

“Model Composition” Revisited: The Ragtime Project

BY BRUCE CAMPBELL

“Theory without practice, as I have said before, is of small value, since music does not consist only of theory and is imperfect without practice. This is obvious enough. Yet some theorists, treating of certain musical matters without having a good command of the practice, have spoken much nonsense and committed a thousand errors. On the other hand, some who have relied only on practice without knowing the reasons behind it have unwittingly perpetrated thousands upon thousands of idiocies in their compositions.”¹

Gioseffo Zarlino

BACKGROUND

Model composition is the writing of music based consciously upon a pre-existent example of style, form, or both. It has a long and honorable history as a technique to develop students’ sensitivity to masterworks and to help them arrive at some objectivity about their own attainments. The practice is not limited to music. In the study of English literature, it is common for students to try their hands at writing a Shakespearean sonnet. The formal conventions are simple enough to recall, but the degree to which students may reflect varying degrees of responsiveness to language, literary conceit, and the Elizabethan world-view varies considerably. In the visual arts, one finds students in museums seated by masterworks, faithfully copying them to the minutest detail. That the casual museum-goer may easily observe how large is the gap between the student’s limited fruit of applied observation and the original does not demean the value of the exercise to the student’s acquisition of technical skill.

¹Gioseffo Zarlino, *The Art of Counterpoint*. Part Three of *De Institutioni Harmoniche*, 1558. Translated by Guy A. Marco and Claude Palisca (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968) pp. 226-7.

Model composition persists in courses of stylistic counterpoint, in which students attempt a genteel forgery of Palestrina or J. S. Bach as expressed in the saying, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. If a phrase does not sound quite like Palestrina or Bach, then try to articulate as precisely as possible, where does the divergence occur? How might the passage be improved? It might be quite a large distance between identifying a weakness and applying a cure, but it is a crucial step. Counterpoint courses are no longer routine for all music students. Students in freshman or sophomore classes may never get the opportunity to compose in some manner that is conditioned by the norms of tonality upon which so much of their curriculum is focussed. Indeed, many are denied any sort of creative-synthetic opportunity at all in theory classes.

In the words of Marcel Dupré, the distinguished composer and organist:

“If you speak of music, the phrase ‘heritage of the past’ is thoroughly misleading. At the least you must perceive that heritage as a living force in our midst, like a lovely garden we have inherited from our forebears and which we now cultivate ourselves, and not like a wilted flower pressed to dry between the pages of a book. It is always the same garden — yet with variations in the strength of its foliage and in the cycle of its seasons.”²

If we examine the so-called Attwood studies,³ the notebooks of Englishman Thomas Attwood who studied with Mozart, we see a progression from species counterpoint to small-scale pieces of free composition such as minuets and variations. The minuet is very remote to most students today, yet its lessons about phrase-building and motive-handling are regarded as still important: witness the

² cited in: Michael Murray, *Marcel Dupré* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985), p. 126.

³ The Attwood Studies, K485a (506a) are available in the *Neue Mozart Ausgabe*, Serie X, Werkgruppe 30, Band I (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1965)

incorporation of the phrase model schema in recent textbooks.⁴ You may have some eager students with a sense of the characteristics of the minuet gained from exposure in studio lessons or ensembles. But without a fairly specific floor plan, the majority will founder while others will adhere unimaginatively closely to one piece they fix upon from the small handful of idealized introductory examples that the instructor provides. When students feel unsure of how to proceed, they often describe themselves as *confused* when they are in fact *unfamiliar*. Their experience in problem-solving has been slight and their motivation to widen their knowledge base of the Western canon may be small. The professoriate has the seemingly quixotic, or at times, Sisyphean task of encouraging conscientious critical thinking and industrious independent effort that has historically been central to the experience of higher education. This is more necessary than ever as the the prospects for musical employment continue to diminish alarmingly: we need to impart the thinking tools that will be expected of a college graduate that are only rarely presented systematically in the studio or rehearsal hall. The liberal education of the music major takes place largely in theory and music history classes.

In the words of Joseph W. Polisi, current president of the Juilliard School:

“Vocational education, to my mind, prepares someone to work on a specific task—let’s say, fixing brake linings. We all want our brake linings to work; somebody needs to do it, and I hope they’re paid well. But their job is to repair brake linings, not to design the brakes, and not to come up with new ideas about how to stop cars in general. That’s what distinguishes an artistic education... We’re talking about creativity, imagination, the human experience.”⁵

⁴ See, for example, Part III of Clendinning, Jane and Betsy Marvin, *The Musician’s Guide to Theory and Analysis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), and Chapters 12, 17 and 18 in Steven G. Laitz, *The Complete Musician*, Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁵ Joseph W. Polisi, President of the Juilliard School, as interviewed by Paul Kawak, reported in the *Juilliard Journal*, Vol. XXI No. 8 (May 2006), p.4 .

Students enter college regarding music as an *activity*, not a *subject*.⁶ Composing is an activity that intrigues a great many students, whereas any form of analysis is an abstraction. Tell students that it's extremely common for the contrasting tonal area in a sonata-form movement in the major mode to be in the dominant and they may wonder aloud what difference that makes to a convincing performance. Ask them to write a short sonatina movement however, and they will discover that phrase structure and modulation are vital to a result that is worth listening to. Using compositional activity to reinforce broad tonal concepts is a powerful way to make music theory more engaging to average students, and to excite the energetic and talented ones. Of course the amount of true originality in student works may be scant, but like fingerprints or snowflakes (so I'm told), each one is different, therefore singular, and much more appealing than devising an acceptable solution to a voice-leading exercise. And practically speaking, workbook exercises are fast becoming obsolete as solutions may be retrieved from the internet.

A class in music history is a knowledge-based course, a class in music theory, a skills-based course.⁷ Students often erroneously assume that the classroom format dictates a similar approach to materials. They find that cramming for the exam doesn't seem to work as well for the theory class, not because, as noted above, they are confused, but unfamiliar, as if they took their places onstage for a dress rehearsal and attempted to sight-read their parts. The apt metaphor for a theory class is the private studio lesson. Centuries-

⁶ Having just emerged from secondary school, the music-education major may have a quite fixed idea of what that profession requires. Maintaining band uniforms, devising half-time shows and above all, ensuring that students are entertained sufficiently in rehearsals so as not to drop out of the ensemble seem far more central than fluency in the application of music theory. The term music education is a misnomer for music participation. However, it is understandable why advocates for the fine arts have urged its use: participation is what one does in extra-curricular activities, like sports; education is supposed to entail learning, although one finds many entering freshman to be ignorant of terms such as tonic and dominant!

