



## COMPOSER BIOGRAPHY

**NATHANIEL DETT**

BORN: October 11, 1882

ERA/STYLE: Modern/Neo-romantic

DIED: October 2, 1943

HOMETOWN: Niagara Falls, Canada

Robert Nathaniel Dett was a Canadian-American composer, organist, pianist, choral director, and music professor. Born and raised in Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada until the age of 11, he moved to the United States with his family and had most of his professional education and career there. During his lifetime he was a leading Black composer, known for blending African-American folk songs and spirituals with the

19th-century Romantic style of classical music.

Nathaniel began playing the piano at age 4, and by 14 was the pianist and organist for his local church. He attended Oberlin University in Ohio and was the first Black student to complete a five-year course there. After earning his Bachelor of Music degree, he toured as a concert pianist before turning to teaching as his main profession, and began composing more works for piano and choir.

In 1913, Dett was named the first Black director of music at the Hampton Institute in Virginia, a position he held until 1932. He also studied at Harvard University in the early 1920s, and completed his Master of Music degree at the Eastman School of Music in 1932. He traveled to Europe on multiple occasions to study and collaborate with prominent composers and musicians during this period, and his compositions grew in complexity and popularity as a result.

Dett held many positions as music and choral director throughout the rest of his career, and was one of the earliest Black composers to be included among professional organizations dedicated to composers and musicians. He joined the United Service Organizations (USO) during World War II as a choral advisor and director in the early 1940s. It was on tour with the USO chorus that Dett passed away unexpectedly. He is buried in his Canadian hometown with the rest of his family. The church where he was pianist and organist was renamed in his honor after his death, and Canada's Nathaniel Dett Chorale, founded in 1998, was named for him and performs his music as well as that of other composers of African descent.