



Curtin, A 2021 Racial Dynamics: The Casting of Lucian Msamati as Salieri in the National Theatre's 2016 Production of *Amadeus*. *Open Library of Humanities*, 7(1): 11, pp. 1-27. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.4701>



Open Library of Humanities

Racial Dynamics: The Casting of Lucian Msamati as Salieri in the National Theatre's 2016 Production of *Amadeus*

Adrian Curtin, University of Exeter, UK, a.curtin@exeter.ac.uk

This article examines the casting of Lucian Msamati as Antonio Salieri in the 2016 production of Peter Shaffer's 1979 play *Amadeus* by the National Theatre in London. This was the first time an actor of colour had played the role of Salieri in a professional production of Shaffer's drama. How did the casting affect interpretation of the play? And what was its cultural significance in the context of current debates about demographic representation in classical music and efforts to diversify the art form and its practitioners? In order to answer these questions this article examines statements made by the production team, theories of casting, and documented responses to Msamati in this role, including professional reviews and comments made online. The article reveals a complicated picture with regard to the efficacy of this casting choice, highlighting limitations and missed opportunities for deeper engagement with the history and politics of race in classical music whilst acknowledging the positive aspects of the casting and its potential for beneficial social impact. In doing so, this article demonstrates the importance of thinking across different types of representation in both cultural production and analysis: specifically, demographic representation *in* classical music (i.e., whom it represents and who is missing or under-represented in its practices) and the artistic representation of classical music, specifically, in this case, in theatre.



Introduction

In 2016 the Royal National Theatre (NT) in London mounted a new production of Peter Shaffer's 1979 play *Amadeus*. Shaffer's drama, adapted into a critically and commercially successful film in 1984, tells a sensational, fictional tale about how the Italian composer Antonio Salieri (1750–1825) plotted against Mozart out of jealousy and spite.¹ It is probably the best-known drama about a Western classical composer and it has helped to sustain and popularise the legend about Salieri's involvement in Mozart's death. One of the notable features of the NT's production of *Amadeus* was the casting of the British-Tanzanian actor Lucian Msamati as Salieri. This was the first time an actor of colour had played Salieri in a professional production.² Msamati received favourable reviews for his performance and the production had a sell-out run.³ It was included as part of the National Theatre Live broadcasts in 2017, remounted at the Olivier Theatre in 2018, and included in the 'National Theatre at Home' series of live-streams in July 2020.

This article explores the cultural significance of Msamati as Salieri in relation to interconnected efforts made in the classical music sector in recent years to (1) highlight the contributions of musicians of colour, past and present, to the tradition of Western art music; (2) make the membership of classical music ensembles and institutions reflect the racial diversity of the societies in which they operate; (3) grow and diversify audiences for classical music vis-à-vis demographics of age, race, and class; and (4) undo the association between classical music and whiteness.⁴ I contend that the casting of Msamati as Salieri had positive symbolic force that coincided with these efforts. However, I argue that this symbolic force was stymied by the production's lack of consideration of the aforementioned efforts and was undercut by negative, unintended connotations of Msamati in the role. To make this argument I will outline contemporary efforts to raise the profiles of classical musicians of colour and will survey scholarly accounts of whiteness in classical music, thereby highlighting the cultural resonance of this casting decision. I will then investigate the stated intentions of the production team, theories of casting, interpretive cruxes, and documented responses to Msamati

¹ The film version of *Amadeus* (1984) was nominated for numerous awards in 1984 and 1985 and won in several categories, including Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director (for Miloš Forman), Best Actor in a Leading Role (for F. Murray Abraham) and Best Adapted Screenplay (for Peter Shaffer). The film achieved a box-office return of over \$90 million.

² Rupert Lord, a representative of the Peter Shaffer Estate, stated in an email: 'I can ... say with some certainty that Lucian was the first actor of colour to play the role in a first class professional production. I very much hope he is the first of many!' (Lord, 2019). This statement is quoted with permission.

³ The 2016–2017 production run of *Amadeus* is described as being a 'sell out' on the National Theatre's website: see <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/shows/amadeus> (last accessed 24 March 2021). I will discuss production reviews later in the article.

⁴ I use 'classical music' in the colloquial sense to refer to several centuries of Western art music, not just music dating from the 'classical period' of the eighteenth century.

as Salieri. In an effort to avoid privileging the opinions of professional reviewers and to gather a broader range of reactions I will also incorporate comments made on social media and on a theatre-focused internet discussion forum.⁵

Ultimately, this article aims to highlight the importance of thinking across different types of representation in both cultural production and analysis: specifically, demographic representation *in* classical music (i.e., whom it represents and who is missing or under-represented in its practices) and the artistic representation of classical music, specifically, in this case, in theatre. This article will demonstrate how the casting of Msamati as Salieri put into play complex racial dynamics connected to the past and present of classical music, even if the production did not sound out these dynamics.

#BlackClassicalMusic

On Twitter the hashtags ‘BlackClassical’ and ‘BlackClassicalMusic’ feature on tweets that highlight classical musicians of colour, both professional and amateur, contemporary and deceased.⁶ Some of the tweets are self-promotional. In one thread dating from April 2019 Twitter users identify themselves as classical musicians of colour, name composers whose work they prize, and include a video of themselves performing a piece of classical music.⁷ Tweets with these hashtags discursively enact identity-consolidation, consciousness-raising, and community-formation. These tweets also do political work by implicitly suggesting that ‘classical music’, sans modifier, is linked to whiteness. This is a controversial proposition for people who believe that classical music has, or can have, universal valence, and that race does not have a bearing on the art form. But, as Kira Thurman observes, ‘classical music, like whiteness itself, is racially unmarked and presented as universal – until people of color start performing it’ (Thurman, 2019: 832). The existence of #BlackClassical and #BlackClassicalMusic on Twitter suggests that the whiteness of classical music is a felt perception for some people of colour who are ostensibly seeking to make their presence within this tradition more visible and to change common misconceptions and faulty narratives about the art form.

Thurman illuminates the ‘liminal space’ that Black classical musicians inhabit, particularly in the US, as a consequence of being ‘[held] up as symbols of racial

⁵ I am mindful of a question posed by Helen Freshwater: ‘Why do [theatre scholars] appear to prefer discussing their own responses, or relaying the opinions of reviewers, to asking “ordinary” theatre-goers – with no professional stake in the theatre – what they make of a performance?’ (Freshwater, 2009: 4).

⁶ Use of #BlackClassicalMusic on Twitter is not uniform. Prior to 2015, the hashtag was used to refer to jazz, picking up on a statement that Nina Simone reportedly made: ‘Jazz is a white term to define black people. My music is black classical music’ (quoted in Egan, 2018).

⁷ The Twitter thread in question may be viewed here: <https://twitter.com/i/moments/1117954910987984897> (last accessed 24 March 2021).

advancement, used to denigrate others who cannot or will not make the same aesthetic choices, or denounced as Uncle Toms' (Thurman, 2018). She offers insight from her own biography, stating that she learned, over the course of her life, that 'to be black and a classical musician is to be considered a contradiction' (ibid.). She was told, for instance, that she 'wasn't really black' because of her professed enthusiasm for Mahler's Fifth Symphony, and that she was somehow '[betraying] black cultures in favor of a white, Western world' (ibid.). Thurman rejects these assertions and argues for the usefulness of the 'liminal space' in which Black classical musicians are notionally situated and for the right of people of colour to take pleasure in the abstraction offered by Western art music, if they wish.⁸ 'At our best', she writes, 'we [Black classical musicians] embody the Brechtian concept of *Verfremdung*, making the familiar strange and uncanny. Our performances and our musical experiences challenge the bounds of blackness and whiteness and the histories of racial oppression that have tried to culturally and musically determine both' (ibid.).

