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Transcribing Ragtime for Guitar

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Transcribing Ragtime for Guitar

A mini-guide

Introduction

The goal of this guide is to offer you an approach to transcribing classic ragtime piano music for solo guitar. For specificity's sake, it focuses on "classic ragtime," strictly meaning the piano solos written in the period roughly from 1895 to 1915 by Scott Joplin, Joseph Lamb, James Scott, Arthur Marshall, etc... but these techniques could be applied to later novelty rags, and who knows what else.

I'll be diverging a bit in a few places- for example, to take a look at Travis picking. Since the guide is concerned with "transcription," it won't be spending much time on arrangement. That is to say, the strategies within assume you want to reproduce a piece accurately and faithfully to the extent practical. The fact of the matter, though, is that when you're attempting to convert fairly dense piano music into playable (read: not self-destructive) guitar music, big choices have to be made, and the line is blurred. Alternatives will be given to a straight-ahead solo transcription.

Some music literacy is obviously assumed. If you can't read grand staff very well, or at all, transcribing a piano piece is bound to be hell. You don't need to read notes on a guitar in order to play ragtime, or to write guitar tabs for that matter- but, the piano score is still a problem. Nevertheless, if you can't read (music,) you should still be able to get most of this guide.

The Facts (Or, Idiot Box)

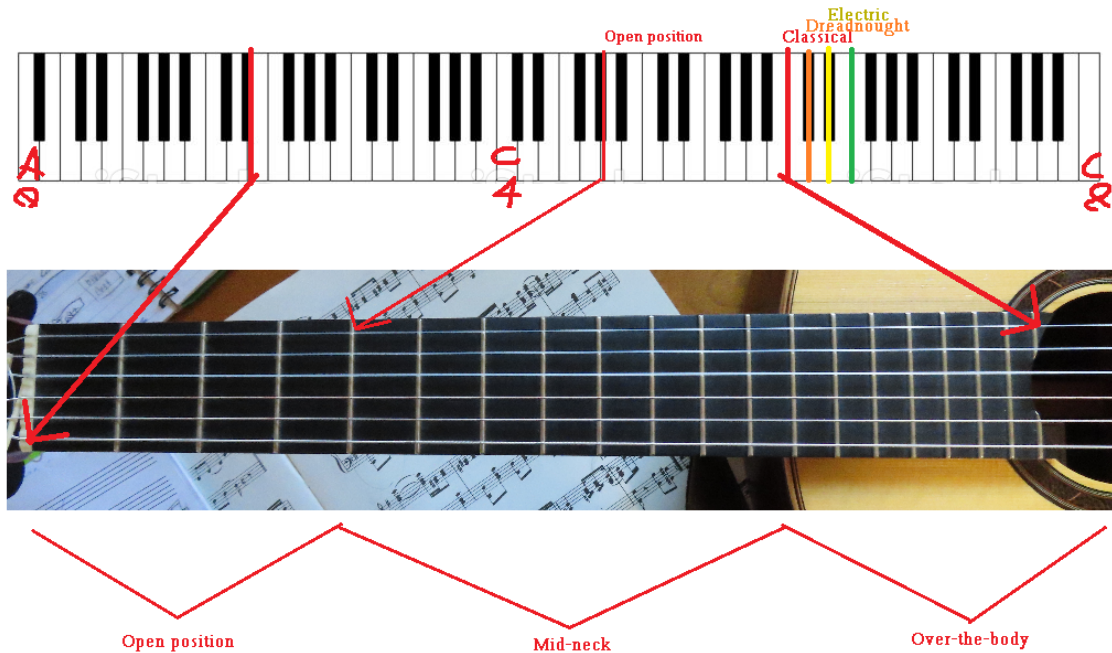
Let's start by getting as hip as possible to the guitar and its various (lacks of) abilities. Maestros can skip this section- however, I highly recommend trying to think outside of the box with me for a second. We don't always think of instruments in highly concrete terms, which is a good thing, but to start this job, we want to know what we're up against.

How do the brute, mechanical possibilities of the guitar differ from those of the piano? The simplest answer might be Range.

