

Appropriation in Opera: Modern performance practice of racially evocative works.

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The repertoire of a classically trained singer has developed over centuries of cultural influence. As singers prepare for recitals, they decide which pieces they will include and how to perform each one. Many factors are essential for these decisions. In the 21st century, our environments challenge us to explore these conditions of creating a recital program. In a post-civil rights era, factors of race and ethnicity should become more important to programming than they were before. The consideration is not whether minority populations are portrayed, but how they are evoked on stage. In the following exposition, I will consider how the history of such portrayals and current institutionalized prejudices affect my decisions as a singer on the recital stage, taking into account performer, composer, and audience identities.

Three culturally influenced components of performance affect how the content of an opera may be conveyed. Composers, their influences, and how familiar they were with the culture being presented are incredibly significant. Secondly, characteristics such as age, gender, geographic location, and ethnicity of an audience directly influence the extent to which one might perform ethically challenging music and whether there is an opportunity for education through the performance. Finally, the identity and background of the performers are pertinent in determining the validity of the message communicated in the performance because it affects the credibility that performers have with their audience. By evaluating these three factors, performers use the material on the musical page to format a performance in a more enlightened, supportive, and educational manner. What follows is by no means a complete exposition of the factors that play into modern performance practice, nor do I pretend to understand the perspectives of members of minority cultures in this country. It is simply a presentation of what I feel are the relevant factors that I take into account when preparing works of racial or ethnic consequence.

To begin, I recognize the difficulty that many have in discussing the uncomfortable issues of race today. Some of the issues I will address here have been debated at length before, but I want to put these artistic issues in the context of the history and modern culture of race in the non-musical world. If you do not believe that daily prejudice is still prominent in today's culture, you may disagree with much what I will present. It has been a long time since signs and ropes segregated our concert halls and many would like to leave those times to the past. Nevertheless, although much has changed since the civil-right era, barriers to equality remain. The added difficulty of today's barriers is that, although they are pervasive, they are often subtler than they used to be, making them perhaps even more difficult to combat legally and psychologically.

Dr. Beverly Tatum, psychologist and president of Spellman College, compares modern racism to a moving sidewalk "because racism is so ingrained in the fabric of American institutions, it is easily self-perpetuating. All that is required to maintain it, is business as usual...[when] people do not disrupt unfair systems of privilege, they are—willingly or unwillingly—on the moving sidewalk, receiving White privilege and inadvertently enabling racism"¹ She does not characterize racism as overt discrimination or individual acts of hate. Rather, she defines it as one's benefiting from a system of privileges based on race that are subtly ingrained in the surrounding culture, making it difficult to detect.

Dr. Tatum's principles also hold true in the operatic world. It is sometimes a challenge for singers of color to be cast on the operatic stage. The first step in presenting an enlightened and open performance is to recognize the institutionalized privileges I receive, whether I want them or not. Bass-baritone Simon Estes recalls his White American agent recently telling him bluntly of what he as a singer has already experienced: "if two people go into an audition, if one is of color

¹ Beverly Daniel Tatum, *"Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?": And Other Conversations about Race* (New York: Basic Books, 2003; 1997), 11.

and the other is not...if their talents are the same, they will take the White artist. If the Black artist is a little bit better, they will take the White artist. If the Black artist is much, much better, they will take the Black artist, but then they will pay him less.”² Of course, there is little proof that such discrimination happens, which can be extremely frustrating. Few declaim outright that this is what they are doing, and maybe it is not readily apparent to the casting directors themselves. However, it is a very real experience to hundreds of singers of color—an experience for which I have no personal basis of denial.

Even when singers of color began to be cast in the arts more regularly, the roles they were given were indicative of the prejudices they faced. They received roles as servants, gamblers, drug addicts, or Mozart’s Moorish villain Monostatos.³ Though female singers of color have experienced many advances, Tim Smith of the Baltimore Sun notices that “one sight remains exceedingly rare: a Black tenor in a leading role from the standard repertoire.”⁴ Smith goes on to quote Willie Anthony Waters, the general and artistic director of the former Connecticut Opera, who observes “a Black man being in a position of power, a leader—and in a romantic position—that’s still not fully accepted.” The problems faced today by singers of color are less overt than being banned from performance halls, as Marian Anderson famously was. Today, it is about the more subtle messages that we send our singers and their audiences as we navigate traditional repertoire.

