

The baroque period and ragtime music essay



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Throughout history we see that historical conditions are one of the key factors that defines a genre or music style during any one time period. These conditions include, but aren't limited to social, cultural, technological and musical trends. Instruments so often evolve as technology evolves; we see breakthroughs in the instruments themselves as well as how they are made and how the music is performed live or captured in the studio. Two of the key movements in music history have been the Baroque time period, Defined generally as “ a style of Western Classical music approximately extending from 1600 to 1750.” [Palisca, G. 2001], and the jazz (more specifically Ragtime) era, defined “ an original musical genre which enjoyed its peak popularity between 1897 and 1918.” [Berlin, E. 2009] I have chosen these two music movements to base this essay on because of the different, but slightly juxtaposed nature of how they developed and how they were structured. Music is often quoted to be ‘ the food for the soul’ and there's no better way to gain knowledge on the topic than to compare two pieces from both time periods.

The first piece I chose is from the baroque period and it is from one of the most famous composers of the time, Johann Sebastian Bach, and is titled “ Bouree In E Minor”. It is composed for the lute and is the fifth movement from the “ Suite in E minor for Lute”. The actual composition is very soft and smooth, far from hard dynamics. The length is also much shorter than most of his other works (10 mins+). It has a quick tempo as it was initially written to be a dance, demonstrating two voices within the piece opposing one another. The piece itself has no lyrics but the form resembles some of the baroque conditions that music should communicate some form of religious

theme within its compositional lyrics, or via emotional stimulus. It is also written for the lute which is an acoustic string instrument, showing that the song is bounded by the technology of the time period. Electricity was yet to be implemented which somewhat restricts the compositional variety between music in the baroque period, although many modern day electric instruments are just old acoustic instruments, re-made to newer technological specifications and requirements. The main concepts behind the Baroque compositions are that it expresses order, while maintaining the tuneful and lively nature of music. The composers viewed what they were doing as reflecting the mood of the times. Baroque, particularly after Bach's death in 1750, was seen as one of the first music styles to show 'trends' within societal views on music. Some people saw that it was 'unfashionable' to perform music of older styles. Another major change that Baroque had on the music world is that females started to appear more commonly as musicians and singers, this shows that the gender suppression was being lifted in the art world and it caused some of Baroque's most important musicians to express their compositions such as Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre. In my view the piece is very mechanical with the almost lack of crescendo and emotion. This is backed up by the statement found in online music journal The Radio 3 that "Later Baroque works suffer a little from over-stylisation, perhaps sometimes to the extent of calcification"[Draper, H. 2008]. The obvious common trend in baroque music, the music is viewed as a structure, much like a mathematical formula rather than full of the emotion, personality and soul that encompasses the jazz movement.

The second music style I chose to analyse is jazz, more specifically ragtime. The piece is titled 'Maple Leaf Rag' and was composed by Scott Joplin. The song is roughly 3 minutes long and is at a very fast and upbeat tempo. It was originally composed for piano and is one of the key pieces of the time. Because the song has a very upbeat tempo and melody, it inspires emotions of hope, happiness and joy. It makes use of seventh chords and because of its influence on the ragtime movement, it is still one of the most recognised pieces from the period. The term 'ragtime' gets its origin from the 'ragged' and syncopated rhythm. It was the original dance music of America's lower class district within cities such as New Orleans and St. Louis. The ragtime movement was shrouded in oppression and social hierarchy, at the time African Americans had no rights and were subject to the harsh treatments of the modern society. The style was a descendant of the "jigs" and march music that were commonly played by African-American bands. There were no typical genres and niches that we have in our modern society so the music was well received in North America. When ragtime was first developed, many of the musicians couldn't read sheet music let alone standard literature, which exhibits some of the lack of knowledge and education in the lower class system of the era. The music was not bound by the stereotypes that we know today and one piece entitled "All Coons Look Alike To Me" by African-American entertainer Ernest Hogan, went on to sell a million copies. The fallback from this was the creation of numerous derogatory pieces "Coon Songs" in which Hogan in his later years admitted that he felt a sense of shame and "race betrayal". When Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" was released, it demonstrated more sophistication and depth than the earlier rag compositions. Because ragtime had such an impact on the