The Range of the guitar varies slightly, but all begin at E3 (E below bass clef,) going to:

- B6 [classical and parlor guitars.]
- C7 [most steel stringers, like dreadnoughts.]
- D7, E7 [electric guitars. E7 is rare.]

Figure one is worth 1000 words:



So, we can safely assume an octave and a fifth. What of the piano? Its range is so large, most people don't even think about it: A0 to C8 is seven octaves and change. What's worse is that on the piano, all of those notes are fairly accessible, while on the guitar, like with most non-keyboard instruments, our range is divided into several rough areas with strengths and weaknesses. Return to figure 1:

- E3-G#5 [Open position:] most familiar. Easiest to read notes, for music readers. Intuitive use of open strings. Chords with open strings- "cowboy chords." Dense and ringing sound.
- A3-E6 [Mid-neck:] less familiar. Harder to read notes the higher you go. Most "neutral" sound.
- E4-B6+ [Above the body:] quite unfamiliar for many. Hard to read. Getting harder to get a good sound. Still accessible on electric guitars; on acoustic guitars this is literally "above the body" and technique is seriously limited.

Astute readers will notice that the above-mentioned ranges are massively overlapping. A complicating factor of guitar which piano lacks is the idea of Position. The left hand can only cover so much of the fretboard at one time, with the specific amount varying according to the player and location on the neck. It may come as a surprise that, in open position, you have access to by far most of the instrument's range. From E3 on the bottom to G#5 on the top, which involves stretching not at all, you have two octaves plus a major third. If your guitar goes up to B, there's only another octave and a minor third left! Still, we want that high range. How can you play very high and very low notes at once? And what if you want to make a huge leap- that is, a shift- for melodic purposes, while sustaining the accompaniment? Open strings are the answer. If you want to play, say, F3 and F6 simultaneously, you can't- not without trickery. Nothing could

be easier, however, than to play E3 (open) and E6. Open strings offer trouble-free access to the lowest of bass notes, as well as hinge points for melodies which allow the left hand the occasional blessed moment of freedom. Of course, the options are fairly narrow, which is why we'll be returning to the subject of "trickery" later. For now, suffice is to say that: Open Strings Are Your Friends.

Maybe the most obvious difference marking guitars from pianos is this: guitars can't do as much. Or, not all at once. This is where the amaze factor of ragtime guitar comes from: it seems like it shouldn't be possible.

The situation isn't dire. The guitar has six strings, meaning up to six sounding voices at a time. However, the options for practical voicings- that is, chord shapes- making use of all at once are narrow. What's more, the technique required to account for and play all of those notes... it's not practical. What can we do? Even sustaining four lines literally is very challenging. Three is bad enough. Two is bad enough! Every polyphonic style of guitar playing has its own ways of coping, however. Some lean heavily on what six-note chord shapes we have, making changes with the remaining fingers of the left hand to achieve melodies (remember- we have two-plus octaves in just one position.) Others play freely with the left hand, "catching" accompaniment notes and chords when convenient. Some borrow from the bluegrass banjo with its streams of open strings and chord tones, and still others compromise, making use of open strings and other clever tricks to ease the act of playing multiple parts continuously. It's important to understand that even rigorous classical music usually doesn't try to maintain more than a few parts, literally, for any great length of time- it's not in the guitar's blood. That being said, the occasional six-note chord is by no means out of the picture, and is in fact very easy, since everyone learns their bar chords sooner or later. The moral here is, (and if this guide has a moral, this is it:) Less is More.

Extra-Musical Factors

There are some things it might pay to think about before we tear into the nuts-and-bolts. Unforgivingly practical types might consider skipping this section (and giving up on music.)¹ All of the below things are quite interrelated, so, in no particular order:

Audience

Audience here refers both to your eventual listeners and to those who might actually want to learn your transcription. Since musicians usually start with what they like the best and then set out to find an audience, I'll ignore the first part. The purely commercial musician could certainly do better than learning to play ragtime guitar, in any case.

You probably want to transcribe music for yourself, which is good. At the very least, you should try to learn it, because it's really the only way to proofread what you've done. You naturally might want other people to learn it too, though. Difficulty, style and form matter here.

¹ Kidding.

