

## Out of Africa: The Cakewalk in Twentieth-Century French Concert Music

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Out of Africa: The Cakewalk in Twentieth-Century French Concert  
Music



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## **Out of Africa: The Cakewalk in Twentieth-Century French Concert Music**

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The term “cakewalk” has traditionally been used in a number of different contexts to embody different meanings. For instance, “cakewalk” may refer to a social event revolving around dance. The term is also used synonymously with “ragtime” to identify early jazz styles. An alternative definition refers to the syncopated short-long-short rhythm (in which the long is twice the duration of the short) found in early jazz, which forms the accompaniment for the cakewalk dance and is incorporated into a significant amount of French concert music from the early twentieth-century. In this paper, I will discuss the background and cultural significance of the cakewalk in several of its forms and definitions. I will look first at the evolution of the cakewalk in America and secondly at its development in France by three twentieth-century composers: Erik Satie, Darius Milhaud, and Claude Debussy. Milhaud uses the cakewalk to represent “primitive” cultures while Satie references current popular dance hall music and Debussy offers the cakewalk as an antithesis to the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Germanic tradition.

The cakewalk dance was first initiated by slaves on plantations in the southern United States.<sup>1</sup> Its roots are tied inextricably to dance: it began as the “walk around” which came to America from the African circle dance by way of its predecessor, the “ring shout.”<sup>2</sup> All of these dances, including the cakewalk, share common dance-step structures. Dancers form circles and dance to an accompaniment comprised of polyrhythms created by a steady bass and syncopated melody.<sup>3</sup> One major difference between the cakewalk and these earlier dances is the steps used in the dance. The original African circle dance featured shuffling steps, which were later replaced by the cakewalk’s prancing, high stepping strut.<sup>4</sup> The cakewalk’s steps developed separately from the ring shout and other offshoots of the African circle dance because of the dance’s purpose, which was to mock the social dances<sup>5</sup> and “fine manners of the Southern gentleman.”<sup>6</sup> The cakewalk was originally intended to parody the plantation owners; interestingly, this has only recently been discovered through orally transmitted tales. Leigh Whipper, a black actor, and Shephard Edmonds, a former ragtime entertainer, are two sources of this aural tradition. Whipper recounts stories first heard from his childhood nurse, a former “strut girl,” who told him, “We’d do [the white party

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<sup>1</sup> Brooke Baldwin, “The Cakewalk: A Study in Stereotype and Reality,” *Journal of Social History* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 207.

<sup>2</sup> Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1979), 123.

<sup>3</sup> Baldwin, “The Cakewalk: A Study in Stereotype and Reality,” 210.

<sup>4</sup> Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 123.

<sup>5</sup> Baldwin, “The Cakewalk: A Study in Stereotype and Reality,” 208.

<sup>6</sup> Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 123.

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dances], too, but we used to mock em, every step.”<sup>7</sup> Edmonds passes on the memories of his parents, who were freed slaves: “They did a take-off on the high manners of the white folks in the ‘big house,’ but their masters, who gathered around to watch the fun missed the point.”<sup>8</sup> Both Whipper and Edmonds were interviewed as a part of the WPA’s (Works Progress Administration) Federal Writers’ Project in the 1930s.<sup>9</sup>

This satirization is a prime example of another African influence, that of “signifyin(g).”<sup>10</sup> “Signifyin(g)” was first introduced to literary theory by Henry Louis Gates. The term refers to a specifically black vernacular and cultural structure present in much African-American literature. Gates refers to these African-American cultural and literary contributions and argues that this art must be reexamined within a historical context, which, in music, includes such elements as “call and response” traditions and the use of blue notes.<sup>11</sup> Gates also argues that there are ideas inherent to the African-American vernacular, both linguistic and musical.<sup>12</sup> Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. develops Gates’ theories and argues that “signifyin(g)” often features the quotation and development of earlier music or musical styles.<sup>13</sup> This is not only a recycling of old ideas, but also a way of paying homage to the development of concepts. In cakewalk, participants used old ideas (i.e. traditional

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<sup>7</sup> Baldwin, “The Cakewalk: A Study in Stereotype and Reality,” 208.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., “Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, and Black Music Inquiry,” *Black Music Research Journal* 11, no. 2 (Autumn 1991): 265-287, 270.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 272-274.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 270-272.

