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The Revival of Scott Joplin's Treemonisha in a Black Feminist Context

“The Revival of Scott Joplin’s *Treemonisha* in a Black Feminist Context”

Annotated Bibliography

Scott Joplin self-published his opera *Treemonisha* in 1911. Unique for its time, the opera was in English, set in the rural American South, and featured an all-black cast. The eponymous heroine, Treemonisha, is distinct from typical operatic leading ladies in that she is an educated woman with no romantic relationship and no tragic ending; at the conclusion of the opera, she is chosen to lead her community. *Treemonisha* had little success during Joplin’s lifetime, and lay mostly forgotten for over fifty years. It was revived in 1972 with a performance by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Morehouse College followed by the Houston Grand Opera in 1975. My research aims to situate the revival of *Treemonisha* in the context of black feminist thought of the 1970s. This research will help connect the dots between the musical, racial, and gender ideologies of the 1910s and 1970s and provide a framework for understanding other revivals of the music of marginalized composers.

Dictionary/Encyclopedia Articles

Stiller, Andrew. “*Treemonisha*.” *Grove Music Online*. Edited by Deane Root. Accessed October 29, 2020. <https://doi-org.du.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.O007195>.

Andrew Stiller is a composer, writer, and publisher known for his *Handbook of Instrumentation*. This article is published in *Grove Music Online*, the most comprehensive music encyclopedia available. Stiller provides a short summary of *Treemonisha* as well as a brief description of its creation and revival, including Joplin’s posthumous Pulitzer Prize for the work. The article features no analysis of the opera’s significance or its relation to ideas of race and gender. Stiller has written an adequate encyclopedia entry that unfortunately leaves some to be desired.

Dissertations and Theses

Hebert, Rubye Nell. “A Study of the Composition and Performance of Scott Joplin’s Opera *Treemonisha*.” DMA diss., The Ohio State University, 1976. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

This dissertation focuses on parallels between *Treemonisha* and Joplin’s life as well as considerations for evaluating and performing the opera. Of particular interest to this study is Hebert’s description of the revival performances. She traces the opera through its performances at Morehouse College, Wolftrap Farm, Houston Grand Opera, the Kennedy Center, and the Palace Theater on Broadway. She then examines the Houston Grand Opera production in closer detail. She explains the philosophy behind Gunther Schuller’s orchestration and provides short descriptions of Frank Corsaro’s direction, Franco Colavecchia’s sets and costumes, and Louis Johnson’s choreography.

Essays in Collections

Sears, Ann. "Political Currents and Black Culture in Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*." In *Blackness in Opera*, edited by Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan, and Eric Saylor, 101-15. Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2012.

Ann Sears is a professor of music and the chair of the music department at Wheaton College Massachusetts. Her research focuses on American music, especially African American music. This article examines the music, language, and politics of *Treemonisha*. Sears identifies several African American musical styles utilized by Joplin in the opera including call-and-response, quartet singing, ring dance, shouts, moans, hollers, and ragtime rhythms. She then contrasts Joplin's use of proper English in the libretto for "good" and educated characters like *Treemonisha* with the dialect spoken by "bad" and uneducated characters such as the conjurers. Claiming *Treemonisha* as Joplin's magnum opus, she places its political message in the context of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois.

Journal Articles

de Lerma, Dominique-René. "A Musical and Sociological Review of Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*." *Black Music Research Journal* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 153-59. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/779549>.

Dominique-René de Lerma was an American musicologist specializing in African American music who taught at Lawrence University Conservatory of Music. He represents the emergence of scholarship on African American music and has a great deal of credibility in this field of study. This article was originally published in the *Black Music Research Newsletter* in 1982 and came in the wake of the "rediscovery" of *Treemonisha* in the 1970s. In this article, de Lerma attempts to answer the question "What is the historical and musical background of *Treemonisha*?" He focuses on well-known (primarily male) black thinkers of the time and Joplin's musical education and upbringing, aligning with a male-dominated narrative of history. He offers very little analysis of *Treemonisha* itself, mainly pointing out what the opera lacks: counterpoint, Wagnerian influence, and a ragtime idiom.

Drimmer, Melvin. "Joplin's *Treemonisha* in Atlanta." *Phylon* 34, no. 2 (2nd Qtr. 1973): 197-202. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/273827>.

Melvin Drimmer was a civil rights activist, author, and educator who taught classes on African American history at Spelman College and Cleveland State University. *Phylon* is a peer-reviewed journal founded by W. E. B. Du Bois providing an African American perspective on United States culture. This article is a report on the premiere of *Treemonisha* in Atlanta in 1972 and a discussion of the opera's place in black theatre history. Drimmer situates *Treemonisha* between the "coon" shows of the early 1900s and later American musical theatre such as *Porgy*

and *Bess* and *Carousel*. He makes special note of the integral role of the black community in the creation, performance, and attendance of the Atlanta production. Drimmer argues that the contexts of the opera's composition and revival contribute to its central place in the black theatre canon.

Duran, Jane. "Women of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Feminism and Social Progress." *Philosophia Africana* 17, no. 2 (Winter 2015/2016): 65-73. EBSCOhost.

