

ASO75

Uniquely American

*Composers
Who Built
A Nation*



Stephen Mulligan
Associate Conductor



**Atlanta
Symphony
Orchestra**

In this Concert for Young People, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra honors American composers who drew world-wide acclaim for their uniquely American orchestral music. Until the late 19th century, American composers adhered to European examples in an effort to win the respect held by European classical composers.

All that changed when American composers took inspiration from the distinct melodies and rhythms of their own country, tapping into folk traditions and the sounds of the people. In addition, African American composers such as Scott Joplin burst forth with a radical and provocative approach to music that had never been heard before. These American composers found their voices by claiming new ground.

The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra welcomes you to our celebration of these great national composers in its Concert for Young People—“Uniquely American!”

#ConcertsForYoungPeople

#MulliganConductor

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Scott Joplin and the Queen City Concert Band in 1888.



The American Style of George Whitefield Chadwick



George Whitefield Chadwick (1854-1931) was born in Massachusetts. He began performing and earning a salary as an organist as a boy. When his father disapproved of his musical ambitions, Chadwick paid his own way to be a student at the New England Conservatory. He pursued his studies all the way to Europe—and returned to Boston as a professional organist, conductor, and composer of choral and orchestral music. He also returned to the New England Conservatory as a faculty member and, eventually, as its director.

From his classical training in Germany, Chadwick had adopted a Romantic style that was hugely influenced by the Czech composer Antonín Dvořák. A Romantic style was characterized by sweeping arrangements that evoke passionate emotions and ideas. Dvořák had spent several years in the United States and was famous for insisting that the future of “American-sounding” orchestral music could be found in the roots of African American spirituals and work songs. Chadwick took that advice to heart and began listening to the people.

Chadwick’s Symphonic Sketches, the Jubilee Movement

Chadwick began his *Symphonic Sketches*, including the Jubilee movement, in 1895. “I determined to make it American in style—as I understood the term,” he wrote. Without specifying what “American style” might mean, Chadwick composed the work with an emphasis on rhythm and syncopation, as well as dramatic mood shifts from joy to serenity to seriousness, as is sometimes typical of the American spirit.

In Chadwick’s score, the Jubilee movement is preceded by a poem that reads:

*No cool gray tones for me!
Give me the warmest red and green,
A cornet and a tambourine,
To paint MY Jubilee!
For when pale flutes and oboes play,
To sadness I become a prey;
Give me the violets and the May,
But no gray skies for me!*



The American Drive of Amy Beach

Amy Beach (1867-1944) was born Amy Cheney in New Hampshire. A child prodigy, she made her professional debut as a pianist at the age of 16 with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. A few months later, Cheney married Dr. Henry Beach and, at his request, limited her concert career to only a few annual charity performances.

Beach was largely self-taught as a composer. She immersed herself in the library of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, learning to compose by studying and memorizing great musical scores—and by translating significant literary works on modern music and instrumentation.

In 1896, the premiere of her *Gaelic Symphony* immediately established Beach as a major American composer and the work was instantly recognized as the first symphony composed by an American woman to actually be performed anywhere in the world.

Like Chadwick, Beach was influenced by Dvořák in quoting folk songs in her work. The music of black Americans, however, was foreign to her.

“We of the North,” she wrote, “should be far more likely to be influenced by the old English, Scotch, or Irish songs inherited with our literature from our ancestors.” Irish music was thoroughly in the American mainstream and could be heard in parlors and on vaudeville stages. Beach’s “Gaelic” Symphony includes traditional Irish melodies and original folk-inspired songs she wrote. In addition, the instrumental accompaniment sometimes imitates the drone of bag-pipes. Beach intended her “Gaelic” Symphony to capture not only the music but also the sufferings and struggles of the Irish people, “their laments...their romance, and their dreams.” With the success of her “Gaelic” Symphony, Beach went on to compose works that included Native American and African American songs as well.