We'll dispense with difficulty and style below, but for now, let's be content to say that you should be at least dimly aware of the sort of thing you're trying to produce. Also note that different kinds of players will have their own different and special tricks, and that the only way to really know is to be one of them- write what you know, in other words. Or, you might have to become more aware of your own different special tricks than you were before so that you can be more general. Some types of player will want written music, others will want a tab, and still others will want to see both. Some will even want a wacky video series. Your best shot is probably to produce both fully-notated and tab versions, unless you're aiming exclusively for classical guitarists (or, conversely, hoping to exclude them.)

Faithfulness

This is the philosophical section. How much does faithfulness to the original piece matter to you? Does the original key matter? Does having all of the notes of every chord matter? Are you willing to transpose melodies by an octave, or even otherwise? Are you even willing to tamper with the form of the piece? On one side, you will find players who think transcribing piano music is at best an impressive gag. For all we know, they're onto something, but we need not mind. On the other hand, you have true perfectionists who won't allow a single bass note out of place. Somewhere in the middle of the bell curve are those of us who want to play the piece-with compromises to help us keep our fingers. Your ear should lead the way. I wouldn't be overly worried about it, words just being words, but this calls back to the "transcription" versus "arrangement" discussion, since if you're content to capture the feel of the music and leave it at that, you don't actually have to be very faithful at all.

Difficulty

Playing ragtime is hard. Playing ragtime on a guitar is hard, and unusual. The challenges are not as familiar to Joe Guitarist as they are to Jack Pianist. You should have an idea of how hard you want this to be, allowing for what the piece you choose dictates, of course. Again, you should write for yourself first, but maybe you'd like to produce something a First-Time Ragger could play. Remember: Less is More. Less is More. And that goes always: unless you want a real, bust-your-chops showpiece, you should just want to make it easy. Easier rep is comparatively faster to learn, likelier to stay with you, and sounds better, especially on your off days. Avoid justifying fiendishly hard passages by telling yourself you'll practice them extra: it's borrowing against the future, and when others encounter these passages, they'll be the gnarly chunks of gristle that cause them to give up. Don't let me stop you, if you think a certain effect is worth it. Non-standard chords and tricky shifts are fine sometimes. In other words, anybody can tolerate the occasional mote of cartilage in their porkchop, but after enough gnawing, most people start to lose their gusto.

Style

What works for ragtime?

I'd like to briefly acknowledge the possibility of a duet. We're leading up to a solo transcription, but practically speaking, duets are the choicer option. For many rags, in fact, two guitarists could learn right off of the piano score, with each person choosing a hand. If you can read bass clef a bit- which you probably can if you want to transcribe a piano piece- you just have to find a buddy who's up for a challenge. The right hand will be read an octave down (which is of course normal reading for guitar,) and there will be lots of crossing between the melody and chords, but with two instruments and good players it doesn't have to matter, especially if different-sounding guitars are used. You could make gains by scanning each hand and converting it to a normal, treble clef guitar part, (and/or tab,) editing for range extremes, easier chord spellings, simplification, and key problems- basically just follow the process for a solo, but for each hand separately.

Flatpicking: This is what most guitarists do. If you did do a duet, there would probably be no major barriers to flatpickers playing either part. Score one for duets. Don't discount flatpicking for solos, either, though. I have seen footage of flatpickers doing amazing, raggy things with tricks like string-skipping. However, this is specialized, and the playing audience will probably consist of you only.

Country blues, Travis picking, and like that: I feel some guilt at not discussing 'true' ragtime guitar at greater length, but others have done it better, and, since we're concerned with transcription, it's outside of the scope of this guide (it leans a little too far towards "arrangement" to fairly count, besides being a specialized style.) Nonetheless, I think an appreciation is warranted. Ragtime as a style has probably existed at least as long for guitarists as for pianists, or longer, for all we know. Not reading music, for the most part, guitarists didn't write down their stuff, but in the music of recorded country blues artists like Reverend Gary Davis, born 1896, we have ample example. Davis, in fact, played his own take on Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag," which you can still hear today. It's called "Make Believe Stunt." Merle Travis, born 1917, later popularized guitar playing rooted in ragtime, using a thumb pick, much like Davis, and his first finger to simulate the ragtime piano sound with impressive flair. Chet Atkins and Jerry Reed, country show-biz polymaths, did even more to advance the thumb pick style by then known as Travis picking.