⁷ The term "skills" seems permanently fixed in edspeak, although it deserves to be rehabilitated. The reader is directed to the remarkably insightful and still relevant Preface to *Counterpoint in Composition* by Felix Salzer and Carl Schachter (New York: McGraw Hill, 1969), which points out "the general neglect of musical techniques, for all too long condescendingly called 'skills.'" (p. viii)

old economic exigencies place the study of music theory into a classroom, an unfortunate compromise. How far would students progress if their instrumental or vocal study consisted entirely of group lessons?⁸ No performer advances without practicing, no matter how insightful the instructor.

A consequence of the fairly-recent separation of music theory from composition has been that traditional tonal craft, like species counterpoint and figured bass, is not well mastered even by those who believe it to be an indispensable prerequisite to Schenkerian analysis.⁹

The challenge to adherents of model composition is to find some practical entry-point to the creative usage of musical materials. The minuet may be too remote, yet urging students to express themselves in any style with which they feel comfortable results too often in a simulacrum of some top 40s ballad, remarkably unrelated to the consistent tonal usage they encounter daily in the repertoire of their lessons and ensembles (and theory classes).

I have found that compositional activity, which in the domain of model composition has at its core applied voice leading (although

⁸ Determined to apply the knowledge-based template, students evaluate instructors, equilibrating clear with easy to proceed, just as the word tricky is used to mean difficult. Therefore many students prefer the factoid approach of multiple choice tests. As in the studio lesson, theory students must rehearse repeatedly and regularly to retain and apply concepts, and to develop accuracy and speed. In comparing the skills- and knowledge-based courses, the homework load upon the instructor is disproportionate. Grading, let alone correcting student papers of any quantity and frequency interferes with scholarly output in comparison to a course whose so-called assessments may consist of midterm and final examinations, and maybe a brief paper. The shift to musical analysis as the goal for a complete professional education is an understandable response to institutional policies.

⁹ A theorist is rated in academia as engaged in substantive research by writing an article about a fugue, whereas demonstrating competence by actually writing a fugue is not significant. That the writing of prose has supplanted the writing of music by persons whose principal responsibility is imparting musicianship is historically incredible. For, as Carl Schachter has observed, "From Pythagoras on, most of the people who have made an enduring contribution to theory have been more than theorists... If, with some of them, music theory reaches the level of 'art'... , it is partly because they were deeply involved with music in all of its important manifestations and were able to make theory another vehicle for artistic expression." (Schachter, Carl E. "Diversity and the Decline of Literacy in Music Theory," *College Music Society Symposium*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Spring 1977, p. 150.)

it will involve many additional decisions), can be introduced to all music theory students through a distinctly American genre that has never lost its popularity: ragtime. Ragtime, unlike so many tonal styles unfortunately, is instantly recognized by undergraduates, and its greatest exponent, Scott Joplin, is a musical household name. Joplin supplies an alternative to European composers, which is ideologically important to some, yet, thanks to his fastidiousness, his works hew to the harmonic and voice-leading norms of what has been called common-practice music.¹⁰ What might appear to be its formal limitation, the rigid use of sixteen-measure sections, is a valuable constraint for beginners as it allows them to concentrate upon the content rather than upon the form of their music. The phrase model enumerates the most basic elements of phrase design, found in utterances both hideous and sublime. Locating its components is rather like identifying the subject and predicate verb in a declarative sentence: they are necessary elements of structure but are devoid of art. Both the music of Beethoven and a forgettable pop song contain cadences, and their aural recognition needs to be drilled, but that is not theory, only the beginning. It is the content that has been slighted by the recent emphasis upon analysis. Model composition is an extension of the technique of the *cantus firmus*, now applied to phrase-lengths and to the harmonic progressions within phrases.

The history of ragtime is fascinating, as are the biographies of its leading composers, and as are various experimental offshoots and derivatives.¹¹ Yet we must use our limited time in the classroom to focus solely upon the construction of music in reasonable facsimile. This means that we shall generalize and establish normative procedures based upon representative works by Joplin, much as there are reasonable prerequisites of understanding prior to writing a Palestrina-style motet or a Bach invention.

¹⁰ In the late twentieth century, it became fashionable again to take ragtime seriously, albeit in the academy: most notable are the rags by William Albright and William Bolcom. A study of their contributions would sidetrack progress toward the goal of emulating a style as embodied in the works of a single composer. However, talented and adventurous students might be stimulated by them as examples of successful ongoing vivification.

¹¹ Igor Stravinsky's *Ragtime* of 1918 comes to mind immediately, and there are many other works in thrall to European conceptions of American rhythmic innovation.

THE PROJECT

This project will review and reinforce these ideas:

- cadences
- period structure
- sentence structure
- the harmonic paradigm of tonic, dominant preparation, and cadence (the phrase model)
- the oscillating or arpeggiated $\frac{6}{4}$ chord
- common uses of applied (secondary) dominant-function chords, principally V^7/V and vii^{o7}/V preceding a cadential $\frac{6}{4}$
- notation and score preparation

Additionally, it will encourage experimentation with motives and repetitions of patterns, but this is a vehicle to animate the progress of the phrase and suggest passing harmonies and so is informally treated. That is, I do not put forward a type of motivic procedure specific to ragtime (beyond the obvious submetrical syncopations, which are mentioned below). It will be invaluable if students have been given a thorough exposure to motive as does Chapter 16 of Laitz's *The Complete Musician*.¹² The pedagogical works on Arnold Schoenberg written in Los Angeles are indispensable in this regard, and will be taken up later.

¹² cited already in footnote 4, p. 364ff.

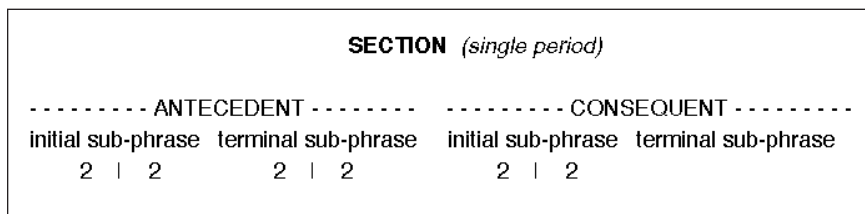
REPERTOIRE

Reference is made to these works, and students should be provided (or be instructed to provide themselves) with scores.¹³ At least the first three works should be studied carefully. To use only one example runs a great risk that students will mimic it too closely.