SCOTT JOPLIN: KING OF RAGTIME

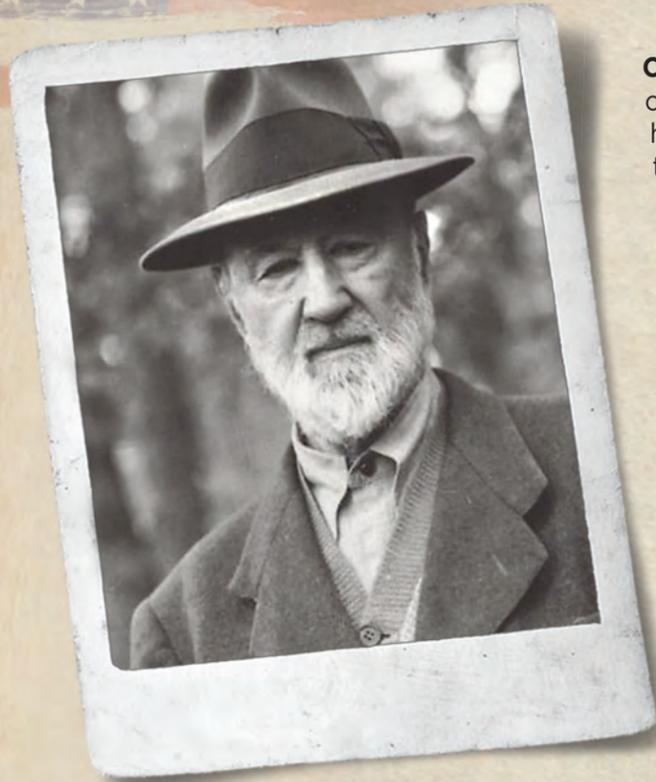
Scott Joplin (1868-1917) changed the world.

Born between Texas and Arkansas, Joplin took up the piano as a child. As a teen, he became a travelling musician, playing piano in saloons late into the evening. Joplin immersed himself in the emerging musical form known as ragtime.

Joplin considered ragtime to be a serious and permanent development in music. His genius and good fortune was to carry ragtime from the nightclubs into the daylight. He had written an enormous hit called “The Maple Leaf Rag”—and had transcribed its tricky rhythms onto the printed page. Despite being a black composer, Joplin secured an atypical business deal with a white publisher and received a percentage for each sale of sheet music. “The Maple Leaf Rag” sold like gangbusters and more followed. Across America, Joplin’s rags were played on parlor pianos and instrumental versions were performed by small bands. Ragtime became the rage for almost two decades. Joplin became known as the King of Ragtime.

Despite respect and popularity, Joplin was never fully included in white society. He performed in venues where African Americans had limited access—and he himself had trouble securing funding for future projects. He did however open the door for black musicians and artists to succeed in a racially segregated nation.

The American Spirit of Charles Ives



Charles Ives (1874-1954) has been called the most “American” of all composers because of his maverick, trailblazing spirit. He had his own vision for American music and dedicated himself to that purpose for the duration of his career. The result is a body of work that is both unique and yet as familiar as a childhood tune.

Born in a small town in Connecticut, Ives studied the piano and other instruments with his father from the age of five years old. At 14, he had become the youngest paid church organist in the state. As a teenager, he began composing marches and fiddle tunes. In fact, *Variations on “America,”* his signature work, was composed when he was 17.



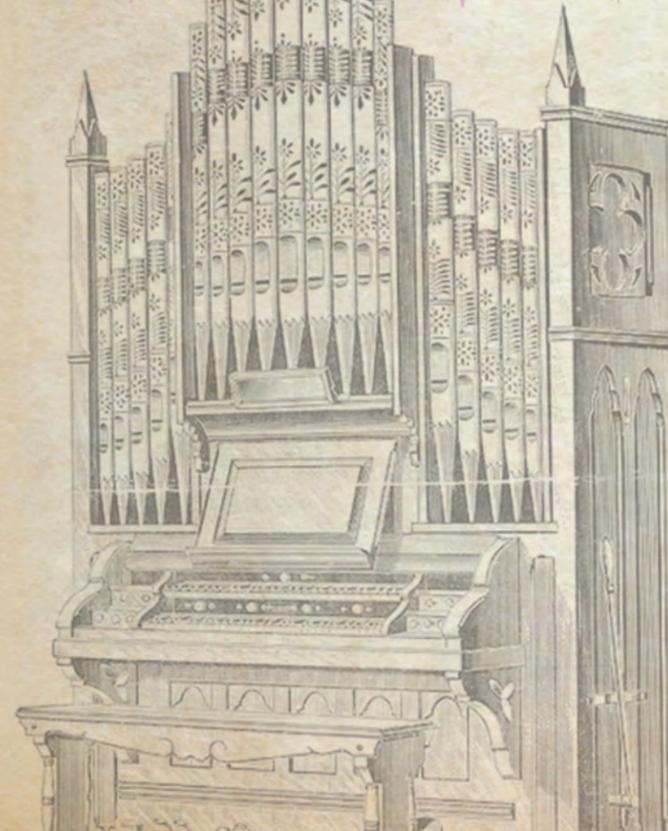
In his youth, Ives developed an abiding respect for the power of everyday music of all kinds—popular songs, camp songs, church hymns, marching bands, bell chimes, and bugle calls. He associated music of the common people with profound emotions and ideals. For Ives, music was not mere sound but an underlying spirit that expresses itself even when performed or sung by common folks. Ives once said, “music is life.”

