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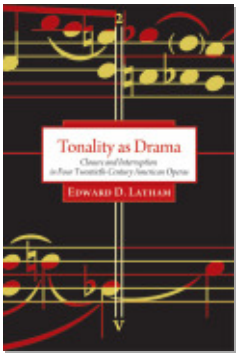
4. The Completed Background LineWith Open-Ended Coda: Scott Joplin's "Grand Opera" Treemonisha (1911)



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CHAPTER 4

The Completed Background Line With Open-Ended Coda: Scott Joplin's "Grand Opera" *Treemonisha* (1911)

"The music of Treemonisha is completely and distinctively American, and it is the first truly American opera, not imitative of the European form."[1]

From the turn of the century to World War I, most American composers were self-consciously trying to emulate (or rival) their European counterparts. Composers such as Walter Damrosch, desirous of acceptance by the European cultural elite, adopted many of the models established by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European composers. This trend is exemplified in the world of instrumental music by Charles Ives' struggle to create a uniquely American style while adhering to the forms and technical elements of European art music. Operas written during this period, typified by Damrosch's *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1913), were often based on a European subject or a work by a European author. *Treemonisha*, Scott Joplin's "ragtime opera," then, stands out among this group of early operas as a singular attempt to combine the distinctly American sound of ragtime with the forms and idioms of European grand opera in the service of an American subject—namely, the plight of slaves working on plantations in the South.

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Though he is primarily remembered as the composer of piano rags such as *The Maple Leaf Rag* and *The Entertainer*, Joplin aspired to write larger forms, part of his crusade to preserve the more serious style of "classic ragtime" in the face of competition from sideshow virtuosi and Tin Pan Alley hacks.[2] His first attempt at an opera, *A Guest of Honor*, was a one-act work comprised of twelve ragtime tunes, which he completed in 1903. According to James Marshall, a ragtime composer and Joplin's friend, *A Guest of Honor* was premiered in a large dance hall in St. Louis, but John Stark, Joplin's primary publisher, refused it based on the weakness of its libretto.[3] The Scott Joplin Ragtime Opera Company formed to perform the opera on tour throughout the Midwest, but was disbanded after only a few performances.[4] Although Joplin applied to copyright the opera, Library of Congress records indicate that a copy of the opera was never received.[5] Biographer James Haskins suggests that Joplin's possible dissatisfaction with the work may have led to its subsequent disappearance:

> Indeed, it is likely that in the face of his hopes for *Treemonisha* he became dissatisfied with the earlier opera, saw it as a merely adequate first attempt at an operatic form, and ceased to value it. This seems to be the only way to explain the fate he allowed to befall *A Guest of Honor*.[6]

Joplin completed a first draft of his second opera, *Treemonisha*, in 1907 while in St. Louis, but continued to revise it until 1910 when a second draft was submitted for publication.[7] Unable to come to an agreement with his former publisher John Stark, with whom he had a falling out over royalty payments, Joplin published the piano-vocal score himself in May 1911, under the imprint Scott Joplin Music Publishing Company.[8] Unlike *A Guest of Honor*, which Joplin had dubbed a "ragtime opera," *Treemonisha* was declared a "folk opera,"[9] though Joplin later amended this value-neutral generic designation, stating:

> I am a composer of ragtime music but I want it thoroughly understood that my opera "Treemonisha" is not ragtime.

> In most of the strains I have used syncopations (rhythm) peculiar to my race, but the music is not ragtime and the score complete is grand opera.[10]

Peter Gammond, one of Joplin's biographers, has suggested that his obsessive focus on getting *Treemonisha* published and performed accelerated his physical decline and ultimately hastened his death (from syphilis-related complications), remarking that "the death certificate … didn't add that [Joplin's death] had been hastened by a violent addiction to *Treemonisha*."[11] Whether Gammond is correct or not, Joplin's single-minded devotion to *Treemonisha* in his last years did lead to neglect of his other sources of income, including a private studio that gradually dwindled to nothing. Indeed, his financial situation became so desperate that his wife Lottie ran their house as a brothel to support him.[12]

From 1908 to 1913, Joplin hawked *Treemonisha* to anyone who would lend him an ear, occasionally publishing announcements such as the following one in the *New York Age*:

> Music circles have been stirred recently by the announcement that Scott Joplin, known as the apostle of ragtime, is composing scores for grand opera.… Critics who have heard a part of his new opera are very optimistic as to its future success.[13]

He finally convinced Thomas Johnson, former president of the Crescent Theatre Company, to back a production in Atlantic City, but sadly, the production never materialized. Instead, Joplin used the last of his savings to rent the Lincoln Theatre, a music hall on 135th Street in Harlem, in July 1911 and mounted a single performance of the opera with an orchestra consisting of himself at the piano, devoid of sets and costumes, which, according to William Sullivan, one of his last remaining students, played to about seventeen people.[14]

The cancellation of two other scheduled productions is mentioned in biographies of Joplin, one in 1913 at the Lafayette Theatre under the auspices of manager Benjamin Nibur,[15] and the other in 1913 at the Washington Park Theatre in Bayonne, New Jersey.[16] These cancellations were a crushing blow to Joplin. Susan Curtis suggests a cultural disconnect as the primary reason for Joplin's failure to make inroads within the New York arts community, particularly the growing African-American community in Harlem. While white critics like Carl Van Vechten wrote approvingly of authenticity in African-American theatre, including the use of magic, voodoo, and folk dancing, in reality Harlem artistic circles consisted largely of college-educated intellectuals who could not relate to Joplin's tale of life on a Southern plantation.[17] Joplin died on April 1, 1917, unaware of the future acclaim that lay in store for the work that his lone treasured reviewer had hailed as "a thoroughly American opera."[18]

Knowing how much *Treemonisha* had meant to her husband, Joplin's widow tried unsuccessfully for years to get it staged on Broadway.[19] Lottie died on March 14, 1953, and it took another two decades before a full-scale production was premiered at the Atlanta Memorial Arts Center. The production was connected to an Afro-American music workshop sponsored by Morehouse College and featured a reconstruction of Joplin's score by T. J. Anderson, who wrote (rather ambitiously) of Joplin: "We see him now as one of the most important creators of his generation, certainly comparable to Schoenberg."[20]

The Atlanta production fueled an enthusiasm for *Treemonisha* that led to three more productions—at Wolf Trap Farm in Washington, D. C. in 1972, at the Houston Grand Opera in May 1975, and at The Uris Theatre on Broadway in September 1975—that established the opera's place in the canon of American opera and ultimately led to Joplin's posthumous reception of the Pulitzer Prize in 1976.[21] The Houston Grand Opera production was particularly noteworthy for its use of costumes, dance, and fantastical elements to overcome the inadequacies of Joplin's libretto. As composer

