

RAGS, CONCERT WALTZES, AND NOVELTIES FOR THE PIANOFORTE BY
SCOTT JOPLIN AND HIS COLLABORATORS
MARILYN NONKEN PIANO

SYNCOATED MUSINGS



intangible classics


divine art

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| 1 | Heliotrope Bouquet – A Slow Drag Two Step (Joplin/Chauvin, 1907) | 4:29 |
| 2 | Sensation (Lamb; arr. Joplin, 1908) | 2:35 |
| 3 | Eugenia (Joplin, 1906) | 4:49 |
| 4 | Stoptime Rag (Joplin, 1910) | 2:39 |
| 5 | Magnetic Rag (Joplin, 1914) | 4:51 |
| 6 | Sun Flower Slow Drag – A Rag Time Two Step (Joplin/Hayden, 1901) | 3:49 |
| 7 | Something Doing – A Ragtime Two Step (Joplin/Hayden, 1903) | 3:39 |
| 8 | Felicity Rag – A Rag Time Two Step (Joplin/Hayden, 1911) | 3:58 |
| 9 | Kismet Rag (Joplin/Hayden, 1913) | 3:13 |
| 10 | Swipesy – Cake Walk (Joplin/Marshall, 1900) | 4:04 |
| 11 | Lily Queen – A Rag Time Two Step (Joplin/Marshall, 1907) | 3:41 |
| 12 | Binks' Waltz (Joplin, 1905) | 3:59 |
| 13 | Bethena – A Concert Waltz (Joplin, 1905) | 5:11 |
| 14 | Pleasant Moments – Ragtime Waltz (Joplin, 1909) | 3:20 |
| 15 | Antoinette – March and Two-Step (Joplin, 1906) | 3:04 |
| 16 | Solace – A Mexican Serenade (Joplin, 1909) | 5:59 |
| 17 | Reflection Rag – Syncopated Musings (Joplin, 1917) | 4:30 |

Total playing time:

67:57

MARILYN NONKEN

Pianoforte

THE MUSIC

More than a century after ragtime emerged as a force in American popular music, perhaps no compositions are as closely identified with the genre as the piano works of Scott Joplin. Yet the self-proclaimed “King of Ragtime Writers” did not think of himself as a pianist – indeed, both contemporary reports and piano rolls attributed to him reveal that his skills at the keyboard were not strong. Yet his musical talents, and his diverse experiences as a performer and composer, were much broader than is often acknowledged. Gifted with perfect pitch, he toured as lead singer with the Texas Medley Quartette. Trained on the violin, he was a first-rate cornet player and found work as a player and bandleader in the clubs of St. Louis and Chicago, as well as Sedalia, where he settled.

All these influences – vocal music, dance music, music for theatre and orchestra – suggest that ragtime, for Joplin and his accomplished peers, exploits a richer harmonic, melodic, and cultural vocabulary than has been recognized. And when we listen to Joplin’s collaborations and forays into other forms, like the march and the waltz, we recognize ragtime as a genre transcending nostalgic or antiquarian interest. They bear witness to a significant range of musical expressivity, and a textured and varied soundworld that grew from a diverse community of composers.

The first five compositions exemplify this multifaceted expressivity. “Heliotrope Bouquet,” a rare surviving example of Louis Chauvin’s work, exhibits a moody lyricism, while Joseph Lamb’s “Sensation” is an ebullient rag that evokes a more urban flavor. Both rags are tributes to Joplin’s professional generosity, graciously shared with all of his collaborators. Chauvin had never learned music notation; in 1907, Joplin incorporated two of Chauvin’s compositions into “Heliotrope Bouquet,” giving the latter primary credit and a share of the royalties. Joplin’s credit on “Sensation” is limited to “arranged by”; he told his publisher, John Stark, that the rag would sell more copies with his own name attached to it. It’s unlikely that Joplin made any musical contribution to this first publication by Lamb, a white New York City-based composer whose work impressed him.