Some of the ways that people of color are portrayed in classical opera can be challenging to our modern sensibilities. Often there are connotations involved when speaking of a character’s beauty. Frequently, heroines are praised for their pale beauty and darker skin is a sign of malevolence. In Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*, Monastatos tells us that “ein Schwarzer häßlich

² Rosalyn M. Story et al., *Aida's Brothers & Sisters* (West Long Branch, N.J.: PARS Media; Kultur distributor, 2000).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Tim Smith, "Black tenors fight prejudice in quest for opera's leading roles" *The Baltimore Sun*, 28 March 2006, A1.

ist...Weiss ist schön!”⁵ (Black is ugly...white is beautiful). Imagine how it might feel for a person of color to sing that line or to be in the audience and hear it professed. Does it convey that the audience member is a valued patron? Papageno agrees with Monastatos, at least on this point, and notes “Schön Mädchen, jung und fein/ Viel weißer noch als Kreide” (Beautiful maid, young and fine/ she is even whiter than chalk).⁶ It is true this expression stems from 18th century European culture and values, and at the very least may only be the opinion of the character speaking, but it does not change the painful effect it may have to an audience member who experiences the realities of biased standards of beauty every day. In Verdi’s *Otello*, Iago observes that Desdemona will soon “dislike the dark kisses of the savage with the swollen lips” (Presto in uggia verranno i foschi baci/Di quel selvaggio dalle gonfie labbra). Note as well what Othello says about his Desdemona “E tu. . .come sei pallida! e stanca, e muta, e bella” (And you...how pale you are! And tired, and silent, and beautiful).⁶ When he suspects her of infidelity, he gives color to her crime, contrasting it with her purity, saying “Il più nero delitto/Sovra il candido giglio della tua fronte è scritto” (That most black crime/is written on the snow-white lily of your forehead). These color metaphors are present throughout our culture (a white vs. black lie, white and pure as snow, black market, etc.) and can have lasting psychological effects on both audience members and singers.

Compare these lyrics to the American beauty standards in which we find ourselves today. Historically, American culture has valued the appearance of those that are of European descendant over that of Asian or African appearances in everything from issues of political rights to worth in the dating world. The desire to be valued and to be considered beautiful can lead to some extreme efforts to conform to the standards. Asian Americans have a long history of performing surgeries on eyes, westernizing them by adding folds to the eyelid to make them

⁵ <http://libretto.musicals.ru/index.php?language=1>

appear larger.⁶ Additionally, according to Mintel International Group, Black women spend over \$1.7 billion in hair care per year,⁷ much of which goes to straighteners and weaves, making it conform to Western beauty standards. These are just two of the ways that women of color try to fit the standard of beauty that their world has presented to them for hundreds of years. For someone like me, a member of the white majority, it is important to remain cognizant that the effects of such pressures on the female self-esteem and body image can be devastating.⁸ Certainly as a singer, as one immerses oneself in the roles that one learns, one presents the values and ideas that make each character who she is. Do the values portrayed in these roles affect the subconscious system of biases that I know I already carry? Particularly on the recital stage, it is more difficult to separate the opinions of the characters from those of the singers and composers and we may need to take extra precaution to consider the interests of one's audience.

