

Godowsky's Genre Cocktail

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Leopold Godowsky (1870–1938) conflates two genres in his 1919 “A Little Tango Rag” from the cycle *Triakontameron*. Both these idioms are in duple meter: they are notated in 2/4 or, less often, 4/4. (The difference between the two idioms can be crudely summarized as follows: in ragtime, the right hand syncopates against an even pulse in the left hand, whereas in tango, the left hand has a characteristic dotted or syncopated pattern.) The subtitle of *Triakontameron*, however, *Thirty Moods and Scenes in Triple Meter*, tells us that the piece is a mash-up of three elements: tango, rag, and waltz time. Granted, earlier composers had combined ragtime and waltz, and ragtime and tango. I am confident, nonetheless, that Godowsky’s was the first tango rag in waltz time—and likely remains the last! Before we examine it, though, let’s explore some connections between rag, waltz, and tango, and Godowsky’s relationships with these genres.



Leopold Godowsky

of rag rhythm, seems to express nostalgia for the ragtime era itself.

Artie Matthews preserved an authentic ragtime sensibility in his series of five “Pastime Rags,” while introducing such experimental techniques as handclaps, tone clusters, and a bass pattern later known as boogie-woogie. (Even when Matthews does employ the traditional ragtime bass pattern, he often relieves it with a scale or a legato phrase.) The third “Pastime” opens with a heavy tango rhythm. The chromatic melody of the fifth, however, boasts not just the rhythm, but also the salty character of the tango. Whether in Argentina or St. Louis, we find ourselves in a dive! Other examples of Latin ragtime include Joplin’s “Solace” and Will Tyers’s “Panama.”

Godowsky’s connection with waltz was lifelong and evident—“Alt Wien,” also from the *Triakontameron*, was his most popular original piece. His “Symphonic Metamorphoses” of Strauss waltzes are legendary for their contrapuntal density. (In one passage of his *Fledermaus*, he manages to superimpose three waltz tunes!) As for tango, only a few years after creating the “Little Tango Rag,” Godowsky would, in effect, co-compose the most famous of piano tangos. In Albeniz’s original version of the *Tango in D*, from *España*, Op. 165, insinuating melodies and piquant turns of harmony are imprisoned in thin, uninteresting piano textures. Godowsky’s “concert transcription” liberates Albeniz’s material. It is possible to consider some of Godowsky’s transcriptions irreverent and trivializing. Here, however, his enriched, contrapuntal treatment turns the tango into the piece Albeniz should have composed.

Born in Poland, Godowsky early adopted American as his country. He was fourteen when he made his first tour of the United States, and he became a citizen in 1891. In 1924, he announced that he was planning to compose a musical picture of America using jazz elements, but never did so. While Godowsky did transcribe the national anthem for piano, the tune itself—British in origin—has no American character. Godowsky observed, though, that several pieces in the *Triakontameron* reflect the American influence, and in the tango rag, “I think I have secured the real syncopated effects in three-quarter time.” This piece—a mixture of three idioms—is itself a tiny melting pot, and remains Godowsky’s most overtly American work.

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Detroit ragtimer Harry P. Guy proudly proclaimed his “Echoes from the Snowball Club” to be the “original ragtime waltz.” This piece, which presents typical ragtime syncopation adapted to 3/4 time, appeared in 1898—a single year after the first published rag (William Krell’s “Mississippi Rag”). While we can assume that players were already ragging pre-existing waltzes (and every other conceivable kind of music), Guy’s charming piece is likely indeed to have been the first published rag waltz. But Joplin’s 1905 “Bethena: A Concert Waltz,” by virtue of its warmth and variety of melodic contours, is the supreme rag waltz. In his classic Joplin biography, Edward Berlin suggests that this tender piece may have been a memorial to Joplin’s first wife, who had died about six months earlier. “Bethena” was brought out by a small publisher—it was not famous in its own day. To posterity, “Bethena,” with its gentle tempering