Classical music is commonly associated with whiteness, even if some practitioners, industry professionals, and aficionados would dispute this claim. Scholars have shown how whiteness is encoded in classical music in ways that are not always recognised, understood, or accepted. Philip Ewell, a music theorist, has argued that music theory has an unacknowledged 'white racial frame' that is supported by 'colour-blind racism' (i.e., covert racial discourse and practices) (Ewell, 2020).⁹ He outlines how the music of white composers is predominately used to exemplify music theory in textbooks, how non-Western music theories have been sidelined in curricula, and how Schenkerian analysis (a method of analysing tonal music taught at university) is bound up with the racism of its creator, Heinrich Schenker (1868–1935). Relatedly, sociologist Anna Bull has drawn attention to the:

powerful congruences between ideas of whiteness, Christian ideas of the body, and the way the body is experienced in classical music practice: cognitive control is essential; text is supreme; the body must be disciplined; the sacred or transcendent is located outside the body; and the fleshly body does not make sense and must be effaced (Bull, 2019: 24).

⁸ Relatedly, the Black String Triage Ensemble, founded by Dayvin Hallmon, performs at the scene of violent crimes in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. See their website: <https://www.theblackstringtriageensemble.org/themission> (last accessed 24 March 2021). Thanks to Sharanya Murali for bringing this group to my attention.

⁹ Ewell quotes from the work of sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, who theorises 'color-blind racism' as an ideology that 'explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of non-racial dynamics' (Bonilla-Silva, 2018: 2). Colour-blind racism exculpates (white) people from 'any responsibility for the status of people of color' (ibid.). Bonilla-Silva references the 'increasingly covert nature of racial discourse and racial practices, the avoidance of racial terminology and the ever-growing claim by whites that they experience "reverse racism"', among other phenomena (Bonilla-Silva, 2018: 18).

In practicing and performing classical music according to certain modes of behaviour, cultivating carefully controlled expressiveness, one ‘produces an historically and culturally specific type of body which...is the idealized embodiment of middle-class whiteness’ (Bull, 2019: 95). Ewell’s and Bull’s observations about the connections between whiteness and classical music, which include consideration of how it is taught, analysed, practiced, and performed, make evident the cultural significance of putting an actor of colour front and centre in the NT’s production of *Amadeus*. Having an actor of colour perform the role of an eighteenth-century court composer in Vienna throws the whiteness of classical music into relief and potentially undermines it.

Associations between whiteness and classical music begin to break down as they are exposed and dismantled and as classical musicians of colour achieve greater visibility and more professional opportunities. For example, Chineke! Orchestra, founded in 2015 by double-bassist Chi-Chi Nwanoku, is the first professional orchestra in Europe to comprise majority Black and minority ethnic musicians. The Chineke! Foundation was created in the same year and aims to ‘provide career opportunities to established and up-and-coming Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) classical musicians in the UK and Europe’ (Nwanoku, 2019).¹⁰ British cellist Sheku Kanneh-Mason, the first Black winner of the BBC Young Musician of the Year award in 2016 (the same year as the NT’s production of *Amadeus*), has performed with Chineke! and exemplifies a contemporary classical musician of colour with a major public profile and ‘crossover’ appeal.¹¹ Kanneh-Mason received global attention as a result of playing at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle in 2018. Kanneh-Mason’s six siblings, including his sister Isata and brother Braimah, have also contributed to ‘mainstreaming’ the sight of young Black people playing classical music. Six Kanneh-Mason siblings performed on the television show *Britain’s Got Talent* in 2015 and received a rapturous reception. Chineke! Juniors, a youth orchestra of Black, Asian, and ethnically diverse players aged 11–22, made it to the semi-finals of the same show in 2020.

Chineke! also seeks to make the work of classical composers of colour better known. They are not alone in this endeavour. Musicologists, performers, programmers, and record labels have been (re-)discovering the work of historical composers of colour who formerly did not receive the recognition they deserved, for example, the mixed-heritage composer, Florence Price (1887–1953).¹² Still, efforts at canon reform and

¹⁰ The US-based Sphinx Organisation, founded in 1997, which works to correct the underrepresentation of people of colour in classical music, is an important predecessor to the Chineke! Foundation.

¹¹ Kanneh-Mason became the first cellist to enter the UK Official Album Chart Top 10 with his second album *Elgar*, released in January 2020.

¹² For articles on Price see Ege (2018) and Shadle (2019). plainsightSOUND is a music research project, founded by Uchenna Ngwe, which aims to rediscover colonial and postcolonial musicians in British classical music. See: <https://www.plainsightsound.com> (last accessed 24 March 2021). See also the database and resources provided by the Institute for Composer Diversity, housed at the State University of New York at Fredonia: <https://www.composerdiversity.com> (last accessed 24 March 2021).

repertoire diversification are not as advanced as they should be. A recent study that contrasted the number of female, Black, and global majority students who are part of elite youth orchestras and music schools in England with the demographic make-up of composers whose works feature in the professional classical music repertoire found that while '[there] is greater diversity than ever before in elite youth orchestras', in terms of repertoire 'the current classical music canon remains predominantly white, male and European' (Griffiths, 2020: 68, 63). There is still much work to be done to present a richer, fuller, more equitable version of classical music history and to change public perceptions about what the art form represents, whom it represents, and who represents it. The NT's 2016 production of *Amadeus* chimed with these endeavours, but, as I will argue, it did not resonate with them fully.

Artistic intentions

Shaffer's play *Amadeus*, which premiered at the NT in 1979, is not alert to issues of race, either in classical music or in society. Consequently, the play does not obviously relate to current initiatives concerning equality, diversity, and inclusivity in classical music. In focusing on one of the best-known classical composers, *Amadeus* contributes to Mozart's fame, which does not need enhancing. It is not as though Mozart or his music are in danger of being forgotten. This was true in 1979 and it is still true today. There are stories about classical musicians, both historical and contemporary, that are worthy of being told on the stages of the National Theatre other than, or in addition to, those that concern canonical composers.¹³ Furthermore, *Amadeus*' fictional tale, which casts Salieri as villain and murderer, perpetuates historically inaccurate mythology. Yet, historical truth is not Shaffer's aim in this play. 'Obviously *Amadeus* on stage was never intended to be a documentary biography of the composer', Shaffer has stated (Shaffer, 2007: 110). The dramatist endeavoured in both the play and film versions of *Amadeus* to tell a captivating story about ambition, ego, jealousy, and revenge. Shaffer was upfront about 'claiming the grand license of the storyteller to embellish his tale with fictional ornament' (ibid.).

Given the fact that *Amadeus* is not historically accurate, casting an actor of colour in the role of Salieri need not be remarkable. Msamati referenced the fictitious aspect of the play and of theatre more generally in public statements about his casting, saying: 'We

¹³ Consider, in this context, Sylvia Milo's play *The Other Mozart*, which premiered in 2014. Milo's play concerns Nannerl Mozart, Wolfgang's sister, who was also a musician. Dzifa Benson, the creative writer attached to the AHRC research network 'Representing "Classical Music" in the Twenty-First Century', was commissioned to write a new play entitled *Black Mozart, White Chevalier*, which explores the relationship between Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Joseph Boulogne, Chevalier de Saint-George.

exist in a world of metaphor. We exist in a world of dreams and of limitless, boundless imagination. And if you are going to turn around and tell me that the only reason you can't buy into the story is because of my lovely chocolatey hue, that's your problem' (National Theatre Live: *Amadeus*, 2017). By the same token, he also remarked: 'I'm not trying to convince you that I'm not me' (quoted in Rees, 2018). This is a seemingly oxymoronic thing for an actor discussing his portrayal of a fictional character (based on a historical figure) to say, but Msamati seems to be suggesting that he was not disavowing race or imagining an audience would not register it. He made this sentiment clearer in a later interview concerning *Amadeus*, stating: 'I don't come into anything unaware of who or what I am and what it represents: my skin-colour and my heritage is mine and I carry it everywhere I go. Whenever someone talks about "colour-blindness" I say "I want you to see my colour"' (Akbar, 2020). For Msamati, then, his casting in *Amadeus* accords with the general spirit of theatrical make-believe, and so the fact that his skin colour does not match that of the historical Salieri is irrelevant, yet he also wants his colour to be noticed. Msamati proposes that his race does not, or should not, matter in relation to the story being told, but it *does* matter in relation to the broader political and representational significance of having an actor of colour play this part. One can infer from these comments that Msamati wants audiences to register his race, but not to presume that it matches that of the character he is playing.¹⁴

