

Scott Joplin opera showcases young soloist's voice

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Soprano Alexa Lokensgard will star tomorrow and Sunday in *Treemonisha*, ragtime composer Scott Joplin's musical snapshot of an African-American community's emergence from slavery.

Soprano Alexa Lokensgard just appeared in an unusual opera at New England Conservatory, where she is getting her master's degree. She sang the lead in the Lee Hoiby adaptation of Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke*.

Now she is about to star in another operatic rarity, *Treemonisha*, famed ragtime composer Scott Joplin's musical snapshot of an African-American community's emergence from slavery. *Treemonisha* is being presented by Opera Providence, and performances take place tomorrow night and Sunday afternoon at the Columbus Theatre on Broadway.

"This is a great opportunity to sing in another show that isn't done very often," said Lokensgard, a 27-year-old graduate student.

The weekend's performances mark the Rhode Island premiere of *Treemonisha*, which was completed in 1910 but not performed in its entirety until 1970, when the piano score was rediscovered. The only previous performance was a concert read-through at a Harlem theater in 1915 that was described as little more than a rehearsal.

This charming folk opera offers a blend of ragtime, spirituals, a sort of pre-blues music and European operetta that is both "beautiful and very moving," said Lokensgard.

Opera Providence had originally cast someone else for the lead in *Treemonisha*, but that person had to drop out because of health reasons, said Lokensgard. Lokensgard was told about the opening by Timothy Steele, music director for Opera Providence, who worked with her at New England Conservatory.

It's a big opportunity for someone who has not been center stage outside of college productions.

Lokensgard grew up in a musical family in Ann Arbor, Mich. Her dad, a college professor, plays the French horn and piano and her brother and sisters sing and play instruments.

Alexa started out on piano, picked up flute in middle school, then switched to voice. She was in musicals and sang in the chorus in high school, and was in a production of *Into the Woods* at St. Olaf's College in Minnesota.

After getting her under-

graduate degree she spent a couple of years with Michigan Opera Theatre in Detroit, singing in the chorus and appearing in bit parts. So taking over the lead in Treemonisha is a big deal for her.

The opera takes place on an Arkansas plantation in the 1880s and addresses the conflicts found in black culture at the end of the 19th century — the pull to move into the American mainstream or continue in the old African ways. Treemonisha is a young, educated black woman who champions the cause of hard work and education among her people. When the local conjurers try to sell her adoptive mother a “bag o’ luck,” she denounces them. In retaliation they kidnap her and attempt to throw her into a wasps’ nest. But she is rescued and returns home to become a community leader.

It is thought the opera has some autobiographical elements. It has been said that the inspiration for Treemonisha may have come from Joplin’s second wife, Freddie Alexander, who was well-read and a prominent member of the African-American community. The opera takes place in September 1884, the month and year of Alexander’s birth.

But Lokensgard said the opera is also reflective of Joplin’s own life. He was sent to a German music teacher when he was young, said Lokensgard, and had a lot of educational opportunities.

“He felt in the early 1900s that blacks were not going to get ahead unless they educated themselves,” said Lokensgard. “He felt that assimilation wasn’t a bad thing, that people weren’t going to lose their identity.”

She said the production does not paint the conjurers as one dimensional. They have their merits.

“The black magic that is practiced in a lot of places in this country is still valid for a lot of people. So there’s a conflict of keeping some traditions and moving forward with others.”

Lokensgard said it is specified in the score that the orphaned Treemonisha is light skinned. She thinks Joplin envisioned a girl of mixed race who was abandoned and left under a tree. Lokensgard is herself from a mixed background. Her father is Norwegian-American and her mother is black and Cherokee.

Much of the opera is written in an African-American dialect, a little like Porgy and Bess.

When a conjurer tries to sell Treemonisha’s mother the lucky charm, her father, Ned, says: “No, dat bag you’s not gwine to buy, ’cause I know de price is high.”

But Treemonisha speaks in crisp English, said Lokensgard. Her manner is “kind of cultured.”

The music also varies, depending on who’s being depicted. The conjurers sing in a folksy manner, said Lokensgard, while the townspeople are often heard in a call-and-response technique. Treemonisha has her own syncopated jazzy style.

“Unimportant words often fall on important beats,” said Lokensgard, “so you have to play against the music to get the language out.”

Besides Lokensgard, RaShaun Campbell and Michelle Johnson appear as Ned and Monisha, Treemonisha’s parents, and Albert Lee sings the role of her friend, Remus, who rescues her from the conjurers. Members of the Rhode Island Philharmonic make up a chamber orchestra.

No matter what the style of music or dialect, though, Treemonisha remains upbeat.

“It’s a hopeful show,” said Lokensgard, “uplifting in a lot of ways.”

Opera Providence presents Scott Joplin’s Treemonisha tomorrow night at 8 and Sunday afternoon at 3 at the Columbus Theatre, 270 Broadway. Tickets are \$20-\$60 with discounts available. Call (401) 331-6060, (401) 621-6123, or log onto www.artixri.com.