Developing wider listening: jazz, part 1

KS4/5

Simon Rushby

Introduction

Few musical genres developed faster than jazz. Within some 30 years, this loosely termed style rose from African-American folk beginnings to become the most popular music in America. Much of this success can be attributed to simultaneously fast technological developments in recording and broadcasting, which allowed new forms of music to be heard across the country (and before long, the world) within hours of their creation.

The accessibility of this new style of music quickly made it an integral part of US culture – a true example of 'popular' music, since it grabbed the attention of people from all backgrounds, transcending the huge social divides found in America in the early 20th century. Its exciting rhythms and catchy melodies had universal appeal, at a time when experimentation and stylistic uncertainty in the classical world alienated many listeners. Jazz became pure entertainment music, but at the same time it held much artistic appeal through its intricate harmonic and rhythmic detail and its increasingly virtuosic performers.

As with other resources in the Developing Wider Listening series, which has been running since late 2020, we will look at the development of jazz through practical and listening activities, supported by contextual background. The hope, as always, is that students can build around their more specialist knowledge, supporting the music they study in class for GCSE or A level and the music they compose or play on their instruments with a broader understanding of musical context and style. This can help them to make links between music they do and do not know, and find parallels between jazz and other music of the 20th and 21st centuries.

In this first resource in a three-part series over the coming months, we'll concentrate on the early days of jazz, looking at how it originated in the tail end of the 19th century, and charting its meteoric rise in the USA from middle-class living-room music to the raucous bars and brothels of major cities in the southern states. We'll start, however, with a general look at jazz style, taking examples from the early, middle and late 20th century, to see if we can find some common characteristics that make this music 'jazz'.

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For more on the history of jazz, see *Music Teacher*, August 2016, March 2017 and April 2017.

Introduction to jazz

Listen with your students to these three extracts (the first one or two minutes of each YouTube video will be fine) and ask them to discuss and note down their key musical features, using their knowledge of the elements of music. What do the three extracts have in common that might be considered features of jazz?

1. *Maple Leaf Rag*, composed by Scott Joplin (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCxLAr_bwpA**). The sheet music for this composition was first published in 1899.
2. *Manda*, played by Fletcher Henderson and his Orchestra (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1_BABUDoT8**). This was recorded in New York in 1924, and featured two young players who would become jazz legends – Louis Armstrong on cornet, and Coleman Hawkins on clarinet and tenor saxophone.
3. *Body and Soul*, recorded by Coleman Hawkins and his quartet in 1939 (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUFg6HvljDE**).

Some of the common features of these three extracts that could be described as typical of jazz include these:

- A lyrical, often catchy melody – in many cases (though not in the examples above) this is sung.
- Complex, often **improvised embellishments** of this original melody.
- A regular **ground rhythm**, rooted in marching music.
- **Swing rhythms**, **polyrhythms** and **syncopations**, which add colour and excitement to the ground rhythms.
- **Blue notes** (chromatic or dissonant notes).
- Regular chord progressions (known as **changes**), coloured by often complex **extensions.**
- Call and response **choruses.**
- Improvised solos.
- Featured instruments: piano/guitar and bass (the **rhythm section**) and trumpet, trombone, clarinet and saxophone (the **reed and horn sections**).

Early jazz

The word 'jazz' has disputed origins, and in its early days was not always attributed to music. Usage from the beginning of the 20th century was found in various contexts, especially sporting ones, alluding to unexpected and sometimes strange behaviour. We still use the term today in the context of 'jazzing up' something, meaning adding colour and excitement.

It was being applied to music by around 1915 in a range of spellings including 'jass' and 'jaz', and quickly became a common description for the whole range of popular music genres in America at that time.

The roots of jazz lie in the **work songs** and **spirituals** most associated with slavery in America in the 18th and 19th centuries. Evidence exists that these were sung by slaves as long ago as the mid 1700s, as they worked in arduous conditions. These songs were rhythmical, to help motivate physical work, and emotive, giving a voice to the slaves' desire for freedom and their developing Christian beliefs.

