

Spring 5-2019

Blackface at the Met: An exploration of the casting of performers of color in the roles of Aida and Othello from 2007-2017

Kaeli Groenert

University at Albany, State University of New York, kgroenert@albany.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/honorscollege_music



Part of the [Music Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Groenert, Kaeli, "Blackface at the Met: An exploration of the casting of performers of color in the roles of Aida and Othello from 2007-2017" (2019). *Music*. 1.

https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/honorscollege_music/1

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Music by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@albany.edu.

**Blackface at the Met: An Exploration of the Casting of Performers of Color
in the Roles of Aida and Othello from 2007-2017**

An honors thesis presented to the
Department of Music,
University at Albany, State University of New York
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation from The Honors College

Kaeli Groenert

Research Advisor: Nancy Newman, Ph.D.

April 2019

Abstract

In the early to mid-nineteenth century, blackface minstrelsy was a common practice seen throughout the United States, as white performers would paint themselves with cork paint and create a caricature of black society at the time. The art form lost popularity with the dawning of the American Civil Rights movement in the mid-twentieth century, but aspects of this have continued in our more modern performing art forms, with people of color not being cast in roles that are written for them. In 1955, Marian Anderson became the first African-American performer to play a lead role at the Metropolitan Opera, breaking the color barrier. Despite this integration, performers of color are not cast as often as their white counterparts, even when a role would dictate it. As recently as 2012, the esteemed opera house was utilizing Blackface for the role of Othello in productions of Verdi's *Otello*, showing that even if a character's skin tone is relevant to the plot, it was not a priority to hire someone who fit that description. Utilizing the Metropolitan Opera Archive, performances of Verdi's *Otello* and *Aida* Opera from the period of 2007 to 2017 were analyzed to determine the rates at which characters of color were performed by performers of color.

Acknowledgements

Many people have aided me through the process of writing my thesis. Firstly, I would like to thank Dr. Nancy Newman for her patience and understanding as I struggled to decide upon a research topic. She provided not only guidance but aided me in the direction of resources that lead me down my final path of research to something that I am passionate about and that is relevant in our modern society. The entire music department has been incredibly supportive throughout my years in the program.

I would also like to specifically thank Professor Fran Wittmann for numerous years of helping me grow into my own instrument as well as introducing me to the world of opera, which has become one of my absolute favorite things. I've learned more from her about my craft than I ever could have from any book, and she constantly pushes me to grow and develop, both as a performer and as a person.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, for their constant support, encouragement and love. I would not have been able to do any of this without you. You have gifted me with a passion for learning and a fire inside me. Everything I do, I do for you.

List of Tables

Table 1.1: Ethnicity of Performers in Aida at the Metropolitan Opera from 2007-2017.....	9
Table 1.2: Ethnicities of Performers playing the role of Othello at the Metropolitan Opera from 2007-2017.....	11

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
List of Tables	iv
Introduction	1
The Integration of Opera	2
Method	6
Verdi's Aida	7
Otello	10
What now?	12
References	15

Introduction

In the early to mid-nineteenth century, American music and art was slowly taken over by the practice of blackface minstrelsy. This involved white performers painting themselves in cork grease to give the appearance of having ‘black skin.’ They were caricatures of Black society. Characters such as T.D. “Daddy”, Rice’s “Jim Crow” and George Washington Dixon’s “Zip Coon” became popular figures. “Daddy” Rice was one of the first performers to construct an entire performance centered around black face by “combining blackness, rags, grotesqueness, song, dance, and dialect” and creating a ‘comic “Negro.”’ (Green, 1970).

Music of composers like Dan Emmett and Stephen Foster dominated the genre, with songs that are now viewed as part of the classic American songbook. Tunes such as Emmett’s “Dixie”, and Foster’s “Camp town races” and “Oh Susannah”, had their origins in the art of minstrelsy (Byrd, 2009).

The tradition did not lose popularity until well into the 1950s with the dawning of the American Civil Rights movement. The practice itself is not dead. It has been used in popular media much more recently. While minstrel shows may be a thing of the past, stage and cinema have continued to grow as art forms.

