

A Stylistic Survey and Performance Guide of
Three Popular Rags and Three Rags, Composed after 2008 by William Bolcom

by

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ABSTRACT

This research paper will examine William Bolcom's compositional style and performance challenges related to *Three Popular Rags* (1967-1968), *Knockout: A Rag* (2008), *Estela: Rag Latino* (2010), and *Contentment - A Rag* (2015). The aim is to reveal some of his contributions to the revival and expansion of ragtime. The paper includes a brief background on William Bolcom and a history of ragtime music. Differences between the compositional styles of Scott Joplin and Bolcom are discussed through descriptive analysis, focusing on musical forms, rhythms, harmonies, and textures. The performance suggestions include elements of dynamics, articulation, extended piano techniques, and pedal use. The author hopes that this stylistic analysis and performance guide will further interest in Bolcom's piano ragtime music.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As scholar, composer and performer, William Bolcom is one of the more prominent American musicians. He has composed symphonies, concertos, sonatas, chamber works, piano solos, operas, string quartets, cabarets, and popular songs. From 1973-2008, Bolcom enjoyed a distinguished teaching career at the University of Michigan School of Music. In 1994, he was named the Ross Lee Finney Distinguished University Professor of Composition.¹ Bolcom received numerous awards, including the National Medal of Arts, a Koussevitzky Foundation Grant, two Guggenheim Fellowships, and an award from the America Academy of Arts and Letters. He was named Composer of the Year by Musical America in 2007.

William Bolcom has composed more than fifty pieces for piano solo since 1959.² His piano music demonstrates a distinctive individual style, and he was honored with the Pulitzer Prize for *Twelve New Etudes* in 1988. Among his significant piano contributions, the *Complete Rags for Piano* plays an important role in reviving and developing ragtime music. Bolcom composed twenty-six rags from 1967 to 2015, combining the traditional ragtime style with contemporary compositional techniques.

The present paper begins with a biography of William Bolcom and his experience with ragtime. Chapter 3 describes the origin, development, and revival of ragtime, as well

¹ Tse Wei Chai, "Pedagogical and Performance Aspects of Three American Compositions for Solo Piano" (D.M.A. diss., West Virginia University, 2016), 47.

² *Ibid.*, 48.

as its relationship with dance music. Chapter 4 explores the compositional differences between Scott Joplin and William Bolcom, while Chapter 5 offers analyses with performance advice.

CHAPTER 2

WILLIAM BOLCOM'S BIOGRAPHY AND EXPERIENCE WITH RAGTIME MUSIC

William Elden Bolcom was born in Seattle, Washington, on May 26, 1938. The Bolcom family had a long tradition of enthusiasm for music, even though no one in his immediate household was a professional musician. His grandfather, William Marshall Bolcom, had plenty of property and owned a lumber mill. He recognized the value of music, and built an entire wing on his Seattle mansion for the visits of concert artists.³ Ignacy Jan Paderewski (1860-1941), one of the most famous Polish pianists and composers, was a frequent house guest, and Bolcom's father, Robert Bolcom was proud to have sat on Paderewski's knee as a child.⁴ Bolcom's mother, Virginia Bolcom, came from Germany, and her father sang tenor in a music club.⁵ Virginia played classical music recordings to William Bolcom while he was still in utero.⁶ With the influence of his family, William showed interest in music and began to study piano at the age of three.

The family had lost their wealth by the time William Bolcom was born, and Robert Bolcom became a lumber salesman to support the family. Robert encouraged and supported William's study of music, and his musical talent was well cultivated. When Bolcom was eleven years old, he began his formal music education. He studied

³ Yeung Yu, "A Style Analysis of William Bolcom's Complete Rags for Piano" (D.M.A. diss., University of Cincinnati, 2007), 24.

⁴ Vera Zholondz, "*Ghost Rags* by William Bolcom: A Descriptive Analysis and Performance Guide" (DMA diss., Louisiana State University, Agricultural, and Mechanical College, 2017), 2.

⁵ Yu, "A Style Analysis of William Bolcom's Complete Rags for Piano," 24.

⁶ Jon Marmor, "From Prodigy to Legend, Composer William Bolcom has Always Been a Husky," *University of Washington Magazine*, June 2003, <https://magazine.washington.edu/feature/from-prodigy-to-legend-composer-william-bolcom-has-always-been-a-husky/>.

composition with George Frederick McKay and John Verrall, taking piano lessons with Madame Berthe Poncy Jacobson.⁷ At the age of eighteen Bolcom started undergraduate studies at the University of Washington, studying with John Verrall as a full-time student and earning his bachelor's degree in three years.

During an Aspen summer music festival in 1957 Bolcom met his future teacher, Darius Milhaud, who is often listed among the legendary composers of the 20th century. Upon graduating from the University of Washington, Bolcom studied composition with Milhaud at Mills College in Oakland, California, where he received his master's degree. In 1961, Bolcom studied with Leland Smith at Stanford University, earning his Doctor of Musical Arts Degree in 1964.⁸

Due to the strong influence of Milhaud, Bolcom went to the Paris Conservatoire as an applicant to the composition program, studying with Milhaud again in 1964.⁹ Bolcom admired Milhaud's experimental approach to musical composition, and was particularly inspired by his use of jazz and Brazilian rhythms.¹⁰ Beyond his classical training, William Bolcom became interested in listening to and playing popular music, jazz, rock and roll, country, and Broadway music.¹¹ Milhaud also gave Bolcom an opportunity to study composition with Olivier Messiaen, with whose guidance Bolcom

⁷ William Bolcom, "Biography," January 2019, accessed December 5, 2019, <http://williambolcom.com/bio>.

⁸ Andria Rachel Fennig, "A Performance Guide to William Bolcom's *Twelve Etudes* (1971) and *Twelve New Etudes* (1988)" (D.M.A. diss., Arizona State University, 2002), 1.

⁹ Anne Feeney, "William Bolcom Biography," accessed January 2, 2019, <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/william-bolcom-mn0000167256/biography>.

¹⁰ Yu, "A Style Analysis of William Bolcom's Complete Rags for Piano," 32.

¹¹ Zholondz, "*Ghost Rags* by William Bolcom: A Descriptive Analysis and Performance Guide," 3.

learned Messiaen's aesthetics of music.¹² Bolcom's diverse educational experience heavily influenced his later musical output, as his compositional style absorbed and combined numerous music elements.¹³

Although Bolcom concentrated on European traditional and modern compositional styles while studying in Paris, his compositions included American popular elements. According to David Ewen in his book, *American Composers: A Biographical Dictionary*, Bolcom's *String Quartet No.8* was awarded "2ème Prix de Composition," but not the first prize because he used "rock 'n' roll" style in the last movement.¹⁴ Bringing pop elements into classical musical compositions was considered inappropriate by many faculty members. Needless to say, the combination of traditional and popular music was controversial at that time.

After winning the "2ème Prix de Composition" award and returning to the United States, Bolcom's academic and personal life suffered. He devoted a lot of time and energy to a cabaret-style operetta, *Dynamite Tonight*, with libretto by Arnold Weinstein. In this work Bolcom attempted a new compositional technique, mixing dissonant vocal lines, hymn-like melodies, Broadway-style show tunes, World War I-era songs, and a tango set, into a complex piece.¹⁵ Unfortunately *Dynamite Tonight* was performed only

¹² Emily Hanna Crane, "A Performer's Approach to William Bolcom's *Concerto in D* for Violin and Orchestra," (DMA diss., Florida State University, 2007), 8.

¹³ David L. McArthur Jr., "A Study of William Bolcom's Compositional Style Serious and Popular Elements as Exhibited by *12 Etudes*, *12 New Etudes*, and *The Garden of Eden*," (D.M.A. diss., University of Colorado at Boulder, 2012).

¹⁴ David Ewen, *American Composers: A Biographical Dictionary* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1982), 84.

¹⁵ Michael Kimmelman, "Operetta: 'Dynamite Tonight,'" *The New York Times*, December 1987, 9, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/12/23/theater/operetta-dynamite-tonight.html>.

one time (by the Actor's Studio Theater in New York on December 21, 1963), because poor audience response led to all remaining performances being canceled.¹⁶ This unsuccessful premiere caused Bolcom to take a break from writing concert music.¹⁷ In the same period he experienced two failed marriages within just a few years; for one, he composed *Lost Lady Rag* as a lament.¹⁸ Because of these frustrating experiences Bolcom considered becoming a popular music composer, changing his compositional style partially from classical to pop music.¹⁹ Bolcom alleged,

“I was trained as a classical musician all my life, but I was always interested in popular music. According to my teacher, it wasn't as good, but I loved it anyway...”²⁰

The year 1966 was very crucial for William Bolcom, with his discovery of ragtime. While searching for the music sheet of Scott Joplin's opera *Treemonisha*, Bolcom also found a score of Joplin's ragtime. He claimed,

“When I discovered ragtime, I discovered a kind of music that I could relate to in every way. I got knocked out by Scott Joplin. I think he's one of the greatest guys of all time. He interested me because he was the first American who was able to take all of these various sources of music and synthesize them...”²¹

¹⁶ Philip Richard Baldwin, “An Analysis of *Three Violin Sonatas* by William Bolcom,” (D.M.A. diss., Ohio State University, 1996), 8.