In Western music, there is a long history of inspiration and borrowing of others' music. This is largely seen as part of the creative process, but the situation changes when talking about music appropriated from oppressed or under represented cultures. Too often, such as with the Indianist operas of the late 19th century, material is taken, manipulated, and used for profit with very little regard for, or acknowledgment of, the original culture. When there is little to no compensation or collaboration, many see such practices as quite offensive, rather than complementary. It is inappropriate to pick and choose the more agreeable aspects of culture, without bearing the burdens that it carries, particularly if the portrayal of the culture will not be entirely accurate. Thus when singing, for example, if I as a member of the racial majority choose to sing African American spirituals on the recital stage, I must be very careful to attend to the

⁶ W. C. Liao et al., "Celebrity Arcade Suture Blepharoplasty for Double Eyelid," *Aesthetic Plastic Surgery* 29, no. 6 (Nov-Dec 2005): 540-545.

⁷ Mika Pettigrew, "Taking Back the Black Hair Care Industry," *Clutch*, 2007, April.

⁸ Carol Challenger, "The Relationship between Self-Esteem and Demographic Characteristics of Black Women on Welfare" (Ph.D. diss., ProQuest Information & Learning, 2006), 1231-.

sensitive nature of the proposition. Spirituals provide an opportunity for black singers to perform music that is not composed by members of the majority culture. I must be respectful of that sometimes-rare opportunity and not appropriate aspects of a culture with whose struggles I am not fully prepared to identify or bear.

The value of this opportunity for African Americans to sing spirituals is widely debated within the community. The experience can be liberating, or it can be a burden. Maxine Claire, in her essay “The Role of Black Women in Opera,” notes, “though it would appear that Black opera singers have assimilated into a dominant European culture and rejected the African influence, Black opera singers find it necessary to include spirituals in their recitals to affirm the ties to African culture.”⁹ However, it is also frustrating to be expected to be able to perform a certain body of repertoire based solely on one’s skin color. Even worse were the recent times when that was all one was allowed to sing.¹⁰ Some believe that in today’s world singers do not have a fully understanding of the emotion and circumstances of the spirituals and so such pieces are no longer a necessary performance outlet. Either way, though the issue is complicated, with a little examination of context, the tensions surrounding the performance of spirituals is easier to understand, particularly in the context of the discrimination sometimes felt in when auditioning for “White” roles. It is out of this context that it may be hurtful for me to appropriate spirituals for a recital.

In a similar manner, it is a sensitive issue for White people to sing dark-skinned roles in operas such as in *Otello* and *Die Zauberflöte*. Not only does a scarcity of jobs for singers of color complicate the matter, but the situation is also intensified by this country’s history of theatrical portrayal of people of color. Even today, opera companies often choose to use makeup to darken

⁹ Maxine Claire, “The Role of Black Women in Opera” <http://lic.law.ufl.edu/>

¹⁰ Ibid.

the skin of singers in certain roles. Although I understand the desire for realism, I am reminded of the tradition of blackface and how painful that subject still is today. I do not say that there is any intentional wrong occurring, but merely suggest that requesting an audience's imagination and indulgence is a smaller price to pay than the alienation of a population for whom the memory of minstrel shows is all too recent. Historically, we have managed to suspend reality for parts roles performed by singers of different genders than the characters they portray. Why not apply the same standard to differences of race?

The use of dark makeup reinforces the perceived discrimination in casting mentioned earlier. It can be frustrating when Black singers find themselves more likely to be cast as Aida than as Violetta. However, the frustration can be increased when they are not even cast as Aida, but instead light-skinned singers darken their skin to prepare for the part. The irony continues when there is discussion about the makeup that suggests that the skin should be darkened—but not too much.¹¹ Such a statement indicates confusion about the origin of the hurt caused by such practices. Some of the pain of the blackface history derives from a perception that these actors want to have the theatrical success of donning darker skin, without being willing to take on, or even acknowledge, the burden that comes with such skin. Though it may be helpful to seek out the many qualified Black tenors of the world for such roles, if Othello must be played by a White man, I believe audiences are capable of suspending enough reality that we need not draw upon such a painful tradition. If it is truly a problem theatrically to have a light-skinned person play the character, then I am sure there are singers of color that would love the opportunity to prove themselves in the role. Yet it is still common practice for opera companies to darken the skin of their white singers.

¹¹ Rosalyn M. Story et al., *Aida's Brothers & Sisters* (West Long Branch, N.J.: PARS Media; Kultur distributor, 2000).