Instead of using black-face, white washing became a new trend among media forums. *Whitewashing* refers to casting white actors as characters who are non-white or of who are considered to be ethnically ambiguous. It has been happening for over a century and continues to this day with performers such as Yul Brenner playing the role of the King of Siam in *The King and I*, and Jake Gyllenhaal as *The Prince of Persia*. The lead actors in the film *Gods of Egypt* were white-Australians, with people of color playing various subservient roles. One of the more recent controversies involved American actress

Scarlett Johansson, who was cast in a role in *The Ghost in the Shell* which was originally written for a Japanese woman.

With modern social media, people have taken to boycotting films to show studio executives that they will not tolerate the erasure of color. After there were calls on the internet to protest the movie, *Gods of Egypt*, the film was a major ‘flop’ at the box office, earning only 10% of its budget back on opening weekend.

Opera, however, is a slower moving medium. It has been unhurried to adopt new cultural norms. There are frequent performances of old standbys, as new productions do not seem to be as popular as the historical works of Mozart and Wagner.

American adults do not go to the opera at the rate that they consume other types of performing arts, with a 2012 study reporting that only 2.1% of American adults had gone to the opera in the past year and only 4.3% watched or listened to a broadcast of an opera. With such low level of participation and with limited viewing/listening options, can consumers afford to be picky in a restricted field? (National Endowment for the Arts, 2012)

The Integration of Opera

While the integration of opera in the United States happened rather late, the breaking of the color barrier in dramas and other plays happened much earlier, beginning in the mid 1820’s with African-American actor Ira Aldridge becoming prominent across the Atlantic Ocean, performing all across England’s main stages. The integration of a main stage Opera company did not happen until over a century later. That, however, did not mean that African Americans were not part of the arts.

Vocal Musicians integrated some of the larger concert halls, much earlier in that. The first being Sissiretta Jones, in the late nineteenth century. Often called the “Black Patti”, a comparison to the popular Italian prima donna of the time, Adelina Patti, Jones became the first African American to sing at Carnegie Hall in 1892. She also sang for several U.S. Presidents, including Benjamin Harrison and Theodore Roosevelt (Foster, 2007).

Jones created her own troupe of singers called “the Black Patti Troubadours.” She capitalized on the popular trend of black musical comedies, and “coon songs”. Jones would often close the show with a spiritual or selections from an opera instead of cakewalks, which were popular at the time. However, the shows fell out of favor as African Americans began seeing black musical comedies as offensive to their own race. (Foster, 2007)

Virgil Thompson’s *Four Saints in Three Acts* premiered in 1934, utilizing a cast composed entirely of African American singers. Despite its cast, the work was not based on African American experience of the time (André, 2018).

Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* followed in 1935 with an all-black cast. It was lauded as a rare and exciting opportunity for its cast members but often time the performers were critiqued by fellow African Americans for validating stereotypes whites had regarding black life. (Brown, 2012). It took several decades and the assistance of the 1976 Houston Grand Opera, as well as the 1985 Metropolitan Opera productions, for Gershwin’s work to reach its status of an all-time great American opera (André, 2018).

Camila Williams, a lyric soprano, was the first African American to integrate a major American opera company. She received a regular contract to perform as Ciao-Ciao San in Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* in May of 1946 at the New York City Opera, a year before Jackie Robinson would integrate baseball (Fox, 2012).

Marian Anderson, contralto, integrated the 72-year exclusively white history of the Metropolitan Opera in 1955 as Ulrica in Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschero*. Anderson's integration of the Metropolitan Opera was believed to be a push toward further desegregation of classical music, and that she would help open the door for other African American performers to stake their claims in that sphere. (Eidsheim, 2011).

Robert McFerrin, baritone, became the first African-American male to receive a contract with the Met in 1955, making his debut just three short weeks after Marian Anderson broke the color barrier. He previously had won the "Auditions of the Air", a radio competition hosted by the Metropolitan Opera to hear new talented singers in the field in 1953. With his winnings, he was able to study different skills for the stage and make his debut as Amonasro in Verdi's *Aida*. (Bourlin, n.d.)

For decades, white performers had played roles that were of different ethnicities than they were, and no one batted an eyelash. However, when a person of color played a role, it was a very different situation.

