

Joplin's "Treemonisha" Gets A Rare Performance

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You probably first heard Scott Joplin's music when his rags were used as the score for the hugely popular film "The Sting" (1973) starring Paul Newman and Robert Redford as two con artists avenging a friend's murder. The tunes adapted by Marvin Hamlisch from Joplin originals won the Oscar for best film score. Just a few years earlier, pianist Joshua Rifkin recorded a selection of Joplin's rags on the classical label Nonesuch Records. In particular, "The Maple Leaf Rag" (named for a social club Joplin belonged to in Sedalia, Missouri) and "The Entertainer" ("The Sting"s main theme) caught people's ear, and so there was a revival of this early African American composer's music whose style preceded jazz.

Throughout his life, Joplin longed to have his ragtime taken seriously, and his other music as well. His efforts to have his autobiographical opera, Treemonisha, written in 1911, staged in his lifetime had come to no avail, for example. Then the music for "Treemonisha" resurfaced in the 1970s to great excitement. There were two impressive arrangements, one from the African American avant garde classical composer and head of Tufts University Music Dept. T. J. Anderson; the other from the head of New England Conservatory of Music Gunther Schuller, which was performed by the Houston Grand Opera and went on to Broadway. Anderson's orchestration was premiered at the Atlanta Memorial Arts Center with Katherine Dunham's choreography and stage direction.

Now comes yet another version from Rick Benjamin who in 1985 discovered a collection of orchestra scores of the Victor Talking Machine Company in an abandoned warehouse. In this vast archive of original 1880s to 1920s orchestra sheet music (and silent film reels) were some orchestrations by Joplin. Benjamin has put together a production for the stage he believes closely approximates the theatrical conventions of the period in which Joplin wrote. Joplin, who was born in eastern Texas sometime between June 1867 and January 1868, died, April 1, 1917, in New York City where he and his wife ran a boarding house for theatrical people. He was the subject of a postage stamp in the Black History series in 1983.

Opera Providence, now in its tenth season, is presenting the Benjamin orchestration for three performances. With stage direction by Lois Roach and choreography by Shaumba Yandje Dibinga, the opera will be played by a 13-piece orchestra under the direction of Timothy Steele. The story line set in 1884 Arkansas is about the making of a black leader, who as it happens is a woman, Treemonisha. Joplin's "Treemonisha" will be performed Thurs., Feb. 14, at 10 am, Fri., Feb. 15 at 8 pm, and Sun., Feb. 17 at 3 pm. For ticket info you can phone 401-331-6060 or go on-line at www.operaprovidence.org. The performances are at the 635 seat Columbus Theater, 270 Providence, R.I.