



A **VOLCANO** production in association with
the **Canadian Opera Company**,
Soulpepper and **Moveable Beast**

SCOTT JOPLIN'S TREMONISHA

Presented by **LUMINATO FESTIVAL TORONTO** and **T.O. Live**

2023

**LUMINATO
FESTIVAL
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PRESS RESPONSES FROM

New York Times : "Best of 2023!"

★★★★ **The Toronto Star** : "Triumphant!"

★★★★ **Stage Door** : "The music event of the year!"

Classical 96.3 : "Spectacular! Not to be missed!"

Intermission : "Profound, and urgently relevant!"

Globe and Mail : "Intoxicating!"

NOW Magazine : "Treemonisha dazzles!"

Toronto Guardian : "Revolutionary! ... An ode to Joplin!"



volcano/treemonisha

The New York Times

Best Classical Music Performances of 2023: 'Scott Joplin's Treemonisha'

Published Dec. 5, 2023 Updated Dec. 6, 2023



Scene from the reimagined "Treemonisha" in Toronto. Credit...Dahlia Katz

Three recent re-imaginings of Scott Joplin's ambitious, flawed opera have converged at a moment of intense interest in bringing back works by underrepresented composers. Most intriguing is a version that premiered in Toronto in June, developed by the theater company Volcano with a core creative team of Black women. They took Joplin's score, characters and setting, and grafted onto them a vastly revised, dramatically stronger plot, with new words adroitly matched to the original rhythms and melodies. And they added African instruments to the strings and winds, for a landscape that felt both mysteriously distant from Joplin and surprisingly friendly to him.

(Read our essay about the recent "Treemonisha" revivals.)

By **Zachary Woolfe** and **Joshua Barone**



The New York Times

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

July 27, 2023, 5:01 a.m. ET



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:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/27/arts/music/treemonisha-scott-joplin-productions.html>

“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; Zodzerick 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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Zachary Woolfe became The Times's classical music critic in 2022, after serving as classical music editor since 2015. Prior to joining The Times, he was the opera critic of the New York Observer. [More about Zachary Woolfe](#)

A version of this article appears in print on July 30, 2023, Section AR, Page 5 of the New York edition with the headline: Reimagining Scott Joplin's 'Treemonisha'.



Ravishingly reborn, Scott Joplin's 'Treemonisha' triumphs at the Luminato Festival

Featuring a new libretto and a winning cast, this extraordinary production makes the case for the King of Ragtime's long-forgotten opera.

<https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/stage/2023/06/11/ravishingly-reborn-scott-joplins-treemonisha-triumphs-at-the-luminato-festival.html>

By [Joshua Chong](#) Staff Reporter Sun., June 11, 2023

Treemonisha



By Scott Joplin, with a new story and libretto by Leah-Simone Bowen and Cheryl L. Davis, directed by Weyni Mengesha. Until June 17 at the St. Lawrence Centre for the Performing Arts, 27 Front St. E. luminatofestival.com

That Scott Joplin never lived to see a fully staged production of “Treemonisha” is one of the greatest blights in American music.



L to R: Khay, Sate (as Nana Buluku) and Jaz Fairy J Simone. Photo by Dahlia Katz

The King of Ragtime’s 1911 composition is arguably his most enterprising work, a foray into grand opera that draws on classical music influences along with folk, blues and his signature ragtime style. Yet his multiple attempts to mount the opera were futile.

Only in 1972, some five decades after Joplin’s death in 1917, was the opera first staged. It’s taken another 50-odd years, however, for “Treemonisha” to come into its own.

For at [Toronto’s Luminato Festival](#), Joplin’s long-forgotten masterpiece has been ravishingly reborn for the 21st century in a triumphant production that opened Saturday at the St. Lawrence Centre for the Performing Arts.

Featuring a new libretto and a winning cast, this version of “Treemonisha” makes a strong case that it should be the definitive one. At the very least, director Weyni Mengesha’s landmark production proves the opera belongs among the seminal works of the modern era.

The success of this “Treemonisha” begins with Canadian playwright Leah-Simone Bowen, who penned a new story to accompany Joplin’s music and co-wrote the libretto with Cheryl L. Davis.

While Joplin’s ingenious score has been rightfully lauded, critics and audiences have historically effused less praise for his libretto. Too simple, too obvious, his story of a young, educated Black

woman who becomes leader of her community in the post-Reconstruction South was boldly feminist for its era, but lacks nuance and thematic depth.