Performers like Jessye Norman, Todd Duncan, Robert Speedo Green, Eric Owens, Leontyne Price, Gulda Schultz, Angel Blue, and Pretty Yende have made their mark on the stage, opening the avenues for more performers to make a name for themselves, facing discrimination from their colleagues.

Leontyne Price faced discrimination from her peers, who suggested that she was singing improper repertory for her voice, and that she was only suited to play Bess from Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (Bernheimer, 1985).

Often times, African American performers feel pigeon-holed into only playing certain roles, such as those in *Porgy and Bess*. Moreover, they have to strategically limit the number of

times they are cast in that show, so as to not be labeled “Porgy singers” (Midgette, 2015). Opera directors do not always look favorably upon those whose resumés are filled with performances of the Gershwin classic, as some do not consider it a “real opera” (Brown, 2012).

Despite the integration of the large opera companies, there has still been use of ‘blackface’, and ‘yellow face’ in productions, rather than casting people of color to play roles that involve a character of a particular race. While makeup isn’t necessarily used in the same capacity as it was during “Jim Crow”, there is still a very negative connotation when it is used to alter the skin tone of a performer rather than hiring a performer of color. This is seen most prevalently in productions of *Aida*, *Otello*, and *Madama Butterfly*.¹

When the Metropolitan Opera hosted a production of *Porgy and Bess*, a number of African American performers were hired, per the stipulations in Gershwin’s estate that the roles must be played by African Americans. However, once this production was over, a large majority of the cast was not hired for other productions and were shown the exit (Brown, 2012).

The Metropolitan Opera used black face in their productions of Verdi’s *Otello* until as recently as 2015. Race plays a critical role in this Shakespearian tragedy, since Othello is seen as an ‘outsider’, and having a white Othello can greatly influence interpretations of the plot (Cooper, 2015).

More recently, in September 2018, the Metropolitan Opera had several performances of Verdi’s *Aida* with several different Aidas cast throughout the season. Not one of them were women of color. Most notably, Russian soprano Anna Netrebko was cast in the title role.

When pictures from dress-rehearsal and opening night were posted, several were of Netrebko in what appeared to be skin-darkening makeup. While not as dark as that formerly

¹ *Madama Butterfly* will not be further evaluated in this paper due to its primary focus on Black performers and their roles.

used in the minstrel shows of the nineteenth century, a noticeably darker shade of make up was applied to help produce a darker appearance, and to differentiate Netrebko's character from Egyptian characters.

Netrebko was outraged when she was asked by Instagram user @calebjaster;

@calebjaster @anna_netrebko_yusi_tiago are you wearing makeup to appear a different race? (@metopera if you have an answer please chime in!) to which Ms. Netrebko replied **anna_netrebko_yusi_tiago@calebjaster** I am play Ethiopian princess in antic beautiful production of Aida and wearing exotic markup. Do you have any problem with that? My skin color is likely naturally dark 🌍 production and having **anna_netrebko_yusi_tiago@calebjaster** so shut up and stick with your piano and not bother great theater with stupid questions 😏

Ms. Netrebko's feelings on the topic become evident, in spite of her broken English, and she did not see an issue in the changing of her skin tone. The Metropolitan opera did not respond to @calebjaster's comments.

But the debate remains is that if there are artists of color available to perform as characters of color, should they not be cast, especially if the plot is driven by racial differences? Are performers of color cast at the same rate as their white counterparts, or even at a rate representative of their makeup in the population?

Method

Using the Metropolitan Opera's archives, data was compiled for the period 2007 to 2017 that documented the number of performances, and the ethnicity of the performers who played the roles of Aida and the King of Nubia in *Aida*, as well as Othello in Verdi's *Otello*. Ethnicity was ascertained by examining the websites of the listed performers. Radio and Met Live HD Broadcasts were counted as performances as it is still a medium for people to enjoy a performance.

Verdi's *Aida*

Giuseppe Verdi was an Italian composer born in 1813 to Carlo Verdi, an inn-keeper, and his wife Luigia, a spinner. He began his education at the age of four with the local church and in 1825, he began lessons with the *maestro di capella*, at St. Bartolomeo, Busetto., Ferdinando Provesi (Parker, 2002).

