

THOMAS H. KERR JR.

EASTER MONDAY SWAGGER

Scherzino for Piano

A Fantasy "Romp" on "Walk Together, Children"



Edited by Susanna Garcia and William Chapman Nyaho

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EASTER MONDAY SWAGGER: SCHERZINO FOR PIANO

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ABOUT THOMAS HENDERSON KERR JR.

Thomas Henderson Kerr Jr. (1915–88) was born in Baltimore, Maryland. He began playing and studying piano at an early age. He taught himself the organ and, as early as fourteen, played for church services, as well as in Baltimore's nightclubs. As a young man, Kerr wanted to attend the Peabody Institute, but, at that time, African Americans were not admitted. He instead attended Howard University for one year, then transferred to the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, where he earned three degrees: a bachelor of music in piano, a bachelor of music in theory, and a master of music in theory. At Eastman he studied piano with Cécile Genhart (1898–1983). He graduated summa cum laude. In 1943, Kerr returned to Howard University as Professor of Piano and served as chair of the piano department until his retirement in 1976.

During his tenure at Howard, his career flourished. He composed and arranged music for significant events that directly and indirectly affected the university, such as the Howard University Centennial and the installation services for James Nabrit Jr., president of the university. He also composed for events of national significance, such as the US Bicentennial, the deaths of presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, and the death of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.

For over thirty-five years, Kerr served as the organist at Plymouth Congregational Church in Washington, DC, where he composed organ, choral, vocal, and ensemble works for services. His organ compositions have been performed at the National Cathedral, the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, the Mormon Tabernacle, and in more than twenty cathedrals and churches in Europe. As a pianist, he performed both on the Howard campus and at venues including the National Gallery of Art and the Phillips Collection. He appeared twice as a concert soloist with the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, DC.¹

Thomas Kerr Jr. raised two children, Judith Elaine Kerr and Thomas Henderson Kerr III, with his first wife, Norma McAllister Kerr (1922–91).² His second wife, Hortense Reid Kerr (1926–2002) was Professor of Piano at Howard University. She performed, catalogued, and lectured on his music and career.³ Thomas H. Kerr Jr. died on August 26, 1988, as a result of an automobile accident. He is buried in Washington, DC, near Howard University.



Thomas H. Kerr Jr.
Photo courtesy of Stuart and Cynthia Reid

1. Thomas Henderson Kerr Jr. Papers.
2. Fitz-Fitzharris, "Compositional Techniques," 6.
3. Hortense Reid Kerr's papers are found in the Kerr Collection at the Schomburg Center.

Easter Monday Swagger Summary

Section	Subsection	Measures	Subject Material	Tonality, Other
Theme	<i>Walk Together, Chillen</i>	1–8 (beat 3)	Chorus	F major
		8 (beat 4)–16	Verse	
A	<i>In two, but choose rhythm and lilt over speed</i>	1–25		
	<i>with a crisp detached touch practically throughout except for middle section</i>	1–8	Chorus	F major/blues
		8 (last eighth)–12	improvisatory episode, based on the chorus	harmonic shift, mood shift
		13–20	Chorus	return to F major, but reharmonized
		20–25	improvisatory episode, based on the chorus	tempo and dynamics tapering to conclude the section
B	<i>Fantasia (with great freedom)</i>	26–60		
	<i>always broadly and with much fantasy</i>	26–38	The verse dominates with a complementing chorus motif using call-and-response techniques.	bitonal harmonies tinged with blues and jazz idioms
		39–50 (beat 2)		gradual harmonic sequencing by ascending thirds, building to a climax
	<i>molto affrettando</i>	50 (beat 3)–60	cadenza-like climax based on the first five notes of the chorus	E-flat minor–F major bitonality

Theme

Easter Monday Swagger opens with an unaccompanied statement of the spiritual “Walk Together, Children” in F major. The melodic emphasis on the minor third, paired with syncopated rhythms, creates a playful, childlike quality. The addition of an E-flat in the verse (mm. 8 [beat 4]–10) provides a subtle blues inflection.

The theme consists of a chorus (mm. 1–8) and verse (mm. 9–16), each structured as two four-bar phrases. The final segment of each is identical, corresponding to the repeated refrain “There’s a great camp meeting in the promised land” (mm. 6 [beat 4]–8; mm. 14 [beat 4]–16).

Section A (mm. 1–25)

Section A presents the chorus melody, playfully exchanged between multiple voices in different registers. Often, one voice completes a phrase begun by another, while a countermelody occasionally weaves through the primary line (mm. 1–3 and 13–15 [top voice]). This interplay creates the impression of a choir performing together—alternating between individual voices and unified moments—capturing the communal spirit of the chorus.

The section is in F major with strong blues inflections. The theme is punctuated by mild dissonances within a quasi-contrapuntal texture. Despite temporary tonal shifts and modulations, cadences in F are clearly defined, providing a sense of tonal stability amid the harmonic exploration.

Section A aligns with the regular phrase structure of the chorus, including two varied statements of the melody, each followed by an episode. The first episode briefly shifts mood, harmony, and texture before returning to the reharmonized melody in F major. The second episode gently winds down with *poco meno mosso*, diminishing dynamics, and a *fermata* that brings the section to a close. The final two measures prolong the F tonality, evoking the blues with the presence of both the major and minor third and the addition of the seventh.

Section B (mm. 26–60)

Section B, marked *Fantasia (with great freedom)*, initiates a dramatic shift of mood and texture. The verse melody appears here for the first time, with irregular phrase lengths and frequent shifts in character and harmonic style. Kerr’s writing feels spontaneous, with fresh colors and ideas emerging every few measures.

Kerr possessed considerable improvisational skills honed through his experiences as a jazz pianist in Baltimore nightclubs and as a church organist at Plymouth Congregational Church. In discussing *Easter Monday Swagger*, Fitz-Fitzharris observes:

Kerr’s improvisational talent is evident in the general traits and typical patterns of his compositions. A spontaneous and eclectic composer, Kerr was a frequent performer in the night clubs of Baltimore, Maryland, as a jazz pianist in the 1940s and 1950s. The harmonies and rhythms of this great genre are apparent in his compositions. Kerr found inspiration in many

For Natalie Hinderas (*The Ensorcerating Siren of the Steinway*)

EASTER MONDAY SWAGGER

Scherzino for Piano

A Fantasy "Rompe" on "Walk Together, Children"
(1970)

Source: Spiritual "Walk Together, Chillen"

Thomas H. Kerr Jr.
(1915–88)

In two, but choose rhythm and lilt over speed ($\text{♩} = 80-88$)

with a crisp detached touch practically throughout except for middle section

10

*sub. meno **f** e cresc.*

13

f

8va

p

mark inner voice

loco

17

con ped.

20

dim.

Poco meno mosso

mp

23

pp

molto rit.

ppp

una corda