

Why They Call American Music Ragtime

By J. ROSAMOND JOHNSON

I HAVE been asked "why do they call American music ragtime?"

To answer this question, musically, I must place what is commonly known as "ragtime" in the class of music where it belongs, i. e., syncopation. Since there is no record or definition in the dictionaries of music of "ragtime" we must then consider the appellation "ragtime" simply a slang name for that peculiarly, distinctive, syncopated rhythm originated by the American Negro. And not until it reaches that higher development, only to be accomplished by scholarly musicians, will it be called "ragtime," such as the Spanish syncopated rhythm is called the "Bolero."

We all know that the Spanish used their peculiar rhythm of syncopation many years as dance music before it was designated in musical literature as the "bolero." The original Spanish "bolero" was a sensuous dance which was extremely popular among the Spanish peasants and tabooed by the Castilian aristocracy, among whom were those whose censorship governed what Spanish music should be. But the wonderful popularity of the "bolero" movement and the unique fascination of the dance which accompanied it overruled this Castilian censorship and influenced the entire music of Spain. Thereby, we have all the music of Spain, direct or indirect expressions of the emotions of the Spanish peasant people. So, likewise, with American music, as it is known here and the world over, it is the direct expressions of the American peasant, the Negro.

The happy expressions of the Negro's emotions in music have been dubbed "ragtime," while his more serious musical expressions have been called "plantation" and "jubilee" songs, and these two styles of his expressions in music are all that I can see that is distinctively



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American music. It is the only music that the musical centers of the world and great musicians of the world recognize as American music.

When such men as Dvorak, Safanoff, McDowell, Chadwick and Damrosch realize the real worth of Negro melody we need not consider the opinions of Finck, Farwell, Loomis and others of less note, who claim that there is no distinctive character in the original melodies of the Negro. Finck, Farwell and Loomis claim that the Indian music is the only American music to base American individuality on, but I can see no

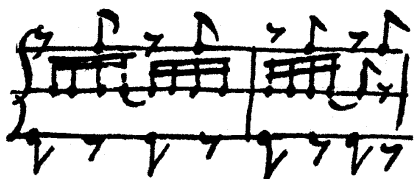
ground for their argument, as the Indian has given us no melodies to equal those of "Steal Away to Jesus" and "Go Down Moses." The latter Dvorak said is as great as the motif in Siegfried.

The Indian is a morbid race, and morbid people are not musical. The younger generation of educated and civilized Indians have produced no composers who have expressed their emotions, as true to their own life, to reach the popular or classic ear of the world, as have been expressed by the Negro (and the Indian has been in the hands of American civilization many years before the Negro). You will find no such melodies among the modern Indian music to equal in popularity "Big Indian Chief," "Navajo," "Big Red Shawl," etc. I know that neither of these songs were written by Indians, for Cole and Johnson are responsible for two of them, and the other was written by a white man. These songs typify Indian life lyrically, but not musically, for the movement and melody are Negro in character except for an occasional tom-tom accompaniment. Had they been set to the broken rhythm of two beats in one measure, five in the next and so on, with the discordant harmonies known as Indian music, they would never have caught the ear of the American people. And if there is to be such a thing as American music it must be a music that the American people enjoy.

Why is it that the American loves to hear the sound of "Dixie"? Analyze the melody and you will find it a typical Negro tune. As to the setting of an Indian subject in the classic form such as oratorio, you will find that S. Coleridge-Taylor's setting of Longfellow's "Hiawatha" is the best of them all. And, by the way, for those who don't know it, S. Coleridge-Taylor is a Negro notwithstanding the fact that he was born in London, England. And is the rival of the great European oratorio composer, Sir Elgar.

In analyzing this peculiar American syncopation we can easily see why it has been called "ragtime." The origin of "ragtime" began with the old darkey patting his foot, and strumming on the banjo, while the pickannies clapped their hands at the same time.

Example: Clapping of hands, strumming on banjo, patting of foot.



And this you will find if placed as an accompaniment to any melody, be it Hungarian, German, Italian or any other, you will find that it will change the entire atmosphere, and the listener will say "Oh, that's ragtime," just as they would if you made the accompaniment in "bolero" style

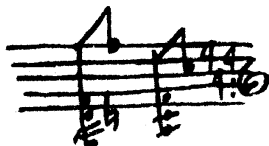
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or 3-4



the listener would then say: "Oh, that's Spanish music. For instance, take the last movement (the Rondo) to Beethoven's "Pathétique sonata," and instead of playing the broken arpeggios, play the accompaniment



or



and your listener will say "ragtime;" likewise they would say "that's Spanish form" is the accompaniment is put in the "bolero" movement.

As to the future possibilities of what is known as "ragtime" or Negro melody, we may hope for great American music to spring from its influence. For as Paderewski says in the November Century, " * * * When lively, they dance. * * * The music of the Negro has been used simply because he has a nat-

ural sense for music, in which the Indians are lacking. * * * Mendelssohn's use of the minor mode may be connected with the Jewish tendency to complaint, to querulousness, which is in turn due to the trials and vicissitudes the race has suffered."

Then, there is a greatness in Negro melody because the sad, minor and dissonant harmonies of the plantation songs were created by the emotions of the suffering slaves.

