WASHINGTON PERFORMING ARTS PRESENTS

A REIMAGINING OF SCOTT JOPLIN’S

TREEMONISHA

BY JESSIE MONTGOMERY, JANNINA NORPOTH, AND LEAH-SIMONE BOWEN

A Volcano Theatre Production, in association with Moveable Beast Collective

Co-commissioned by Washington Performing Arts, Stanford Live, Southbank Centre, Canada’s National Arts Centre, and Banff Centre for the Arts

Coming in 2020-2021

ABOUT THE CO-COMMISSION & PRODUCTION

Washington Performing Arts has co-commissioned a new semi-staged production of Scott Joplin’s opera Treemonisha—a revolutionary and masterful work that, tragically, was never fully produced in the composer’s lifetime. The opera is being reimagined by an international team of creators and performers led by Volcano Theatre [Toronto], in association with the Moveable Beast Collective. This production is reflective of Washington Performing Arts’ investment in special productions that engage education, community, media, and mainstage partners across multiple genres. A new libretto for Treemonisha has been written by Volcano’s playwright-in-residence, Leah-Simone Bowen, and a new orchestration and music were created by New York-based composers and performers Jessie Montgomery and Jannina Norpoth, who are both known to Washington, DC audiences for their compositions and performances of contemporary works with the PUBLIQuartet. The reimagined work provides a 21st century framework for understanding a powerful story of Black identity and agency in the years following the Civil War. Washington Performing Arts seeks to collaborate with community and cultural organizations throughout the region for creating wider impact through residency and educational opportunities surrounding the historical and social themes explored in Treemonisha. The production will be presented in Washington, DC during the 2020-2021 season at a venue TBA.

PREVIEW VIDEO: TINYURL.COM/WPATREEMONISHA

WHY NOW? THE TRAGEDY OF SCOTT JOPLIN’S WORK

Joplin’s vision—deeply feminist, politically progressive, and musically adventurous—never came to fruition during his lifetime. The libretto was problematic—Joplin was a novice librettist. But beyond that, no backer would touch it. The New York establishment was not ready to embrace an opera by a Black composer. Joplin spent his life savings on an unrealized dream, and was to be buried in a pauper’s grave just five years after its completion. His hand-written orchestral parts were tossed in the garbage sometime in the 1960s, and were it not for a piano/vocal reduction he registered with the Library of Congress, Treemonisha would have vanished forever. While there have been several notable productions of Treemonisha mounted since the 1970s, the creative team assembled by Volcano Theatre brings a contemporary lens to Joplin’s work. Their innovative voices use the original work as a point of departure for examining the Black experience in the United States from Reconstruction to the present.

SAVE THE DATE: Treemonisha Workshop, 918 Bathurst, Toronto, Canada | January 24-26, 2019

Contact Nicholas Brown [nbrown@washingtonperformingarts.org] for more information
ABOUT SCOTT JOPLIN’S TREEMONISHA

Joplin called Treemonisha an “opera,” and it is almost unbelievably progressive for its time, both musically and politically. Found under a tree by an ex-slave named Monisha, Treemonisha grows into a woman who will change the course of her post-Civil War community. Written in 1911, Joplin’s Treemonisha is one of the few surviving live performance pieces about the immediate post-slavery era written by a Black person who actually lived through it. It fuses classical and folk sounds with gospel; with the Black precursor to the barbershop sound; and with ragtime’s own signature syncopations. Joplin’s young female protagonist, Treemonisha, is elected by her 1880’s community as their leader—long before women, let alone Black women, were able to vote anywhere in North America. This was truly a new kind of opera.

