

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

Added to the National Registry: 2016

Essay by Paula Marie Seniors, Ph.D. (guest post)*



Scott Joplin

INTRODUCTION

In 1911, Scott Joplin published his grand opera “Treemonisha.” In 1972, a truly exhilarating moment of biracial solidarity occurred with a biracial creative team mounting the world premiere in Atlanta, Georgia. “Treemonisha” created quite a buzz, proving a stupendous hit. African American Dr. T.J. Anderson, the orchestrator, proposed establishing The Scott Joplin Foundation, with his anticipated fees for the publication of his orchestrations and projected performances at universities and beyond, going to the “education of Negro youth [and Black musicians].” This never came to pass. In the 1970’s subsequent productions saw the biracial creative group replaced by whites. The hope of seeing “Treemonisha” performed throughout the decades were dashed. This essay looks at the machinations that led to the blocking of these fantastic enterprises.

SCOTT JOPLIN

Scott Joplin was born in 1867/68 in Texarkana, Arkansas, to freewoman Florence Givens and former slave Giles Joplin. They filled their home with music playing. Literate African Americans educated Joplin. Recognizing Scott’s talent, Florence bartered maid work for his use of a piano, and he studied music with mulatto Mag Washington, Black Indian Professor J.C. Johnson, and German Julius Weiss. Johnson and Weiss encouraged Scott to pursue a music career. In 1884, Joplin performed ragtime around the country, attended George R. Smith College for Negroes, studied theory and composition, opened a music studio, and published compositions including “The Maple Rag” in 1899, emerging as the King of Ragtime. Joplin composed the Ragtime opera “A Guest of Honor” (1903) and “Treemonisha” (1911) which he self-published and presented in a barebones production in New York City (1915). He died never seeing a fully realized production:

In 1972, “Treemonisha” made its world premiere at the Atlanta Memorial Arts Center.

Dr. T.J. Anderson, the renowned African American composer, who was in residence at the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (1969-1972) and was the Danford Visiting Professor of Music at Morehouse College, orchestrated using Joplin's "personal notated score," and his own copy of the score. Joplin scholars considered Anderson's orchestrations the definitive version of "Treemonisha" by being "in line with Joplin's original vision." The creative team also included the celebrated African American Katherine Dunham, who directed and choreographed; the legendary African American Dr. Wendell Whalum, director of Morehouse's Glee Club who musically directed the Glee Club and the Morehouse, Spellman, and Atlanta community singers; and the white anti-racist integrationist Robert Shaw, director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, who conducted. The cast included the crystal voiced Alpha Floyd as Treemonisha, Seth McCoy as Remus, Harold Henderson as Zodzetrick, Louise Parker and Simon Estes as Monisha and Ned, and Dunham's East St. Louis's Performing Arts Training Center Dancers. The 1972 recording is *ELECTRIFYING* and *SUBLIME*, a wonderful celebration of Black Excellence, achievement, and biracial solidarity.

"TREEMONISHA"

"The Joplin Opera itself fascinating first because it's the first folk opera ever written in this country."

--Dr. T.J. Anderson, orchestrator of "Treemonisha"

"Treemonisha" takes place on a plantation in Texarkana, where African Americans made up a quarter of the population as voters, politicians, preachers, sharecroppers, and landowners. The world premiere portrayed Black working class life in a realistic and respectful manner, moving away from traditional stereotypes. The plot: In 1866, Monisha and Ned longed for a child and their wish came true as they found Treemonisha under their "Sacred Tree." They hid their family formation narrative from everyone. When Treemonisha was seven, Monisha bartered her maids-work and Ned's woodchopping for Treemonisha's education by a white woman, mirroring Joplin's life. At a time when "The Moynihan Report" promoted the concept of the degenerative African American mother and family, the world premiere portrayed the Black family as Melvin Drimmer of "Phylon" wrote as "a strong well-knit Black family, magnanimous in victory and virtuous." As the opera begins 18 year-old Treemonisha returns home, ready to teach and lead, embodying African American woman power. She finds Conjuror Zodzetrick, embodying the African trickster God Papa Legba, peddling African religious/magical practices—"bags of luck." Being brave, Treemonisha confronts him, "You have caused superstition and many sad tears, you should stop, for your doing great injury." Zodzetrick threatens Treemonisha, but is stopped by Remus, Treemonisha's love interest. The couple banish the conjurers. Joplin follows the common ideology of uplift of maligning African traditions, as James Weldon Johnson noted revolting "against anything connected with slavery."

After the expulsion of the conjurers, the community comes together to husk corn. Treemonisha proposes "A Ring Play"--hambone, songs, and ring games which African slaves brought to the U.S., evoking Joplin's childhood memories. They sing "Goin Around" which Dr. Anderson contends that Joplin choreographed given he "has dance steps written in the score... [placing him] years ahead of Arnold Schoenberg's ["Moses and Aron"]."

