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Ms. Berg

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MUTH 104

Maple Leaf Rag

The Maple Leaf Rag is a ragtime piece composed by Scott Joplin and released in 1899. This was one of Scott Joplin's most well formulated compositions, which received much acclamation for its revolutionary rhythms, transitions, and themes. The Maple Leaf Rag aided Scott Joplin's goal of popularizing ragtime through its swing-like and upbeat melodies.

Ragtime was originally a modification of a march but turned into its own distinct style because of its repetitive use of syncopation. It is most commonly written in $\frac{2}{4}$ but can also be written in $\frac{4}{4}$. Occasionally it can be written in $\frac{3}{4}$ and be called a ragtime waltz. Most commonly the form of a rag piece will follow the patterns of *AABBACC'*, *AABBCCDD*, or *AABBCCA*, although the maple leaf rag does not follow one of these strictly. Ragtime pieces also frequently feature a bridge section in the dominant key which may be repeated between any two sections throughout the piece. The maple leaf rag does feature a section in the subdominant key, which I have analysed to be the bridge, mainly because of the tonal center and difference in theme.

Scott Joplin, the composer of *Maple Leaf Rag*, was the son of a freed slave and as a result of the times, had a harsh upbringing. Initially, he worked as a railroad worker, later on also taking on music as a hobby. Music eventually became his way of life and he quit his job to further pursue it. This ended up making his professional life significantly more taxing upon him as he struggled to make enough money to stay afloat. His main goal was to make ragtime an upper-class listening experience, an art belonging in theaters and concert halls for the rich as well as enjoyable for the poor. Towards the end of his life he failed to find any investors to help support his composition or orchestration of his pieces. This led him to attempt to orchestrate one of his pieces *Treemonisha* by himself. He died of syphilis at the age of 48, with *Treemonisha* incomplete.

Out of Scott Joplin's works, *Maple Leaf Rag* is up there amongst his most famous pieces *The Entertainer*, *Solace*, and *Stoptime Rag*. It has a time signature of $\frac{2}{4}$ and follows the form of *AABBACC'* with a repeated bridge before the double *C* section. The piece features a lot of *V – I* resolutions and generally follows the 18th century chord progression system tightly apart from a few instances of borrowing chords from the minor key, and the supertonic key. The piece is in *Ab* major, and switches to the subdominant (*D♭* major) during the bridge. The rhythms feature a lot of syncopation — much like the rest of ragtime and the melodies feature a lot of octaves and arpeggios. It was originally written for piano, but also orchestrated later. The original left hand mainly exists to accompany the melody in the

right hand, utilizing chords and octaves to accentuate particular points in the song. The right hand plays the melody, often in syncopation with the left hand, which also features a lot of arpeggios. The original piece did not have lyrics, but during certain performances, lyrics by Sydney Brown would be sung along to it - describing a poor man who impresses a rich crowd by his piano skills by playing the *Maple Leaf Rag*.

Although the original piece did not utilize enharmonics that made the function of certain chords obvious, with a little restructuring, it is easy to see that it simply follows a $V - I$ pattern for majority of the piece, with interest thrown in with a few VI and vii chords off the V s. At a couple points in the melody, secondary dominance is used on both the minor key and the supertonic tone.

The A section features a regular rhythm in the first two measures and repeats the exact same and variations of the rhythm throughout the entire section. The left hand has an even simpler rhythm of mainly just eighth notes for the entire song. The first section's melody mainly consists of upward arpeggios in multiple forms with embellishments. I would consider this to be the primary theme of the piece as it is revisited again later.

By comparison — or similarity — the B section also uses the exact same rhythm more religiously in the section, but strays from the strictly upward arpeggios found in the A section, and has an overall downward movement throughout the section, and a single downward arpeggio at the end of the section. It feels to me more like a slight modification of the A theme — a combination of upward arpeggios with the overall downward movement.

The Bridge, the most different section in the piece introduces a new rhythm in the right hand, whilst maintaining a similar pattern in the left. It has a small dialogue with the upward and downward movement from the A and B section, having both upward and downward movement as well as arpeggios. It is also in the subdominant key, which may be seen as more exciting as it drifts from the same tonal center the rest of the piece has.

The last section C Switches back to the original key, whilst maintaining some of the melodies from the bridge and more of the patterns of A. It has a very resolute and satisfactory ending to the song as well.

Overall, the *Maple Leaf Rag* is one of Scott Joplin's masterpieces in the genre of ragtime, displaying multiple characteristics of the rest of ragtime while showing more technical and musical nuance throughout — making it a favorite among musicians and audiences alike.