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Assigning Racially and Ethnically Specific Repertoire: The Student Veto Option



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INTRODUCTION

AN ONGOING DEBATE as to who should choose the repertoire that voice students learn, practice, polish, and perform continues to simmer. Should teachers choose the songs or should students be encouraged to select their own repertoire? Either approach can have advantages and disadvantages.

Many teachers have found that students are more motivated to practice repertoire they have chosen themselves, although students sometimes choose songs that are too far beyond their current capabilities. Students frequently perform with greater emotional connection on songs that already are familiar to them, but students often imitate in lessons the particular stylisms and inaccuracies they learned from their favorite recordings of these songs. Teachers can choose songs designed to intentionally build areas of technique, but students sometimes choose songs that display vocal abilities or strengths that may otherwise have been neglected or unexplored in teacher-chosen songs.

Regardless of who chooses the music, students and clients with professional ambitions in either opera or music theater will eventually need to focus on the repertoire of characters they could conceivably play on stage. This may mean zeroing in on repertoire of the appropriate voice range and *Fach* and, in music theater especially, may also focus on “type” or “castability.”

Who, then, is best equipped to choose repertoire in the voice studio when it is for a character of a specific race or ethnicity?

In this article, I will explore how race and ethnicity can factor into a performer’s “type.” I will identify some of the opportunities as well as problems that ethnically and racially specific repertoire can present in both the voice studio and in singers’ professional endeavors. I then will introduce the “student veto” policy that can be used to give singers more of a voice when making repertoire decisions.

RACE VERSUS ETHNICITY

It is worth taking a moment to briefly examine the difference between race and ethnicity. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines race as referring to physical differences that groups or cultures consider socially significant.¹ People may identify their race as African American or Black, Asian,

White, Native American, or any number of other races. Ethnicity, on the other hand, refers to shared cultural characteristics, which may include language, ancestry, practices, and beliefs.

Author and social worker Amy Morin distinguishes that race may be identified as something inherited and ethnicity as something learned. “While someone may say their race is ‘Black,’ their ethnicity might be Italian, or someone may say their race is ‘White,’ and their ethnicity is Irish,” she says.²

The APA also states that, since terms used to refer to racial and ethnic groups continue to change over time, it is important to be mindful of each individual person’s preferred designations.³

REDEFINING CHARACTER TYPE

In *The Musical Theatre Codex: Index of Songs by Character Type*, author Anita Endsley explains that character archetypes can be traced back to the writing of Theophrastus in 319 BCE.⁴ His work *The Characters* identifies 30 character types by their most prominent traits (The Insincere Man, The Stingy Man, etc.) in order to define moral types and clarify plot. In sixteenth century Italy, *commedia dell’arte* similarly employed stock characters who wore masks and costumes to delineate their type.

Although type is often conflated with an actor’s physical appearance in modern music theater, Endsley points out that contemporary considerations for commercial character types have expanded beyond “look” to include an actor’s physical “presence,” demeanor, and temperament.⁵ She chronicles how the musical *Hairspray* uses the Cinderella story to create characters that challenge the norms of type regarding race and body image.

The lead female characters are non-traditionally written to identify ample-silhouetted Tracy Turnblad as Cinderella who is tormented by the antagonistic, yet beautiful, Amber Von Tussle along with her well-preserved-former-beauty-pageant-mother, Velma Von Tussle . . . [Sam] Waters [writer and director of the 1988 film] made social heroes of the bountiful female Turnblads (one of whom is cast as a male in drag) as well as their socially discriminated counterparts Seaweed, Little Inez and Motormouth Mabel . . . With Waters’ non-traditional characters, his “Cinderella” was not a standard Ingénue, the secondary character romance

was inter-racial, and racial integration was the conflict. As societal perspectives change, so do the limitations on a character descriptive.⁶

In order to ensure that the characters in *Hairspray* reflect the intention of the show’s content, the licensing agreement was changed in June 2020 to require that Black roles be cast with Black performers. In an Instagram post, *Hairspray* composer Marc Shaiman wrote, “we are grateful to say that Music Theatre International (which represents and licenses *Hairspray*) WILL be requiring groups to cast the show so as to accurately reflect the characters as we wrote them. A show that specifically addresses one aspect of the black experience during the civil rights battles of the early 1960s deserves to have its characters accurately and appropriately portrayed on stage.”⁷