The National Theatre is committed to being 'as diverse and inclusive as possible', as stated in the programme for the 2016 production of *Amadeus*, which contains an essay explaining the justness and benefits of having a 'theatre for everyone' and outlining the NT's 'diversity targets' and challenges, both onstage and off. There were no actors of colour in the original NT production of *Amadeus* in 1979, whereas the 2016 production featured several actors of colour, including Karla Crome, who played Mozart's wife, Constanze, and Sarah Amankwah and Hammed Animashaun, who played the Venticelli (Salieri's informants). In a radio interview for the BBC, the director Michael Longhurst mentioned how casting certain (unspecified) actors helped him to make the play 'feel' more contemporary:

What was really exciting for me was to take a script that is very much of its time and place and find really fresh and new, exciting actors that bring something ... to the way the characters are represented that just really freshens it. ... As a white director

¹⁴ For a comparative discussion about opera, see the documentary *Aida's Brothers and Sisters: Black Voices in Opera and Concert*, directed by Jan Schmidt-Garre and Marieke Schroeder (Parsmedia, 1999), which features interviews with African-American singers performing the roles of Black characters and characters who have traditionally been played by white performers.

you have to be so careful of being a gatekeeper to the work that goes on stage, and, frankly, we have a hugely talented cast, and it's a *historical* play so if you want to go and see what the real chaps were like, you can Google them.¹⁵ What we're doing is telling a piece of theatricality and it feels fresher and the text feels more up to date because of that (Front Row, 2016).

In these remarks Longhurst is circumspect about explaining precisely how the casting achieved the aim of 'freshening' the play and making the production '[feel] more up to date'. Not having an all-white cast differentiates the 2016 production from the 1979 production, but Longhurst does not elaborate on the decision to cast actors of colour in roles based on historical figures who were white (namely, Salieri and Constanze). In other public remarks about casting Msamati as Salieri, Longhurst cited Msamati's skills as an actor and as a company leader when discussing Msamati's suitability for the role.¹⁶ He does not specify how the casting helped him to reimagine the play, or indeed how the production team, including Msamati, conceptualised the casting, particularly the role of Salieri, or whether Longhurst and Msamati had a shared artistic vision about what it meant for Msamati to play the role. The programme does not elaborate upon casting decisions either. The representational logic of the casting was left open to interpretation.

'Colour-blind' versus 'colour-conscious' casting

Although Msamati rejects the idea of colour-blindness ('I want you to see my colour'), the NT's 2016 production of *Amadeus* effectively operated according to the principle of colour-blind casting. It did not make much of the fact that actors of colour were playing characters whose ethnicities (presumably) did not match their own and did not correlate with their historical counterparts (i.e., Salieri and Constanze). An exception to this was the accent Msamati used, which occasionally had a trace of Zimbabwe in it, bringing the actor's African heritage to mind. Salieri's interaction with the Venticelli was also noteworthy. As Msamati, Amankwah, and Animahaun are all actors of colour, their close association onstage throughout the performance suggested a cabal, a unit of Black power operating within the majority-white city of Vienna, yet the production did not develop this idea. By and large, the integration of actors of colour into a play that has traditionally been cast with all-white actors did not figure in the story being

¹⁵ Ironically, a Google image search for 'Salieri' prominently yields photographic images of F. Murray Abraham from the film version of *Amadeus*.

¹⁶ Longhurst has remarked: 'If you want a man on the stage taking on God, Lucian is your man. I knew Lucian had that power and that command, as well as being the nicest man in the world, which, when you're taking on a stage this size, you want a company leader like him' (NT Talks, 2017).

told, but was treated as incidental, part of a heightened theatricality that freely mixed eighteenth and twenty-first-century signifiers in its costuming, props, and sound design. The production also featured cross-gender casting: Alexandra Mathie played the supporting role of Count Johann Kilian Von Strack. But this element of the casting was not emphasised either.¹⁷ The production did not obviously endeavour to probe gender or racial issues connected to the play (e.g., associations between whiteness and classical music) or to explore in depth the cultural significance of having an actor of colour play the part of Salieri.

The concept of colour-blind casting is complicated and contested. Colour-blind casting suggests that an actor's race does not need to correspond with the racial identity of an actor's character, assuming the latter is articulated. Audience members can disregard a perceived racial mismatch, if there is one, and focus on the character being portrayed, though it would be naïve to assume that audiences will uniformly not 'see' an actor's race just because a production uses colour-blind casting. Lynnette Goddard muses: 'if it were true that we could be blind to colour, that race can bear no semiotic signification, then the very concept of colour-blind casting would be redundant – if we did not see colour then there would be no need to consciously ignore it' (Goddard, 2016: 83). Likewise, Naomi André observes:

[There] is an underlying falsity in the claim behind 'colorblind' casting. There is no blindness today regarding black and nonblack casting of roles or roles of any racial/ethnic identity; race and gender are always noticeable: people do not *not* see race and gender. Even if roles are portrayed where these identities are meant to be ambiguous, these are parameters that audience members will always look for and notice. ... Actors, singers, directors, and audiences are all aware that the personhood of the performer will be read into the characterization of the role and the reception of that actor in that particular role. Audiences may understand that a performer's race is not a featured element of his or her character in the drama; that is not the same as saying that audiences will ignore (or even forget) the racial identity of an actor (André, 2018: 14–15).

Msamati did not suppose that his racial identity would not factor into people's perceptions and possibly mismatch with their prior conception of the character of Salieri; indeed, as previously stated, he wanted people to 'see' his colour. In a newspaper

¹⁷ It is unclear whether Mathie was playing Von Strack as a male or female character. A male name was given in the programme. But Adam Gillen, as Mozart, used a female pronoun to refer to Mathie's character in the performance.

feature, the actor related a verbal exchange he had with an unnamed person in which race went unspoken but apparently operated as subtext:

‘Someone said [to me], “I saw the original in 1979”. And I said, “Oh. Great”. And then it was repeated. And I’m [like], “OK, I catch your drift”.

Because for them Salieri was white? ‘Yes, of course, he was’, says Msamati, who is unapologetic about the significance of his taking on the role, as a black man, in what is the latest high-profile example of colour-blind casting (Rees, 2018).

There is a potential disconnect between Msamati’s professed desire to have audiences register his race and ethnicity and the principle of colour-blind casting to which the production ostensibly adhered.

Colour-blind casting can be problematic when it is not carefully considered. It can lead to the creation of unintended negative associations. Goddard notes that ‘a lack of awareness about the way race signifies in performance means that unwitting and ambivalent connotations between racial stereotypes and role can be created by the parts that black performers are placed in’ (Goddard, 2016: 84). The Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2012 production of *The Orphan of Zhao* is a good example of problematic colour-blind casting. In this staging of a thirteenth-century Chinese play, only three out of the seventeen roles were cast using actors from East-Asian backgrounds; these actors had different ethnicities and nationalities and were cast in servant roles. The rest of the company constituted white actors playing Chinese characters (Rogers and Thorpe, 2014: 431).¹⁸

Colour-blind casting can also reinforce cultural and historical norms, even inadvertently. The original Broadway production of *Hamilton*, which premiered in 2015, cast Black and Latino actors in the roles of the ‘founding fathers’. This has widely been understood as allowing people of colour to recognise themselves in the story being told about America’s past and to feel ownership of it. But, as Lyra D. Monteiro argues, this interpretation overlooks the way in which, by downplaying slavery, for example, *Hamilton* ‘actively erases the presence and role of Black and brown people in Revolutionary America, as well as before and since’; consequently, ‘[the] play can ... be seen as insidiously invested in trumpeting the deeds of wealthy white men, at the expense of everyone else, despite its multiracial casting’ (Monteiro, 2016: 93, 96). Colour-blind casting does not prevent whiteness from being reinforced or de-centred; indeed, it can have the opposite effect, despite appearances to the contrary. Including actors of colour in the cast of *Amadeus* and featuring an actor of