African dances) in a satirical way. The use of such traditional elements highlights the historical importance of tribal dance, which is ironically contextualized as a sarcastic protest against oppression. The sarcasm and humour used by the slaves to mock their oppressors very much belongs to the tradition of “signifyin(g).”

The cakewalk has a very strong history as a social tool that permitted slaves to communicate their history and protest against the atrocities to which they were subjected.<sup>14</sup> Although the musical elements were secondary to the dance itself, music remained integral to cakewalk since the dance was never unaccompanied. Traditional African drums were often prohibited items in the United States, although occasionally, some instruments did slip past customs. Much of the percussive accompaniment for the dance was provided by clapping hands and stomping feet. Some slaves made drums with the few materials available to them, while the main melodic instruments were quills (reed whistles), banjos, and fiddles.

With the advent of minstrelsy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the cakewalk was championed by white performers in blackface parodying the slaves' dances. This reversal is summed up very succinctly by Imamu Baraka, who “find[s] the idea of white minstrels in blackface satirizing a dance satirizing themselves a remarkable kind of irony.”<sup>15</sup> The complete ignorance on the part of the performers of the history of the dance was yet another example of the ignorance that prevented

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<sup>14</sup> For the following description of cakewalk dance music, I am indebted to Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance in the United States from 1619 to 1970* (Palo Alto, California: National Press Books, 1972), 83-87.

<sup>15</sup> Baldwin, “The Cakewalk: A Study in Stereotype and Reality,” 212.

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southerners from recognizing the cakewalk as anything more than a failed attempt to emulate their culture.<sup>16</sup>

Minstrelsy presents an interesting twist in the history of the cakewalk. Ironically, minstrelsy “was both racist and a way to marginally bring black music to white America.”<sup>17</sup> Greater awareness of black culture was offered to the American population, but this was a highly constructed perspective. For instance, many American composers incorporated the rhythms and stereotypical image of the cakewalk and its dancers into rags that became hugely popular.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, although the cakewalk continued to be associated with black culture (especially through racially charged depictions of slaves on the covers of sheet music),<sup>19</sup> the African heritage and cultural background of the cakewalk were already beginning to be distanced from the popular American musical tunes. There was very little beyond the basic rhythms of ragtime to connect the music and dance of plantation slaves of the early nineteenth century to the parlor music of middle- and upper-class Caucasians in the early twentieth century.

This style of cakewalk-influenced music was not only fashionable in America but was also wildly popular in France.<sup>20</sup> The portrayal of the exotic in the form of American slave culture had a wide audience appeal. Although the cultural transfer had begun long before,

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<sup>16</sup> Baldwin, “The Cakewalk: A Study in Stereotype and Reality,” 208-9.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 212-3.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> For the following short history of the cakewalk’s influence on American and European culture, I am indebted to R. Reid Badger, “James Reese Europe and the Prehistory of Jazz,” *American Music* 7, no. 1, Special Jazz Issue (Spring 1989): 56-7.

Parisian “Negrophilia” hit its stride in the 1920s.<sup>21</sup> During the First World War, jazz spread in France because of the many American military brass bands touring the country. These bands were led by conductors like Will Marion Cook, Louis Mitchell and, most notably, James Reese Europe. Europe was the first black leader of a military band in the United States Army. His band was sent to France to perform from January 1, 1918 until his return home on December 31 of that same year. His band played everything from the conventional marches by Sousa to jazz, and “although the Hellfighters [Europe’s band] could not compete technically with the other great military bands, they nevertheless won the crowd over completely.”<sup>22</sup> Their popularity speaks to the Parisian interest in American culture.