¹⁷ Yu, “A Style Analysis of William Bolcom's Complete Rags for Piano,” 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁹ Yu, “A Style Analysis of William Bolcom's Complete Rags for Piano,” 26.

²⁰ Terry Waldo, *This is Ragtime* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1984), 180.

²¹ *Ibid.*

In hopes of reviving ragtime, Bolcom began playing rags as much as possible, even in classical concert halls.²² However, presenting rags in the concert hall was very difficult because mid-twentieth century audiences had mixed views about accepting ragtime as an art form. Bolcom responded by pointing out that revered classical European composers even borrowed American pop elements for their works.

“It might be argued that the “serious” composers of Europe have been more able to draw from American sources than our own have. Ravel’s *G Major Concerto* draws heavily on Gershwin; Milhaud’s *La Creation du monde* is inspired by American jazz; Satie wrote a parody of an Irving Berlin tune to use in his ballet *Parade*; Stravinsky was reportedly impelled by the look—only the look—of a page of printed American ragtime to write his *Piano Rag-Music*, the rag in *L’Histoire du Soldat*, and other ragtime-flavored pieces...”²³

In 1967 Bolcom began to compose his own piano rags, mostly based on Scott Joplin’s classic rags. Bolcom additionally encouraged other musicians to compose ragtime music. William Albright, one of Bolcom’s colleagues at the University of Michigan, was also writing rags at the time, and they shared their compositions. Bolcom learned the stride style from James Herbert “Eubie” Blake (1883-1983). Blake was good at composing stride style, and played an essential role during the ragtime revival of the 1970s. Stride ragtime was also influential in Bolcom’s piano ragtime.

A new period commenced in Bolcom’s life when he met his third wife, mezzo-soprano Joan Morris, who was born in Portland, Oregon in 1943. In 1973, Bolcom and Morris began performing popular songs from the late 19th-century through the 1920s and

²² Yu, “A Style Analysis of William Bolcom’s Complete Rags for Piano,” 28.

²³ Ibid.

1930s; they also recorded many albums of cabaret songs together, and gave masterclasses focusing on “classic American popular songs.”²⁴

Having written twenty rags for piano by 1975, Bolcom returned to composing “serious” music with confidence. As the result of his successful experiences with ragtime and improved personal life, Bolcom courageously incorporated various musical styles—especially American popular music—into his concert music.²⁵ His combination of classical and pop elements led to many accolades. In 1988 Bolcom won the Pulitzer Prize in Music for *Twelve New Etudes* for Piano, and in 1997 he was commissioned to write his *Nine Bagatelles* for the 10th Van Cliburn Competition. For his outstanding contribution to music, the University of Washington and UW Alumni Association bestowed upon Bolcom their Alumnus Summa Laude Dignatus Award (2003). The recording of his two hour and forty-minute song cycle *Songs of Innocence and Experience* for soloists, chorus, and orchestra, won four Grammy awards in 2005: Best Classical Album, Best Choral Performance, Best Classical Contemporary Composition, and Best Popular of the Year, Classical.²⁶ In 2006 he was also decorated with the National Medal of Arts for his achievements in music and the arts.

Over many decades Bolcom has devoted himself to bringing attention to American popular music. He not only revived ragtime, but contributed new rags that include new elements. As a result of his contribution American ragtime music was brought to new heights. And finally, by melding conventional classical music with

²⁴ Joan Morris, “Bolcom & Morris,” accessed December 9, 2019, <https://www.bolcomandmorris.com/joan-morris>.

²⁵ Yu, “A Style Analysis of William Bolcom’s Complete Rags for Piano,” 30.

²⁶ Chai, “Pedagogical and Performance Aspects of Three American Compositions for Solo Piano,” 46.

modern popular elements, Bolcom discovered and established his own compositional style.

CHAPTER 3

EVOLUTION OF RAGTIME

“Ragtime is a musical composition for the piano comprising three or four sections containing sixteen measures each which combine a syncopated melody accompanied by an even, steady duple rhythm.”

— David A. Jasen, Trebor Jay Tichenor²⁷

Ragtime is a distinctly American style of popular music that enjoyed a prosperous period between the 1890s and 1920s, until ragtime evolved into jazz. The term “ragtime” suggests “ragged time”: juxtaposed regular and irregular rhythms, with syncopation taken from African American music.²⁸ The form and harmony is derived from European classical music.²⁹ Thus ragtime can be distinguished from other American musical forms in that it synthesizes musical elements from Europe and America.

The fundamental characteristic of ragtime is a syncopated melody accompanied by a duple-meter march. However, ragtime music appeared under several different names during the years of its popularity. Classic ragtime, stride style, and novelty piano were the most prevalent descriptive names. The formation of ragtime was related to some earlier styles of music, including march and a few musical dance fads of the period such as foxtrot, cakewalk and two-step.

²⁷ David A. Jasen and Trebor Jay Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime: A Musical History* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 1.

²⁸ Eric Charles Melley, “William Bolcom’s *3 Ghost Rags*: An Orchestration for Chamber Ensemble with Commentary on the History and Propagation of Ragtime” (D.M.A. diss., Arizona State University, 2013), 2.

²⁹ John Valerio, *Stride & Swing Piano* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2003), 4.

After the 1910s, a number of widely accepted musical elements such as dotted rhythm, swing rhythm and blues notes (which are the flat third, flat fifth, or flat seventh notes of a major scale) merged into ragtime, causing it to change some of its original identity.³⁰ Swing rhythm (Ex.1) interprets two even notes with a triplet feeling, the first held a bit longer than the second, typically applied to eighth notes.³¹ During its evolution ragtime also combined with Latin-American musical styles, such as the habanera or tango-like syncopations.³² By incorporating diverse music styles ragtime was able to develop and grow.



Example 1: Swing Rhythm

3.1 Classical Ragtime

Classic rag is short for classical ragtime, the standard form of a ragtime piano composition pioneered by Scott Joplin, James Scott and Joseph Lamb at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the earliest days of ragtime, there was no standard form until Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag*, composed in 1899. The term "classic rag" was initially coined by the white music publisher John Stark, who published and promoted the music of Scott Joplin.³³ To distinguish Joplin's rags from the "common" rags of other publishers, Stark

³⁰ Yu, "A Style Analysis of William Bolcom's Complete Rags for Piano," 21.

³¹ Ibid., 19.

³² Ibid., 4.

³³ McArthur, "A Study of William Bolcom's Compositional Style Serious and Popular Elements as Exhibited by *12 Etudes*, *12 New Etudes*, and *The Garden of Eden*," 34.

called Joplin’s pieces “Classic rag.” Due to its strong success, *Maple Leaf Rag* became the archetype for classic rag form.³⁴ Classic rag can thus be considered a musical structural convention.

The typical classic rag starts with a four-bar introduction, followed by a pair of independent sixteen-bar themes in the tonic key. The theme is also called “strain” or “chorus.” It continues with two sixteen-bar strains in the subdominant key. Each strain includes four four-bar phrases in which the first and third might be the same, and the strain often repeats one time completely. It can be written as: INTRO-AA-BB-A-CC-DD (See Fig. 1); after two strains in the tonic key, the subdominant key represents the “trio,” which may have one or more sixteen-measure strains.³⁵

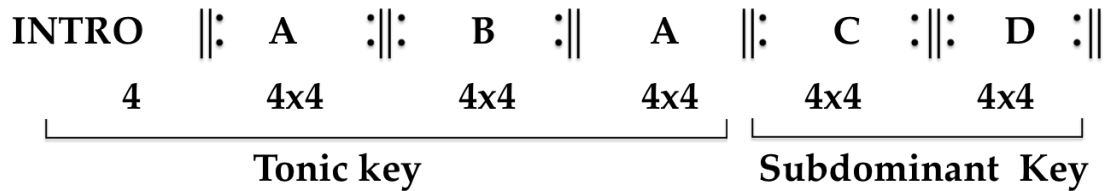


Figure 1: Classical Ragtime Musical Structure

Most classic rags use this form, but this pattern is only a reference. There are a number of standard variations: AABBAACC, AABBCDD, and AABBCCA.³⁶ The introduction may be longer, shorter, or omitted. Strain C or D may continue in the

³⁴ Ibid., 35.

³⁵ Edward A. Berlin, *King of Ragtime Scot Joplin and His Era* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 292.

³⁶ Edward A. Berlin, “Ragtime,” October 2013, accessed November 11, 2019, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002252241>.

original key rather than the subdominant key. Most rags are in major, but when an occasional rag starts with a minor key, strain B is usually in the relative major while strain C is in the subdominant of the relative major.³⁷ Sometimes the piece ends in a tonic key, sometimes not.³⁸ The concluding D strain may be omitted or replaced by strain A, B or C. A brief transitional phrase might be inserted between two strains. The musical form of classic rag thus has multiple variations, but still follows a basic format.