The dramatic interludes of the pastoral “Eugenia,” a study in chromaticism, are worlds apart from the rollicking and virtuosic “Stoptime Rag,” which finds Joplin in an unusually raucous mood. Joplin’s experimentation with rhythm and chromaticism culminates in the late “Magnetic Rag” (1914), in which the melody, almost a study in perpetual motion, courses through a tense minor key.

The Scott Hayden collaborations (1901-1913) extended through most of Joplin’s career; the earliest is “Sunflower Slow Drag,” published only two years after Joplin’s landmark “Maple Leaf Rag.” These more virtuosic works explore a richer harmonic palette than Joplin’s usual, presenting a greater spectrum of colors: Hayden exploits the higher and lower extremes of the keyboard, while Joplin usually works in a narrower range. The filigreed intimacy of “Something Doing” compliments the grandiosity of “Felicity Rag,” in which meditative and extroverted passages alternate. And in “Kismet Rag,” among the latest of these collaborations, the cheerful and disarming display of aimless, delighted noodling recalls the earlier “Something Doing.”

Just as cheerful but texturally spare, Joplin's two collaborations with Arthur Marshall nod to folk and regional musics. "Swipesy" presents a more naïve disposition than the Hayden rags. While "Lily Queen" is the more ambitious of the two, neither is as meditative as the Hayden/Joplin collaborations, nor as narratively structured as Joplin's own. These are the sunniest compositions on the program.

The waltz form attracted Joplin throughout his career, belying his early interest in dance music and eliciting some of his more self-conscious and stylized compositions. While "Binks' Waltz" veers towards the grandiose, Joplin's justly-celebrated "Bethena" may be his most idiosyncratic composition, with almost recitative-like transitions between each of its four sections suggesting an impatience with the strict AABCCDD structure of the classic piano rag. "Pleasant Moments" reaches for a refined, transparent elegance and closes with an uncharacteristically playful coda.

The rarely-performed "Antoinette" is an outlier among Joplin's piano solos, its march-like A section introducing a dramatic, almost operatic passage. Joplin biographer Edward A. Berlin suggests that "Antoinette" may be the only extant fragment from Joplin's opera *A Guest of Honor*. The music, orchestrations, and original libretto for the 1903 opera, about Booker T. Washington's visit to the White House two years earlier, were confiscated during its Midwestern tour, as a result of the touring company's bankruptcy. They are considered irretrievably lost.

"Solace" and "Reflection Rag" are two of Joplin's most haunting (and accomplished) compositions. A study in melancholy, the first borrows from the Mexican *habanera*, while the second, written in 1907 but published posthumously (perhaps because Stark considered it too difficult for general audiences when first composed), alternates between emotional highs and lows. Indeed, there is a sense of nostalgia, intimacy, and delicacy as the work concludes, belying the bravura strains of the opening passages.

Comparing Joplin's solo rags with those of his collaborations reveals a quality that sets Joplin's work apart: His more idiosyncratically-crafted rags exhibit a subtle anxiety, recognizable only when heard in context with the works of Chauvin, Hayden, Marshall, and Lamb. "Bethena" and "Reflection Rag" express unusual emotional tensions, unresolved yearnings touched with sadness, mystery, and hope — tensions absent from the music of his collaborators. (In "Antoinette," Joplin wryly parodies melodramatic anxiety in a passage evocative of the maiden-tied-to-the-railroad-track situations in early silent films.) This palpable anxiety hauntingly lingers in the listener's mind.

Over a century after Joplin and his colleagues first explored its expressive possibilities, the ragtime form continues to attract performers and composers. Musicians as diverse as Max Morath, Ann Charters, Joshua Rifkin, William Appling, Guido Nielsen, Rick Benjamin, and John Arpin have brought their personal interpretive stances to this body of work; composers such as William Albright, Trebor Jay Tichenor, and William Bolcom have found unique inspiration in the genre, one earlier shared by Ives, Debussy, Stravinsky, and Milhaud.