Allow me to take a moment to explore further the portrayal of people of color in some operas that are popularly performed today. As I analyze the cultural phenomena reflected in these productions, let us keep in mind the perspectives of those people being portrayed. Of course, there is fascination with the “exotic other,” and nonwestern cultures have often been portrayed on stage for their foreign and arousing effects. Such portrayal is a major criticism of the orientalist works of the operatic canon. Edward Said, a former professor and cultural critic at Columbia University, argued that much of the knowledge the West had about Eastern cultures stemmed not from fact, but rather from the artistic representations and constructs created in the West.¹² This phenomena manifests itself in the lumping together of many cultures, for example, by using pentatonic scales and simple rhythms to depict Eastern cultures. Recall the music used to depict the scene inside the Temple of Vulcan in Verdi’s *Aida*. Here, Verdi reaches into, what musicologist Michael Pisani calls, his “ready-made toolbox of exotica” to portray the scene.¹³ The music remains static, with no elaboration, development, or intellectual depth. The vocalist sings repetitive modal scales with minor second grace notes, which have come to represent a myriad of nonwestern cultures. Accentuating the seductive score, productions most often have the dancing priestesses wear scanty costumes. This image of the sexualized other fits with the way modern entertainment portrays women of similar skin color. For example, although there are many pop icons of color, they are often portrayed in exotic or “wild” contexts (Whoopi Goldberg, Queen Latifah, Tyra Banks) and are often shown in animal-print clothes or leather.¹⁴ These patterns in popular media reflect the bias of beauty that exists in the minds of consumers and it is important to note how they parallel the patterns in entertainment that have been around for hundreds of years.

¹² Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam : How the Media and the Experts Determine how we See the Rest of the World*, Rev. , 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 200.

¹³ Jonathan Bellman, *The Exotic in Western Music* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 218.

¹⁴ Phillip Benjamin Howard, "Racial Knowledge Effects on Minorities: How Stereotypic Knowledge Biases African Americans' Inferences" (Ph.D. diss., ProQuest Information & Learning, 2001), 4475.

Negative portrayals of minority populations are also present in operas about Native Americans. As American composers searched for sounds unique to their experience, they turned to the original inhabitants of their land in search of their “authentic sound.” Instead, they produced what later became known as the Indianist movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These works told stories and used motives that allegedly drew from and represented Native American lives. Charles Sanford Skilton (1868-1941) composed several works using these methods, and in particular, he produced a one-act opera, *The Sun Bride*, which was broadcast on NBC in 1930.¹⁵ The opera relies heavily on a practice of sun worship and is about Bluefeather, a traveling Indian that encounters the Bonita clan. He engages the clansmen in a gambling game to win the hand of the clan’s Sun Bride, who, because of her religious status in the community, cannot marry. When Bluefeather wins the game, the Sun Bride pleads to the Sun God for help, who strikes Bluefeather dead with a bolt of lightning.¹⁶

It is unfortunate how many operas of this type feature gambling and female subjugation, as though these traits are defining aspects of Native American culture. Additionally, for his melodies, the composer uses tunes accumulated from Native Americans in and around Lawrence, Kansas, but each melodic appropriation differs significantly from the his initial transcription.¹⁷ Catherine Parsons Smith, professor of music at University of Nevada, questions whether “a series of borrowed themes, whether taken from published transcriptions, (unidentified) recordings, or directly from a native person, guarantee an “Indian” opera.”¹⁸ She finds that *The Sun Bride* reminds her more of Greek myths than of pueblo legends. She notes “Skilton has a relatively

¹⁵ John Tasker Howard and James Lyons, *Our American Music, Three Hundred Years of it*, 3d , rev. and resetd ed. (New York: Crowell, 1954), 841, A77.

