

RACISM: OPERA'S UNLISTED CAST MEMBER

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Abstract

Interaction among the human population has long been, and will remain, a major barometer for determining the outcome of many affairs of life. Current world events have again made race, racism, and race relationships an intricate part of daily journalism. Each of the operas identified in this study is firmly established in the tradition of European lyric theatre performance. Accordingly, each score is frequently produced in opera houses throughout the world. Moreover, the scores have been recorded extensively by major performing artists. The composers of these works are held in very high esteem by all who are identified with the arts. These operas have survived through, and thrived upon, many different philosophies and concepts of production. To examine in detail a complete study of these truths in relation to the operas brought forth in this discussion is beyond the scope of this essay. The thrust here is to allow five Black male operatic characters to take centre stage and expound, with some analysis and detail, upon their stories.

Introduction

In opera libretti the races are characterised as they are perceived within the cultures of those who author the stories. Opera is all about the dramas and overwhelming mysteries of life. Black men are usually a struggling population within the fabric of world environments: economically, politically, and sociologically. It is therefore no accident that Black men are often "victims of one thing or the other" in many operatic storylines. That opera is a culturally biased art form is an arguable proposition, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Giuseppe Verdi: *Aida*

The action in *Aida*, the concluding opera of Giuseppe Verdi's magnificent second period, is built upon military and political conflict

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between two neighbouring African nations: Egypt and Ethiopia. Africa, often thought of as the Black Continent, is in reality a very diverse population of pigmentation. *Aida* strikingly shows Ethiopia as the blacker and less resourceful nation. Egypt, in *Aida*, is clearly the nation with less "colour" and tremendous power.

Amonasro, a Black man, the father of Aida and the king of Ethiopia, is first seen among a group of Ethiopians that have been captured by the Egyptian army. Aida recognizes her father among the new Ethiopian captives. Amonasro discreetly tells Aida to keep quiet about his identity. Aida becomes a captive of Egypt long before Amonasro. Aida's royal lineage remains unknown to the Egyptian people. Amonasro, disguising himself to be an officer in the Ethiopian troops, asks the Egyptian king for mercy. Radames, captain of the Egyptian army, and the High Priest, jointly intercede to the Egyptian king for the Ethiopians. The Ethiopian captives, with the exception of Aida and Amonasro, are given freedom from Egyptian captivity. Amonasro wants revenge for Egypt and liberation for Ethiopia. Amonasro is perceptive. He immediately discerns the love that Radames has for his daughter, and he knows that through her, information can be obtained from Radames that will bring victory to Ethiopia in an upcoming attack on Egypt that is being planned by the Ethiopian army. Amonasro well knows his daughter. Time away from her has not lessened his power of psychological persuasion. Amonasro knows how to make Aida buy into his plan. She is still daddy's little girl.

Richard Wagner: *Das Rheingold*

Loge, a half-god or demigod, in *Das Rheingold*, the first opera in Richard Wagner's monumental epic, *Der Ring Des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelungs*), a cycle of four music dramas designated by the composer as a tetralogy, symbolizes a population.

Loge is certainly the archetype of minorities in present day society. Loge is used by those in power, who detest him: in return Loge detests them. Although Loge has grudging respect for Wotan, the chief god..., finally he gives up on Wotan altogether.¹

The council of gods in *Das Rheingold* is a quadrival: Wotan, Loge, Donner, and Froh. Among the four, Loge is the only demigod: three fifths of a man, not a part of the decision-making process, window-dressing. There are three goddesses: Fricka, Freia and Freda. Two niblungs: Alberich and Mime. Two giants: Alberich and Mime. Two giants: Fasolt and Fafner. Three rhinedaughters: Woglinda, Wellgunde, and Flosshilde.

Being “a minority” in the workplace, in the classroom, and on the stage, is often very lonely and intimidating. The minority can never be just as good. The minority must always be much better. The minority can never be sure about how it will be accepted by his own people when he aspires for something that is beyond the commonplace. The higher one goes the better target one makes is true for the majority. For the minority, it is more deeply entrenched and magnified. Moreover, it certainly does not help anything when those who are in political power make bigotry, ignorance, and prejudice fashionable.