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early development of jazz, as well as blues, there were a small number of artists (such as Jelly Roll Morton) who were able to play both jazz and ragtime during the time period both styles overlapped. While jazz was much more popular than ragtime it quickly surpassed ragtime in mainstream popularity during the early 20th century. The musical form of ragtime was that of a modified march made widely used by John Philip Sousa, using the polyrhythms that were prevalent to early African music. The most common time signatures for ragtime were that of 4/4 or 2/4 with the evident left hand rhythm of bass notes on the odd beat, while the syncopated rhythm is played on the right hand. Unlike waltz (3/4) and march (2/4) ragtime isn't synonymous with any particular time signature.

Both Baroque and Ragtime are styles that narrate the time period that they took place in. Both "Maple Leaf Rag" and "Bourée in E Minor" are quintessential pieces to the development of both Ragtime and Baroque. Bourée in E minor is written in a standard 4/4 time signature while Maple Leaf Rag is written in 2/4 which gives a faster, more rush feeling. Both of them keep a fast paced tempo, the main contrast is that Maple Leaf Rag has great dynamic while Bourée in E Minor has a soft and smooth dynamic contour. They both express feelings of emotion that were present in the time periods, Maple Leaf Rag keeps up emotions of hope and perseverance during the time of hardship for African-Americans. Bourée in E minor on the other hand shows a flow away from the mechanical and mathematical view on music that the Baroque period exhibits. The instrumentation of the two pieces is fairly similar, Maple Leaf Rag is composed of a single instrument, the same with Bourée in E minor. The timbre of both pieces is a obvious

difference as they are both composed on different instruments, while they are both able to play the same notes, the characteristics of each one sounds distinct. As they are both played solo, there is no orchestration between the two. Because of technological constraints and the style, both pieces were composed for acoustic instruments, lute and piano. The main technological difference between the two is that recording mediums were not available during the baroque period so the only tracks are interpretations of the work by other musicians. On the other hand piano rolls and basic recording technologies were available during the ragtime period so there are very old and low quality recordings of the song being played by Joplin himself. In my own findings, I feel that Baroque deals more with cultural issues (such as religion being pushed by government, the demand for new art, discourse and proclamation being viewed with much significance) while Ragtime deals with more societal issues (racism, oppression, family, hope and some tongue in cheek humor). The pieces don't have any lyrical part to their composition but still portray some of these emotions and feelings, if you were to ask almost anybody if they recognize either of these pieces, there's a very high chance they would of as they are used countless times throughout modern marketing and promotion. Both of them have been used in the soundtracks of thousands of cartoons, films, video games and commercials as the copyright for both of them have expired.

Music is often quoted as food of the soul, and through studying early music styles I have found that this is largely true. Music gives listeners a passage into the time and allows them to paint a image of the social, technological and cultural values of the time. For this essay I chose to write on the

Baroque time period and the early Jazz period, specifically Ragtime. The pieces I chose were 'Bouree in E minor' by Sebastian Bach, and 'Maple Leaf Rag' by Scott Joplin. I found that these two pieces of work, although very different, showed how iconic pieces of music can portray the conditions of the time over a few centuries. When these factors change, so does music. Composers are often limited by the technology of the day, and as shown by Bouree in E minor, the lack of recording technology has left us with no original recordings of Bach, only modern musicians interpretations of them. Feelings are commonly provoked through the dynamic and phrasing of musical pieces and by listening to the two songs, I can say that I felt some of the same feelings that the original composers of these pieces were trying to portray, whether it was joy and hopefulness with 'Maple Leaf Rag' or the feeling of prosperity and structure in Bouree in E minor. Comparing songs from two different movements is often hard because they are both expressing very different social, cultural, technological and musical conditions, but I found that these two songs were not very difficult because as both the composers were in different conditions, they produced similar influences in the songs. Looking at a song and analyzing what might of influenced the artist is one of the most important skills in analyzing the music style itself and music is often written from the heart and soul, and these two songs definitely showed some strong points as to what the composers were feeling at the time.