¹⁶ Charles Sanford Skilton, Thomas Warburton, and Lilian White Spencer, *The Sun Bride : A Pueblo Indian Opera* (Madison, Wis.: A-R Editions, 1999), xiii.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Catherine Parsons Smith, "Review: [Untitled]; the Sun Bride: A Pueblo Indian Opera," *Notes* 57, no. 3 (Mar. 2001): 749.

short, twenty-year tradition of operas on Indian subjects to draw from, and a far, far longer American tradition of theatrical stereotypes (noble savage, pathetic dusky maiden, untrustworthy half-breed, etc)¹⁹ to employ.

Though we have grown as a society in our ability to separate cultural fact from fiction, *The Sun Bride* can tell us a lot about the United States and its history. Where is the line between artistic license and authenticity? Which do we, as a society, value more? I believe it is naïve to think that I, for example, am self-aware enough to weed out the influences of hundreds of years of accumulated stereotypes from the media around me when it has only had a few decades to begin to right itself. Therefore, we/I must be careful about the images we/I feed ourselves.

Though *The Sun Bride* and other Indianist operas are not performed with great frequency, other operas that feature Native Americans enjoy more stage time, including a recent production of Rameau's *Les Indes Gallant*. Rameau could not have had more access to Native American culture than Skilton did, but he makes his own attempt at their representation. Rameau's four-act Opéra-ballet takes its audience on a journey recounting the triumph of love among the people of Turkey, Peru, Persia and North America (as broad as that geographic region is). The first three acts are problematic in their representations, but I will focus on the last act entitled, tellingly, *Les Sauvages*.

Act four of *Les Indes Gallant* takes place in North America and recounts the attempts of a Spaniard and a Frenchman to woo Zima, an Indian princess, who ultimately prefers a man from her own community. Though the act is a comedy, it strikes a little close to reality, both metaphorically of Native American's relationship with Europe in the 18th century and of the treatment of native women at that time by European men. We know from modern comedians that it is much safer to make fun of one's self, but one must be careful when creating satire of others,

¹⁹ Ibid, 750.

particularly underdogs. *Les Savages* walks that line because, although hyperbole of the Europeans is used, it is a self-mockery that can come with a position of privilege. This teasing comes across much differently than a caricature of an oppressed people, who, particularly at the time of the opera's composition, had very little opportunity to represent itself in Europe. With the long success (over three hundred performances)²⁰ of *Les Indes Gallant*, its and others' representations would shape how people native to the Americas would be perceived.

Though it is difficult to tell how Rameau might have staged the original production, modern performances give their own perspectives, which, independent from the material in the score, can be held accountable to the modern sensibilities that we have developed since the original production. The Opéra National de Paris published its latest production of *Les Indes Gallant* on DVD in 2005. The version is conducted by William Christie and directed by Andrei Serban.²¹ This production received rave reviews for its opulent and "exotic" sets and costumes, which feature large headdresses, tobacco pipes, and heavy face paint.²² The act culminates with a gigantic golden turkey on stage and the entire cast dancing some combination of "Walk like an Egyptian" and the "Chicken Dance." The entire production has a very "noble savage" air to it.

None of the reviews that I have found for this production has any qualms about such a thing appearing on stage. Personally, I find the attempt at humor quite uncomfortable to watch. Though it may be done in jest and with a light heart, the production is trivializing of a people that has a history with Europe that is far from funny. I believe it is misleading to suggest that it is harmless just because it is intended for comedy—so too were Al Jolson's blackface minstrel shows. When we produce such opera in today's world, we may be able to excuse the composer

²⁰ Jean-Philippe Rameau et al., *Les Indes Galantes* Opus Arte, 2005.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

for his environment and influence, but we are still accountable for what we know today as we interpret and produce what is on the written page.

We must also remember that we are not immune to the influences of the past. Rameau was inspired to write the music to this act after an exhibition of two Native Americans that were captured and brought to Paris in 1725.²³ A review of a the Brooklyn Academy of Music's 1993 production of *Les Indes Galantes*, comments "when I hear this wonderful piece, in the back of my mind there is the image of two Native Americans, which I imagine dancing like I have seen in pow-wows in this country, in full feather head-gear, stomping their feet and drawing circles on some wooden stage."²⁴ This narrow image of Native American culture is the very one that many have worked so hard to dispel over their history with Europe and here it is reemphasized in the mind of the reviewer. How heart breaking it must be to see such a portrayal of oneself on stage and know that it will shape how your companions understand you and your family.