Neema Bickersteth (Treemonisha) and Cedric Berry (Zodzerick). Photo by Dahlia Katz

No one, however, has attempted to rewrite the story of “Treemonisha” to the scale that Bowen and Davis have done. “Ambitious” seems too light an adjective to describe their work, which injects the “Treemonisha” with a timeless universality and adds complex themes of self-hate, Black identity and intergenerational trauma.

The backstory of the titular character remains largely untouched: as a newborn baby, Treemonisha (Neema Bickersteth) is placed in a hollow tree by her mother, Priscilla, who is shot and killed after fleeing a nearby plantation. Adopted by Monisha (Andrea Baker) and her husband Ned (Nicholas Davis), Treemonisha is raised unaware of her birth story and biological mother.

She lives among the freedmen, a group of farmers and tradespeople hostile to the neighbouring Maroons, feared by Treemonisha’s people for their Hoodoo beliefs.

While in Joplin’s original story, Treemonisha is abducted by these conjurers, she is afforded more agency by Bowen and Davis, instead torn in a love triangle between her unlovable fiancé Remus (Ashley Faatoalia) and the Maroon Zodzerick (Cedric Berry).

Treemonisha’s conflict grows after she learns about her origin story on her wedding day: when Treemonisha was born, her birth mother also left behind a bag of luck, almost identical to the one gifted to her by Zodzerick. Could she, too, be a Maroon, the very people she is taught to despise?



Neema Bickersteth as Treemonisha. Photo by Dahlia Katz

As the title character, Bickersteth is a standout in a brilliant cast, setting out on Treemonisha's journey of self-discovery with starry-eyed conviction and delivering her multiple arias with shimmering beauty. Canadian singer SATE, with her earthy and soulful timbre, is also a revelation as Nana Buluku, the leader of the Maroons and from whom Treemonisha seeks counsel. Fantastic, too, are Baker as Monisha and Kristin Renee Young as Treemonisha's sister, Lucy.

The terrific 23-member company is aided by some vibrant staging by Mengesha, who again proves she is one of the few directors who can tame the unwieldy Bluma Appel Theatre. Esie Mensah's choreography more than fills Camellia Koo's evocative sets (with additional designs by Rachel Forbes), which covers the floor with sand and features dangling ropes twisted together to evoke the dense Arkansan forests.

Joplin's music itself defies categorization. Syncopated ragtime rhythms collide with tuneful folk melodies; lyrical arias, no doubt influenced by the great Italian and German works, are juxtaposed with spiritual call-and-response numbers.

What makes or breaks "Treemonisha," however, is its orchestrations. Only Joplin's piano accompaniment have survived, meaning composers have had to craft new orchestrations based on that existing material.

In the 1970s, American Gunther Schuller encumbered Joplin's light score with blistering Wagnerian orchestrations, treating "Treemonisha" as heady European opera. In 2011, Rick Benjamin went the opposite route with a ragtime-inspired accompaniment.

Neither, are utterly convincing.

Jessie Montgomery and Jannina Norpoth's fresh orchestrations for this production, conducted by Kalena Bovell, are the first to meet Joplin's music on its own terms. Historically European instruments share the stage with West African percussion, creating a sound that, like Joplin's score, blends a variety of styles.

This production, however, isn't faultless. There are times it feels there isn't enough music for Bowen and Davis's dense libretto, brimming with ideas. And some scenes, particularly turning points in the second act, are played with too much comedy.

Still, it's impossible not to surrender to the magic of "Treemonisha." It's quite the coup that Luminato and TO Live managed to land this world premiere, produced by Toronto-based Volcano. No fewer than 10 illustrious companies around the world have signed on as co-commissioners. There's no doubt that this reimagined version has more life ahead.



The company of Treemonisha. Photo by Dahlia Katz

It's also not lost on me how life imitates art. The opera's generation-spanning journey out of obscurity and into the spotlight is not unlike that of Treemonisha herself, left by one parent and nurtured by another. Some 100 years later, Bowen and her team are writing the wrongs of music history, finishing what Joplin started.

I can only imagine what the King of Ragtime would make of this "Treemonisha." It's probably beyond his wildest dreams, in the best possible way.