These styles lean heavily on well-known chords, the meat and potatoes of the guitar. When Travis picking, one might grab a bar chord and use the leftover fingers of the left hand to add melody notes while maintaining a boom-chuck pattern in the thumb pick. The bass-chord sound of a pianist's left hand is very effectively simulated, but pretty much at the cost of bassline flexibility. If you value a very rich sound and great stylistic roots over literalness of interpretation, consider going for it, because the sound is fantastic. For it to really work, though, you need to be plenty flexible. At any rate, if you want to play ragtime guitar, it's good to know what the old masters have been doing all along.

Steel (slide:) Lapsteel, Hawaiian guitar, Dobro, ‘slide guitar’ on an ordinary instrument, even pedal steel. Not playing in this style, or rather group of styles, I won’t say much, but I bring it up because it’s intriguing. Players are used to using the fingers of their right hands with great dexterity, as well as shifting (sliding) up and down the neck with abandon. Tunings will probably be open (more on this later,) but, given the totally triadic nature of ragtime, this doesn’t have to be any big problem. Just like in flatpicking, there’s no great barrier to a slide player taking the lead in a duet, although depending on their preferred tuning the accompaniment part might need reworking.

Classical: A discipline apart. Classical guitar deals exclusively with nylon strings, written music, and a particularly circumscribed technique making use of the thumb and first three fingers of the right hand (rarely more or fewer.) Classical guitarists are usually flexible, or at least willing, when it comes to music, but of course own their own specific tricks and preferences, like anybody else. *As a group*, they’ll tolerate demanding tasks, like big shifts and stretches, somewhat more than others. Special considerations are actually few, but, if anything, the ‘Less is More’ doctrine actually applies extra here, since producing good, even tone on nylon strings can be tricky. Some unique tricks, such as rapid tremolo, are to be found, but they’re probably of limited use in ragtime. If you want classical guitarists to play your transcription, you need to provide a treble clef part.

Fingerstyle: This is really a vague label, meant to include everything that *isn’t* flatpicking. I include it here mainly to call attention to some more differences between classical players and others. “Fingerstylists” may play on nylon strings, but more play on steel. They’re much more likely to want to see tabs. They have a greater tendency to remain in a position more and shift less, which, besides ease, has its advantages (we’ve already seen how Travis pickers can unleash lots of notes at once with relative ease.) Since the group is massively inclusive, generalizations can only get you so far, and it should be said that there are wildly unique and impressive subgenres active today that owe fairly little to either Travis picking or the classical technique. Once again, not belonging to any of these styles, I can’t say much, but know that if you’re hoping to get non-classical fingerstylists to play your transcription, you should provide a tab, and also that some of the shifting antics classical guitarists are used to will seem a little less reasonable over here. One area in which fingerstyle players might have the classical guys beat is familiarity with odd tunings, capo, etc., although classical guitarists usually end up with proficiency at low D.

Transcription
(Or, Finally!)

In abstract: this approach starts by applying a few transformations to the whole entire piece which will help simplify the transcription chore greatly, as well as lending continuity. Afterwards, it's all footwork, mainly consisting of casting a jaundiced eye at the results and writing what we get down as an 8vb treble clef part. Then it's time to edit it up and produce a final copy, as well as a tab, if we want to.