Most of the classic rags are set in 2/4 meter. The right hand contains the syncopated melodic theme. The left-hand plays a march-style “oom-pah” accompaniment pattern: regular alternation between a bass note (or octave) and a chord. Harmonically, major, minor, diminished seventh and dominant seventh chords are most common to classic rags.³⁹ The tempo is steady rather than frequently changing. Most classic rags follow these principles which also influenced later composers during the revival of ragtime.

Most of Joplin’s rags were published as written sheet music; classic rags are intended to be played following the composer’s specifications. Traditional ragtime was one of the main influences for early jazz, except that jazz focuses on improvisation (sometimes using rag tunes).⁴⁰ Following a composer’s written score, or not, is an essential difference between classic rag and jazz, or some other ragtime styles.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Yu, “A Style Analysis of William Bolcom’s Complete Rags for Piano,” 14.

³⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁰ Paul Oliver, William Bolcom, and Max Harrison, *The New Grove Gospel, Blues and Jazz: With Spiritual and Ragtime* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 23.

3.2 Stride Ragtime

Stride style ragtime evolved from traditional ragtime, but was more of a virtuosic and improvisational piano style made famous in the 1920s and 1930s. Stride style was developed on the East Coast of the United States, sometimes called East Coast ragtime style. Unlike the rest of ragtime, stride ragtime was conceived by and originally performed solely by black artists, including Eubie Blake (1883-1983) and James P. Johnson (1894-1955).⁴¹

The term “stride” originates from the word “striding,” reflecting the pianist’s left hand striding or leaping to play across the long distance on the keyboard. Stride style continued the ragtime principle of a march-like left hand. But while classical ragtime pianists’ left hand alternated between a single note and chord in the middle of the piano, stride ragtime pianists stretched much farther from the middle toward the bottom of the keyboard, creating a fuller sound. Covering this greater distance with the left-hand became a significant symbol of stride ragtime.

Stride style absorbed the elements from classic ragtime while developing new characteristics.⁴² Syncopation in stride style often alternates between the right and the left hand, creating counter-melodies by moving the bass line.⁴³ Besides syncopation, stride pieces also used more complicated rhythmic patterns, such as swing and dotted rhythms. Stride style ragtime put a new twist on the traditional ragtime, and was also a challenge for performers.

⁴¹ Jasen and Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime: A Musical History*, 240.

⁴² Yu, “A Style Analysis of William Bolcom’s Complete Rags for Piano,” 18.

⁴³ Zholondz, “*Ghost Rags* by William Bolcom: A Descriptive Analysis and Performance Guide,” 5.

In terms of harmony, seventh and sixth chords occur frequently, while the ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth appear irregularly; in classic style, the left-hand produces mostly single notes or octaves.⁴⁴ Blues notes also occur in stride ragtime.⁴⁵ Compared with the classic style, these intricate harmonies lead to a more dissonant sound.

Improvisation based on written music is another important feature of stride ragtime.⁴⁶ Unlike traditional ragtime pianists, stride players were not concerned with the form of ragtime. Many of them showcased their improvisational skills and were less reliant on the printed score. Since the performance was largely improvised, most published stride pieces are found on piano rolls and recordings rather than music scores. In this way stride style has further distinguished itself from traditional ragtime.

3.3 Novelty Ragtime

Novelty ragtime, a genre of piano music developed in the 1920s, was arranged and performed music on piano rolls. Although it shares this aspect with stride style, and was developed in New York at about the same time, novelty piano music is substantially different. It is also quite different from classic ragtime, although it shares structural similarities.

As previously observed, classic ragtime was generally printed on sheet music. With the development of the record industry, novelty piano music sold more in the form

⁴⁴ Yu, "A Style Analysis of William Bolcom's Complete Rags for Piano," 19.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 18.

of the “hand-played” piano roll and phonograph record.⁴⁷ Piano-roll arrangements influenced the novelty style, and many works were composed with considerably difficult piano technique. The majority of novelty ragtime composers are American pianists with classical music training, such as Zez Confrey (1895-1971), whose “*Kitten on the Keys*” with its highly impressive piano technique came powerfully to the attention of the public in 1921. Novelty piano pieces contain extremely complicated rhythmic patterns and harmony. This is why a lot of great novelty rags appeared only on piano rolls, played mostly by their composers.⁴⁸

The inspiration for novelty piano music can be found in popular dance music, folk ragtime, and the music of Impressionism.⁴⁹ The form follows classic ragtime, containing three or four strains. However, the distinctive sound of novelty ragtime is influenced by French Impressionists Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel, featuring the chromatic scale, whole-tone scale, and parallel fourths.⁵⁰

3.4 Ragtime, March and Dance Music

Before the earliest ragtime, American music was associated with marches and dances. As one of the most common musical genres, march music was used in military movements and processions. Ragtime borrowed both the AABBCDD musical form and

⁴⁷ Jasen and Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime: A Musical History*, 215.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ David Thomas Roberts, “Novelty piano,” 2001, accessed November 22, 2019, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000049104>.

⁵⁰ Jasen and Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime: A Musical History*, 214.

strong repetitive rhythms from marches. Composers of early rags utilized all march tempos and meters, except 6/8 time.⁵¹ And from the march came the strong “oom-pah” rhythms of ragtime, with alternating bass notes and chords in a steady tempo.

The cakewalk was a pre-ragtime dance popular until 1904. Many early rags used cakewalk style. The cakewalk represented an African American dance competition with the cake as a prize.⁵² Beginning in 1897, syncopated rhythmic patterns appeared in published cakewalk music, making it sound like ragtime.⁵³ But while the characters of cakewalk and ragtime are similar, cakewalk music is much simpler than ragtime. The syncopations are repetitive and easy to predict. Also, the harmonies and melodies of cakewalk are not as complicated.⁵⁴

“Animal dances” were another category of popular social dances, including the foxtrot, turkey trot, pony trot, and chicken scratch. Animal dances became associated with ragtime after the 1910s, although with its dotted rhythms foxtrot was the greatest influence.⁵⁵ Foxtrot music is in 4/4 time, and the two most popular rhythms are “slow-slow-quick-quick” and “slow-quick-quick.”⁵⁶ These distinctive rhythmic patterns influenced and eventually merged into ragtime.

⁵¹ Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 100.

⁵² Claude Conyers, “Cakewalk,” *Grove Music Online*, February 2011, accessed January 01, 2020, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002092374>.

⁵³ Berlin, “Ragtime.”

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁶ Claude Conyers, “Foxtrot,” *Grove Music Online*, accessed January 29, 2020, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002219055>.

3.5 Ragtime Revival

Joplin's music was largely forgotten in the 1920s and 1930s. After the 1920s ragtime passed through several stages. In the 1940s, Lu Watters played many forgotten piano rags in his jazz band.⁵⁷ A more significant revival occurred in 1950, when the first ragtime research book, *They All Played Ragtime*, was written by Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis. The book brought "classic ragtime" back to audiences again.⁵⁸ Following this, Joplin's rags were performed and studied by many classical musicians and scholars. In 1971, Joshua Rifkin released a collection of Joplin's compositions which won the Grammy Award. The following year the New York Public Library published *The Collected Works of Scott Joplin*, making his music widely available to the public.⁵⁹ Together Rifkin and Gunther Schuller orchestrated and made recordings of Joplin's piano rags, bringing ragtime back into the music world.⁶⁰ The revival perhaps received its greatest attention when Joplin's 1902 rag, *The Entertainer* was used as background music in the highly popular Hollywood film, *The Sting* (1974). Subsequently Joplin's music was performed widely and even transcribed for orchestra, band, string quartet and other ensembles.⁶¹

These early revival occurrences inspired many composers to write new rags. Some imitated the style of the original ragtime period, while others furthered the

⁵⁷ Berlin, "Ragtime."

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Edward A. Berlin, "Joplin, Scott," October 2013, accessed November 10, 2019, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002253061>.

⁶⁰ Berlin, "Ragtime."

⁶¹ Berlin, "Joplin, Scott."

development and evolution of the musical form. Eubie Blake, William Albright, and William Bolcom were among leading composers who contributed not only to the retention of ragtime's identity, but also to bringing ragtime into a modern period.⁶²

⁶² Berlin, "Ragtime," 4.

CHAPTER 4
COMPOSITIONAL STYLISTIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN
SCOTT JOPLIN AND WILLIAM BOLCOM

Ragtime music has enjoyed two great eras: the first from the 1890s to 1920s, during which its greatest composer was Scott Joplin, and the second beginning in the 1970's, with William Bolcom and William Albright as champion figures.

