

# AMERICAN CLASSICS

# SCOTT JOPLIN

## Piano Rags

Alexander Peskanov



## Scott Joplin (1868-1917): Piano Rags

Even though we know and love Scott Joplin's music, precious few facts about his life are available. It is not agreed on when or where he was born, and 24th November 1868, the most widely accepted date, is probably not accurate. His mother, whose memory was faulty, put him down as being born in Texarkana, Texas, a town which was, in reality, established some five years later. When Joplin was very young, and when it finally became a real place, his family did move there, leaving the farm where Joplin's father, born into slavery, worked. Young Scott was allowed, at the age of seven, to play the piano in a white neighbour's house; a local music teacher, hearing him noodle around, took an interest in the talented boy and offered him free lessons.

After high school in Sedalia, Missouri, which became his home base, Joplin lived the life of an itinerant musician, performing wherever and whenever he could. He formed his own band to gig for money, writing songs and playing the piano in upscale black social clubs (one of which was called the Maple Leaf). He may have even taken classes at a local college to learn notation. Early on he began to publish songs and the then-fashionable piano rags, and also to develop some larger stage works, a step toward fulfilling his lifelong interest in opera.

In 1901 Joplin moved to St Louis with his first wife, Belle. He also spent time in Chicago before returning to Arkansas, where his marriage soon ended. In June 1904 he married Freddie Alexander, who died some ten weeks later, at the age of twenty, from pneumonia. After this he left Sedalia, never to return. Because an earlier failed tour with an opera (now lost) called *A Guest of Honor* left him in terrible debt, he had to cast about for money as his career was taking off. After toiling about in St Louis for a while he went, in 1907, to New York City, where he became associated with publishers (the retail sale of sheet music was a cash industry in those pre-recording days) and began to earn a good living as a composer. He wrote an opera, *Treemonisha*, considered by many to be his masterpiece, and when the young

Irving Berlin published his hit song *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, Joplin claimed that much of it was stolen from one of his own opera's scenes. He contracted tertiary syphilis in 1916, which led to his hospitalisation and eventual death in a mental institution in 1917, possibly at the age of 49.

Scott Joplin is an undisputed master, the self-anointed "King of the Ragtime Writers," but it was a form he by no means invented; hundreds of examples were in print before his first known publication. Unlike writing in, say, sonata form, ragtime is a style more than a set of construction limitations - though not without form - and is so-named, according to Joplin, "...because it has such a *ragged* movement." Ragtime music is favoured by a free sense of syncopation, which is when a steady beat is established and offbeats bounce against it.

This sort of musical hijinks, at least to the ears of the gilded age, was decadent, an indication of darker (in both heft and skin tone—a ragtime song was also called a "coon song") musical forces at work. Ragtime seemed more the province of dance halls and cheap bars than of the upper crust, and though Joplin worked in this field (and moved amongst these people) he always thought of himself as a composer more than a Tin Pan Alley songster.

The present disc opens with Joplin's most famous composition, the 1899 (or 1897) *Maple Leaf Rag*, the best-known instrumental rag of the period. Legend has it that a white publisher walked into the upscale black Maple Leaf Club—something that, in those days, simply did not happen—and seated at the piano was none other than Scott Joplin, playing the *Maple Leaf Rag*. This publisher then bought the piece and, by all accounts, made a mint. True or not, this piece was Joplin's jump to fame, and even though he outdid himself in *Easy Winners*, one of Joplin's greatest achievements built on similar principles, it is the *Maple Leaf* which continues to hold our attention today: its use of scintillating syncopations over the barline, an uncommon practice even in the rag, gives this piece its

sexy surface, coupled with its use of blue notes and sliding chromatic melodies.

This recording also includes the mainstay piano favourite *The Entertainer*. This interesting trifle, which became all the rage on intermediate pianos everywhere in the 1970s through a motion picture called *The Sting*, renewed people's interest in ragtime, Joplin's in particular.

*Heliotrope Bouquet: A Slow Drag Two Step* was composed in Chicago in 1907, a collaboration between Joplin and Louis Chauvin, a younger ragtime composer of note (and someone for whom Joplin had great admiration). The piece makes odd, uncommon use of a sensual Habanera beat, as does *Solace—A Mexican Serenade*. Latin music and Ragtime music were always thought to have similar rhythmic attributes.

Joplin wrote his *Pine Apple Rag* for a famous vaudeville group called the Musical Spillers, and they played it on two xylophones and a marimba accompanied by a theatre (that is a small, pickup) orchestra. It is a whiz-bang piece, dominated, at least in the music's second strain, by a single rhythmic figure, again, another uncommon ragtime practice. When the Spillers did play it, it often received such an ovation that it had to be repeated.

