

Music Theatre Wales London date cancelled after social media attacks

October 12, 2017 by [Mike Smith](#)

Music Theatre Wales' last date of the tour of its innovative opera *The Golden Dragon* has been cancelled by the venue after social media criticism for employing non-Asian singers. The opera describes them as being chefs from South East Asian countries.

Ironically, the characters in this political work based on the play by Roland Schimmelpfennig represent all migrant and vulnerable workers and the opera's theme is how they are vulnerable, exploited and dehumanised; a worthy theme that would seemingly be supported by those making the criticisms.

A similar campaign was waged against theatre companies over the casting of actors from one racial group to portray characters from another. However, opera would find such racial matching nigh on impossible with the vast range of races represented in works, the wide range of vocal requirements, artist availability particularly for companies either working outside large, multiethnic cities and budgets to cast artists from a wide area. Some opera companies, and theatre companies, also exist to give opportunities for artists from specific geographic areas. Obvious opera examples would include *Madam Butterfly*, when most characters are Japanese, *Turandot* where all of the characters are East Asian, *Aida* where all are North African. The argument could be extended to should non Slavs play characters from Slavic countries (*Janacek*, *Tchaikovsky*, *Mussorgsky* etc) etc etc. Of course, this would all bar non Caucasians playing characters in most Italian, French, German opera. This opera itself is Hungarian, sung in English and based on a German play, with characters based on Ancient Greek Aesop's Fables.

The performance at the Hackney Empire would have been the work's London premiere.

In a statement, MTW said, "We acknowledge that we have made mistakes. Having chosen to stage this work – an operatic adaptation of a German play, partly set in a pan-Asian restaurant – we now recognise that we did not discharge in a sensitive way our responsibility to the communities it depicts. Featuring Caucasian singers as performers playing multiple roles, some of whom are specified as Asian characters, has caused offence. This practice is still widespread within the opera world, and we acknowledge that it is problematic, and realise that we should have reflected more deeply on the implications it had for the kind of production we made. These errors of judgement were ours alone. Our exceptional performers are not to blame.

"We're extremely disappointed by this cancellation, and on behalf of our outstanding cast, ensemble and technical team, we want to express our regret that a production that has been so widely acclaimed by audiences and critics won't now be seen in London. Music Theatre Wales's work is undoubtedly challenging, but we have never set out to offend. We continue to believe in *The Golden Dragon* as an important and powerful modern opera that is a sincere attempt to engage with the issues that face people living at the margins of Western society,

and which gains its power through forcing audiences to confront their complicity in exploitation.”

This is a transformative experience for the company and one from which we are determined to learn. We are already in the process of meeting with a number of professionals and practitioners who wrote to us to raise their concerns, and we will be listening to them as we engage in a thorough review of our approach to equal opportunities and diversity: in our programming, in our casting, and across all our activities as a company. We are committed to incorporating this learning into everything we do.

“We are also aware that this is an industry-wide issue and we’re determined to move forward as an active contributor in building relationships that will initiate and guide change across the sector.”

You can catch this powerful, superbly performed work at other tour venues.