The Few Known Autographs of Scott Joplin

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*American Music* is currently published by University of Illinois Press.
Scott Joplin ranks as one of America's leading black composers. He was the "King of Ragtime," the talented composer of "The Maple Leaf Rag," which sold over a million copies, and of other successful rags, and interest in his music has recently revived as a result of the movie The Sting. His rags have also had an effect on other American composers, and he is considered abroad as a composer of representative American music. He was awarded a Pulitzer Prize posthumously in 1976.

Joplin led an active life. More than twenty companies published over fifty of his compositions from 1896 to 1917. He lived in St. Louis and New York City, among other places, and died in New York City in 1917 at the age of forty-eight. He was married twice and had brothers, sisters, nephews, and nieces. He was educated both as a regular student and as a musician. He played piano in public places and toured in vaudeville, frequently as part of a group. He formed a Ragtime Opera Company. He cut piano rolls of his music for several companies. He taught music. Some of his rags went through a number of editions and in a few cases were published by successive publishers. He published seven of his own works in St. Louis and New York City, a few successfully. He was reported from time to time in the press. In short, Joplin did not lead an isolated life.

Nevertheless, after inquiries to every library, to specialists in the field, and to other individuals who might be a likely source, I have been able to find only the following autographs of Joplin: (1) the original contract for the publication of his "The Maple Leaf Rag" in 1899; (2) applications for American copyright for seven of his works of which his firm was the publisher from 1901 to 1915, including a transmittal letter and a transmittal note to the U.S. Copyright Office; and (3) a printed piano-vocal score of his opera, Treemonisha, 1911, which contains a few changes in the music and text in his handwriting.

1. "The Maple Leaf Rag" contract (Plate 1). This contract, dated August 10, 1899, was owned from 1899 to 1980 by the original publisher of the music, John
Stark & Son, Sedalia, Missouri, and successor family firms with virtually the same name in St. Louis. Raymond Stark, the great-grandson of John Stark who had signed the contract, recently permitted me to acquire the contract.

The contract, which contains provisions relating to the publication of a musical composition similar to provisions in a contract today, was prepared by R. A. Higdon, a lawyer who also served as witness; it is not known whether Higdon represented Stark or Joplin or perhaps both. The contract and the back of the contract have the handwritings of five different persons: Scott Joplin; John Stark & Son, signed by John Stark; Higdon; someone who wrote in the two lines above the signatures, perhaps dictated by Higdon to a secretary or bookkeeper; and a clerk who wrote file information on the back.

"The Maple Leaf Rag" was Joplin's first and most successful rag and established him as the "King of Ragtime." In 1977 John S. Stark, the grandson of the original John Stark, wrote me that "after the publication of 'The Maple Leaf Rag' brought much success to both men [Joplin and John Stark], all future business was conducted on a handshake basis due to mutual trust." Thus, although the Stark firm subsequently published a number of Joplin's works, Raymond Stark has advised me that his firm has no other Joplin autograph.

2. The applications for American copyright are in the Copyright Office, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Although Joplin's works were generally published by John Stark and others, Joplin formed his own music publishing firm, Scott Joplin Music Co. in St. Louis and New York, or just Scott Joplin in New York, and from time to time his firm published his music.

When Joplin's firm published his music, it was necessary for his firm to file applications for American copyright, and these applications were signed by him on behalf of his firm. Thus, there are copyright applications in his handwriting for the following of his works:

"The Easy Winners," October 10, 1901

A Guest of Honor, February 16, 1903. There is an application in Joplin's handwriting, but the work was not published. There is also a related transmittal letter, the only known Joplin letter (Plate 2)

"School of Ragtime," January 18, 1908, including related transmittal note

Treemonisha, May 22, 1911

"A Real Slow Drag," July 15, 1913

Prelude to Act 3 (Treemonisha), December 23, 1913


In addition, "Frolic of the Bears" was copyrighted by Joplin on June 22, 1915, but the copyright application cannot presently be located.

The copyright applications are on forms supplied by the Register of Copyrights and contain the customary information, all in Joplin's handwriting, regarding the name and address of the publisher, the name and citizenship of the composer, the title of the composition, and the date of publication.

Plate 3, the front and reverse sides of the copyright application for Treemonisha, is typical of Joplin's copyright applications.
3. The printed piano-vocal score of *Treemonisha* with manuscript changes. At the time Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis were writing *They All Played Ragtime* in 1949-50, probably the first comprehensive book on ragtime, Blesh came to know Joplin’s widow, Lottie Joplin, and he obtained from her a copy of the piano-vocal score of Joplin’s opera, *Treemonisha*, which had been published by him in 1911.