- The Entertainer (first section)
- The Easy Winners (first section, entire piece recommended)
- Wall Street Rag (entire piece)
- Magnetic Rag (optional, but entire piece valuable as “pushing the envelope”)
- Elite Syncopations (optional)

TERMINOLOGY

Examples used for discussion below refer to a 16-measure structure as a section. The section is *divided* into two phrases of equal length, an antecedent and a consequent. Within this general scheme, some common variants occur. Often the phrases are *subdivided* into two four-measure sub-phrases: an initial sub-phrase and a terminal one. The sub-phrase can be divided furthermore into two-measure units (a half-sub-phrase?) as famously in the first section of *The Entertainer*. Here is a visual summary.



Example 1 - One possible design of a section (with nestings)

Is there any word in the classroom deadlier than hierarchy? Instructors can't seem to stop themselves from using it, but frequently don't stop to define it. Such a concept may make sense to students if they perceive it in a straightforward example of phrase

¹³ Lawrence, Vera Brodsky ed. *Scott Joplin Collected Piano Works*, New York: The New York Public Library, 1971. The works are in the public domain and widely available, for example online at the International Music Score Library Project: <http://imslp.org>

organization. (Arcs could be added to the above diagram to show nesting.) Later, it can be extended by analogy to longer phrases and formal divisions.

It is common for students to be given a working definition of a musical period as a unit consisting of at least two phrases, the last of which has a relatively *more* conclusive cadence than the previous one(s). The strict application of such a definition would yield analyses of some ragtime sections as double periods, and others as lacking periodic form at all. (For example, the first and third sub-phrases, that is, the two initial sub-phrases in the first section of *The Entertainer* may be analyzed as ending with perfect authentic cadences.) A preference for describing phrase organization according to harmonic criteria, along with a passion for rigor, may obscure the obvious commonsensical design by thematic association. Similar issues arise with the 32-measure song form. When a fixed length is expected by the listener, fussiness about internal cadential hierarchy can be misleading or irrelevant.

FORM

The basic plan of a ragtime piece comprises four 16-measure sections. Each section is sensibly understood as a single period. Four of these periods, with obligatory repeats, are strung together for a 144-measure composition, yielding an A–A–B–B–C–C–D–D design. Most commonly, sections A and B are in the tonic; C and D are a (perfect) fifth below, so a natural division into two equal halves occurs, as shown in Example 2. This practice recalls the American march form as perfected by John Philip Sousa in which the so-called *trio* section is a fifth below the initial key. One hesitates to describe the later key as the subdominant, for the harmonic relationship could just as easily be V to I as I to IV. The term *trio* is a misleading at best, for the final section of a rag (or a march) generally has a triumphant quality, and is the loudest segment. This practice is quite apart from the *trio* as in the compound-ternary minuet and trio (or scherzo and trio) of the European concert tradition in which *trio* denotes a thinner texture, simpler harmonies, and the character of a contrasting, subordinate interlude.

It is nearly obligatory to begin the piece with a four-measure introduction elaborating a simple tonic-to-dominant progression, and which often repeats a one-measure motive. Originally, ragtime was a dance form and the introduction alerted the dancers to get

into position. Although many A sections begin with an eighth-note upbeat, the introduction never does. (A common student error begins the introduction with an upbeat.) A fine example is *Wall Street Rag* (1909).

Part One		Part Two	
section 1 (A)	section 2 (B)	section 3 (C)	section 4 (D)
8 + 8	8 + 8	8 + 8	8 + 8
"tonic"		"subdominant"	

Example 2 - Typical design of a ragtime piece

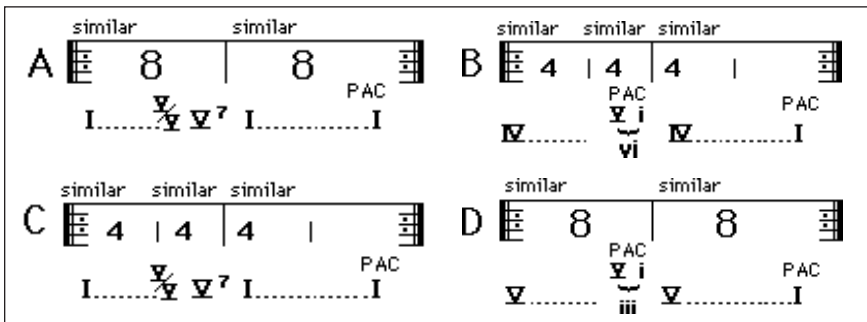
A slightly more complicated scheme brings back section A without repeat after section B. The common procedure may be diagrammed as intro-A-A-B-B-A-trans-C-C-D-D. Less common than an introduction is the four-measure transition between the halves. Sometimes these four measures of transition are modulatory, especially if the upcoming key-area is not a fifth below the initial tonic, and occasionally they are properly an introduction to the second half and written entirely in its key-area. A clear example is *The Easy Winners*.

It will assist students to think in terms of modules or units of structure if measure numbers are applied to support them. The introduction will have four measures, which can be referenced as intro-1, intro-2, and so on. Each section will have 16, so begin each with the number one (A-1 is the first measure of the first section, B-1 is the first measures of the second section, and so on). Then "measure 8" will refer to the last measure of the antecedent in nearly all cases. In referring to scores in this paper, I shall use conventional numbering, but later, in describing a student project, I shall use this structural numbering. This may appear to be a very small point, but when a student is working at something new, literally nothing comes easily, or rather, it is efficient to attempt to reduce the possibility for a mix-up.

There are general characteristics that we can observe about each of these sections. The A section generally has the most memorable tune, and often is less regular in terms of thematic organization than subsequent periods. A contrasting period is not unusual. The B section invariably begins with a chord other than the tonic, and it is generally less assertive than the A section, although its final cadence is very strong. The C section usually begins in a lower

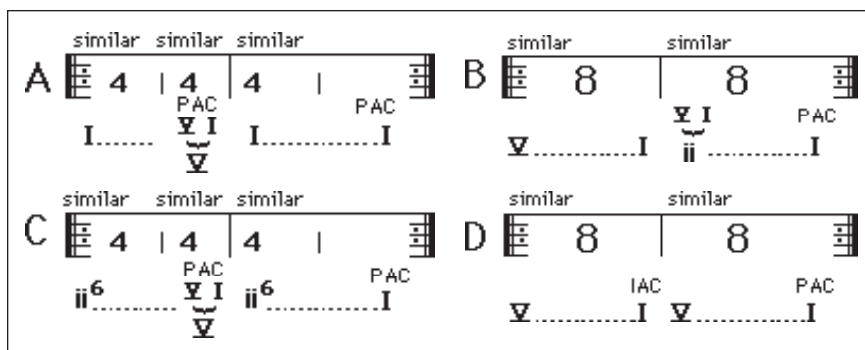
tessitura than the preceding two sections. This move heightens the contrast obtained by the shift to the new key-area, which locally at least, sounds like a relaxation into the subdominant. Finally, the D section returns to the register of the A section (or higher), and is bright, even raucous, for a sprightly and rousing conclusion.