¹⁸ For more on the *Orphan of Zhao* controversy, see the special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* devoted to it (*Contemporary Theatre Review*, 2014: 24.4).

colour in the lead role did not, then, automatically undermine or reframe the white, Eurocentric basis of Shaffer's play. It did not necessarily encourage audiences to interrogate whiteness or question links between whiteness, Europeaness, classical music, and universalism.¹⁹

As 'colour-blind casting' is something of a misnomer, 'colour-conscious casting' is arguably a better descriptor and approach. Colour-conscious casting, writes Harvey Young, 'actively draws attention to the ways in which race complicates or supports a production. It encourages audiences to *see* race and to think critically about its meaning and value in performance' (Young, 2013: 60). In 2015 Msamati became the first actor of colour to play Iago in a Royal Shakespeare Company production. This production, directed by Iqbal Khan, featured the Ghanaian-born British actor Hugh Quarshie as Othello and is an example of what Goddard calls 'colour-conscious colour-blindness', through which directors 'demonstrate an awareness of the potential significations of race when casting black performers and adjust the text accordingly to challenge typecasting and avoid reaffirming stereotypical perceptions of race and gender' (Goddard, 2016: 84). Khan's production of *Othello* 'acknowledged the inclusive casting by making conscious decisions about how Iago would deliver certain parts of the play and react to some of the racist language in ways that acknowledged his racial and cultural specificity' (Goddard, 2016: 91).

Colour-conscious colour-blindness allows a production to make productive use of an actor's identity by acknowledging it and making it purposeful, avoiding the traps of unintended stereotypical connotations and uninterrogated whiteness. Brandi Wilkins Catanese encapsulates the challenge and potential of this approach:

When color-blind casting allows black actors to take on roles for which they would not otherwise be considered and then gives way to a production process in which the black actor's intersectional identity is integrated into, rather than sacrificed to, the production, the practice does not abandon still-urgent, race-based political inquiry: instead, it acknowledges the multiplicity of the black subject as a political and aesthetic force (Catanese, 2011: 68).

A play that directly engages the topic of race, such as *Othello*, clearly necessitates careful thinking with regard to non-traditional casting, but so does a play like *Amadeus*, which is not thematically about race but is nonetheless invested in whiteness via its dramatization of a canonical classical composer (Mozart). Casting an actor of colour in

¹⁹ My thinking here is inspired by Brandi Wilkins Catanese's book *The Problem of the Color[blind]* (2016), particularly Chapter 2, pp. 32–71.

the role of Salieri offered an opportunity to investigate the whiteness of the play, and of classical music more generally.

(Black) Salieri and (white) Mozart

The NT's 2016 production of *Amadeus* did not avail itself of this opportunity. Moreover, it did not demonstrate 'colour-conscious colour-blindness' with respect to the casting of Msamati as Salieri, which, when considered in the contexts of the play, of this particular staging, and of cultural history, was not unquestionably positive in terms of its signification. Consider the arrangement of roles. Msamati played the lead role, and Salieri is presented as a powerful and well-respected figure in the court of Emperor Joseph II, but Salieri plays second fiddle to Mozart in the story he tells. (One of the ironies of Shaffer's play is that it is called *Amadeus* and not *Salieri*.) Salieri denigrates himself and his own abilities whilst trumpeting Mozart's God-given genius. Shaffer's play suggests that Mozart did not have to work especially hard to compose music; it just came to him fully formed in his head. The depiction of adult Mozart as an unknowing, childlike genius, an *idiot savant*, principally derives from Romanticism, as Peter Kivy has argued (Kivy, 2001). The concept of 'musical genius' in relation to Western art music is contentious. Alex Ross remarks: 'The danger of the word "genius" is that it implies an almost biological category – an innately superior being, a superhero. It is probably no accident that the category of "genius", an obsession of the nineteenth century, coincided with the emergence of the pseudoscience of race, which held that certain peoples were genetically fitter than others' (Ross, 2019). Having an actor of colour playing Salieri lauding and testifying to the genius of Mozart, played by a white actor in this production (Adam Gillen), made it possible for audience members who were unmindful of colour-blind casting – who saw Salieri as being Black or associated with blackness – to accept spurious ideas about genius (overlooking the social construction of this category) and its alignment with racial hierarchy.²⁰ Audience members who already had racial biases, implicit or otherwise, could have interpreted the production in this way.

Amadeus has consolidated the idea of Mozart as an irreverent, childlike genius in the popular imagination, just as it has made Salieri into the self-declared 'Patron Saint of Mediocrities' (Shaffer, 2007: 103). The only featured example of Salieri's music in

²⁰ See DeNora (1995) on the social construction of musical genius. In an interview in the *Guardian*, Msamati questioned the way geniuses are identified and considered: 'I do believe there are some who are touched by the gods but then you have to get sociological: who had the resources? Who was backed? And how many "geniuses" have disappeared because they weren't supported or didn't have the resources? Also, is it really genius or is it genius because people are telling us it is? Or are we elevating our own sense of wonder [towards a "genius"] because it is outside of our own abilities?' (quoted in Akbar, 2020).

the play is a short march written in honour of Mozart. In Shaffer's account, Mozart shows up the simplicity of this march and, by extension, Salieri's limitations as a composer by instantly learning and 'improving' upon Salieri's music. Salieri is not shown composing or performing with other musicians. In the 2016 NT production members of the Southbank Sinfonia functioned as a type of dramatic chorus with whom Msamati-as-Salieri interacted as part of the storytelling.²¹ The musicians were dressed in modern concert black, which visually distinguished them from Salieri and the other eighteenth-century characters. Longhurst remarked:

By having the orchestra onstage, framed as a modern orchestra, you have, I guess, the keepers of our music today, and they are the people that Salieri is trying to influence, but I guess we know as an audience member that it's Mozart's music that we listen to and that they'll be playing 400 years down the line (NT Talks, 2017).

In Act 1, a cellist in the ensemble pointedly shook his head when Msamati as Salieri mentioned his comic opera *The Stolen Bucket*. Msamati gestured at the cellist, as though inviting him to play something from the opera, but the cellist did not. The other musicians onstage (including the actors playing the Venticelli who also held musical instruments) stood stock still and did not return Msamati's gaze. The production mined the passing reference in the script to a composition by Salieri for comedic effect. It substituted a different opera by Salieri for the one referenced in the script (*The Chimney Sweep*), presumably because *The Stolen Bucket* sounds funnier and more stupid. Audiences laughed at this part of the performance. The production subverted Salieri's status as a successful court composer and built on Shaffer's depiction of Salieri as being second-rate, uninspired, and unimportant.

The unflattering presentation of Salieri is potentially problematic when considered in relation to the casting of Msamati in this role. It could be interpreted as inadvertently supporting a racist ideology in which classical music is thought to be more 'naturally' suited to white people and Black classical musicians are considered 'lesser than' their white counterparts. If a *Black* actor had played Mozart to Msamati's Salieri, this reading would not have been possible. Yet, the racial pairing of the lead actors appears to have been an element the production wished to retain. Notably, the understudy for Msamati was Black and the understudy for Adam Gillen, as Mozart, was white. If one attended this production and either or both Msamati and Gillen were not performing, one would still witness a version of the play that featured an actor of colour in the role of Salieri

²¹ For a lengthier discussion of the role of the musicians in this production, see Curtin (2019).

and a white actor as Mozart.²² The poster image, which sees Msamati as Salieri standing in front of a wall on which a well-known portrait of the historical Mozart (not Adam Gillen) is plastered multiple times in black and white, establishes a visual contrast and, by extension, a racial contrast between Salieri and Mozart.²³ Racial difference was conceptually part of this production even if the production opted for a colour-blind approach to casting.