Gunther Schuller (who re-orchestrated the opera for the Houston production) noted, *Treemonisha* is "a very uneven piece and certainly not a great piece of drama but, on the other side of it, it has some of the most beautiful music Joplin ever wrote."[22]

The question of genre and appropriate venue, issues central to each of the works discussed in the subsequent chapters of this volume, has also colored the reception of *Treemonisha*. The 1911 review of the work in *The American Musician* placed it squarely between grand opera and light opera, labeling the work "character opera" or "racial opera," meaning that its characters sang in the style most particularly suited to them (i.e., the syncopated rhythms of African-American folk melodies).[23] As noted above, Joplin clearly considered the work grand opera, yet his wife Lottie persisted in calling it a "ragtime opera."[24] Biographer Peter Gammond claims that "with hindsight we might justifiably say that he aimed too high," and suggests "had he aimed at the sphere where ragtime more naturally belonged—the musical comedy stage—he might well have had a roaring success on his hands."[25]

Nonetheless, *Treemonisha* stands as a seminal achievement, a work that, written a quarter century before *Porgy and Bess*, "won popular national attention as a hybrid of African-American and European elements."[26] That an African-American composer wrote it makes it all the more important. As Haskins notes, "For Scott Joplin, a black man deeply committed to American Negro folk rhythms, to focus his energies on writing the folk opera *Treemonisha* was like W. E. B. Du Bois mounting a serious campaign for the presidency of the United States."[27] The influence of ragtime on the works of subsequent composers around the world, particularly the three studied in Chapters 3–5, is a testament to Joplin's belief in the flexibility and potential of the style.[28]

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Synopsis

Treemonisha is set on a plantation deep in a forest somewhere in Arkansas, northeast of the town of Texarkana. Ned, a freed slave who manages the plantation for its white absentee landlords, and his wife Monisha are raising a daughter they found as an infant under a tree outside their cabin (hence her name, Tree-Monisha). Educated by a white woman in exchange for labor from Ned and Monisha, Treemonisha challenges the superstitious beliefs of the community in Act 1 by confronting Zodzetrick, one of the local "conjurors" ("The Bag of Luck"). He refuses to give up conjuring and, threatened by Treemonisha's pupil Remus, retreats into the forest, vowing vengeance on Treemonisha. After learning the truth from Monisha about her mysterious origin ("The Sacred Tree"), Treemonisha enters the forest with her friend Lucy to gather leaves for a wreath and is kidnapped by Zodzetrick and his accomplice, Luddud ("Confusion"). Remus and some of the other men run off in search of them.

Act 2 opens at the conjurors' forest hideout. Zodzetrick and Luddud present Treemonisha to the other conjurors, accusing her of trying to rob them of their livelihood ("Treemonisha in Peril"). Despite the objections of Cephus, the group condemns her and carries her off to a brush arbor to punish her. Simon suggests throwing her onto an enormous wasp nest, but before the punishment can be carried out Remus arrives dressed in a scarecrow costume (No. 14). Convinced that he is the Devil, the superstitious conjurors flee in panic and Remus rescues Treemonisha ("The Rescue").

Treemonisha and Remus return home in triumph at the opening of Act 3, and the other men arrive soon after with the captured Zodzetrick and Luddud in tow ("Treemonisha's Return"). The community wants to punish them with a severe beating, but Treemonisha urges their leader, Andy, to free the prisoners instead and pleads with the group to forgive them. When stern lectures from both Remus and Ned fail to sway the community ("Wrong is Never Right" and "When Villains Ramble Far and Near"), Treemonisha

makes a personal appeal that finally persuades them to show forgiveness ("Conjuror's Forgiven"). She then calls for the appointment of a leader, and the community convinces her to accept the role herself ("We Will Trust You as Our Leader"). Finally, she "leads" everyone in a dance of celebration ("A Real Slow Drag").

Scoring and Analyzing the Roles of Zodzetrick and Treemonisha

The plot synopsis above establishes Treemonisha and Zodzetrick as the central protagonist and antagonist of the opera. On one hand, scoring their roles provides a thorough catalogue of the local dramatic failures that ultimately lead to Zodzetrick's downfall, and on the other hand a detailed illustration of Treemonisha's emerging role as a successful leader of the community. Of the twenty-one beat objectives or main objectives shown in the score of Zodzetrick's role (Table 1), only seven are successfully achieved, five of them in Act 2. Zodzetrick's superobjective is to keep his business (selling "bags o' luck") thriving by preserving the plantation community's superstitious culture. In order to attain this goal, he has to strengthen his hold on the community and eliminate the opposition represented by Treemonisha and her friends and family, avoiding any appearance of weakness that might jeopardize his position as the leader of the conjurors. When his usual unctuous approach fails him in his first confrontation with Treemonisha ("The Bag of Luck"), he reverts to threats, intimidation, and kidnapping to frighten the community. Although in "Treemonisha in Peril," the accusation of Treemonisha at the hideout, he is successful in maintaining control of his band of conjurors by making her a scapegoat, Zodzetrick's bid to control the broader community through fear is thwarted by the rescue of Treemonisha and her election as leader.

	Y/N	KEY	CADENCE	LINE
SO: to keep his business thriving by preserving the community's superstitious culture	n	G	HC	3-2‖
MO_1 (I/2): to strengthen his hold on the community	n	G	---	---
BO_1: to con Monisha into buying a bag of luck	n	G	PAC/e: PHC	---
BO_2: to convince Ned of the bag's worth	n	e	IAC→EC	---
BO_3: to preserve his air of mystery	y	G	PAC	3-line
BO_4: to ingratiate himself with Treemonisha	n	d	---	8-5‖
BO_5: to intimidate Treemonisha	n*	e	PAC	---
BO_6: to spook Treemonisha	n*	C	PAC	---
BO_7: to intimidate the community	n	c	EC	---
[MO_2 (I/10): to weaken the community's resistance]	n	C?	---	---
BO_1: to conceal Treemonisha's disappearance	n	e	PHC	---
BO_2: to make Treemonisha vanish	n	C	DC/DC	3-line
BO_3: to sew anxiety and confusion	y*	a	PAC	---
MO_3 (II/12): to strengthen his power base	y	C	PAC	3-line
BO_1: to reassert his authority among the conjurors	y	a	PAC	3-line
BO_2: to shift blame onto Treemonisha	n	C	HC	---
BO_3: to make Treemonisha a scapegoat	y	C	PAC	3-line
[MO_4 (II/13): to quell doubts with a show of power]	y	e	PAC	(5-line)
MO_5 (II/14): to get rid of Treemonisha	n	C	---	---
BO_1: to persuade conjurors to kill Treemonisha	y?	C	IAC	---
BO_2: to maintain control of the conjurors	n	a	---	---
[MO_6 (III/20): to steal the community's spirit]	n	D	HC/IAC	5-(2‖)-3