Here are basic diagrams with greater detail for two pedagogically-useful rags. That for *Wall Street Rag* is more detailed than Example 2, which omitted the thematic subdivision of section C in order to reinforce the antecedent-consequent pairing. When students digest and hear that, then the notion of thematic hierarchy (the use of sentence structure) can be more readily perceived. Initially, many students assume a period and a sentence are mutually exclusive. Sometimes this is a desire for simplification (rather than understanding), but we might say it is also a democratic bias, as when students infer that chord-inversions are, or even maybe ought to be treated (and used in exercises) equally. (What have you got against the $\frac{6}{4}$ chord anyway?)¹⁴



Example 3 - Overall design of *Wall Street Rag* (1909)

¹⁴ Graduate classes composed largely of international students easily recognize how the democratic bias inhibits an understanding of hierarchy, and they have less trouble with it. Even more indicative of American culture to them is the frequency of clichés based upon violent metaphors. In Microsoft’s PowerPoint, we use bullet points to show how we’ll hit the target, for they trigger lining up our ducks in a row so we don’t have to take a shot in the dark but rather shoot fish in a barrel. We fire off a letter or shoot someone an e-mail about how to fight crime by declaring a war on drugs. Of this light-hearted footnote you probably expect a punch line.



Example 4 - Overall design of *The Easy Winners* (1901)

Students should be asked to transfer the information from the schematic diagrams to their scores, and listen to multiple recordings, before discussion in class begins. It is wise to include arrangements for melodic instruments with piano, as their project will use this configuration (and about which more below). Versions for ensembles also encourage careful listening.

I caution against emphasizing the differences among sections, as the generalization will not assist students in writing their own section (the first). However, one could devise an extensive, multi-week group project in which students would assemble a committee piece, each person composing a section. Then a close examination of several entire works by Joplin would be important in order to discover how different types of thematic organization contribute to a cumulative effect of motion over the discrete sections. After students have written their individual contributions, such overall study of an entire rag will be beneficial as they decide the final ordering for the individual sections. This may involve transposition and suggest changes of tessitura.

Joplin provided short descriptive prose for each section in *Wall Street Rag*. While perhaps naïve and dated, its sincerity is unquestionable.

A: *Panic in Wall Street, Brokers feeling melancholy.*

B: *Good times coming.*

C: *Good times have come.*

D: *Listening to the strains of genuine negro ragtime, brokers forget their cares.*

These comments may prod students to think imaginatively, perhaps infer some musical hermeneutics or a dramatic, progressive

scheme. The following is a bit out of order, but to follow up upon the idea of group participation: initiate a Committee Rag by organizing students into teams of four. Each team will produce a complete rag, with one section written by each student. Members could meet together and get much benefit from each other’s critique. Because the style of ragtime is so familiar and the sense of overall trajectory so apparent in the familiar examples, students can rely upon what is popularly called the intuitive response to a degree impossible, for instance, in modal counterpoint. By the way, teams can promote some healthy rivalry, for all student projects should be performed in class. Enterprising students will arrange their work for quartet or ensemble.

It is worth noting that one of Joplin’s earliest pieces (1899) and arguably his most famous, *Maple Leaf Rag*, has no introduction, and only the third section is in the subdominant. Although beginners are unnerved by exceptions, it is useful for them to ascertain and articulate to what extent a celebrated piece may not adhere to the norms that the composer established for most of his creative activity in the genre.¹⁵ It does not make it irregular or strange. The normative procedure needs to be presented and reinforced by the instructor as a *modus operandi*. Redundancy, often considerable, is necessary in making important points stick with beginners.

The experience with exceptions may prove valuable later on when students encounter seeming anomalies in more complex formal designs. Then they may be less likely, for example, to describe a monothematic sonata-form movement as breaking the rules. In the case of Haydn’s *Paris* symphonies (numbers 82 through 87), most of the sonata-form first movements exhibit this characteristic, so within the context of the group, monothematism is actually the rule rather than the exception.

“Practice before concept: music before music theory” is a sensible route. Students will hear how the latter follows from the former, rather than the latter being imposed upon the former.

¹⁵ The first section has a consequent that is thematically unrelated (in any obvious way) to the theme of the antecedent. The consequent is made up of one eight-measure conclusive phrase and its repeat an octave lower, in the register of the opening. It is a fine example of how register can play a crucial role in establishing conclusiveness.

PRELIMINARY EXERCISE:

Order It!

Before going into the details of organization that will be necessary for most students to achieve a respectable result, let them experiment with the components. A hands-on way to acquaint students with the process of ragtime composition is to give them a section broken up into four-measure segments (sub-phrases), and ask them to put the segments in the correct order. This can be done by reproducing each four-measure segment on a single page in random order. One could photocopy and cut up a score, but it is clearer if one takes the trouble to notate the score using a note-processor and printing out each sub-phrase on a separate system. Then one can eliminate anticipative syncopations which belong, expressively at least, to the next measure (see, for example, measure 12 of *Magnetic Rag*). In addition, the segments will then appear uniform visually. A pianist plays the segments in the order given on the sheet, and students are asked to provide ordinal numbering. The exercise is more rewarding if the segments are printed on separate slips of paper (about $2\frac{1}{2} \times 8''$) and students are put into small groups,¹⁶ preferably gathered around a keyboard for re-hearings. The excerpts can be paper-clipped to cardboard on the music rack. Somehow the tactile experience of re-ordering the pieces of paper makes a stronger impression than staring at a single page of four segments. Group members discuss with one another their reasons for a particular succession. Given the constraints of the genre, the discussion should focus, eventually, on cadences and initial thematic material.

The difficulty for many students in arranging four thematically-related sub-phrases varies greatly, depending upon the examples chosen. It isn't always as obvious as it may seem to the instructor. Paying attention to the bass motion in cadences (or anywhere else) is entirely new to many singers and single-line instrumentalists. The exercise will encourage students to listen carefully, and wholly. A useful variant of this exercise is to play the segments and not provide *any* written notation, so that students will have to rely only on their ears and memory. The cadence ending the period is always authentic, and usually perfect. It is sensible to start with straightforward examples that students can use later as direct

¹⁶ If you can enlarge the project to include the Committee Rag, keep the same groups.

models for writing. Choose a section which begins in the tonic and closes with a perfect authentic cadence, and which employs sentence structure. The first section of a ragtime piece usually fulfills these requirements and very often contains the most memorable or signature melodic material. The authentic cadence is the marker for the fourth sub-phrase. Sentence structure will dictate that the first three sub-phrases will be thematically identical, or very similar. As a recommended procedure, begin by playing four separate four-measure excerpts, and ask students to identify just the one which would end the consequent. While easy for some students, others must be given the opportunity to develop confidence.

