



CLIBURN IN THE CLASSROOM

DIZZY FINGERS

Ragtime's influence on American culture

CLASS ACTIVITY: Life and Times of Nathaniel Dett

Grade Level(s): 2-4

Subject Areas: Music, History, Social Studies

OBJECTIVE

This activity introduces students to a composer who broke barriers as the first Black composer to graduate from the prestigious Oberlin Conservatory, the first to have his music commercially available on piano rolls, and one of the first to be accepted into the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) after its inception.

SPACE AND EQUIPMENT CONSIDERATIONS

Students will need copies of the provided Nathaniel Dett timeline and a pencil, as well as a school-issued Chromebook or iPad and internet access to do research.

MUSIC TO EXPLORE

DETT *In the Bottoms* (I. Juba Dance)
Magnolia Suite (I. Magnolias)
TCHAIKOVSKY 1812 Overture

ACTIVITY

1. Allow students some time to read and learn about Robert Nathaniel Dett. Some suggested websites are below.
<https://kids.britannica.com/students/article/Robert-Nathaniel-Dett/321347>
<https://songofamerica.net/composer/dett-robert-nathaniel/>
<https://pianoinspires.com/this-week-in-piano-history-the-birth-of-nathaniel-dett-october-11-1882/>
2. To better understand the scope of his influence in paving the way for future generations of underrepresented composers, have students place significant events throughout Dett's life on the provided timeline (ex. 1908 – graduated from Oberlin Conservatory). To provide context, the timeline includes important historical and musical events that happened during his lifetime.
3. To further understand Dett's unique musical language, compare the piece referenced on the timeline – Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture – with the two most recognized pieces by Dett, the "Juba Dance" and "Magnolias." Even though these are only separated by a few years, they sound very different. Lead students through a conversation about what they hear, and how Dett's culture and heritage are written into the music.
4. Conclude with a movement activity, "patting Juba," more commonly known today as "The Hambone." This was an American folk music tradition utilized by enslaved people, and has been worked into many pieces of classical music, including the Dett's "Juba Dance." The pattern is:
 - a. Slap your outer thigh with the palm of your hand.
 - b. Slap your chest with the palm of your hand.
 - c. Slap the top of your thigh with the back of your hand on the way back down from your chest.
 - d. Slap your outer thigh with the palm of your hand.

For younger groups, the video below may be utilized to help learn the pattern: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0LirYOXwRA>