Verdi applied to study at the Conservatory in Milan at the age of 18 but was refused for several reasons. Due to his rejection, he began to privately study with Vincenzo Lavigna, the former concert master of *La Scala*, and began a lifelong relationship with the theatre (Parker, 2002). This gave him a unique perspective and inside view of how the opera houses worked.

Verdi, unlike many of his predecessors and other composers of the time, preferred to negotiate fees for premiere performances directly with theater management rather than through an agent. His later stipulations with theatres often were often times centered around which performers he knew to be available for roles. Given that information, he would then settle on an idea with his librettist. With that agency, Verdi agreed to compose *Aida* to honor the opening of the Suez Canal in 1871 with a cast he hand-selected.

Set in majestic Ancient Egypt, *Aida* is at its heart a story of forbidden love between Aida, an Ethiopian princess and slave to Princess Amneris, and Radamès, an Egyptian general. When Radamès defeats the Ethiopians, he is promised Princess Amneris to wed as an appreciation of his service. Aida suffers with the conflicting feelings she has for Radamès, the man she loves, and her native land. The conflict between Egypt and her southern border neighbor is outlined in the first scene of the opera by Ramfis, the Egyptian high priest.

Edward Said argues that *Aida* is undeniably about European domination, and that Verdi viewed this as an opportunity to exert full control over the creative process. Alternatively,

Hans Busch suggests that *Aida* was commissioned due to the relevance of a conflict of the time, with a slave insurrection in the Sudan, being a recurring hostility. The dark-skinned Ethiopians of *Aida* represent a racial and archetypal other from dangerous conquered lands to the south. (Gauthier & McFarlane-Harris, 2012). This is suggested throughout the opera by Amneris's behavior and language, which act as a reminder of the difference between the Ethiopians and the Egyptians. The Ethiopians are frequently referred to as "barbari" (barbarians), marked by their 'blackness', while the Egyptian characters are much more "stable."

Verdi cleverly exemplified this in the first scene of the second act, in which Amneris has the slave-girl chorus, accompanied by the harp, perform a dance described in Ricordi's notes as "lively and rather 'grotesque' without complicated steps". Amneris does not participate, and instead observes. When the slave girls have stopped singing, Amneris replies with no harp accompaniment, and no trace of their flattened supertonic, representing the more abstemious, restrained Egyptian (Gauthier & McFarlane-Harris, 2012).

This is done also through the production design. In the production book for the original European premiere at La Scala, Giulio Ricordi, director wrote that the performers playing Aida and Amonasro should be blackened with makeup; they should have "olive, dark reddish skin" when they performed on the stage, giving a greater sense of the danger of the 'other' (Gauthier & McFarlane-Harris, 2012).

Verdi's *Aida* is often cited as one of the best operas to show new-comers to the Art due its pure spectacle and stunning vocals. The title-role is written in Verdi's later style, utilizing dramatic sopranos. The range of C4-C6 is well within the range of an average soprano. Overcoming the powerful orchestrations that Verdi provides and filling a large opera house

with sound are two of the largest difficulties of the role. While this does limit the number of performers who are capable of performing this role well, particularly to the caliber required for a top opera house, this role is not as limiting as other Verdi or Wagnerian roles.

The chart below provides information on the ethnicity of the performers cast in the principal roles in *Aida* when performed by Metropolitan Opera during the years 2007 to 2017.

Table 1: Ethnicity of Performers in *Aida* at the Metropolitan Opera from 2007-2017

Year	Non-Black Aida	Black Aida	Non-Black Amonasro	Black Amonasro	Total Performances
2007	3	4	7	0	7
2008	-	-	-	-	-
2009	10	0	10	0	10
2010	5	0	5	0	5
2011	-	-	-	-	-
2012	16	1	17	0	17
2013	-	-	-	-	-
2014	9	0	9	0	9
2015	4	0	4	0	4
2016	4	3	7	0	7
2017	6	1	7	0	7
Total	57	9	66	0	66

Of the 66 performances of *Aida*, there were only nine performances in which Aida, an Ethiopian princess, was played by a black performer, accounting for 13.6% of the performances. Specifically, the role was played by the two same black performers, Angela M. Brown and Latonia Moore. Amonasro, Aida’s father and the king of Nubia, was played exclusively by white performers.