Treemonisha achieves sonic unity by bridging the old and the new

CATHERINE KUSTANCZY
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL
PUBLISHED JUNE 12, 2023



Centre: Sopranos Neema Bickersteth (Treemonisha) and Kristin Renee Young (Lucy). Photo by Dahlia Katz

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/theatre-and-performance/reviews/article-treemonisha-achieves-sonic-unity-by-bridging-the-old-and-the-new/>

Composer Scott Joplin is perhaps best-known for his influential 1899 work, *Maple Leaf Rag*, but he also wrote two operas: *A Guest of Honor* (1903) and *Treemonisha* (1911). While the score for the former is lost, the score for the latter was rediscovered in 1970 and given a full performance two years later; in 1976, Joplin was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize in music, and *Treemonisha* has gone on to be presented at theatres in the U.S. and Europe.

Now, a new *Treemonisha*, seven years in the making, is being presented in Toronto as part of this year's Luminato Festival, with local company TO Live as co-presenter. This version reimagines the work musically and narratively, and sets it with a distinct 21st-century focus incorporating intersectional feminism and Black American history. With a 10-person orchestra led by Panamanian-American Kalena Bovell (the first Black woman conductor in Canadian opera history), *Treemonisha* uses a historical framework of late 19th-century America to explore the search for identity within wildly different communities.



The company dances "A Real Slow Drag". Photo by Dahlia Katz

Abandoned by her mother (Ineza Mugisha), the title character (Neema Bickersteth) is raised by Monisha (Andrea Baker) and Ned (Nicholas Davis) after being found in the nook of a tree – a clear nod from Joplin to Richard Wagner and his famous *The Ring of the Nibelung* series. Indeed, *Treemonisha* creates its own special brand of mythology, and here finds an engaging blend of sounds reflecting that ethos thanks to a sparky new orchestration and arrangement of the score by Jessie Montgomery and Jannina Norpoth. It's one that makes liberal use of its own form of leitmotifs, particularly with regard to the two distinct groups presented within the narrative and symbolized by the title character and Zodzerick.

Playwright Leah-Simone Bowen, together with co-librettist Cheryl Davis, have fashioned a story in which Zodzerick is a member of a community of Maroons (enslaved Africans who had escaped slavery to live as free men and women) who practice their old spiritual beliefs in the peace and relative isolation of nature. They are mistrustful of the white appeasement and European stylings of the freedmen, as represented by *Treemonisha*, her adopted parents, church community and especially her betrothed, Remus (Ashley Faatoalia). The music provides clear cues for each world,

the jaunty strings and woodwinds offering the toe-tapping sounds of ragtime and swooning late-Romantic writing which Joplin clearly relished; equally effective is the pulsating percussive sounds and some very intoxicating kora playing (by Tunde Jegede) to evoke the world of the Maroons.



Neema Bickersteth (Treemonisha) and Cedric Berry (Zodzerick). Photo by Dahlia Katz

Director Weyni Mengesha treats the romance between Treemonisha and Zodzerick with care, with their physical placement often revealing of the title character's emotional states. When he initially approaches her with the "bag of luck," she is awkward and scared – if intrigued – and keeps a cautious distance; later, she is quick to kiss him in the forest (to the cheers of the opening-night audience). Set designer Camelia Koo's elegant simplicity makes clever use of various textures (twine, cloth, wood), while Nadine Grant's late 19th-century costumes form an especially intriguing visual contrast to one another, all muted colours and frills on one side, vibrant hues and draping on the other.

Soprano Neema Bickersteth is an especially commanding stage presence, her colourful voice handling the wide-ranging vocal writing and stylistic turns, and is beautifully complemented by mezzo soprano Andrea Baker's touching Monisha; their scene together in the first act, when Treemonisha's origins are revealed, is shot through with tenderness. As Zodzerick, baritone Cedric Barry showcases a luscious, glowing tone and engaging stage presence, while tenor Ashley Faatoalia, as the hapless Remus, offers a pure, radiant sound and clarion diction.

The sounds of new and old within the orchestra are kept under careful watch by Bovell's firm hand, although at times they form an uneasy alliance, which is probably the point: It's precisely

that friction that drives much of the narrative. The split between identities – American, African, daughter, lover, God-fearing, nature-loving – and the anguish resulting from such divides holds much of the power of this reimagined *Treemonisha*.