The religious faith that underpinned many of these songs ironically came from the influence of their white European immigrant slave masters, who owned the plantations on which they worked. Europeans flocked to America during the 19th century to take advantage of the rich opportunities this newly colonised land offered, bringing with them not only religion but also a range of popular dance genres such as:

- **reels** and **jigs** from Ireland.
- **Ländler** and **waltzes** from Austro-Germany.
- **quadrilles** and **sarabandes** from France and Spain.

Similarly, slaves brought against their will from West Africa to work for these people carried with them their own musical culture, highly rhythmical and vocal, and including features such as **pentatonic** melodies, **cross-rhythms**, polyrhythms and syncopation.

Early ingredients of jazz

Here are examples of the musical genres mentioned above. Listening to these could be useful in helping determine the very early building blocks of jazz style.

- 'The Monaghan Twig' (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioSXKgsr3fk**). Folk music from Ireland could possibly have influenced the melodic decorations and swing rhythms of early jazz.
- The Austrian Ländler was popular in the 18th century and preceded the waltz. Its regular underlying rhythms and lyrical melodic shapes could well have influenced the melodies of the spirituals and work songs that developed into jazz. This one (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUfWRBGQkzo**) comes from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *The Sound of Music*.
- You can see clear structural and rhythmical similarities between this quadrille (a 19th-century dance) and **ragtime** music: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JPrMGiGJdo**
- The complex polyrhythmic style on display in this exhilarating example of West African **djembe** drumming definitely seeped into jazz rhythms: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZHfmgIb4mc**

Spirituals

The transatlantic slave trade – arguably the largest forced migration in world history – involved the selling of captured Africans to Europeans based in the United States, Caribbean and South American countries, as well as across the Sahara into North Africa and Europe. Millions of slaves captured in West African countries (usually those with an Atlantic coastline) were forced to work for landowners in the 18th and early 19th centuries, and though the US Congress outlawed the international slave trade in 1808, second-and third-generation African Americans remained in slavery until the Civil War.

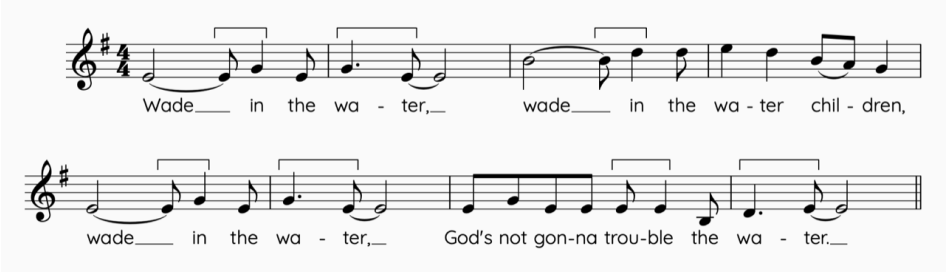
These slaves had an **oral tradition** of songs about freedom and Biblical stories that was passed from generation to generation. It was not until after the Civil War that travelling groups popularised these **spirituals**, as they became known, and though early recordings of spirituals were made by white artists, in the 1920s black blues singers such as Mamie Smith came to prominence with their performances of them.

One of these early travelling vocal ensembles was the Fisk Jubliee Singers, formed in 1871 by students at Fisk University in Nashville. They made some of the earliest recordings of spirituals, such as this one (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=naFcHO9KBnQ**), recorded in 1909.

The group still exists, and we'll use a performance by one of their more recent incarnations to learn a little more about spirituals.

Listen to the first 51 seconds of 'Wade in the Water' by the Fisk Jubilee Singers (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kUfvUDOOxQ**), performed in 2019 in Nashville, and answer the questions below.

Here is the melody of the **refrain**, which is sung twice in this excerpt:



1 Is this spiritual in a major or minor key?
2 Describe the rhythm of the melody at the two points marked by brackets in the music.
3 How many different notes make up the melody of the refrain?
4 Why do you think the words appealed to slaves?