Later, Treemonisha notices that her friend Lucy wears a head wreath while she wears a ribbon. Lucy suggest “you should wear a wreath made of pretty leaves.” Treemonisha goes to her “Sacred Tree” to gather leaves, but Monisha protests, recounting their family formation, of how “the rain or the burning sun you see, would have sent you to your grave, But sheltering the leaves that old tree, your precious life did save. So now with me you must agree, Not to harm that sacred tree.”

“The Sacred Tree” represents survival, hope, and the coded spiritual “Run Mary Run’s” refrain: “you’ve got a right to the tree of life.” Treemonisha and her parents pledge their love for one another, and Treemonisha and Lucy set out in search of leaves.

Back at the Plantation, Parson Alltalk sermonizes “Good Advice,” but is interrupted by Lucy disheveled, gagged, and bound. Lucy *saved herself* from the conjurers, a “symbol of women’s liberation,” using her African American woman super power. Lucy recounts her misadventure and Treemonisha’s captivity. The neighbors cry-sing in what Anderson describes as “a system of notation for a cross between speaking and singing,” a Joplin invention created before Schoenberg’s sprechgesang. Remus dressed as an “ugly scarecrow” and the men set off to save Treemonisha.

In the forest, Zozetrick and Treemonisha arrive as his minions sing about “Superstition.” They decide to throw Treemonisha into “The Wasp-Nest,” but spotting the “De devil” (Remus), they scamper away. Saved, the couple make their escape out of the forest and happen upon an acapella quartet singing “We Will Rest Awhile” in the cotton field. In this song, Joplin uses the African American invention—the barbershop quartet. Treemonisha and Remus continue their trek and meet workers who invite them to dinner because “Aunt Dinah Has Blowed De Horn.” The 1972 production discarded Minstrelsy and the Hungry Negro stereotypes. It took great care to present these scenes and the African American working class respectfully.

Meanwhile, at the cabin, Ned choruses Monisha’s bemoaning “I want to See My Child Tonight...I would rescue her or go insane.” Monisha crushes “The Moynihan Report’s” degenerative Black mother, by showing the loving, devoted fierceness of Black motherhood. The couple annihilate “Moynihan’s Report” as a loving family. They will their daughter home. The captured conjurers soon follow. The women want revenge--“punish them!” Treemonisha pleads “give them a severe lecture, and let them freely go,” to no avail. Remus joins her protestations singing “Wrong Is Never Right,” again to no avail for the neighbors want vengeance--“the conjurers should be dispatched to the other sphere, to make old Satan feel glad.” Treemonisha finally prevails. With the spirit of forgiveness embraced by the community, Treemonisha proposes that “[w]e ought to have a leader in our neighborhood,” and the community sings “we will Trust you as Our Leader,” and bestow upon Treemonisha the crown of leadership. At this joyous occasion, Treemonisha leads the community, “The Slow Drag,” the finale choreographed by Joplin. She sings--“salute your partner, do the drag... Marching onward, Marching to that lovely tune.”

THEFT

Subsequent productions of “Treemonisha” at Wolf Trap (1972), Houston Grand Opera (1975,) and on Broadway (1975), saw Anderson, Whalum, Shaw, and eventually Dunham banished, given the machinations of Vera Brodsky-Lawrence, the first person to publish Joplin’s works,

and an outlier in Atlanta. In 1972, Brodsky-Lawrence successfully wrested the copyright and trust away from the Joplin heirs and placed the opera with The Dramatic Publishing Company, and ensured that only she could grant permission for the performance of “Treemonisha,” notwithstanding the reality that Dr. Anderson held Joplin’s “personal notated score,” and his own 1911 copy as early as 1970. Brodsky-Lawrence maligned the biracial creative team with the producers of these productions and beyond, and threatened litigation. She threatened lawsuits if Anderson tried to publish his orchestrations and create The Scott Joplin Trust for Black Youth. With great resolve, racist contempt, and an ideology of white superiority, Brodsky-Lawrence undermined Black excellence, biracial solidarity and esprit de corps. She completely shut out this biracial group, those who made Atlanta’s “Treemonisha” a spectacular and rousing success, a true model of interracial cooperation and solidarity. Her actions are heartbreaking.

The 1972 world premiere of “Treemonisha” in Atlanta proved an incredible story of TRIUMPH, interracial solidarity, *and* white theft. A beautiful legacy of Black Excellence could have come to fruition with Dr. Anderson’s Joplin Trust and Katherine Dunham’s St. Louis Performing Arts Training Center and Dance Company leading the way in productions of “Treemonisha” across the country. Through Anderson’s Trust and Dunham’s group, the opera could have uplifted African American youth for generations, offering performance opportunities and opportunities to learn stagecraft. White theft destroyed these plans, they did not deter the aspirations of these creative artists.