Early on, Wotan states that he has sent Loge on an important mission. Wotan is in a bad situation and he is hopeful that Loge will return with information that will provide for him a way out of his dilemma. Loge is not one of Wotan’s favourite people, but Wotan knows that Loge has strengths that he does not have and strengths that he needs. The drama in *Das Rheingold* is propelled by a “minority.”

Minority populations, even when they are locked out of the clusters of power, often control the agendas of society. When Negroes in the nineteen fifties boycotted the buses in Montgomery, Alabama, USA, the bus company was thrown into economic peril because the greater percentage of bus riders was from the Negro community. There was then no turning back for the civil rights movement of that era in America. The courageous act of Rosa Louise Parks, a Black woman, “a minority,” not only brought onto the stage of history, another “minority,” Martin Luther King, Jr., it also gave new life and impetus to public protest for human rights.

This development in twentieth century America made other powerful acts acceptable and possible: the feminist movement, the movement for gay rights, mainstreaming in education, the voting rights acts, and the many focused marches. Throughout the world, social and political movements received wings from what American minority communities had been seen doing to promote human dignity. This

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momentum in twenty-first century America is currently alive and well in Black Lives Matter.

Loge is a survivor who knows how to make the system work for him. Loge is street-smart, knows himself and has faith in his own ability. Loge believes that he is smarter than the majority community. Loge has the skills and qualities that minorities must have if they are to live victoriously within racist and bigoted societies.

Loge, in the concluding moments of *Das Rheingold*, laments his belief about the gods taking themselves into their own destruction. Loge wonders about remaining a part of the compound, thinking about permanently returning to a more predictable estate. After a psychodynamic encounter with himself, Loge chooses to follow the gods and not risk even greater marginalisation. Loge decides to take what he has learned from “the gods” about how to “make it,” and “whip it back” on them.

Minorities, like Loge, are often caught between a “rock and a hard place,” and left feeling that they are without choices. Decisions, consequently, might not always be made on conviction. Expediency is less overwhelming. A Negro spiritual states it profoundly and simply:

Lord, I'm out here on your word,
Lord, I'm out here on your word,
If I die on the Battlefield,
Lord I'm out here on your word.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *Die Zauberflöte*

Monostatos, the Moor in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, is a total and comprehensive personification of the stereotypical characteristics that are often used to define black males in American society. Monostatos buys into the negativism, and allows this to become ingrained within his personality. A slave in body, mind and spirit, Monostatos is first seen trying to seduce a white woman. After a third attempt at trying to seduce the same woman, Monostatos is disgraced and put out of his community; after which, he joins a gang. Monostatos and fellow gang members are ultimately destroyed.

One has to only pursue a casual perusal of American history to learn that it is difficult, if not impossible, for a nation to overcome and erase the degrading fallout that comes from a legally sanctioned legacy of slavery. An irony of physical enslavement is that, while bodies

languish in imprisonment, the minds and spirits of those bodies can remain unchained; thus leaving fertile ground for growth in faith, perception and perspective. A striking example of this truth is Nelson Mandela: who overcame years of imprisonment with his mental state fully intact and completely unbroken, subsequently becoming President of South Africa for five years, from 1994-1999.

The enslavement of bodies is an abomination, but the captivity of minds is a far greater calamity. If minds are in bondage, physical enslavement is an inescapable consequence. African Americans victoriously survived “slavery” and “Jim Crow” because they kept their minds “stayed on freedom.” African Americans began to lose resilience with the fall of American apartheid. The result for African Americans has been a lowering of standards and an overall retrogression in many aspects of life: all too often put into motion and kept alive by African Americans themselves. From Monostatos to African Americans comes a fivefold admonition: learn from your history; don’t dig your own graves; if there is what seems to be a diabolical plan in place for your destruction, be diligent and shrewd; racism and discrimination are not going away; be not your own worst enemies.

Monostatos is the head slave. The other slaves, not identified as being Black, have very little, or no respect for him. Is their lack of respect for Monostatos based upon his being Black, his ignorance about history and customs, or his dislike of, and discomfort with, his pigmentation? As Monostatos is in *Die Zauberflöte*, the African American male is at the bottom of his country’s socioeconomic hierarchy. He is often an outcast from his family and community.