Otello

While there are several different operas based on Shakespeare's tragedy, the most common incarnation was composed by Giuseppe Verdi. Rossini also composed a version of *Otello*; however, the Metropolitan Opera has not had a production of Rossini's in the period examined in this paper.

Verdi, who worked on *Otello* with librettist Boito, heavily drew on the work of August Wilhelm Schlegel. Schlegel created a popular series of lectures that were frequently paired with many of the Italian translations of William Shakespeare's works.

Alfredo Edel, the costume designer at La Scala originally proposed to have *Otello* costumed differently than other cast members, perhaps in a Turkish outfit or that of the exotic Saracens. It was Verdi himself who wanted *Otello* to be dressed throughout the opera as a Venetian Nobleman (André, *From Othello to Porgy: Blackness, Masculinity, and Morality in Opera*, 2012).

Unlike Shakespeare's original play, which is set in Venice, Verdi's *Otello* takes place in Cyprus. Both cities are often viewed as intersections between east and west, and act as an exotic locale. *Otello* is drawn carefully to be part of the 'us' rather than the Muslim Turks he has defeated in the first act. He proclaims their victory. However, it is abundantly clear that *Othello* is not part of the 'us'. He is aware of it, as is Iago, who carefully utilizes this to help manipulate characters to do his bidding.

Verdi uses aural themes throughout the opera in an effort to humanize the character. A recurring theme is *bacio*, or the kiss, between *Otello* and *Desdemona*, which is heard in the first act and is woven throughout the opera. It recurs in the final act, immediately following the brutal murder of *Desdemona* by *Otello*, showing his regret in killing his beloved. His otherness is also

marked sonically; as he enters the stage as Desdemona says her prayers, a diminished fourth and a minor second occur, representing the diametrically opposed emotional worlds that Othello and Desdemona find themselves in. The Venetian Nobleman from the first act is no more. “Whatever goodness this tenor once possessed has been purged, his inner darkness now matches his external complexion” (André, From Othello to Porgy: Blackness, Masculinity, and Morality in Opera, 2012).

Table 1.2: Ethnicities of Performers playing the role of Othello at the Metropolitan Opera from 2007-2017

Year	Non-Black	Black	Total
2007	-	-	-
2008	8	0	8
2009	-	-	-
2010	-	-	-
2011	-	-	-
2012	5	0	5
2013	7	0	7
2014	0	0	0
2015	8	0	8
2016	5	0	5
2017	0	0	0
Total	33	0	33

Not a single performance in the past decade was by a person of color.

The role of Otello is one of the most difficult operatic roles to perform and is sometimes described as a “voice killer”. Stuart Skelton, an Australian Heldentenor who has played the role states:

“But Otello is still a role that any tenor approaches with caution. Some people call it a “voice killer”. I don’t believe that – a role will only kill your voice if you shouldn’t be singing it in the first place – but it is incredibly taxing, both vocally and emotionally. You need a huge degree of stamina, to be equally comfortable at the top and bottom of your range, and you need to cut through some very heavy orchestration and ensembles, while retaining as much beauty of tone as possible. And then, from a dramatic point of view, you have to convince both as the military hero of Act I, and then as a vulnerable, volatile and ultimately broken man.

No one contests the difficulty of this role, and while this may limit the number of performers who are capable of performing it, does that allow for the utilization of black face or the loss of Othello’s ‘otherness’ as a vital aspect of the plot? (Skelton, 2014) Are there no African American males who can handle the role?

What now?

While some people believe that there is no issue in using makeup to darken skin tone for the sake of creating a believable appearance, there are certainly those that do find it offensive. What is evident is that there is still a significant lack of diversity in the sphere of classical music.

The American Guild of Musical Artists, the labor union protecting the rights of opera singers, dancers, and choristers, requires membership to perform at large opera houses. After reaching out to AGMA, I was informed that the AGMA does not keep information regarding the demographics of their members. It is difficult to tell the rates at which minority members are represented in the arts if there is no one tracking the information.