Jane Duran is a lecturer in the Department of Black Studies at UC Santa Barbara who has written extensively about feminist theory. *Philosophia Africana* is a peer-reviewed journal featuring philosophical works exploring Africa and the Black Diaspora. In this article Duran identifies aspects of womanism in three women activists from the Civil Rights Movement: Anne Moody, Muriel Tillinghast, and Rita Schwerner. She contrasts womanism with typical feminism in that womanism focuses on black women specifically and especially on ties to community. This emphasis on community stems from gender roles in West African villages and was intensified during the volatile post-slavery period in the United States. Through these three activists, Duran paints a striking picture of womanism in the Civil Rights Movement and argues for its continued study.

Gross, Klaus-Dieter. "The Politics of Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*." *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 45, no. 3 (2000): 387-404. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41157951>.

This article was published in the official journal of the German Association for American Studies. Klaus-Dieter Gross compares Scott Joplin's vision of African American leadership and liberation as presented in *Treemonisha* with the contemporaneous thinkers Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey. Although Washington had little to no interest in the arts, especially opera, he does align with Joplin in a belief in progress and rationalism. Joplin and Du Bois are both more egalitarian in terms of gender than Washington. The tenets of Garvey's separatist black nationalism are thoroughly rejected in *Treemonisha*. Gross ends his article with a short discussion of why the opera failed during Joplin's lifetime. Overall, he does an excellent job placing *Treemonisha* in its contemporaneous political context and identifying elements of cross-fertilization between European and African American music and culture.

Lumsden, Rachel. "Uplift, Gender, and Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*." *Black Music Research Journal* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 41-69. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/blacmusiresej.35.1.0041>.

Rachel Lumsden is an Assistant Professor of Music Theory at Florida State University and has done doctoral level work in both Music Theory and Women's Studies. In this article, she inquires "How does *Treemonisha* interact with ideas of gender and racial uplift at the beginning of the twentieth century?" Lumsden examines prominent female writers and speakers of the racial uplift movement and Joplin's own ideals and relation to the movement, highlighting his belief in the value of education. Her writing takes a feminist stance, considering the

intersectionality of race and gender and listening to voices that were often silenced or ignored during the time period in question. She engages deeply with both the libretto and the music, paying close attention to the character of Treemonisha and her relationship to uplift ideologies of the time.

Weathers, Mary Ann. "An Argument for Black Women's Liberation as a Revolutionary Force." *No More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation* 1, no. 2 (February 1969): 66-70.

This essay is widely considered to be a pioneering text of black feminism and the women's liberation movement. Weathers contends that women's liberation must eventually become part of a total armed revolutionary movement, heavily implied to be a communist revolution. She argues that black women are not matriarchs and that the myth of the patriarchy must end. At the same time, she makes it very clear that the movement is not anti-male, but rather pro-human. While Weathers calls upon middle class black women to teach and raise awareness, she recognizes that poor women also have a vital perspective as they see all the faults of society. She ends the essay by expanding the scope of her argument. She recognizes that all women suffer oppression and that in fact, almost every single person is being exploited by the elite in control of the world. However, she says that women must be the driving force behind any greater attempt at revolution.

Secondary or Tertiary Monographs

hooks, bell. *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*. Boston: South End Press, 1981.

Gloria Jean Watkins, known by her pen name bell hooks, is a feminist activist, author, and professor. The title of this book is based on Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman" speech. The main focus of *Ain't I a Woman* is the convergence of sexism and racism that afflict black women and socialize their identity out of existence. hooks traces the experiences of black women from slavery through the 1970s. She argues that black women have been systematically excluded from black liberation movements due to ideas of male supremacy, and from women's liberation movements because of white racial supremacy. One glaring omission of the book is any mention of lesbian feminism, especially when compared to contemporaneous black feminist works. Despite some oversimplifications and overgeneralizations, bell hooks delivers a powerful explication of the dual oppressions faced by black women in America.

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg: Crossing Press, 1984.

Audre Lorde was a black lesbian feminist, activist, writer, and poet. *Sister Outsider* is a collection of fifteen essays and speeches from 1976 through 1984. It is considered a foundational text of black feminist studies. One major theme of the book is transforming silence into action. In fact, the book as whole represents Lorde's effort to break her own silence and assert the multifaceted nature of her identity. She argues for an intersectional understanding of race,

gender, and class in contrast to the single (white) viewpoint of mainstream feminism. Institutionalized rejection of difference, as manifested in racism, sexism, and homophobia is scrutinized and criticized. As its title suggests, *Sister Outsider* is an examination of Lorde's own place on the "outside" of society and of the intersection of marginalized identities.

Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Orlando: Harcourt, 1983.

Alice Walker is a writer, poet, and activist best known for her novel *The Color Purple*. This book is a collection of thirty-six pieces written by Walker between 1967 and 1983. It is an exploration of the concept of womanism, coined by Walker herself to be a feminist theory specifically applicable to black women and women of color. In many of the pieces, Walker writes about her own personal experience of being black, a woman, and a writer, and the interactions between those three identities. As a writer herself, Walker presents her views on other writers such as Flannery O'Connor, Jean Toomer, and Zora Neale Hurston. She also addresses the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King Jr., Coretta Scott King, and what she believes to be the important but unglamorous duties of the black revolutionary artist. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* is a deeply personal expression of Alice Walker's own experiences of the intersection of race and gender.