*The Paragon Rag* is, for the attentive listener, something of a quirky departure for Joplin; in its second theme, one hears a composer trying to drop some of the expected conventions, in this case, the standard "oom-chuck" left hand one expects in a rag, and trying to

stretch the boundaries of his form. He accomplishes a similar progression away in *Elite Syncopations*, where he even uses a chromatic bass line in octaves.

*Pleasant Moments* and *Bethena* are both *cantabile* ragtime waltzes, gorgeous with lush harmonies and lilting melodies (ragtime is usually thought to be an aggressive, hyperthyroid music, and these types of pieces serve as bromides). Both also feature, more so than many of Joplin's other works, counterpoint, or a dialogue between the left and right hands (in contradistinction to the usual practice of the left hand being accompaniment, the right hand playing the foreground melody).

One of Joplin's first compositions, *Original Rag*, should be of interest for the Joplinite (both newfound and seasoned) because it displays, from an early age, this composer's innate understanding of his material. All the features we associate with the later Joplin are well in place: his ability to spin out long melodies even with syncopation; his chromaticism; his easy, directed sense of harmonic development (the sign of a real composer, and not so prevalent in the Tin Pan Alley hackworkers). Even in much later, lesser pieces like *Fig Leaf—a High Class Rag* or the *Country Club Rag*, we still can trace all the stylistic tricks back to the earlier works, and see that Joplin, even while pressing ahead, felt essentially attached to a certain, unshakable tradition.

**Daniel Felsenfeld**

## Alexander Peskanov

Alexander Peskanov's American debut as orchestral soloist came with the National Symphony under Rostropovich, and he has since appeared internationally with orchestras such as the London Symphony Orchestra, the English Chamber Orchestra, SABC Orchestra, Cape Town Symphony and the Hong Kong Philharmonic, as well as in the United States with the Baltimore, St Louis, Houston, Utah, Richmond and Pacific Symphonies. He was also the featured soloist during the six-week tour of the Polish Chamber Orchestra, which included appearances at The Kennedy Center and Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Among the illustrious musicians with whom he has collaborated are Maurice André, Jean-Pierre Rampal and Yo-Yo Ma, and he also appears frequently as soloist/lecturer at universities throughout the United States and was featured at the EPTA Conference in London. Alexander Peskanov is also a successful composer, and his recordings include a CD of his own piano compositions entitled *Spirits of the Wind - Peskanov Plays Peskanov* which has been featured in a satellite broadcast on National Public Radio stations. His other recordings include concertos by Mozart and Beethoven, and Morton Gould's *Concerto Concertante*. A graduate of the Stoliarsky School of Music in Odessa, Ukraine, he received his Masters and Bachelor degrees at the Juilliard School in New York. He is the author of the series of six books entitled *The Russian Technical Regimen for the Piano*. Other highly acclaimed works for solo piano include *Peskanov's Musical Galleries* and *Peskanov's Musical Reflections*.

Playing  
Time:  
65:29

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# Scott JOPLIN

(1868-1917)

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|----|--|------|
| 1  | Maple Leaf Rag                             | 3:11 |
| 2  | Heliotrope Bouquet: 'A Slow Drag Two-Step' | 4:30 |
| 3  | Pine Apple Rag                             | 3:42 |
| 4  | Solace: "A Mexican Serenade"               | 6:55 |
| 5  | Paragon Rag                                | 3:59 |
| 6  | Pleasant Moments: "Ragtime Waltz"          | 4:05 |
| 7  | Elite Syncopations                         | 3:59 |
| 8  | Original Rag                               | 4:32 |
| 9  | Fig Leaf: 'A High-class Rag'               | 4:34 |
| 10 | The Entertainer: 'A Ragtime Two-Step'      | 4:42 |
| 11 | The Easy Winners                           | 4:12 |
| 12 | Country Club Rag                           | 3:59 |
| 13 | The Strenuous Life                         | 5:16 |
| 14 | Bethena: 'A Concert Waltz'                 | 7:53 |

## Alexander Peskanov, Piano

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Producers: Bonnie Silver and Norbert Kraft

Engineer and Editor: Norbert Kraft

Piano technician: Ted Campbell

Booklet notes: Daniel Felsenfeld

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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 - it is as the 'King of the Ragtime Writers', the master of freely syncopated and extraordinarily inventive piano rags, that he is best remembered today. The present disc features many favourites, including Joplin's most famous composition, the scintillating *Maple Leaf Rag*, *The Entertainer*, which became all the rage in the 1970s thanks to its use in the motion picture *The Sting*, and the quirky *Elite Syncopations*.

Booklet notes in English

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