THE REIMAGINING: A WORD FROM LIBRETTIST LEAH-SIMONE BOWEN

“When I found out that Scott Joplin had written an opera with a Black woman as the lead character, I was intrigued. When I found out that he had written the libretto for an all-Black cast and that the central conversation in the piece took place within the Black community, I was blown away. Joplin wrote this opera set around the post-civil war Reconstruction era without White voices. To be a Black man writing in the early 1900’s and in this genre was a completely subversive move. At a time when Black people were newly freed, Joplin created a story of a community of Black people that had agency. He was truly ahead of his time.”

ABOUT VOLCANO THEATRE

Volcano is an international award-winning theatre company based in Toronto. Using innovations in global and intercultural performance practice, Volcano seeks to create theatre that is stylistically and socially modern, a theatre that explores identity, politics, history, and the contemporary human condition. Volcano is both cosmopolitan and uniquely Canadian, bringing Canada the latest in international theatre trends while touring Canadian artists and works around the world. Led by Artistic Director Ross Manson, Volcano has been a vital contributor to the independent theatre scene since 1994, and continues to question what it means to be a purveyor of outward-looking, rigorous Canadian theatre. Washington Performing Arts is honored to collaborate with such a distinguished and innovative international partner to reimagine one of America’s most compelling and rarely-produced operatic works.

COLLABORATING ORGANIZATIONS
Jessie Montgomery (Co-Arranger & Composer) is a New York native violinist, composer and music educator. She has been recognized as an important emerging composer by the American Composers Orchestra, the Sphinx Organization, the Joyce Foundation, and the Sorel Organization through generous grants and fellowships that support and promote her works. She has received commissions from the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, the Young People’s Chorus of New York, and Cygnus Ensemble. She was the inaugural Musician Fellow at Lighthouse Works in partnership with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. Since 1999, Montgomery has been affiliated with the Sphinx Organization, which supports the accomplishments of young African-American and Latino string players. She has held the post of Composer-in-Residence with the Sphinx Virtuosi since 2012. An active chamber musician, Montgomery has performed with the highly acclaimed Catalyst Quartet. She was a co-founder of PUBLIQuartet, an ensemble of composers and arrangers playing their own music as well as that of emerging and established contemporary composers. From 2004 to 2009 she was also a member of the Providence String Quartet, a pioneering ensemble in community-based music education. Montgomery holds a Bachelor’s degree from The Juilliard School in violin performance and a Master’s Degree in composition and film scoring from New York University. Her music was performed by PUBLIQuartet during Washington Performing Arts’ 2017-2018 season.

Jannina Norpoth (Co-Arranger & Composer) made her debut as a soloist with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra at age 14. Since then she has built a career as an innovative collaborative artist with a passion for contemporary music, genre bending and improvisation. Her string quartet, PUBLIQuartet, was the 2013 New Music/ New Places winner of the Concert Artist’s Guild Competition and was awarded the 2015 Adventurous Programming Award by Chamber Music America and ASCAP. With PUBLIQuartet, Norpoth performed on Washington Performing Arts’ series in 2017-2018 and she participated in a Mars Urban Arts Initiative workshop for students at Suitland High School. Norpoth performs and writes alongside her husband bassist/guitarist/songwriter John-Paul Norpoth in the folk/rock group HOLLANDS. Norpoth’s tour appearances have included the Detroit Art X Festival, Montreux Detroit Jazz Festival, Mostly Mozart Festival, VH1’s Save the Music, and Ecstatic Music Festival at Merkin Hall. As a soloist she has performed with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Birmingham Bloomfield Symphony, Ensemble 212, and Bachanalia Chamber Orchestra. She has been a featured performer alongside such acclaimed musicians as Jay - Z, Beyoncé, Regina Carter, violinist/composer Daniel Bernard Roumain (DBR), Pamela Wise and the Latin Jazz All-Stars, Boys Il Men, Dionne Warwick, Anita Baker, Michael McDonald, My Brightest Diamond, Alexi Murdoch, and DM Stith. As an arranger she has written for Keyshia Cole, John Legend, and others.

