

# Trailblazers in Opera: Scott Joplin

## LESSON PLANS - GRADES 4 AND UP

### MATERIALS

- Access to YouTube or [Google Drive](#)
- Pencils, Crayons, or Colored Pencils
- Speakers and Projector/Smartboard

### CONTENT VOCABULARY

- Musical Genius
- Ragtime
- Opera
- Superstition
- Segregation
- Social Acceptance

### PRE-LESSON STEPS

- Please write the following essential questions on the board or display in your online meeting space. (Please adapt wording to fit your students' reading level.)
  - All cultures have superstitions (walking under ladders, breaking mirrors, placing horseshoes over the door, four-leaf clovers, among others). Can you think of any other superstitions still believed in your community? Do you believe in any of them? How could educational training in school change how seriously you took superstitious beliefs?

## PRE-LESSON STEPS CONT'D

- In the 1890's when Ragtime music was created, racial segregation was either the law or the prevalent social practice in America. How difficult was it for Black musicians to earn a living by performing under severe restrictions affecting where and how they could stay, work, travel, and eat as they provided music to a public eager to hear Ragtime?
- In the era after the Civil War until the present day, many Americans believed that women weren't able to make decisions in community leadership roles (as in Scott Joplin's opera *Treemonisha*). Do you believe this to be true?
- How different would the present world be if 50% of the population (women) had been able to participate in leadership roles in the long history of the world?
- Write the following "bell ringer" up on the board: "What does it mean to be a "musical genius?"

## ACTIVITY STEPS

### Day One: Who is Scott Joplin?

- Introduce: Ask the students to describe what the words "musical genius" means to them. "Beethoven, Scott Joplin, Miles Davis, Jimi Hendrix, and Prince are all examples of musical geniuses. Can you think of others? Why do you think that their musical creativity changed or influenced the music of their time?"
  - Give the students 5 minutes "writing time" to respond to the question.
    - Have them journal about it. This can be your bell ringer for the day.
  - Begin with writing student responses on the board and start guiding their responses to two import thoughts – "creating a new way of making music that changes and expands how musicians compose and perform music for the public" and/or "having to overcome the resistance to change that many people have to something new and different."
  - Ask the students if they know who Scott Joplin the "King of Ragtime" is. (African-American composer of Ragtime piano works, waltzes and operas. His renovated home in St. Louis, Missouri is a National Historic Landmark).

## ACTIVITY STEPS CONT'D

- Show the video “Scott Joplin – King of Ragtime” (15 mins)
  - Scott Joplin is considered the “Greatest” of the writers of Ragtime music but there were many important Ragtime music composers and players in St. Louis and Kansas City during the Ragtime era. Besides Scott Joplin, local music innovators included James Scott, Charles L. Johnson, Tom Turpin, Joe Jordan, Artie Matthews. Tom Turpin was a saloon keeper and the first African-American to publish a Ragtime composition in 1897. Every new Ragtime pianist that arrived in St. Louis was required to visit his bar, the Rosebud Cafe, and play against the local competition to establish their “place” in the local music scene. In those days, a musician was expected to be a complete entertainer meaning they had to not only play an instrument but had to be singers, dancers, and comedians too!
    - Missouri History Museum - Tom Turpin
  - Invite students to share their own experiences in response to the following questions:
    - Have you ever been in a one-on-one competitive situation? (Sports, the arts, debate club, academics, etc.)
    - How did you prepare for it?
    - How did you handle the pressure?
- During the 1904 World’s Fair, St. Louis was the center of the Ragtime world. There was a designated entertainment district called “The Pike” where entertainers from all over the world gathered to provide what was to many visitors’ new forms of artistic expression. All the best Ragtime musicians came to St. Louis for the Fair, and for a short time, St. Louis was the center of the Ragtime universe.
  - Homework before the next day of class:
    - Look up “The Pike” at the St. Louis 1904 Worlds Fair and describe some of the activities that visitors experienced.
  - OR
  - Search the internet for the beginnings of “Ragtime Music” and give a brief history of the development of this art form in the 1890’s.

