

OPERA THEATRE **OTSL** of SAINT LOUIS

Opera on the GO!
TREEMONISHA
Study Guide



Photography by Eric Woolsey

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Welcome!

Thank you for inviting Opera Theatre of Saint Louis' digital Opera on the GO! program into your school! We are so happy to share this special abridged production of Scott Joplin's Treemonisha, and to introduce your students to the world of opera. In addition to our performance, there are links to several "mini-workshops" that will introduce students to a few of the many elements that contribute to a fully-produced opera!



This virtual presentation is funded in part by The Saigh Foundation and the Missouri Humanities Council.

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Letter from the Director

Dear Educator,

I am so excited to share Scott Joplin's TREEMONISHA with you and your students this season. Not only is this an important opera by a black composer that deserves to be a part of the canon, but Treemonisha is also a chronicle of a time in history after the civil war when freed men and women of color were starting to build communities and establish their lives anew as acknowledged citizens of the United States known as the Reconstruction era- an aspect of history that is often overlooked by textbooks and storytellers. Set on a plantation, the central conflict of the opera involves two differing perspectives on how to live: the old ways with superstitious beliefs and practices (possibly tethered to religious ideologies from Africa) vs Western education, faith and societal structure (which, today we might consider assimilation). It's important to note that both approaches were a matter of survival. You'll see in the opera that Zodetrick sells his bags of luck as his primary form of income. He and his community of conjurers, who are unseen in this condensed version of the opera, represent the freed people of color who did not get any land nor stayed on the former plantation as sharecroppers. Thus, they survived how they could. Meanwhile, Treemonisha and her community represent the alternative: living off the land as farmers, seeking an education, and applying Christian morals to their way of life. The difference in dialect between Zodzetrick and Treemonisha's people is utilized to highlight their differing levels of education and class, and it's even mentioned that Treemonisha received her education from a white woman. The opera was written at a time when the notion of assimilation was a matter of survival for black folks who wanted to be embraced by or at least safe in white American society. One could argue that the opera is pro-assimilation, but I hope we may all encourage the students to consider both sides of the story.

As one of the earliest black opera composers, Joplin was a musical pioneer melanging the classical style of opera with the turn of the century, popular ragtime music. As a former resident of St. Louis from 1900-1903, it was here that Scott Joplin penned the iconic tune "The Entertainer." You will find several parallels between Joplin's life and the story of Treemonisha. Similar to the title character, Joplin received his music education from a white teacher. Treemonisha's commitment to lead her community out of ignorance mirrors Joplin's own mission. Also, the setting is near Joplin's childhood home of Texarkana, Texas and in September 1884 which happens to be the year Joplin's wife Freddie Alexander was born.

I hope Treemonisha may spark an interest in classical music and opera with your students. With a unique story helmed by a woman leader guiding her community towards progress, perhaps this production may inspire young future leaders among the audience. I also hope that a curiosity to learn more about this time of Reconstruction will be sparked in the students and teachers. I can't wait for you to join us at the opera!

-Kimille Howard, Stage Director

Synopsis

Our story begins on a plantation near the Texas Arkansas border in 1884. Zodzetrick, a conjurer and our trickster in this story, is trying to sell a “bag of luck” to Monisha claiming it will magically help solve her problems. Fortunately, her husband Ned steps in and stops the sale. Their daughter Treemonisha, who is one of the few educated members of the community, and her friend Remus scold Zodzetrick for trying to trick everyone with his phony “bag of luck.” Treemonisha then notices the beautiful wreath of leaves on Monisha’s head and wants one of her own. Just as Treemonisha is about to pick some leaves from a nearby tree, Monisha stops her and tells her the history of the sacred tree and how Treemonisha was found beneath that tree when she was a baby. Although Treemonisha is surprised to learn that she is adopted, Ned and Monisha reassure her she is loved unconditionally.

After some time passes, Remus alerts Ned and Monisha that Treemonisha has been captured by Zodzetrick as retaliation for interfering with his business. He plans to shove her into a wasp-nest, but just as he is about to do so, “the devil” shows up and scares Zodzetrick away. Treemonisha immediately recognizes the devil as Remus dressed as a scarecrow and is grateful that he saved her. They return home to Treemonisha’s parents who were worried sick about her. A plan is hatched to punish Zodzetrick; however, Treemonisha convinces everyone to forgive him and move forward. Realizing that Treemonisha is right, they support her wishes and persuade her to lead the community. They all then celebrate by dancing “A Real Slow Drag.”

