

## On Treemonisha

**Leah-Simone Bowen**

Scott Joplin's original opera was, for its time, groundbreaking. Written during Reconstruction and set in the community he grew up in, it serves as a historical document and as a window into Joplin's world view. Treemonisha, a young black woman, is chosen to lead her community because of her education. She steers her people away from "ignorance", which is reflected by a group of men described as "conjurers" who sell their bags of luck and "superstition".



*Librettist Leah-Simone Bowen, soprano Neema Bickersteth, and stage director Weyni Mengesha.*

Although groundbreaking in 1911, the opera today reveals cultural wounds, stereotypes and a viewpoint that although was most likely integral to Joplin's survival, is now problematic. When I read *Treemonisha* for the first time I was as intrigued as I was concerned. The obvious divisiveness between a western education meaning success and acceptance, and anything other than that meaning you were ignorant, negates the deep cultural knowledge and experiences that Black people used to survive and thrive during the worst period of our histories.

As I looked into the experiences of African Americans during Reconstruction, this was the beginning of a now ongoing conversation on how best to survive in America. This debate is best illustrated in the two camps of this period, W.E.B Dubois and Booker T. Washington. Joplin's thesis in this piece aligns with Booker T. Washington, who believed that success and acceptance would come through hard work, accommodation and self-reliance. This would make the newly-freed truly American.

Dubois agreed that education was imperative, but so also was political action, resistance and duality – Black people could be both African and American. He wrote *"The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self... He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world"*

My reimagining of Joplin's libretto finds a Treemonisha who uses her education as a tool, not to dismiss the community of conjurors - now medicine people - but to embrace them. We find two separate and feuding communities of African Americans asking the same question after slavery "How do we move forward from here?"

The community Treemonisha grows up in is a patriarchy, led by her father Ned. They hold to the tenets of a western education and a belief that if you work hard, eventually acceptance will come. The community of medicine people is a matriarchy, led by an elder medicine woman named Nana. They hold to traditional African practices including medicines and ceremony and a belief that their traditions hold as much value as the western ideals that have been imposed upon them. Because of Treemonisha's curiosity and acceptance of both these worlds, she is the only one able to merge these separate groups, as she believes that they will only survive this new America, together.

Joplin wrote this piece with an all Black cast and with a conversation that was only happening in his community. I aim to preserve that discussion while allowing this new Treemonisha the space to grow – all the while being mindful that history always holds a mirror up to the future. This work is about the things we were told separated us, and how we internalized them. It is about the remnants of memory, trauma, love and joy, but most of all it is about Black women and their extraordinary ability to survive. It is a love letter to all of the people who came before and to Joplin himself.

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*For more information on Volcano's reimagining of Scott Joplin's Treemonisha, visit [www.volcano/treemonisha](http://www.volcano/treemonisha).*