Whenever art is great, there is always some tragic or sad motive connected with it. There is no joy without ever having had sorrow. We all agree that the slaves of America knew what grief was, and their emotions were expressed in their songs of "Jesus," some from the fear of their masters and others from the hope they had for deliverance.

After slavery we find the Negro singing his happy minstrel songs, giving expressions of his joy. I will admit that some of these songs were written by white men, but when we remember that some of the *best* of them, such as "Golden Slippers," "Carve Dat Possum," "In De Ebenin' By De Moonlight," were written by Sam Lucas and Jim Bland, both Negroes, we have the right to claim them as being the outcome of a happy sense of emotions prompted by the fact of being free men. And so on from stage to stage through the "Razor-Blade," "Black Gal of Mine" type of song up to present emotions of the Negro of to-day, who gives us such songs as "Bamboo Tree," "Congo Love Song," "Owl and the Moon," by Cole and Johnson; "Island of Bye and Bye," by Rogers and Williams; "Mandy Lou," by Will Marion Cook, and the excellent setting of "Ethiopia," by Harry T. Burleigh, due to the conditions of the new Negro's ambitions and training.

If music is the art of expressing emotions, then the Negro has certainly given to us his conditions expressed in song. And what is folk-lore but the expressions of a peasant people in song. And this is proof that there is a school of music in that peculiar rhythm of syncopation originating from the patting of the foot, the clapping of the hand and the strumming on the banjo by the old plantation darkey, which has passed through the same stages of improvement by new emotions of the new Negro of to-day just as he has improved in every other way. We know that the Negro is cap-

able of doing things now that were impossible for him to do forty years ago. I am one among the many other Negroes who can write my own music and arrange it for voice and orchestra. And this is due to my good fortune of being able to study at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston.

In the days of slavery I would have known nothing of the science of music, and some white man like Foster might have written down my expressions in music just as I have done for many white song writers of to-day, who were unable to write music for themselves. And yet the same spirit of melody can haunt me now, as it did the slave in his plantation songs.

Sometime ago I read in the "Literary Digest" a statement from Mr. Booker T. Washington, saying that "the Negro folk-song is the only distinctively American music." To this Mr. Henry T. Finck took exception, and claimed that "Old Folks at Home," or better known as "Swanee River," was written by Stephen Foster, a white man, and for that reason it is a white man's melody and has no character of Negro melody in it. According to Mr. Finck's argument Mr. Foster (whom I consider was a great song writer of his day) was a bad song writer, because it is quite necessary for a song writer to apply the character and atmosphere of the text in the musical setting of a song, and this is exactly what Mr. Foster did in "Swanee River," and that is why it has lived these many years the world over.

Mr. Finck in his article admits that Mr. Foster attended Negro camp meetings and lived on the plantations. Yes, and the truth of it is that Mr. Foster did this for the purpose of placing himself in the direct atmosphere of the Negro style of melody. Sir Arthur Sullivan was a white man, but no one can deny that the "Mikado" is not influenced by Japanese character of music. I am a Negro, but that does not prevent my writing a German, French or Italian melody. One of my teachers in harmony and composition was all German, and couldn't speak English.

This ought to serve to give somewhat of a German influence to my compositions. And after having studied compositions for piano by the greatest composers along with the best grand operas for fifteen years, why should I be unable to blend such treatment of the classic

with the undeveloped music of my race? Some day some great composer (who knows perhaps he may be some *brave* white man) will take up the work where Dvorak left off and give to the world of music just what the American music-lover is clamoring for. The popular ear both white and black likes the "rag-time" song, and just so soon as this peculiar American syncopation is developed into a classic form will the censors of music find a place for "ragtime" in the history of music. Perhaps they may call it con "Raggioso."

It is just as hard for the American people to recognize Negro music as the distinctive music in America as it was for the Russians to realize that the Japanese could fight. Had our wonderful Mr. McDowell followed the advice of the great Dvorak and given much attention to the Negro folk-song, his works would have reached the hearts of the American people with greater force. His "From an Indian Lodge" is purely a Negro melody only for the tom-tom accompaniment. As I have said before, accompaniment changes the color of any melody.

If composers want themes for American symphony, or American grand opera, let them study the sad strains of the Negro plantation songs and they will find food and inspiration for great works. As Paderewski says: "All great music is mostly done in the minor mode." If the baby laughs to-day we

soon forget it until he laughs again, but if the baby dies to-day we never forget, for it has struck the chord of the heart. Just so with lively music; we think of it while we hear it, and enjoy it as we do the pleasing things of life. But when we hear the minor strains in music we call up the sad memories we never can forget. Therefore, dissonant chords are used to express the tragedies of life, which are far more impressive than our moments of pleasure which we so soon forget.

"Negro music," "American syncopation," "ragtime" or "Raggioso," just whatever you choose to call it, is here, and it is here to stay, for it has already caught the ear of the people the world over. As the Toledo Blade, of November 14th, in reviewing Cole and Johnson's "Red Moon" production, says: "When the Negro first made his appearance on the stage as a musical comedy entertainer, the public looked askance at him. They could see nothing in the Ethiopians' contribution to American melody but 'ragtime' and the cheap, syncopated music of the dance halls, but the black man has surprised them. If he has done anything at all in the past few years it has been to raise the tone of the popular price offerings. And he is climbing higher every year. Where he will stop time alone can tell.

"Perhaps it will be at grand opera. Anyhow he seems to be headed that way."