

V. Three Piano Rags

Sometime in the late 60's, after many years of a rather explosive and eventful artistic (and emotional) life, Tenney became extremely interested in ragtime. It is understandable, after a period of intense political and artistic upheaval, and after some profound changes in his personal life, that he was attracted to a music whose elegance was immediately apparent, and whose charm and attraction reflect basically a joyous outlook on life and art. Also, Tenney's deep and long-standing interest in American music, as well as his personal friendship with the great blues and traditional music scholar, producer, writer and performer Sam Charters, led him to consider in depth what is after all one of America's truly unique and indigenous musics.

Ragtime also gave him a chance to "flex his muscles" as a pianist and as a composer. There is a tremendous amount of craft in these rags, of a particular type that his earlier music (after Monody) seldom required. One senses that the writing of these rags was a kind of personal and artistic release for him. Most of Tenney's music is, as I've mentioned, basically good-natured, in a serious way. All of it is more of an affirmation of things he believes in than arguments with things he doesn't. The rags mark a kind of turning point for Tenney: the music after this point tends to be quieter, more lyrical, and even prettier than that which preceded them. Consider, for example, Fabric for Ché or Viet Flakes in comparison to Hey When I Sing... and Quiet Fan. After Seeds, little of Tenney's music, with the possible exception of For Ann (rising), reflects the gentle side of his nature, and as he matured it could be that he felt the need to put more of this into his work. I think also that Tenney was anxious to leave electronic music, as he did quite decisively soon after, and the writing of the rags was a kind of gentle exorcism of some of his previous ideas. He felt the need to move on, and the rags provided a comfortable and congenial transition.

These three pieces are squarely in the style of classical ragtime. One example of this, aside from the obvious formal and pianistic traits, is the use of melodic figures which are essentially broken chords - as in the various presentations of the "theme" of "Milk and Honey" (Example v.la,b,c) or in the introduction to "Tangled Rag" (Example v.ld).

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Example V.1a

(Milk Hounds; section 1; ms. 1-2)



Example V.1b

(Milk; sect. 1; ms. 5)



Example V.1c

(Milk; sect. 2; ms. 15)



Example V.1d

(Tangled Ram; intro; ms. 1)



But there are several stylistic traits peculiar to Tenney's rags: economical motives which are remarkably prevalent - so much so that the rags could almost be three movements of the same work. One such motif is the harmonic idea of suspending a given pitch over a changing chord. This is present in each of the rags, and entire sections (like the second theme from Raggedy Ann, and the second section from Milk and Honey) are based on this simple but effective idea. This technique is common in traditional ragtime as well, but in these rags it becomes a kind of trademark.

A second common theme is the use of the interval of the second (or ninth), though in this case, unlike its use in Seeds, it is diatonic. A third is the heavy use of chromatic passing and ornamental tones to make what are in reality simple harmonies sound far more interesting. This is of course one of the generative ideas for Tangled Rag, but it is common in the other two as well. One last characteristic, which would not even be worth mentioning were it not for the predominance of its use here, is the prevalence of sequential material in a way that is not quite so frequent or extended in classic ragtime.

Raggedy Ann, is dedicated to Sam and Ann Charters, the latter one of the earliest and finest modern pianists to explore ragtime. (She is also a well-known writer on various American topics, including a biography of Jack Kerouac).

This piece makes by far the most extensive and frequent use of the suspended top note effect, as well as the use of the intervallic second. Also, Tenney seems to be interested in breaking up the rhythmic line in a kind of "hocket" fashion: all of these motives may be seen in the introduction (Example V.2).

The structure of Raggedy Ann is the most sectionalized of the three in the way that it consists of many, small segments rather than a few large ones. After the introduction, there is an eight bar statement of the rather sad,

Example V.2

Introduction

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the introduction of the rag 'Raggedy Ann'. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 2/4. The tempo marking '(not too fast)' is written in parentheses in the left margin. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and chords. The piece concludes with a final chord in the bass staff.

descending theme (Example V.3) lyrically flowing into its disintegration in the final two measures (Example V.4). After a repetition, the second section begins with a more "annunciatory" theme (based on the "suspended" top note), and with a more strongly felt harmonic sense (note that in Example V.5, the tonic appears in root position as opposed to the second inversion, as in the first section). This

Example V.3



Example V.4



Example V.5



entire section is itself tertiary, composed of three sets of repeated four measure themes, the second being a kind of interlude (in the dominant), the first and third exactly the same. The first section then returns (not indicated in the published score, but to my knowledge Tenney has always played it this way), with a final chord modulating to the subdominant. The last section of the work is a full statement of the material of the second section, sixteen measures long, with repeat, that does not include the previous interlude and in other ways differs from the initial "seed", ending on the tonic seventh (or the dominant of the new key). Finally, there is a wonderful eight measure chorale-like coda, reminiscent of the Alcott's movement of Ives' Concord, but in close simple harmonies, which makes use once again of the suspended top note (Example V.6, right hand only).

