



William Bolcom



Joshua Rifkin



Mary Lou Williams

MORE ON THE JOPLIN RENASCENCE

Reviewed by RICHARD FREED

LAST October 22, to celebrate the New York Public Library's publication of Vera Brodsky Lawrence's two-volume edition of *The Collected Works of Scott Joplin*, the Library's Music Division presented an invitational concert of Joplin's music, and those who were there are still remarking on the evening as one of the most memorable events of the season. A substantial portion of that concert was taped, and Nonesuch Records pressed the disc as a gift to the Library; it bears the Library's own label, it will not be distributed commercially, and there are only a thousand copies to go around. The price is steep—a \$10 contribution to the Library—but the lure is the first opportunity to have a recording of some of the music from Joplin's opera *Treemonisha*.

The three choruses on this disc could well represent the first performance of any part of *Treemonisha* since Joplin's death. It was just sixty years before this concert that Joplin published the opera himself; he also sponsored the only performance it received during his lifetime, an unsuccessful presentation without scenery or orchestra in 1915. It was not until this year that *Treemonisha* received its belated premiere in fully staged form—the Morehouse College production last January in Atlanta, with the music orchestrated by T. J. Anderson, was received rapturously by critics and others who made the pilgrimage to attend—and there were six more performances in August at Wolf Trap Farm Park in Vienna, Virginia, using a new orchestration by William Bolcom. There have been rumors since last winter of an impending recording of either the complete opera or a single disc of excerpts from it; so far neither has materialized, but on the Library disc there are three choruses cited by critics who reviewed the Atlanta premiere as outstanding segments of the score.

Though the *Treemonisha* excerpts are presented here with only piano accompaniment, and the recorded balance is less than ideal, the infectiousness of the material is apparent at once. (The rhythmic clapping and occasional stamping during the encore of *We're Goin' Around* come from the members of the sophisticated invited audience, some of whom even joined in the dancing on the stage!) Equally apparent is that it is nonsense to refer to *Treemonisha* as a "ragtime opera" or a "folk opera." As William Bolcom has observed in commenting on his experience in orchestrating the work, there is not a single rag in the entire score. And it is about as much a "folk opera" as *Boris Godounov*—even less, in fact, since Moussorgsky did use actual folk tunes in *Boris*. What we have here is music by a

serious and highly original composer who was no mere concocter of tunes; though Joplin elevated his piano rags to quite an exalted level, he did not attempt to make an opera by slapping a bunch of them together.

Various listeners may find various influences in the music. One composer who came to my mind while I was listening to these excerpts was—quite surprisingly, if only fleetingly—Frederick Delius, whose *Appalachia* and *Koanga* were almost certainly unknown to Joplin, and whose use of "ethnic" material was, of course, quite pointed. Joplin, on the other hand, worked unselfconsciously in forms in which he was comfortable, with no emphasis on or striving for "local color."

We're Goin' Around, as indicated above, is the kind of number that sweeps the audience right along with it, beginning modestly, then gathering momentum for an effect both ingratiating and exhilarating. Like the celebrated hopak in *The Fair at Sorochinsk* (since Moussorgsky's name has already been invoked), it brims with good spirits. *Good Advice* is a sermon with congregational responses—not a caricature, but with humor nonetheless. According to Harold C. Schönberg's New York *Times* review of the Atlanta premiere, "the audience went out of its mind after hearing 'A Real Slow Drag' . . . this finale to the opera is amazing . . . harmonically enchanting, full of the tensions of an entire race, rhythmically catching. It refuses to leave the mind." Even without the orchestra and the stage action, the excerpts here give ample evidence that none of this enthusiasm is misplaced; it is a pity, though, that the text could not be provided, for it isn't very clear.

The extremely welcome—if all too brief—sampling of *Treemonisha* is by no means the only attraction of this record, on which eight of Joplin's intriguing piano pieces are played by three different performers, two of whom have been especially identified with the sudden Joplin renaissance. It was Joshua Rifkin's first Nonesuch record of piano rags (H 71248), released in 1970, that started the whole thing as far as the public is concerned, and William Bolcom was one of the prime movers in the resurrection of *Treemonisha*: having fallen in love with the score several years ago, he worked with T. J. Anderson in preparing the Atlanta premiere before undertaking the new orchestration for the Wolf Trap production, and he has also played some of the piano rags on his own Nonesuch disc (H 71257) and in concert. Mary Lou Williams, of course, is a prominent figure in jazz and a remarkable pianist by any standard. The disparity between Bolcom's and

Williams' styles is striking, but it has always been a measure of the substance of a musical work that it sustains its validity under varied interpretive approaches.

Since seven of these eight pieces (all but *Pleasant Moments*) have also been recorded by Rifkin in his two Nonesuch collections (Volume Two is H 71264), the Library disc offers opportunities to compare the pianists directly in some of the same works, as well as with each other generally, in terms of style. Joplin buffs equipped with the three Nonesuch releases may also note a certain mellowing on Rifkin's part since his initial venture: there is greater flexibility in his "live" version of the *Magnetic Rag* than in his studio version (H 71248). Miss Williams' performances are brilliant, high-spirited, and fun; if her approach seems perhaps too jazz-and-blues oriented, there is no denying its exuberance.

It is as natural for such a program as this to begin with the *Maple Leaf Rag* as it is for a Sousa disc to start off with *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, and the honor of execution in this case fell to Bolcom. To these ears, his approach is the most persuasive. His version of *The Ragtime Dance* contrasts sharply with Rifkin's (H 71248), suggesting that he took more to heart Joplin's admonition, quoted by Rifkin, that "It is never right to play 'Ragtime' fast." Bolcom is more relaxed and more genial, without seeming the least bit contrived, and his foot-stamping in the pauses at the end (which Rifkin leaves entirely empty) seem in keeping with the spirit of the work.

SPIRIT is evident here in abundance, as are dedicated musicianship and a feeling of excitement described quite aptly in Vera Lawrence's notes as "electrifying." Altogether, this is quite a package: eight of the piano rags played in a fascinating variety of contrasting styles, plus a tantalizing taste of *Treemonisha*. Whatever may follow in the way of Jopliniana, this treasurable disc will retain its uniqueness—and the price is modest enough when one considers what enthusiasts have paid and are paying for "pirate" recordings of events of much less cultural significance.

AN EVENING WITH SCOTT JOPLIN. "Live" recording of the concert at the Library and Museum of the Performing Arts, Lincoln Center, New York, October 22, 1971. *Maple Leaf Rag* (1899); *Solace: A Mexican Serenade* (1909); *The Ragtime Dance* (1906); William Bolcom (piano). *Elite Syncopations* (1902); *Pleasant Moments* (1909); *Pine Apple Rag* (1908); Mary Lou Williams (piano). *Bethena: a Concert Waltz* (1905); *Magnetic Rag* (1914); Joshua Rifkin (piano). *Treemonisha* (excerpts—1911): *The Corn Huskers—We're Goin' Around* (a ring play, soprano and chorus); *Good Advice* (baritone, chorus); *A Real Slow Drag* (soprano, mezzo-soprano, chorus); Barbara Christopher (soprano), Clamma Dale (mezzo-soprano), Michael Gordon (baritone), Dennis Moorman (piano), chorus, John Motley director. NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY NYPL SJ \$10.00 (available postpaid exclusively from the Library & Museum of the Performing Arts, Music Division, 111 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10023).