

Scott joplin and the entertainer



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Biography of Scott Joplin

Scott Joplin was an American pianist and composer. His name is famous all over the world due to his contribution to music with his ragtime compositions, among which there are 44 pieces, one ballet, and two operas.

Scott Joplin was born in 1868 in the City of Texarkana, a small town of Northeast Texas. His father, a railway worker, played the violin, and his mother was a singer and played the banjo. So it did not come as surprise that Scott as well as his two brothers liked music. In his childhood, Scott had an opportunity to play the piano and soon it was found out that he was a talented boy. It needs to be mentioned that in those days not every African-American family could afford to buy a musical instrument, but many poor families with talented children were ready to do everything for their kids' future and the development of their talent. So Scott had a chance to play the piano because his father had collected some money and bought an old and used instrument.

So Joplin played the piano whenever he was able to. Rumor about the talented Negro boy spread through the town, and he found a teacher who decided to teach him for free. While learning, Joplin got a serious musical background and learnt everything about the most prominent European composers of the first half of the nineteenth century. As a musician, Joplin had a profound theoretical knowledge as well. Naturally, he knew Negro folk music and was acquainted with the “shout” tradition and work songs, which later appeared in his opera *Treemonisha*. His main repertoire consisted of

European romantic music of the nineteenth century, which is still loved by people (Reed 118).

The music of Scott Joplin was influenced by his mother, who looked after his musical education. One may assume that the central character of the opera “Treemonisha” is related to the image of Joplin’s mother. She died in 1882 when Joplin was 14 years old, and some time after the mother’s death, Scott left the ancestral home and became one of those musicians who had to roam the country in order to earn some money (Jasen 10).

In fact, Joplin differed from the typical pianists of those days who were crazy about getting money and earning more in order to spend time with pleasure. He was quiet, concentrated and modest; he was a good and reliable friend, always ready to help. The ordinary appearance masked the strong nature of the African-American man who made up his mind to gain popularity in music. He was the first African American to create the so-called Negro music (Berlin 16).

Such nomadic life led Joplin to St. Louis in 1885. This city became his permanent place of residence for the following two decades. He gave concerts in St. Louis and some nearby towns, responding to every invitation he got. In a while he gained the reputation of one of the leading pianists in his style in the Middle and South West. Twice within this period he moved to town Sedalia, Missouri. As he took the music very seriously, he entered the GeorgeSmithNegroCollege, where experienced teachers lectured a profound course in music theory.

At the same time Joplin played the cornet in small brass band and directed his own dance orchestra. Besides, he toured with the vocal quartet “ Texas Melody”. Thanks to all these activities, Joplin became a highly qualified musician at thirty: he taught music, dealt with the arrangement, directed music bands, sang, and played not only the piano, but many other instruments (Reed 125).

Moreover, Joplin began to compose music. His first compositions (typical sentimental songs) were not different from those written by some other composers. In 1897 the whole country listened to ragtime, whose popularity could definitely be compared with madness. It resembled the popularity of jazz in the 1920s or swing in the 1930s . Ragtime was connected with the dance ‘ cakewalk’. White musicians mastered ragtime very quickly and it dominated in the American popular music as well. There were many ragtime contests, ragtime schools, books and magazines about ragtime, and so on.

Naturally, this boom touched upon Joplin. In 1899 he brought some of his rags to the editor, but the latter accepted only “ Original Rags”. Scott Joplin knew that sooner or later all his unaccepted works would become popular. Some time later Maple Leaf Rag was appreciated by John Stilwell Stark, a retailer of musical editions and instruments. Two men signed a contract and published the rag. This engagement played a key role in the lives of both men and they became honest and reliable partners. For Maple Leaf Rag Joplin was paid a descent fee and this composition had a colossal success. Stark sold several hundreds copies of sheet music and carried his business to St. Louis. Since that time Joplin became wealthy and well-known (Berlin 28).

Scott Joplin was recognized as the best ragtime composer. Thanks to the success of Maple Leaf Rag, he could devote himself to composing and teaching music. He published thirty three rags, about twenty five songs, waltzes and solo pieces, and a guide on ragtime music. He worked hard and constantly improved his skills. Joplin worked not for money but for art, and while rags should have been easy and available even to inexperienced pianists, Joplin's late works were very complicated and required more solid playing skills. Joplin hated simplification and condemned those composers who picked up the tempo or experimented with rhythm. He insisted on playing rags as they were written. Besides, he claimed that rags should be written and played thoroughly and seriously, as this music is rather rigorous and accurate.

Before the beginning of the World War I the popularity of ragtime dropped. Joplin's interests changed as well, and in 1907 he moved to New-York. He composed fewer rags and devoted himself to composing music in the European style. In 1909, Joplin published five rags. In 1903 he finished working on his opera A Guest of Honor, and in 1910 the composer began to work on his new opera Treemonisha.

Scott Joplin was carried away by this work. Stark refused to publish the opera as it seemed uninteresting and unpromising, and the composer published it at his own expense. Treemonisha was not ideal and Joplin could not find people who would help him to stage it (Reed 132). Being sure in its strengths, he staged it without decorations with his own incidental music. It was accepted coolly by the audience and by the critics as well. After this Joplin worked little and died in April 1, 1917.