Composed in 1791, *Die Zauberflöte* is Mozart’s final compositional legacy to lyric theatre. Critics and musicologists have long agreed that the story, an exploration of man’s search for truth and his confusion between the forces of light and darkness, is, at its core, nothing more than a delightful fairy tale. It is, however, quite clear from this writing that the libretto of *Die Zauberflöte* could be a springboard upon which to launch an analytical symposium about racism, discrimination and provincialism: as they relate to gender and geographical bias. There is no disagreement about the sublimity of Mozart’s music.

Giuseppe Verdi: *Otello*

Giuseppe Verdi scholars have long been in agreement about the greatness, power, and craftsmanship of his opera, *Otello*¹. Everything is blended into a seamless texture. Characterisations are strong and definitive. No note is without meaning and relevance. It would be unthinkable to produce *Otello* with cuts; there is never any downtime. When and where Giuseppe Verdi was in his chronological and creative life at the time of *Otello*'s composition, in his seventies, and after *Aida* and the *Mazoni Requiem*, is of importance and significance.

One can hear in *Otello* some of the motives, but with far more development, that are used in *Aida*. The tremendous ensemble writing in *Otello* builds upon the choral and harmonic timbres that are woven into the *Mazoni Requiem*. The *Mazoni Requiem* orchestra interacts with and tonally paints, the score's deeply penetrating poetry. In *Otello*, Verdi uses the orchestra not just as an accompanying ensemble, but as a supporting player around, within, and underneath the drama, at a level that surpasses *Aida*, and with a sophistication that far exceeds any of his other operas. *Aida* was the crowning achievement of Giuseppe Verdi's second period. The *Mazoni Requiem* was his major contribution to the concert repertoire. Verdi came to the composition of *Aida* as a mature organic craftsman. Could *Otello* have been composed before *Aida* and the *Mazoni Requiem*? The jury is still out. This writer says no!

Looking at *Otello*, the ultimate figure of Shakespearian tragedy, is a revelatory adventure. He is a personality far more complex and comprehensive than just a character to be only enjoyed when seeing a play, or seeing and hearing an opera. There was once a time when, at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA, graduate students in the Leadership Program were required to study *Otello* the man: one who had it all, and one who lost it all.

Otello, a Black African moor, had come to a political position of power and prestige in a foreign culture and country. *Otello* is the husband of Desdemona: a white woman. Desdemona loves *Otello*, but their marriage is not supported by her family. In addition to being surrounded by political and personal enemies, they are enveloped with cultural prejudice. From the beginning, doom for *Otello* is apparent. Foes immediately engineer and put into action a program to bring about his downfall. Devised and driven by Iago, a calculated plan deeply rooted in

¹ From Shakespeare's *Othello*

deceit, greed, hatred, jealousy, and racism, brings Otello to emotional and psychological breakdown. He is made to believe that Desdemona has been unfaithful. Iago's revenge is culminated when Otello murders his wife and then kills himself.

Intimacy among interracial couples: within their families, within their communities, and within their countries, is controversial. In American society, intimacy between a Black man and a white woman is more controversial than intimacy between a white man and a Black woman. There was a time when in some American geographical areas a Black man could be lynched for just looking at a white woman! Yet, even during America's time of legal enslavement of Blacks, intimacy among white men and Black women, consensual and forced, was a common occurrence. Proof of this is evident in the broad range of pigmentation within the African American nation! *Otello* openly deals with one of world society's most explosive and forever fresh sociological hotbeds.

Otello has natural and scholastic intelligence. Otello has brilliance in militaristic strategy. Otello lacks common sense and discerning power about things and people that personally affect his life. Otello is insecure. Otello is uncomfortable with his Black skin. Otello has no knowledge of, and connection to, his own culture, heritage, and history. Otello is one without an identity. Otello believes that he is infallible! Iago knows Otello's strengths, weaknesses and idiosyncrasies. Otello's downfall is made inevitable because Iago has a knowledge of, and astuteness about, Otello's personality at a level that is unknown to Otello himself. Additionally, Iago's cleverness gets others to buy into his plan for Otello's destruction.