Key

SO = Superobjective
MO = Main Objective
BO = Beat Objective
y/n = Yes/No
I/2 = Act 1, No. 2
HC = Half Cadence
PAC = Perfect Authentic Cadence
IAC = Imperfect Authentic Cadence
PHC = Phrygian Half Cadence
EC = Evaded Cadence
DC = Deceptive Cadence
IAC→EC = Imperfect-becoming-Evaded Cadence

Table 1 The Score of Zodzetrick's Role (Joplin, *Treemonisha*)

After their initial confrontation at the beginning of Act 1, each of the main characters is forced to make a decision: faced with resistance from a determined opponent, each must change their strategy or risk losing the battle of wills. In contrast to Zodzetrick, whose refusal to abandon his

single-minded determination to remove her as an obstacle ultimately leads to dramatic failure, Treemonisha comes up with an alternate solution that represents a triumph of intellect over brute force, as shown in the score of her role in Table 2. Instead of running over Zodzetrick, she goes around him, asserting her leadership and strengthening her bond to the community with the help of Andy and Monisha. While Zodzetrick is absent for the remainder of Act 1, Treemonisha is constantly present, welcoming new laborers ("The Corn-Huskers"), planning entertainment ("We're Goin' Around"), participating in traditional activities ("The Wreath"), and showing respect to the elders of the community ("Treemonisha's Bringing Up"). Thus, when she is kidnapped, the entire community immediately decides to rescue her, and she then uses her near-martyrdom as leverage to persuade the people to abandon superstition and vengeance for faith and mercy, ending Zodzetrick's "reign of terror." It must also be noted that, although she initially demurs when asked by the people to be their leader, it is Treemonisha herself who proposed such an election, and the demurral is merely an adept public relations maneuver by an adroit politician.

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	Y/N	KEY	CADENCE	LINE
SO: to free her community from fear	y	B♭	PAC	3-line
and lead them toward a brighter future	y*	B♭	HC	$\hat{3}$-$\hat{4}$-$\hat{5}$
[MO_1 (I/1): to establish the hope represented by her theme as the defining framework of the opera] with the help of the orchestra	y*	B♭	PAC	3-line
MO_2 (I/2): to convince Zodzetrick to change his ways	n	E♭	—	—
BO1: to stop Zodzetrick in his tracks	n	E♭	DC→HC	$\hat{3}$-$\hat{2}$‖
BO2: to shame Z. into giving up "conjury"	n	B♭	—	—
[MO_3 (I/4): to begin asserting her leadership] with the help of Andy	y*	G	PAC	5-line
[MO_4 (I/5): to strengthen her bond with the women] with the help of Monisha	y*	B♭	PAC	3-line
MO_5 (III/21): to capitalize on her near-martyrdom	y	B♭	PAC	3-line
MO_6 (III/25): to convince the community to be merciful and forgive Zodzetrick and Luddud	y	B♭	PAC	3-line
MO_7 (III/26): to persuade the community to elect a male leader (perhaps Remus)	n	C	—	—
MO_8 (III/27): to lead the community	y	F	PAC	5-line

Table 2 The Score of Treemonisha's Role (Joplin, *Treemonisha*)

The background structure of Zodzetrick's role, as defined by the connections between the tonal areas and primary tones of each of the numbers in which his influence is exerted, comprises a motion from G major (I) to C major (IV) and finally to A minor (ii), as shown in Figure 1. As a result of his confrontation with Treemonisha ("The Bag of Luck"), during which, with the help of her friends and family, she effects a shift to the subdominant key area (C major) and changes the prolonged tone from B to E, Zodzetrick is forced to spend Act 2 trying to establish a tonal center that will support a viable return to C as upper-neighbor to B, thereby enabling him to eventually return to his original key (G major) and primary tone (B) and successfully complete a closed tonal structure for the opera as a whole.[29] Though he accomplishes a shift to A minor ("Confusion"), he is unable to permanently install C as primary tone. Instead, E returns and is reinterpreted

as $\hat{5}$ of A minor, and Zodzetrick ends the opera where he began: on the losing end of a (tonal) struggle with Treemonisha.

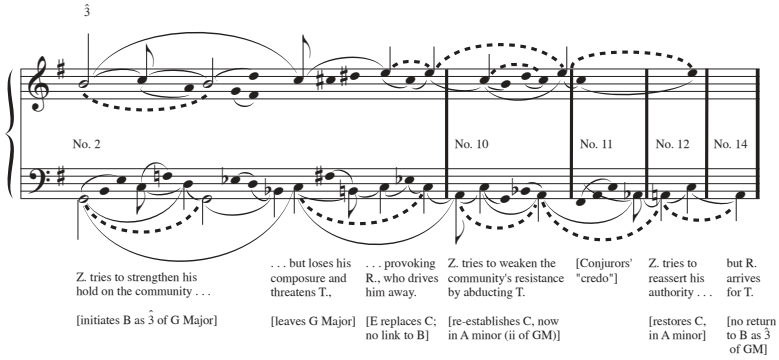

Figure 1 The Background Structure of Zodzetrick's Role (Joplin, *Treemonisha*)

As the source for all of the dramatic tension in the opera, "The Bag of Luck" deserves the most hermeneutically freighted modulations in *Treemonisha* (Figure 2). Zodzetrick makes his entrance in G major, initiating B as primary tone with his opening sales pitch to Monisha ("I want to sell to you"). Descent to $\hat{1}$ is interrupted over a half cadence at m. 8, as he gauges the effect of his words on Monisha, but is immediately followed by closure to a perfect authentic cadence at m. 12, completing a parallel period.[30] In his haste to make a sale, however, Zodzetrick omits $\hat{2}$ (A) over the cadential dominant, substituting an exuberant D instead. A hesitant Monisha restates the primary tone B and leads it again to an interruption at the half cadence in m. 14 as she questions the effectiveness of the "bag of luck." Zodzetrick abruptly changes his approach (he does not bother with a pivot chord), reinterpreting B as $\hat{5}$ of E minor, and adopting a more personal, conspiratorial tone (mm. 15–22).