Only at the conclusion is there a sonic unity, one that still wisely gives Joplin the last word, textually and musically. Such an ending proves a suitable metaphor for the presentation itself, a production by Volcano (a Toronto-based theatre company) in association with The Canadian Opera Company, Soulepepper and Moveable Beast – and to the power of bridging old and new within the operatic idiom. It can be done, *Treemonisha* whispers; the will is all.

intermission

where all great theatre discussions happen

REVIEW: *Scott Joplin's Treemonisha* at Volcano Theatre/ TO Live/Luminato

By Glenn Sumi

June 15, 2023

<https://www.intermissionmagazine.ca/reviews/treemonisha-luminato/>

When a show's title comes complete with a composer attached, it often feels like a crass marketing move. *The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess*? *Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella*? Um. Who else would these shows be written by?

In the case of *Scott Joplin's Treemonisha*, however, the king of ragtime's name deserves pride of place at the beginning of the title. It's about time he got proper recognition for his contribution to the operatic canon.

Yes, opera. While Joplin is best known for his lively, toe-tapping ragtime classics like the "Maple Leaf Rag" and "The Entertainer," he also penned three works for the stage, including 1911's *Treemonisha*.

But he never lived to see a full staging of that work. He paid for the score's publication and a modest concert version in Harlem, cutting his already huge expenses by playing the piano accompaniment himself. Unfortunately, that premiere left audiences and potential investors underwhelmed; it also nearly bankrupted the composer. His score and libretto were essentially lost until the 1970s, when it received its world premiere at Atlanta's Morehouse College.

And so this Volcano Theatre production, presented by TO Live and the Luminato Festival in association with a handful of other companies, feels like a major rediscovery. While the score

remains largely intact, it's been newly arranged and orchestrated by Jessie Montgomery and Jannina Norpoth; and the book and libretto have been effectively adapted by Leah-Simone Bowen and Cheryl L. Davis.

With these changes, the work — it's being dubbed “a musical reimagining” — emerges as layered, profound, and urgently relevant.



Sate as Nana Buluku. Photo by Dahlia Katz

In a brief prologue set in 1864 at a plantation near Texarkana, Arkansas, a young enslaved woman carrying a newborn child is being pursued by someone. She's soon shot, but before she dies she secretly places her baby inside a hollowed-out tree.

Twenty years later, that same child is now grown up and goes by the name of Treemonisha (Neema Bickersteth). Raised by Ned (Nicholas Davis) and Monisha (Andrea Baker) among a group of upwardly mobile Black folks called the Freedmen (slavery was abolished in 1865), she's the first in her community to attend college.

She's just about to be married to an upstanding — if rather dull — man named Remus (Ashley Faatoalia). But when she discovers that her parents aren't her parents, and also realizes she doesn't love Remus, she calls off the wedding and sets out on a journey to discover her real roots. She believes the answer lies in a group of nearby forest-dwellers called the Maroons, whom the Freedmen fear because of their Hoodoo beliefs and customs.

Joplin's score encompasses a wide range of colours and moods. It's misleading to call this a ragtime opera, although in many sequences you can feel the familiar syncopated rhythms of one of the earliest incarnations of jazz.

Montgomery and Norpeth's orchestrations suggest everything from classical and gospel to Calypso and blues. Conducting an orchestra that includes both European and African instruments, Kalena Bovell brings out the rich textures and sounds that evoke the two strands of this milieu — the world of the Freedmen, who have been influenced by colonial customs, and the Maroons, who live a life more tied to the land and sea.

That contrast also emerges in the colourful costumes (by Nadine Grant) and sets (by Camellia Koo) that fill up director Weyni Mengesha's fresh and lively staging.

While there's occasionally an episodic feel to the opera, especially in the second act, Mengesha makes sure we always know where we are and what's at stake for Treemonisha and the two groups of people she's caught between.

One of the highlights is an amusing Act One revival scene, played for comic relief, in which the extroverted and accurately named Pastor Alltalk (Marvin Lowe) "heals" members of his congregation. This scene gets a sombre variation in the second act when the Pastor's opposite number, the Maroon leader Nana Buluku (SATE), mourns one of their fallen.

Each one of choreographer Esie Mensah's dance numbers tells us a lot about the characters and helps mix up the opera's rhythms. (The same can't always be said of Western opera dance sequences.)