Now listen to the rest of the extract, which consists of three verses, each followed by the refrain.

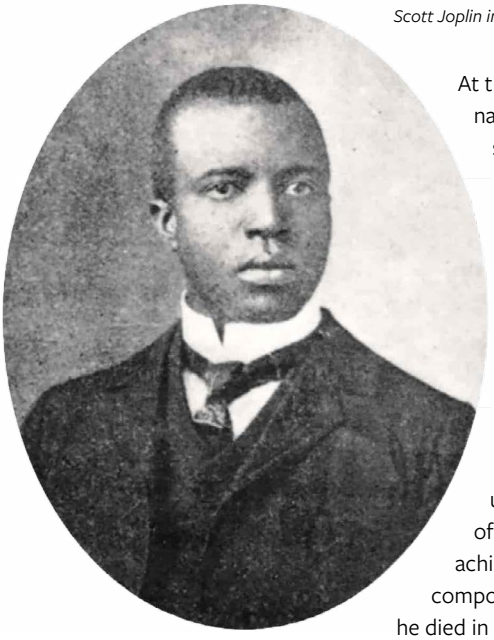
5 Describe the music of the solo singer and of the rest of the group during the verses.
6 After the third verse, the refrain is sung three times. How is it embellished by the solo singer?
7 A small coda comes at the end of the extract. Describe how this derives from the music of the refrain.

Teacher notes:

The spiritual is in a minor key, with frequent syncopations or **pushes** in the melodic line, including at the two points marked by brackets. The melody is pentatonic, and the words encourage the listener to seek solace in the safety of the calm waters, where they will be protected. This idea of protection by God was a common theme in spirituals, and there are references in the verses to Moses and the Israelites, who – the Bible tells us – crossed the Red Sea with God's help in calming the waters.

The soloist sings **verses** at a slightly higher pitch, so that she can be heard, and the choir accompany with **motifs** taken from the refrain in a kind of **call-and-response** pattern. The **embellishments** here and in the final repetitions of the refrain include **ornaments**, **blue notes**, and **melisma**, and they are **improvisatory** in style. The **coda** repeats the final line of the refrain, steadily becoming slower.

Ragtime



Scott Joplin in 1903

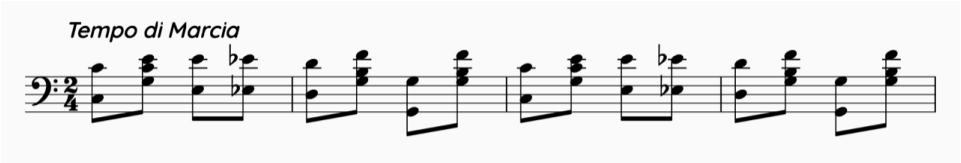
At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, a composer named Scott Joplin rose to prominence with his new style of piano music. Joplin was a Texan, born some time in the late 1860s, who studied piano in his teens and travelled widely as a performer in his 20s, before settling in Missouri where he studied music at a college for African Americans.

Once Joplin began to find success as a songwriter, he moved to St Louis and published instrumental music for piano, ballets and operas, developing his new ragtime style that he described in a book – *The School of Ragtime* – published in 1907. His piano rags were undoubtedly his legacy and he made piano rolls of his performances, though his obsession with achieving success with the opera *Treemonisha* that he composed in 1910 drove him to a nervous breakdown, and he died in an institution in 1917.

