bar 41 has an *allegro* tempo with conjunct contour going up and down like a wave. It has a gradual change in dynamics and has F-G-B-D-F-D arrangement making it a G-B-D-F minor seventh chord in the third position. Bar 42 has an *andante* start with disjunct melody and wide range. Here we have yet another E-G-C-C-E-C making it a C-E-G major triad in the first position. Bars 43 and 44 change back to a soft volume level and then back to a loud volume in bars 45 and 46 and back to soft in bars 47 and 48. This gives the piece a jolly feel and so it doesn't remain dull by having the same pitch throughout. Bars 43 and 44 has a repeated melody of bars 39 and 40. Bar 44 has a different bass accompaniment than that of 40. The bass accompanies the melody to provide E-A-C-A which is A-C-E a minor triad in the second position. Bar 45 has a very narrow conjunct melodic motion that ascends and descends like bar 35. It has a gradual change and a F-A-C-C-C can be observed, which is a F-A-C major triad in the root position. Bar 46 has a sudden change in dynamics with a disjunct melodic motion. The contour goes down by a wide range and the G-B-D-F-D make a G-B-D-F minor seventh chord in the root position. Bars 47 and 48 is also a repeat of bars 39 and 40. Bar 49 changes back to forte once again with a gradual change in dynamics and narrow conjunct melodic motion. In this bar there is a F-G-B-D-F-D which makes a G-B-D-F minor seventh chord in the third position. Bar 50 continues with the forte volume level with a level contour at an *adagio* tempo. It also has a G-C-E-C-E-C which is a

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C-E-G major triad in the second position. Bar 51 has an allegro tempo with gradual change in dynamics and a very narrow conjunct range of motion. Bars 52 and 53 are like bar 51, they continue the allegro tempo with gradual changes and narrow conjunct melody. Here we have A-C-F-D-D which is a D-F-A-C minor seventh chord in the second position. Bar 53 also has a G-B-D-F minor seventh chord in the root position like bar 46. Bar 54 goes back to an adagio tempo with the melody staying at a level contour and a constant volume. The accompanied bass descends by disjunct motion, a gradual change in dynamics.

Bar 55 begins with a forte volume and a moderato tempo. It mostly has a level contour and a narrow range of motion. Here there is A-C-F-F-A which makes it a F-A-C major triad in the first position. Bar 56 also has a moderato tempo with an ascending conjunct melodic motion. The change in dynamics is gradual with B-D-F-B which makes it a B-D-F minor triad in the root position. Bar 57 is a repeat of bar 55. Bar 58 has an allegro tempo with narrow range of motion. It has a gradual change in dynamics with G-D-G-B making it a G-B-D major triad in root position. Bar 59 starts with an moderato tempo and changes up and down between two notes describing a glissando aspect. It has a disjunct motion and a G-B-D triad as in the previous bar but in the first position. Bar 60 has a tardo tempo and a disjunct motion ascending with a sudden change in dynamics. Here we can find A-C-F which makes it a F-A-C major triad in the first position. Bar 61 goes back to the allegro tempo with a gradual change ascending by disjunct motion. By observation there is a B-D-E-B which is obviously missing a G to make it a E-G-B-D minor seventh chord in the second position. Bar 62 is like bar 60, tardo tempo with a disjunct motion and a sudden change in dynamics. Bars 63 to 67 is repeated from bars 55 to 59. Bar 68 starts with an andante tempo and a disjunct melodic motion. The contour goes up with a gradual change in dynamics. Here we have a D-D-#G-B-F which makes a #G-B-D-F diminished seventh chord in the second position. Finally, bar 69 begins with a forte volume level and an allegro tempo. The change in dynamics is gradual and has a disjunct melodic motion that maintains a somewhat level contour. In this last bar we can see a C-B-G which is clearly missing an E to make C-E-G-B a major seventh chord in the root position.

The Entertainer creates an overall joyful atmosphere and makes one want to dance like the irrepressible, swinging dance music its derived from. It is no doubt that Joplin's brilliant talent composed one of the greatest pieces of all time. The upbeat tempo allows for an easy adoration for the piece, as it gives a feeling of relief.

To summarize, Scott Joplin used his musical prowess to portray his thoughts on society through his many compositions, as he did in his famous ragtime piece, The Entertainer. Joplin's contribution to the history of music was a significant and very influential one.

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