Scott Joplin (1868-1917), an African-American composer and pianist, was born in Texas. When he was young, Joplin studied classical music with a local German piano teacher, Julius Weiss. Weiss introduced Joplin to both folk music and classical music, providing a foothold for his composition of ragtime music.⁶³ In 1899, Joplin established a good relationship with the publisher John Stark, who published about one-third of Joplin's works including his second piano rag, *Maple Leaf Rag*. The success of *Maple Leaf Rag* was not immediate with only 400 copies sold in 1899, but by 1909 it had sold half a million copies.⁶⁴ Joplin thus became famous through the publication of this one piece, and was regarded as the King of ragtime.⁶⁵ Through the next few years he published almost 40 piano rags, with titles like *Sunflower Slow Rag* (1901) and *The Strenuous Life* (1902). Joplin composed and concentrated on his second opera in 1911, *Treemonishia*, referred to as a "ragtime opera." Until his death in 1917, Joplin continued composing, although he destroyed some of his manuscripts.⁶⁶

⁶³ Yu, "A Style Analysis of William Bolcom's Complete Rags for Piano," 13.

⁶⁴ Berlin, "Joplin, Scott."

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Joplin's rags influenced many American composers, especially William Bolcom.

Bolcom recalled that:

“One day in the fall of 1967 I had lunch with Norman Lloyd, then head of the music division for the Rockefeller Foundation, who mentioned having heard of a ragtime opera by Scott Joplin. Who is that? I asked—few people in 1967 knew the name Scott Joplin—and Norman told me Joplin was the composer of the *Maple Leaf Rag* but that his opera existed only in legend. For some reason, I immediately went on the trail of *Treemonisha*, only to find that no one even at the Library of Congress, Lincoln Center, or the Schomburg Collection had it.”⁶⁷

Bolcom did not find the sheet music of Joplin until he asked his officemate at Queens College, Rudi Blesh (who had dedicated his career to editing ragtime and jazz music), to make photocopies of *Treemonisha* plus many of the piano rags.⁶⁸ Reading through the music, Bolcom was captivated, sharing with colleagues his fascination with Joplin and trying his own hand at writing rags.⁶⁹ Out of admiration Bolcom publicly played several of Joplin's rags, and encouraged other musicians to pursue them (e.g. T.J. Anderson, Vera Brodsky Lawrence and Joshua Rifkin).⁷⁰

After discovering Joplin's music, Bolcom began performing ragtime in classical concert halls. In 1967 he began composing his own ragtime pieces, although most of these still imitated Joplin's rags. However, when comparing the mature rags of William Bolcom with Scott Joplin, we can find many differences in their compositional styles.

⁶⁷ Berlin, *King of Ragtime Scot Joplin and His Era*, 249.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

4.1 Musical Form

All of Joplin's rags are described by scholars as "classic rags."⁷¹ Most of the classic rags include three or four strains, and each strain needs to be repeated completely at least once. The form of AA-BB-A-CC-DD was used for *Maple Leaf Rag*, and is typical of most of his rags.

As stated, most of Bolcom's earliest rags were very similar in form to Joplin. For example, *Incineratorag* (1967) contains standard classic rag form of Introduction-AA-BB-CC1-DD. Composed in the same year, *Seabiscuit* also uses a traditional musical form: Introduction-AA-BB-A-CC-DD-Coda. However, as Bolcom's compositional techniques improved, the musical form became more complicated. He no longer followed Joplin's structure, but added more strains and didn't repeat them as often or in as predictable a pattern. For example, the musical structure of *Lost Lady Rag* (1969) is Introduction-A-B-A-C-D-E-C1, and the adaptation of his *Eubie's Luckey Day* (1969) is long and complex: Introduction-AA-BB-A-Transition-CC1-D-D1-D-E-FF-E1-CC1-Coda.

Each strain of Joplin's rags contains the standard four four-measure phrases. The introduction, transition and coda are often in these four-measure motives, as well. Most of Bolcom's early rags follow this same structure, with exceptions. The A strain of *The Serpent's Kiss* (1969) contains three eight-measure phrases, while the B and C strains have seventeen measures each. And every strain from *Estela: Rag Latino* (2010) contains irregular phrases, which means the audience cannot anticipate the length of the strain.

⁷¹ Yu, "A Style Analysis of William Bolcom's Complete Rags for Piano," 14.

4.2 Tonality and Harmony

Most of Joplin's rags are in major tonality. The A strain and B strain are in the tonic key, with the C strain and D strain usually in the subdominant. Most of Bolcom's rags follow the traditional tonal sequence, but there are some irregularities. Many are in a minor key, rarely used in classic rags. Sometimes the tonality moves from minor to the relative major key. For example, *Last Rag* begins in B minor, modulates to D major, and then modulates even further before ending in D major. Sometimes the music stops in a minor key after various modulations, such as in *The Gardenia* (1970), which begins in F major, modulates to B-flat major and finally ends in B-flat minor.

In terms of harmony, Joplin used major, minor, dominant seventh, and diminished seventh chords. However, Bolcom's rags often have non-chord tones, secondary chords, and unstable passages. In his later rag, *Estela: A Rag*, the chord progression in three transitions do not have close tonal relations. Bolcom also combined his rags with novelty and stride styles by using chromatic elements, blues notes, parallel fourths and left-hand broken tenths.

4.3 Meter and Rhythm

Most of Joplin's rags are in 2/4. Besides using march-style duple-meters, Bolcom also used some irregular meters. For instance, he uses a variety of unusual meters to interrupt the regular beats, such as 4/8, 6/16 and 5/16 in *Estela*.

A typical feature in Joplin's rags is syncopated rhythms, which are played by the right hand against a march-like "oom-pah" accompaniment in the left hand. Repetitive rhythmic patterns occurred in Joplin's rags, as well. Joplin's *The Entertainer* is an

example. As shown in Example 2, the tied and untied syncopated rhythmic patterns occur in the right hand, while the left-hand plays “oom-pah” patterns.



Example 2: Scott Joplin, *The Entertainer*, mm.5-12⁷²

Although Bolcom usually follows the meter and rhythms of traditional rag, his rhythmic patterns are often more complicated and contain more diverse elements. The right-hand frequently plays triplets and dotted rhythms, while the left-hand plays octaves or dotted rhythmic patterns rather than only “oom-pah” patterns. Compared with Joplin’s simple ragtime, Bolcom borrowed rhythms from other musical styles to develop his rags, challenging pianists’ rhythmic and technical abilities.

⁷² Scott Joplin, *Scott Joplin Complete Piano Rags*, (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1988).

4.4 Use of Piano

Pianists and composers have not always restricted themselves to traditional use of the keyboard, sometimes adopting extended piano techniques and prepared pianos to create unconventional sounds. Both Joplin and Bolcom were likely to use body language such as stamping to add dimension to their musical expressions. Joplin's "*Stoptime Rag*" (See Ex. 3) is a good illustration of these extended techniques:

"To get the desired effect of 'Stoptime', the pianist should stamp the heel of one foot heavily upon the floor, wherever the word 'Stamp' appears in the music."⁷³

Fast or slow

stamp stamp stamp stamp stamp stamp

stamp stamp stamp stamp stamp stamp stamp stamp

Example 3: Scott Joplin, *Stoptime Rag*, mm.1-7

Bolcom not only used stamping in his rags, but also asked the performer to knock on wood, whistle and make clicking noises with the tongue. In *Knockout*, Bolcom asks the pianist to tap triplets, dotted and syncopated rhythms on the wood of the piano, in

⁷³ Ibid.

addition to playing melodies. *The Serpent's Kiss* is perhaps Bolcom's most complicated piece involving stamping, knocking, tongue clicking and whistling

William Bolcom composed many great piano rags from 1967 to 2015, making significant contributions to the piano ragtime repertoire. He dedicated himself to reviving and developing ragtime music by playing and composing more complex and innovative rags. As a result of his efforts, ragtime music became more widely known, accepted, and appreciated.

CHAPTER 5

DESCRIPTIONS AND PERFORMANCE CHALLENGES

In this research Bolcom's early suite, *Three Popular Rags*, and his last three rags—*Knockout: A Rag*, *Estela: Rag Latino*, and *Contentment - A Rag*—will be analyzed for musical form, harmonies, rhythms, musical textures, and practicing challenges.

5.1 Three Popular Rags

Three Popular Rags, Bolcom's second piano ragtime suite, is comprised of *Seabiscuits*, *Tabby Cat Walk*, and *Last Rag*. The suite represents Bolcom's early rag style, which mainly emerged through the use of syncopated rhythm, less complicated musical texture, and simple diatonic harmonies that were typical of Joplin.⁷⁴ But Bolcom also began developing his own compositional style, infusing rare elements such as the minor key. Hence, Bolcom's early rags may be said to combine the classic ragtime principle of Joplin with his own new ideas.

5.1.1 Seabiscuits

Seabiscuits, referring to hard unsalted biscuits or bread, is the first piece of *Three Popular Rags*, composed in 1967. Bolcom explained that *Seabiscuits* is inspired by the big-city novelty rags and stride pieces at the end of the 1910 decade.⁷⁵ Therefore,

⁷⁴ Yu, "A Style Analysis of William Bolcom's Complete Rags for Piano," 47.