Therefore, when casting the Black roles in *Hairspray*, an actor’s type must go beyond demeanor and temperament and include race, as well. To ignore this directive would be both an infraction of the licensing agreement and would engage in what author Rebekah Dare Guin calls “whitewashing” or “race-bending,” which is when directors cast White actors as characters of color.⁸

WHITEWASHING AND EQUITY IN CASTING

One obvious problem with whitewashing is that it deprives actors who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) of opportunities to play roles and sing repertoire that was written to be racially specific. This problem is enhanced by the already unequal footing BIPOC actors have when it comes to casting in nonracially specific roles.

According to *The Visibility Report: Racial Representation on NYC Stages*, only 20% of nonracially specific roles were cast with BIPOC actors on professional New York City stages in the 2017–2018 season.⁹ The study, conducted by the Asian American Performers Action Coalition, includes both Broadway theaters as well as nonprofit theaters.

The study further reveals that, regarding casting, White actors continue to be the only race to “over-represent” by almost double their respective population size, given that 32.1% of NYC’s population is White while 61.5% of actors on NYC stages are White. Conversely,

BIPOC actors continue to be underrepresented with regard to their population size, with 67.9% of the NYC population identifying as BIPOC, but only 38.5% of actors on NYC stages being from BIPOC communities.¹⁰ These numbers even account for a five-point percentage increase in the casting of BIPOC actors from the previous season.

According to *The Daily Northwestern*, university student Valen-Marie Santos, who grew up in a Latinx community in South Florida, has seen the reality of these statistics in her own college community. Although she never used to feel that her identity could inhibit her opportunities, that belief is changing. “There is a mindset that if [a] role’s ethnicity is not specified, it’s default white,” she says. “I feel like sometimes I enter a room and I am cut off from consideration for so many things just because of how I look and how I read.”¹¹

That fact that BIPOC actors in NYC are cast significantly less often in roles that are nonracially specific is a statistic that is alarming in and of itself. The practice of whitewashing only serves to further disadvantage BIPOC actors.

In the voice studio, teachers who assign racially or ethnically specific repertoire to singers who do not possess the prescribed background or identity risk perpetuating the mindset that leads to whitewashing in casting, especially if those assigned studio songs will be publicly performed. It is worth considering whether NATS should adopt policies for its competitions and student auditions that disallow whitewashing in repertoire selection—at the very least, when it concerns songs from shows like *Hairspray* that have such clearly established parameters from its creators.

However, it also can be problematic if teachers overwhelmingly assign or suggest repertoire to their BIPOC students that is racially or ethnically specific.

TYPECASTING AND STEREOTYPED REPERTOIRE

In *Sing for Your Life* by Daniel Bergner, Black operatic bass baritone Ryan Speedo Green recalls advice he received early in his career from “two of the most influential people at the Met.”¹² He was warned not to follow the path of a certain mid-career bass, who is also Black, who had never overcome a variety of technical

issues in his voice. As a result, this bass was accepting engagements to play Joe in *Show Boat*, a character whose signature song is “Ol’ Man River.”

Green remembers being told that when a singer starts accepting roles like Joe, “it’s not because he thinks it’s going to move him in the right direction artistically. It’s because he needs the work.”¹³ He was further advised, “You want to take advantage of the [Lindemann] program, so when you leave here you’re prepared. So you don’t end up singing Joe. So you can avoid the *Show Boats*. You want to avoid being typecast.”¹⁴

This is not just a concern for singers like Green, who is now in his mid-30s. In 1961, George Shirley was the first Black singer to win the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions. He later became the first Black tenor to perform a leading role at the Metropolitan Opera, where he would perform for 11 seasons. Even a trailblazer like Shirley, however, had to diligently avoid the dangers of typecasting by postponing his first performance of Sportin’ Life in *Porgy and Bess* until 1998. “I didn’t sing Sportin’ Life until I was 64 years old,” he says. “I didn’t want to do it earlier because I knew I’d be typecast.” He felt it was a big enough risk that he delayed performing the role, even though he believes *Porgy and Bess* to be one of the greatest operas ever written, and despite the fact that, as he says, “I knew I could sing one hell of a Sportin’ Life.”¹⁵