Less obvious examples are useful not so much as models for direct imitation than to provide students with some sense of the possibilities within the apparent constraints of the genre. Presenting form in a way that will appear “crystal-clear” to an average student is crucial for their completion of a satisfactory assignment. Discussion of works that are beyond the reach of a first attempt to emulate is entirely optional. Nevertheless, to discourage impatient students from concluding that ragtime has a form that is routine and boring, consider a later work, such as *Magnetic Rag* of 1914, which has an initial section built as a contrasting period. The two sub-phrases of the antecedent are thematically very similar. Students hearing the four segments for the first time may conclude that the two melodic statements that begin the same are the first sub-phrases, respectively, of the antecedent and consequent of a parallel period. The two sub-phrases of the consequent are identical, and there’s no simple clue of melodic closure on $\hat{1}$ to signify the very end. One hopes that (aided by a process of elimination), students will identify the root-position tonic cadence, strengthened by a preceding subdominant, as the end of the period. They will then locate the other cadence, an imperfect cadence in *iv* as the conclusion of the antecedent, and then everything has fallen into place. The second section of *Magnetic Rag* is in G minor. Its tonal and thematic organization is much more evident than the first. The minor mode is rare in ragtime, but students might be led to hearing its foreshadowing in the cadence of the first section’s antecedent. In the third section, the usual period of 16 measures has been expanded to 24. It’s not pedagogically worthy to include it as an exercise in segment-arrangement preparatory to composition, but with a thoughtful and receptive class, and several weeks of focused ragtime study, it is worthwhile to encourage students to speculate about the enlargement.

The Entertainer (1902) is a reasonable first choice, for it is likely that many students have heard it and it is formally very clear-cut. The consequent ends with a perfect authentic cadence and the antecedent pauses on the dominant, supported by an applied (secondary) dominant. The initial sub-phrase of the antecedent and that of consequent are identical. That may be enough to classify it as a phrase model, but refrain from dismissing the chromatic tones as paltry surface elaboration.

Another instructive example is *The Easy Winners* (1901). Like *The Entertainer*, it is well-known and employs the sentence (the first three sub-phrases begin the same) within a musical period. (The consequent ends with a PAC and the antecedent pauses on the dominant, supported by an applied dominant.) However, the initial sub-phrases of antecedent and consequent are *not* identical. In the latter, the bass $D\flat^2$ continues to C^2 (measure 16), using a 5–6 voice leading, with the sound, but not function, of a phrygian progression.¹⁷ In the same manner that it is useful to distinguish a deceptive progression, which occurs *within* a phrase, from a deceptive cadence which *ends* one, so it is instructive to identify the phrygian semitone bass as a *motion*, rather than always as a *conclusion*. It is worthwhile to draw students's attention to the association of the C major chord with the focal point (highest note of the melodic line). The linking of a climactic note with a uniquely-used, often altered chord is a frequent, but surely not a necessary condition of persuasive writing. In the initial sub-phrase of the antecedent, the $D\flat$ chord (IV, in measure 7) serves to prolong the initial tonic harmony. In the consequent, the $D\flat$ chord in the comparable location (measure 15) is itself prolonged by the major mediant ($III\sharp$). The terminal sub-phrase begins in measure 17 and is essentially the same music as measure 7. This sub-phrase intensifies the characteristic syncopated rhythm of the section, as found in measures 6, 7, and elsewhere. I do not think it is far-fetched to ask students to perceive measure 18, second beat, as a diminution of measure 5. Aside from showing them an unequivocal instance, it may suggest a technique to use if a similar opportunity arises in their own work.

If the instructor discusses details such as those in the preceding paragraph, it is important to emphasize that they refer to *content*

¹⁷ An example of secondary mixture. See Chapter 22 of Edward Aldwell and Carl Schachter. *Harmony and Voice Leading*, Second Edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1989).

and not to requirements of the form. Otherwise, part of the class may attempt some sort of phrygian progression at the end of the consequent’s initial sub-phrase! In this regard, model composition resembles the Elizabethan sonnet exercise much more than the faithful copying of a painting. As noted above, without this caution, students may adhere inartistically closely to a specific scenario. Voice leading details, motives and specific chord-choices are usually related, gathered under the heading of organicism. It is useful to point out such examples but not to expect them.

It is noteworthy that *The Entertainer* has a thematic intensification similar to that in the first section of *The Easy Winners*: the terminal sub-phrase begins in measure 17 and is essentially the same music as measure 7. The ensuing two measures repeat the motive. (It is worthwhile to label the process as *intensification by motivic repetition*, for it is a common technique and can be successfully applied by students to their own work.) However, measure 17 is texturally simplified: the octaves are present, but no thirds. The cadence (measure 19) culminates with restoring the thirds, as the previous cadential measures, 7 and 15.

Generally speaking, any chromatic note should serve some motivic purpose, as it is not a requirement (in the major mode) of tonal organization. I have found it useful to mention the literary technique informally called “Chekhov’s gun”: that an object (in musical context, a chromatic note) introduced near the beginning must figure later in the drama (for ragtime: within the section), otherwise it is artistically superfluous (“random” is the current buzzword for this) and should not have appeared in the first place. In measures 5 and 6 of *The Entertainer*, the tonic chord is prolonged from $\frac{3}{4}$ to $\frac{6}{8}$ position (root position to first inversion). The F Major chord functions as an upper neighbor note of E3, and the $b\frac{3}{4}$ chord in measure five, second beat (locally, an applied dominant), might be called a secondary embellishment: an embellishment of an embellishment. In the terminal sub-phrase of the antecedent (measures 9-12), the chromatic Eb3 introduces the dominant of the dominant. In the terminal sub-phrase of the consequent (measures 17-20), the chromatic descent re-uses the Bb3 of measure 5, now more prominent as a member of the bassline, and a transposition of measure 10 occurs in measure 18 to introduce the cadential $\frac{4}{4}$.