⁷⁵ William Bolcom, *Complete Rags for Piano* (Edward B. Marks Music Company; Revised ed., 2000).

Seabiscuits not only has the character of classic rag style, but also represents novelty and stride rags.

Like most of Joplin’s rags, *Seabiscuits* is composed of four strains, as shown in Figure 2, and the piece uses a classic rag form: Intro-AA-BB-A-CC-DD-Coda. The Introduction and Coda have two four-measure phrases and one four-measure phrase, respectively. Each strain contains four four-measure phrases. The tonal plan of *Seabiscuits* is typical of most rags: the Introduction, A strain, and B strain are set up in the tonic key of G-flat major, followed by modulation to the subdominant (C-flat major) during the C strain, and remaining there until the end of the piece.

Strain	Intro	:	A	: :	B	:	A	:	C	: :	D	:	Coda
Measure	1-8		9-24/25		26-41/42		43-58		59-74/75		76-91/92		93-96
Phrase	4+4		4x4		4x4		4x4		4x4		4x4		4
Tonality	G-flat Major: →							C-flat Major: →					

Figure 2: No.1 *Seabiscuits*, Three Popular Rags, Musical Structure

Unlike the lively 2/4 time of classic rag, the time signature of *Seabiscuits* is 2/2, which is commonly used in stride style. By indicating a “Cakewalk tempo,” Bolcom sets up an effortless musical style with repetitive rhythmic patterns. The Introduction starts with a chromatic descending triplet, one of the features of novelty piano style, and follows with a dotted melodic rhythm while the left hand plays a bass octave, two chords, and a quarter rest (See Ex. 4).

Cakewalk tempo

mp

Example 4: No.1 *Seabiscuits*, Three Popular Rags, mm.1-5

The A (Ex. 5) and B (Ex. 6) strains contain more classical rag style elements. They feature tied or untied syncopations with some dotted rhythms in the right hand. In the A strain the left hand plays the “oom-pah” accompaniment pattern with the pure harmony of I or V, while in the B strain the left-hand accompaniment is composed of parallel descending octaves. The melodies in A and B strains follow the character of a cakewalk style.

8va 2nd time

Example 5: No.1 *Seabiscuits*, Three Popular Rags, mm.9-14

Example 6: No.1 *Seabiscuits*, Three Popular Rags, mm.24-30

The C (Ex. 7) and D (Ex. 8) strains include tied syncopated rhythms and a few dotted rhythms. The C strain starts with a parallel ascending motive of the octave, fourth,

and fifth.⁷⁶ In contrast to the C strain, the right hand in D strain begins with a descending motion against the contrary motion of octaves of the left hand.⁷⁷ The components of the Coda come from the Introduction, which repeats the dotted rhythms and triplets.



Example 7: No.1 *Seabiscuits*, Three Popular Rags, mm.59-61

In the D strain, dense chordal textures appear in the right hand with a chromatic top voice. To perform this melody successfully, pianists need to emphasize the top notes in each chord and find a direction, while avoiding harsh sounds. Finding a good balance is a primary challenge.



Example 8: No.1 *Seabiscuits*, Three Popular Rags, mm.76-79

⁷⁶ Yu, "A Style Analysis of William Bolcom's Complete Rags for Piano," 62.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

One of the challenges of *Seabiscuits* is to play the subdivisions accurately. The pianist must not ignore small differences between similar rhythmic patterns. For example, in the Introduction, after playing an upbeat triplet, one might carelessly execute the dotted rhythm in m.1 as an eighth-note triplet with the first two notes tied (See Ex. 4). Likewise in Ex. 5, performers must begin the first phrase with a very even eighth-note rhythm in the right hand, avoiding the temptation to mimic the dotted rhythm of following measures. Paying strict attention to such details during practice is, as always, the key to ultimately combining performance accuracy with the necessary performance freedom.

Providing good dynamic contrast plays a vital role in making this piece more attractive to listeners. Performers should consider the dynamics in advance to successfully achieve different levels of sound. A staple of ragtime is the complete repetition of one strain. So, pianists need to use a different dynamic when they play the same strain again. (And every strain needs to be performed twice, as indicated by Bolcom.) In the A strain, pianists need to play *mezzo-piano* the first time and *forte* in the repetition. Additionally, the dynamic is also changed within just one measure to convey the humor of the phrase. Then the first half of mm. 30 needs to be played in *mezzo-forte* and the second half *pianissimo*. For mm.59 the first note is *forte*, followed by an immediate dynamic transfer to *piano* and then a crescendo until the *forte* appears again. It requires the pianist to shift weight rapidly.

Syncopation, or stressing the weak beat temporarily is a signature rhythm type in ragtime, playing a very significant role. In the A strain, Bolcom uses an accent mark (>) or *sfz* to indicate the syncopation, such as in mm.12 and mm.14. To adequately express

Bolcom’s ideas, performers need to always be conscious of the syncopated rhythms (with or without accents).

Again, *Seabiscuits* illustrates two aspects of Bolcom’s compositional style: the traditional ragtime style with use of a classic rag form; and stride, novelty and cakewalk featuring chromatic motives and dotted rhythms.

5.1.2 Tabby Cat Walk

Tabby Cat Walk, a foxtrot dance style ragtime, was composed by Bolcom in 1968. The musical structure is AA-BB-A-CC-DD-Coda, and it is one of Bolcom’s rags which follows the classic ragtime form. Each strain of this piece contains the standard four four-measure structure excepting the Coda. The A and B strains stay in the tonic key (E-flat major), and then the C strain (trio) modulates to the subdominant (A-flat major). Finally, the D strain moves back to the tonic.

Strain	: A	: : B	: A	: C	: : D	: Coda
Measure	1-15,16/17	18-32,33/34	1-15,35	36-50,51/52	53-67,68/69	70-90
Phrase	4x4	4x4	4x4	4x4	4x4	21
Tonality	E-flat Major: —————→			A-flat Major:	E-flat Major: —————→	

Figure 3: No.2 *Tabby Cat Walk*, Three Popular Rags, Musical Structure

In its foxtrot character, *Tabby Cat Walk* is humorous and playful, with a brisk sounding tempo. Bolcom’s indication of “slow two-step tempo, slyly,” (♩=116) suggests that the performer might play lightly to demonstrate the “slyly” crafty cat. The style of *Tabby Cat Walk* features syncopations and dotted rhythms that are similar to *Seabiscuits*.

The A strain (Ex. 9) presents a dotted rhythm in both hands. The top voice in the right hand has syncopated rhythms. Although untied syncopation is simple to see, Bolcom still uses accent marks (>) to stress the importance of the quarter notes. However, the syncopated rhythm is less important than the dotted rhythm. Unlike traditional ragtime, the dotted rhythms of *Tabby Cat Walk* occur in the left hand more often than the steady “oom-pah” patterns. Pianists need to focus on the articulation to play all notes detached, except the notes with a slur in the left hand. As shown in Example 9, Bolcom notates that the right-hand should play smoothly, while the left-hand plays more detached (in spite of the two-note slurs).⁷⁸

Slow two-step tempo, stily ♩ = 116

WILLIAM BOLCOM (1968)

Example 9: No.2 *Tabby Cat Walk*, *Three Popular Rags*, mm.1-4

The B strain (Ex. 10) keeps the musical flow of the A strain by including the dotted rhythm in both hands. The last note in each measure (the weak beat in the dotted rhythm) is accented. Although they are emphasized, pianists should not hold these short notes too long.

⁷⁸ Bolcom, *Complete Rags for Piano*, 29.

30 ^{*}
 R.H.: 2nd time δ \uparrow to "loco"

f - mf

Example 10: No.2 *Tabby Cat Walk*, Three Popular Rags, mm.18-20

Trio

f - pp

Example 11: No.2 *Tabby Cat Walk*, Three Popular Rags, mm.36-38

optional repeat

mp - p
leggero *sfz*

sim. *sfz*

Example 12: No.2 *Tabby Cat Walk*, Three Popular Rags, mm.53-58

Unlike A and B strains, the textures in the C (Ex. 11) and D (Ex. 12) strains are more characteristic of stride ragtime style. The right-hand plays untied or tied syncopation rather than the dotted rhythm. The left-hand accompanies with eighth-note octaves, or chords, instead of “oom-pah” patterns. The slight triplet elements are also present in both strains, such as at mm.56.

The articulation in the C strain is legato. To attain a well-played legato, all the notes must be in the same tonal color. There is also an accent between each legato mark to emphasize the importance of the last notes. The articulation in D strain is more complicated. Staccato, slur, and legato are indicated in turn. The articulation marks ask the performers to take care of all the details when preparing the piece for performance.

