

Hearing the Story: A Narrative Framework for Analyzing Late-Nineteenth-Century African-American Piano Music

Abstract

This paper introduces a narrative approach to the analysis of late-nineteenth-century African-American piano music, a repertory that has received little sustained attention in music-theoretical scholarship. Although recent research has significantly advanced the study of Black vocal traditions, instrumental works, especially piano pieces written for popular and theatrical settings, remain largely absent from analytical discourse. This absence reflects both the precarious survival of many sources and long-standing assumptions about the limited analytical value of small-scale or functional repertoires. By adapting narrative theory to harmonic analysis, this paper argues that these works invite close analytical engagement and articulate structured musical meaning. Musical examples focus on piano compositions by Jacob J. Sawyer (1856-1885). Drawing on narrative concepts developed in literary theory and adapted to music by scholars such as Carolyn Abbate and Byron Almén, the paper treats tonal motion and harmonic tension as expressive processes unfolding over time. In Sawyer's music, chromaticism, augmented-sixth and common-tone-diminished seventh chords, and rhythmic displacement function not as decorative surface features, but as integral components of musical design. Situated within post-Civil-War Black performance culture, specifically between minstrelsy and early Black musical theatre, these piano works employ familiar dance genres such as marches and waltzes while subtly reshaping tonal expectation and closure. Combining close harmonic analysis with narrative interpretation, the paper demonstrates how this repertory supports analytically rigorous readings and challenges the boundaries of the traditional musical canon.

Web-Based Databases for Genealogy Research

- <http://www.ancestry.com> (\$389 per year [all access])
- <http://www.genealogybank.com> (1690-today; >9,000 newspapers; >2B records; \$99 per year)
- <http://newspaperarchive.com> (1607-today, more than 15,600 titles; \$75 for 6 months)
- <http://newspapers.com> (21,800+ newspapers from the 1700s-2000s; 692+ Million Pages; Millions of additional pages added every month; included in the “all access” ancestry.com membership)

Sheet Music – Digital Collections

- Library of Congress Sheet Music Collection www.loc.gov/library/libarch-digital.html
- Sheet Music Consortium <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/sheetmusic/>
- Historic American Sheet Music <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/hasm>
- Levi Sheet Music Collection <https://levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu/>
- Mississippi State University Sheet Music Collection <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/cht-sheet-music/>
- 19th-Century American Sheet Music <https://dcr.lib.unc.edu/record/f5b8a5c3-cc48-4e2d-9675-589f870fecc3>
- 19th-Century California Sheet Music <https://people.ischool.berkeley.edu/~mkduggan/neh.html>
- African American Sheet Music <https://library.brown.edu/cds/sheetmusic/afam/index.html>

Analysis of Sawyer's Piano Music

- piano pieces as embedded “sonic scenes” within minstrelsy, jubilee concerts, and early Black musical theatre – not as autonomous salon works
- common-tone diminished-seventh chords as moments of surprise/instability that complicate tonal certainty and suggest unsettled social conditions
- augmented-sixth chords and intensified chromaticism as markers of drama, suspense, and resistance
- persistent chromatic ornamentation narrates “partial emancipation”
- harmonic / rhythmic “color” functions as coded discourse: outwardly meeting stage expectations while enabling irony, ambiguity, and cultural critique within racialized performance constraints

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Out of Bondage Waltz

Jacob J. Sawyer, Op. 2

Andante Maestoso

Musical notation for measures 1-4. The piece is in F major, 3/4 time, and begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The bass line features a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The treble line has a melodic line with some grace notes. Chord symbols are provided below the staff.

Chord symbols: F: I (IV[♯]) I V⁷/V V ⁷ I[♯] I⁶ ii⁶ ct^{o7} I[♯] V[♯]/IV vii^{o6}/V iv⁶ (I[♯])

Musical notation for measures 5-8. The dynamics range from fortissimo (*ff*) to pianissimo (*pp*). The tempo remains Andante Maestoso. The bass line continues with eighth notes, and the treble line has a more active melody. Chord symbols are provided below the staff.