Opera and music theater are by no means the only media in which stereotyping occurs. Northwestern University professor Henry Godinez had similar experiences when he was first starting out as a young actor. According to an article in *The Daily Northwestern*, his first role on TV was to play a drug dealing, murderous Columbian. He later auditioned for another show to play a murderous Puerto Rican, but he did not get the job because he lacked a Spanish accent. “I started to realize people didn’t look at me the way I thought they did,” said Godinez. “They just looked at me as somebody with a ‘Z’ in their name that has dark features, who should play bad guys, rapists and drug dealers.”¹⁶ Despite his feeling that Northwestern has made significant improvements in telling culturally specific stories on stage, he believes its theater students still endure the repercussions of stereotypical casting. This includes only getting callbacks for roles that are culturally specific, which, students say, “limits their opportunities to explore abundant

acting experiences and perpetuates myths surrounding their races and ethnicities.”¹⁷ Younger generations of performers, therefore, must be equally aware of the career-limiting dangers of typecasting and stereotyping as were their predecessors.

Micki Martinez, a recent BFA music theater graduate with several professional productions on her résumé, has similar misgivings about accepting stereotyped roles. She points out, “A lot of characters in musical theater are portrayed quite offensively . . . Latina characters are usually bitchy or slutty or overbearing or villainous.”¹⁸ She is discouraged when casting directors view her only through that lens. “I get frustrated when I bring in [for an audition] something that is from a protagonist or an Ingénue and they tell me, ‘This isn’t your type.’ And the only reason it’s not my type is because of my ethnicity.”¹⁹

Martinez has seen classmates and colleagues experience identical limitations in the voice studio, as well. “There are a lot of teachers who assign rep that aligns with stereotypes of students’ racial identities—that align students with the stereotypes that are put on them.”²⁰

In an interview in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, Jonathan Onyango, an undergraduate music theater major from Kenya studying in the United States, related feeling he was expected to perform stereotypical scripts or sing certain songs based on his ethnicity. In his private voice lessons, he was often told he would be a “good fit” for stereotypically Black roles.²¹

In an acting class, Onyango was asked to perform a monologue from *The Great Debaters* in which a Black character describes his experience witnessing several other Black people being lynched. Onyango said he didn’t want to perform the monologue and asked to perform an alternate scene instead, but he felt pressured to perform the assigned monologue.²² Onyango’s experience represents another problem with assigning the songs of BIPOC characters to BIPOC singers: Embodying this repertoire can be traumatic.

“OL’ MAN RIVER”

In an OnStage Blog article, author Shannon Gaffney explains the importance of performing shows like *Ragtime* and *Hairspray* that offer a multitude of roles for Black people. Besides the opportunities they provide these artists, “They address very real, painful experiences

faced by the Black community,” she says. “It is crucial for us to recognize this suffering and continue to tell those stories.”²³

However, she also emphasizes that these should not be the only shows in which Black actors are welcome. “Why do we only allow Black people to perform when they are performing their trauma?” she asks. “Why are they only welcome in stories when they are forced to live through the hate and discrimination directed toward their community again and again? This is already something that they are living through every day. It is inescapable.”²⁴

Ryan Speedo Green found this to be true of “Ol’ Man River,” as well. Before officials from the Met had warned him against performing *Show Boat*, he had already played the role of Joe for a summer theater company while he was in college. As described in *Sing for Your Life*, each night, after he performed “Ol’ Man River,” the audience would offer minutes-long standing ovations that had to subside before the show could continue. As he says, “It disturbed me, to stand there and feel it. It actually shocked me—the extent of it. I’ve never had longer applause in my life. Not before, not since. We did four or five performances, and every night it was the same. Every night everything came to a stop.”²⁵

He believes that, were he to sing the song for a Black audience, they may clap, but they would not be shouting for an encore performance. He further mused, “Why are white people so moved by this song? It’s about something you shouldn’t want to hear about from me. It’s about how everything, every day, is so hard because of you. Because of white people putting black people down. It’s about being oppressed. It’s about being free but not free. It’s about a man who’s a second-class citizen, who has to live belowdeck [*sic*], who makes two cents a day. He’ll never earn enough money, never earn the respect he deserves, never be treated equally. He’ll always have to watch his people get treated like crap. And his only consolation is death. When he dies he’ll be free.”²⁶