Verdi's score is not the easiest opera to produce. Only a few tenors can handle the title role's vocal demands. No black tenor has yet made the role his own, and been called upon to perform the character on the world's great stages of lyric theatre.² The ramifications of the world yet to see and hear a Black Otello on a major lyric theatre stage are probably more intriguing than not being able to find a Black tenor capable of doing the role. Otello is a victim, but he is also a hero. Black men are not seen as, or expected to be, heroes. Thus, it is not then too much of a stretch to believe that, for many lyric theatre audiences, seeing a Black man as Otello, a heroic personality and presence, would be unacceptable, in spite of being identified in the libretto as being Black.

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Desdemona's being a white woman also makes the probability of a Black tenor becoming renowned in this role, a remote possibility, at best.

Unless there are some very dramatic changes within the fabric of world society, the derogatory perceptions about Black men that currently exist will continue to be a part of the culture. A white man in black face playing Otello keeps everything within the realm of imagination. Here we are in the first quarter of the twenty-first century being confronted with, on a daily basis, the reality of how far we still have to go with human relationships: in all areas of our lives throughout the world.

No African American soprano has become identified with Desdemona. Leontyne Price, one of the twentieth century's greatest Verdian singers, recorded the role twice. She said that vocally it was no problem, but that she would never do the role on stage because Desdemona is identified in the story as being a white woman.³

The late Shirley Verrett, a twentieth century artist who excelled in Verdian soprano and Mezzo soprano roles, did Desdemona once with the Opera Company of Boston, in white face. Why she did not find the role completely satisfying and why she did not keep the role active in her repertoire remain open to speculation. She was asked, during an interview before the performance, about the believability of a Black woman playing a white woman in an opera that features race as a central issue.⁴ She saw no difference in using make up as a theatrical tool to lighten her skin to play Desdemona, as white sopranos using make-up to darken their skin to play Aida.

At the Sacramento Opera, Kentucky Opera, and Oper Hamburg, baritone Donnie Ray Albert, one of the greatest Verdian singers currently on the operatic stage, is an African American that has done Iago.⁵ Donnie Ray Albert has a commanding stage presence that matches his tremendous vocal instrument and his portrayal of Iago is, in today's world of operatic performance, most outstanding.⁶ For those stage directors who have culturally racist and prejudicial attitudes, casting a Black man as Iago, opera's most sinister and villainous madman, might be a gesture with camouflaged purpose. This, of course, takes nothing away from the artistry of Donnie Ray Albert and the other Black baritones who have done or who will do the role.

George Gershwin: *Porgy and Bess*

Porgy and Bess is George Gershwin's last major work. Composed in 1934 and 1935, the libretto by DuBose Heyward and Ira Gershwin uses

lyrics by DuBose Heyward and Dorothy Heyward. The complete libretto is based upon the play *Porgy* by DuBose and Dorothy Heyward. *Porgy and Bess* has a well-documented history of controversy and discussion from the communities of musicology, music criticism, and Black America. Is it singspiel or opera? Can a Jewish composer accurately capture Black culture? Is *Porgy and Bess* a stereotyped treatment of Black Americans? Debate has mellowed with time, but opinions from which such questions sprang remain strong. Importantly, performing artists have always known and accepted *Porgy and Bess* as an opera. The libretto's quality, the composition's organic depth, and the score's vocal demands, make *Porgy and Bess* more than traditional *Singspiel*.

One can argue about the appropriateness and capability of a Jewish composer being involved with a lyric theatre work about Black people and an aspect of Black culture, but it is no more far-fetched than an African American composer being involved with a work for the lyric theatre about Jewish people or an aspect of Jewish culture. Moreover, it was courageous for Gershwin to insist that fully staged productions of *Porgy and Bess* be produced, in the country to which the work belongs, with a Black cast: not Caucasians in black face. This stipulation remains in Gershwin's will. American Caucasian singers have always sung and recorded *Porgy and Bess*, but Gershwin's stand about casting in fully staged productions has protected the opera's believability, integrity, and seriousness. "The arts" in Black America have always been multicultural. Gershwin well knew this fact. Emphatically, he knew how to surround himself with people who knew how to authenticate not only what he had in his mind, but also what he had put on paper.