Far more than a nostalgic throwback to a "simpler" time, however, these explorations and the continued excavations of the form confirm ragtime as a soundworld all its own — a soundworld that remains remarkably contemporary. The early 20th century culture in which this music was composed seems surprisingly similar to the culture of the early 21st. A society tearing itself apart in the effort to navigate

tensions created by white responses to the increasingly important roles of Black and immigrant Americans in urban and rural cultures; the threat of health crises like the frequent and devastating yellow fever outbreaks and the Influenza Epidemic of 1918; even the geopolitical consequences of America's increasingly isolationist and nationalist foreign policies – this was the background to ragtime's emergence, and it remains the background to 21st century interpretations of this uniquely American music. Those anxieties are ours, demanding our individual responses. Syncopation, perhaps the most obvious quality of ragtime, exploits rhythmic irregularity and imbalance, seeking but never finding final resolution, perhaps an uncanny reflection of our own personal and cultural predicament. They may also be the key to ragtime's continuing appeal and its imaginative reinterpretation.

George Hunka

THE COMPOSERS

Scott Joplin (c. 1868-1917) grew up in Texarkana, Arkansas, the son of Giles Joplin, a railroad worker, and Florence Givens, a housecleaner. They were a musical family, his father playing the violin at local parties and his mother a singer who could also play the banjo; Joplin was permitted to practice the piano in private homes while his mother cleaned. In about 1894, following a period as an itinerant musician travelling both in the Midwest and on the East Coast (a singer, he also played the cornet and led a band that performed his own arrangements), Joplin made his way to Sedalia, Missouri, to formally begin his career as a musician and ragtime composer.

Receiving his musical education from private instructors and at Sedalia's George R. Smith College, his broad interests led him to compose over a hundred individual rags, two operas, a ballet, and, reportedly, a piano concerto over his short life. In 1907, he moved to New York City, setting up shop as a piano instructor as he attempted to make a living from his compositions alone; the failure of his second opera *Treemonisha* (1911) led to a profound depression from which he never fully recovered. Joplin married three times ("Bethena" was possibly composed in memory of his second wife, Freddie, who died only ten weeks after their wedding in 1904) and left no children; at the age of 48 he died in New York's Manhattan State Hospital, a mental hospital, most likely of syphilis.

He won a posthumous Pulitzer Prize in the bicentennial year 1976 for his contributions to American music. Like Marilyn Nonken, Joplin was also apparently a Steinway artist — Berlin notes that "Scott's massive Steinway," which still exists in private hands, had a tone that was "mellow rather than brilliant."

Joseph Lamb (1887-1960) was born in Montclair, New Jersey. He received no formal musical training in his youth and attended St. Jerome's College in Ontario to study engineering. Music, however, remained an avocation, and his first songs were published in Toronto in 1905. He moved to New York and took a position first in a dry goods firm and later a publishing house, finally meeting Joplin, a musical idol of his, in 1907. Legend has it that, at that time, Joplin asked Lamb to play one of his original compositions for him; Lamb did so, leading

Joplin to comment, "That sounded like a good colored rag" — surprisingly high praise, especially as Lamb was white. Joplin arranged the publication of Lamb's first great success, "Sensation," with his own publisher. Lamb continued to compose through the ragtime era, in 1915 publishing "Ragtime Nightingale," another of his best-known rags, with the Stark organization. By 1920, the ragtime era had passed, and Lamb took a job as bank office manager for Oelbermann, Dommerich and Co., where he remained until retiring in 1957. Although he continued to compose in his spare time, Lamb's music languished in obscurity until 1949, when Harriet Janis and Rudi Blesh interviewed him for their seminal history of the period, *They All Played Ragtime*. Music historian Sam Charters recorded two performance sessions and interviews with Lamb for Folkways Records before Lamb's death in 1960. Since then, Lamb has been considered as one of the "Big Three" ragtime composers, with Joplin and James Scott.

