



# COMPOSER SPOTLIGHT



## R. NATHANIEL DETT

1882–1943

Style: Romantic/  
Contemporary



### Early Life

Nathaniel Dett was born in Drummondville, Ontario, a descendent of slaves who traveled north via the Underground Railroad. When he was 11, his family moved from Canada to Niagra Falls, New York.

### Education

Dett received his first piano lessons at the age of five. Initially, his parents could only afford lessons for his older brothers, but when their teacher discovered Nathaniel's interest in music, she offered to give him lessons for free.

By age 14, he was playing for his local church. He later studied piano and composition at the Oberlin Conservatory and was the first black American to complete a Bachelor of Music degree there in 1908.

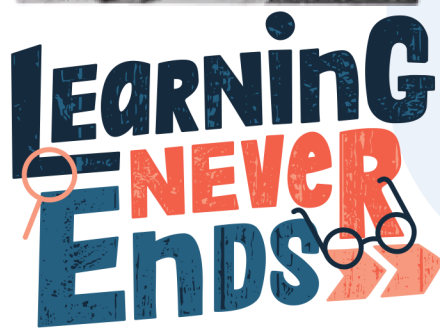


Oberlin Conservatory, Ohio



### A Lifelong Learner

Nathaniel Dett is known as a composer, pianist, choral director, and music professor. He taught at several universities while continuing his own music studies at Northwestern, Columbia, Harvard, and other schools. He even studied with Nadia Boulanger in France and later earned a music degree from Eastman. He was a true lifelong learner.



### Stylistic influences and Legacy

Dett was greatly influenced by Dvořák's melding of Bohemian folk songs with a classical style and by the works of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. He similarly incorporated African-American folk songs and spirituals into his choral and piano compositions and set them in a European romantic style. He later shifted from neo-romanticism to a more contemporary sound. His other achievements include founding the Musical Arts Society, serving as president of the National Association of Negro Musicians, and serving as the USO (United Service Organizations) choral advisor during World War II.

### Significant Works:

- In the Bottoms
- Magnolia Suite
- Listen to the Lambs