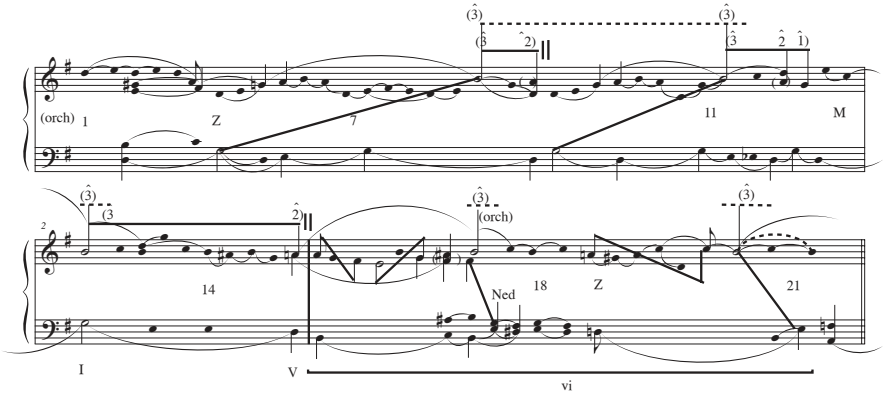

Figure 2a "The Bag of Luck," voice leading (Joplin, *Treemonisha*, No. 2)

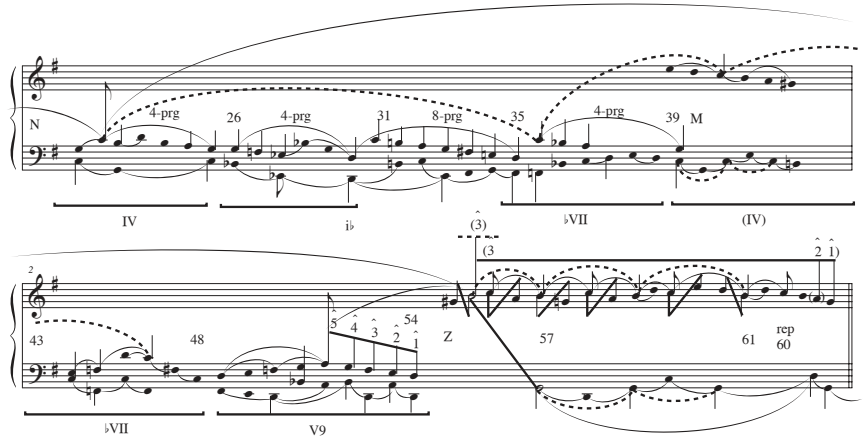

Figure 2b "The Bag of Luck," voice leading (cont.) (Joplin, *Treemonisha*, No. 2)

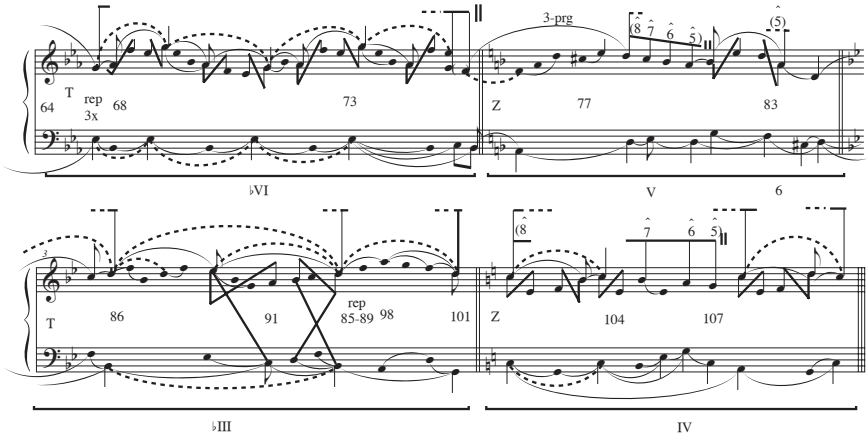

Figure 2c "The Bag of Luck," voice leading (cont.) (Joplin, *Treemonisha*, No. 2)

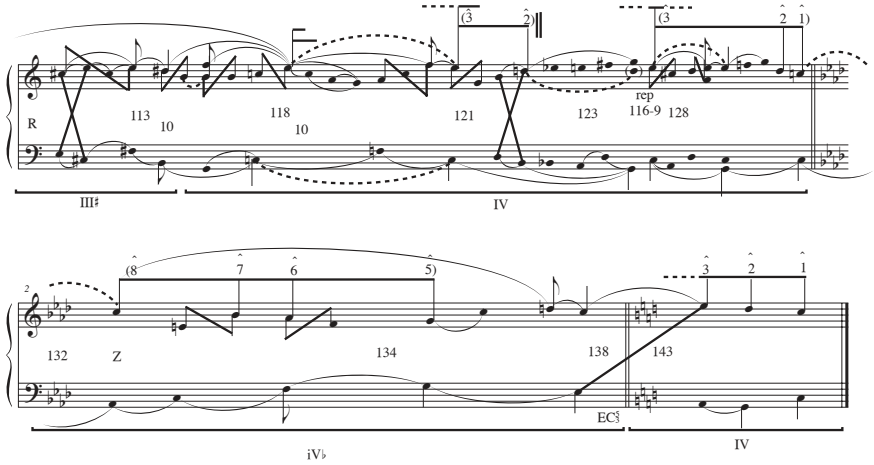

Figure 2d "The Bag of Luck," voice leading (cont.) (Joplin, *Treemonisha*, No. 2)

Ned objects to the tactics used by Zodzetrick, and he seizes control of the scene's tonality in mm. 22–49 and shifts it rapidly away from G major/E minor, cycling through C major, G minor, and F major in an attempt to discredit the conjuror and dissuade his wife. His failure to convince Monisha is demonstrated, however, by his inability to achieve full cadential closure—he reaches half cadences at mm. 30, 46 and 50, and abandons a cadential $\frac{6}{4}$ at m. 37.[31] Finally, in mm. 49–54, Ned leaves Zodzetrick an opening when he

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asks Zodzetrick, in the key of D minor (the minor dominant of G major), to identify himself. Though he now realizes he will probably not get the sale, Zodzetrick seizes the opportunity to save face and reassert his authority, slyly reinstating G major with B as primary tone through sleight of hand (the use of a common-tone diminished seventh chord). However, though he again closes to the tonic over a strong perfect authentic cadence at m. 63, he avoids $\hat{2}$, this time substituting an added sixth above the dominant (B, $\hat{3}$). Though this sort of substitution is certainly idiomatic in ragtime and subsequent jazz styles, it nonetheless weakens the sense of linear closure inherent in Zodzetrick's melody.

At this point in the scene, Treemonisha picks up where Ned has left off. Once again moving the tonal area to the flat side of the circle of fifths by reinterpreting Zodzetrick's G major tonic as $\hat{3}$ of E♭ major (mm. 64–75), she challenges his moral integrity. In uncharted waters and uncertain how to proceed, the conjuror cautiously backpedals, returning to D minor (mm. 76–85) in order to reassert G major once more. Undeterred, Treemonisha transforms D minor into B♭ major (mm. 85–101) and chastises him for his many acts of deception. At this point, Zodzetrick begins to come unraveled, abandoning both his composure and his home key and threatening Treemonisha in C major: "An' it won't be long 'fore I'll make you from me run."