Very little is known about the short life of **Louis Chauvin** (1882-1908), although during his lifetime he was considered a brilliant ragtime pianist and composer among his peers as well as a successful stage comedian. He was born in St. Louis, Missouri, to mixed-race parents (his father Mexican-Indian and his mother African-American). Like many other ragtime pianists and composers, he was self-taught and regularly performed at Tom Turpin's Rosebud Café in St. Louis, a meeting place for midwestern ragtime composers, including Joplin and Joe Jordan. Only two other songs by Chauvin were published before his death in Chicago at the age of 26, the outcome of a dissolute life spent largely in opium dens and among prostitutes.

Arthur Marshall (1881-1968) was about 13 years old when Joplin joined the Marshall family in Sedalia as a boarder. He had already had some training in classical piano; recognizing the young man's talent, Joplin encouraged Marshall's musical studies and took him on as a protégé along with Scott Hayden, Marshall's classmate at the segregated Lincoln High School. Marshall and Joplin enrolled together at Sedalia's George R. Smith College, where Marshall studied music theory and education. For some years, Marshall made a living as a performer and ragtime composer, retiring from music in about 1917 after his second wife's death and several health problems. He held odd jobs in St. Louis and elsewhere until 1950 when, during ragtime's first revival after the Second World War, he came out of retirement to perform in ragtime festivals. He died in Kansas City at the age of 87.

Scott Hayden (1882-1915) was born in Sedalia and became Joplin's protégé at the age of 17, at about the same time as Arthur Marshall, Hayden's classmate at Lincoln High School. (Joplin's first wife, Belle, was also Hayden's sister-in-law.) In all, Joplin and Hayden collaborated on four rags, all of which are included on this program; the only solo rag of Hayden's that still exists is "Pear Blossoms," which itself was unpublished and incomplete during his own lifetime; it was later completed by ragtime performer Bob Darch. Hayden's small output may be attributed to the emotional trauma that accompanied the death of his wife Nora and his newborn daughter in 1903, after which he ceased composing and became an elevator operator at Chicago's Cook County Hospital. He contracted tuberculosis and died at the age of 33.