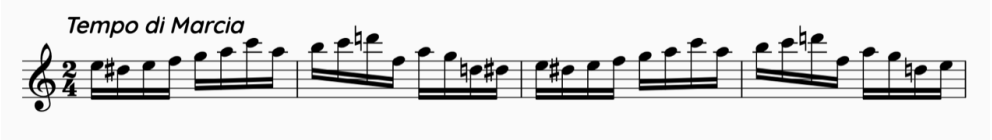
Scott Joplin's new ragtime style combined European dance styles with African rhythmic and melodic features. He focused particularly on the popular genre of **marching music**, made famous throughout America by bandleaders such as John Philip Sousa in the years during and after the Civil War (1861-65). You can illustrate this by playing these two examples back to back:

- 'The Stars and Stripes Forever' by John Philip Sousa, written in 1896: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-7XWhyvIpE**
- 'The Cascades' by Scott Joplin, written in 1904 for the St Louis World's Fair: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZVoFl_fD2k**

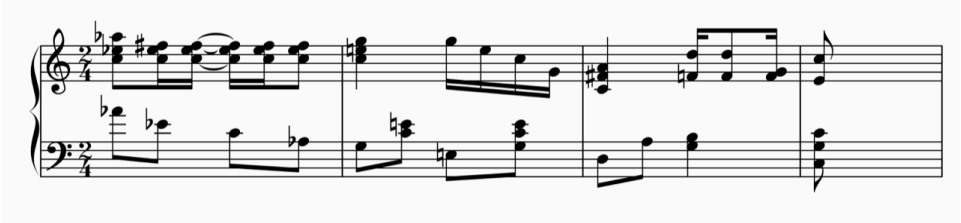
Joplin took the four-in-a-bar marching rhythm and turned it into a style of piano playing known as **stride**, where the left hand drives the music forward with a combination of bass notes and chords, imitating the bass drum and cymbals of the marching band, but usually in 2/4 time. These examples come from 'The Cascades'.



The right hand would imitate the exciting rhythms of the band's snare drum, with consistent semiquaver patterns.



Syncopating these figures, by adding ties or reversing quaver/semiquaver patterns, was known as **ragging** or playing 'ragged', ultimately leading to this new style being known as ragtime. The closing bars of the first section of 'The Cascades' illustrates the ragtime style perfectly, with the right-hand syncopations supported by the steady marching beat of the left hand.



Scores of Scott Joplin's rags, including 'The Cascades', can be found online on free sites such as IMSLP (**https://imslp.org/wiki/Category:Joplin,_Scott**). Piano students may like to investigate and learn to play some of the easier ones, either as solos or duets with one player taking the left hand and one the right. Remember, ragtime is played in march time, so don't take it too fast! There's also an arrangement of 'The Entertainer' in ABRSM's 2023-24 piano grade 3 book.

Middle-class Americans, keen for home entertainment, purchased Joplin's music either in sheet form, if they could play the piano, or as piano rolls for an invention called the **player piano**, sometimes referred to by its original trade name of **pianola**. This was an instrument that cleverly 'played itself'. A paper roll, punched with holes that corresponded to pitches and durations, moved through the instrument as air pressure (supplied by pedalled bellows or electricity) passed through the holes and activated the hammers of the piano. You can see a pianola in action, playing Joplin's *The Entertainer*, here: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=aseMAEctM1s**

Studying ragtime

We're going to take some time now to look in more depth at 'The Entertainer'. If you'd like to start with a performing session, there's a relatively easy arrangement available for download here: **www.8notes.com/scores/20278.asp**. The piece was made doubly famous through its inclusion in the 1973 film *The Sting*.

Let's start our in-depth study by looking at the structure and tonality of 'The Entertainer'. Play this version (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=e01ulR5KMWI**), which includes a free download of the sheet music. Get students to answer the following questions:

- How many sections are there?
- Which are repeated, and which are different? Using letters A, B and so on, what is the overall structure of 'The Entertainer'?
- What is the key of the piece? Are there any key changes?

Scott Joplin's rags followed a similar structure to the popular marches of the day. After a short introduction, the first section (A) is played, with repeat, and a second section (B) follows, also repeated but with the right hand an octave higher. The A section returns, before we move into F major for the C section. A linking passage takes us back into C major for a new section (D) which ends the rag. Rather surprisingly, there is no reprise of the A or B sections.