In *The Easy Winners*, similar relationships of motive and harmony may be found. There is a chromatic note just prior to the cadential $\frac{4}{4}$ at end of the antecedent. (This time, it’s the the leading-tone to the

dominant, a so-called misspelled vii^{07} of the dominant. $F\sharp 3$ “should” be $G\flat 3$. (At one time, this passing chord would be called a raised submediant!) The $A\sharp 2$ is a harmonic expression of the chromatic idea present in the first sub-phrase ($B\sharp 4$ and $E\sharp 5$). The $E\sharp 5$ as a lower neighbor is enlarged when it becomes a chord tone in the dramatic culmination of the section with the C major chord in measure 16. The beginning of the terminal sub-phrase (measure 17) can be heard as a prolongation of IV (measure 18 as its upper fifth), a hearing which is supported to some extent by the alternation of strong and weak measures, or more literally, as a quotation of measures 7 and 8, as indicated above. It is a valuable lesson about context to consider if the IV in measure 17 leads directly to V in measure 19, or resolves immediately to the tonic in measure 18. Skillful pianists in class might be asked to demonstrate how the theoretical interpretation could affect the interpretation: are measures 8 and 18 identical or somehow a bit different as regards a projected sense of mini-arrival? If students don’t hear the difference or feel that it matters, well, that’s really of little significance, as it isn’t going to improve their writing.

Students can learn much about harmony in context from these pieces. For example, in the first section of *Wall Street Rag*, measures six and eight, a chord is formed entirely by neighbor notes: $D5$, $F4$ and $A\flat 3$ embellish $C5$, $E4$ and $G3$. There’s nothing gained by calling it a $ii^{0\sharp 4}$ chord, and clearly $C3$ is pedal tone, not an unresolved seventh. By using roman numerals to interpret *function* rather than to denote pitches—which is more easily done with figured bass—the bewildering number of chordal functions can be reduced when linear origins are kept in mind. However, we must take care not to give the impression that the structure is more important than the actualization of that structure. The ragtime assignment exists to reinforce that awareness, of course. Analysis is never a creative activity as it doesn’t produce something independent or stand-alone. It may be insightful, and it may stimulate the imagination to new possibilities of interpretation, but an interest in making observations *about* music as an end in itself is the exception among average undergraduates.

The comments about the motivically-sourced embellishing role of harmony above need only be given to classes that seem capable of applying it with some imagination. In like manner, pointing out the role of $E5$, $D5$ and $C5$ to guide the melodic line in the first section of *The Entertainer*, while more easily comprehended than the discussion above, will not engage everyone.

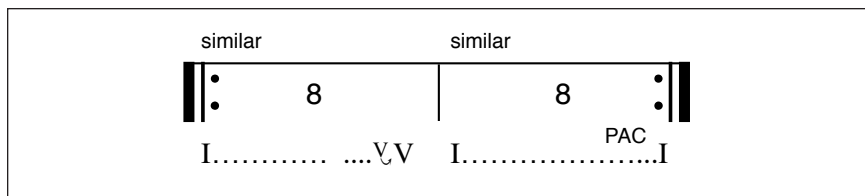
What roman numeral to write for the cadential ♯ seems to have become a shibboleth of harmonic ideology. In a completely literal sense, it’s I and in a functional sense, V. When students are unfamiliar, they often take a literal approach.¹⁸ The use of roman numerals for both purposes often misleads students, as they have difficulty making the distinction. If students are told that there is no such thing as a tonic six-four chord, they will want to have an alternative label. Some students will arrive at the not-entirely-illogical conclusion that in a “second-inversion chord” the roman numeral corresponding to the scale-step of the lowest note is appropriate under all circumstances. Other students are flummoxed that 2̂, 4̂, and 7̂ (listed from bottom to top and arranged vertically) will take the same roman numeral as 5̂, 1̂, and 3̂, for they recognize that “II4” would be nonsense. Much classroom theory is an uneasy alliance between applying symbols (roman numerals) and determining function, yet textbooks seem to grow more detailed and longer. If students were given a very short *précis* of harmony for reference and a comprehensive anthology, music study could be more a process of discovery than of application of concepts.¹⁹

STRUCTURE

As noted earlier, the basic formal unit in a rag (a section) is 16-measures, evenly divided into antecedent and consequent phrases, as given in Example 1. This design is commonly called a musical period, and is one of the most basic types of phrase organization from the late 18th century onwards. The importance of a fixed-length form for beginners cannot be overestimated. It is comparable to the use of a chorale tune in a Baroque-style counterpoint class in which students concentrate upon motivic consistency in the lower voices guided by the harmonic direction of the phrase. Within the fixed-length phrases in ragtime, students can map out a suitable progression directed toward the cadence, and coordinate a top-voice linear progression that can be elaborated by motivic cells.

¹⁸ For example, graduate students for whom English is a distant-second language may naturally hear you mean “the treble clef is a cymbel” when you said “symbol” — their assumption being that a word most likely has a musical reference.

¹⁹ This is the activity of education in the studio. Singers learn several songs by Schubert, on the assumption by the teacher that the experience with a representative selection will equip them to master others later on their own. General characteristics of the German Lied are not given much time.



Example 5 - Very basic design of a section

Formal analysis involves the description of two domains: the harmonic and the thematic. The harmonic characteristics will be addressed first. Form in Western music is defined most fundamentally by its *harmonic* design, not its thematic design, contrary to the common view that students hold initially. Much apparent confusion among students can be avoided if they are encouraged to make separate observations about each domain. Important thematic or melodic material typically *begins* a phrase; functional harmony (a cadence) is what *ends* it.

In ragtime, the antecedent is characterized by a pause on the dominant, or a substitute, and the consequent concludes with an obvious tonic cadence, usually of the perfect authentic type. The end of the antecedent phrase is inconclusive in relation to that final cadence. Some writers have tried to define exactly what an inconclusive cadence is, but such enumeration is unnecessary or actually misleading to students, who may try to commit a list to memory. In this case, a fuzzy relativism is better. Simply stated, anything less forceful than a perfect authentic cadence in the tonic can be inconclusive.

Turning now to the composition of a single section, there are several thematic plans available, but to a novice the parallel period is the more manageable than a contrasting one, as shown in Example 6a. This paradigm will most likely be very much like what the student has encountered in phrase structure of the Classical Era. Compare the first section of *Elite Syncopations*.

similar		similar
	8	
a. Structure of a parallel period with no division		
similar	similar	similar (varied)
	4 4	
b. Structure of a parallel period with division in the antecedent 4 + 4		
similar	—————	similar
sim. sim.		sim. sim.
	2 2 4	
c. Structure of a parallel period with subdivision in the antecedent (2 + 2) + 4		

Example 6 - Common phrase designs

Another frequent procedure is to divide the antecedent into two parallel sub-phrases, 4 + 4, as shown in Example 6b, often called sentence structure. See the first section of *The Easy Winners*. As the larger structure is still the parallel period, the beginning of each 4-measure group will begin with the same material. The *final group* of four measures is always different, but it will usually make use of a previous motive to intensify the drive toward the cadence.