Despite these humanistic convictions, Ives’s creative output was largely carried out in private. For two decades, his work was consistently rejected as laughable or outrageous. Ives was a composer who never made a living from his music. Instead, he supported himself by selling life insurance. It wasn’t until late in his career that Ives received recognition and esteem when he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his *Symphony No. 3*. Since his death, he has been recognized as one of the great American composers.



Ives’ *Variations on “America”*

Ives’s *Variations on “America”* is an arrangement of a traditional tune, known as “America (My Country, ‘Tis of Thee)” Ives created the work for a Fourth of July celebration in 1892 at the Methodist church where he was organist. The piece was later arranged as an orchestral work by American composer William Schuman. Although the piece is considered challenging by organists, Ives spoke of it as being “almost as much fun as playing baseball.”



JOPLIN: RAGTIME

Ragtime is a uniquely American musical phenomenon. Led by Joplin, ragtime swept America for two decades, from the mid 1890’s into the early 1900’s, to the extent it created an attitude and defined the era beyond its music. Ragtime excited young people and threatened adults in the staid polite society, much as rock ‘n roll, heavy metal, jazz, hip-hop, rap, and other genres have today.

The roots of ragtime go back to honky-tonk piano players improvising in bars and saloons along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers in the late 1890’s. These musicians were mostly self-taught and largely uneducated, including former slaves, hill folk of Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Carolinas, and minstrel-troupe performers. The key ingredient of ragtime is syncopation, a rhythmic style used to propel the melody against a steady stride in the bass-line. One can also hear the bouncy influence of minstrel songs, banjo styles, and fiddle music such as jigs and reels. To the general public, “ragtime” was the peppy, energetic, syncopated treatment of any type of music.

In the early 1900’s, ragtime was everywhere—parlors, piano rolls, music boxes, and vaudeville shows—but it also had its critics. Some described ragtime as “unmusical rot,” “musical trash,” and “double-jointed jumping jack airs that fairly twist the ears of an educated musician from their anchorage.” One critic wrote: “The counters of the music stores are loaded with this virulent poison which, in the form of a malarious epidemic, is finding its way into the homes and brains of the youth to such an extent as to arouse one’s suspicions of their sanity.”

Such criticism only sent young people flocking to ragtime in droves.



The Plot of *Treemonisha*

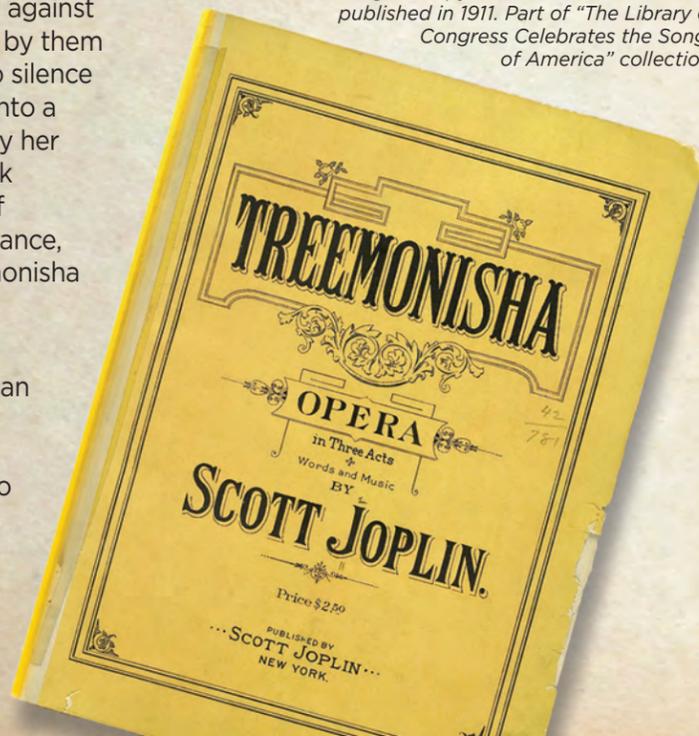
Treemonisha is a young black woman who lives on a former slave plantation in 1884.