In the Coda (Ex. 13), components from the A strain return. *Tabby Cat Walk* ends with a series of measured silences, a unique feature in this piece. Unlike the A strain, there is no four-measure phrase. Instead, Bolcom eliminated parts from the original phrases and replaced them with two or three measures of rest. The continuous music suddenly stops for no reason, leaving the audience wondering how the piece will end.⁷⁹

To depict the character of a cat, the pianist has to observe the various instructions for soft dynamics: sempre *pianissimo*, *decrescendo*, *pianissississimo*, silence, *pianissimo*, *diminuendo*, *pianississimo*, silence, *pianissimo*, *pianississimo*, and *pianissississimo* steps. Bolcom also uses a wide range of articulation between staccatissimo and slur to express the emotions. Pianists have to be especially sensitive and fast when striking the keyboard to imitate the sound of a cat’s light foot.

⁷⁹ Yu, “A Style Analysis of William Bolcom’s Complete Rags for Piano,” 65.

The musical score is written for piano in 3/4 time, featuring a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). It consists of four systems of music. The first system begins with a second ending bracket and includes dynamics *pp*, *pppp*, and *sf*, along with a triplet marked "count exactly 3" and an asterisk. The second system includes a *dim.* marking and a *ppp* dynamic. The third system features a first ending bracket with a "count exactly 2" instruction, followed by *pp* and *sfz* dynamics, and ends with the instruction "G.P.". The fourth system includes *ppp* and *pppp* dynamics. The score is characterized by syncopated rhythms and dotted notes in both hands.

Example 13: No.2 *Tabby Cat Walk*, Three Popular Rags, mm.69-90

To repeat, *Tabby Cat Walk* is one of the rags influenced by classic ragtime form and foxtrot dance. Maintaining a lively and humorous character in performance is important, as the alternation between syncopation and dotted rhythms in both hands make

the piece lighter and more playful. Bolcom also requests a large range of dynamics, from silence or *pianissississimo* to *forte*, so the audience can experience surprise.

5.1.3 Last Rag

Written for his friend Norman Lloyd, *Last Rag* was composed by Bolcom in the same year as *Tabby Cat Walk* (1968). However, compared with the first two rags of the suite, the musical form and tonality of *Last Rag* are unusual. First, it has a rarely-used form that excludes the D strain: A-BB-A1-CC-B (See Fig. 4), and consists of three different sixteen-measure strains. Second, the A strain is set in B minor (minor keys being unique in rag style) which unexpectedly modulates to the relative key of D major. Next, the C strain moves to G major, which is the subdominant key of the B strain in D major. Then, it closes with the B strain, ending in D major.

Strain	A	: B :	A1	: C :	B
Measure	1-16	17-31,32/33	36-51	52-65, 66-67/68-69	17-31,34-35
Phrase	4X4	4X4	4X4	4X4	4X4
Tonality	B Minor	D Major	B Minor	G Major	D Major

Figure 4: No.3 *Last Rag*, Three Popular Rags, Musical Structure

Bolcom’s marked tempo for *Last Rag* is “Andante semplice” (Ex. 14), with “*legato, cantabile*” for the right hand melody line, which together suggest playing the piece simply and taking it easy. Syncopated rhythms are used in the melody while the left-hand plays the “oom-pah” pattern, typical of the stride rag.

A specific performance challenge presented by *Last Rag* is the stride style of “oom-pah” patterns in the left hand. The swings between the bass note and chord cover a sizeable distance, while the right hand needs to simultaneously play an active melody line. The stride style bass lines are seen throughout most of Bolcom’s rags. To create a continuous sound, performers need to maintain a steady tempo and make full use of the sustaining pedal while playing the “oom-pah” patterns. Pianists need to be quick enough to execute clean pedal changes with each bass note bringing a new harmony.

Andante semplice (♩ = 96 – 102)
legato, cantabile

WILLIAM BOLCOM (1968)

Example 14: No.3 *Last Rag*, Three Popular Rags, mm.1-8

Example 15: No.3 *Last Rag*, Three Popular Rags, mm.13-16

The use of blues notes reflects another aspect of stride style. The right hand melody contains blues notes on several occasions. For example, the A strain can be divided into four phrases: a (mm.1-4), b (mm.5-8), a1 (mm.9-12), and b1 (mm.13-16). The F sharp as fifth of B minor appears in mm.7 (phrase b). To create a different sound between the two phrases, Bolcom used the flat fifth, F natural instead of F sharp in mm.15 (See Ex. 15). Pianists need to set up the F natural with care, lest the audience misunderstand the note as a mistake.

The B strain (Ex. 16) maintains similar rhythms to the A strain while moving to the brighter tonal color of D major. Like the A Strain, the compound melody lines are more critical to highlight than syncopation. To perform this piece successfully, maintaining a good balance is the key. Pianists must avoid repeating harsh dissonant chords in the left hand, and the melody must sing out in the right hand. This requires proper arm and finger weight transfer to ensure controlled voicing.

Example 16: No.3 *Last Rag*, Three Popular Rags, mm.17-22



Example 17: No.3 *Last Rag*, Three Popular Rags, mm.36-39

After the B strain, the A strain returns with the instruction “*molto espr. ma non rubato*” (Ex. 17). This suggests the music has more expressive power without excessive time freedom. To emphasize the dynamic of *forte*, the left hand plays an octave bass instead of a single note. The middle voice in the right-hand also adds more running notes, creating richer and more intricate harmonies.

In C strain (Ex. 18), the left hand carries a melody line at the beginning of the phrase, responding to the right hand’s theme.⁸⁰ However, the right hand melody is more important than the left hand. Pianists need to avoid emphasizing multiple voices equally at the same time, each cancelling the other out. In this case, the top voice should prevail to express Bolcom’s emotion.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 68.



Example 18: No.3 *Last Rag*, Three Popular Rags, mm.52-58

Last Rag features a classic rag style, similar to the other pieces of the set with straightforward form and syncopated rhythms. It also displays a stride style that includes left hand “oom-pah” patterns, dense chordal textures, blues notes, and clear highlighting of melodic lines.

5.2 Knockout: A Rag

“Philip Brunelle, whose Vocal Essence group in Minneapolis/St. Paul hosted a two and a half weeks festival of my music in 2007, asked for a rag (for a tour with the Prairie Home Companion orchestra), which occasioned *Knockout*.”

— William Bolcom⁸¹

⁸¹ Bolcom, *Complete Rags for Piano*.

Knockout: A Rag was composed in 2008, which was fifteen years apart from Bolcom's former piano rag in 1993, *Epithalamium*. This piece exhibits several aspects of classic ragtime style, such as a simple form, tempo, harmony, and rhythms. However, *Knockout: A Rag* also includes Bolcom's new compositional ideas, such as knocking on the piano fallboard.

There are three main themes in this classic rag form (Fig. 5): Introduction-AA-BB-C-C1-Transition-A-B-Coda. The Introduction, A strain, and B strain are in the key of B-flat major, followed by the C and C1 strains in the flat-submediant key (G-flat major). Then the piece modulates back to the original key from Transition to the end. As a classic rag, most strains have the standard sixteen measures with the exception of the C1 strain, which has fourteen measures. In addition, Bolcom eliminates the last two measures (mm.36-37) when pianists play the B strain and Coda together.

Strain	Intro	: A : :	B	:	C	C1
Measure	1-4	5-19,20/21	22-36,37/38		39-54	55-68
Phrase	4	4x4	4x4		4x4	4+4+6
Tonality	B-flat Major: →			G-flat Major: →		
Strain	Trans	A	B	Coda		
Measure	69-72	5-19,21	22-35	73-84		
Phrase	4	4x4	4x4-2	12		
Tonality	B-flat Major: →					

Figure 5: *Knockout: A Rag*, Musical Structure

The four-measure introduction (Ex. 19) begins this rag in an unusual way, which entails knocking on the wood of the piano. Bolcom suggested “Lively Rag tempo (♩=69)” to establish a fast march style tempo.

Lively Rag tempo (♩ = 69)

higher sound

mf

lower sound

Rap wood with knuckles

precise but boisterous

f molto staccato

Example 19: *Knockout: A Rag*, mm.1-4

The structure of the A strain (Ex. 20) is traditional with four four-measure phrases. Each phrase contains three measures of a chordal staccato melody plus one of knocking rhythmic patterns. Three “*molto staccato*” octaves in the left hand launch the melody. Bolcom requires playing *forte* and *fortissimo* (second time) in a “*precise but boisterous*” way, and pianists need to use good weight distribution to play the A strain steadily. The left hand plays a stride style accompaniment that leaps a great distance on the keyboard.

The rhythmic pattern of the A strain is not the same as in classic ragtime. The long notes of syncopation are replaced by a short note and a rest (See Ex. 21). For example, in m.6 and m.7, the original eighth-note chord is replaced by a sixteenth and a sixteenth rest to keep the style lively. Of course pianists need to avoid holding chords through the rests.

Example 20: *Knockout: A Rag*, mm.5-12

Example 21: *Knockout: A Rag*, Rhythmic patterns, mm.5-7

Unlike the staccatos of the A strain, the B strain (Ex. 22) demonstrates a “*more connected, but still spiky*” melody, or more lyrical with emphasized accents (>). At the ends of the phrases there are brief breaks during which Bolcom asks the pianist to tap dotted rhythms. Again, the left hand in the B strain features a more stride style with a number of widely spaced intervals, even with broken tenths or ninths this time. For pianists who have difficulty reaching such wide intervals, keep the wrist loose and take the thumb to its key with an easy lateral motion rather than extend too much and cause

stiffness. The damper pedal helps with smoothness, of course. And as always in rags, maintaining a steady tempo is vital.