Unfortunately for the conjuror, his direct threat angers Remus, Treemonisha's friend and pupil, who joins the fray and puts further distance between Zodzetrick and his desired tonal goal by shifting the key to B major via another common-tone diminished-seventh chord (mm. 110) as he rebukes him. As he praises Treemonisha, Remus then appropriates Zodzetrick's C major and negates its potential to serve as support for an upper-neighbor to the original primary tone B by initiating E as local primary tone instead (mm. 115–31). Unlike Ned and Zodzetrick, Remus leaves no doubt as to his conviction and persuasiveness, reaching perfect authentic closure to $\hat{1}$ at mm. 131 via an explicitly stated $\hat{2}$ over the cadential dominant. Zodzetrick, off balance, is left to bluster ineffectually toward an evaded cadence in C

minor (m. 138) before Treemonisha and Remus join forces and restore C major, banishing Zodzetrick from the stage with a strong perfect authentic cadence that concludes the number (m. 145).

In order to make his way back to G major, Zodzetrick has to rehabilitate C major/A minor as a "neighboring key" by reinstating C—not E—as primary tone. He is brought a step closer to this intermediate goal through the confusion caused by his abduction of Treemonisha at the end of Act 1. In the second half of "Confusion" (Figure 3), as Monisha describes the kidnapping to the community, the tonal area shifts to A minor, though still keeping E as primary tone (mm. 41–92). Each of the main characters reacts differently to the news. Monisha tries to remain brave by returning to C major, but her fear is telegraphed by the lack of closure in her music (half cadences at mm. 52 and 59 and a prominent deceptive cadence at m. 64). Ned, for his part, abandons reason and descends to Zodzetrick's level, using the conjuror's G major key and B primary tone to declare his murderous intentions ("I'll beat dat trifling Zodzetrick until he runs like a big cur dog, and I'll kill that scoundrel Luddud jus' lak I would kill a hog"). Like Zodzetrick, in letting his emotions get the better of him Ned omits $\hat{2}$ over the dominant, precluding linear closure to the tonic (m. 72). Even the staunch Remus is unnerved by Treemonisha's sudden disappearance: his confident C major promise ("I'll bring Treemonisha home") ends with a mode-mixed deceptive cadence to ♭VI (m. 80).[32] The number concludes in A minor, with the entire community urging Ned and Remus to hurry and save Treemonisha by closing a 5-line from E, albeit only with an implied $\hat{2}$ over the dominant (m. 87).

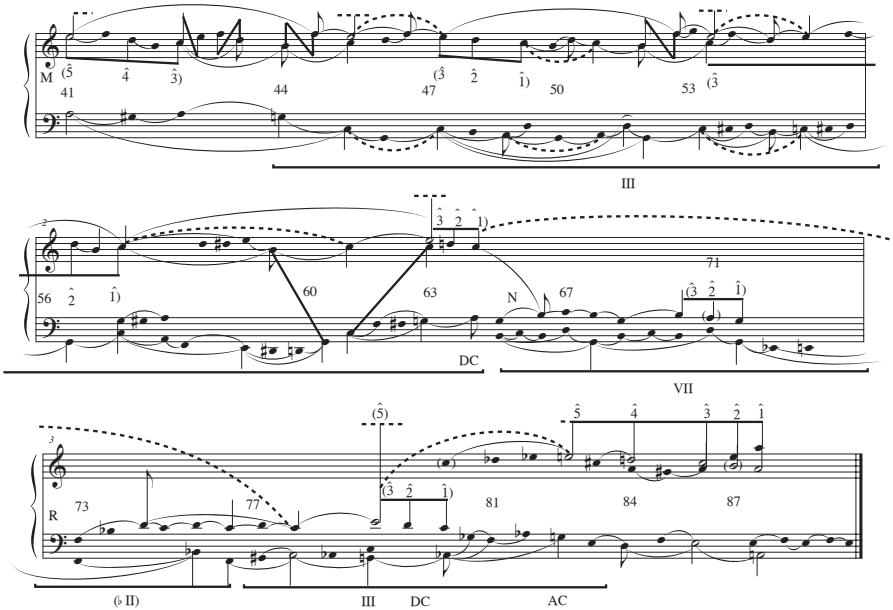

Figure 3 "Confusion," voice leading (Joplin, *Treemonisha*, No. 10)

As Act 2 opens, the scene shifts to the conjurors' forest hideout, Zodzetrick's stronghold. It is here that Zodzetrick has the best chance of regrouping and resuming progress toward the attainment of his superobjective. The "Superstition" number, a conjuror's credo of sorts, begins with an orchestral introduction in F major, establishing C as primary tone (Figure 4). After a transitional modulation to F minor, the band of conjurors enters in A♭ major (♭II in G major), reinterpreting C as the head note of a 3-line. As the litany of superstitions grows more bizarre and extreme ("If a neighbor comes to see you, an' squeezes yo' han' very tight, you had better speak loud 'Hee-Hoo,' that neighbor is not right"), the number modulates to F minor (mm. 73–100). A♭ major is restored for the final "amen" section, however, and a local 3-line is closed to the tonic.

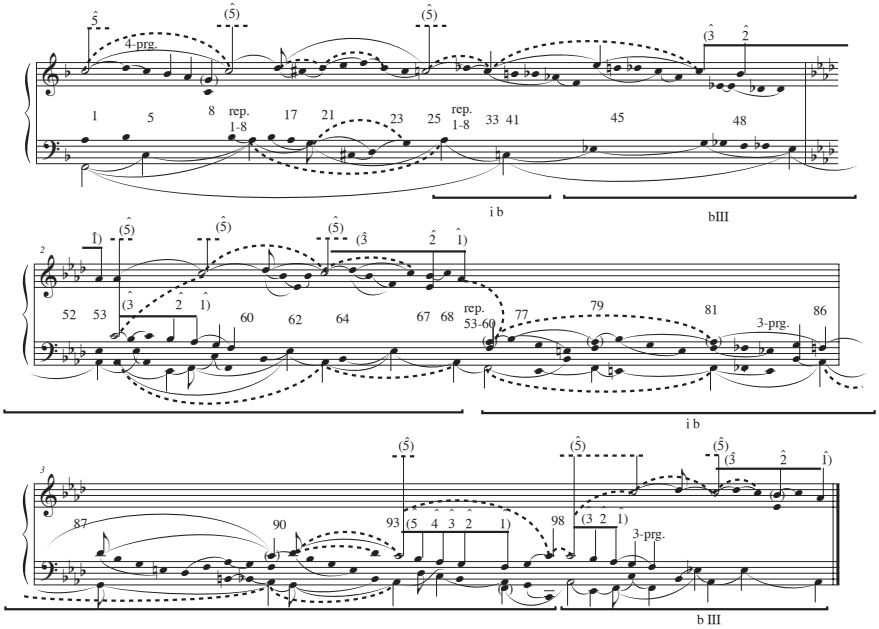

Figure 4 "Superstition," voice leading (Joplin, *Treemonisha*, No. 11)

