

# SCOTT JOPLIN

# REFLECTIONS

## SCOTT JOPLIN RECONSIDERED

as recorded by  
**LARA DOWNES**

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## REFLECTIONS ON JOPLIN

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I must have been 7 or 8 when I first saw the movie “The Sting.” This would have been at the historic Castro Theater in San Francisco, where my mom used to take us for double matinees of old movies on weekday afternoons. We called this homeschooling. The movie was about two very good-looking con men and one very bad mob boss, with a soundtrack that featured music by Scott Joplin. I fell deeply, permanently in love with Scott Joplin’s music and Paul Newman’s smile.

I probably learned *The Entertainer* that same year. Remember how everyone learned *The Entertainer*? The sound of that piece, played hesitantly and unevenly, with stumbles over the tricky parts, is burned into my memory. My friend Helga can still sing the tune with the fingering her piano teacher assigned: 1-2, 1-5, 1-5, 1-5, 2-3-4-5-2-3-4-1-3-2. Remember how the ice cream truck used to play *The Entertainer* on its rounds through your neighborhood? It was the sound of summer.

Joplin wrote *The Entertainer* in 1902, at the dawn of a new century. That year, Theodore Roosevelt became the first American president to ride in an automobile. The first American movie theater, the Electric Theater, opened in Pasadena. The Texas Oil Company/Texaco was founded; the first J.C. Penney and Target stores opened. Langston Hughes, John Steinbeck, Ansel Adams, Richard Rodgers, and Tallulah Bankhead were all born in 1902, destined to define a new American cultural era.

To reflect on Joplin’s music and life is to consider the cross-currents of American history – how fast they move, how abruptly they collide. He was born in Texarkana just five years after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. His parents were musical – his father, a former slave, had played the violin for plantation gatherings back in North Carolina; his mother sang and played the banjo. As a little boy, he was allowed to play the pianos in houses where his mother worked as a cleaner. He taught himself the basics, and at age 11 he started piano lessons; his teacher was a German Jewish immigrant who had ended up in Texarkana as the private tutor for the children of a wealthy lumberman. Those lessons, offered without charge, instilled a love of classical music so deep as to compel Joplin to write not one, but two, operas in a lifetime that most definitely did not welcome a Black composer into the business of writing operas. By the time he was in his teens, he was making a living as an itinerant musician, shaping a new sound called ragtime.

Ragtime exploded onto the American scene at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, visited by some 27 million people. The saloons, cafés, and brothels surrounding the fairgrounds resonated with the melodies of traveling ragtime musicians, including Joplin, who was there with his own band. By 1897, this music that the St. Louis Dispatch described as “a veritable call of the wild, which mightily stirred the pulses of city-bred people” had become a national craze. It was mainstream America’s first encounter with the simple but radical trick of syncopation, that displacement of the beat that causes a propulsion, a swinging of the hips, a feeling that anything might happen. Ragtime was the overture to the music of the 20th century: first jazz and swing, then soon enough R&B and rock-and-roll.

In 1899, Scott Joplin walked into the Sedalia, MO shop of John Stark, a Civil War veteran/ice cream salesman/music publisher, carrying with him the manuscript of *Maple Leaf Rag*. They signed a contract that gave Joplin a 1% royalty, and by 1914, Stark had sold 1 million copies of the piece, ensuring Joplin a healthy income and the title “The King of Ragtime.” Three years later, he died, just 48 years old, and the ragtime craze died too. The new American century was moving at a breakneck pace. James P. Johnson’s *Carolina Shout* ushered in a next-level era of stride piano virtuosity. And there was a new sound coming out of New Orleans, the music that would give the Jazz Age its name. The King of Ragtime was quickly forgotten as the 1920s roared along.

That's history – things evolve and change, trends come and go. And often, they come back around for a second look. We Americans love our nostalgia. In 1970, the pianist and musicologist Joshua Rifkin reintroduced Joplin's music to a generation that was more than ready, after the traumatic firestorms of the '60s, to reconnect with the music of a quieter, gentler time. Rifkin's recordings, and the blockbuster success of "The Sting," ushered in a Joplin revival that even included the long-overdue first full production, in 1972, of his opera *Treemonisha*.

But today, all of that is 50 years in the rearview mirror. Our own still-young American century is moving along at an astounding, chaotic pace. We're living in an age of reflection, reconsidering many things – revisiting our past to accept, reluctantly, the profound contradictions of our American experiment – the same contradictions that defined Joplin's existence. He was one of the first Black Americans born into the promise of freedom, a promise that only went so far. He spent his life bumping up against color lines, while his work crossed over them. He invented and innovated because he had to. This is a central motif in American music, a truth I take for granted as my lineage and my legacy. And I choose to see it as something unintentionally liberating and transformative. This is how hybridization happens, how adaptive novelty fuels change, how new languages are invented.

Joplin's music is an extraordinary reflection of many disparate influences: his father's plantation melodies; his piano teacher's sonatas and fantasies; decorous parlor waltzes in the homes his mother cleaned; boisterous "jig-piano" tunes in the saloons and brothels where he played in his youth. His music moves through prisms of hope and heartache. Two of his most beautiful pieces, *The Chrysanthemum* and *Bethena Waltz*, were written for his wife Freddie, who died just ten weeks after their wedding – the first to woo her, the second to mourn her. His opera *Treemonisha* expresses an audacious desire to fully merge popular and art music – an idea too far ahead of its time. His last published work, *Magnetic Rag*, written as he confronted the disaster of *Treemonisha*'s failure as well as a rapid physical decline, is tinged with melancholy, but also insists on the possibility of new ideas. Joplin's music is a total embrace of everything he was made of, and a vision of making something new.

Everything is clearer in hindsight. When I look back now at that long-ago afternoon at the Castro Theater, I see my little-girl self bathed in the glow of a giant movie screen, falling in love with Joplin's music because somehow it reflected me. Somehow his music showed me the contradictions and conflicts that come with being a musician of many facets. Maybe it gave me a glimpse of my own future – the lines that try to define you, the lines your creativity can cross. Maybe it opened my eyes to the undeniable freedom of imagination, the power of vision, and the unique beauty to be found in a mirror that reflects all the things you are.

Lara Downes  
February 2022

# Prelude

from *Treemonisha*

SCOTT JOPLIN (c. 1868-1917)

*Edited by Lara Downes***Andante affettuoso** (♩ = c. 50)

5

*p*

*mf*

10

*rit.* **A little quicker**

15

*f* ♩ = c. 66

19

# Bethena

## A Concert Waltz

SCOTT JOPLIN (c. 1868-1917)

Edited by Lara Downes

Gentle and flowing (♩ = c. 126)

rit.

9 a tempo, singing

14

19

25

poco rit.

a tempo