The opera's supporting characters are carefully defined, although their dynamics are uneven. Baker's Monisha, Lowe's Pastor, and Faatoalia's Remus practically raise the roof of the Bluma Appel, while Davis's Ned and Cedric Berry — who plays a mysterious figure who first introduces Treemonisha to the Maroon — are a little subtler. Kristin Renee Young, meanwhile, is enchanting as Treemonisha's sympathetic sister Lucy.

But it's Bickersteth, involved in this production for the seven years it's been in development, who emerges as the piece's natural leader. Gifted with a clear, bright soprano that soars over the orchestra in a series of arias, and conflicted by the choices she has to make, Bickersteth is so effective she makes you think of all the iconic characters in operatic repertoire.

Joplin, at long last, belongs in the company of their composers, too.

now.

Black opera 'Treemonisha' dazzles at Toronto's Luminato festival

BY OSOBE WABERI JUNE 12, 2023

<https://nowtoronto.com/culture/black-opera-treemonisha-dazzles-at-torontos-luminato-festival/>

Calling all theatre heads!

[Treemonisha](#) the opera is here in Toronto and the all-Black cast did not disappoint.

Luminato Festival Toronto, TO LIVE and Volcano Theatre held a black carpet opening for the show on Saturday, where the city's best and brightest arrived draped in black and gold ready to witness history in the making.



Pastor Alltalk (Marvin Lowe) leads a sermon. Photo by Dahlia Katz

Originally written by Scott Joplin (c. 1911), *Treemonisha* is set in the post-slavery era, and beautifully fuses classical music with soulful music.

The entire cast sings their heart out as they deliver powerful lines reminiscent of live poetry.

You can expect the story of a Black woman's journey as she discovers herself and leads her community towards a new future.

What makes this play (set soon after the abolition of slavery) incredible, is that it was actually written by a survivor of that era.

"I am so thrilled to see this opera that has been in the works for seven years," Christine Harris, senior director, marketing and communications for Luminato, told Now Toronto.

"It is a monumental production featuring a Black cast, Black orchestra – a celebration of Black excellence!"

Mayoral candidate Mitzie Hunter also stopped by the carpet and shared that in all her life she's never seen anything like this, but if it was going to happen, Toronto would be the city to do it.

“We’re a city that delivers talent and excellence to the culture and the whole world,” she said.

[READ MORE: ‘Diligence and determination’: The first Black woman conductor in Canadian opera history will lead an all-Black orchestra in Toronto](#)

You can also witness the globally acclaimed Panamanian-American conductor and violinist, [Kalena Bovell](#), grace viewers with flawless music by way of an orchestra throughout the entire show.

Bowell is officially the first Black woman conductor in Canadian opera history and beautifully led the first all-Black orchestra in the country.

You can catch Scott Joplin’s *Treemonisha* at the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts until June 17.



Treemonisha: Operatic Black Excellence

June 14, 2023 Michelle Ormsby

<https://torontoguardian.com/2023/06/treemonisha/>

Treemonisha is a timeless classical Black opera being re-imagined for this year’s *Luminato Festival Toronto*. This performance sees Canadian soprano **Neema Bickersteth** (*Century Song*) lead an all Black cast and crew in the retelling of this post-slavery era story. What makes this production unique is the story comes from the lived experience of a member of the Black community reflecting their perspective during such a traumatic time.

Scott Joplin’s revolutionary tale of female sovereignty and community is reconceptualized with a new story and libretto by playwright and broadcaster **Leah-Simone Bowen**, host of *The Secret Life of Canada*, working alongside Emmy-nominated co-librettist **Cheryl L. Davis**. This opera was written in 1911 when being a Black composer was unheard of. This opera is unique in nature considering operas are synonymous for telling the narratives of Europeans. This alluring story captivates the audience with its powerful vocals, while the costumes expertly recreate the feel of existing in 19th century rural United States. Opera aficionados and critics alike will be moved by the depth, sound and jarring plotline of this classic.