"Treemonisha in Peril" brings Zodzetrick even closer to restoring C as a large-scale upper neighbor tone. As he and Luddud enter the camp with Treemonisha, the key shifts again to A minor (diatonic ii of G major, versus the mode-mixed ♭II of the previous number) and C is initiated as the primary tone of a 3-line (Figure 5). The conjurors' predisposition to harshly judge the captive stranger in their midst is demonstrated by the perfect authentic closure in their choral melody as Luddud calls for their attention (mm. 16–17). Luddud successfully demonizes Treemonisha in the eyes of the conjurors (via a perfect authentic cadence in mm. 25–26), but Cephus, a member of the group who is secretly in love with Treemonisha, tries to grant her a reprieve by effecting a modulation to C major (mm. 36–38). Simon, a lesser leader of the conjurors, implacably returns the key to A minor and Treemonisha is condemned. Because her punishment is temporarily deferred, however ("Come on ev'rybody to de brush arbor, dis gal mus' have de punishment dat's waitin' for her"), there is no closure in A minor. After a half cadence at

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m. 42, the number modulates to C major and closes with a perfect authentic cadence (m. 46).

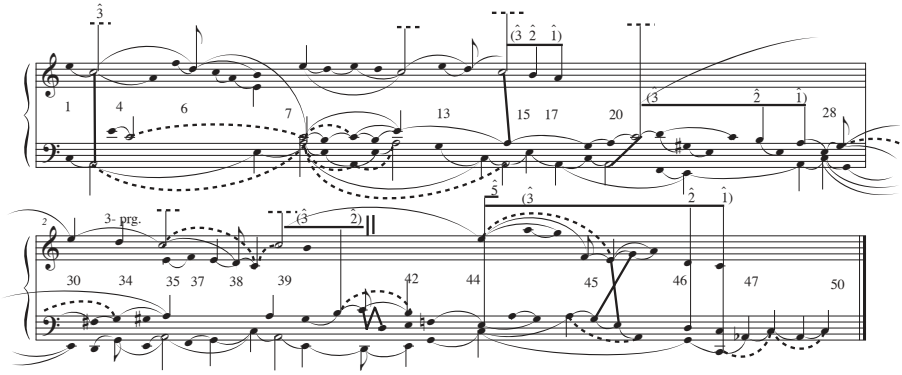

Figure 5 "Treemonisha in Peril," voice leading (Joplin, *Treemonisha*, No. 12)

Upon arriving at the brush arbor, Simon informs the other conjurors of his plan in "The Wasp-Nest": to throw Treemonisha onto an enormous wasp nest nearby. After an imperfect authentic cadence in C major indicating their assent (mm. 8–9), Simon begins a countdown, intoning the goal tone C and using it to pivot to A minor (mm. 9–12), as shown in Figure 6. Before he and the other conjurors can complete a descent to the tonic, however, Cephus again interrupts, distracting the group by calling attention to the arrival of a strange figure (Remus, dressed in a scarecrow costume) and restoring E as the primary tone. Mass confusion ensues as the conjurors, believing Remus to be the devil, flee in all directions, and the number closes in A minor, with an unresolved C as the final structural pitch in the melody.

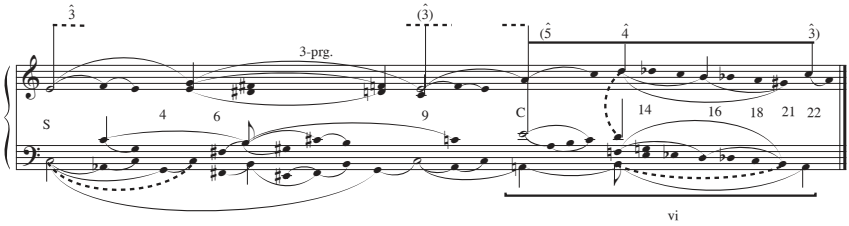

Figure 6 "The Wasp-Nest," voice leading (Joplin, *Treemonisha*, No. 14)

Although Zodzetrick does restore C as an upper-neighbor tone supported by A minor (ii), he is unable to use it to return to B over G major/E minor, and the background structure of his role remains incomplete and unresolved, even though it is not interrupted in the technical sense of the term.[33] His narrow-minded focus on getting rid of Treemonisha costs him his larger objective—to maintain control of the community. In contrast, Treemonisha is able to successfully bring about the return of her primary tone D ($\hat{3}$ of B♭ major), initiated in the overture, and achieve linear and harmonic closure to the tonic in No. 25 as she achieves her superobjective: to free her community from fear and lead them toward a brighter future (Figure 7).

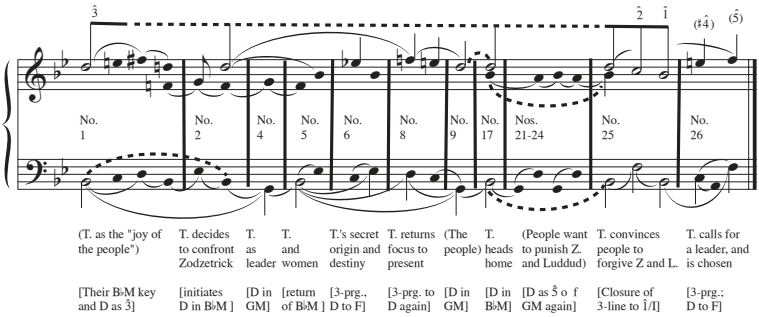

Figure 7 The Background Structure of Treemonisha's Role (Joplin, *Treemonisha*)

In a sense, Treemonisha's struggle to win the hearts and minds of the people can be represented as a struggle for control of the pitch D. Although D as primary tone ($\hat{3}$) is initially associated with the key of B♭ major (Treemonisha's key) in the overture, where it anchors the main theme of the opera representing "the happiness of the people when they feel free from the conjurors and their spells of superstition,"[34] it later becomes closely affiliated with the people's simplicity and ignorance, serving as $\hat{5}$ of G major (Zodzetrick's key) in the chorus numbers (Nos. 4, 9 and 21). Each time that D is introduced in a negative (G major) context, however, Treemonisha is able to redeem it in B♭ major: Zodzetrick's G major temptation of Monisha becomes a B♭ major reproach ("The Bag of Luck"), the raucous ring dance ("We're Goin' Around") becomes a meaningful springtime coronation ritual

("The Wreath"), the simplistic salvation offered by a traveling preacher ("Good Advice") becomes the actual salvation of Treemonisha herself from the conjurors ("Going Home"), and the condemnation of Zodzetrick and Luddud ("Treemonisha's Return") is transformed into an act of forgiveness ("Conjuror's Forgiven").