You could suggest further analysis depending on the depth you want to go into and the levels your students are working at – prompts could include:

- What are the key features of the melodies in each section?
- What rhythmic characteristics can you find?
- Is the harmony simple or complex? Are there any chromatic chords?

Further listening and composing ideas

Here are links to three more Scott Joplin rags, one of which has been arranged for an ensemble that neatly links us into the next section of this resource:

- 'Elite Syncopations': **www.youtube.com/watch?v=sE7x05LJj4w**
- 'The Easy Winners': **www.youtube.com/watch?v=faook_07POQ**
- 'Maple Leaf Rag': **www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdnB_9vPurc**

You may like to encourage students to try their hands at composing a section of a new ragtime piece. Stick to simple chords such as I, IV and V (but with some inversions and 7ths for colour) and compose a semiquaver melody with syncopations using the major or pentatonic scale. The examples from 'The Cascades' earlier in this resource could help. Alternatively, they may wish to arrange an existing piano rag for an instrumental ensemble.

New Orleans and Dixieland jazz

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Bourbon Street in the French Quarter, New Orleans

In the early 1900s, the city of New Orleans, Louisiana, was fast becoming the hub for a range of exciting musical styles. Settlers from all over the world, particularly Europe, South America and the Caribbean, arrived into its port. Following the abolition of slavery after the Civil War, many African Americans settled in New Orleans, mostly living in squalid, run-down areas where they struggled to find work opportunities and were faced with segregation and racial inequality.

This multi-cultural diversity created a hotbed of musical fusions and styles in New Orleans's busy bars, brothels and clubs. Existing popular styles such as blues, ragtime and marches were combined with African, Caribbean, Latin-American and European music brought into the city by the settlers, resulting in a sound that was singularly and unmistakeable New Orleans jazz – though the word 'jazz' was not used to describe it at first.

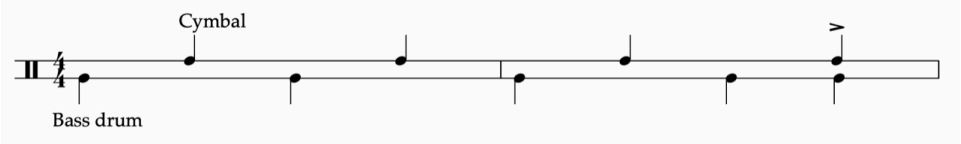
It was in the run-down district of Storyville that this New Orleans jazz style really took hold. One of the leading bands of the early decades of the 20th century was called the Original Dixieland Jass Band, and their early recordings (which started in 1917) combined African-American, ragtime and Sicilian music, though they quickly left New Orleans and set up in the more affluent Northern city of Chicago.

Dixieland jazz, as it's now commonly known, featured a band consisting of trumpet or cornet, clarinet and trombone (known as the **front line**) and tuba or double bass, piano or banjo and percussion known as the **rhythm section**. At first, two players played the drums – one with bass drum and cymbal (played with a wire beater) and the other with snare drum, just like in a marching band. Later, the drum kit was developed so that one player could manage all the parts.

Dixieland Jazz is also known as **traditional jazz**, or 'trad' jazz. The Dixieland name came from the French word *dix* meaning ten – probably because early $10 notes issued in New Orleans and used by French-speaking residents had the word written on them. 'Dixie' quickly became a common name for Louisiana, and eventually all the southern states.

Each instrument in a Dixieland jazz band had its own role. The trumpet or cornet took the main melody and led the improvised solo sections, while the clarinet played a high **countermelody** that embellished the cornet part. The trombone also played a countermelody, in the tenor range, which often made use of its ability to slide (**glissando**). These three instruments would improvise around a known melody, called a **standard**, and would listen to each other and play complementing lines.

