

“Scott Joplin's Treemonisha”--Gunter Schuller, arr. (1976)

Added to the National Registry: 2016

Essay by Scotty Gray (guest post)*



Original 1976 album cover

The richness of American culture has been fascinatingly preserved by the National Recording Registry at the Library of Congress by including in its 2016 listing the Deutsche Grammophon recording of the Houston Grand Opera's 1975 performance of the African American rag time composer Scott Joplin's opera "Treemonisha."

The opera, completed in 1910, is itself a commentary on a period of civil unrest in American history and an examination of a distinctive aspect of American culture. Joplin addressed the challenging conflicts in African American culture of the time through the story of Treemonisha, who, in the story, has been adopted by Ned and Monisha, former slaves. The old superstitions of the earlier culture are presented in the play by the "conjure men" who kidnap Treemonisha, but she is finally rescued, returned to her family, and becomes an example of a newer culture emphasizing the importance of education for women as well as men.

Joplin had studied with a music teacher from Germany who exposed him to some of the literature and techniques of more classical styles and in "Treemonisha," he clothed aspects of European opera in the distinctive garbs of ragtime. There are melodious arias, ensembles, choruses, and ballet sequences. He completed the text and music of "Treemonisha" in 1910 and it was published in a piano-vocal score in 1911.

The Houston Grand Opera's full-scale production, directed by Frank Corsaro and produced by Thomas Mowrey, was a new version orchestrated and conducted by Gunther Schuller, a classical

and jazz scholar and 1994 Pulitzer Prize recipient for a distinguished musical composition by an American.

Deutsche Grammophon's 1976 recording ([G] 2707-083; CD/Deutsche Grammophon 435709-2, engineered by Gernot Westhäuser and Peter Burkowitz) of this performance increased the appreciation of Joplin's music and the work has become accepted in the American opera repertory. The recording album package includes a 22-page booklet with color photographs of the production, extensive notes by Vera Brodsky Lawrence (historian of American music, editor of "The Collected Works of Scott Joplin," and an artistic consultant to the Houston Grand Opera's performance), and the complete lyrics of the opera.

Joplin's message in the opera begins with a potpourri "Overture" and the entrance of the conjurer Zozetrick (sung by Ben Harney) promoting the old culture with his sales pitch of "dis bag o' luck" and his claim that "Strange things appear when I says 'Hee hoo!'" The conjurers are challenged by Treemonisha (sung by Carmen Balthrop) with their "tricks of conjury / You have caused superstition and many sad tears." She is defended by Remus (sung by Curtis Rayam) in his solo which affirms the thesis of the opera: "You can't fool Treemonisha--she has a level head / She is the only educated person of our race / For many long miles far away from this place / She'll break the spell of superstition in the neighborhood, and all you foolish conjurors will have to be good."

The exit of the conjurors is followed by the festive and rollicking chorus of corn huskers, "Swing dat lady, goin' around." Monisha, Treemonisha's mother (sung by Betty Allen), explains, in the longest aria of the opera, that Treemonisha wears a bonnet rather than a wreath of leaves like the other girls because she was found under the sacred tree and should not use its leaves, disclosing her adoption and acknowledging again the old traditions and superstitions. Treemonisha and the corn huskers are all surprised that Monisha is not her mother. Her mother then sings about Treemonisha's upbringing explaining, in part, "When you were seven years old / There being no school in the neighborhood / A white lady undertook your education." Treemonisha and Lucy (sung by Cora Johnson) leave to find leaves from another tree. Parson Alltalk enters for his "Good Advice" homily on morality in the style of an African American "call and response" between the preacher and his congregation. Monisha then sees Lucy returning without Treemonisha. Lucy explains that two conjurers kidnapped, bound, and gagged Treemonisha and Act One ends in utter confusion and Remus's promise to dress in a scarecrow suit, enter the conjurer's camp, scare them off, and rescue Treemonisha.

Act Two begins with a meeting of the superstitious conjurers in the woods and the bringing in of the kidnapped Treemonisha whom they say has "been tellin' de people dat dey should throw away their bags o' luck." They've threatened to push her into a wasp nest. The woods become alive with a "Frolic [ballet] of the bears," who populate the forest with the conjurers, but run off when they hear the conjurors. Remus enters in his scarecrow suit and the conjurers believe him to be the devil and flee. Joplin's stage directions at this point are: "The scene is suddenly changed to a cotton field; a wagon road is in front, and men and women are seen picking cotton" and a male quartet sings, "We will reset awhile." Remus asks directions back to the John Smith plantation and Joplin's stage directions are: "There is a pause in the music during which the

cotton pickers hear Aunt Dinah blow a horn three times” to signal the time to go home to which a chorus of cotton pickers sing a chorus, “Aunt Dinah has blowed de horn,” and perform a rollicking dance (ballet), ending Act Two.

Act Three begins with the return of Treemonisha to her grieving family, the threat to punish the conjurers, Treemonisha’s forgiveness of her captors, and her command to set them free. Remus follows with a homily, “Never treat your neighbors wrong” and an “octet chorus” reiterating Remus’s words. The opera moves to its climax with the people’s affirmation of Treemonisha, “We will trust you as our leader”; even the men proclaim her so. The majestic climax to the opera comes in “A Real Slow Drag,” in the true and distinctive musical style of Joplin with its confident refrain of “marching onward” (not unakin in message to a later “We Shall Overcome”).

Scott Joplin, “Treemonisha,” and the Houston Grand Opera’s 1975 performance merit a recording such as the one done in 1976 by Deutsche Grammophon. In 1976, the Pulitzer Prizes bestowed posthumously a special award on Scott Joplin for his contributions to American music. The music historian Gilbert Chase, in his “American Music: From the Pilgrims to the Present,” called “Treemonisha” a “semi-miracle” and wrote that “Treemonisha” “bestowed its creative vitality and moral message upon many thousands of delighted listeners and viewers.” Ted Libbey, former critic for the “New York Times” and later Director of Media Arts of the National Endowment for the Arts, in his review of the Houston Grand Opera production, spoke of “Treemonisha” as “a lively mix of ragtime, minstrel show, vaudeville, grand opera, Wagner, Verdi, and Offenbach, with lots of dancing, a big role for the chorus, and arias and ensembles of affecting simplicity and beauty.” Harold Schonberg, music critic of the “New York Times,” said of the opera’s plot, “the forces of ignorance and superstition against liberalism and education as represented by a lady named Treemonisha...it refuses to leave the mind.”

In its choice of this Deutsche Grammophon recording of the Houston Grand Opera’s performance of Scott Joplin’s opera, “Treemonisha,” the National Recording Registry at the Library of Congress has helped preserve the range, diversity, and richness of America’s musical heritage.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.