Yet another variant of the parallel period subdivides the antecedent into *two* sub-phrases which *contrast* thematically, as given in Example 6c. However, repetition is preserved in that the *first* of these four measure sub-phrases is subdivided still further into two-measure units, which *are* parallel. These four measures recur at the beginning of the consequent. Compare the first section of *The Wall Street Rag*.

RHYTHM

Undoubtedly the most characteristic and infectious aspect of ragtime is its rhythm. It causes students the fewest difficulties, so not much class time need be spent on it. Over the steady *oom-pah* bass and chord pattern in the left hand, the right hand employs syncopation and frequently, micro-rhythms.

Example 7 consists of three musical diagrams labeled a, b, and c, enclosed in a rectangular border. Diagram a shows a rhythmic pattern on a five-line staff with two beams. The first beam contains four eighth notes, and the second beam contains four eighth notes. A slur is placed over the fourth and fifth notes of the first beam. Diagram b shows a similar two-beam pattern. The first beam has two eighth notes, and the second beam has four eighth notes. A slur is placed over the second and third notes of the first beam. Diagram c shows a 3/8 meter pattern. The time signature '3/8' is written to the left. The pattern consists of four groups of notes: the first group has two eighth notes, the second group has two eighth notes, the third group has two eighth notes with a slur over the second and third notes, and the fourth group has four eighth notes.

Example 7 - Some characteristic rhythmic patterns

Tying the fourth and fifth sixteenth-notes together yields perhaps the most common rhythmic cell (Example 7a). Syncopation within a beat — tying the second and third sixteenth notes together, is also very common (Example 7b). Repetitions of a very short pattern can establish a micro-rhythm. The meter 3/8, for example, can be imposed over two measures (Example 7c). Regarding the *oom-pah* rhythm, students should be alerted that a repetition of the same bass note on beats one and two in this pattern is generally avoided, unless the notes are members of a cadential dominant (or cadential $\frac{7}{4}$ chord).

There are numerous other patterns, of course. An exhaustive list will not assist the student materially, and through overkill may subvert the pedagogical goal. Tracing how a *few* motives are used consistently within one composition will show how rhythmic motives work *with* pitch to create accent and motion. Speaking of the motive, it may be divided into two components: *pitch* and *rhythm*.²⁰ By identifying pitch and rhythm separately, students can

²⁰ If students become accustomed to expecting pairs of attributes in making descriptions (accented/unaccented, harmonic/thematic, structural/embellishing), it will deepen their observations. One label isn't enough! Assuming that there is likely a counterpart will rouse the imagination.

devise a melodic line and then impose rhythmic cells upon it — this is called *ragging* the tune. Conversely, they may favor a particular set of rhythms, and subsequently coordinate in a consistent fashion melody notes or arpeggiations within a chord.

The notion of *hypermeter* and to a lesser degree, *metrical displacement* can be reviewed because of the regularity of the phrasing. Within a group of four measures, some measures take a strong accent, others, a weak one. In the first section of *Wall Street Rag*, in the initial sub-phrase of the antecedent, the even-numbered measures (those with the neighbor-note chords) need to be accented. However, the terminal sub-phrase of the antecedent begins with a strong measure. Within the regular grouping of four-measure rhythmic units, the individual measures develop different patterns of accentuation. The relative straightforwardness of hypermeter in ragtime can give students confidence and insight to apply this technique of performance-relevant analysis to compositions in the studio.

RAG IT!

A useful way to begin is to use the aforementioned technique of ragging a tune. Like *Order It!* where it was phrase-structural, this is an isolation of a particular aspect, motivic-imposition. Virtually everyone has heard Robert Burns’s *Auld Lang Syne*. Example 8 gives the first phrase, along with a ragged version.



The image shows two staves of music. The top staff is a melody in 2/4 time, starting with a quarter note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5, then a quarter note B4, and finally a quarter note A4. The lyrics are: "Should auld ac-quain-tance be for-got and nev - er brought to mind?". The bottom staff is an accompaniment in 2/4 time, starting with a quarter rest, followed by eighth notes G4, A4, B4, and C5, then eighth notes B4, A4, G4, and F4, then eighth notes E4, D4, C4, and B3, and finally eighth notes A3, G3, F3, and E3.

Example 8 - First phrase of “Auld Lang Syne”

Notice how the lower neighbor note is combined with the most common rhythm cell, the tied fourth and fifth sixteenth notes, to establish a simple motive that can be put easily to recurrent use. The harmony for the folksong can be plainly diatonic, or enriched with applied dominants.

TEXTURE

Although Joplin wrote ragtime pieces principally for the piano, this is not recommended for students unless they are accomplished pianists. Ragtime is difficult to play well. Joplin lived to see his works abused for pyrotechnical display rather than appreciated as expressive, lyrical, and often reflective character pieces. His later publications often offer this advice, "NOTE: Do not play this piece fast. It is never right to play Ragtime fast. *Composer.*"

If we use the piano along with a melodic instrument, we shall reap several benefits.

- The three musical strands of melody, bassline, and harmony are assigned to their respective staves.
- Students usually choose to write the melody for their major instrument, or in the case of voice majors, for an instrument with which they have some affinity. This generally results in idiomatic and often gracious statements. Students get vast helpings of piano music in theory classes from the widely-used anthologies. This exercise cultivates the appreciation of other instruments.
- It's much easier to play, of course. What is assigned to the left hand in the Joplin piano rag is now the entire task of the pianist.
- The voice leading in the piano need not be compromised in order to accommodate melodic figuration, or technical limitations. The writing will follow the rules of voice leading for the so-called keyboard style, with three notes in the right hand and the bassline in the left.
- The isolation of the bassline on a single staff encourages the student to think of it as a secondary melody. If basic theory study has included counterpoint in five species, then the student has the chance to apply it here in a practical way between the initial tonic chord and the cadential progression.

A graphic representation of the thematic procedure can be helpful. A grid of the type given in Example 9 can assist the student in a preliminary analytical homework assignment.