As a baby, she was found under a spreading tree by two former slaves who adopted her as their own and named her "Treemonisha." She has been educated to read and write and applies herself to the world as a free thinker. Her community, however, is riddled with con men who prey on the ignorance and superstition of the townspeople to make them believe in fake magic.

When Treemonisha speaks out against the con men, she is kidnapped by them and disappears. Their plan is to silence Treemonisha by throwing her into a wasp nest but she is rescued by her friend Remus and brought back to safety. Realizing the value of education and the risk of ignorance, the community chooses Treemonisha to be their teacher and leader.

Thematically, *Treemonisha* deals with the conflicts in African American culture at the end of the 19th century. The desire of African Americans to move into mainstream American society was challenged by the cultural pull of the old African ways and superstitions.

Original copy of the *Treemonisha* score published in 1911. Part of "The Library of Congress Celebrates the Songs of America" collection.



The Story Behind Joplin's *Treemonisha*

Joplin wrote *Treemonisha*, the first opera about post-slavery life by a black person, in 1910. Musically, the work fused classical, folk, and gospel, and bore ragtime's syncopations. Thematically, it was way ahead of its time.

Joplin himself paid for a piano-vocal score to be published in 1911. A magazine review of the score praised it as an "entirely new phase of musical art and...a thoroughly American opera (style)." Despite the praise, Joplin never saw the work fully staged during his lifetime. He staged a reading in 1915 for potential backers in New York with himself at the piano—but the backers were not interested.

Two years later, Joplin died and was buried in a pauper's grave, bankrupted by the cost of publishing *Treemonisha*.

The opera was considered lost and forgotten until 1970 when the score was rediscovered. The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra mounted the world premiere in 1972, in a joint production with the music department of Morehouse College, using the orchestration by Dr. T. J. Anderson. The performance was directed by the celebrated black choreographer Katherine Dunham, and conducted by Robert Shaw, one of the first major American conductors to hire both black and white singers for his chorale. The production drew rave reviews from audiences and critics—and remains a memorable highlight in the history of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra.

The opera occupies a special place in American history, with a heroine who seeks to lead her people out of ignorance and superstition. For this aspect alone, the opera has been seen as an early voice for civil rights causes, notably the importance of education, literacy, knowledge, and community solidarity to African American advancement.



What to Listen For in *Treemonisha's* Overture

Joplin's ambition was for *Treemonisha* to be both a serious opera in the European tradition and an entertaining piece of music. While some call it a "ragtime opera," Joplin drew on ragtime only in the dance episodes to convey "racial character." The music also reflects Joplin's childhood and creates a valuable record of rural Southern black music from the 1870s-1890s, re-created by someone who was actually there.



JOPLIN: SYNCOPATION

In musical terms, ragtime creates excitement due to the use of syncopation—which instills a sense of excitement and spontaneity into the music that was not otherwise familiar to the general public before the 1890's. Syncopation results from displacing the beat from its regular and assumed course of meter. The effect is that syncopation triggers an impulse to swing and sway with a musical looseness that was generally unknown at the time. Young people loved it and conservative adults did not know how to react.

Counted in 2-4 time, syncopation delivers a "short-long-short" feel, with a fourth sound added for grounding.



In ragtime, syncopation may be simple—and grow increasingly varied and complex.

As popular music, ragtime was completely replaced by the emergence of jazz in the 1920's. It is clear, however, that jazz would never have been able to swing the beat if ragtime had not first introduced syncopation to the public.



JAMES PRICE JOHNSON:

