



SCOTT JOPLIN

Piano Rags • 2

Benjamin Loeb



Scott Joplin (1868-1917): Piano Rags, Volume 2

While there is uncertainty regarding Scott Joplin's date of birth, considered to be in November 1868, there is less doubt as to his American birth-place: the developing border town Texarkana. This was situated in the north-eastern corner of Texas close to the state line that separated Texas from Arkansas. Born just six years after the abolition of slavery, Joplin's father had been a slave while his mother was free born. His parents had amateur musical interests enabling him to grow up within a musically sympathetic home and by the age of seven he began piano lessons with a neighbouring white teacher. This local musician nurtured Joplin's innate musical gifts and, as well as providing a rudimentary musical education, encouraged his life-long interest in music for the stage.

By the time he left school in Sedalia, Missouri, Joplin was sufficiently advanced to earn his living as a jobbing musician, playing the piano in bars and clubs, writing songs and performing in a dance band, playing piano, banjo and cornet. It was these early experiences that led him and other black musicians to ragtime, a style that had developed from his cultural environment and in particular the dance music of the black communities. In essence Ragtime was a fusion of African rhythms, derived from the black slave community, marching tunes and western European harmony emerging from native American composers such as Louis Gottschalk and Stephen Foster.

Joplin inherited the formal shape and constraints of the Rag with its regular pattern of sixteen-bar sections, usually repeated, all in the same tempo. Typical also was the duple metre - 2/4, (although 6/8 and 3/4 are occasionally used), a four bar introduction and modulations to related keys. Without any melodic development the structure became a 'necklace' of tunes; fresh ideas that frequently created an AABBCDD pattern. Onto this mostly rigid framework Joplin raised the Rag to an art form and with *Maple Leaf Rag* (Naxos 8.559114) elevated both the genre and his name for all time. Through published editions and versions for the

pianola Ragtime rapidly gained widespread popularity, a craze lasting some twenty years roughly between 1895 and 1915.

Amongst Joplin's earliest compositions were marches and waltzes, two of which were published in 1896 the same year as *The Crush Collision March*, the earliest composition included here, which predates by just one year the first published Rag by the white bandmaster William H. Krell. *The Crush Collision March* is clearly not a Rag since it shares few, if any, of the regular ragtime features that belong to the majority of his forty or so original piano works, but instead, is an illustrative period piece depicting a train crash complete with notes in the score alerting the performer to the noise of the trains and train whistles.

By 1899 Joplin had produced his *Rag-Time Dance*, published seven years later in a condensed form, which now has all the characteristics associated with ragtime, bright melodic figuration and syncopated rhythms in the right hand over a steady, regular left hand providing harmonic support. *Rag-Time Dance* has the unusual addition of foot-tapping marked in the score by the word 'stamp' – a direction that fills the otherwise silent beats and sustains dramatic tension. The score directs the performer to "stamp the heel of one foot heavily upon the floor at the word 'stamp'". It further recommends the player not to "raise the toe from the floor while stamping". More typical of the *Rag-Time Dance* is its major key, extrovert mood created by busy semi-quaver movement in the right hand and the modulation to the subdominant after the first 16 bar 'strain'.

From the following year came *Swipesy*, a lively Cakewalk, a collaborative work written jointly by a black colleague Arthur Marshall and completed by Joplin. Here limited rhythmic patterns might fail to hold our interest were it not for its fresh, zestful melodic line. In 1901 Joplin married Belle and moved north east to St Louis, possibly to be nearer to his publisher John Stark, and lived on teaching work and the royalties coming from his hugely successful *Maple Leaf Rag* published in

1899. Composition also occupied him and amongst three new rags of 1901 was the playful *Peacherine Rag*.

A highly productive year followed with a number of Rags including *A Breeze from Alabama*. Dedicated to the black cornet-player P.G. Lowery, this is a cheerful work, its right-hand chords of sixths and thirds not unlike those of *The Entertainer* from the same year. Joplin's *Weeping Willow* of 1903 has a song-like quality, possibly influenced by his steady and sometimes obsessive work on his first opera *A Guest of Honor*, an enterprising attempt to create a Rag Time Opera, and one that ultimately failed.

Following the failure of Joplin's first marriage in 1904 he married again, his second wife dying from pneumonia just ten weeks after the ceremony. His compositions continued, however, and four new rags emerged including *The Chrysanthemum* and *The Cascades*. Subtitled an *Afro-American Intermezzo*, *The Chrysanthemum* has a highly personal trio section marked *piano* and *dolce*, while the rippling arpeggio figuration of *The Cascades* portrays the waterfall in the Cascade Gardens, a central feature of the 1904 World Fair in St Louis.

A year later there appeared *Eugenia*, a reflective rag (also in a version for band and orchestra) with the characteristic notice at the start: "It is never right to play Ragtime fast". While gaiety may not be noticeably present here, an infectious exuberance marks another 1905 Rag, *The Rosebud March*, named after a salon in St Louis and one of just two rags in 6/8.