AFTERMATH

In 1972, at age 44, Dr. Anderson went on to chair the music department at Tufts University (1972-1990) as the Austin Fletcher Professor of Music (1978) and Emeritus (1990). A renowned composer of international fame before “Treemonisha,” Anderson continued his career composing over 80 works including the operas “Soldier Boy, Soldier” about the effects of the Vietnam War on African Americans, and “Walker” about the freed slave David Walker. He composed symphonies, chamber music, vocal music, and scores for Yo-Yo Ma, and the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. Anderson founded the National Black Music Caucus, received numerous accolades and awards from the National Endowment of the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation, and graduate students now write dissertations about him and his compositions. In 1998, Dr. Anderson published his “Treemonisha” orchestrations. Companies around the country perform his orchestrations including The Collegiate Choral, Alice Tully Hall (2006), the Chattanooga Choral Society and the University of Tennessee Music and Theatre Department, who performed the opera in 2009 for the 40th anniversary of the world premiere, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra with the Morehouse College Glee Club (2020), and many others. Dr. Anderson celebrates his 92nd birthday in 2020.

Working as an anti-racist integrationist, Robert Shaw continued on as the conductor of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and its Chorus, recording, winning Grammy and ASCAP awards. Following his lifelong tenet of social justice through music, he worked to place African Americans on the Orchestras’ Board of Directors like Dr. Anderson. He worked to integrate the orchestra and chorus and participated in programs to train Black musicians. He hired Black instrumental and vocal soloists including singers Marietta Simpson and “Treemonisha” alumni and member of his chorus, Seth McCoy. Shaw made it his mission to use African Americans within the Symphony, thus he appointed Alvin Singleton Composer in Residence, and used the

compositions of “Treemonisha” alumni Uzee Brown who played Parson Alltalk, Billy Taylor, Frederic Tillis, John Lewis, Ulysses Kay, George Walker, and many others. He continued the partnership with Spellman College and Morehouse College by having the orchestra perform at the schools and routinely using Black performers and composers. Robert Shaw conducted the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus until 1988 when he became their Music Director and Conductor Emeritus, working across the country as a guest conductor and teacher of choral conductors until his death in 1999.

Katherine Dunham. the great African American dancer, anthropologist, creator of the Dunham Technique, founder of The Dunham School and dance company, producer of her own Broadway and touring musicals, choreographer and star of film and stage, continued working to build her East St. Louis’s Performing Arts Training Center (1967). PATC enrolled over one thousand students, offering college credit transferable to Southern Illinois University where she was a professor. She wanted to create an associate degree granting program at the Center, and worked towards that goal in the 1960s and 1970s. Through PATC, she offered classes at Head Start Programs for pre-schoolers, The Concentrated Education Program for Adults, as well as public schools and community centers. Through the PATC Dance Company and musicians she uplifted St. Louis’s impoverished African American youth. They toured the country, performed at the White House, and the students thrived moving past their once dire circumstances. They went on to great careers due to her belief in them. Dunham consulted with community programs across the country. In 1980, lack of government funding led to the demise of PATC. In 1982, she retired from her professorship at Southern Illinois University and founded the Katherine Dunham Children’s Workshop which exists to this day. Ever the activist, in the 1980s, she protested the U.S. Policies on Haitian refugees and went on a hunger strike. In 1987, the Alvin Ailey Dance Company and invited her to choreograph her “L’Ag’Ya” and honored her with the concert, “The Magic of Katherine Dunham.” In ill health, Katherine Dunham moved to New York City and was feted until her death at 96.

Wendall Whalum committed his career to music as the chair of Morehouse’s Music Department (1953-1987), the Fuller E. Callaway Professor of Music, and the director of the Morehouse Glee Club and Band. He excelled as an author, musicologist, composer, and arranger. Under his direction, the Morehouse Glee Club toured several African countries and performed with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. Dr. Whalum also worked as the organist and choirmaster at several of Atlanta churches. Ever the scholar, he studied the construction of the pipe organ to advance his craft as an organist. He accomplished much in his short life. He died in 1987 at the age of 56.

In 1911, Scott Joplin wrote the first indigenous folk opera in the United States, “Treemonisha,” three years before Zitkala-Sa’s “The Sun Dance.” Joplin proclaimed:

I am a composer of Ragtime music but I want it thoroughly understood that my opera “Treemonisha” is not Ragtime. In most strains I have used syncopations (rhythms) peculiar to my race, but the music is not Ragtime and the score is complete Grand Opera.

And thus “Treemonisha” emerged. Dr. T.J. Anderson, Katherine Dunham, Dr. Wendall Whalum, and Robert Shaw, this wonderful band of creative souls created something wonderful

in the 1972 world premiere of “Treemonisha,” they achieved greatness. This production lives on in Dr. Anderson’s orchestrations and the 1972 recording of this phenomenal production.

Paula Marie Seniors, is an associate professor at Virginia Tech, biographer of her family’s legacy “Mae Mallory, the Monroe Defense Committee and World Revolutions: African American Women Radical Activists” and award-winning author of “Beyond Lift Every Voice and Sing: The Culture of Uplift, Identity and Politics in Black Musical Theater.”

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