While it is tempting to simply read the struggle between Treemonisha and Zodzetrick as a conflict between flat keys and sharp keys, such a conflict does not entirely explain the tonal structure of the opera. Although the keys used by Joplin for Treemonisha (B♭ major), Ned (F major), Monisha (E♭ major) and Remus (C major) are primarily drawn from the flat side of the circle of fifths, the conjurors are represented both by sharp keys (G major and E minor for Zodzetrick) and flat keys (F major and A♭ major for the other conjurors). Moreover, Ned and Remus, in trying to convince the people to give up their desire for revenge at the end of the opera, speak to them in their own language, as it were, each adopting the key of D major for their moralistic exhortations ("Wrong is Never Right" and "When Villains Ramble Far and Near").

What does make Treemonisha's role especially compelling from the point of view of background structure, however, is its ability to simultaneously project large-scale closure and cyclic continuity. Joplin achieves this effect by bringing back Treemonisha's home key of B♭ major at the crux of the opera, where she convinces the people to forgive the conjurors (No. 25), but then prolonging it in the denouement through a motion to its dominant (F major) as the people look toward a brighter future by electing Treemonisha as the leader that will free them from ignorance and superstition (Nos. 26 and 27). This two-part structure is represented in Figure 7 by the background closure of a 3-line in B♭ major in No. 25 and the subsequent motion to the dominant in "A Real Slow Drag" that leaves open the question of whether or not Treemonisha becomes a successful leader and justifies the faith placed in her by the community, a question that remains unanswered as the curtain falls at the end of Act 3.

After brief appearances in “The Bag of Luck” (the confrontation with Zodzetrick) and “We’re Goin’ Around” (the ring dance) during which she is not the center of attention, Treemonisha comes into her own in No. 5, "The Wreath," reclaiming the key of B♭ major as she innocently but cleverly goes about preparing for her own “coronation” by steeping herself in the traditions of the community so as not to appear aloof or haughty. She establishes D as primary tone at m. 5, prolonging it through a third-progression involving raised $\hat{4}$ (mm. 5–12) that parallels the background structure of her role (Figure 8). After Monisha alludes metaphorically to Treemonisha’s future success as a leader of the community (“an’ very fine yo’ wreath will be”) by closing a middleground descent through $\hat{2}$ to the tonic (mm. 18–20), the key shifts to E♭ major. It is not yet time for Treemonisha to be crowned as leader, and the number concludes without closure in the home key.

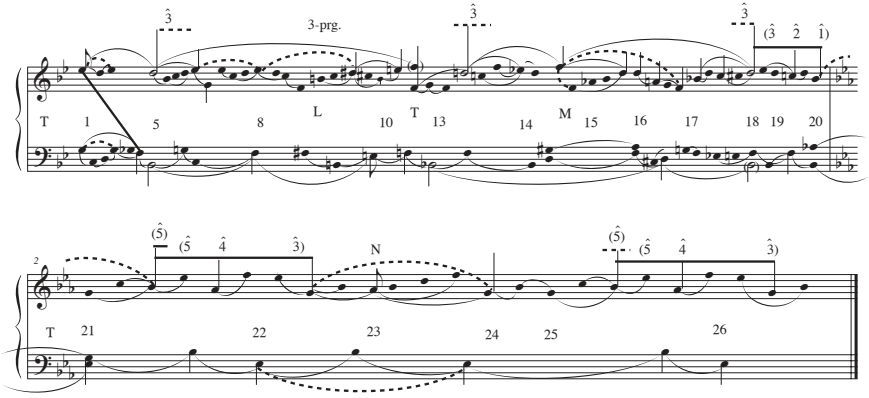

Figure 8 “The Wreath,” voice leading (Joplin, *Treemonisha*, No. 5)

Treemonisha’s triumphant return to the plantation in "Going Home" after her dramatic rescue in the forest brings with it the return of her home key, B♭ major. Remus initiates D as the local primary tone at m. 6, prolonging it through a fourth-progression before it is transferred up an octave to Treemonisha’s vocal line at m. 8 (Figure 9). Because Treemonisha has not yet reached her destination (in both literal and dramatic terms), however, the primary tone is prolonged through the end of the number and does not

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resolve to the tonic. With its restatement of Treemonisha's key, yet absence of closure, this number provides perfect "traveling music" for her journey back to the community.

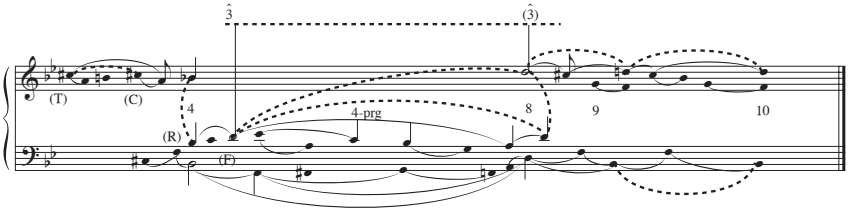

Figure 9 "Going Home," voice leading (Joplin, *Treemonisha*, No. 17)

With the joyous return of the opera's B♭ major main theme in the orchestra at m. 21 of "Treemonisha's Return," supporting a strong statement of the D primary tone in the choral soprano line, Treemonisha's iconic status within the community is confirmed with certainty (Figure 10). Treemonisha herself provides a strong linear descent to the tonic supported by a perfect authentic cadence that concludes the first section of the scene, in which she recounts the story of her rescue (mm. 23–32). She even showcases her charismatic flair as a storyteller and orator, keeping her audience in suspense by using an evaded cadence at m. 28 as she withholds just for a moment the crux of the story regarding the success of Remus's strategy.