	1	2	3	4
ANTECEDENT				
	5	6	7	8
	the music of measure 1 goes here			
	9	10	11	12
CONSEQUENT	the music of measure 1 goes here	the music of measure 2 goes here	the music of measure 3 goes here	
	13	14	15	16

Example 9 - Grid of thematic organization (4 | 4 | | 4 | X)

Example 10 is a section of ragtime, written in accordance with the steps outlined so far. It follows what the author has found to be the most workable plan: the one shown earlier in Example 6b. Note that the music is laid out with four measures per line, so that the formal design is as obvious as possible. The score is in concert pitch. Students should be asked to provide a separate part for the solo instrumentalist, transposed if necessary (true in this case, for the alto saxophone). At this point, details of score-preparation should be reviewed. (See item six of Example 11). Observe that measure 13, the climactic point, differs from the initial measures of the three preceding four-measure groups, but still manages to preserve the basic F-E-F neighbor motion that is derived from the folktune.

The Acquittance Rag
for alto saxophone & piano

Slow march tempo. *Hieronymous Bellcamp.*

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Example 10 - "Acquittance Rag"

A list of suggestions can be provided to assist the student in determining the steps needed to complete a successful project, as shown in Example 11.

- 1) Rule the music paper in four four-measure systems, and number them.
The meter is 2/4.
- 2) Sketch in cadences for the antecedent: PAC on V, and the consequent: PAC on I
- 3) Sketch the melodic line (and chords) for the first measure or so — copy that into measures 5 and 9 (but not measure 13!)
- 4) Complete the melody of the antecedent: sketch bassline & harmony (RNs)
consequent: sketch bassline & harmony (RNs)
- 5) Write the accompaniment, with oom-pah pattern, check the voice leading.
- 6) Add slurs, dynamic markings and articulations as appropriate to a “real” musical composition.
- 7) Copy over neatly onto a separate piece of music paper — everything will count!
(Your teaching assistant will define what “everything” means.)

Example 11 - Suggestions for the student

An approach to composition that might help students is what might be called the pitch-outline or framework method. Example 12 gives the first section of a ragtime piece, and the systems below the music provide a very simple outline of contours and important notes. This technique is by no means to be equated with linear analysis: quite the opposite, it is devised to generate material. Quite often, an initial motif can be established from which the student can devise a framework. That generative motif here is the descending arpeggiated triad from D6 to D5 (what might be called the *thesis*). An equally conventional stepwise progression of the third, D5–C5–B4, may be seen as a second distinct idea (antithesis, if you wish). In the terminal sub-phrase of the antecedent, the stepwise progression replaces C5 with C#5, turning toward B minor. In the terminal sub-phrase of the consequent, the third-progression of D5–C5–B4 is continued with another one (through transfer of register), B4–A5–G5. In measure 15, both elements (the downward-arpeggiated triad and the third-progression) are combined (a *synthesis*). Because cadential progressions serve as formal articulation and are so commonplace, it is often a challenge to write music for them that connects motivically with what has gone before. The last four measures of a section move predictably toward the cadence, yet will commonly contain the dynamic and registral focal point (apex).²¹

²¹ Actually, this example does not have a single high point, and the highest note occurs at the beginning! Viewing this as anomalous might lead to listening to a performance of the opening of the second movement of Bach’s *Double Violin Concerto*, BWV 1043, which also begins on the highest note on the phrase, and considering the musical meaning that results.

Frederick Street Rag

The image displays a musical score for 'Frederick Street Rag' in 2/4 time, key of D major. It is divided into four systems, each containing piano accompaniment and a generative outline. The piano part consists of a treble and bass staff. The generative outline is shown in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). Measure numbers 1, 5, 9, and 13 are indicated at the start of their respective systems. The score includes various musical notations such as chords, arpeggios, and melodic lines.

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Example 12 - "Frederick Street Rag" and its generative outline

This excerpt is not an example of what the project described in this paper would bring about. (*Acquaintance Rag* is an instance of that.) Firstly, it is for piano solo. Secondly, the cadence of the antecedent, while less conclusive than the cadence at the end, is not on the dominant. If you provide your own A+ example to show students how it can be done (and to establish respect), there is a danger that some students will emulate it much too closely.²²

The most useful and systematic work for undergraduate model-composition teaching that has engaged the author's attention for beginning tonal composition was written by Arnold Schoenberg. Frustrated with the lack of musical background among students in his classes at the University of California, Los Angeles in the 1940s, he wrote several textbooks that remain his least studied and cited works. His *Models for Beginners in Composition*²³ will repay a close examination manyfold. Schoenberg was convinced that the student of composition must master thoroughly the traditional techniques and organizational methods, and possess a wide and intimate knowledge of musical literature if he wishes to solve the more difficult problems of contemporary music.²⁴ He is much less preoccupied with pitch than many of his followers. His emphasis is much more upon process and the aggregation of components of structure, starting with his often-misunderstood *Grundgestalt* and continuing to formal design. For example, in the earliest chapters he deals with fashioning a motive from a triad, and with period and sentence structure. Some of his basic examples may assist students who feel stumped trying to devise a melody, especially if they have been given an analytical introduction to the topic of motive earlier.

²² This can occur with any style. For example, Bach's C Major Prelude (from the *Well-Tempered Klavier*, Book 1) is employed so often to show how what appears to be simply a chord progression actually has a long-range registral design. Without examining several more examples of Bach preludes, students may devise their own chord progression (the long-range registral design being lost on them) and figure it accordingly.

²³ Arnold Schoenberg, *Models for Beginners in Composition*, London: Faber and Faber, 1967.

²⁴ From Gerald Strang's introduction to Arnold Schoenberg's aforementioned book (p. xiv). Conveniently, the awareness of compositional structures and styles furnishes the graduate with some tonal facility that could serve as the foundation for subsequent teaching duties.

CONCLUSION

Music theory classes frequently devote too much time to analysis, considering it to be the summit of musical study. This does not give students pleasure: they strive to figure out and remember what the teacher wants to hear, regarding theory as an intellectual game. The discovery approach through model composition, be it by means of chorale harmonization, stylistic counterpoint, or the echoing of more so-called accessible styles, is as important and necessary to musical maturation as the hands-on approach in the instrumental or vocal studio. Ragtime is a practical way to engage the beginning student in the process of linking musical elements. From several decades' experience, I have observed that virtually all students respond well to the Joplin model. Even insecure students will devise pieces that are recognizable as ragtime. This success may provide encouragement for more ambitious studies later: it is just a beginning step, of course. The only areas of serious composition for which there is even the slightest demand from the public at large — band music, church music, and secondary school music — are often written not by professional composers but by practitioners: choral or band directors. They may have so-called practical aspects (read: easy to pull together with few rehearsals) gained from years of experience, but the part-writing is sadly often the least competent component. If in the near future the level of craft improves in these pieces, then the attempt to connect voice leading to meaning in theory classes will have been worthwhile.