In such an environment today of diversity workshops and politically correct buzz words, it may seem impossibly difficult to interact freely with another culture in the context of the performance stage. I believe, however, there are some composers and productions doing so with both political and artistic success. An example of a sensitively composed opera about Native Americans is Anthony Davis's *Wakonda's Dream*, which premiered in Omaha in 2007. Firstly, Davis gives the characters complex emotions and dimensions previously denied to most ethnic minorities on stage. Secondly, he assures his success by collaborating with those living the experiences he is trying portray. He fully acknowledges and lauds his influences and those from whom he draws inspiration. He does not attempt to speak for a people that have their own voices, but only uses what they have already expressed to compose a touching opera. Davis's setting is

²³ François R. Velde, Review of *Les Indes Galant*. 3 March 1993. www.medieval.org/emfaq/velde/indesgal.htm.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

also contemporary, allowing the Native Americans he portrays to join us in the 21st century, rather than confining them to 1492. Finally, whereas Skilton sought Native American tunes to convey the culture he was representing, Davis intentionally strives for a voice that “is not imitative or derivative.”²⁵ Often, a major litmus for any production is its acceptance by the people it portrays and *Wakonda's Dream* was not only met with praise, but was also incorporated into outreach and educational programs in the Native American community.²⁶

Then, of course, there is *Porgy*. In speaking of *Porgy and Bess*, I realize I touch on a much debated and controversial subject. Bear with me, as I feel it is a major part of the operatic racial history that should inform performance decisions today. As with most of what I deal with in this discussion, it is a complex debate filled with many misunderstandings.

Grace Bumbry, famed soprano who played Bess at the Met in 1985 explains, “I thought it beneath me, I felt I had worked far too hard, that we had come far too far, to have to retrogress to 1935.”²⁷ Imagine being hired to sing a role that is one of the very few characters that looks like you being portrayed in opera houses, and to have that character act, talk, and be treated in the very way that you, after years of struggle, are supposedly a testament against. It is true that many Black singers get their starts from this opera, because in the face of discrimination elsewhere, Gershwin, to his credit, stipulated that only African Americans may play the singing roles in *Porgy and Bess*. I do not feel, however, that this fact necessarily wipes away the ignoble portrayals of African Americans seen in the opera. The roles are often seen as an “operatic servitude”—an inevitable rite of passage for a black singers wishing to pass into the operatic

²⁵ Press Release for *Wakonda's Dream*. March 2007.
www.urbanmozaik.com/UM.2007.April/07apr_fea_10.wakonda.html

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ James Standifer, “The Complicated Life of *Porgy and Bess*,” *Humanities*, 18. No. 6 (November 1997).

world.²⁸ Though it is true all singers must do their time in bit roles and as understudies, White singers have the privilege that these less-desired roles still often present positive representations of their heritage. Black singers often must rise through roles that are degrading caricatures of their past.

Now, imagine that you are a young school-aged African American child, visiting the Metropolitan Opera as part of a school outreach program trying to engage young people in the arts. You see a production of *La Bohème* and it immediately draws you in. The marketing strategy has worked and you return next week of your own volition. This time they are showing *Porgy and Bess* and you are excited because you hear it is the great American opera. You are also excited that the entire cast is made of people that look like you. Surely, this means that opera can be something to which you can relate and your friends were just misguiding in saying that opera is for White people. However, when you go, you see that when opera portrays people like you, it shows poverty, hyper-sexuality, and gambling. You see, as psychologist and critic Douglas Watt describes the opera, “a White man's version of Black folkways and characterizations from which their race has fought so painfully to escape.”²⁹

How does this make our young patron feel? Is this little girl thinking about how the quality of music justifies the caricatures portrayed? Is she consoled by the fact that it takes place way back in the 1930's? Does she want to come back to see next week's opera, which will probably feature mostly White singers? In a time when our audiences are aging and opera companies are in the red, can we afford her alienation? True, we have our Lady Macbeths and Carmens who can be violent and immoral women, but we also have our Paminas, Susannas, and Marguerites, to foil them. It is also true that there are very successful Black singers at the Met that

²⁸ Story, Rosalyn M., “The Visible Man,” *Opera News*, 70, No. 8 (February 2006).

