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Has Scott Joplin’s ‘Thoroughly American Opera’ Found Its Moment?

“Treemonisha” — brilliant, flawed and unfinished — is ripe for creative reimagining at a time when opera houses are looking to diversify the canon.



By [Zachary Woolfe](#)

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Neema Bickersteth as Treemonisha at the Luminato Festival in Toronto. The vastly revised plot had new words (by the playwright Leah-Simone Bowen, with Cheryl L. Davis) adroitly matched to the original rhythms and melodies. Credit...Dahlia Katz

Excerpted from the full article [here](#).

“Treemonisha” experiments seem to be everywhere these days: Three very different versions have recently been presented, in the United States, Canada and France. ...

“Other than knowing the title, knowing it existed, I really didn’t know it,” the composer [Jessie Montgomery](#), who collaborated with Jannina Norpoth on the orchestrations for a reimagining of the work that premiered in Toronto in June, said in an interview. ...

Developed by the theater company Volcano with a core creative team of Black women: the book writers, arrangers, conductor and stage director. [This] team took Joplin’s score, characters and setting, and grafted onto them a vastly revised plot, with the new words — by the playwright Leah-Simone Bowen, with Cheryl L. Davis — adroitly matched to the original rhythms and melodies.

Bowen and Davis take the “conjure men” more seriously and compassionately. They are now part of a community of “Maroons” — inspired by the Black people who lived in some Southern marshlands in the 19th century, and held Hoodoo spiritual beliefs linked to their roots in Africa — looked down on by Treemonisha’s circle of upwardly mobile, anxiously assimilationist freed Blacks.

“Depicting Hoodoo today as rooted in superstition and ignorance has no value,” Bowen said in an interview. “I wanted to explore how Treemonisha’s intelligence would be a tool she uses to understand that.”



A scene from the Toronto “Treemonisha.” “Depicting Hoodoo today as rooted in superstition and ignorance has no value,” said Bowen, the playwright. “I wanted to explore how Treemonisha’s intelligence would be a tool she uses to understand that.” Credit...Dahlia Katz

Remus is now Treemonisha's priggish fiancé, left at the altar and then a jealous villain; Zoderick is the romantic lead who steals her heart and brings her back to her roots. The tragedy that transpires between the two men punctuates a richer plot than Joplin's, as well as a more precise and moving parable of needless divisions between people with so much in common. ...

Montgomery and Norpoth, the composer-orchestrators, wanted the musicians to be visible onstage... so they settled on a chamber-size mix of strings and winds — and, deliberately, none of the piano so associated with Joplin and ragtime. Especially in the Maroons scenes in the forest, the arrangement makes haunting use of the kora — the West African string instrument whose player is often a kind of community bard — and African percussion, for a landscape that feels both mysteriously distant from Joplin and surprisingly friendly to him.

There are reworked songs from Joplin's score, as well as some melodies borrowed from his art songs, and some changes in the order of numbers. "Some of it goes pretty far from what Joplin usually sounds like," Norpoth said in an interview, "but all of it is based on his themes."

She added that the creators hoped to carve out even more space for improvisation and kora solos, and to forge deeper links between the African instruments and the rest of the ensemble. But this production... feels ready to be seen more widely... [a] sterling example of how art of the past can take on new life in a new era.

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