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Crazy for Ragtime by Robert Winter ; Dale Franzen ; Nmon Ford-Livene

Total Joplin: The Complete Works of Scott Joplin by Scott Joplin

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INTERACTIVE MULTIMEDIA AND SOFTWARE REVIEWS

EDITED BY CHARLOTTE CROCKETT



Crazy for Ragtime. Interactive CD-ROM by Robert Winter. Vocal soloists Dale Franzen and Nmon Ford-Livene. Calliope Media, 1996. Calliope 10613. \$49.95. Requires: for Macintosh, 68040 processor, 8 MB RAM (12 MB installed), 256-color 640 × 480 display, 2x CD-ROM drive, system 7; for Power PC, 10 MB RAM (16 MB installed); for Windows, 486/66MHz, 16 MB RAM, 265-color 640 × 480 Super VGA display, 2x CD-ROM drive, 8-bit MPC-compatible sound card and speakers, mouse, Microsoft Windows 3.1.

Total Joplin: The Complete Works of Scott Joplin. (American Composers Series.) Sunhawk Corp., 1996. ISBN 0-9652955-0-8. \$44.95. Requires Windows 95 or Windows NT 3.51, 8 MB RAM, 3 MB free hard-disk space; MIDI/WAVE sound card, 486DX (32 bit) processor, 2x CD-ROM drive, VGA+ display (256 colors, 65,536 16-bit colors preferred), headphones or speakers, mouse, and keyboard.

Publishers of CD-ROMs about vernacular music are finally starting to become competitive. The last few years have seen the appearance of products about specific artists such as Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Bob Dylan, Prince, Brian Eno, Peter Gabriel, and David Bowie. Some are more broadly conceived, purporting to introduce the history of blues, country music, jazz, folk music, rap, and rock—or even to teach aspects of music theory through these genres. It is not surprising then that two discs regarding ragtime appeared during 1996. *Crazy about Ragtime* takes a broad view of the cultural and musical history of ragtime, its predecessors, and successors, while *Total Joplin* focuses on Scott Joplin, who is often referred to as the “King of Ragtime.” The two programs share similarities in approach, but there are also differences that are worthy of special attention.

Robert Winter’s *Crazy for Ragtime* was the first CD-ROM produced by Calliope Media, which the author founded with Jay Heifetz, son of violinist Jascha Heifetz. According to the information on Calliope’s Web site (<http://www.calliope.com/about>),

the company’s mission is “to change the way people experience interactive media titles.” Winter has taken significant strides in helping Calliope fulfill its mission with *Crazy for Ragtime*, which both entertains and educates in a fascinating manner. **Those familiar with Winter’s earlier products for Voyager, such as Igor Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* and Antonín Dvorák’s *New World Symphony*, will again experience the author’s golden touch with multimedia and will be reminded why he is so highly respected as a teacher, performer, and historian.**

The curtain frame begins by showing an old map of the United States as a ragtime piece plays in the background. From the map’s location of St. Louis, Missouri, often regarded as the birthplace of classic ragtime, emerges an image of a maple leaf, an obvious reference to Scott Joplin’s popular *Maple Leaf Rag*. A video box displays a series of brief excerpts from very old black-and-white silent movies, starting with rare footage of the dance known as the cakewalk. Still images of illustrated sheet music title pages and portraits of musicians flash

across the motion-picture panel as the title frame opens. Users who want to proceed directly to the title frame can simply hit a key to escape from the curtain frame.

The title frame displays an interactive table of contents on the U.S. map, which now also contains a multiplicity of blinking city names. Clicking on a city displays a captioned illustration of a musician or a piece of sheet music associated with ragtime there. A collapsible menu bar offers options for a glossary, for a "Find" tool that allows keyword searching of practically the entire contents of the program, for an excellent contextual help function, for backtracking, and for a table of contents for the CD-ROM's seven major sections.

"The Ragtime Craze," which is the historical portion of the program, traces the sociocultural and musical context of ragtime from minstrelsy, Victorianism, and salon music to dancing, Tin Pan Alley, and jazz. Winter does not neglect the influence of ragtime on vernacular music and on the works of such composers as Claude Debussy, Igor Stravinsky, and Charles Ives. **The stimulating and lengthy audiovisual presentation is accompanied by a script that one can peruse separately.**

Among the strengths of the seven subsections of "The Ragtime Craze" is Winter's treatment of coon songs, a turn-of-the-century genre that stereotypes African-Americans in a way that is now very offensive. The author approaches the subject clearly and cogently without being squeamish. Those unfamiliar with the history of dance will be enlightened by the subsection titled "Animal Dancing," which discusses the cakewalk, turkey-trot, grizzly bear, and chicken scratcher, not to mention the fox-trot, which was named after the movie mogul Harry Fox. **Accounts of ragtime performance at the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago are examined in an inquisitive manner without breaching the bounds of musicological objectivity.**

One of the more intriguing subsections deals with the topic of women and music. Considering the seeming complexity of much of the recent discourse on gender and music, Winter opts to present the subject in a most logical fashion. He poses thought-provoking questions about the domestication of ragtime and why composers like Adaline Shepherd and May Auffer-

heide may have been permitted to compose in a style that was often connected with immorality during an era that was known for the genteel values of the female gender.