²⁹ Neil Steinberg, “The Politics of ‘Porgy,’” *The Chicago Sun-Times*, November 17, 2008, 16.

might portray these women, but flip through an issue of *Opera News* to see who gets the attention. Positive Black examples are much less frequently highlighted, particularly by predominantly White institutions. This habit reinforces the limitations of an environment in which the histories of White people are primarily being taught in schools, in textbooks, and generally absorbed into the common subconscious. There are thousands of stories about the importance of people of color to our country that go untold in many educational institutions every year.

Anthony Davis provides a hopeful alternative to Black representation on stage. Acknowledging his dissatisfaction with *Porgy and Bess*, Edward Said of Columbia University points out that “a truly authentic Black opera exists—it’s *Malcolm X* by Anthony Davis.”³⁰ Davis himself acknowledges that “*Porgy and Bess* would never ultimately be a Black opera,” and that audiences “identified with *X* in a way they would never identify with *Porgy and Bess*.”³¹ Though Gershwin did what he could, visiting churches and conducting interviews to inform his composition, he could not escape his time or his own race. Davis ground his opera in real and factual events, thus escaping the dangerous ground of creating fictional characters and story lines. His ability to portray the many complicated aspects of the situations of his characters strengthens the opera’s authenticity.

In light of this cultural environment in which I find myself, I have, in preparing my student recitals, been challenged to consider the responsibility I have to balance the authenticity of a work with the offensive cultural norms that may contrast with contemporary values. If I find, as has recently been the case, that I desire to perform a set that, despite its high musical value, is hurtful to some of my peers, how might I handle the situation? Firstly, I much acknowledge the privilege I have as a White soprano and understand the implications of that identity. Coming from

³⁰ Rosalyn M. Story et al., *Aida's Brothers & Sisters* (West Long Branch, N.J.: PARS Media; Kultur distributor, 2000).

³¹ *Ibid.*

my position of privilege, I can choose to ignore issues of race and it may never have an effect on my personal well-being or my career. However, if I do choose to sing such a work, I should not expect to receive the benefit of the doubt from my audience members of color. Because few White performers regularly consider such matters, there is little reason for my audience to assume that I have done so. Therefore, performing an aria from *Porgy and Bess* may come across as insensitive and ignorant of the deep undercurrents of such works.

I do not suggest, by any means, that we silence or bowdlerize offensive works already in the repertoire. On the contrary, I feel to censor them further relegates issues of institutionalized racism into the subconscious where it is more difficult to fight. In the same way, I do not believe we should alter the texts of such works to fit our modern sensibilities, which for all we know could be quite provincial twenty years from now. Instead, let us preserve the works in their original form as best we can, for they are important windows into our Western musical history. It is, however, important to acknowledge, digest, and problematize the issues that such pieces present.

Lawrence Rosenwald, of Wellesley College, has many excellent points on the performance of prejudiced works, particularly when it comes to anti-Semitism. Rosenwald avoids questions of whether a piece should be performed, evading the rightfully threatening possibility of limiting artistic freedom. He instead wonders of pieces with anti-Semitic themes such as the Bordesholm *Marienklage*: “*could* an American audience listen to this piece without being distracted from the themes of loss and lamentation by the anti-Semitic sentiments accompanying them?”³² Such a question frames the debate in relation to the audience, rather than simply in relation to the material being presented, and can be applied to any number of problematic works.

³² Ibid.