Example V.6



Milk and Honey, subtitled "Mielle's Rag" for Tenney's daughter (the name related to Romance language words for honey) is perhaps the easiest to play of the set, and structurally the closest to classic ragtime. Its use of what might be called "extended diatonicism" is quite unusual. Even the first chord in the introduction presents a series of suspensions based on the IV chord that are not quite resolved until the last chord (Example V.7).

The piece is in three sections (the last subtitled "Blue Jig"), and it does not return to the first between the second and third. Throughout, there is a successful use of

Example V.7



various techniques for the prolongation, elision or suspension of cadences, as in the alteration of bass lines to delay the subsequent tonic chord (Example V.8a) or the use of deceptive cadences (Example V.8b). In addition, subtle transformation of simple sequences is used to give this piece a flowing, continuous quality. The use of the second, obvious in the very first measure, is also the "theme" of the jig, and is found all through the harmonic texture. The harmonic material, although seemingly quite simple, often conveys a great amount of information in a short space of time and in very few notes, in a way that reminds me of Joplin's great Heliotrope Bouquet (Example V.9a,b). Note the use of a suspended top pitch in the first section (Example V.10) and in the rapid chain of suspensions and harmonies in ms. 8, which later prepares the listener for the basic texture of the second section, in which this becomes the theme. Example V.11, from the Trio (ms. 7-8) is another example of this unusual harmonic motion, both in the Maj 7 to dom 7 progression in measure 7, and in the chromatic movement of measure 8.

Tangled Rag is the most developed and distinctive of the set, and is the closest to being what might be called a modern rag. It is an elaboration of three ideas: the use of

Example V.8a



Example V.8b



Example V.9a

(ms. 14, section 2)

(I VI II V)

Example V.9b

(ms. 19, Scott Joplin "Hokitape Bouquet")

I₄ II₄ IV₄
III of I

Example V.10

(ms. 6)

Example V.11



(1) a simple diatonic three note melodic figure suspended over a (2) continuous triadically related chromatic sixteenth note figure, all in a context of a (3) "latin" (beguine) rhythm:



I have not seen this rhythm used often, if at all, in classical ragtime, but it works well and gives the rag a very distinctive character. Tangled Rag is also the longest of the set. After an introduction which makes use of all the above ideas, the first section states the three note melodic figure (Example V.12a) (note here the frequent use of harmonic suspension as well). This type of three-voice polyphony is a common sonority in classic ragtime, as in the following from Joplin's Elite Syncopations (Example V.12b - first few measures, last section). In Tangled Rag, the first part (in Bb) is divided into two eight bar segments, with the second theme using a sixteenth note descending figure as an elaboration of the first. The second section, also in two parts, begins with a cadenza-like passage (Example V.13), alternating with an intervallic variation of the first theme. Note that the ascending theme of this section is composed of chromatic anticipations, as are most of the melodic figurations in the piece. The second sixteen bar section, like the first, is repeated, and then the first section returns, without a repeat; intact, except for the final measure modulation to the trio (in Eb, but beginning

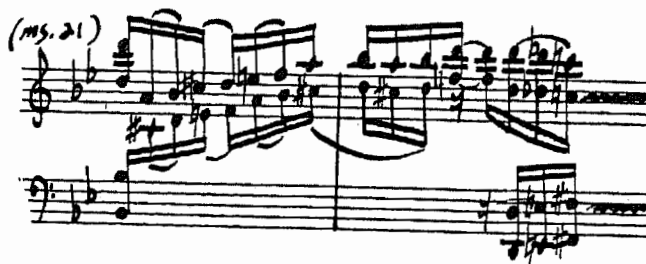
Example V.12a



Example V.12b



Example V.13



on the dominant). The trio is a rhythmic variation on the main theme, with a related dotted rhythm now in the top voice only, and placed slightly out of phase with the steady chromatic bass line accompaniment (Example V.14). In its

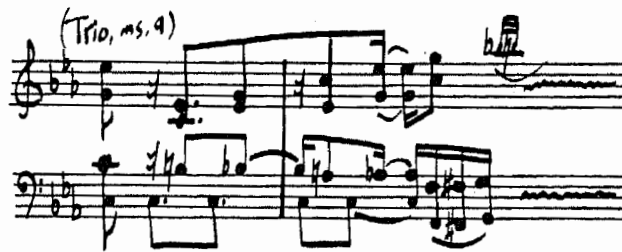
Example V.14



rhythmic usage, this is the most complex section of all the rags, and is unusual for ragtime in general (Example V.15). Harmonically, like the other sections (and indeed the other rags), a chordal analysis would show a rather simple progression, while the extensive use of chromatic passing tones, anticipations and suspensions creates a more complex aural effect.

The final section, after the repeat of the Trio, explores the "filling in" of the dotted rhythm in a conventional way, with the top voice supplying the unaccented notes (Example V.16a,b). The example (V.16b) shows the "resultant" rhythm as well. Here, the melody has been moved into the left hand, and it is almost the same as the initial theme of the first section. It ends quite dramatically, descending from high Ab to low G three octaves below in two and a half measures, and then quickly rising to the final Eb chord.

Example V.15



Example V.16a



Example V.16b