SUPERSTITION

A superstition is a belief that is not entirely based on fact or reality. Superstitious beliefs can be found in cultures all over the world and often have to do with luck. For example, it is considered bad luck to say “Macbeth” in a theater as there is a long history of mishaps surrounding that play. Similarly, many people won’t say “good luck” to a performer. Instead, they would say “break a leg” or for opera we say “toi toi toi” (pronounced like the word toy). Some performers even have their own personal superstitions. For example, world-class tenor Luciano Pavarotti insisted on finding a bent nail backstage and putting it in his pocket before he would perform!

Cast

TREEMONISHA



Chase Sanders
Soprano

MONISHA



Jouelle Roberson
Soprano

REMUS



Leo Williams
Tenor

NED



Randell McGee
Bass

ZODZETRICK



Nicholas LaGesse
Baritone

Creative Team



Kimille Howard
Stage Director



Jonathan Heaney
Music Director



David Murakami
Video Designer



Robert Poe
Choreographer

Costume Designer
Stacy Michele Harris

Props Master
Daniel Henke

Production Manager
Maggy Bort

Stage Manager
Emma Fletcher

Assistant Stage Manager
Calyn Roth

Characters

TreemonishaSoprano
MonishaSoprano
NedBass
RemusTenor
ZodzetrickBaritone

TREEMONISHA



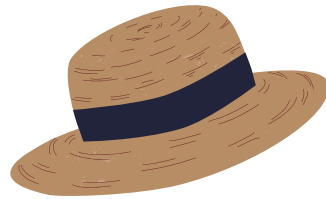
A young, educated woman

MONISHA



Treemonisha's mother

NED



Treemonisha's father

REMUS



Treemonisha's friend and love interest

ZODZETRICK



A conjurer who tricks people and tries to sell bags of luck

The Composer



SCOTT JOPLIN was born in Texas in the late 1860s. His parents were both musicians who shared their musical talents with their children. As a boy Joplin learned to play guitar, cornet, and even sang in a vocal ensemble, but his real passion was the piano. After exploring the piano on his own for a while, his mother found him a teacher named Julius Weiss who taught Joplin piano in exchange for having his mother do housework. Weiss not only taught Joplin how to play piano but also exposed him to many different styles of music including folk, classical, and opera. Joplin enjoyed learning about these different styles but loved creating his own music as well. His preferred style, ragtime, included lots of snappy, syncopated rhythms that made people want to move and dance. By the time he was a teenager Joplin was becoming a local celebrity playing his music all over at churches, clubs, and at social events.

Joplin's talents eventually led him to Sedalia, Missouri where he attended college to formally study music. While there he composed his iconic "Maple Leaf Rag" which eventually exploded in popularity and earned him the title "King of Ragtime." This piece helped bring ragtime to the masses and by 1914 had sold over 1 million copies. It also served as a blueprint for other composers who wanted to write their own rags. Thanks to Tom Turpin's popular Rosebud Bar, many of the great ragtime musicians of the day were gathering in St. Louis. Not wanting to be left out, Joplin made St. Louis his home from 1900-1903 where he focused on composing and teaching. After enjoying success writing for the piano, Joplin shifted his interests to opera and ballet. He moved to New York City where in 1911 he wrote both the music and words for *Treemonisha*. This opera included bits of his signature ragtime style, but Joplin also incorporated several other musical styles including folk, gospel, and classical. Despite his past successes, Joplin did not get to see *Treemonisha* fully realized during his lifetime. However, nearly 60 years after his death the work was miraculously rediscovered. By 1975 *Treemonisha* was finally seen on a major opera stage in a production by the Houston Grand Opera. The performance was successful, and Joplin was awarded a special Pulitzer Prize posthumously. Since then, this opera has been seen on stages all over the world, including England, Germany, Finland, France, and St. Louis.