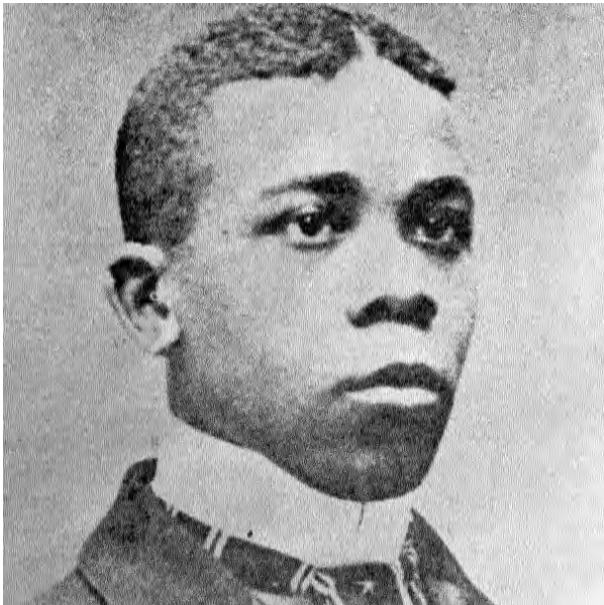
Louis Chauvin



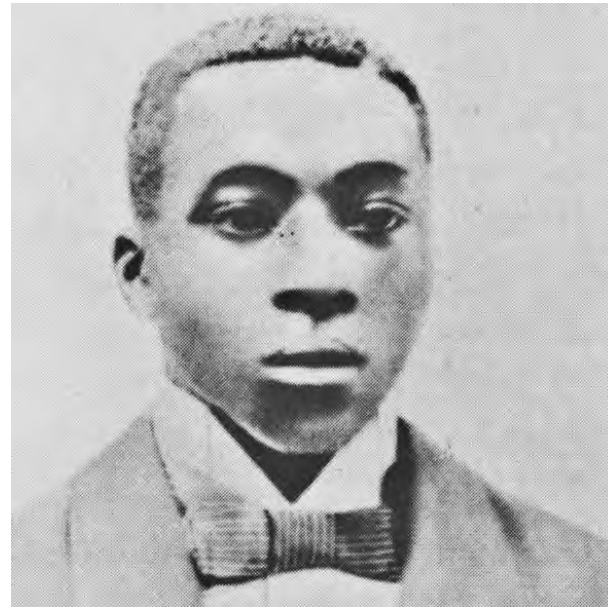
Joseph Lamb



Scott Hayden



Arthur Marshall

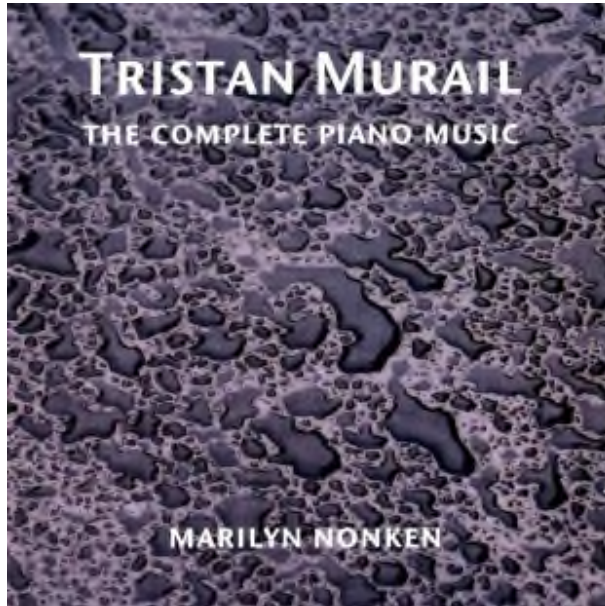


THE PERFORMER

Pianist and musicologist **Marilyn Nonken** is recognized as "a determined protector of important music" (*New York Times*) and "one of the greatest interpreters of new music" (*American Record Guide*). Dedicated to the music of the 20th and 21st centuries, she is acclaimed for her nuanced interpretations of 20th-century experimentalists such as Arnold Schönberg (the composer perhaps most associated with the rise of atonality) and ultramoderns Charles Ives and Ruth Crawford Seeger, as well as contemporary French composers Tristan Murail and Hugues Dufourt.

Her discography includes over 30 recordings, and her writings include *The Spectral Piano: From Liszt, Scriabin, and Debussy to the Digital Age* (Cambridge, 2015) and *Identity and Diversity in New Music: The New Complexities* (Routledge, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, it became her personal project to make public her private passion for Joplin and his circle, to reinterpret their ragtime in way that might bring to light its too often underappreciated worldliness, elegance, and virtuosity. Marilyn Nonken is Professor of Music at New York University's Steinhardt School.

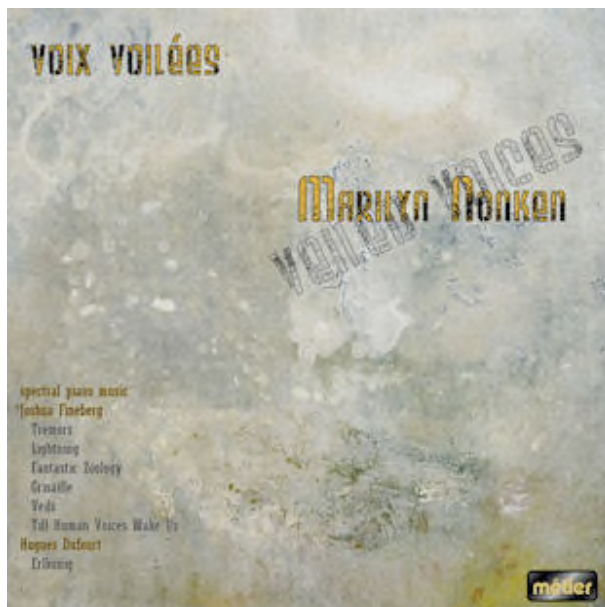
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SCOTT JOPLIN

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