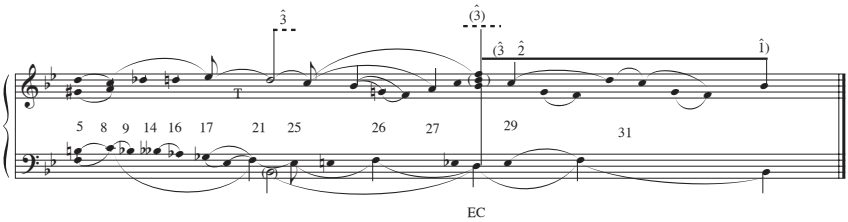

Figure 10 "Treemonisha's Return," voice leading (Joplin, *Treemonisha*, No. 21)

After an intriguing tonal struggle in No. 21, "Treemonisha's Return," in which Treemonisha's triumphant return (B♭ major, mm. 1–32) is jeopardized by the community's desire for revenge (G major, mm. 37–72), she again

resorts to her inner circle of friends and family to help win over the rest of the people. First Remus (No. 22), then Ned (No. 24), appeal to the people in D major, the dominant of their old (superstitious) key of G major. When the people remain hesitant, Treemonisha finally takes matters into her own hands and there is a moment of extreme tension at the opening of No. 25 as she makes a personal appeal for forgiveness (mm. 1–15). It is far from certain, in fact, as the orchestra descends chromatically by step through an augmented octave from B to B♭ (mm. 11–15) that the community will give in to Treemonisha's demands (Figure 11). Only after she takes the initiative and becomes the first to shake hands with the conjurors (m. 16) do the others follow suit and permit the restatement of the primary tone D and background closure to the tonic (m. 37).[35]

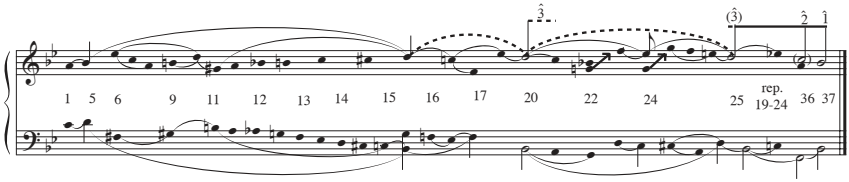

Figure 11 "Conjurors Forgiven," voice leading (Joplin, *Treemonisha*, No. 25)

Summary

As a first example of multi-movement background structure in practice, *Treemonisha* provides an excellent introduction to the advantages and challenges of the model. Treemonisha's dramatic success at the conclusion of the opera is clearly evident in the libretto and in the surface features of her music (including mode, tempo, rhythm, and register), and is intuitively perceived by the audience. The interpretation of her music in the opera as a unified background structure in B♭ major, however, suggests that she consciously establishes her superobjective—to free her community from fear and lead them toward a brighter future—in her first scene, and that Joplin

compositionally recalls that initial decision for the audience at significant moments in the plot ("Going Home" and "Conjuror's Forgiven") by returning to B♭ major and using D ($\hat{3}$) as the primary melodic tone. This makes her descent to her final perfect authentic cadence in "Conjuror's Forgiven" much more powerful, for the performer and thus also for the audience.

On the other hand, attempting to relate the considerable amount of music that intervenes between these B♭ major moments to the fundamental structure raises significant theoretical and phenomenological questions. How much latitude should be granted to a background structure that spans over two hours of music, particularly in terms of parallel voice leading and chromaticism? Traditionally, Schenkerians have frowned on both of these features, tending to exclude them from the background whenever possible. It is common, however, in the teaching of Schenkerian analysis to invoke the concept of structural levels to explain apparent middleground instances of parallel voice leading (i.e., parallel fifths or octaves revealed at the middleground level are ameliorated by the intervening intervals of the foreground). Since a multi-movement structure such as the one presented for Treemonisha's role is essentially a combined middleground-background structure for the opera as a whole, the same principle could be applied to the parallel fifths in No. 5 and Nos. 21–22. Instances of middleground chromaticism in individual pieces, on the other hand, are usually reduced out at the background level in a conventional Schenkerian graph, and the same principle could be applied to Treemonisha's background graph. The E and F♯ in No. 2 (refer again to Figure 7), prolong the primary tone D, while E in Nos. 8 and 26 serves as a dissonant passing tone filling in a consonant skip to F that represents Treemonisha's potential as a future leader of the community.

ENDNOTES

[1] Haskins, *Scott Joplin*, 177.

[2] Ibid., 170–1.

[3] Ibid., 130.

[4] Ibid., 137–8.

[5] Ibid., 162.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., 160, 172.

[8] Ibid., 166–7.

[9] Ibid., 161.

[10] Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 226.

[11] Peter Gammond, *Scott Joplin and the Ragtime Era* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), 100.

[12] Ibid., 98–100.

[13] *New York Age*, March 5, 1908. Quoted in Haskins, 161–2.

[14] Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 214. Haskins has the date of the performance much later (in early 1915), but Berlin offers a convincing argument, based on secondary sources, for moving the date to 1911. See Haskins, *Scott Joplin*, 190.

[15] Susan Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man's Tune: A Life of Scott Joplin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 156.

[16] Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 222.

[17] Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man's Tune*, 157–9.

[18] *The American Musician*, June 24, 1911. Quoted in Haskins, *Scott Joplin*, 178.

[19] Kay C. Thompson, "Lottie Joplin," *The Record Changer* (October 1950), 18. Quoted in Haskins, *Scott Joplin*, 3.

[20] Dominique-Rene de Lerma, *Reflections on Afro-American Music*, 74 and 85. Quoted in Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man's Tune*, 3.

[21] Haskins, *Scott Joplin*, 14–16.

[22] Ibid., 15.

[23] Ibid., 178.

[24] Ibid., 195.

[25] Gammond, *Scott Joplin and the Ragtime Era*, 146–7.

[26] Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man's Tune*, 162.

[27] Haskins, *Scott Joplin*, 171.

[28] In an appendix, Peter Gammond gives a substantial list of compositions influenced by ragtime that includes works by Gershwin, Copland, Weill, and many other American and French composers. See Gammond, *Scott Joplin and the Ragtime Era*, 215–8.

[29] Though C major itself could provide adequate support for C as primary tone, this would create an 8-line, which is rare in the Schenkerian literature. The shift to A minor establishes C as the would-be primary tone of a local 3-line in No. 12, though a subsequent return to C major prevents local closure to the tonic.

[30] Measures are numbered from the beginning of each numbered scene in the 2001 Dover edition of the original piano-vocal score: Scott Joplin, *Treemonisha: Opera in Three Acts* (New York: Scott Joplin, 1911).

[31] The abandoned cadence is defined in William Caplin, *Phrase Structure in Classical Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[32] The Houston Grand Opera recording of *Treemonisha*, which includes many cuts throughout, also does not employ the ♭VI given in Joplin's score at m. 80, substituting a C major tonic instead. While the cuts do not substantially alter the structure of the opera, the harmonic substitution was an uninspired choice that weakens the sense of panic and desperation in the community at the end of No. 10.

[33] As noted in Chapter 1, Schenker defines interruption as a breaking of the line at $\hat{2}$ over V, followed by a return of the primary tone and a descent to $\hat{1}$ over I.

[34] Joplin, preface to *Treemonisha*, 3.

[35] The melodic substitution over the structural dominant here is the more conventional replacement of $\hat{2}$ with the leading tone (m. 36).