1. Choose your rag.
 - Some will be way harder than others!!! Look for...
 - Huge melodic leaps
 - Wild rhythms (not a big problem in classic rags, rampant in novelty rags)
(*The above aren't dealbreakers by any stretch, but you might start thinking about what trickery you'll use to play them smoothly)
 - Consider key- do you want to tangle with transposition, tunings or capo? Or otherwise, probably something athletic to play?
 - Be thinking of difficulty, faithfulness, style, audience.
2. Take the treble clef down an octave (probably just mentally; you don't need to write it out. Remember you can just read 8vb the way you always do for guitar music)
3. Scan the result for range extremes. Make a note of range breakers, high or low, and decide whether having to transpose them will ruin anything for you
4. Concurrently decide on a key and/or tuning, then stick with it. Consider capo as the best way to tackle non-"guitar keys."
5. Start transcribing!
 - Start by defining your melody and bassline, then filling in other voices according to your
 - Where you feel it's important to have a chord, just a few notes- maybe 2, will often suffice.
 - Use your cowboy chords and barre chords for big moments and feel confident that all guitar players will get it.
 - Use tricks to account for all of the important pitches in chords. You can replace 5ths in aims and taste.
 - Omit left hand octaves quite generally.the bassline with 3rds where you feel it helps. Accidentals are cool and important effects you should try to include.
 - The 'banjo technique' (so called by me:) Reduce a meaty passage to bass and melody lines only by taking important notes not found in the melody and plunking them down in the bass, displacing them if necessary. Usually very little is actually required to get all the pitches you want.
6. Work through your result and edit for ease. Create a final copy and/or tab. Enjoy

Breakdown

Choosing your rag is obviously a matter of personal taste. Some will, of necessity, be harder to work on and play than others, so you should think on this. Luckily, most old rags are in the public domain now, so not only are they available, they're distributable- but you might want to double-check. Quick scans of the music will reveal whether the texture is primarily flowing and sparse or dense and chaotic. It obviously helps to have your guitar so you can get creative with suspect sections on the spot. Sometimes, you'll find, things that seem like trouble have easy solutions, while more innocent bits are booby-trapped. Key is not necessarily an index of how hard the piece will be, but it might present an extra, distinct layer of difficulty, whereas a key like E would be no extra challenge. If your choice is in a key that's not native to guitar, like Bb for example, face the fact that your choices are transposition, capo, or obnoxious difficulty.

Dropping the melody an octave is basically a necessity. There probably are piano rags you wouldn't have to do this for, *strictly speaking*, but most will probably have obnoxious range problems otherwise, not the least of which is having to play high up the neck all the time. Dropping the bass an octave is obviously out of the question; bringing it up an octave is perhaps possible but would gain you nothing. Dropping the melody, unquestionably, is elegant because of how natural it is to guitar players, and it mostly does our range-condensing for us. You still might have individual problems to deal with...

Extreme highs of range should be pretty obvious if you're used to reading on guitar because there will be tons of ledger lines. Usually this stuff is for effect in rags, with the majority of the melodic material actually existing on the staff or the first few lines above. Therefore, you can start thinking about how you might creatively dispense with the astronomically high notes. Even if you're within your guitar's range, don't feel like you'll be committing a crime by changing them, because the resulting shifts would definitely produce a disproportionately difficult piece of "gristle." Comes a time when there actually is a melody line beyond your possible and/or practical range, or you just don't want to have to make the shifts for whatever reason. Would you be okay with transposing them down an octave, or paraphrasing them at a different pitch level? Keep this stuff on the tackboard of your brain for a while.

By now, you should have a pretty clear idea of the challenges of your piece. Think of transposition, tuning and capo as salves for the pain. If you have gone ahead with a piece in Bb, damn the torpedoes, you really have two good options, which are to transpose and to capo up. First, consider odd tunings. "Scordatura" is the word preferred in the classical world for changing the pitch of at least one string. Classical guitarists are, as a group, familiar with drop D- that is, tuning the bottom string to D3 for a bit more range, as well as a bit more range in a position. You also get a new open note, of course. Other tunings are not unknown, but they usually deal with the bottom E and A only. I have seen low F, as well as drop D+G. Open tunings, more the realm of fingerstylists and steel guitarists, are advocated for by many, and may be well worth your time. There are also pseudo-open tunings, like the fairly common "DADGAD." This seems

exotic, but only demands you retune three strings, and not by much, making it fairly accessible, although I'd hate to change over in performance. The main reason I would consider an odd tuning would be to create a set of open strings more relevant to my key, followed by lower bass notes for effect.

