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Can a 108-year-old opera – by Scott Joplin – be made to sing for today?



Jessie Montgomery and Yamoussa Bangoura prepare for this month's workshop of "Treemonisha" in Toronto. The 108-year-old opera was written by Scott Joplin, best remembered today for his rag compositions. (John Lauener)

By [Peter Marks](#)

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The themes that composer Scott Joplin was exploring in his masterwork "Treemonisha" — feminism and black aspiration — struck Leah-Simone Bowen as so ahead of their time that the opportunity to give them a new context for 21st-century audiences struck her as impossible to pass up.

"That it's essentially a conversation within an African community," the playwright said. "That it's about a black woman leading — and that she's *chosen* to lead? It's really subversive."

And that these ideas were planted in a musical piece 108 years ago by an African American composer who never saw it blossom made the challenge for the Canadian writer and colleagues in the United States all the more irresistible.

As a result, arts institutions from across the continent and the Atlantic — among them, Washington Performing Arts — have invested in an endeavor that Bowen and like-minded artists are now developing: an expansively reimagined “Treemonisha,” for which only a piano and vocal score exists, in the Library of Congress. Although the work finally reached the stage in 1972 and is occasionally revived with its schematic original story, no one has tried, the creative team says, to significantly alter its narrative infrastructure in hopes of reaching a wider audience.

That’s the mission originally staked out by the Toronto theater company [Volcano](#), with a goal of unveiling the revised “Treemonisha” next year in San Francisco and then taking it on tour to other cities, including a production hosted by Washington Performing Arts in fall 2020.

“I wanted to stick closely to Joplin and create an entirely new story that furthers those themes that resonate with today,” said Ross Manson, Volcano’s artistic director. “As far as I can find, the libretto has never been touched. We’re just giving Joplin the help he was denied.”



Reza Jacobs, music director for the reimagined work. (John Lauener)

The next step in “Treemonisha’s” binational evolution comes in a 12-day workshop beginning Jan. 14 in Toronto, where 15 singers and a full orchestra will reveal the progress in the three-act work, which Joplin called an opera but Volcano’s leaders say defies easy categorization. The group’s big-umbrella ethos affirms that notion.

“I define theater as, well, anything,” Manson said.

“This is a very unique opera,” added Jannina Norpoth, who, with Jessie Montgomery, is arranging the jazz, blues, barbershop and gospel-inflected score, and interpolating into it other Joplin songs. “It lies outside the classical realm, even though it’s classical music.”

However you define the outcome, this ambitious overhaul, with commissions from WPA, London’s South Bank Centre, Canada’s National Arts Centre, and arts organizations in California and Alberta, signals an upgrade in efforts to underline African American accomplishments in the fine arts. Joplin, who died penniless in 1917 at age 48, made his reputation as a composer of rag, but his forays into other musical forms went

underappreciated. His fame faded as he lapsed into illness and dementia, and it wasn't until a new popularization of his rag compositions, such as "The Entertainer," featured in the 1973 Oscar-winning movie "The Sting," that a major Joplin resurgence occurred.

Manson got the idea for the "Treemonisha" project after seeing it in a Toronto concert hall. "The music was unlike anything I've heard," he said. "As a document, it's visionary. He was putting into classical form an American folk form."

It tells the story of a foundling named Treemonisha, discovered under a tree by a former slave on the Texas-Arkansas border in the late 1800s. She grows up to lead a black community living on a plantation, espousing education as a means to achieve. Joplin's forte, however, was not narrative structure. "As an opera, it is naive, with a libretto virtually devoid of tension or literary ability," New York Times classical music critic Harold C. Shonberg wrote, after the premiere in Atlanta in 1972. "Joplin thought naturally in small forms, and his opera is a collection of set pieces rather than a work with any kind of thread running through it."

Bowen, Norpoth and Montgomery, aided by stage director Weyni Mengesha, have set about inventing a story with a stronger spine to support the music, while retaining Joplin's vision. A critical pivot in their version presents "Treemonisha" as the tale of a fractured community of former slaves, half of whom stayed after the abolition of slavery and turned to the land and their Christianity. The others fled into the forests, embracing what Volcano describes as an "ancient spirituality." It becomes Treemonisha's crusade to bring the two communities together — to move forward together in a reconciliation with the past.

This has required not only a meticulous rewriting of the text, but also a sifting through Joplin's other compositions to bolster the integration of song and story.

"Jessie was the one who said [Joplin] had written dozens of marches," Bowen recalled. "And all of these marches lend themselves to all this drama, more of a tense feel." One of the pieces, "The Great Crush Collision March," about a staged train crash in Crush, Tex., in the 1890s, was adapted for the new "Treemonisha." Norpoth and Montgomery also added African instruments to incorporate more traditional sounds.

The next step, in what has become a painstaking reclamation process, is the Toronto workshop, to hear how these elements have coalesced and how firmly they fulfill Joplin's artistic blueprint.

"Joplin never had his day with his opera," Norpoth said. "It really was his life's work."

"In a way, we are resurrecting it," Bowen added. "But he was the orchestrator, 100 years ago."