Tenor Ashley Faatoalia (Remus). Photo by Dahlia Katz

This production of *Treemonisha* offers audiences a beguiling glimpse into the life of a young Black woman who overcomes tremendous adversity and loss during the slave era, discovering her ability to unify her community leading them to a new future filled with possibilities. **Bickersteth's** rich soprano voice blends seamlessly with the talented cast and nine-piece chamber orchestra. The sounds of Western and African instruments fill the atmosphere and bring a surreal feeling of immersion. **Joplin's** score lies in the fusion of his famed ragtime syncopations with classical, folk and gospel sounds. The re-imagining of this classic can be seen in the new arrangement and orchestration reflecting the duality of split identities: African and American. This dichotomy encourages audiences to reflect on the role and influence ancestors play in accepting the reality of living on new unfamiliar land.

This revolutionary retelling also sees a breadth of new scores adding to **Joplin's** trailblazing and iconic stance which places a female leader at the helm of this American opera. These arrangements pull from traditional spirituals and male-led hymns to offer more space for female voices to flourish. Audiences can hear the influence of gospel, jazz, rhythm and blues and American songs intertwined in this masterpiece.

Joplin's play sees a progressive display of feminism created far before such ideologies were accepted. The story takes place in the 1880s following the abandoned reconstruction efforts made by the United States government. *Treemonisha* is avant-garde, exploring themes of Black identity, feminism and leadership from an honest perspective. When **Joplin** first created this play, Black opera composers were a radical idea; a sentiment which remained true until 2021 when **Terrance Blanchard** (composer of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*) became the first Black composer to have an opera produced by the *Metropolitan Opera*. *Treemonisha* acts as an ode

to **Joplin**, who posthumously received a *Pulitzer Prize* in 1976. **Joplin's** opera was almost lost altogether following his death when his orchestral parts were thrown out. *Morehouse College* in Atlanta is partly responsible for the revival of this opera, as it premiered in 1972 featuring **Joplin's** original vocals.

Now more than ever, the narrative of *Treemonisha* amplifies the Black voice and the progressive nature and strength of Black women. This opera fosters cultural inclusivity in an area of artistic expression which rarely embraces the stories of the Black community. *Treemonisha* will usher in a new generation of Black opera lovers, encouraging community members to experience pride in our cultural heritage and in seeing our narrative performed as an operatic experience.

This *Volcano* production in association with *The Canadian Opera Company*, *Soulpepper* and *Moveable Beast* will move audiences through a myriad of emotions, culminating in pride.

Luminato Festival Toronto and TO Live co-present the world premiere event in Toronto between June 6 and 17, with the opening night taking place on Saturday, June 10 at 8pm. The Black carpet event will make Canadian opera history, taking place at Bluma Appel Theatre, St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts (27 Front Street East). An ASL interpretative shows will take place Sunday, June 11 and the live audio described performance will take place on Saturday, June 17, just be sure to secure your audio description device.

Stage Door Review

Treemonisha

Monday, June 12, 2023



Neema Bickersteth as *Treemonisha*. Photo by Dahlia Katz



by Scott Joplin, directed by Weyni Mengesha
Volcano with the Canadian Opera Company, Soulpepper &
Moveable Beast, Bluma Appel Theatre, Toronto
June 10-17, 2023

<https://www.stage-door.com/3/Reviews/Entries/2023/6/treemonisha.html>

Treemonisha: “Was I born to do this?”

2023 has been a great year for Ontarians to get to know Black opera. February saw the first performance of an opera by a Black composer, *La Flambeau*, in the province. March saw the first performance of the opera *L'Amant anonyme* (1780) by Black composer Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges. And March also saw the premiere of *Of the Sea* featuring the largest all-Black cast in a Canadian opera. Now Luminato and TO Live are presenting the Canadian premiere of Scott Joplin's 1911 opera *Treemonisha* with an all-Black orchestra led by Kalena Bovell, the first Black woman to conduct an opera in Canada. Like *L'Amant anonyme*, *Treemonisha* is one of those operas I have read about but despaired of ever seeing. After enjoying Volcano's wonderful production, I can aver that *Treemonisha* is a must-see for anyone interested in Scott Joplin or the history of opera in North America.

Treemonisha is produced by Volcano with the Canadian Opera Company, Soulpepper and Moveable Beast and is a coproduction with ten other companies in Canada, the US and the UK. This is a new production of Joplin's opera and, as the producers note, a re-imagining of it.