In my opinion, the best suggestion put forth thus far for such works is the concept of workshops and discussion to accompany a performance. Though we should avoid trite talkback sessions, a deep and intelligent discussion, ideally taking place several days before a concert, is a way to prepare and engage an audience in the larger issues at play. Rosenwald's article in *Historical Performance* suggests such discussions be held in conjunction with performances.³³ In a response to this article, Tom Hall of the Baltimore Choral Arts Society mentions his success with a grant-sponsored public symposium held ten days before his performance of Bach's *St. Mathew's Passion* in the spring of 1991. They "enlisted the cooperation of the Institute for Christian Jewish Studies, a Baltimore-based group that works to promote inter-faith understanding" and "began by acknowledging that prejudice exist not only in music, but in virtually every important art form in Western Culture." They then "stimulated thought and dialogue, and helped listeners focus attention on the artistic, theological, and historical aspects of the *St. Mathew Passion*."³⁴ Of course, these sorts of events take time and effort, but I believe that the outreach and cultural understanding that results is well worth the cost. I understand, however, that for many touring groups with tight budgets that such session are simply not possible. In such situations detailed program notes may have to suffice. Hall also mentions that in his experience, "perfunctory program notes" are not enough to confront successfully the complex thoughts and emotions that arise from such performances, but they are better than ignoring the issues all together.

I agree with Rosenwald when he says of discussing the politics of performance that "raising the question means opening Pandora's box. But I think we should open it anyway." In fact, it is already open. Some of us have the luxury that in our day-to-day lives we need not think

³³ Lawrence Rosenwald, "On Prejudice in Early Music," *Historical Performance*, no. Fall (1992): 69.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

about such issues, where as others are daily reminded of the ways their race or ethnicity affects them. Some may contend that the quality of the music in question is superb enough to justify its sometimes-offensive content. Yet Rosenwald again wonders, “Does music have sanitizing power? Is music sanitary? Or is music seductive, diminishing resistance to words it carries to our ears?” Music has much power, indeed, and it can be used to either augment or reduce prejudices in a subconscious way that is much more effective than speeches and essays. One cannot assume that it is neutral or acts as a buffer in such discussions.

When we acknowledge music’s power, we gain an understanding of how its influence affects the daily lives of the people who hear it. There is so much more that could be said on these matters, as each piece and performance requires individual study and solutions. It is significant if members of the majority and those with institutionalized privilege are willing to talk about such issues. It demonstrates that microaggressions of partiality do affect everyone. Dr. Tatum compares racism to smog: “sometimes it is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in.”³⁵ It is not that one wakes up and chooses to discriminate, but rather if one is a member of the majority, there is an institutionalized system of advantages that is in place. For example, no one has ever assumed that I, a White middle-class female, attend my school because of affirmative action. No one as has ever assumed that I am there on an athletic scholarship. When I go to the store, the manager does not follow me as I shop and I can assume I will find pantyhose or band-aids that match my skin tone.

Though these examples may be small issues, they regularly affect people of color, and are symptoms of the greater smog we breathe. All this to say, when we realize the advantages we have, we may think more carefully about how we use our privilege to rectify the situations of the

³⁵ Beverly Daniel Tatum, *“Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?”: And Other Conversations about Race* (New York: Basic Books, 2003; 1997), 6.

burdened. I feel that music is created to serve people, and not the other way around. In the preceding exposition, I have presented a perhaps disheartening assessment of race relations in the context of operatic performance. I firmly believe, though, that there is much value in the power of opera to be an agent of racial reconciliation in this country. One may not agree with my assessment of the performance of the works mentioned, but know the issues and pain surrounding them are real and are to be wrestled with if we ever hope to expand opera's audience base. As opera companies struggle to stay afloat, they cannot afford to ignore matters of race, because they must ensure that no one in their limited audience become alienated. Though I wish we were beyond prejudice, I recognize that it is very much alive in my communities. I cannot in any way claim to understand the complex issues of race and reconciliation in this country, but for me and my future recitals, I choose to take these matters into account in my programming and to accompany controversial works with comprehensive discussion.

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