

## Suggested levels in Scott Joplin's Piano Pieces

Compiled and annotated by Robert Edwards

I am writing with my promised list of suggestions for approximate levels within the compositions of Scott Joplin. I have grouped the pieces I personally feel are worthwhile (that is, they have endured the test of time in their aesthetic merit, originality and general pianistic/expressive/pedagogic worth) into 3 main levels. While all Joplin pieces contain many octaves in the left hand, many have rapid, multi-octave passages in the right hand, which renders them more technically difficult, so I've placed them within higher levels. Obviously, these are merely my own suggestions, Joplin certainly never "leveled" his work, nor has anyone else to my knowledge. I hope the list is of use to you and to whomever you care to share it with.

### "Beginning" Pieces:

- *Peacherine Rag*: While this piece features a trio section in A Flat, which is a daunting key for many students, the notes and chords fall nicely under the hands and are not exceedingly difficult to play once learned.

- *Weeping Willow*: Easy to read keys (G and C) and, though it features concise, neat themes (the first theme is simply a G Major triad followed by another G octave/ major 3<sup>rd</sup>), it contains secondary dominants as well as references to relative minor, etc, to bring about a lovely, multi-hued composition. There is ample opportunity for variations in the repeat of the last section.

- *Something Doing*: Set in the keys of F and B Flat, it's not especially complicated to read and is well within the grasp of a smaller hand (except for the ever-present LH octaves). There are some interesting fingering problems in the 2<sup>nd</sup> section which will probably need some special consideration by the teacher before assigning to a student.

- *The Favorite*: While this piece features use of multi-octave themes in the RH (trio and last section), they fall well within the keys and are at a relaxed enough pace for many students to be successful with them. Not really a "favorite" among Joplin's rags per se, but is quite charming. Contains the only use of triplets in Joplin's piano writing.

- *The Chrysanthemum*: This is another piece, like the Favorite, though perhaps cut of finer cloth, which also contains brief RH octave passages in a relaxed tempo. Interesting and emotionally shaded piece.

-***Pleasant Moments***: Easy keys of G and C. The only notable octaves here are in LH accompaniment, though there are several leaps from hand position to another that can be tricky. LH sings a graceful melody in trio section. Like most of Joplin's waltzes, this is in rondo form.

-***Country Club***: Keys of C and F. Rare use of grace notes in main theme, which basically consists of repeated C triads. Rather a more spare sound than many rags, but dignified and subtly rich, making use of secondary dom./relative minor etc. The second and last sections make use of successive thirds (many with chromatic relationships), can be used as a "thirds" etude of sorts with some effective fingerings.

-***Swipesy***: One of Joplin's early collaborations, it's a lively, raucous romp in the "cakewalk" tradition. Keys of B Flat and E Flat, few RH octaves. Very fun piece, though not one of Joplin's more melodically or harmonically sophisticated works.

-***Magnetic Rag***: The antithesis of Swipesy, this is the last rag published during Joplin's life, it is a true "classic" rag in that it synthesizes many stylistic and expressive devices from "classical" music. There are numerous touch, dynamic, tempo etc. markings throughout as well as rich harmonies, long, lilting, almost "Romantic" melodic phrases (some with countermelody within the same hand), so it is a good piece for an artistic student. However, the hand positions and technical requirements are not especially taxing. It is a piece that can help teach expressive playing within the ragtime framework.

-***Solace***: As with "Magnetic Rag", Solace is a very expressive piece which is not exceedingly difficult in a technical sense. LH grace notes in 2<sup>nd</sup> section are fun though rhythmically challenging. The counter melodies/inner voices in the trio are magnificent in a subtle way and must be handled well to be effective. Joplin really bares his soul here so treat with caution; it's a piece which must be handled with unaffected, tender sensitivity.

