



The Genius of Scott Joplin

John De Chiaro, guitar

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

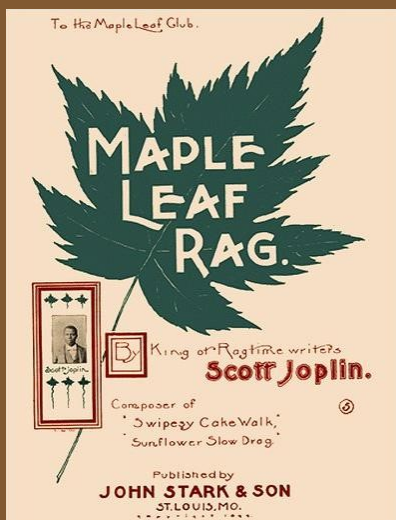
The self-proclaimed “King of the Ragtime Writers,” Scott Joplin was one of the most significant figures in American music at the turn of the twentieth century. Although Joplin’s music was largely forgotten for several decades after his death, the ragtime revival of the 1970s reaffirmed his position as the central figure in ragtime, especially after the 1973 film *The Sting* brought his music back into the public consciousness. Today most people will recognize the name Scott Joplin if you as much as hum the opening bars of his most famous piece, *The Entertainer*.

Scott Joplin was born in northeast Texas in either 1867 or 1868, and grew up in Texarkana. Although Joplin’s mother was free-born, his father was an ex-slave—not surprising considering Joplin was an African American born only a few years after the abolition of slavery. His parents had an

interest in music, but it was when the seven year-old Joplin began taking piano lessons with a German-American neighbor that he first gained an appreciation for music as an art form. As a young man, Joplin worked as a travelling musician, participating in a vocal quartet and befriending ragtime pioneer, Tom Turpin. By 1894, Joplin had settled in Sedalia, Missouri, a town toward the center of the state which would become his home for several years.

In his first years in Sedalia, Joplin made his money by playing piano both in dance halls and in brothels; he also led his own dance band as a cornetist. Then in 1899 he published his *Maple Leaf Rag* named after the Maple Leaf Club, a dance hall in Sedalia where Joplin was employed as pianist. This rag was Joplin’s breakthrough, and an estimated 500,000 copies of the sheet music were sold in the first ten years following its publication. According to the risky and unusual contract which Joplin signed with his publisher John Stark, the hitherto unknown composer was entitled to a penny per copy which, as it turned out, gave him the equivalent of a factory worker’s yearly salary from just the one piano rag.

In addition to the popular success it won, *Maple Leaf Rag* set the standard format for successive rags: rags were now to contain four themes rather than just three with the typical layout of these being AABBAACDD. *Maple Leaf Rag* also established the piano rag as an art form with its use of blue notes and chromatic melodies. Joplin, however, did not invent ragtime with this composition: hundreds of rags were already in print before Joplin ever published *Maple Leaf Rag*. Joplin’s accomplishment instead was to



bring new artistry to ragtime's march meter and syncopated melodies; indeed, it was these syncopated or rhythmically-irregular and, thus, ragged-sounding melodies which had inspired the term "ragtime." The ragtime pianist would play these syncopated melodies with his right hand while he maintained a steady rhythm in the bass with his left. Joplin took these traits and expanded upon them in his own rags. This was especially the case in *Maple Leaf Rag* where, for example, the syncopations extend over the barline—an unusual practice for even the syncopation-saturated genre of the rag.

It was not enough for Joplin to write artistic rags, however: he also chose to explain in words the artistry he brought to his rags. In his 1908 manual *School of Ragtime*, Joplin reinforced that rags should be played at a moderate tempo—"never play ragtime fast," he warned. He also emphasized that rags were notated compositions and not improvisations—"each note will be played as it is written." Although ragtime became one of the main precursors to jazz, a genre which many listeners and practitioners regard as inseparable from improvisation, this was not the case in Joplin's conception of ragtime. To be sure, many jazz musicians have also pointed toward the value which preconceived composition and notation can bring to jazz, including pioneers as influential as Jelly Roll Morton and Duke Ellington, although few of these musicians have been as adamant as Joplin.

In addition to his writings, Joplin also sought to expand his horizons by composing in established classical genres as evidenced by his two operas, a ballet, and persistent rumors of a lost piano concerto and a symphony. The first of Joplin's two socially-conscious operas, *A Guest of Honor*, revolves around the occasion in 1901 when the era's leading civil rights leader, Booker T. Washington, was invited to dine at the White House with President Theodore Roosevelt. The opera apparently saw some initial success when it began its national tour in 1903. The thievery of box office receipts by a member of Joplin's production company early in their tour, however, left Joplin unable to pay his booking expenses, and it is believed that the score was confiscated in partial retribution and ultimately destroyed.