Scott Joplin (c.1868-1917), as most people know, is famous as the “King of Ragtime”. Few people know that he also wrote classical music. Joplin's first opera was *A Guest of Honor* (1901), now lost, which went on tour through the US. *Treemonisha* (pronounced tree-mo-NISH-a) was his second. Joplin paid for the piano-vocal score to be published and that is now all that remains. Though the score received a rave review at the time, neither this nor a concert read-through in 1915 led to the work being taken up by an opera house. The opera was never staged during Joplin's lifetime and his orchestrations have been completely lost.



Neema Bickersteth (*Treemonisha*) and Sate (*Nana*). Photo by Dahlia Katz

Treemonisha had to wait until 1972 for its world premiere with orchestrations by Black composer T.J. Anderson. The opera achieved wider fame when it was presented at the Houston Grand Opera in 1975 with orchestrations by White composer Gunther Schuller and travelled to Washington, DC, and Broadway. The opera has since been performed in Italy, Finland, Germany and France with its most recent performance in London, England, in 2019.

Critiques of the opera have always praised Joplin's music and his goal of creating a separate form of African-American opera but have found the libretto Joplin wrote wanting. This has spurred the "re-imagination" of *Treemonisha* both in libretto and orchestration by Volcano. Leah-Simone Bowen has written a revised story and she and Cheryl L. Davis have written a new libretto. Jessie Montgomery and Jannina Norpoth have newly orchestrated the score for an ensemble of ten, including African instruments such as the marimba, bala, djembe and kora.



Conductor Kalena Bovell leads the 10-piece orchestra. Photo by Dahlia Katz

The new version follows the general outline of the Joplin's original plot. Set in Joplin's hometown of Texarkana, Texas, in 1884, it traces the growth of the 19-year-old Treemonisha from educated young woman to leader of her community. The conflict in the original is between Christian Freedmen, formerly enslaved people who have taken over abandoned plantation land, and people whom Joplin calls "conjurors" who still adhere to traditional African beliefs.

In the original, Joplin portrays the Freedmen as good and the conjurors as evil. The enlightened Treemonisha preaches against the ignorance of the conjurors led by Zodzetrick and in revenge they kidnap her and plan to cast her onto a giant wasps' nest. Luckily, she is rescued from that fate by her friend Remus. At the end Zodzetrick and his companion Luddud are captured and the Freedmen want to kill them. Treemonisha intervenes and calls for forgiveness and peace.

The new version replaces the conjurors with Maroons. Maroons are descendants of Africans in the Americas who escaped from slavery and formed their own settlements. As they note in the programme the co-librettists particularly have in mind the Maroons of Great Dismal Swamp in North Carolina, who lived there between about 1700 and the 1860s where they generally avoided discovery and capture.



Sate (as Nana Buluku) leads the Maroons in a Hoodoo ritual. Neema Bickersteth (Treemonisha) is centre. Photo by Dahlia Katz

Changing the conjurers to Maroons shifts the conflict from one between good and evil to one between new ideas and ancestral ones with no negative judgement placed on either. In the original Treemonisha and Remus are just friends. In the new version they are engaged and about to be married, even though Treemonisha admits to her sister Lucy that she doesn't love Remus. As in the original Treemonisha discovers that Monisha and Ned are not her parents.

In the new version Treemonisha vows to find out who her mother was. Rather than being kidnapped, this Treemonisha intentionally goes to the Maroons land believing that her mother was likely one of them. Zodzerick (as he is now called), far from trying to harm Treemonisha, offers to be her guide and the two fall in love. Without giving too much away, Remus goes to find his fiancée and he rather than Zodzerick becomes the villain.

In the original the moral authority of the Freedmen is embodied in Pastor Alltalk while the conjurers have no central authority. For the new version the librettists have invented the character of Nana to stand as the embodiment of the Maroons' beliefs to balance Pastor Alltalk's Christianity. In the end Treemonisha, thus creates peace not merely between the Freedmen and the Maroons but between Christianity and ancestral religion.

The revisions to the libretto make Treemonisha a much more complex character. They also make for more varied action, which, strangely enough, is more melodramatic than in the original. Not all the revisions are helpful. In the piano-vocal score Pastor Alltalk says nothing we would find objectionable to his congregation. Yet, the librettists have decided to replace his encouragement of good will with misogynist remarks about women's requirement to obey their husbands and generally to stay quiet. The problem here is that audiences might assume the Pastor's statements were written by Joplin, not by 21st-century revisionists. This misogyny, seemingly accepted by the congregation, also makes the opera's ending, where all choose a woman to lead the, less believable.