"Listening to Ragtime" uses a theoretical approach to ragtime, discussing the functions of syncopation, form, phrasing, variations, embellishments, and harmony. Winter compares classic rags with Tin Pan Alley rags, folk rags, and rag songs, and explains the differences between the New Orleans style of playing rags and the faster St. Louis style. He offers numerous excerpts from rag scores and performances. Even novices without the skills to read musical notation should be able to understand the concepts that the author so plainly sets forth.

In the section called "Let Me Perform," Winter provides valuable suggestions for playing and singing rags and illustrates the popular dances of the ragtime era through graphics and original film. The "Reference Room" offers a wealth of information for further study. This part includes fifteen video clips, profiles on approximately three dozen composers, the illustrated title pages of about 200 compositions, 138 still images, the text of 248 magazine and newspaper articles, and an annotated bibliography of more than thirty selected sources on the musical and social history and literature of ragtime.

The core of the musical content is "The Ragtime Sampler," which includes the scores, music, background information, and a simplified analysis for over sixty compositions dating from 1853 to 1919. A few non-ragtime pieces are also included in this section. One can easily generate worklists arranged by composer name, date or city of publication, publisher name, or musical form. MIDI sound files are provided for all the pieces, and there are also digital recordings of live performances. One can follow the score while listening to the recording; a box appears around the measure to be played in order to make it easier to follow along. Because it is not always known at what tempos rags were played, there is a mechanism for changing playback speed, and a simple click on the reset button restores the default tempo.

For those interested in experimenting with sound, the MIDI files can be played back to simulate nearly any instrument. There are also volume and transposition

controls for each staff of the piano score, so, in effect, one could create a rag that sounds totally different from the original. For example, manipulation of the controls could produce a bitonal version of James Scott's *Frog Legs Rag*, with a flute playing the treble staff in the key of C while strings play the bass staff in G.

Related to this section is another called "Make Your Own Rag." Users can pick and choose phrases in the form of "tiles" from any rag in the database and match them to the phrases of a predetermined format. Again, by manipulating the controls for musical key, volume, tempo, and instrumentation, there is the possibility of arriving at something quite interesting and unusual. **Winter has fine-tuned this section to such a degree that one can match upbeats and downbeats in order to "compose" smooth, symmetrical phrases.**

There are a few features of *Crazy for Ragtime* that might merit rethinking if a new edition is produced. For example, while it is true that African Americans as well as Caucasian Americans—including Jewish immigrants and middle-class men and women—contributed in vital ways to the ragtime saga, some may quibble over Winter's statement that ragtime is the "first truly original American music." Also, since Winter himself mentions that ragtime was performed in its heyday by not only singers and piano soloists but also combinations of instruments, small orchestras, and other soloists (such as banjo players), it would have been enlightening to hear audio examples of such renditions. The difference in the volume levels between MIDI files and digital files is substantial and cannot always be easily adjusted without leaving the program, nor can playback always be easily stopped or fast-forwarded. The applications of the "Back" and "Retrace" buttons do not seem to work consistently. The many sheet-music title pages from the Archive of Popular American Music in the UCLA Music Library's Special Collections have been misidentified as being from the Department of Music. **Overall, however, this is a superb multi-purpose product, with enough educational and entertaining information about rags and ragtime to suit anyone's taste.**

Total Joplin is the first commercial interactive music title produced by Sunhawk

Corporation. The bulk of the CD-ROM is devoted to a digital compilation of scores and recordings of all of the music composed by Scott Joplin (1868–1917)—over seventy works in all, or approximately five hundred pages of sheet music, including the complete score of the opera *Treemonisha*. The CD-ROM comes with version 2.1 of the Solero Music Viewer for reading, playing, and printing the compositions, although the newer version 2.2 downloaded from Sunhawks Web site (<http://www.sunhawk.com>) provides improved viewing and playback of the music. For example, with version 2.1, the links between the song titles and the actual recordings become unsynchronized. Solero technology displays individual notes in a different color from the rest of the score as they are played rather than highlighting whole measures as Calliope does in *Crazy for Ragtime*. The main drawback here is that it can be difficult to follow the score when tempos are fast or textures dense, because the flashing colors across the musical notation can be very distracting. Like Calliope's music viewer, the Solero technology does not always allow for easy volume adjustment, especially once the program has started. Using a Hewlett Packard DeskJet 693C, however, this reviewer was able to print beautiful copies from the digitized piano scores in *Total Joplin*.