Ragtime Music

Ragtime is an American style of music that grew very popular during the late 1800s and early 1900s. The earliest forms of this music were improvisations that pianists made up on the spot. Thanks to people like Scott Joplin, St. Louis was right in the center of the action as many pianists flocked to the area to be a part of the craze. “The Entertainer” is one of Joplin’s most famous pieces that was composed right here in St. Louis. You can still hear this style of music today played at many state fairs and theme parks. Ragtime also played an important role in the development of jazz music.

Born out of the march style of John Phillip Sousa, ragtime added a more “ragged,” wandering melody to the strict rhythmic style of a march. At its heart, ragtime music usually features a steady but often jumpy bass part contrasted with a highly syncopated melody. Although *Treemonisha* is not exclusively a ragtime opera, you can hear elements of the ragtime style right at the beginning of the overture.

SYNCOPATION

Syncopation is when a musician changes the expected rhythmic pattern by emphasizing the weak beats and minimizing the strong beats. This often appears in the form of short long short patterns. Notice in the example below how many of the notes in the upper line do not line up with the notes in the lower line. This gives the music a sense of moving forward and often makes the listener want to move their body or even get up and dance.



Slow Drag: A Dance

Dance was a popular activity for people in the time of this opera. One such dance, “A Real Slow Drag,” is featured at the end of Treemonisha. This style of dance has specific instructions that Joplin included in the score for the opera.

1. The Slow Drag must begin on the first beat of each measure.
2. When moving forward, drag the left foot; when moving backward, drag the right foot.
3. When moving sideways to the right, drag the left foot; when moving sideways to the left, drag the right foot.
4. When prancing, your steps must come on each beat of the measure.
5. When marching and when sliding, your steps must come on the first and third beat of each measure.
6. Hop and skip on the second beat of the measure. Double the Schottische (slow polka) step to fit the slow music.



What does this dance look like?

Watch the following video to see the slow drag performed by the cast from the 1975 Houston Grand Opera production. In the video you will see how Treemonisha leads the rest of her community in this cheerful dance. Feel free to join in and give it a try!

[Video](#)

What to Listen for

Like many operas, the opera Treemonisha is comprised of many shorter pieces woven together to tell the story. You will notice how the music changes throughout the opera to reflect what is happening. Here are a few of the highlights you will hear in this performance:

OVERTURE:

The opera begins with an instrumental piece called the overture. The music gallops along with a cheery melody that helps create an image of life on a busy plantation. Quickly the mood changes to treacherous, dizzying music that descends lower and lower telling the listener that trouble is brewing.

THE SACRED TREE:

Starting with a solemn minor key, Monisha's aria tells the story of how Treemonisha was discovered beneath a tree as a little baby. The 3/4 time signature gives a waltz feel that soothes the listener and captures Monisha's motherly tone.

WRONG IS NEVER RIGHT:

Remus's aria features an easy lilt as he encourages the group not to retaliate against Zozetrick. Notice how the vocal line travels throughout his range and features some wide leaps. This constant motion highlights the idea that one should not dwell on their misfortunes.

WHEN VILLAINS RAMBLE FAR AND NEAR:

Ned's aria has several similarities to Remus's aria. Like Remus, Ned is lecturing on morality, but his message is geared toward Zozetrick and trying to convince him to stop his evil ways.

A REAL SLOW DRAG:

The final piece of the opera is a playful dance led by Treemonisha. Her melody starts with some playful syncopations and juicy sustained pitches. The music then shifts to a happy march-like tune as everyone joins in to celebrate the happy ending to the story.

Glossary of Music Terms

Aria	A solo song in an opera or operetta
Bravo!	A compliment shouted by the audience to the performers after a very good show
Duet	A song performed by two musicians
Ensemble	A selection performed by multiple musicians; also means the whole cast performing the show together
Finale	The final musical number in an opera, usually involving soloists and chorus
Legato and Staccato	In Italian, "legato" means "tied together." Legato describes notes played or sung with a smooth connection. The opposite is "staccato" in which notes are played in a short, detached manner
Libretto	The words or "script" of an opera
Overture	The musical prelude at the beginning of the opera. Usually it introduces musical themes to be heard later in the performance
Ragtime	A musical style that had its peak from the 1890s to 1910s. Its cardinal trait is its syncopated or "ragged" rhythm.
Recitative	A free-style declaration usually "sung-spoken" as an introduction to an aria or chorus that moves the story forward
Syncopation	Changing the expected rhythmic pattern by emphasizing the weak beats and minimizing the strong beats

It may seem like opera has a fancy word for everything and singers are no exception! There are many different types of voices. The list below shows the 4 main voice types for men and women.

