Historic Jazz Piano Styles in Live Performance, 1900-1940

An Honors Recital (HONRS 499)

by

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This recital is dedicated to the purpose of outlining the evolution of jazz piano styles prior to about 1940. The emphasis is on the piano as a solo instrument, a unique position occupied by the piano since it can play both melody and accompaniment to its melody. The program notes are designed not to give a detailed analysis of each selection, but instead to help guide the members of the audience in understanding the historical context, the general stylistic traits of the pieces, and perhaps the significance of particular key persons in the development of jazz piano styles.

The selections themselves progress chronologically, and they are carefully chosen to provide an interesting and varied program. The most important factor, however, in considering which pieces to include is the accurate representation of the various styles. The pieces chosen are those that seem to embody the stylistic traits in the most easily perceived manner, because the purpose of the recital is to demonstrate these early jazz piano styles to the audience.

All of the pieces performed are based on transcriptions of actual recordings.
With the emergence of ragtime comes the first genuinely American music. This new and unique music combines elements of brass band styles, European forms, and folk traditions. Scott Joplin, the foremost ragtime writer, collaborated with Scott Hayden on this piece in 1901. There are four different themes (each theme section designated A, B, etc.) arranged in the order ABACD, a common form for piano rags. The highly rhythmic A theme contrasts well with the more flowing themes B and C. It is interesting to note that the main rhythmic motive of theme A occurs exactly in reverse in the following section (B). This is classic ragtime.

A) \( J \)  
B) \( J \)

Bethena - a Concert Waltz -1905 ... ... ... ... ... ... Joplin

Ragtime composers experimented with 3/4 time, but the ragtime waltz never found the popularity of standard rags in 2/4 (two beats per measure). The exciting propulsion of syncopation in 2/4 did not transfer well to waltz time. There are a few good examples, however, and perhaps the finest is Joplin's waltz "Bethena". The piece consists of five themes, each in a different key (unusual for a piano rag) and connected by short interludes. The African-American polyrhythmic influence, one of the most important aspects of the ragtime style, is particularly evident here. The primary rhythmic motive of the right hand over the three quarter notes of the left hand is virtually the same as a 4 over 3 polyrhythm.

Weeping Willow -1903 ... ... ... ... ... ... Joplin

A subtle introduction leads us into one of Joplin's most flowing and song-like rags. This piece is in a standard ABACD form with four different themes. The modulation to a new key with the beginning of theme C is a common feature of ragtime. The final theme (D) is particularly march-like.
Baltimore Todolo . . . . . . . . . . . . Eubie Blake (1883-1983)

In the world of honky-tonks and saloons the ragtime pianist played not just for entertainment but often for dancing. Eubie Blake's "Baltimore Todolo" was composed with just that in mind. This piece has only three main themes arranged ABACA.

Bugle Call Rag -1916 . . . . . . . . . . . . E. Blake

Before radio and the phonograph, the pianist was often the only entertainment, and he would frequently try to impress his audience or outdo his peers. Pianists would take additional repeats on sections of the rags, and improvise variations on the melody. Also, many pieces created by lesser pianists would tend to have fewer themes (maybe only two), but these theme sections would be repeated many times in a "theme and variations" fashion. Another crowd pleaser would be for the pianist to take existing melodies and transform them into the ragtime style. "Bugle Call Rag" is such a piece.

Jelly Roll Blues -1915 . . . . . Ferdinando "Jelly Roll" Morton (1890-1941)

Jelly Roll Morton was probably the first to consider himself a jazz pianist and composer. In fact, he was very careful to distinguish between ragtime and the jazz style he pioneered. Morton combined the melodic-compositional emphasis in rags and the improvisational-variational emphasis in blues. His style of playing freed the more strict rhythms of ragtime with the use of anticipated downbeats, shifted accents, and swung eighth notes. The left hand plays syncopated figures and Spanish type rhythms. His music is generally in 4/4 time, not the earlier 2/4 of ragtime, and although the organization of his compositions is similar in form to ragtime, much more emphasis is placed on thematic variation, paraphrase, and free harmonic improvisation.

Mule Walk Stomp . . . . . . . . . . . . James P. Johnson (1891-1955)

James P. Johnson is generally considered the father of Harlem stride. This style was closely related to ragtime and flourished in the East. The term stride refers to the left hand style of alternating between bass note and chord (as in ragtime music). The music of stride players was usually faster than ragtime and full of complex right-hand figures. A considerable degree of
coordination and stamina is necessary. Johnson's piece "Mule Walk Stomp" was originally composed as a dance to play for the homesick southerners living in New York.

Climbin' and Screamin' -1939 Pete Johnson (1904-1967)

Most people have probably heard the form of blues-piano known as boogie-woogie. The strong, repetitive, rolling bass line underneath the percussive right hand is easily recognizable. This piano style developed mostly during the 1920s and 30s. Boogie is a style based mostly on complex rhythmic variation, unlike contemporary jazz styles which were more harmonically oriented. Tension and relaxation are created by tremolos and dissonances; these devices are interwoven in a structure of complex and diverse rhythms.

Blues in Thirds -1928 Earl Hines (1903-1983)

With Earl Hines, the last ties to ragtime fall away and a whole new concept of keyboard improvisation takes shape. Hines preference for line, as opposed to the constant texture of ragtime, is demonstrated by his clearly articulated melody, often played in octaves. He also interrupts the regularity of the stride left-hand to play off-beat accents and sometimes contradict the meter. Hines playing exerted a strong influence on the subsequent development of jazz piano style.

Keepin' Out of Mischief Now -1932 Thomas "Fats" Waller (1904-1943)

Fats Waller, well-known for his musical humor, was a true virtuoso of both piano and organ. Waller, a pupil of James P. Johnson, had firm roots in the stride tradition but developed his own sound and timeless piano style. His best playing was not comic but rather sensitive and introspective, full of wit and musical thought. He was a composer, and many of his songs are still widely known.

Squeeze Me (T. Waller) -1939 Willie "The Lion" Smith (1897-1973)

William Smith was one of the foremost stride players of New York. His music blended ragtime, impressionism, and counterpoint, often contrasting delicate, subtle melodic
lines with intense swing. His lush harmonies were an important influence on both Duke Ellington and Art Tatum.

**Sweet Lorraine (Parish, Burwell) . . . . . Art Tatum (1909-1956)**

Art Tatum, with his incredible technique, summarized everything that had preceded him. His style was characterized by both rhythmic and harmonic variation, which he could create with seemingly boundless invention. Tatum's virtuosity transformed his stride and swing influences into a unique and unmistakable style, leading the way to the revolutions jazz music would undergo in the years following World War II.