The French infatuation with black American culture was perpetuated by other performers in different contexts as well. One of the most prominent was Josephine Baker, a dancer who arrived in Paris in 1925.<sup>23</sup> Baker was known for her Paris début in *La Revue nègre*, which was attended by many influential members of the Paris arts scene, including Darius Milhaud.<sup>24</sup> Baker epitomized the *art nègre* in Paris by portraying stereotypes of primitivism and exoticism associated with African Americans. For example, she generally performed in costumes suggesting a kind of

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<sup>21</sup> Petrine Archer-Shaw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 9.

<sup>22</sup> Badger, “James Reese Europe and the Prehistory of Jazz,” 57.

<sup>23</sup> Archer-Shaw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s*, 94.

<sup>24</sup> Glenn Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), 135.



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savagery or without clothing altogether.<sup>25</sup> She was often referred to as being pre-human, bestial, or primitive in her dancing but despite this criticism, she faced much less prejudice than she did as a black woman at home in St. Louis.<sup>26</sup> Baker was also able to appear almost white when she wished, especially in her life off-stage.<sup>27</sup> Because of this dual appearance, Baker was able to reap the benefits of access to the white world which may have contributed to her appeal. Parisians seem to have been more interested in the exotic that was accessible, an Other that was not much different from themselves.

The French art scene was enthralled by this trend of dancers and musicians from America, an infatuation which manifested itself on many cultural levels. I will primarily be examining the French incorporation of the cakewalk in art music, although composers of popular music also manipulated similar musical and rhythmic themes. For my purposes, I will focus on the concert music of three French composers: Satie, Milhaud, and Debussy, whose compositions emerged out of this Franco-American cultural exchange.

Erik Satie used the typical short-long-short cakewalk rhythm as well as other ragtime syncopations in many of his works. His first piece to feature the rhythm, "Prélude de *La Mort de Monsieur Mouche*," was copy-written in 1900. Just four year later, he published two more works using the cakewalk rhythm, *Le Picadilly* and *La Diva de l'Empire*. The former is a march and the latter, a song in the tradition of

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<sup>25</sup> Archer-Shaw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s*, 117-120.

<sup>26</sup> Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre*, 138-42.

<sup>27</sup> Archer-Shaw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s*, 94.

other cabaret songs Satie was writing at the time.<sup>28</sup> *La Diva* uses the cakewalk rhythm not only in the accompaniment but in the vocal line as well.

27  
el - le met - tant de dou - ceur

LA DIVA DE L'EMPIRE  
© Copyright 1919 by Salabert (Paris)

Darius Milhaud's ballet *La création du monde*, or "The Creation of the Earth," produced in 1923, was the high art equivalent of the popular *Revue nègre* in which Baker appeared.<sup>29</sup> His composition uses elements of jazz, to which Milhaud was exposed on his visit to Harlem in 1922.<sup>30</sup> He uses this musical framework to tell a story based in part on African creation myths.<sup>31</sup> The cakewalk rhythm is present, though much of the syncopated effect is softened due to the work's slow tempo. It is interesting to note that when the rhythm appears, it is almost solely in the bassoon line, although it occurs near the end in the

<sup>28</sup> Robert Orledge, "Satie & America," *American Music* 18 (2000): 78-102, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 113-5.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Lawrence Kramer, "Powers of Blackness: Africanist Discourse in Modern Concert Music," *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1996), 62.

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trumpet. The use of the bassoon in this instance recalls Stravinsky's earlier *Le sacre du printemps*, with its prominent bassoon line at the opening. Both ballets are concerned with the representation of primitivism, and the use of the cakewalk rhythm in the bassoon line forms a connection between the bassoon, jazz and primitivism.