Yet the production disregarded racial difference in the interracial pairing of Karla Crome as Constanze and Adam Gillen as Mozart. In not making anything of this pairing, it rendered the racial dynamics unimportant. This would not have been the case in the eighteenth century, but the production's conflation of the contemporary and the historical, and its colour-blind approach to casting, renders the issue moot. This production's approach to race generated multiple interpretive possibilities and cultural associations, some positive, some negative. The production offered rich opportunities for racial discourse, yet, because it did not harness them, negative implications and associations were left unchecked and the potential to advance progressive cultural politics was muted. The production did not make a strong or coherent statement about race, which left a discursive vacuum to fill.

Responses to Msamati as Salieri

Interestingly, only a handful of reviews highlighted the fact that this production featured an actor of colour in the role of Salieri. Theoretically this could indicate acceptance amongst critics of the artistic merit and representational wisdom of 'inclusive casting'. However, as Goddard observes, there is a history of British theatre reviewers '[politely] ignoring race so as not to risk appearing to be racist', so there is cause to scrutinise what was said and not said in reviews of this production (Goddard, 2016: 90). Some comments made in the reviews are highly questionable. For example, Quentin Letts in the *Daily Mail* notes: 'Lucian Msamati is an actor of many talents, but I fear he is miscast in this leading role. His patchy Italian accent lends a pleasing riff to the name "Mozarrrrt", but the thickness of his voice and physique seem wrong for such a sinuous politician' (Letts, 2016: 53). Contrary to Letts' supposition, politicians, sinuous and otherwise, come in all shapes and sizes and have different vocal qualities. Sue Webster in *This is London* includes this objectionable

²² Similarly, Monteiro notes that the casting of Miranda's understudy in the original Broadway production of *Hamilton* belies the creators' claim of colour-blind casting: '[Miranda's] stand-in, Javier Muñoz (who performs once a week in Miranda's stead), is also Puerto Rican, marking Hamilton's Caribbean connection in contrast to the other Euro-American founders, all of whom are black' (Monteiro, 2016: 91).

²³ The poster image is available to view on the NT's website (and elsewhere): <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/shows/amadeus> (last accessed 24 March 2021).

remark in her review: ‘Msamati is dreadfully ugly, so it is hardly surprising that his Salieri has little success in the seductive arts’ (Webster, 2016: 16). This remark is wrong on many levels. Msamati is hardly ‘dreadfully ugly’ – quite the opposite, but, in any case, using this language to describe him in a review is demeaning at best, and racist at worst.

Mike Scott-Harding, in a review for Afridiziak.com, a website devoted to African-Caribbean theatre, begins his review by referring to ‘something standing in the corner of the room. It is a bold presence – lurking, surveying, and waiting patiently’ (Scott-Harding, 2018). The ‘elephant’ in question, as Scott-Harding describes it, is the fact that Msamati is playing a role that has hitherto been performed by Caucasian actors (e.g., Paul Scofield, Ian McKellen, F. Murray Abraham). Scott-Harding proceeds to praise Msamati for the calibre of his performance, which, he says, ‘reminds us – once again – of the universality of the human condition’ (ibid.). It is hardly a coincidence that the reviewer who pointed out the elephant in the room is himself Black. Other writers of colour also drew attention to Msamati’s African heritage. In an article on the website *The Spinoff* Keagan Carr Fransch frames her discussion of the 2018 superhero movie *Black Panther* by mentioning that she recently attended the NT’s production of *Amadeus*. Fransch states that seeing Msamati as Salieri was personally meaningful for her:

This production was important for me to see as an actor, yes, but more so as an actor of African descent. Seeing someone who had literally walked the same streets as me in Zimbabwe doing something on a main stage in one of the leading theatres of the world? That people were paying actual money to see? Incredible (Fransch, 2018).

Fransch proceeds to observe that ‘[the] paying people in question in the theatre with me that afternoon were, of course, mostly white people over 50, except for a few people of colour that I could count on my hands as I waited in the foyer for the doors to open’ (Fransch, 2018). One of these people, Fransch notes, was the Zimbabwean actor Danai Gurira, who played the character of Okoye, a military general, in *Black Panther*. Gurira’s presence at the performance, coupled with the representational significance of Msamati as Salieri, added to the cultural and personal meaningfulness of the production for Fransch and connected these two pieces of culture that both featured actors of colour in leading roles.

White reviewers were typically circumspect about the casting of Msamati. They picked up on racial aspects in a casual manner. For instance, Ian Shuttleworth, writing in the *Financial Times*, noted that Msamati’s ‘slight African accent...[emphasised] Salieri’s outsiderdom as an Italian in the German-speaking imperial court’ (Shuttleworth, 2016). Andy Humm, an American writer, surprisingly found echoes of O.J. Simpson: specifically,

at the beginning of the play when Salieri refers to his last composition, which he entitles ‘*The Death of Mozart, or Did I Do It?*’ (Humm, 2017).²⁴ Aleks Sierz, in his review, nodded to the racial politics of casting Msamati as the villain of the piece, but diverted from pursuing this topic: ‘although it might at first seem questionable to cast a black man as the devil character, thus not challenging a whole tradition of prejudice, Msamati brilliantly leads us through the evening’ (Sierz, 2016). Sierz does not explain how his qualms were assuaged, though he did note that ‘[when], towards the end, [Msamati] mentions slavery, the fact that he is a black man gives this line an extra depth’ (ibid.). Sierz’s review reflects the mixed messaging about race in this production. Many reviewers were evidently unable or unwilling to pin down what, if anything, the production was aiming to communicate about this topic, especially with regard to the casting of Msamati.

Social media commentary about this production was less guarded about the casting. Surveying this commentary makes the provocation of casting Msamati as Salieri more evident. Twitter features many examples of people praising Msamati for his portrayal of Salieri, but, predictably, there are also tweets that criticise his performance and the casting choice, labelling it as ‘#PC’, for example. One tweet indicates that the author has ostensibly taken umbrage at the casting because of Msamati’s race: ‘At the National Theatre Lucien [sic] Msamati is playing Salieri in ‘Amadeus’. A black man pretending to be a white man. THAT offends me’ (@Dreadno20040065, 2017). Twitter user @RudelyAwoken apparently objected to the casting of a black person in a villain role: ‘So the NT cast a black actor as the evil Salieri in Amadeus. Sigh’ (@RudelyAwoken, 2016). A Twitter conversation sparked by a tweet criticising reviewer Quentin Letts’ mooted racial biases offers anecdotal information about private audience responses to Msamati as Salieri:

First time I went to see [Msamati] in Amadeus the actors hadn’t even left the stage after curtain call before I heard the people behind me complaining to each other ‘but Salieri wasn’t black...’ like it was their first reaction to the incredible show we’d all just seen... Of course it *wasn’t racism*, ‘historical accuracy’ was their only concern (as it so often is) but Salieri speaking English was apparently ok! (@AudienceBulldog, 2018)

Another user replied: ‘We had the displeasure of sharing the lift to the car park with a couple who thought [Msamati] didn’t sound English enough and should have ... worn whiteface to be “more believable”’ (@TQGEssex, 2017). These tweets may not be reliable

²⁴ O.J. Simpson was acquitted of murdering his former wife, Nicole Brown, and her friend Ron Goldman in 1995. In 2007 Simpson co-wrote a book entitled *If I Did It*, which offered hypothetical descriptions of the murders of which he was accused.

evidence of audience reception. One cannot know if the reported audience remarks are accurate; they could be entirely made up and part of a myth-making process.²⁵ If nothing else, these tweets illustrate how NT audience members write about one another online, distinguishing themselves from people (real or imagined) who have divergent and possibly wrong-headed opinions. The casting of Msamati as Salieri prompted audience members and other observers to take a position on the appropriateness of this choice, sparking an online conversation about race and representation in theatre.

