Teaching notes: Scott Joplin, “The Sacred Tree,” from Treemonisha

Overview

As with many of Joplin’s works, “The Sacred Tree” from Treemonisha contains a plethora of common-tone diminished seventh chords, making it an ideal candidate for in-class examples of that chord. Since Joplin uses diminished-seventh chords of all types in close proximity to one another, this might be an ideal practice exercise to show students the functional differences between common-tone diminished seventh chords and secondary leading-tone chords. The work also contains numerous examples of secondary dominants and a prominent French augmented-sixth chord in the opening measures of the work.

Specific examples

Each of the following is numbered on the score (in orange):

1. (and 2. and 3.): On page 2 of the score, you’ll find a secondary leading-tone chord (1.), another secondary leading-tone chord that functions as a passing chord (with a harmonic elision, 2.), and a common-tone diminished seventh chord (3.).
2. On page 2 of the score, you’ll find a common-chord modulation from the home key of C minor to the relative major, E♭.
3. On page 5 of the score, you’ll find a pedal 6/4 chord that contains modal mixture.
4. On page 5 of the score, you’ll find a common-tone diminished seventh chord that illustrates the neighboring function. It’s missing its seventh so this probably isn’t the clearest example to use, but the “neighborliness” here is obvious.
5. On page 6 of the score, you’ll find an altered version of the typical I → CTº7 → V⁴₃ → CTº7 → I⁶ progression (CTº7 acting as a passing chord). Here, Joplin substitutes a mediant triad for the initial tonic and leaves out the second common-tone diminished seventh chord, but the voice-leading is almost the same: it contains scale-steps 3 → 4 → 5 in the soprano.
6. On page 6 of the score; this is another great example of a CTº7 acting as a neighboring chord.

Ambiguities, or things that might not work so well in a pedagogical context

1. Though it’s likely that the overall form of the aria is ternary, there are some relatively ambiguous spots at the phrase level, particularly in the B section of the work. Some places contain conflict between the melodic/textual and the harmonic trajectory of the phrase (for example, at the bottom of p. 4).
2. Likewise, there are spots in the B section that are somewhat ambiguous; the material on p. 11 is one such spot.
Andante con espressione. M.M. = 92

One Autumn night in

bed I was lying, Just eighteen years ago, I heard a dear little baby crying, While

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loudly Ned did snore. And the baby's
crying seemed to be somewhere
near that sacred tree, And the baby's
crying seemed to be somewhere
near that sacred tree.

I called to Ned and said, "Wake up, A baby is crying outside the door."

But Ned said, "You have dreamed enough," And went to
sleep once more; Y e t t h e b a b y's c r y i n g

seemed to be s o m e w h e r e n e a r t h a t

s a c r e d t r e e, Y e t t h e b a b y's c r y i n g

seemed to be s o m e w h e r e n e a r t h a t

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\[ V \]
It was twelve o'clock, or just before, When the rain fell hard and fast, The baby's cries I heard no more, It had gone to sleep at last, And
very quiet it seemed to be,

near that sacred tree,

seemed to be, some where near that sacred tree.

Ten o'clock next
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morn-ing, The hot sun was shin-ing, And the

dar-ling lit-tle ba-by....... I re-al-ly had for-
got-ten; But I could hear the hum-ming bee,

Some-where near that sa-cred tree, But I could hear the hum-ming
bee,

Some-where near that sa-
cred tree.

cresc.

cresc.

I was bu-
sy in the cab-
in,

When to my sur-
prise,

plain-
ly heard a
noise,

It was the

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baby's cries. And as I listened, it seemed to be,

Some where near that sacred tree; And as I listened, it seemed to be,

Some where near that sacred tree.

I came out in the
yard to see,
And find out where the child could
be;
And there, in rags, the baby laid,

Sheltered by that tree's cool shade, I found it
where I thought 'twould be, There beside... that sacred
tree, I found it where I thought 'twould be, There be-
side that sacred tree.

took the child into... our home, And now the darling girl... is
grown, All I've said to you is true, The child I've
told you of... is you... Take not a leaf, but leave them be. On that dear old sacred tree, Take not a leaf, but leave them be. On that dear old sacred tree.
The rain or the burning sun, you see,

Would have sent you to your grave, But the sheltering leaves of

that old tree, Your precious life did save.

So now with me you must a -
gree, Not to harm that sacred

tree; So now with me you must a

gree, Not to harm that sacred

tree.