135



LA CRÉATION DU MONDE  
© Copyright 1929 by M. Eschig (Paris)

The cakewalk rhythm is much more prominent in two of Milhaud's other works, *Scaramouche* and especially *Le Bal Martiniquais*, both of which are available in scores for two pianos. The rhythm appears in the third movement of *Scaramouche*, which is subtitled "Brazileira," and in the second movement of *Le Bal Martiniquais*, which is subtitled "Biguine." These two movement titles imply a relationship to the music of South America and the Caribbean, respectively. Not only do these works use North American influences, but they also incorporate Southern and Central American rhythms. Brazilian music, especially black Brazilian music like the *Samba*, is also a hybridized music comprised of partially African elements inextricably intertwined with dance. The development of syncretic musical forms (structures that incorporate elements of two or more distinct cultures into a new musical idiom) in the Americas are very much related. They share as a common ancestor the music of African slaves brought from their home to work on plantations. The developments of these idioms differ in that the music was subject to much greater constraints in North America while in South and Central

America the slaves were allowed much more freedom for cultural expression. Thus, South and Central American music often retains many more elements of the original African music from which it derives. The *Samba* is most closely associated with Carnival in Brazil.<sup>32</sup> Carnival in Martinique is most closely associated with the *beguine*, a relationship evident the title of the second movement of *Le Bal Martiniquais*.<sup>33</sup> The *beguine* is primarily a musical form, unlike the cakewalk and *Samba*, which are intertwined with dance.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, Claude Debussy's musical output includes one of the earliest and most transparent uses of the cakewalk. The sixth and final piece in his suite *Children's Corner* is entitled "Golliwog's Cakewalk." A Golliwog is a minstrel doll that was extremely popular in England in the early twentieth century.<sup>35</sup> This piece, published in 1908, is the only piece I have found that acknowledges the cakewalk in its title.<sup>36</sup> It is written for solo piano and is in ABA form. The cakewalk makes up the A sections while the B section provides a contrasting rhythmic makeup. In the A section, the cakewalk rhythm appears in nearly every measure. The A sections are very lively and are marked by many accents, staccato passages and dynamic contrasts.

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<sup>32</sup> Gerard Béhague, "Samba," *Grove Music Online*. 20 September 2008 <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

<sup>33</sup> Julian Gerstin, "Martinique and Guadeloupe," *Grove Music Online*. 20 September 2008 <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Ann McKinley, "Debussy and American Minstrelsy," *The Black Perspective in Music* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1986), 249-258, 249.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

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Musical score for Golliwog's Cakewalk, measures 10-14. The score is in 2/4 time and B-flat major. The right hand features a melodic line with accents and slurs, while the left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment with chords and single notes. Dynamics include *mf* and *sf*.

GOLLIWOG'S CAKEWALK  
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After a transition of 14 measures in the contrasting B section, in which the mood of the first section is preserved despite a *ritardando*, the energy of the piece shifts suddenly. Debussy quotes the famous opening Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*.<sup>37</sup> This quotation is not out of respect, however, as the line (which is to be played “avec une grande émotion”) is punctuated by a few satirical “hiccups” which lead back to a short passage using the cakewalk rhythm. It should be mentioned that although the cakewalk rhythm is used in the B section, it is phrased entirely differently and the tempo is significantly slower and includes a more flexible tempo; the result is that the cakewalk is more difficult to detect in this texture.

Musical score for Golliwog's Cakewalk, measures 61-65. The score is in 2/4 time and B-flat major. The right hand features a melodic line with a slur and a fermata, while the left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment with chords and single notes. Dynamics include *p* and *pp*. The tempo marking is *a tempo*.

GOLLIWOG'S CAKEWALK  
© Copyright 1995 by Alfred Pub. Co. (California)

<sup>37</sup> Ann McKinley, “Debussy and American Minstrelsy,” 249.

Debussy uses the cakewalk rhythm and melody from the opening of the A section, still in the tempo of the B section, to return to the slightly modified A section that closes the piece. The only alteration to the material this second time is the exclusion of the introductory material and the addition of a more final sounding conclusion.