One of the websites in which the conversation about the casting of Msamati as Salieri was conducted was Theatreboard.co.uk, which describes itself as ‘the UK’s independent online forum for intelligent and lively discussion on all things theatre’. A member of the discussion board named wickedgrin broached the topic of colour-blind casting, anticipating push-back from others:

I didn’t even dare mention the colour blind casting initially. It’s fine if the characters are fictional but when the characters depict historical figures it becomes rather tiresome. Mozart’s wife was not black (although I thought the actress was very good in the role). You can only imagine the fuss if Martin Luther King was played on stage by a white actor. It is great that black actors are getting more exposure in contemporary work and in musicals such as *In the Heights*, *Memphis* etc. but in this it is just unnecessary. The two Venticellis were also black – the males [sic] performance was appalling. I will now take to my bunker to avoid the incoming missiles of politically correct posts (wickedgrin, 2016).

A few ‘missiles’ were fired, though the tone of the replies was civil and the points made were rational. A respondent named Baemax observed that stories about Martin Luther King will invariably be about race, whereas race is not a topic of concern in Shaffer’s play, adding: ‘If we can colour-blind cast Shakespeare’s *Histories*, we can colour-blind cast *Amadeus*, after all it’s about as based in true historical fact as the Shakespeare’ (Baemax, 2016). Another respondent, with the username Snicole, concurred, and offered an opinion informed by her own racial identity:

I think the casting works in *Amadeus*, [Salieri] is an outsider – an Italian in an Austrian court and Msamati is, for the most part, an outsider on the stage. I am still of the belief (and maybe as a mixed race person I notice it more) that parts aren’t

²⁵ The anecdote, writes Jacky Bratton, ‘occupies the same functional space as fiction, in that it is intended to entertain, but its instructive dimension is more overt. It purports to reveal the truths of the society, but not necessarily directly: its inner truth, its truth to some ineffable “essence”, rather than to proven facts, is what matters most – hence its mythmaking dimension’ (Bratton, 2003: 103).

written for black people in the way they have been for white so we need to come along and claim the good ones (Snicole, 2016).

The comments in this discussion thread indicate a collective effort to solve a representational ‘crux’: namely, Msamati as Salieri. They provide a window into some (assumed) audience members’ discrepant views, demonstrating thinking-in-process, as occurs in everyday conversation.²⁶ It is true, of course, that comments made online are not representative of all audience members and that most individuals who attended the production or watched a live stream of it have not commented about it publicly online.

This synthesis of responses to the casting of Msamati as Salieri from professional critics, audience members, and other online commentators reveals conflicting opinions about the appropriateness of casting Msamati in this role, with race as the principal cause of dissent. The internet provides forums for people to articulate ideas and opinions that they might be more guarded about sharing in other public domains without a veil of anonymity. Despite the relatively scant discussion in professional reviews about casting a person of colour in the role of Salieri, comments posted on social media and on online forums demonstrate that this was, in fact, a fairly hot topic of conversation, at least for some people, and one that was not necessarily resolved. The public conversation about this production could have been more nuanced and impactful had the production engaged more deeply with the cultural implications of casting an actor of colour in the role of Salieri and connected with the history of composers of colour in classical music.

Blackwashing, black history

In connoting the idea of a Black Salieri by casting an actor of colour in the role, but not exploring this provocation in depth or through ‘colour conscious’ casting, this production of *Amadeus* was notionally linked to ‘blackwashing’: the act of recasting the racial identity of a historical figure. This has happened with Beethoven. The theory that Beethoven had Moorish ancestry and was thus actually ‘Black’ first appeared circa 1915 and has periodically been raised and refuted ever since (Rinehart, 2013: 117).²⁷ Curiously, ‘the myth of Beethoven’s hidden ethnicity still lingers in contemporary

²⁶ Matthew Reason proposes that online exchange by audience members about theatre occupies a liminal position ‘that is both between and inclusive of’ written criticism and conversation (Reason, 2016: 250). He considers audience conversations to be ‘a performative process of “unfinished thinking”, speech acts that both recall experiences and bring them into being through a perpetual oscillation between knowing and not-yet-knowing’ (Reason, 2016: 237).

²⁷ Rinehart explains: ‘The logic goes something like this: Beethoven’s family, by way of his mother, traced its roots to Flanders, which was for sometime under Spanish monarchical rule, and because Spain maintained a longstanding historical connection to North Africa through the Moors, somehow a single germ of blackness trickled down to our beloved Ludwig’ (Rinehart, 2013: 117).

culture’, along with other myths about the composer (ibid.: 112).²⁸ The American multidisciplinary artist Terry Adkins (1953–2014) tapped into this myth with his time-lapse video *Synapse* (2004), which shows a familiar portrait of an older, pale-skinned Beethoven slowly morphing into a younger, brown-skinned man with braided hair – a ‘Black Beethoven’ – and then back again, on repeat, over the course of 18 minutes, accompanied by ambient, instrumental drones (suggesting tinnitus and also Beethoven’s deafness).²⁹ The effect is hypnotic and destabilising. One is reminded of the long tradition of representing Jesus of Nazareth as a white-skinned man in European art, extending back to the fourth century C.E., despite evidence to the contrary (Oliver, 2014: 112), thereby ‘whitewashing’ him.

Nicholas Rinehart contends that blackwashing is connected to the fact that Black composers and female composers have historically been sidelined in Western art music and excluded from the canon. When Black composers *have* been remembered, Rinehart notes, they have sometimes been whitewashed: referred to or named after their notable Caucasian contemporaries. Joseph Boulogne, Chevalier de Saint-George (1745–1799) was given the moniker ‘the black Mozart’; Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875–1912) was called the ‘African Mahler’. This whitewashing of ‘real’ Black composers is ‘very clearly and undeniably insulting, belittling, and discriminatory’, Rinehart maintains, because ‘it erases the name and life’s work of a black man and replaces them with those of a white man. ... [Music] history must remember and acknowledge these composers on their own terms, not as the “other” versions of white men’ (Rinehart, 2013: 128, 129). It would be unfair and inaccurate to claim that the 2016 production of *Amadeus* straightforwardly blackwashed Salieri. After all, the production did not make Msamati’s character Black, even if Msamati wanted audiences to ‘see [his] colour’. Both Msamati and the director, Michael Longhurst, repeatedly stated that the production was not meant to be historically accurate, just as the play itself is not. Nonetheless, the production raised the *spectre* of blackwashing by allowing audience members to ideate a Black Salieri and uncomplicatedly juxtaposing this self-declared ‘mediocrity’ with the vaunted figure of a white Mozart.

Conversely, by including multiple people of colour in the cast the production signalled (presumably, by happenstance) the historical fact of Black people having lived in central Europe centuries ago, something that has not always been widely recognised or acknowledged.³⁰ The majority of people brought to Europe from Africa in

²⁸ Myths about Beethoven were explored in an exhibition at the Cité de la musique - Philharmonie de Paris that opened in October 2016, entitled ‘Ludwig Van: Le Mythe Beethoven’: <https://philharmoniedeparis.fr/fr/exposition-ludwig-van-le-mythe-beethoven/accueil> (last accessed 25 March 2021). For an account of the exhibition see Jeffries (2017).

²⁹ The video is available to view here, at the time of writing: <https://vimeo.com/77824888> (last accessed 27 March 2021).

³⁰ See Earle and Lowe (2005).

the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were slaves; some lived as free people. Blackness and Europeanness are thus historically intertwined, even if these identities have been, or have thought to have been, in tension with one another. The NT's inclusively-cast production of *Amadeus* symbolically presented a harmonious union of these identities. The historical record presents a more complicated picture.