The rhythm section underpinned this with various accompanying techniques. The piano or banjo part was mostly chordal, though pianists often played solos in ragtime stride style. The rhythmic, often syncopated chordal playing or strumming was known as **comping**. The double bass or tuba would play a rhythmic bottom-line part, often including a technique known as **walking bass** which was a scalic, regular rising and falling pattern. Bass drum and cymbal would play a pattern known as a **big four** – where they alternated beats but came together on the second fourth beat, as shown below:



'Tiger Rag'

'Tiger Rag' was the first recording made by the Original Dixieland Jass Band, released in 1917 and probably developed by members of the band from a popular New Orleans standard of the time. No one knows who wrote it – many leading New Orleans performers claimed credit – and it's possible that it was adapted from a French quadrille.

Many of the musicians playing in New Orleans in the early 1900s were either from Creole or African-American background. Creoles were people of European ancestry, born in America, or immigrants from the Caribbean and people of mixed race. While Creole musicians were often educated in the European tradition, African Americans were freed slaves or their offspring, usually unable to read music but talented improvisers brought up on blues, spirituals and gospel.

The version of 'Tiger Rag' linked below was recorded in 1922 by the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, an all-white and Creole band (as were the ODJB) which included famous members such as pianist Jelly Roll Morton and clarinettist Leon Roppolo. Made up from leading musicians from New Orleans and Chicago, the New Orleans Rhythm Kings were hugely influential in the development of traditional jazz all over America. This recording was one of their very first, and you can use the 'walk-through' below to guide your students through making their own study of the music.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1_TlLfF9xg

Like Sousa's marches and Joplin's ragtime compositions, Dixieland jazz arrangements had multiple sections, often in different keys. Each section was known as a chorus and would either feature the whole band (**shout chorus**) or one of the front-line players (**solo chorus**).

'Tiger Rag' begins with an eight-bar introduction in the key of B flat major, consisting of a four-bar repeated idea led by cornet. You can clearly hear cornet, clarinet and the lower, warmer tones of an alto saxophone.

The music moves very quickly into the first chorus, at 0:08, in the key of E flat. This is a 16-bar chorus, arranged into four four-bar phrases. The cornet leads, but there are several **breaks** for clarinet at ends of phrases. The chord progression, known as the **changes**, is common to Dixieland standards, using just **tonic, dominant 7th** and **supertonic 7th** chords:

Eb – Eb – Eb – clarinet break
Eb – Eb – Bb^7 – clarinet break
Bb^7 – Bb^7 – Eb – Eb
F^7 – F^7 – Bb – clarinet break

The next chorus (0:25), also 16 bars, has just one break midway and mixes up the chords, spicing up the harmony with a new progression in the final phrase. Note how the rate of chord changes doubles in this last line:

Bb^7 – Bb^7 – Eb – Eb
Bb^7 – Bb^7 – Eb – clarinet break
Bb^7 – Bb^7 – Eb – Eb
Ab F/A – Eb/Bb C^7 – F7 Bb^7 – Eb

The remainder of 'Tiger Rag' is in the key of A flat major. Chord changes follow a similar pattern, and choruses remain 16 bars long, but there are some featured instruments. First, a **stop chorus** leaves space for comic descending glissandos on the trombone and a further clarinet break midway. Then, at 1:13, there's a full solo for clarinet, accompanied by rhythm section (and a trombone break midway). You can clearly hear the energetic comping of the banjo and some complex rhythms on a wood block in this solo chorus. Glissandos and fast **vibrato** are typical of New Orleans clarinet playing.

At 1:46 the clarinet is joined by cornet and trombone – with cornet playing the break – and this ends up being the final chorus. Though the changes will have been worked out in advance, much of the melodic playing will have been improvised and this final chorus has a very complex texture of many weaving lines. A small coda extends the chorus by two bars (2:21), to accentuate the final tonic chord.

Many leading jazz musicians, like Bix Beiderbecke, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Frank Sinatra (in a version with lyrics) have recorded 'Tiger Rag', and it has become a commonly used song before sports matches, particularly for high school and college teams with tiger mascots.

In part two of this resource, we'll see jazz moving north from New Orleans to Chicago and New York, as transportation and recording technology accelerated its appeal, leading to the rise of the big band and the massively popular genre of swing.