The "Music Directory" allows one to list Joplin's compositions alphabetically by title or chronologically and includes those for which the score has not survived. Passing the cursor over a title begins playback of a composition without having to click on it. Further options permit one to view the music and digitally restored title pages, hear a synthesized recording of what sounds like a player-piano rendition, and view significant bibliographic information about the piece. Unfortunately, Joplin's vocal music is performed only instrumentally. One can create variation by substituting numerous instrument types for the default player piano. **By comparison, the songs in Calliope's *Crazy for Ragtime* are rendered by vocalists, or, if one desires, the vocal part may be omitted for an effect of "ragtime karaoke."** *Crazy for Ragtime* also has controls and a reset button governing speed, volume, and transposition. **Despite these tools to create sonic variety in both products, the MIDI**

synthesis gives such recordings a decidedly wooden feeling, as opposed to the more artistic human performances digitally recorded in *Crazy for Ragtime*.

The title page includes buttons (such as "Foreword," "Overview," "Playlist," "Biography," and "Credits") that clearly indicate the options for pursuing information. The foreword, written by ragtime specialist Trebor Jay Tichenor, is excellent. The overview includes sections on ragtime structure, classic ragtime, stride piano, and the demise of ragtime. The playlist allows one to select up to ten compositions for continuous playback while viewing other parts of the program. Unfortunately, the playlist selections disappear completely upon interruption, and the title of each composition disappears after playback, so that one cannot easily go back to check the titles of the works of a particular playlist once it is in progress.

The biographical information about Joplin derives from Edward A. Berlin's outstanding 1994 monograph *King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era*. The contents of this section are displayed chronologically in outline form using time graphs. Clicking on any graph leads the user to more complete information about that era of Joplin's life, to links for hearing music from the period, and to the text of newspaper clippings about contemporary historical and cultural events. Citations for these articles are excluded, unlike the listing of newspaper and magazine articles provided in *Crazy for Ragtime*.

The credits for *Total Joplin* include biographical information about most of the contributors, a bibliography of four sources on ragtime, and information about the publisher. A text file on the CD-ROM in-

cludes notes that try to document all corrections to mistakes found in the scores during the process of proofing the audio portions—that is, after the Sunhawk Music Editing system scanned the sheet music and translated it into sound files. An additional text file about *Treemonisha* includes the introduction, preface, cast, and synopsis for the opera.

Total Joplin is a product chiefly for music lovers, music students, and pianists. It does not have the breadth of *Crazy for Ragtime*, but it is generally successful in its endeavor to both teach and entertain, just as *Crazy for Ragtime* is in its own way. But what is the target audience for such publications? A look at the publisher's Web site reveals that Sunhawk Corporation considers itself both a digital music publisher and software manufacturer. The development of its Solero technology for digitizing, playing, and printing sheet music drives most of the company's activities, or so it appears. The Web site includes a list of musical pieces in Sunhawk's catalog that are currently available via the Internet. One can download without cost a brief preview of any of the pieces, including the works in *Total Joplin*. Users are charged \$1.99 or more to view and print an entire composition.

As informative and entertaining as both *Crazy for Ragtime* and *Total Joplin* are, we are still experiencing only the tip of the iceberg as technologies continue their rapid change in the worlds of CD-ROM, the Internet, and other formats of interactive communication. We look forward to enhanced versions of both products and heartily applaud the significant accomplishments of the current editions.

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Computer Music: An Interactive Documentary, interactive CD-ROM for Macintosh and Windows. CyberLearning Collection. \$49.95. Requirements for Macintosh: 4 MB RAM, system 7.x, color monitor (13" minimum). Requirements for Windows: 5 MB RAM, sound card, Windows 3.1 or Windows 95, color monitor (640 × 480 256-color display), headphones or speakers.

Computer Music: An Interactive Documentary contains a wealth of information useful to anyone interested in using computers in conjunction with musical composition, performance, or recording. Instructional

sound and video clips cover many important concepts, ranging from the nature of binary systems to various types of synthesis, from digital sampling, editing, and processing to composing with MIDI instruments.