



R. Nathaniel Dett
(1882 – 1943)

“There was poured into the astonished and delighted ears of the world an indigenous music, sung by its own creators, a music as fresh as the morning, as intimate as the breath and as vital as the heartbeat.”
-R. Nathaniel Dett

Celebrated composer R. Nathaniel Dett was born in Drummondville (Niagara Falls), Ontario on October 11, 1882. He died on October 2, 1943 in Battlecreek, Michigan. Dett studied piano as a child and was church organist in Niagara Falls, Ontario from 1898-1903. During this period he composed numerous works, including the well-known *The Cake Walk* and *After the Cake Walk*. Among his other works are *Listen to the Lambs* (1914), an eight-part anthem which was recorded by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir; *Juba Dance* (1913), a piano solo which has appeared in the Royal Conservatory of Music syllabus and was a favorite of Dett’s friend, Percy Grainger; and the oratorio *The Ordering of Moses* (1937).

Dett earned several degrees at various educational institutions, including Oberlin College (Bachelor of Music, 1908; Honorary Doctorate of Music, 1926); Howard University (Honorary Doctorate of Music, 1924); and Rochester’s ESM (Masters of Music, 1932). Dett studied composition in Paris with the internationally-renowned Nadia Boulanger and performed at prestigious concert halls such as Carnegie Hall and Boston Symphony Hall. Dett also performed for two American presidents, Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Dett taught at several distinguished schools, including:

- ❖ Lane College, Jackson MS, 1908-1911
- ❖ Hampton Institute, VI, 1913-1932
- ❖ Samuel Houston College, Austin TX, 1935-1937
- ❖ Bennett College, Greensboro NC, 1937-1942

Nathaniel Dett was dedicated to the cause of Black music, winning the Bowdoin and Boott prizes in 1920 from Harvard University for his paper *The Emancipation of Negro Music* and for his motet *Don’t Be Weary, Traveler*. Dett also explored and promoted Black music by editing collections of spirituals and folk songs, and was a founding member of the National Association of Negro Musicians, serving as the organization’s President from 1924 to 1926.