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, it is estimated that there could have been up to two hundred Africans living and working in Vienna (Bressey, 2011). There is a famous example of an African who held a court appointment in Vienna: Angelo Soliman, who lived there from 1753 to 1796. Soliman's biography makes the idea of Mozart interacting with an esteemed Black composer in the Viennese court less fanciful, if only as a thought experiment. Soliman was known as a 'court moor'. He was, for a time, tutor to the children of the Prince of Lichtenstein, Aloys I and was a member of the same Masonic lodge as Mozart (ibid.). Caroline Bressey notes that the posthumous treatment of Soliman's body – desecrated and placed without his permission in the Imperial Cabinet of Natural Curiosities – illustrates 'the tension between belonging and acceptance on the one hand and the disdain for Africans held by Europeans [of the time] on the other' (ibid.).

Racial politics were not highlighted in the National's 2016 production of *Amadeus*. The vision it seemingly offered of a harmonious, ethnically diverse, eighteenth-century Vienna was rose-tinted. There is no evidence to suggest that the production team was aware of the history of Black people in Europe in the eighteenth century, or of Soliman in Vienna, for instance. Notably, the production did not have a designated, standalone dramaturg. Longhurst, the director, was the unofficial dramaturg.³¹ The production did not feature any people of colour among members of the offstage creative team (e.g., the director, designers, composer, choreographer). In her critique of *Hamilton*, Monteiro wonders whether, had Lin-Manuel Miranda employed a person of colour as his historian, he would have been able to write a play that downplays race and slavery to the extent that *Hamilton* does (Monteiro, 2016: 96). One could make a similar observation about the lack of engagement with Black history in the NT's 2016 production of *Amadeus*, even though Black history is not a concern of Shaffer's play.

There was, arguably, a missed opportunity here to explore the uncontested whiteness of Shaffer's play, and, associatively, to deconstruct the links between whiteness and classical music, encouraging audiences to reflect upon: race and privilege; the effects of mythologizing select composers; the social construction of

³¹ As stated in an email to the author from Erin Lee, head archivist of the National Theatre.

the category of ‘musical genius’; the formation of the canon of classical music; and the marginalisation and erasure of musicians of colour (composers and performers alike). Some of this could have been accomplished in an essay included in the programme, for example, informing audiences about overlooked composers of colour who were contemporaries of Mozart, such as Joseph Boulogne, and highlighting the whitewashing of Boulogne effected by the moniker ‘the white Mozart’. A colour-conscious casting approach, perhaps informed by the principles of Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theatre, which invites the audience to be cognisant of the actor playing the role as well as the fictional character they are playing, could have defamiliarized the story Shaffer tells in *Amadeus* in such a way as to make Salieri’s quasi-outsider status as an Italian in the Viennese court resonate with the history of Black classical musicians and with historical figures such as Angelo Soliman. (Recall Thurman’s proposition, cited earlier, that Black classical musicians can embody the Brechtian concept of *Verfremdung*, making the familiar strange and uncanny.) This, in turn, might have allowed audiences to gain a more nuanced, and less idealised, impression of racial dynamics in eighteenth-century Vienna and elsewhere in Europe, and connected the production to contemporary efforts to restore and enhance diversity (of all kinds) to classical music. In this way the production would have purposefully fused artistic representation of classical music with issues of demographic representation in classical music. I should stress: it was not incumbent upon the production team to undertake this approach just because an actor of colour was cast as Salieri. Interrogating the culture of classical music did not have to be part of the production team’s agenda, but this approach would, in my opinion, have made Shaffer’s play more culturally relevant for the twenty-first century.

Conclusion: changing perspectives

This article has presented an in-depth look at the National Theatre’s 2016 production of *Amadeus*, focusing on the cultural significance and implications of casting Lucian Msamati as Salieri, and has connected this casting choice to current debates and initiatives concerning race and representation in classical music. The production did not make these connections, which is why, I have argued, it was coincident but not in dialogue with them, and why its evocation of blackness in a play about classical music was inexpert, though still provocative. Ultimately, this analysis reveals a complicated picture with regard to the efficacy of this casting choice by highlighting limitations and missed opportunities for deeper engagement with the history and politics of race in classical music whilst acknowledging the positive aspects of the casting and its

potential for beneficial social impact. bell hooks writes that '[making] a space for the transgressive image, the outlaw rebel vision, is essential to any effort to create a context for transformation. And even then little progress is made if we transform images without shifting paradigms, changing perspectives, ways of looking' (hooks, 1992: 4). Casting Msamati as Salieri in this production presented a novel image of Salieri, but did it change perspectives about classical music?

There is some indication that it did. The Spring 2019 issue of *The Poetry Review* featured a poem written by the Nigerian-born, UK-based poet and playwright Inua Ellams, entitled 'Fuck / Symphonies'. In this poem, which, according to the poet, was partly inspired by the NT's production of *Amadeus*, the speaker articulates aesthetic pleasure gained from listening to orchestral music on an analogue radio, a listening experience figuratively presented as a type of aural sex:

I reached to spin that radio's dial but she had got to me / had me hooked in / to the orchestra / the symphony / the pit / with its wise wood and windy ways / the oak and gold / the whole world of her held me in its holy mouth / in its halting time / had me lifted / from the tight urban gloom / into a light filled with room / into a room filled with light (Ellams, 2019a).

And yet, in the opening lines of the poem the speaker anticipates a future falling-out-of-love with the music that has so enraptured him:

Months from now it will happen again / in gin-and-juice loose-tongued-stupor / I'll be like fuck classical music / fuck those elitist dudes in dark suits / there's nothing I haven't seen J Dilla do / that dude with a MIDI and a Mac composed the whole world right on wax (ibid.).

The speaker's positive turn toward classical music may not last; nonetheless, the pleasure it gave him on at least one occasion was apparently intense. And even if the speaker forgets his newfound appreciation, the poem memorialises it and serves as an evocative testament to the power of classical music to move us, physically and emotionally. In an accompanying essay about the poem, Ellams notes how he was inspired by the NT's 2016 production of *Amadeus* ('in the world of that play, I felt like I deeply appreciated classical music'), mentioning Msamati by name, and by attending a performance of Chineke! Orchestra, saying: 'I loved the visual spectacle of that many black bodies on stage playing music I had associated with the upper class, imperialism and power. It felt like reparations or a counter-cultural colonisation of sorts' (Ellams, 2019b).

‘Fuck / Symphonies’ is part of the cultural legacy of the NT’s production of *Amadeus* and is an indicator of the potential change in perspectives prompted by Msamati in this role. Msamati himself was modest and cautiously optimistic about the potential impact of his involvement in this production. ‘If I do nothing else’, he remarked, ‘the simple fact that because I am playing Salieri at the National Theatre and that brings people from communities who would never set foot in that building, just maybe in a teeny tiny little way I’ve helped bring people together’ (quoted in Rees, 2018). Furthermore, perhaps when audience members, or just people who saw the production poster, will think of a classical composer, Msamati’s face, or a face like his, will come to mind more readily, thereby transforming images and shifting paradigms, little by little.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the peer reviewers of this article. Their comments have helped me to strengthen the argument and refine the delivery. I am also grateful to Adam Whittaker and Rose Harris-Birtill for their support and suggestions. I presented an early version of this research at a symposium for the AHRC research network 'Representing "Classical Music" in the Twenty-First Century', held at the University of Exeter in September 2019, and at a research event in the Drama department of the University of Exeter later that month. Thanks to attendees of these events for their feedback.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Akbar A 2020 Lucian Msamati on Amadeus: 'Colour-blind casting? I want you to see my colour.' 14 July. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/jul/14/lucian-msamati-salieri-amadeus-mozart-national-theatre-at-home> [Last accessed 6 August 2020].

André, N 2018 *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press. FOI: <https://doi.org/10.5622/illinois/9780252041921.001.0001>

@AudienceBulldog 2018 First time I went to see him in Amadeus the actors hadn't even left the stage after curtain call before I heard the people behind me complaining to each other "but Salieri wasn't black..." like it was their first reaction to the incredible show we'd all just seen... [Twitter]. 7 April. <https://twitter.com/AudienceBulldog/status/982534773636771840?s=20> [Last accessed: 8 November 2019].