In 1907 Scott Joplin abandoned his failing opera project, left Missouri and moved to New York in search of a new beginning. From this year date two further floral titled rags, an upbeat *Rose Leaf Rag* and nostalgic

Gladiolus Rag whose emotions reach a high point in the final strain where expressive harmonies lend a tender, wistful quality, foreshadowing similarly deep emotions in his tango-serenade *Solace* (Naxos 8.559114) that appeared two years later shortly after marriage to his third wife in 1909.

Joplin was by now working on his largest operatic venture, *Treemonisha*, a work that was to occupy him up until its ill-fated single performance in 1915. He was still producing miniature pieces, however, and from 1910 came *Stoptime Rag*, a whirling, scintillating *scherzo*, brimming with high spirits which, like *Rag-Time Dance*, requires performers to stamp their feet. From 1912 there appeared Scott Joplin's *New Rag*, a work whose sunny optimism was to be short-lived. When a subdued *Magnetic Rag* followed two years later, its emotional range clearly mirrored the composer's troubled mind and deteriorating mental condition brought on by feverish work on his opera. Crushed by the failure of *Treemonisha* in 1915, his last piano work, *Reflection Rag*, subtitled *Syncopated Musings*, from 1917 suggests, like his health, a declining creative energy no longer possessing that inspirational spark that lit many of his best works. With continuing depressions and now riddled with syphilis, Scott Joplin was to spend part of his final year in Manhattan State Hospital where he died a broken man. His Rags, however, live on and remain, whether they be reflective or joyous, a lasting document to a style in which he excelled, becoming the 'King of Ragtime Writers'.

David Truslove

Benjamin Loeb

Benjamin Loeb, a native Texan, is an accomplished conductor, accompanist, and soloist. His widely varied projects range from the classical to the contemporary. He is currently the Associate Conductor of the El Paso (TX) Symphony and Founder and Music Director of the El Paso Symphony Youth Orchestras. He served four years as Assistant Conductor for the Haddonfield Symphony (NJ) and two as Assistant Conductor for the Greater Bridgeport (CT) Symphony Orchestra, and has served for three summers as Assistant Conductor/Chorusmaster for the TodiMusicFest in Portsmouth, VA. He is also the Founder and Administrator of the International Conducting Workshop and Festival, held around the world in such places as Prague and Zlin, Czech Republic, Sofia, Bulgaria, and Chihuahua, Mexico. In 2002 he completed his Graduate Performance Diploma in Conducting at the Peabody Conservatory as a student of Gustav Meier, after having completed a bachelor's degree at Harvard University, a master's degree at the Curtis Institute, and a doctorate at the Juilliard School. His conducting career began at Harvard, where he directed several ensembles, and took off after he conducted performances by the Harvard Concerto Soloists with Yo-Yo Ma as soloist at Sanders Theater in Cambridge and at the John F. Kennedy library in Boston for the "Profiles in Courage" Awards Ceremony. He has conducted and recorded songs of his sister, the singer/songwriter Lisa Loeb, for her three albums, as well as songs that appear on various movie soundtracks. In addition, he has worked frequently with his brother, Philip, a composer and audio engineer, and his other sister, Debbie, an actress and singer. As a pianist, Benjamin Loeb has won critical acclaim, and his concerts have taken him to musical centres throughout the United States, as well as to Argentina, Chile, Tokyo, Seoul, Panama City, and a number of musical centres in Europe. He now is based in El Paso, Texas, from where he continues to tour worldwide as conductor and pianist, and teaches at the new El Paso Conservatory of Music.

Playing
Time:
64:49

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Scott JOPLIN

(1868-1917)

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| 1 | Rag-Time Dance: A Stop-Time Two Step | 3:05 |
| 2 | A Breeze From Alabama:
March and Two-Step | 4:19 |
| 3 | The Chrysanthemum:
An Afro-American Intermezzo | 4:42 |
| 4 | Peacherine Rag | 3:47 |
| 5 | The Cascades: A Rag | 3:14 |
| 6 | Weeping Willow: A Rag Time Two Step | 4:22 |
| 7 | Gladiolus Rag | 4:26 |
| 8 | Eugenia | 4:40 |
| 9 | The Crush Collision March | 4:52 |
| 10 | Reflection Rag: Syncopated Musings | 4:51 |
| 11 | Magnetic Rag | 5:21 |
| 12 | Swipesy: Cake Walk | 3:22 |
| 13 | Scott Joplin's New Rag | 4:03 |
| 14 | Rose Leaf Rag – A Ragtime Two Step | 4:04 |
| 15 | The Rosebud March | 2:49 |
| 16 | Stoptime Rag | 2:51 |

Benjamin Loeb, Piano

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American flag, folk artist, 1880s.



AMERICAN CLASSICS

Although Scott Joplin's musical interests were considerably broader than what could be expressed in ragtime – he composed two operas (*Treemonisha* is considered by many to be his masterpiece), a ballet, and two orchestral works – he is best remembered today as the 'King of the Ragtime Writers', the master of freely syncopated and extraordinarily inventive piano rags. This recording includes the whirling, scintillating *Stoptime Rag*, the nostalgic *Gladiolus Rag*, and Joplin's last ever work for piano, *Reflection Rag*. Volume One is available on Naxos 8.559114.

Booklet notes in English

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