The musical score for Example 22, 'Knockout: A Rag', measures 22-30, is written for piano in 2/4 time. It consists of two systems of music. The first system (measures 22-25) features a right-hand melody with beamed eighth notes and triplets, and a left-hand bass line with chords and single notes. Dynamics include *mp* and *sim.*. The second system (measures 26-30) continues the right-hand melody and left-hand bass line. Dynamics include *f* and *mp*. Performance instructions include 'more connected, but still spiky' and 'piano in a poco cantabile'.

Example 22: *Knockout: A Rag*, mm.22-30

The C strain is different from the first two. As a trio section, it features dotted rhythmic patterns in both hands with *piano in a poco cantabile*. Besides dotted rhythms, blues notes are found in the C strain, indicating the influence of stride style. Examples include F-flat in the right hand in mm. 42, and B double flat in the left hand in mm.44.

TRIO

poco cantabile

p *pp* *sim.*

Ped. *

sim.

Example 23: *Knockout: A Rag*, mm.39-48

The rhythmic patterns in the first half of the C1 strain are basically the same with some important differences. Tapping on the keyboard also appears in the C strain, now containing triplet and dotted rhythmic patterns. The musical structure of C1 is also different, with the third phrase in six measures rather than four. Like the C strain, the C1 strain is set in G-flat major, but the tonality is not confirmed until the last note. Subsequently there is a four-measure transition (Ex. 24, mm.69-72) with a lengthy chord, interrupted by more knocking for the hands before the left hand four octave figure leads back to B-flat major.

Example 24: *Knockout: A Rag*, mm.63-72

A twelve-measure Coda (Ex. 25) summarizes the entire piece. The first half uses material from the A strain, with the dynamic changed to *piano*. After the sudden *fffz* chord, the rhythmic knocking patterns return until the end.

One of the leading performance challenges is alternating both hands quickly between keyboard and fallboard. With such a short time to switch hand placement, pianists need to take care at all times to play in accurate rhythm and avoid rushing the tempo.

The image displays three systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system is marked 'CODA' and begins with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats. It features a piano (*p*) dynamic, staccato (*stacc.*) articulation, and a crescendo (*cresc.*). The second system continues with a forte (*f*) dynamic, fortissimo (*ffz*), fortississimo (*fffz*), and mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamics. It includes performance instructions for a 'cluster' and 'S.P.' (Sustained Pedal). The third system shows a decrescendo (*dim.*), piano-piano (*pp*), and pianissimo (*ppp*) dynamics, and includes a triplet of notes.

Example 25: *Knockout: A Rag*, mm.83-94

Knockout: A Rag is a contemporary piece that combines the influences of stride style, novelty style, and classic rag style. It contains the new percussive element of knocking or tapping sounds—more evidence of Bolcom’s strategy to bring contemporary idioms to ragtime. One of the leading performance challenges is alternating both hands quickly between keyboard and fallboard. With such a short time to switch hand placement, pianists need to take care to play in accurate rhythm and avoid rushing the tempo.

5.3 Estela: Rag Latino

The pianist Robert Satterlee commissioned a number of composers to write works in memory of Albright, and mine became *Estela: Rag Latino*. Following the Latin tradition of giving women's names to dance pieces, *Estela* is dedicated both to Bob and to the wonderful Argentine pianist, Estela Olevsky, and is a melding of tango and rag.

— William Bolcom⁸²

In 2010, Bolcom wrote *Estela: Rag Latino* in memory of his old friend William Albright, another great rag composer in America. With its tango influence, *Estela* is not a typical rag. In the harmonies, dotted rhythms, forms, and musical textures, *Estela* reaches a new level for ragtime. Again Bolcom broke with some traditions of ragtime and explored new possibilities.

In order to gain a more dramatic effect, the musical structure and tonal plan are greatly expanded and more complex than traditional ragtime. *Estela: Rag Latino* comprises several different strains (See Fig. 6): A-B-A1-B1-Transition 1-C-A2-D-Transition 2-D1-C1-Transition 3-E-A3-Coda. All strains contain irregular phrases that are correspondingly shorter or longer than the usual sixteen measures. The tempos, tonality, dynamics, and textures of *Estela* also tend to contrast a great deal from one strain to the next. And the character of traditional ragtime is less obvious here, as Bolcom continued to develop his own compositional style.

⁸² Ibid.

Strain	A	B	A1	B1	Trans1
Measure	1-13	14-25	26-39	40-51	52-54
Phrase	3+5+5	4+4+4	3+4+7	4+4+4	3
Tonality	B-flat Major:	—————→		B Major:	Unstable
Strain	C	A2	D	Trans2	D1
Measure	55-69, 70-77	78-85	86-102	103-107	108-115, 116-122
Phrase	(6+9) + 8	3+2+3	3+4+4+4+2	5	(4+4) + (4+3)
Tonality	A-flat Major → G Major	C Major	E Major	Unstable	D flat-Major → E Major
Strain	C1	Trans3	E	A3	Coda
Measure	123-135	136-142	143-185	186-196	197-210
Phrase	6+7	7	3+3+7	3+8	5+9
Tonality	C Major	Unstable	C Major	B-flat Major:	—————→

Figure 6: *Estela: Rag Latino*, Musical Structure

At the very beginning of *Estela* (Ex. 26), Bolcom writes “Con Spirito” to represent the emotion. The piece is played with intense energy. The A strain is in the key of B-flat major, although there are many non-chord tones and accidentals. The time signature begins with 4/8 and then changes to 6/16, 2/8, 4/8, 5/16, 4/8, 6/16, and 2/8 respectively, an element rarely used in traditional ragtime. In terms of rhythm, the compound melodies contain four, three, and two-note motives with dotted and syncopated rhythms. The dynamic of *ffz* is emphasized on each minor 2nd interval in the right hand, and accents are added or both hands on the first note of each motive. The inner voice in the right hand also carries a descending chromatic motion at the beginning of each phrase. The musical structure of the A strain contains three small phrases (mm. 1-3, mm. 4-8, and mm. 9-13) instead of the standard sixteen-measure phrases.

Con spirito (♩ = 126)
straight 16ths throughout

Example 26: *Estela: Rag Latino*, mm. 1-13

The B strain (Ex. 27) remains in B-flat major, while its rhythmic patterns exhibit a more classic ragtime style in contrast with the A strain. The compound melodies in the right hand create a typical tied syncopated rhythm pattern. The top voice plays the syncopated four sixteen-notes motive, and the inner voice carries the synthesis of dotted rhythm and syncopation. The left hand accompanies with march-style “oom-pah” or “pah-oom” patterns that include dotted rhythms. The B strain of *Estela* is a typical example of incomplete strain, which includes three four-measure phrases.

Example 27: *Estela: Rag Latino*, mm.14-17

The rhythmic patterns of the A1 strains are similar to the A strain, though the structure of these irregular phrases have small differences. The next strain moves to the key of B major; but due to the similar rhythmic patterns with B strain, it can be regarded as the B1 strain (Ex. 28).

Example 28: *Estela: Rag Latino*, mm.20-24

The three measures of Transition 1 (Ex. 29) are harmonically unstable. Because of its short length, this three-measure phrase is a bridge between B1 and C.

The musical score for Example 29, 'Estela: Rag Latino, mm.52-54', is written for piano. It consists of two systems of music. The first system is marked 'scherzando' and 'mp'. The right hand plays a series of chords and eighth notes, while the left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment. The second system is marked 'slentando' and shows the music fading out.

Example 29: *Estela: Rag Latino*, mm.52-54

The C strain (Ex. 30) also contains irregular phrases. It starts in A-flat major, and after fifteen measures, moves to G major. The C strain begins with the left hand tied syncopations. The right-hand melody uses the dotted notes and syncopated rhythms from the B strain.

The musical score for Example 30, 'Estela: Rag Latino, mm.56-61', is written for piano. It consists of two systems of music. The first system is marked 'ffz'. The right hand plays a series of chords and eighth notes, while the left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment. The second system is marked 'mp floating' and 'ffz'. The right hand plays a series of chords and eighth notes, while the left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment.

Example 30: *Estela: Rag Latino*, mm.56-61

Due to an unresolved cadence (See Ex. 31 m.76), Bolcom inserts an extra rest in 3/8 meter (m.77) to separate the C and A2 strains. Bolcom uses this silence solution again between strains D1 and C1 as well as the E to A3, where a whole measure rest performs the same function as before.

Example 31: *Estela: Rag Latino*, mm.74-80

After the A2 strain, *Estela: Rag Latino* moves to the D strain in E major. The D strain can be divided into two sections. In the first section (Ex. 32), the right hand plays syncopated chords as the left hand accompanies with a series of sixteen-note patterns. In the second half (Ex. 33), the top voice carries the same tune, but the syncopation is tied, while the inner voice plays a sixteen-note pattern against the “oom-pah” in the left hand.