@Baemax 2016 Amadeus - NT [TheatreBoard] 28 October. <http://theatreboard.co.uk/thread/1732/amadeus-nt> [Last accessed 8 November 2019].

@Dreadno20040065 2017 At the National Theatre Lucien Msamati is playing Salieri in 'Amadeus'. A black man pretending to be a white man. THAT offends me. [Twitter]. 12 December. <https://twitter.com/Dreadno20040065/status/942727027467145216> [Last accessed 8 November 2019].

@RudelyAwoken 2016 So the NT cast a black actor as the evil Salieri in Amadeus. Sigh. [Twitter]. 30 September. <https://twitter.com/RudelyAwoken/status/781967159773757440> [Last accessed 8 November 2019].

@Snicole 2016 Amadeus - NT. [TheatreBoard]. 28 October. <http://theatreboard.co.uk/thread/1732/amadeus-nt> [Last accessed 8 November 2019].

@TQGESsex 2017 We had the displeasure of sharing the lift to the car park with a couple who thought he didn't sound English enough and should have been worn whiteface to be "more believable". [Twitter]. 7 April. <https://twitter.com/TQGESsex/status/982648358832451584?s=20> [Last accessed 8 November 2019].

@wickedgrin 2016 Amadeus - NT. [TheatreBoard]. 28 October. <http://theatreboard.co.uk/thread/1732/amadeus-nt> [Last accessed 8 November 2019].

- Bonilla-Silva, E 2018 *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Bull, A 2019 *Class, Control, and Classical Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190844356.001.0001>
- Bressey, C 2011 *The Black Presence in Vienna: Angelo Soliman: An African in Vienna*. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/equianocentre/blackpresenceblog/previous-posts/nov-2011> [Last accessed 11 November 2019].
- Catanese, B W 2011 *The Problem of the Color [blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Curtin, A 2019 Orchestral Theatre and the Concert as a Performance Laboratory. *NTQ*, 35(4): 291–311. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X19000356>
- De Nora, T 1995 *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792–1803*. Berkeley: University of California Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520920156>
- Earle, T and Lowe K (eds.) 2005 *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.
- Egan B 2018 Say it Loud, Nina Was Black and Proud, 12 March. <https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/music/say-it-loud-nina-was-black-and-proud-36689114.html> [Last accessed 19 November 2019].
- Ege, S 2018 Florence Price and the Politics of Her Existence. *The Kapralova Society Journal*, 16(1): 1–10.
- Ellams, I 2019a Fuck / Symphonies. <https://poems.poetrysociety.org.uk/poems/fuck-symphonies/> [Last accessed 19 November 2019].
- Ellams, I 2019b Innua Ellams on Tuning Out, Tuning In. <https://poetrysociety.org.uk/publications-section/the-poetry-review/behind-the-poem/ellams-tuning-in/> [Last accessed 19 November 2019].
- Ewell, P 2020 Music Theory's White Racial Frame. *Music Theory Online*, 26(2). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30535/mto.26.2.4>
- Oliver, W H 2014 Reconsidering the Skin Colour (Race) of Jesus and His Ancestors. *Journal of Early Christian History*, 4(2): 95–115. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2222582X.2014.11877306>
- Fransch, K C 2018 Brightness and Blackness: The Effect of *Black Panther* on an African New Zealander, 27 February. <https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/27-02-2018/brightness-and-blackness-the-effect-of-black-panther-on-an-african-new-zealander/> [Last accessed 8 November 2019].
- Freshwater, H 2009 *Theatre & Audience*. Basingstoke: Palgrave. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-36460-8>
- Front Row 2016 Amadeus, Astrid Lindgren's War Diaries, Richard Wright, 27 October. <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/ODA59FA3?bcast=122787063> [Last accessed 3 November 2019].
- Goddard, L 2016. Will We Ever Have a Black Desdemona? Casting Josette Simon at the Royal Shakespeare Company. In: Jarrett-Macauley, D *Shakespeare, Race and Performance: The Diverse Bard*. London: Routledge. pp. 80–95.

- Hooks B 1992 *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press.
- Humm, A 2017 On London Stage, Love Trumps Hate – Mostly, 1 January. <https://www.gaycitynews.com/on-london-stage-love-trumps-hate-mostly/> [Last accessed 28 March 2021].
- Jeffries, S 2017 Beethoven in Dreadlocks ... the Show that Celebrates Great Myths about the Composer, 9 January. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/jan/09/roll-on-beethoven-cultures-favourite-dead-composer-ludwig-van> [Last accessed 11 November 2019].
- Kivy, P 2001 *The Possessor and the Possessed: Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and the Idea of Musical Genius*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300087581.001.0001>
- Letts, Q 2016 Mozart's Magic, Even in His Pink Doc Martens. *Daily Mail*. 28 October. p. 53.
- Lord, R 2019 Email to the author. 1 October.
- National Theatre Live: Amadeus* 2017 Directed by Michael Longhurst and Rufus Norris. [Film]. London, National Theatre.
- NT Talks 2017 Michael Longhurst on Amadeus. <https://www.mixcloud.com/NTTalks/michael-longhurst-on-amadeus/> [Last accessed 3 November 2019].
- Nwanoku C 2019 Introducing the Chineke! Foundation. <https://www.chi-chinwanoku.com/chineke-foundation/> [Last accessed 19 November 2019].
- Oliver, W H 2014 Reconsidering the Skin Colour (Race) of Jesus and His Ancestors. *Journal of Early Christian History*, 4(2): 95–115. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2222582X.2014.11877306>
- Reason, M 2016 Conversation and Criticism: Audiences and Unfinished Critical Thinking. In: Radosavljević, D, *Theatre Criticism: Changing Landscapes*. London: Bloomsbury. pp. 236–254. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472577122.ch-014>
- Rees, J 2018 Lucian Msamati Interview, 8 January. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/lucian-msamati-interview-salieri-could-help-bring-people-together/> [Last accessed 3 November 2019].
- Rinehart, N T 2013 Black Beethoven and the Racial Politics of Music History. *Transition: An International Review* (112): 117–130. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2979/transition.112.117>
- Rogers, A and Thorpe, A 2014 A Controversial Company: Debating the Casting of the RSC's *The Orphan of Zhao*. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 24(4): 428–435. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2014.946925>
- Ross, A 2019 Antonio Salieri's Revenge. 27 May. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/06/03/antonio-salieris-revenge> [Last accessed 6 August 2020].
- Scott-Harding, M 2018 Amadeus – Review. 28 October. <http://www.afridizak.com/theatrenews/reviews/october2016/amadeus.html> [Last accessed 8 November 2019].
- Shadle D 2019 Plus Ça Change: Florence B. Price in the #BlackLivesMatter Era. 20 February. <https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/plus-ca-change-florence-b-price-in-the-blacklivesmatter-era/> [Last accessed 19 November 2019].
- Shaffer P 2007 *Amadeus*. London: Penguin.

Shuttleworth, I 2016 Amadeus Review, 29 October. <https://www.ft.com/content/a7fb412e-9c3b-11e6-a6e4-8b8e77dd083a> [Last accessed 8 November 2019].

Sierz, A 2016 Amadeus, National Theatre. 28 October. <https://www.theartsdesk.com/theatre/amadeus-national-theatre> [Last accessed 8 November 2019].

Thurman, K 2019 Performing Lieder, Hearing Race: Debating Blackness, Whiteness, and German Identity in Interwar Central Europe. *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 72(3): 825–865. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/jams.2019.72.3.825>

Thurman, K 2018 Singing Against the Grain: Playing Beethoven in the #BlackLivesMatter Era, 29 September. <https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/singing-against-grain-playing-beethoven-blacklivesmatter-era/> [Last accessed 17 November 2019].

Webster, S 2016 Theatre. *This is London*. 11 November. p. 16.

Young, H 2013 *Theatre & Race*. Basingstoke: Palgrave. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-39097-3>