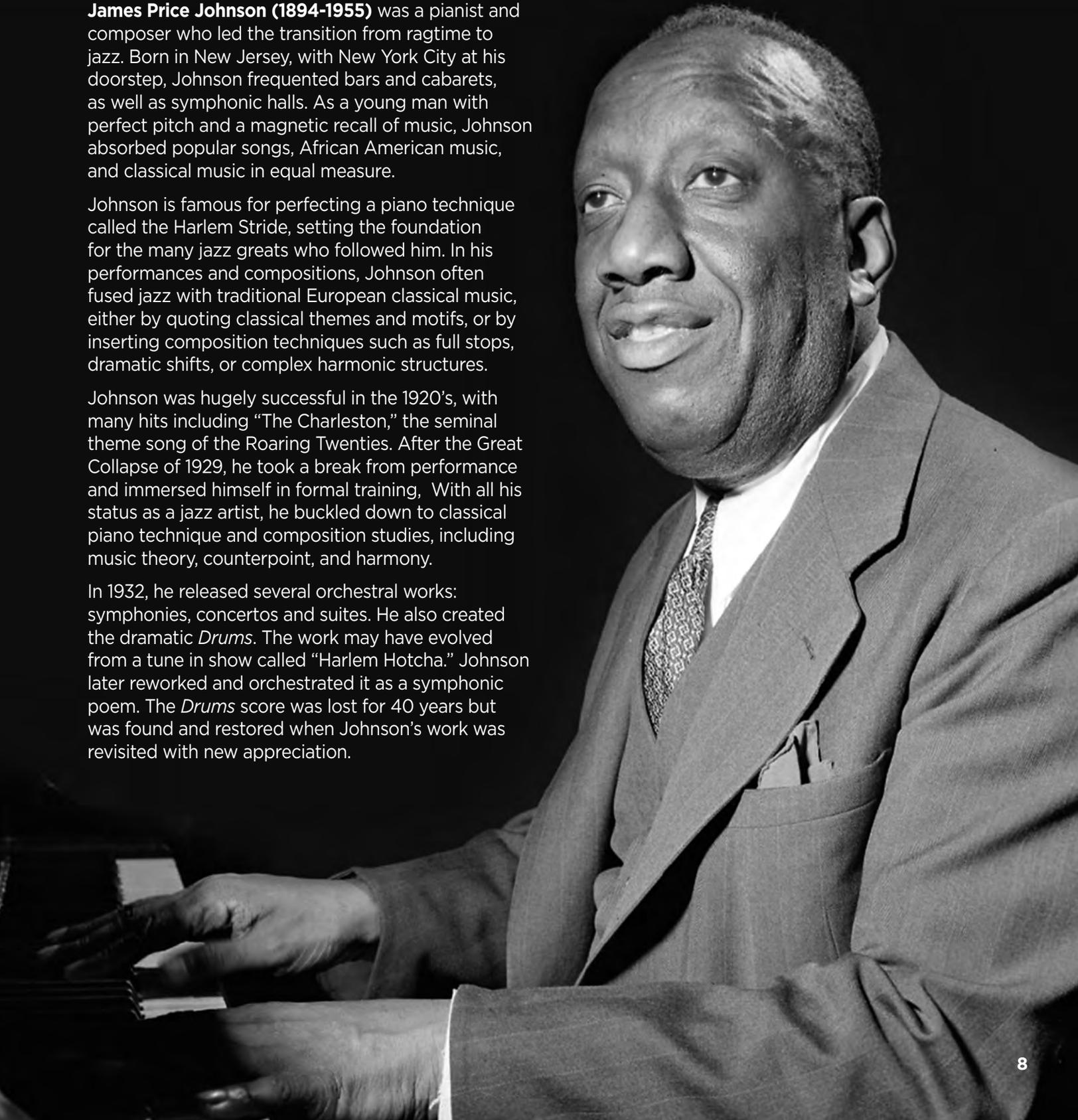
From Jazz to Ragtime

James Price Johnson (1894-1955) was a pianist and composer who led the transition from ragtime to jazz. Born in New Jersey, with New York City at his doorstep, Johnson frequented bars and cabarets, as well as symphonic halls. As a young man with perfect pitch and a magnetic recall of music, Johnson absorbed popular songs, African American music, and classical music in equal measure.

Johnson is famous for perfecting a piano technique called the Harlem Stride, setting the foundation for the many jazz greats who followed him. In his performances and compositions, Johnson often fused jazz with traditional European classical music, either by quoting classical themes and motifs, or by inserting composition techniques such as full stops, dramatic shifts, or complex harmonic structures.

Johnson was hugely successful in the 1920's, with many hits including "The Charleston," the seminal theme song of the Roaring Twenties. After the Great Collapse of 1929, he took a break from performance and immersed himself in formal training. With all his status as a jazz artist, he buckled down to classical piano technique and composition studies, including music theory, counterpoint, and harmony.

In 1932, he released several orchestral works: symphonies, concertos and suites. He also created the dramatic *Drums*. The work may have evolved from a tune in show called "Harlem Hotcha." Johnson later reworked and orchestrated it as a symphonic poem. The *Drums* score was lost for 40 years but was found and restored when Johnson's work was revisited with new appreciation.





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With Deepest Gratitude



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