Stanford, CA, February 13, 2020—This spring, Stanford Live presents the world premiere of *Scott Joplin’s Treemonisha*, a 21st-century reimagining of the sole surviving opera by the “King of Ragtime” (April 23–26). Produced by Canada’s Volcano Theatre, in association with Moveable Beast, and led by a predominantly Black, female creative team, the new work combines original source material from *Treemonisha* (c. 1911), Joplin’s visionary tale of community and female leadership, with a new story and libretto by playwright and broadcaster Leah-Simone Bowen, working with co-librettist Cheryl L. Davis, and expanded musical arrangements and new orchestrations by composers Jessie Montgomery and Jannina Norpoth. In the title role, soprano Neema Bickersteth – “an incredible performer”
(The Guardian) whose “galvanic voice outshines anything else onstage” (Vancouver Observer) – heads an all-Black cast, with an all-Black majority-female, nine-piece orchestra performing on Western and African instruments, under the award-winning stage direction of Weyni Mengesha, and conducted by Jeri Lynne Johnson.

The genius of Joplin’s score lies in the fusion of his famed ragtime syncopations with classical, folk and gospel sounds. While retaining much of this original source material, the new arrangements also draw on some of the genres his work would later inspire, such as jazz, R&B and American song. Click here to see a video preview of Scott Joplin’s Treemonisha.

Chris Lorway, Executive Director of Stanford Live, says:

“We’re thrilled to have this work as the centerpiece of our 2019–20 season. As the world changes around us, it is critically important to hear stories about women – and in particular women of color – who bring communities together and take the culture forward.”

Treemonisha: a Pulitzer Prize-winning opera almost lost forever

Joplin was posthumously awarded the 1976 Pulitzer Prize for Treemonisha, one of the few surviving performance pieces about post-slavery life by a Black artist from that era. Set in the 1880s, shortly after Reconstruction was abandoned by the U.S. government, it is the story of a young woman chosen by a Black community to be its leader. Written before women were granted the right to vote, the opera was feminist and progressive, introducing conversations about Black identity that were far ahead of its time. This proved too thematically subversive for the early-1900s New York opera scene, which was, in any case, unready to embrace a work written by a Black composer for an all-Black cast. As a result, Treemonisha remained largely unknown until its first complete performance in 1972. By this time only the piano and vocal score survived, the orchestral parts having been thrown out after Joplin’s death in 1917. His forward-looking, prize-winning opera only narrowly escaped being lost altogether.

Reimagining the libretto

Librettist Leah-Simone Bowen explains:

“Joplin wrote this piece about a conversation that was only happening in his community. I aim to preserve that discussion while allowing this new Treemonisha the space to grow, being mindful that history always holds a mirror up to the future.”

As Bowen discovered, Joplin’s original libretto was written at a time when two contemporary modes of thought were in play. The first, supported by Booker T. Washington, promoted hard work, Western education, and appeasement. The second, of which W.E.B. Du Bois was an advocate, proposed that it was only in combination with resistance and activism that education held the keys to success and social change. This philosophy started the
conversations about duality that enabled Black Americans to identify as both African and American.

In Bowen’s reworked libretto, *Treemonisha* depicts a community divided during the aftermath of slavery. One branch of this community, in which Treemonisha was raised, continues to live on the plantations and embraces Western education and the church. The other branch, a matriarchal community, lives hidden in the forest, where it rekindles African ancestral roots and spiritual practices. Accepting beliefs from both groups, Treemonisha works to bring the two together to thrive in post-slavery America.

Bowen’s reimagining aligns *Treemonisha* more closely with Dubois’s thinking, and her own sense of intersectional feminism, by portraying Treemonisha as a female leader in a patriarchal environment, who leverages education to cultivate a community that welcomes both African traditions and American ideals. Her story explores collective and personal histories, the ways those histories merged and affected Black identity and survival during Reconstruction, and the ways they continue to resonate today.

Bowen says:

“This work is about the things we were told separated us and how we internalized this separation. It is about the remnants of memory and 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.”

*Treemonisha* in the community

Before presenting the world premiere of *Scott Joplin’s Treemonisha* at Palo Alto High School’s state-of-the-art Performing Arts Center, Stanford Live looks forward to hosting the work’s rehearsal residency in partnership with Bayview Opera House, a community cultural center offering free and low-cost arts events in San Francisco. For more information visit live.stanford.edu.

About Stanford Live

Stanford Live presents a wide range of fine performances from around the world, fostering a vibrant learning community and providing distinctive experiences through the performing arts. From its home at Bing Concert Hall, Stanford Live functions simultaneously as a public square, a sanctuary and a lab, drawing from all Stanford University has to offer to connect performance to the most significant issues, ideas and discoveries of our time.

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Stanford Live presents world premiere of Scott Joplin’s Treemonisha

Palo Alto High School Performing Arts Center
50 Embarcadero Road
Palo Alto, CA 94301

Thursday, April 23 at 7:30pm
Friday, April 24 at 7:30pm
Saturday, April 25 at 8pm
Sunday, April 26 at 2:30pm

Tickets: $42–$84

Creative team:
Scott Joplin, composer
Leah-Simone Bowen, story and librettist
Cheryl Davis, co-librettist
Jessie Montgomery, co-arranger
Jannina Norpoth, co-arranger
Weyni Mengesha, stage director
Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, choreographer
Reza Jacobs, music director
Jeri Lynne Johnson, conductor
Neema Bickersteth, creative producer
Ross Manson, dramaturg
Deanna Downes, dramaturg
Camellia Koo, set designer
Kimberly Purtell, lighting designer
Marci Rodgers, costume designer

The world premiere production of Scott Joplin’s Treemonisha is co-commissioned by Stanford Live with support from a Hewlett Foundation 50 Arts Commission and the Stanford Live Commissions and Programming Fund; National Arts Centre, Canada with support from the National Creation Fund; Washington Performing Arts; the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity; and Southbank Centre, London UK. The production has received funding from the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council. The Stanford Live presentation is generously supported by Mary and Clinton Gilliland, the Koret Foundation, and the Stanford Presidential Residencies on the Future of the Arts.

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Tickets are now on sale and can be purchased at live.stanford.edu or by phone at (650) 724-2464.

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