Joplin's second opera *Treemonisha*—the central project of the ten years he spent in New York City from 1907 to 1917—did not fare much better, at least not in Joplin's lifetime. This opera's apt plot focuses on a young black woman whose education allows her to save her

community from the enslavement of ignorance and superstition, a message Joplin hoped would speak to the larger African-American community. Left to fund the project himself, Joplin was able to stage only a single performance of *Treemonisha* in 1915; to save money, he had to condense the full orchestral score into a mere piano accompaniment which he could play on his own. Further tragedy ensued when Joplin contracted tertiary syphilis in 1916 and died in a mental institution in 1917. Unlike *A Guest of Honor*, however, the score of



Treemonisha survived, and—after a proper premiere in Atlanta in 1972—it has become regarded as the composer's masterpiece. The posthumous success of *Treemonisha* and the larger reevaluation of Joplin's compositions since the 1970s has proven a complete turnaround, and many present-day listeners have come to appreciate the genius of Scott Joplin.

Tonight's program opens appropriately with the most famous of Joplin's compositions, *The Entertainer*, which he considered a ragtime two-step. The two-step was a popular dance of the era which was often accompanied by the playing of rags. The title "entertainer" was likely chosen as a reference to the nickname the composer had been given at the Maple Leaf Club where he had entertained from the piano. Joplin wrote *The Entertainer* in 1902, a time when he could live comfortably from the proceeds of *Maple Leaf Rag* and devote himself more fully to composing and teaching piano. In 1899, he had married Belle Hayden—the widowed sister-in-law of fellow composer and occasional collaborator, Scott Hayden—and the newlyweds had moved to St. Louis, where Joplin hoped he could establish himself as a serious composer of opera and ballet. *The Entertainer*, like several of the other piano rags he wrote at this time, greatly benefited from the work he was doing on his opera, *A Guest of Honor*.

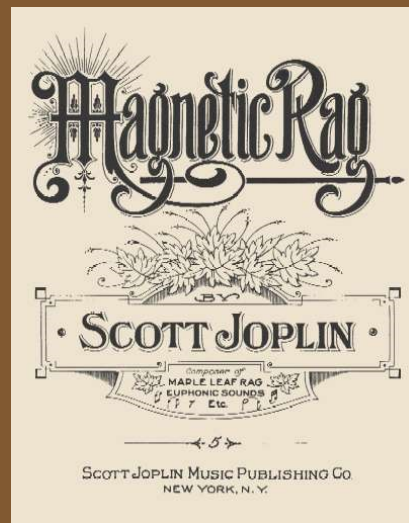
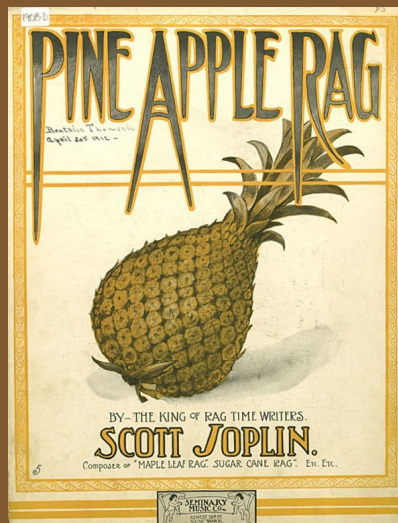
There is more sophistication here than in his earlier rags, and, specifically, *The Entertainer* employs the classical principles of counterpoint to a greater extent than previously. As an interesting side note, Joplin dedicated *The Entertainer* to James Brown and his Mandolin Club. The mandolin, a plucked string instrument, was popular with African-American musicians of Joplin's day, and there were many ensembles formed by groups of mandolinists. Although it would require further research, perhaps there is a scholarly argument to be made for playing Joplin's rags on the mandolin's relative—the guitar—as we hear tonight.

Our next two pieces were written amid more difficult years in Joplin's life. Within the span of a mere few months between 1903 and 1904, *A Guest of Honor* was destroyed, plunging Joplin into considerable debt; he and Belle divorced; and then his beloved second wife, Freddie Alexander, contracted pneumonia and died within ten weeks of their wedding. Accordingly, Joplin's compositions from these trying years vary in quality, although there are still a few of real merit. *The Heliotrope*

flag. Though without the extroversion of a Sousa march, *Nonpareil* with its mix of light, folksy material and more pensive, introspective music might still be suggestive of the young American nation at the turn of the twentieth century, contemplating its place in world affairs.