The satirical nature of the Wagner quotation suggests that Debussy manipulates the cakewalk rhythm to protest against Wagner's use of heavy orchestration, through-composed music and frequent modulations. In contrast, "Golliwog's Cakewalk" is for solo piano with a thin texture (often no more than two or three notes being struck at a time), with clearly delineated and contrasting sections. The piece's whimsical character contributes to the satirical tone. There is significant repetition, very little chromaticism and strong perfect cadences. All of these musical elements point to a clear disaffiliation with the late nineteenth century German aesthetic and Wagnerian style in particular.

The cakewalk also seems to represent the antithesis of Wagner's own musical tastes. The music is far simpler compared to Wagner's ideal, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and the dance's satire and comedy provide a ready tool for composers to ridicule Wagner's seriousness. Debussy's piece is also for children, much like *La Boîte à joujoux*; this is in sharp contrast to Wagner's use of heavy philosophy to dictate the terms of his music. As Debussy would have seen it, cakewalk music came to France from Africa via America, and thus completely skirts the nineteenth-century German music scene.

Debussy's image of black Americans in "Golliwog's Cakewalk" is simple, childish and humorous. However, Debussy incorporates the cakewalk not as a political

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commentary about African Americans but rather to facilitate a musical discussion about Wagner; here, the cakewalk is merely a tool used for compositional effect. The cakewalk is also an inherently satiric and comedic vehicle, and such comedy translates into Debussy's work much in the same way that physical comedy transcends culture and language.

Although "Golliwog's Cakewalk" is one of the first and most obvious examples of the French adoption of this dance, it is not the only one of Debussy's works to reference cakewalk. Another piece featuring the cakewalk rhythm is his *The Little Nigar*, published in 1909. The cakewalk melody in this piece was later used in *La Boîte à joujoux*, a children's ballet written in 1913 and performed in an orchestral transcription after his death.<sup>38</sup>

The image displays two musical staves in 2/4 time. The first staff, labeled '1' and '8va', shows a melody for 'La Boîte à joujoux' with a dotted line indicating an octave shift. The second staff, labeled '5', shows a melody for 'The Little Nigar'. Both pieces feature a characteristic cakewalk rhythm of eighth notes.

LA BOÎTE À JOUJOUX, THE LITTLE NIGAR  
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Two other piano pieces reflect Debussy's profound interest in this same musical idea. Both are found among his two books of piano preludes. The first is "Minstrels," the twelfth and final prelude in the first book, and the second is "General Lavine-eccentric," the sixth prelude in Book II.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> McKinley, "Debussy and American Minstrelsy," 250-1.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 254.

The cakewalk rhythm appears briefly and subtly in “Minstrels,” but is not directly incorporated into “General Lavine-eccentric;” however, Debussy writes that the latter should be played “Dans le style et le Mouvement d’un Cake Walk.” This direction suggests that Debussy’s audience would have been familiar with the cakewalk not only as a rhythmic figure, but as a musically distinct style.

The evolution of the cakewalk in France is partially revealed through a comparison of Debussy’s “Golliwog’s Cakewalk” and Milhaud’s *La création du monde*. Debussy’s work dates back to 1908, considerably earlier than Milhaud’s, which premiered fifteen years later. As a result, Debussy was at the front of the movement introducing jazz and ragtime elements to French concert music while Milhaud arrived on the scene later. As one of the first innovators in this area, Debussy explored the first African-American music to reach French shores, while Milhaud had access to a more developed tradition. As mentioned earlier, Milhaud also had the opportunity to visit Harlem and view jazz in its original context; thus his influences were often from secondary sources.

Generally then, the cakewalk’s distinctive rhythm was the primary element explored by French composers. Musically, the basic harmonies and form are left in the Americas and are replaced with the more complicated and dissonant harmonies of the French composers. Similarly, the rhythm is worked into larger ideas and more complex compositions. On a cultural level, the dance and true “signify-cance” of the cakewalk is largely ignored by the composers in favour of the stereotype perpetuated by minstrelsy. African culture is incorporated into a European context in the case of Milhaud, but as a stereotypically



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primitive “African” culture as opposed to that of the American plantations. In early twentieth century France, the cakewalk and other elements of cultural exoticism are divorced from their historical contexts.

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