While Joplin may be famous for his piano rags, in his opera he uses ragtime for only two big dance numbers – “We're Goin' Around” and “A Real Slow Drag”. Otherwise, the music sounds mostly like the parlour songs one might have heard in the 1910s, especially since the librettists have followed Joplin's lead in writing the lyrics in rhyming couples or ABAB-rhymed quatrains. There are, however, many other styles from full operatic arias to folk songs, blues, spirituals, and gospel.

The greatest liberty the librettists and the orchestrators have taken is in Act 2 set in the Maroons' settlement. The invented character Nana is cast not as an opera singer as the others but as a blues or jazz singer. Her head voice and vocal style completely distinguish her from all the other performers. This section is also where the orchestrators make use of the instruments of African origin, the stringed kora being the most unfamiliar. These instruments used in the sequences of African dance and especially in the “hoodoo” scenes where Nana conjures up ancestors are marvellous in their rhythm and harmonies. Even though I loved these sections, I did wonder if the use of instruments that Joplin did not use took us out of Joplin's own soundworld. Joplin would know equivalents to drums like the bala or djembe. The closest equivalent to the kora he would know would be the banjo. That is an instrument invented by people of African descent in the Americas and would perhaps be more suitable for the African-American opera Joplin was trying to create.

The opera has a strong cast. Neema Bickersteth has a warm, steady, high-lying soprano and has no trouble with some of the very high notes Joplin (or the orchestrators) throw her way. Bickersteth has always been a fine actor and is expert in conveying more than one emotion at once such as Treemonisha's combination of relief and outrage to learn the truth about her birth mother and the progress of her love conquering her mistrust of Zodzerick.

Cedric Berry has an impressively rich, multihued baritone as Zodzerick. We feel we are on his side when we first meet him, contrary to the original libretto, and are happy that he should turn out to be Treemonisha's love interest.

Ashley Faatoalia boasts a full Italianate tenor as Remus. It's rather too bad his character should be changed from that of a hero in the original to that of a fool and worse in the new version, but Faatoalia is expert at playing comedy and does win our sympathy by the end.

The singer SATE makes Nana every bit as mysterious as the librettists want her to be. SATE has a presence and a voice that commands the stage and is ideal for representing a woman with supernatural powers.

In other roles, Andrea Baker as Monisha, Treemonisha's foster mother, gives a moving account of her aria "The Sacred Tree" explaining the deep meaning of a certain tree both for her and for Treemonisha, who is named after it. Kristin Renee Young as Lucy has a high soprano that makes her various duets with Bickersteth a delight. Nicholas Davis has a sturdy baritone eminently suitable for Monisha's husband Ned. And Marvin Lowe sports an especially resonant bass-baritone as Pastor Alltalk, with a depth of tone that contrasts with his satirical character name.

Set designer Camellia Koo has designed a simple but beautiful set in earthen colours flecked with brighter notes. Ropes hanging all along the back wall can be gathered together to form trees for the forest near which the Freedmen live or let loose to create the long vines that hangs over the swamp land where the Maroons live. Treemonisha's sacred tree, created from these same ropes but flown in and out, is a gorgeous object on its own.



Khay dances during "Aunt Dinah". Photo by Dahlia Katz

Nadine Grant has designed a host of handsome costumes – some reflecting the general high style of the 1910s for the Freedmen, some the lived-in clothing of the Maroons and some the Quaker-like habits of the travellers Treemonisha and Lucy meet on their journey.

Esie Mensah's choreography has an equally wide range. She creates lovely patterns for the ring dance "We're Goin' Around" and gradually scales up the involvement of the whole company in the opera's finale "A Real Slow Drag". In contrast to these stately dances of the Freedmen, she choreographs African-inspired dances of an acrobatic nature for the Maroons, excitingly performed by Jaz 'Fairy J' Simone, Khay and Pulga Muchochoma.

The ten-member ensemble was placed on the stage on stage right. The band, which sounded much thinner and drier than it should have, really needed an acoustic shell behind it to reflect the sound into the audience. Kalena Bovell conducts the score with verve and precision.

There's no doubt that *Treemonisha* is the music theatre event of the year. It's an opera and a production I would gladly see again soon. Toronto had to wait 112 years to see it this time. Let's hope the wait is not so long next time.

Christopher Hoile