Scott Joplin's death coincided with the ragtime's decline, but the genre did not die. There were many people who organized clubs, published copies of sheet music, and gave concerts. In 1971, the musicologist and pianist Joshua Rifkin recorded and released the album of Joplin's rags which had a great success. After it *Treemonisha* was staged in Atlanta in 1972 and in Broadway in 1975. Thus, the dream of the famous composer became true.

Nevertheless, he became popular due to his unique rags, which went down in history of music and continue to charm the listeners with their originality, elegance and ease.

The Analysis of The Entertainer by Scott Joplin

The Entertainer is a classical piano rag, which was created by Scott Joplin in 1902. This rag played a key role in the ragtime revival at the end of the twentieth century when it was used as the theme track in the film *The Sting*. Now it is ranked as #10 on the list of "Songs of the Century". Analyzing this rag we should mention some information about its publication history and popularity and point out the subject of The Entertainer, its form, rhythm, tempo, dynamics, melody, tone and harmony.

The Entertainer is one of the most popular Joplin's rags. Its copyright was registered in 1902. The rag was published in St. Louis by John Stark. Actually, people forgot about it quickly and only half a century later, on publication of *They All Played Ragtime: The True Story of an American Music* written by Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis in 1950, Scott Joplin returned to everyone's lips. In 1970 the famous pianist Joshua Rifkin released the recordings of Joplin's piano rags The Entertainer among them. And finally, The Entertainer was

used in the film *The Sting* and became a hit on the popular music charts. In 1976 Scott Joplin was awarded the Pulitzer Prize posthumously.

The Entertainer is a good example of ragtime and follows all basic rules of this genre. Ragtime was considered to be a piano form and was presented mostly by songs for dancing and entertaining that were very popular between 1897 and 1910.

The subject of the rag is difficult to point out and many musicologists say that this music doesn't have any subject at all. Nevertheless, while listening to *The Entertainer* listeners may notice many elements that give a shape to the composition and make people think about something important. We may feel the power and energy of America that lived in the heart of every citizen of the country. *The Entertainer* had the sub-title "A rag time two step", so we cannot help connecting the rag with the mentioned form of dance that was popular in America at that time.

The form (or the plan) of *The Entertainer* is ABACD. This form is called variation and means that the material (harmony, rhythm, melody or timbre) is repeated in an altered form. In this case the rag has a theme, which is followed by refrain, then the theme repeats again and finally we hear the improvisation.

The next element is rhythm. It is the movement marked by the succession of weak and strong elements. The rhythm of *The Entertainer* is light, and this rag is usually played fast. The rhythm of the rag is syncopated as it accents even number of beats. Speaking about the meter, it should be mentioned

that in The Entertainer a duple meter is used, and the visual rhythm pattern may be showed as aBaB or aBcD.

Tempo is closely connected with the rhythm, but unlike rhythm it may be changed. This depends on a performer, who may play the piece of music slowly, fast and in between (largo, allegro, and moderato, respectively). The Entertainer may be interpreted in several ways as well but in most recordings it follows moderato tempo, which was intended by the composer. Sometimes, performers use allegro, but moderato is more euphonic.

The dynamics is a characteristic of a note or sound which refers to its volume. Besides, it deals with the variations of this volume within the whole composition. Thus, a performer may use 'piano' for soft sounds or 'forte' for strong or loud ones. There are also some variations of these two notions like 'mezzo-piano' or 'mezzo-forte' and 'pianissimo' and 'fortissimo'. In The Entertainer dynamics is explored from 'pianissimo' to 'fortissimo', but the transitions from loud to soft sounds and vice versa are made smoothly. Such smooth transitions are termed 'decrescendo' and 'crescendo', and it is very important to pay attention to them while performing this very composition.

The melody of this rag does not depend on its tempo and dynamics and may be characterized as rich and powerful. This means that regardless of the tempo chosen by the performer, The Entertainer won't change its mood. This music will maintain its energetic and positive feeling anyway. The melody is closely connected with meter and is played with duple accents and syncopated rhythm. Generally, this rag presents a typical tune for the

ragtime that arose in African-American communities and became extremely popular all over America.

The tone of The Entertainer may be characterized as light and unobtrusive, there is no tension. The rag is written in the key of C major but there is one segment written in F.

The harmony is the use of simultaneous tones, chords or notes. The harmony in The Entertainer by Scott Joplin is pleasing and tame. We may recognize some blues notes which are typical for jazz. In general, each note of the rag is played in consonance, which makes people like it and listen to it with pleasure.

All mentioned elements prove that Scott Joplin was a professional composer who managed to create many unique compositions. The Entertainer is a good example of ragtime as it follows all its rules and requirements. There are no inappropriate sounds, no sudden transitions, no unusual tempo shifts. It seems, the main aim of Scott Joplin was to entertain, and this aim is reflected not only in the title of the rag but in its composition, melody and other mentioned elements as well.

To sum it up, Scott Joplin played a very important role in the ragtime development. Most his rags are popular nowadays despite the fact that they were written long ago. As for The Entertainer, it remains one of immortal ragtime masterpieces.