

Scott Joplin's folk opera is a charmer

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Treemonisha, Scott Joplin's snapshot of plantation life in the 1880s, is getting a rare Rhode Island outing this weekend at the Columbus Theatre, in Providence. And the show, presented by Opera Providence, is as much historical curiosity as bona fide opera.

It's actually a charmer of a piece, as long as you're not looking for pulsing drama and sweeping arias à la Puccini. This is more a quaint folk opera laced with ragtime tunes and a plot that's right out of a children's book.

Treemonisha was completed in 1910, but Joplin never saw it staged. It was not until 1972, after the piano score was rediscovered, that the opera received its premiere. It went to Broadway three years later.

While the orchestration has been lost, Opera Providence is using a reconstruction that is close to the kind of band Joplin would have used, 13 players with a one-man percussion section that's heavy on the snare drum.

The show reflects Joplin's own feelings that hard work and education are tickets to success.

Treemonisha, who was found under a tree as an infant, is 18 when we meet her. She is educated and rejects the superstitions of the plantation's conjurers. When one of them tries to sell her adoptive mother a charm, she denounces him.

Seeking revenge, the conjurers kidnap Treemonisha and threaten to toss her into a monster wasp's nest, of all things. Boyfriend Remus shows up and rescues her.

Some of this is a little awkward. Remus, a sumptuous tenor by the name of Albert Rudolph Lee, appears in what looks like an African mask, and the bad guys get spooked and head for the hills. Just as lame is the "ballet" of dancing bears, three cast members in furry animal masks prancing about the stage. The choreography is downright silly.

But there is a sweet duet by Treemonisha's parents, who are pining away for their kidnapped daughter, that is sung by RaShaun Campbell and Michelle Johnson. Campbell was a little bellowy in solo roles, but Johnson, a Texas-bred soprano who recently made her Boston Symphony debut, has a lovely voice.

But the star of the show is Alexa Lokensgard, an attractive lyric soprano who makes a fetching Treemonisha. Lokensgard is a graduate student at the New England Conservatory, but proved a seasoned singer and decent actress at a student concert yesterday morning.

The show has a lot of choral numbers, including a barber shop quartet, and the ensemble singing was fine. But the Columbus stage is barely big enough to contain the cast — things look awfully cramped.

Still, there is enough room to fit a half-dozen funky tree trunks wrapped in fabric and the shell of a shack where Treemonisha and her parents live.

Joplin obviously had gifts as a composer. Anyone who has heard his "Maple Leaf Rag" knows that. But as an opera writer, his talents are stretched. When the music tried to point up tension or indicate something threatening, it sounded almost like a silent movie score. At other times there were shades of Gilbert & Sullivan and Stephen Foster.

But the final chorus is catchy and upbeat, and there are a lot of spirited tunes to be found. It's just that it's a little thin as opera goes. Don't go looking for Verdi-esque passions, treachery and betrayal. Even the nasty conjurers are promptly forgiven by the townsfolk.

Performances of Treemonisha take place tonight at 8 and Sunday afternoon at 3 at the Columbus Theatre, 270 Broadway, Providence. Tickets are \$20-\$60 with discounts available. Call (401) 331-6060, or (401) 621-6123, or log onto www.artixri.com.