This copy of *Treemonisha* (Plate 4), still owned by Blesh in New York City, contains a few pages with changes in the music and text in Joplin’s handwriting and is the only known example of music in Joplin’s handwriting.

Other Joplin autographs are known to have existed. After Joplin died in 1917, other autographs of his were seen by Blesh in 1949-50, when he interviewed Joplin’s widow, but these were lost after her death in 1953. Blesh has seen the following unpublished manuscripts in Joplin’s handwriting.¹

- “Pretty Pansy Rag” incomplete song
- “Confidence Rag” incomplete song
- “Confidence Rag” piano arrangement from song
- *Treemonisha* orchestrations
- “For the Sake of All” incomplete ragtime song
- “Magnetic Song” incomplete song
- “Pretty Pansy Rag” incomplete song orchestration
- “Search Light Rag” incomplete orchestration
- “Recitative Rag” incomplete orchestration
- “Morning Glory” incomplete song
- “Stoptime Rag” incomplete orchestration

In addition Blesh saw a copy of Jadassohn’s *A Manual of Simple, Double, Triple and Quadruple Counterpoint*, which was well-thumbed and marginally noted by Joplin,² but this also has disappeared. Joplin’s unpublished opera, *A Guest of Honor*, for which he had filed a copyright application in 1903, was almost certainly in his handwriting, but it has been lost for many years. There is also said to have been a manuscript orchestral score of Joplin’s opera *Treemonisha*, which had been published in piano-vocal form. The existence of the manuscript orchestral score was recalled by Sam Patterson, who said he had copied the orchestral parts of the opera from Joplin’s orchestral score.³ Finally, on one of Joplin’s travels, when he was apparently unable to pay rent at a Pittsburgh boardinghouse, it is said that he left a trunk full of his possessions with the landlady, intending to reclaim the trunk when he was able to pay the rent. He never returned for the trunk.⁴ *A Guest of Honor* or other manuscripts may have been in the trunk.

It is hoped that this article will alert musicologists and librarians to watch for these lost Joplin manuscripts, as well as for other of his manuscripts. Scott Joplin is too important an American composer to be represented by so few known autographs.
NOTES

This agreement entered into this 10th day of August in the year of our Lord 1899 by and between John Stark and son party of the first part and Scott Joplin party of the second part both of the City of St. Louis and County of Pettis and State of Missouri.

Witnesseth: That whereas Scott Joplin has composed a certain piece of music entitled Maple Leaf Rag and has not funds sufficient to publish same.

It is hereby agreed with above parties of the first part that John Stark and son shall publish said piece of music and shall pay for all plates and for copy right and printing and whatever may be necessary to publish said piece of music.

It is further agreed by and between the parties hereto that John Stark and son shall have the exclusive right to said piece of music to publish and sell and handle the same as they may seem fit and proper to their interest.

It is further agreed by and between the parties hereto that Scott Joplin's name shall appear in print on each and every piece of music as composer and John Stark and son as publishers.

It is further agreed by and between the parties hereto that Scott Joplin shall have free of charge ten copies of said piece of music as soon as published.

It is further agreed by and between said parties that Scott Joplin the composer of said music shall have and receive a royalty of one cent per copy on each copy of said piece of music sold by said Stark and son.

It is further agreed by and between said parties that the said Scott Joplin shall be allowed to purchase and the said Stark and son agrees to sell to the said Joplin all the copies of said music he may want at the price of five cents per copy but said copies shall not be sold for less than twenty-five cents per copy by said Joplin. It is further agreed that John Stark and son will not sell for less than fifteen cents per copy.

Witneseas our hands and seals the day and year first above written.

Signed in presence of

[Signature]

PLATE 1.
"The Maple Leaf Rag" Contract—1899.
Author's collection
St. Louis Mo. Feb 16th 1903

librarian of Congress

Dear Sir,

Please find enclosed with this letter one dollar and application for copyright. The title of the musical composition is in type writing in the blank space on the application.

Yours truly,

Scott Joplin

7217 Lucas Ave
St. Louis Mo.
P.R. Send Copyright Certificate.
PLATE 3.
Copyright Application for *Treemonisha*—1911.
Copyright Office
Thank you!

Don't speak here.

PLATE 4.
Joplin's Music and Text Changes in *Treemonisha*;
copyright 1911 by Mary L. Wormley.