### Mid-range Selections:

-***Leola***: This "fancy Maple Leaf" uses the same basic harmonic and thematic layout as that famous rag as well the same keys/key relationship (A flat/A Flat/D Flat/return to A Flat), though in a more graceful, lyrical style, so might be a good stepping stone toward Maple Leaf or perhaps just after learning Maple Leaf. Begins with a lovely arpeggiated melody and has a rather involved use of "thirds" in the second section. Rather simple last section must be treated with care to retain its lyrical yet regal quality without sounding bombastic or strained.

-***Palm Leaf Rag***: Charming, bouncy rag in B Flat and E Flat. Brief octaves in RH in trio. Very cute rag.

-***Pineapple Rag***: Another lively rag with some surprisingly rich harmonies as underpinning, very effective and fun. Keys of B Flat and E Flat. One of the most difficult parts seems to be the introduction, which takes some thoughtful fingerings and hands-apart practice.

-***Bink's Waltz***: In the keys of B Flat and E Flat, this waltz is not really even syncopated as most of Joplin's work is, but is a charming "parlor" piece and would seem to be an homage to the Chopin "Grande Valse Brillante" genre which Joplin surely studied during his youthful years of piano training with a German master. Also reminiscent of waltzes by Schubert and Brahms, though this piece is perhaps more easily managed. However, the 2<sup>nd</sup> section has the RH playing entirely in octaves and is quite challenging, as it is marked "con fuoco" and contains leaps and scalar passages, yet must be played in a melodic, legato manner. Some more legato octave passages in 3<sup>rd</sup> section though in a more relaxed manner here. The piece is in Rondo form. For a student with good octave control it can be a real showpiece.

-***Lily Queen***: Though a rather "lightweight" piece in some respects, it can be very charming when played well. Of special note is the last section which features chromatic grace notes embellishments which give a piquant kick to the melody, very distinctive sound when executed well. Keys of C and F.

-***Paragon Rag***: This robust rag is concisely composed, with clear melodies in the first and third sections and a rollicking, "player piano-style" RH embellishments in the second section. The linear melody in the last section is very chromatic, calling for some resourceful fingerings. Keys of G and C.

-***The Strenuous Life***: Keys of C, G and F. A relaxed, unpretentious piece which was an homage to Teddy Roosevelt, it contains a rather unique trio section which is very nicely though subtly syncopated. A tricky octave lick awaits at the very end of the piece but overall not one of Joplin's more difficult pieces.

-***The Sycamore***: As above, very relaxed, pleasant rag in which the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> sections feature octave passages in RH.

-***Rose Leaf Rag***: Keys of C and F. Very elegant, understated "classic rag" with interesting contrary-motion arpeggiation in opening section and lots of thirds interspersed with octaves in second section, to a most charming effect. A gorgeous final section with rich syncopations and joyous harmonies brings forth the conclusion to this jewel of a composition.

-**Reflection Rag**: Joplin's favorite publisher brought this piece out posthumously, and it is based on sketches Joplin left unpublished at the time of his death. It, like "Magnetic Rag" is tinged with a "classical" feel in parts, including sophisticated chromatic melodies and orchestral-sounding arpeggiation in LH. A lovely piece which would be played well by a student new to rags as the syncopation is not especially intense.

### **Everything Else:**

After this list, pretty much everything else of worth (in, again, my opinion) falls into the "hardest" category. Maple Leaf Rag, which mostly falls well under the hands (after being extracted from among all the flats a student must read in the score), still belongs here due to the especially wide reaches in LH in the trio section. There are many other pieces in "easy keys" like C or G major, which I do not class as "beginning" or "mid-range" as they are actually more difficult for the hands than many pieces in flat or sharp keys. Often a seemingly simple-looking score will in actuality offer up a myriad of difficult reaches or awkward fingerings, etc. when studied.

I hope that these notes will assist teachers, students, and performers in selecting pieces from this rich repertoire of poetically expressive and intoxicatingly robust music.

Best regards, Robert Edwards