Transposition seems to be the route most have followed in transcribing ragtime. To pick a new key, remember those range extremes you found earlier and test them out. Do they now fit more snugly? Are the open strings a good fit? The open (bass) strings should ideally contain at least the root, fourth or fifth of the key, which in standard tuning or drop D leaves us with E, A, D, G, and B, meaning you'd do well to pick one. Transposition can be done in real time while you work through your transcription, although it's probably worth frontloading the headache and just transposing the whole thing in the first place. Transcribing at pitch, then transposing the guitar part, will be counterproductive unless you plan meticulously or presuppose a transposed guitar neck, both of which seem harder than just changing the piano score.

Now we arrive at capo. Make no mistake: far from a "hillbilly crutch," a capo, or capotasto, if you are fancy, is a magical device allowing the instant and accurate retuning of all six strings at a go. Classical guitarists are unlikely even to own one, since it's almost never called for in the repertoire. Jazz guitarists won't use one, since they're not necessarily relevant to the style and can even be a hindrance. Still others might disdain them as proofs that their users can't play bar chords. However, I suspect many fingerstylists will be totally hip to their usefulness. A few facts: capos can be used with alternate tunings, like drop D. They're easily set up or removed, even possibly in performance. And, they don't actually have to sacrifice much range at all.

It follows that, if the standard, open tuning is a good fit for a certain set of keys, every fret we capo up to will take those keys with it up a half-step. So, by using a capo on only the first several frets, we can actually achieve good tunings for every chromatic key.

Capo at fret:	Preferred keys, from better to worse (roughly) ->					
0	A	E	D	G	B	C
1	Bb	F	Eb	Ab	C	Db
2	B	Gb/F#	E	A	Db	D
3	C	G	F	Bb	D	Eb
4	Db	Ab	Gb/F#	B	Eb	E

We can see that, between open position and the first fret, a range sacrifice of *one semitone*, we have good options for every key except for the rare F#/Gb. One more fret solves that. I filled the table out to the fourth fret, because that way multiple options for every key are presented. If using drop D+capo, a capo at the fourth fret is still only a loss of one whole tone versus standard tuning. That is not bad.

There isn't much I can say about the transcription task itself. This is where your art comes in. Once you've picked a piece, dropped the melody, noted trouble spots, and chosen a

strategy for your key, all that's left is copying the melody and bassline to a single staff, filling in the in-between notes where you can. We now know that less is more, and that simplification is the ticket to a playable and appealing result. Nonetheless, here are a number of tricks and kicks useful to me. And, mind you, these are all just angles on the "Less is More" doctrine, anyway:

Chords. I don't even try to keep a chord everywhere the composer has one, generally preferring to choose one of the notes in a left-hand chord to include in the bassline instead. Which you choose is up to you, but I prefer to choose whatever note isn't being heard between the notes of the melody and bassline. Octaves and fifths aren't that important, of course, but thirds and anything with an accidental are choice bits. When you do feel you need a chord, maybe because it has an important role in a passage, or interacts with the melody, just a few notes will usually cut the mustard. Two, even. If you see a big, loud chord in both hands, go for a classic cowboy chord- just hit it!

Avoidance of repetition. There are times when a melody note is blatantly repeated, in which case the melody simply goes like that and I let it be. However, you'll often find moments when right-hand chords contain notes the melody just left off of. This, as an effect, is better suited to piano than guitar. To achieve a better flow and minimize the risk of melodic cloudiness, it's usually better to drop repeated notes from chords, or displace them. Your fingers will thank you, as this always results in more natural fingerings.

The "Banjo Technique." My imprecise term for scattering the notes of a chord when nothing else works, or when we do want to avoid that repetition. Sometimes an important accidental doubles the melody off the beat, for example, but playing that and whatever else you need to seems a bit too hard to be worth it. Oftentimes you'll find that the accidental can be put in the bassline, displacing it from its original position but still accounting for all of the pitches and simplifying things greatly. In passages like this the line between bass and melody wavers a little bit and you're left with a nice, flowing texture that's easy to play. It can also be very nice to set up for a big bass note this way.

Now for editing. I won't say anything about music or tab preparation, but make sure to use rhythm and beaming conventions, for example, that make the bass and melody obvious. You should try to learn the piece *before* you decide on a final version- you might decide something just doesn't flow.

Then play!