

# AN AMERICAN MUSICAL PIONEER SCOTT JOPLIN

Presentation by **George Kurti Plohn**

Before starting my presentation allow me to interject a very sad note. One of the greatest of present-day opera singers passed away this past Wednesday at the peak of his career and success, namely the baritone Dmitry Hvorostovsky, called by his adoring public 'Elvis of the 'Opera'. I would rather call him The Pavarotti of Baritones. My handout will be self explanatory.

Today, ladies and gentlemen, we are going to have a completely different venue. Our central theme is going to be the American ragtime composer and pianist **Scott Joplin**, who pioneered this particular new genre of music, **the ragtime**, music which had its origin in black music, as a way for slaves, kidnapped from different parts of Africa and speaking different languages, to communicate. It evolved into work songs, blues and gospels. And young Joplin would pick up by ear and played them on the piano, without ever having a piano lesson.

He was born in 1868 to Giles Joplin, an ex-slave from North Carolina, and Florence Givens, a freeborn African-American woman from Kentucky. The Joplins subsequently moved to Texarkana where Giles worked as a laborer for the railroad and Florence was a cleaning woman. Joplin's father had played the violin for plantation parties in North Carolina, and his mother sang and played the banjo. Scott was given a rudimentary musical education by his family and from the age of seven, he was allowed to play the piano while his mother cleaned. At some point in the early 1880s, Giles Joplin left the family for another woman. His wife Florence struggled to support her children through domestic work. According to a family friend, the young Joplin was serious and ambitious, studying music and playing the piano after school. While a few local teachers aided him, he received most of his music education from a **Julius Weiss**, a German-born American Jewish music professor who had immigrated to Texas in the late 1860s and was employed as music tutor to a prominent local business family. Weiss was no stranger to receiving race hatred himself. Impressed by Joplin's talent, and realizing his family's dire straits, Weiss taught him free of charge. He tutored the 11-year-old Joplin until the boy was 16, during which time Weiss introduced him to folk and classical music, including opera. Weiss helped Joplin appreciate music as an art as well as an entertainment, and helped his mother acquire a used piano. According to Weiss' wife, Lottie, Joplin never forgot Weiss. In his later years, after achieving fame as a composer, Joplin sent his former teacher gifts of money when he was old and ill, until Weiss died.

Scott grew up in Texarkana, where he formed a vocal quartet, and taught mandolin and guitar. During the late 1880s he left his job as a laborer with the railroad, and travelled around the American South as an itinerant musician. He soon discovered, however, that there were few opportunities for black pianists. Churches and brothels were among the few options for steady work. Joplin played pre-ragtime 'jig-piano' in various red-light districts throughout the mid-South. He went then to Chicago for the World's Fair of 1893, which played a major part in making ragtime a national craze by 1897, when it was described by the *St. Louis Dispatch* as "...a veritable call of the wild, which mightily stirred the pulses of city-bred people".

One of his first, and most popular pieces, the "Maple Leaf Rag", became ragtime's first and most influential hit, and has been recognized as the quintessential *rag*, what at the beginning was simply called only "*feel good music*". It also brought the composer a steady income for life, though Joplin did not reach this level of success again and frequently had financial problems. In 1901, Joplin moved to St. Louis, where he continued to compose and publish music, and regularly performed in the local community. Then came a time when he had financial problems, and the score to his first opera *A Guest of Honor* was confiscated in 1903 with his belongings because of non-payment of bills, and is now considered lost. He continued to compose and publish music, and in 1907 moved to New York City to find a producer for a new opera. There Joplin met Lottie Stokes, whom he married in 1909. In 1911, unable to find a publisher, Joplin undertook the financial burden of publishing *Treemonisha* himself in piano-vocal format. He attempted to go beyond the limitations of the musical form that made him famous, without much monetary success; *Treemonisha* was not received well at its partially staged performance in 1915. The audience, including potential backers, was indifferent and walked out. After a disastrous single performance Joplin suffered a breakdown. He was bankrupt, discouraged, and worn out. *Treemonisha* went unnoticed and unreviewed, largely because Joplin had abandoned commercial music in favor of art music. Unfortunately, by 1916, Joplin was suffering from tertiary syphilis and a resulting descent into insanity. In January 1917, he was admitted to Manhattan State Hospital, a mental institution. He died there on April 1, 1917 of syphilitic dementia at the age of only 49 and was buried in a pauper's grave that remained unmarked for 57 years. His grave at Saint Michaels Cemetery in East Elmhurst was finally given a marker in 1974, the year when the movie *The Sting*, which showcased his music, won for Best Picture at the Oscars.

During his brief career, Scott Joplin wrote 44 original ragtime pieces, one ragtime ballet, and two operas.

Unfortunately, Joplin's death marked also the end of ragtime as a mainstream music format, and in the next several years it evolved with other styles into jazz, and eventually big band swing.

And then, finally, but much later, his music was rediscovered and returned to popularity in the early 1970s, now Joplin being called "**King of Ragtime**", with the release of a million-selling album recorded by Joshua Rifkin. This was followed by the Academy Award-winning 1973 movie *The Sting* with Paul Newman and Robert Redford with the adaptation of Joplin's music by Marvin Hamlisch, that featured several of Joplin's compositions, including "The Entertainer". Hamlisch lightly adapted Joplin's music for this movie, for which he won an Academy Award for Best Original Song Score and Adaptation. His version of "The Entertainer" reached number 3 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 and the American Top 40 music chart in May, 1974, prompting *The New York Times* to write, "The whole nation has begun to take notice." Thanks to the film and its score, Joplin's work became appreciated in both the popular and classical music world, becoming, in the words of music magazine *Record World*, the "classical phenomenon of the decade."

And in the meantime the opera *Treemonisha* was finally produced in full to wide acclaim in 1972. And on top of all this, in 1976 Joplin was posthumously awarded a Pulitzer Prize.

And so ends the story of Scott Joplin, the King of Ragtime.

Our DVD lasts 1 hour. We are deeply indebted to Dennis Kobray, the creator of this DVD, in which he so brilliantly narrates the life story of Joplin and plays on piano many of Joplin's wonderful ragtime compositions.



Scott Joplin

Trailer of Dennis Kobray's Scott Joplin DVD, part of our today's presentation:

8 min.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDNCr3aBufg>

- Maple Leaf Rag Played by Scott Joplin:

2.5 min

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMAAtL7n\\_-rc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMAAtL7n_-rc)

- Scott Joplin Movie Dueling Pianos Competition Scene – 1977:

6.5 min

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOi9K7yZ6QA>