Example 32: *Estela: Rag Latino*, mm.89-90



Example 33: *Estela: Rag Latino*, mm.97-98

Transition 2 connects the D and D1 strains with a series of syncopated chords that are unstable. The D1 strain stays in D-flat major, and then moves to E major. The C1 strain modulates to C major and stays there until the end of the E strain. The E strain is the climax of the piece, as the dynamics move from *fortissimo* to *fffz*. The A3 strain returns to B-flat major. *Estela: Rag Latino* concludes with an irregular, fourteen-measure coda, resting finally on a soft *pianississimo* that creates a resolution to the tonic.

Tango is a Latin American music and dance genre. Tango music is in 2/4 or 4/4 time with a moderate tempo.⁸³ It is related to the habanera rhythm, a Cuban form of syncopation used as the rhythmic pulse.⁸⁴ In the accompanying example, rhythm (a) is the habanera, and (b) and (c) are two derivatives. (See Ex. 34)



Example 34: Habanera Rhythms

Tango syncopations are used throughout *Estrela*. In the A strain (m.5), there are eight sixteenth notes as three, three, and then two. The rhythmic pattern can be regarded as tango-like syncopation (c) (See Ex. 34). The left hand accompaniment for the B1 strain (m.20) is in habanera rhythm (c). And the rhythmic motive in the top voice of the D strain (m.97) is made up of a variation of habanera rhythm (a).

For the performer, there is often a special challenge in connecting the various sections of a piece smoothly and effectively. With *Estrela*, connecting the strains is

⁸³ Richard, Powers, “Tango (ii),” *Grove Music Online*, January 31, 2014, accessed April 12, 2020, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002258399>.

⁸⁴ “Influential Cultures: Concept and Examples of the Hahanera in Tango and Jazz,” African-American and Latin American Styles of Music, accessed April 03, 2020, <https://african-americanandlatinamericanstylesofmusic.weebly.com/habanera-rhythm.html>.

especially difficult for the ragtime genre. Each strain has its own dynamic range, rhythmic patterns, and musical textures, requiring a certain coolness and precise control of the fingers. Moving from A to B strain, for instance, requires quick mental and physical reflexes. In terms of the dynamics, pianists need to play the last phrase of the A strain (See Ex.26 mm.9-13) with accents and *diminuendo* from *ffz* to *pianissimo*, then move abruptly into the first phrase of the B strain (See Ex. 27) which begins *subito forte* with the left-hand required to play strong accents on off-beats (*fz* or *ffz*). Skill is equally required in handling the habanera rhythmic patterns of the A strain, with the meter switching back and forth quickly between 4/8, 6/16/ 2/8/ 4/8/ and 5/16, creating a rocking experience of rapidly changing accents and syncopation. Such conversions of rhythm are often a significant challenge for pianists. In addition, the articulation at the end of the A strain is slurred in both hands, but the B strain immediately breaks loose in the left hand with a quick “oom-pah” accompaniment of contrasting staccato notes (now more in character with common ragtime). With such contrasts, the coordination of melody, dynamics, articulation and rhythm must be carefully practiced.

Estela: Rag Latino is one of Bolcom’s most virtuosic pieces, showing a new approach to ragtime. It contains an unusual tonal plan, complicated rhythms, fast running tempo, a wide range of dynamics, habanera rhythmic patterns, and a variety of performance challenges. *Estela: Rag Latino* represents Bolcom’s broad exploration of a personal compositional style, and is an outstanding contribution to his modern rag repertoire.

5.4 Contentment - A Rag

Many years ago, I wrote a *Last Rag*, trying somehow to put a gentle stop to my rag addiction. It was unsuccessful obviously, but when the *Complete Rags for Piano* recently came out in print, it seemed the capper had appeared with *Rag Latino*. However, September 2015 *Contentment* wouldn't go away unless I wrote it down, and here it is (who knows, maybe it will be the last one). I dedicated it to Joan Morris, who has brought so much joy and, well, contentment- for over forty years of songs and marriage.

— William Bolcom⁸⁵

Contentment - A Rag, the most recent rag from Bolcom's *Complete Rags for Piano*, was composed in 2015 and is dedicated to Bolcom's wife, Joan Morris. It commemorates their marriage of over forty years. Joplin's influences are still reflected, mainly through syncopation, simple form, lyrical melody, and simple harmonies. However, Bolcom also uses many of his new methods in this gentle, quiet rag.

With a formal structure of AA-B-A1-Transition 1-CC1-CC1-Transition 2-A1-Coda (Fig. 7), Bolcom uses the standard form of a classic rag in which each strain contains four four-measure phrases; but he uses a C1 instead of D strain. The harmonic structure in *Contentment - A Rag* resembles most of the classic rags: A and B strains are in the tonic key (B-flat major), and the Transition 1, C and C1 strains stay in the subdominant (E-flat major), before modulating back to B-flat major again from Transition 2 until the end.

⁸⁵ Bolcom, *Complete Rags for Piano*.

Strain	: A :		B	A1	Trans1
Measure	1-15,16/17		18-33	34-49	50-53
Phrase	4x4		4x4	4x4	4
Tonality	B-flat Major: →		E-flat Major:		
Strain	: C		C1 :	Trans2	A1 Coda
Measure	54-69		70-83,84-85/86-87	88-90	91-106 107-110
Phrase	4x4		4x4	3	4x4 4
Tonality	E-flat Major: →		B-flat Major: →		→

Figure 7: *Contentment - A Rag*, Musical Structure

Bolcom writes “Slow Drag” (♩=80), a slow tempo used widely in rag music. In the A strain, the tied syncopated rhythm and right-hand compound melody mix easily together, accompanied by steady “oom-pah” patterns in the left hand (Ex. 35).

Slow Drag ♩ = c. 80

The image shows a musical score for 'Slow Drag' in 2/4 time, marked 'p' (piano) and 'gently'. The tempo is indicated as ♩ = c. 80. The score is in B-flat major. The first strain (measures 1-17) is shown, with a red box highlighting the first measure. The bass line consists of a steady 'oom-pah' pattern, and the right hand features a syncopated melody with tied notes.

Example 35: *Contentment - A rag*, mm.1-8

Similar patterns continue throughout the B strain (Ex. 36), in proximity with strain A. The melody line includes chromatic ascending motion figures, by which the syncopated patterns are connected.



Example 36: *Contentment - A rag*, mm.18-21

While the formation of A and B strains are common in a classic rag, more complex harmonies exist in *Contentment - A rag* than in traditional rags. As a performer, one should attempt to hear each special chord before touching the keyboard. The half-diminished seventh chord in mm.4 as a prime example. B flat is a passing tone in the top voice. The chord is made up of C#-E-(G)-B, not a part of the harmonic framework in B-flat major but a borrowed chord from b minor. Therefore, pianists should use a bit of rubato, allowing more time to showcase its special nature among the busy harmonic progressions.

The C (Ex. 37) and C1 (Ex. 38) strains differ from A and B not only in tonal plan, but also in their features. The right-hand carries more than one voice, and the left-hand plays a single bass line. In the C strain, Bolcom uses a short cycle of fourths, which alternates between a minor 3rd and major 2nd. Bolcom adds the four-note chromatic ascending fragments based on the cycle of fourths in the C1 strain as well.

Example 37: *Contentment - A rag*, mm. 54-57

Example 38: *Contentment - A rag*, mm. 70-73

The march-style tempo of this rag requires pianists to control their fingers accurately. The B strain, Transition 2, and Coda each contain a *ritardando*, and the performer must take care to otherwise maintain steadiness to avoid losing the ragtime character. *Contentment - A Rag* is the final rag of Bolcom’s output at this point in time. It displays features of classic rag including the form, syncopations and simple harmonies, as well novelty style chromatic motion. Once again Bolcom adds his own elements, such as cycled fourths instead of “oom-pah” patterns.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The ragtime music of William Bolcom is among his most significant contributions. He composed a total of twenty-six rags, which can be played as individual pieces or in combination. His ragtime output not only retains traditional ragtime style, but also blends in the other styles with his own innovations.

For this study, Bolcom's early compositional style of ragtime is represented by his second ragtime suite, *Three Popular Rags*. These three rags were heavily influenced by classic ragtime, consisting of syncopated rhythms, simple forms, and harmonies. Bolcom gradually increased his use of other styles, such as stride style, novelty piano, and animal dance. His approach has thus changed over time, with the more recent rags containing greater rhythmic complexity, somewhat massive contrasts of dynamics, dissonant harmonies, and intricate piano techniques. With these compositional advancements come increased performance challenges for pianists.

The present collection of rags represents just a small portion of William Bolcom's entire compositional output. The primary purpose of this research paper is to promote further understanding, awareness, and interest in Bolcom's contributions to the genre, with the hope of encouraging more performers to consider Bolcom's ragtime for their concert programs.

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