Chord symbols: V[♯]/V vii^{o4} ^{o3} vii^{o7}/IV vii^{o4}/V V[♯] (ii IV[♯]) V⁷

Musical notation for measures 9-16. The tempo changes to Tempo di Valse (3/4 time). The dynamics are piano (*p*). The bass line features a steady eighth-note accompaniment with some chords marked with a star (*). The treble line has a melodic line with grace notes and accents. Chord symbols are provided below the staff.

Chord symbols: I V⁷ vi V⁶/vi

Musical notation for measures 17-24. The dynamics range from piano (*p*) to forte (*f*). The tempo remains Tempo di Valse. The bass line continues with eighth notes, and the treble line has a melodic line with grace notes and accents. Chord symbols are provided below the staff.

Chord symbols: ii⁶ [♯] V⁷ ct^{o7} I

Musical notation for measures 25-32. The dynamics range from piano (*p*) to forte (*f*) and then diminuendo (*dim.*). The tempo remains Tempo di Valse. The bass line continues with eighth notes, and the treble line has a melodic line with grace notes and accents. Chord symbols are provided below the staff.

Chord symbols: I V⁷ V⁶/vi ⁷ vi

Musical notation for measures 33-40. The dynamics range from piano (*p*) to forte (*f*) and then diminuendo (*dim.*). The piece concludes with a 'Fine' marking. The bass line continues with eighth notes, and the treble line has a melodic line with grace notes and accents. Chord symbols are provided below the staff.

Chord symbols: ii[♯] cad[♯] V⁷ I

7th Exposition Grand March

Composed by Jacob Sawyer. Op. 3.

Allegro Marziale.

Piano

F: V vii°/V V $\frac{3}{2}$ I $\frac{6}{4}$ V $\frac{4}{4}$ I ct o7 cad $\frac{4}{4}$ V $\frac{3}{4}$ /V V 7 I V $\frac{6}{5}$ I 6 vi 6 V $\frac{6}{5}$ /ii ii 7 V 7 ?

I ct o7 I add6 a: iv $\frac{6}{5}$ cad $\frac{4}{4}$ V 7 ? cad $\frac{4}{4}$ V 7

i / F: iii V $\frac{3}{4}$ I vi 6 V $\frac{6}{5}$ /ii ii 7 V 7 ? I ct o7 I

V $\frac{3}{4}$ /IV IV 6 Gr $^{+6}$ cad $\frac{4}{4}$ V $\frac{3}{4}$ /V V 7 I / C: IV I V 7 I

Respectfully dedicated to Messrs Vokes and Tyler.
MANAGERS OF THE BIJOU THEATRE BOSTON.

THE BIJOU.

MARCH.

Composed by JACOB J. SAWYER.

Con spirito.

Ab: I vii^{o7}/ii ii vii^{o6}/ii ii cad⁴ V⁷ I V⁷

6 I App V⁷ I ct^{o7} (P)

11 I V⁷ I Eb: IV App

16 V⁷ I V⁷ I 1. 2. / Ab: V I

21 Ab: IV cad⁴ V⁷ I ct^{o7} (P)

28

I ct°7 I V $\frac{3}{vi}$ IV I cad $\frac{4}{4}$ ct°7 cad $\frac{4}{4}$ V $\frac{7}{7}$

Chromatic Bass Line

36

1. I ct°7 I V $\frac{3}{vi}$ I $\frac{Eb}{b}$: IV V $\frac{9}{9}$ I add6 V $\frac{7}{7}$

2.

43

I ct°7 I V $\frac{9}{9}$ I V $\frac{3}{ii}$ ii

50

ii $\frac{\#6}{6}$ cad $\frac{4}{4}$ V $\frac{7}{7}$ I IV $\frac{Ab}{b}$: I V $\frac{7}{7}$

56

I V $\frac{7}{7}$ I ct°7

61

I V $\frac{7}{7}$ I Chromatic Bass Line

66

cad⁴ ct⁷ cad⁴ V⁷ I_/Db: V V⁷

Chromatic Bass Line

73

I add⁶ V⁷ I add⁶

81

I_/Ab: IV cad⁴ V⁷ I

88

V⁷ I_/Db: V I_/Db: (V) ii⁶ cad⁴

95

V⁷ I ii⁶ cad⁴

102

V³/iii iii⁶ vi² V⁷ I I **Fine**