This lack of diversity is not just felt on the stage, but in administrative roles as well, including artistic directors, managers and executive board members (Muslar, 2015). We cannot expect there to be changes in the arts if there is no advocacy for minorities.

Is opera just too old to change? Are the tales woven hundreds of years ago ready to be left on the shelf to gather dust? No, opera is not dying. Opera companies are performing new and different repertoire composed by women and people of color in hopes of expanding love for the genre and introducing a whole new generation of opera-goers.

Opera Theatre of St. Louis, in collaboration with Jazz St. Louis, commissioned an opera, *Champion*. Composed by jazz composer Terrance Blanchard, *Champion* tells the story of Emile Griffith, a gay African-American boxer in the 1960s. This is a far cry from your run-of-the-mill production of *Die Zauberflöte* or *La Traviata*. Despite its much different plot and style of composition, being mainly a Jazz piece, *Champion* drew large and *diverse* crowds at each of its productions.

Opera Philadelphia had a series of performances entitled *Queens of the Night* that featured drag queens as the main performers and brought in an increasingly diverse audience, varying in age, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity.

Perhaps what opera needs is to embrace the diverse nation that America is. Including more people of color should not be viewed as a risk, but rather as a way to reflect the changing times. “Committing to diversity in arts organizations is not about checking off a box, filling up a diversity quota, or reaching out to the few people of color that you know. It is about establishing an organizational commitment to diversity advancement” (Muslar, 2015).

Increasing arts education is a way to increase awareness of the crafts and to help involve more students in the future of art. Utilizing children's operas, and diverse casts that represent different groups can encourage and inspire further generations of performers and artists.

References

- André, N. (2012). From Othello to Porgy: Blackness, masculinity, and morality in opera. In N. André, K. M. Bryan, & E. Saylor (Eds.), *Blackness in opera* (pp. 11-31). University of Illinois Press.
- André, N. (2018). *Black opera: History, power, engagement*. University of Illinois Press.
- Bernheimer, M. (1985, February 17). . . . Yes, but are we really color deaf? *Los Angeles Times*.
- Brown, G. K. (2012). Performers in Catfish Row. In N. André, K. M. Bryan, & E. Saylor (Eds.), *Blackness in opera* (pp. 164-180). Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Byrd, J. (2009, February). Whitewashing blackface minstrelsy in American college textbooks. *Popular Music and Society*, 32(1), 77-86.
- Cooper, M. (2015, September 17). An 'Otello' without blackface highlights an enduring tradition in opera. *The New York Times*, p. AR1.
- Eidsheim, N. S. (2011, September). Marian Anderson and "Sonic Blackness" in American opera. *American Quarterly*, 63(3), 641-671.
- Foster, C. (2007, August 28). Sissieretta Jones (1869-1933) • BlackPast. Retrieved October 20, 2018, from <https://blackpast.org/aah/jones-sissieretta-1869-1933>
- Fox, M. (2012, February 2). Camilla Williams, barrier-breaking opera star, dies at 92. *The New York Times*, p. B17.
- Gauthier, C. R., & McFarlane-Harris, J. (2012). Nationalism, racial difference, and "Egyptian" meaning in Verdi's Aida. In N. André, K. M. Bryan, & E. Saylor (Eds.), *Blackness in Opera* (pp. 55-74). University of Illinois Press.
- Green, A. W. (1970, Spring). "Jim Crow," "Zip Coon": The northern origins of negro minstrelsy. *The Massachusetts Review*, 11(2), 385-397.
- Midgette, A. (2015, October 16). Talking race and "blackface" in opera: The long version. *The Washington Post*.
- Muslar, E. (2015, May 20). *Racial and ethnic diversity in arts management: An exposé and Guide*. Howlroud Theatre Commons. Retrieved from <https://howlroud.com/racial-and-ethnic-diversity-arts-management>
- National Endowment for the Arts. (2012). *A decade of arts engagement: Findings from the survey of public participation in the arts, 2002–2012*. National Endowment for the Arts.
- Skelton, S. (2014, September 5). Verdi's Otello: A role to approach with caution. *The Guardian*.