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The Guardian view on the 'yellowface' casting row: classical music has a diversity problem

The pulling of Peter Eötvös's opera The Golden Dragon from the Hackney Empire must provoke some tough thinking



The Golden Dragon, by Peter Eötvös. 'The fact that common sense clearly did not kick in points to a wider problem with diversity in classical music that goes beyond operatic casting.' Photograph: Clive Barda

The Hackney Empire in London [announced last week](#) that it had cancelled a performance of an opera that had come under fire from members of Britain's east Asian community. [The Golden Dragon](#), by the Hungarian composer Peter Eötvös, is set in a Chinese restaurant, and has Chinese characters. But the cast was all white. In [its statement](#), Hackney Empire cited its commitment to reflecting the UK's diverse population on its stage.

In truth, common sense ought to have kicked in at [Music Theatre Wales](#), which created the production, long before The Golden Dragon reached the stage. The opera's music and

libretto are by white men; the staging was designed and directed by white men. Though the well-intentioned production seeks to shine a light on the immigrant experience, it seems perverse to attempt to do so without any involvement at all from the communities described. The music itself contains passages that can be understood as cultural clichés that skate dangerously towards caricature.

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The fact that common sense clearly did not kick in points to a problem with diversity in classical music that goes far beyond operatic casting. Though there has been a recent efflorescence of women attaining high-profile music director jobs (such as [Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla](#) at the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra), conducting remains far from a level playing field, with women and non-white artists relative rarities.

[Research by Sound and Music](#), the UK's national organisation for new music, has found that while a nearly equal number of girls and boys take GCSE music, girls account for a steadily decreasing proportion of composers as they move through college and into the profession. In terms of BAME singers on stage, the problems are exacerbated by a narrow and homogenous group of gatekeepers (casting directors and singers' agents); and many British productions, having scant funds for lengthy rehearsal periods, are apt to rely on the kind of singers who can learn a work at speed. That often means casting those whose training involved years as a cathedral chorister followed by an Oxford or Cambridge choral scholarship.

Arguably, however, the problem is most importantly one of mindset. Too often, lack of diversity in programmes is defended by artistic directors using weak arguments – that it would compromise quality to factor in thinking about race or gender, for example. Or that if an opera is essentially “a fable” (itself something of an orientalist trope), it does not matter if an all-white cast is singing non-white parts. Or that programming must not be “contaminated” by extra-musical considerations (as if that were possible, or even desirable). This may seem almost laughably old-fashioned to many, but it is the kind of thinking (with some [honourable exceptions](#)) that remains too common in classical music.

After an initial hesitation, Music Theatre Wales has finally done the right thing by [promising a period of self-examination](#). It remains an exciting company that now has the opportunity to challenge its own thinking, and even begin to lead the way. Other parts of the industry, including funders, can also learn from this episode. Singers from BAME backgrounds should be better supported. Programmers should embrace the fact that widening the pool from which they draw will enrich, not diminish, audiences' experiences. In an ideal world, white, black and Asian singers would be cast any which way. But we are not there yet. Casting is not colour-blind if only white people get the parts.