## ACTIVITY STEPS CONT'D

### Day Two: Scott Joplin's Opera - Treemonisha

- Ask the students what they think about opera.
  - When most people think of an opera, they imagine people singing classical music in a language they don't understand. That is not all that opera is about. Opera includes instrumental music, singing, dance, costumes, props, lighting, storytelling, and sometimes even live animals on stage! In Scott Joplin's opera, you will find the story is sung in English set in an authentic American history period. It is what is called a "folk opera," as it uses music and themes related to a particular culture, in this instance, African-American rural Southern culture in 1884 shortly after the American Civil War.
- The opera's storyline takes place on an old southern plantation and focuses on the best way that the former slaves and their children can prosper as a race with their new freedom. Scott Joplin, as a Black man, believes that:
  - The old superstitions ("bags of luck," carrying rabbits' feet, voodoo curses, and the like) will hold the community back from new opportunities.
  - Formal education (reading, writing, literature, science) is the only way to achieve equality in American society.
  - Women in leadership positions in local communities and society at large must be encouraged in order for society to realize its full potential. (Half of the world's population is female, so that is half the world's brainpower!)
- Discuss these three beliefs in class, allowing an open dialogue among students. (Allow approximately 15 minutes for discussion.)
- Show the video highlights of the 1981 Houston Grand Opera production of Treemonisha. At the conclusion, ask for student feedback on the experience.

## ACTIVITY STEPS CONT'D

### Choice Board Assignment

Have the students choose one of the following assignments to showcase their learning about Scott Joplin and his opera Treemonisha:

#### Choice One:

Write a Journal Entry: Imagine that you are Scott Joplin, the world's most famous Ragtime composer. Everyone accepts you as a great writer of popular music, but can't image you being able to write in what they consider "serious music." What would you say to them that would make them take you seriously as a writer of opera, classical music, or classical ballet? Share your journal entry with the class.

#### Choice Two:

Write a song that reflects the community in which you live. Record it on your cell phone or on another recording device and share it with your class. Explain to the class what was your inspiration (a real-life event, people you know, how your community makes you feel, etc.).

#### Choice Three:

Create a poem that shows your respect and admiration for early African-American musicians and what they overcame (segregation, in many cases the lack of formal musical education and training) to continue to create new musical styles including Ragtime, blues, jazz, rock & roll, rhythm & blues, and rap among others. Share your poem with the class.

#### Choice Four:

Research and write a short Journal Entry on another African-American musician/composer who has made an impact on you individually or the society as a whole. Why do you feel that this individual should be recognized as special? Share your Journal Entry with the class.

#### Choice Five:

Ragtime piano music was one of the musical genres that Americans danced to at home and other entertainment venues. Develop a short dance routine using the Ragtime music samples suggested on "YouTube Ragtime Samples". The dance steps used can be current moves, old dance moves witnessed at a family event, or a routine newly created by you. Share your "Ragtime dance" with the class (using the Ragtime music samples as a background).

# STANDARDS

## Missouri Fine Arts GLEs

## National Standards

MU: Re7B.8b (pg. 11)

FA 3, 5

Identify and compare the context of programs of music from a variety of genres, cultures, and historical periods.

MU: Cn10A.8a (pg. 14)

FA 1, 4, 5

Demonstrate how interests, knowledge, and skills relate to personal choices and intent when creating, performing, and responding to music.

MU: Cn11A.8a (pg. 15)

FA 1, 3, 4, 5

Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.

## Missouri Social Studies GLEs

9-12.AH.1.CC.D

Using an inquiry lens, develop compelling questions about United States history post 1870 to determine helpful resources and consider multiple points of view.

6-8. AH.5.PGC.1.A

Using an American history lens, describe how people's perspectives shaped the sources/ artifacts they created.

6-8. AH.5.PGC.1.B

Using an American history lens, examine the origins and impact of social structures and stratifications on societies and relationships between peoples.

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