Leah-Simone Bowen (Librettist) is a Toronto-based writer, producer and director. She is currently playwright-in residence at the Blyth Festival and has also completed residencies at Playwright’s Workshop Montreal and the Stratford Festival of Canada. Her latest play, The Flood, will be published by playwright’s Canada press in 2018 and she is editing Black Comedy an anthology of comedic pieces by writers of colour. Leah was the Associate producer for the Lumianto Festival and the Artistic Producer at Obsidian Theatre, one of Canada’s leading culturally specific theatre company’s from 2010 to 2014. Bowen is a graduate of the University of Alberta’s theatre program.
ABOUT WASHINGTON PERFORMING ARTS

For more than 50 years, Washington Performing Arts has created profound opportunities for connecting the community to artists, in both education and performance. Through live events in venues that span the landscape of the D.C. metropolitan area, the careers of emerging artists are guided, and established artists who have a close relationship with local audiences are invited to return. In this way, the space between artists and audiences is eliminated, so that all may share life-long opportunities to deepen their cultural knowledge, enrich their lives, and expand their understanding and compassion for the world through the universal language of the arts.

Washington Performing Arts is one of the leading presenters in the nation. The organization’s inherent belief in the complete spectrum of the arts is revealed in performances of the highest quality, including classical music, jazz, gospel, contemporary dance, international music and art forms, and works that bend genres in provocative ways. The commissioning of world premieres on local stages to support artists’ creativity is critical to the mission of Washington Performing Arts. Dynamic education programs in the schools and beyond are a hallmark of the institution. Set in the nation’s capital and reflecting a population that hails from around the globe, these abundant offerings both ground us in the great heritages of the world, and allow our imaginations to fly, evoking fresh perspectives on life.

Washington Performing Arts has been honored for its work at the intersection of arts presenting and education. The organization has received Mayor’s Arts Awards for Outstanding Contribution to Arts Education (2015) and Excellence in Service to the Arts (2012) and was honored by President Barack Obama with a 2012 National Medal of Arts (becoming only the fourth D.C.-based arts group and the first arts presenter of its kind to be so honored).

WASHINGTON PERFORMING ARTS SPECIAL PRODUCTIONS

Washington Performing Arts has distinguished itself for cultivating special projects of national, artistic, and historical significance that provide a platform for creators across artistic genres. Highlights from recent seasons include the Of Thee We Sing: The Marian Anderson 75th Anniversary Celebration (broadcast nationally on BET and featuring Jessye Norman & Dionne Warwick), Wynton Marsalis’ Blues Symphony (a collaboration with Shenandoah University and Jazz at Lincoln Center), The Migration: Reflections on Jacob Lawrence (a collaboration between Step Afrika!, the Washington Performing Arts Men and Women of the Gospel Choir, the Phillips Collection, and 11th Street Bridge Park), SHIFT: A Festival of American Orchestras (in partnership with The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts), and Living the Dream...Singing the Dream (the annual Martin Luther King Jr. tribute, co-presented with the Choral Arts Society of Washington).

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By Peter Marks

January 5

The themes that composer Scott Joplin was exploring in his masterwork “Treemonisha” — feminism and black aspiration — struck Leah-Simone Bowen as so ahead of their time that the opportunity to give them a new context for 21st-century audiences struck her as impossible to pass up.

“That it’s essentially a conversation within an African community,” the playwright said. “That it’s about a black woman leading — and that she’s chosen to lead? It’s really subversive.”

And that these ideas were planted in a musical piece 108 years ago by an African American composer who never saw it blossom made the challenge for the Canadian writer and colleagues in the United States all the more irresistible.

As a result, arts institutions from across the continent and the Atlantic — among them, Washington Performing Arts — have invested in an endeavor that Bowen and like-minded artists are now developing: an expansively reimagined “Treemonisha,” for which only a piano and vocal score exists,
in the Library of Congress. Although the work finally reached the stage in 1972 and is occasionally revived with its schematic original story, no one has tried, the creative team says, to significantly alter its narrative infrastructure in hopes of reaching a wider audience.