By mid-1907, Joplin had decided to relocate to New York City in order to both restart his career and find a publisher for *Treemonisha* which was, at the time albeit, still a work in progress. The next two rags we hear tonight are later pieces, composed following this move. Indeed, *The Magnetic Rag*, composed in 1914, was the last piece of his he would see in print before his death. It was issued through his own publishing company formed by he and his third wife, Lottie Stokes, who he had met in New York. Its form is truly unique among the ragtime genre, inverting the standard layout established in *Maple Leaf Rag* to AABBCDDAA-Coda. Moreover, the tonal relations of these themes move from the tonic key of B-flat major to its relative key, G minor, in the B thematic material and the parallel key of B-flat minor for the D themes. Its level of chromaticism is also suggestive of the blues genre,

which would soon attain widespread popularity in the 1920s. Jazz critic, Ted Gioia, praises *The Magnetic Rag* as “music on a large scale that was now being squeezed into the narrow confines of rag form—so much so that it seemed almost consciously designed to defy the commercial expectations that Joplin's earlier successes had engendered.” Conversely, *The Rose Leaf Rag*, written in 1907 soon after Joplin's arrival in New York, speaks to the composer's gift for crafting slow, endearing melodies. Indeed, the inscription found on its cover as a “Companion to *Maple Leaf Rag*, By Same Composer” aims to take full advantage of the commercial potential attached to Joplin's name.



Bouquet, is subtitled a slow drag two-step. To create *The Heliotrope Bouquet*, Joplin borrowed two themes from Louis Chauvin, a younger ragtime pianist who Joplin visited in Chicago in 1906, and then matched them with two themes of his own creation. Chauvin was apparently an inventive improviser—a forerunner to the many fantastic jazz improvisers who would win fame as the commercial recording industry gained traction—but rarely wrote down his musings at the piano. Thanks to Joplin's insistence on notation, however, these two themes of Chauvin at least were preserved. Our next piece, *Nonpareil* (*None to Equal*), is a ragtime two-step composed in 1907. The cover of its sheet music depicts Uncle Sam, respectfully holding and admiring an American

The next three pieces we hear are not rags, but marches. Accordingly, each lacks some quality particular to the rag genre. The first, *The Rosebud March*, was published in 1905 and named after a saloon in St. Louis. It is in 6/8, an uncommon meter for rags. *The Great Crush Collision March* was written in 1896, several years before *Maple Leaf Rag*, and possesses still less of the qualities characteristic to rags. Instead, it is a piece illustrating the public spectacle of a staged train crash in the city of Crush, Texas near Waco which Joplin might have witnessed in-person. The piece is full of sounds evoking locomotives as well as the fateful collision of the title; the score even indicates these moments in writing! The march, *Cleopha*, was written in 1902 and lacks the syncopation required to be a rag. Nevertheless, this short piece still includes the

rhythmically-steady accompaniment characteristic of ragtime. Ultimately, our program concludes with one final rag, *The Pine Apple Rag*, written for the famous vaudeville group known as the Musical Spillers. This show-stopping rag often had to be repeated it received such thunderous applause when played by the Spillers on two xylophones, marimba, and their small theatre orchestra. *The Pine Apple Rag* was published in the authentic version for piano in 1908.

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About Jackson. Jackson Harmeyer is a graduate student pursuing his master's degree in musicology at the University of Louisville where, in April 2017, he was awarded the Gerhard Herz Music History Scholarship. Previously, Jackson graduated *summa*

cum laude from the Louisiana Scholars' College in Natchitoches, Louisiana following the completion of his undergraduate thesis, "Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers." From 2014 to 2016, Jackson served as director of the successful chamber music series, Abendmusik Alexandria, and since that time has remained concert annotator for presenters of classical music across Louisiana. His current research interests include French spectral music and the compositions of Kaija Saariaho. He recently shared this research in March 2018 at the American Musicological Society South-Central Chapter's annual meeting in Asheville, North Carolina. Also a composer, Jackson has worked to integrate the vocabulary and grammar of modern music into compositions which are not only innovative but also engaging to the general listener. His compositions have been performed at the Sugarmill Music Festival and New Music on the Bayou.

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