Soprano: The highest of the 4 voice types. Soprano voices can be light or can be dramatic. The kind of voice they have determines what kind of opera role they play.

Mezzo-Soprano: The lower of the female voice types. Mezzo-Sopranos are sometimes called Altos when they sing in an ensemble. Mezzo-Sopranos sometimes play young men in operas - this is called a "pants role."

Tenor: The higher male voice type. Some tenors can sing in the same range as altos (or higher) and are called countertenors. Tenors usually get to be the "leading man" or the hero in operas, like Remus.

Bass: The lowest of the 4 types. Singers who sing between tenor and bass are called Baritones. In opera, the low basses are often bad guys, comedic characters, or father-figures.

Let's Put on a Show!

It takes a lot of people to put on an opera, even if it's a short one! Below are just some of the people who are involved in our production of TREEMONISHA and their roles in preparing the show for you. If you're interested in music or theater, maybe one or more of these jobs would be a good fit for you!

Stage Director

- Creates the vision for the show
- Plans and runs all the rehearsals
- Helps singers and actors find the best ways to act and move on the stage

Music Director

- Rehearses and conducts all the music
- Works with the orchestra and singers on how to interpret the music
- Works with singers and instrumentalists on technique, language, and other skills

Singer

- Rehearses with the stage and music directors
- Memorizes lines, songs, and stage movement
- Performs the show in front of the audience!

Production Manager

- Works with the director to understand plans for the way the show should look
- Communicates between designers, stage managers, and directors
- Makes sure all the sets, costumes, and equipment are being taken care of on time

Administrator

- Hires singers, directors and designers
- Schedules rehearsals and performances
- Makes sure everyone has what they need to put on a great show!

Designer

- Creates the sets and props
- Creates the costumes, wigs, and stage makeup
- Works with Stage Director and Production Manager to bring the show to life

Projection Designer

- Works with the Stage Director to understand the style of the show
- Creates videos and photography
- Puts together multimedia presentation to enhance sets, props, and costumes in creating the atmosphere of the show

Stage Manager

- Communicates between the Stage Director, Music Director, and the singers
- Makes sure everyone and everything is where it needs to be when it needs to be there
- Runs the show after the Stage Director leaves



Additional Resources

This study guide was compiled to prepare your students for the best experience with Opera Theatre of Saint Louis' Opera on the GO! production of Treemonisha. For more information and more ideas on in-class activities please check out these additional resources.

Take a Field Trip!

Located at 2658 Delmar Boulevard, [The Scott Joplin House State Historic Site](#) is a popular attraction that offers tours of the famous composer's St. Louis residence for a modest fee. Visitors can learn more about Scott Joplin and see a working player piano feature ragtime hits from Joplin and his contemporaries.

Further Study:

- [Treemonisha Children's Book](#)
- [The King of Ragtime Children's Book](#)

General Music Resources & Lesson Plans:

- [PBS Learning Media: Metropolitan Opera Collection](#)
- [LA Opera Connects Lesson Plans](#)
- [Opera Arrangements for Middle & High School Bands & Orchestras](#)
- [Royal Opera House Create & Sing](#)
- [Kennedy Center Opera Collection](#)
- [SD Opera: Music & Science Curriculum](#)
- [The Getty: Performing Arts in Art Curriculum](#)

Dance & Movement Resources & Lesson Plans:

- [Kennedy Center Dance Collection](#)
- [PBS Learning Media Dance Hub](#)
- [New Victory Theatre: Movement](#)
- [Royal Opera House Create & Dance](#)

Lighting Design & Technical Theatre Resources & Lesson Plans:

- [Royal Opera House Theatrecraft](#)
- [Technical Theatre Terms](#)
- [Lighting Equipment](#)
- [PBS Learning Media Technical Theatre Hub](#)
- [New Victory Theatre: Set & Costume Design](#)