That’s the mission originally staked out by the Toronto theater company Volcano, with a goal of unveiling the revised “Treemonisha” next year in San Francisco and then taking it on tour to other cities, including a production hosted by Washington Performing Arts in fall 2020.

“I wanted to stick closely to Joplin and create an entirely new story that furthers those themes that resonate with today,” said Ross Manson, Volcano’s artistic director. “As far as I can find, the libretto has never been touched. We’re just giving Joplin the help he was denied.”

The next step in “Treemonisha’s” binational evolution comes in a 12-day workshop beginning Jan. 14 in Toronto, where 15 singers and a full orchestra will reveal the progress in the three-act work, which Joplin called an opera but Volcano’s leaders say defies easy categorization. The group’s big-umbrella ethos affirms that notion.

“I define theater as, well, anything,” Manson said.

“This is a very unique opera,” added Jannina Norpoth, who, with Jessie Montgomery, is arranging the jazz, blues, barbershop and gospel-inflected score, and interpolating into it other Joplin songs. “It lies outside the classical realm, even though it’s classical music.”

However you define the outcome, this ambitious overhaul, with commissions from WPA, London’s South Bank Centre, Canada’s National Arts Centre, and arts organizations in California and Alberta, signals an upgrade in efforts to underlie African American accomplishments in the fine arts. Joplin, who died penniless in 1917 at age 48, made his reputation as a composer of rag, but his forays into other musical forms went underappreciated. His fame faded as he lapsed into illness and dementia, and it wasn’t until a new popularization of his rag compositions, such as “The Entertainer,” featured in the 1973 Oscar-winning movie “The Sting,” that a major Joplin resurgence occurred.

Manson got the idea for the “Treemonisha” project after seeing it in a Toronto concert hall. “The music was unlike anything I’ve heard,” he said. “As a document, it’s visionary. He was putting into classical form an American folk form.”

It tells the story of a foundling named Treemonisha, discovered under a tree by a former slave on the Texas-Arkansas border in the late 1800s. She grows up to lead a black community living on a plantation, espousing education as a means to achieve. Joplin’s forte, however, was not narrative structure. “As an opera, it is naive, with a libretto virtually devoid of tension or literary ability,” New York Times classical music critic Harold C. Shonberg wrote, after the premiere in Atlanta in 1972. “Joplin thought naturally in small forms, and his opera is a collection of set pieces rather than a work with any kind of thread running through it.”
Bowen, Norpoth and Montgomery, aided by stage director Weyni Mengesha, have set about inventing a story with a stronger spine to support the music, while retaining Joplin’s vision. A critical pivot in their version presents “Treemonisha” as the tale of a fractured community of former slaves, half of whom stayed after the abolition of slavery and turned to the land and their Christianity. The others fled into the forests, embracing what Volcano describes as an “ancient spirituality.” It becomes Treemonisha’s crusade to bring the two communities together — to move forward together in a reconciliation with the past.

This has required not only a meticulous rewriting of the text, but also a sifting through Joplin’s other compositions to bolster the integration of song and story.

“Jessie was the one who said [Joplin] had written dozens of marches,” Bowen recalled. “And all of these marches lend themselves to all this drama, more of a tense feel.” One of the pieces, “The Great Crush Collision March,” about a staged train crash in Crush, Tex., in the 1890s, was adapted for the new “Treemonisha.” Norpoth and Montgomery also added African instruments to incorporate more traditional sounds.

The next step, in what has become a painstaking reclamation process, is the Toronto workshop, to hear how these elements have coalesced and how firmly they fulfill Joplin’s artistic blueprint.

“Joplin never had his day with his opera,” Norpoth said. “It really was his life’s work.”

“In a way, we are resurrecting it,” Bowen added. “But he was the orchestrator, 100 years ago.”