A sociological analysis of *Porgy and Bess* and each of its characters is beyond this writing. *Porgy and Bess* is not, however, and the citizens of Catfish Row are not, indeed, a stereotypical portrayal of Black America. Catfish Row is a diverse, rural, southern, Negro community with lifestyles that are somewhat predictable. All peoples have "catfish row communities" within their culture. Within these communities, there is always a person around whom the action revolves. In "Gershwin's Catfish Row Community" that person is Porgy. Just as in *Porgy and Bess*, the opera is not, and the citizens of Catfish Row are not stereotypical of Black America. Porgy the man is not a personification of the stereotypical characteristics that are often used to define Black males in American society.

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Porgy is magnificent and compassionate. When Bess is left destitute and without a place to go, he takes her into his home and provides for her. Bess becomes for him something that he has never had: a true love. From her association with Porgy, Bess learns a different kind of love. The depth of Porgy's love for Bess and his overwhelming desire to protect her from the vicissitudes of life come together in a dramatic display of strength, and drive him to murder Crown! Porgy's love for Bess is the kind of love that Hosea the eighth century B.C. prophet had for Gomer: a prostitute that he married and repeatedly forgave for being unfaithful.

Porgy is not formally educated, but he is endowed with belief in God and native intelligence. In Catfish Row, Charleston, South Carolina, USA, native intelligence would be called mother wit and common sense. Porgy believes in God. He, accordingly, believes in himself. Mother wit and common sense have given Porgy coping powers and overcoming skills. Porgy is respected and admired within his community. When he speaks people listen. Porgy likes to gamble, but he does not allow the totality of his environment to be governed by chance. Porgy is superstitious, but his ability to think after he murders Crown keeps superstition from becoming his worst enemy. Porgy cannot walk, but he never indulges in self-pity. Porgy never gives up on Bess nor on his faith nor, indeed, on his community. Porgy never gives up on his ability to overcome. Porgy never gives up on life.

Conclusion

Amonasro, Loge, Monstatos, Otello, and Porgy are bound together in victimization and pigmentation. Amonasro, the overthrown King of Ethiopia and a Black African, is a victim of political espionage. Loge, a demigod, is a victim of social degradation. The pigmentation of Loge is left to speculation. It is not, however, far-fetched to believe that the librettist is personifying in Loge's characterisation his image of a Black man. In mythology, black is the colour that is always associated with the worst of everything in society. Monostatos is a victim of tridimensional enslavement. The libretto identifies him as being black and ugly. I once did Monostatos in a concert version of *Die Zauberflöte*. I was the only African American in the cast. "You have been typecast": this was said to me by more than one of my colleagues. Otello, the Moor, is a victim of psychological entrapment. Otello is also uncomfortable with his being Black. Porgy, a cripple, is a victim of physical malady.

Victimization can be overcome with strength, character, and motivation. This is seen with Amonasro and Porgy. Victimization can be fought with “street smarts”. This is seen with Loge. One can become a victim of one’s enemies if one lacks perception. This is seen with Otello. One can by choice remain a victim. This is seen with Monostatos.

Endnotes

¹When George Shirley, world renowned African American tenor, made these statements as part of a conversation with the author, Loge was one of his roles, directed by Herr Got Friedrich, at the Deutsche Oper in West Berlin. Shirley also, in the conversation, talks about typecasting in German opera houses, and how it might have played into his being cast as Loge. [Wallace McClain Cheatham, ed., *Dialogues On Opera And The African American Experience* Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 1997, 114-5.] Artistic and musical criteria must always be the standard for casting, but what could be a more powerful visual presence than an African American male being cast in the role that embodies, from sociological and political perspectives, what has defined on so many levels for centuries the history of minorities. There is, however, nothing downtrodden or weak about Loge’s words and music. Loge’s words and music match the ageless intensity of his symbolism.

²*Ibid.*, 103.

³Bill Zakariasen, “The Price is Right,” *New York Daily News*, September 1982.

⁴ Shirley Verrett, *I Never Walked Alone*, (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2003), 239.

⁵ Donnie Ray Albert, *Resume of Donnie Ray Albert* (New York: Pinnacle Arts Management, 2007) [database on-line]; available from www.donnerayalbert.com.

⁶ *Ibid*

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