Green points out that the song was written by two White men, Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II, in the 1920s, when White people and Black people had separate toilets and sinks. Regardless, as he says, the song pleased audiences back then and it still pleases them today. Despite the enthusiastic audience reception, Green says, “I’m belittling myself the whole show to appease the white man.”²⁷

Daniel Bergner, Green's biographer, brings up some of the controversial elements of Joe's character and his portrayal in the show, including singing the N-word, singing in dialect, and singing text that emphasizes Joe's resignation to his "degrading plight."²⁸

There is an additional story recounted in *Sing for Your Life* in which Green succumbs to pressure from a career-influential individual to sing "Ol' Man River" at a private party. When he approached the stage, he was told by the elderly pianist for the evening, who is also Black, to sing "the PG version," by which he meant that Green should change the lyric "White boss" to the less confrontational "big boss." As Bergner writes, "Ryan laughed softly, furious. So he was supposed to sing woe-fully about the oppression of black people while taking care not to make white people uncomfortable?"²⁹

Certainly, not every Black artist who has performed "Ol' Man River" over its nearly 100 year existence has had the same experience with the song as Green. But, given the controversial nature of the piece, the *expectation* that he should sing it—that it is *assumed* to be in his active repertoire—is problematic.

It must also be mentioned that, for many BIPOC artists, playing characters who are of their same race or ethnicity can be a welcome, even thrilling opportunity. As Los Angeles-based actor Ashley Marian Ramos points out, this is especially the case when the story being told is culturally celebratory. "As someone who rarely sees herself racially reflected in character breakdowns or in the media, I find a lot of relief and joy when I am specifically called for," says Ramos, who is of Filipino descent.³⁰ "There's a joy to be had when I'm being counted and seen, especially because there's such a scarcity in those opportunities."³¹

She recalls being moved to tears the first time she was invited to audition for a Filipino character, and hopes the future will bring more chances to do the same. In the meantime, she longs for BIPOC artists to simply be given equal consideration for roles for which race, ethnicity, or culture are not central to the characters or stories being presented. "Decentralizing whiteness and wiping clean that default should be the goal," she says.³²

STUDENT VETO

So, where does all of this leave studio teachers? Should we never suggest that BIPOC students and clients work

on songs from BIPOC opera and music theater characters? Some of the answers may lie with the original question of this article: Who should choose the repertoire, teacher or student?

In my studio, I have always suggested songs to work on, but more and more I encourage students to bring in their own ideas, as well. After conversations and consultations with several BIPOC performers who are friends, former students, and current students, I have implemented a "student veto" policy where students are free to reject any of my song choices with no questions asked. As a teacher, I still use all of the considerations I normally would when suggesting repertoire. One of those considerations may be type, which could include a student's race or ethnicity. However, if I make a song suggestion and a student says, "No, I don't want to work on that song," we move on, regardless of how good I think that song may be for the student.

My follow-up response is to explain my pedagogic reasoning for why I picked that particular song. Maybe it sits in a *tessitura* that I believe will help the singer's ability to negotiate that part of the range. Maybe it has the challenge of open vowels in the *passaggio*. Maybe it calls for mature storytelling. Once the student knows my reasons for choosing the song, we work together to find a different song that meets those same criteria. I may never know the reasons students reject song choices—whether they feel they are traumatic, stereotyped, or that they simply do not like the songs—unless they offer that information. But students know that I will not ask for a reason and they will not have to explain to me, their White teacher, why they do not want to work on the song. We can just move on to the business of picking alternative repertoire.

Having recently completed her undergraduate degree, Martinez believes that the veto policy may be especially useful with younger students and in academic settings, where there may be more of a power differential between teacher and student. "Students have the jurisdiction to say, with no explanation, no justification, and no feeling of pressure on them, 'I don't want to work on that,'" she says.³³ Having it as a written policy makes it even more freeing, since all the students will read it, know about it, and, hopefully, not feel singled out should they decide to exercise their veto.

Martinez also believes there is benefit in going one step further and creating a written studio policy that teachers will not assign or suggest *any* repertoire that is racially or ethnically specific. Instead, they will leave it to the students to decide if they would like to introduce any of that repertoire in the studio. “That puts the ball in [the students’] court and takes pressure off of the teacher, who may be wondering, ‘Am I going to offend somebody by bringing this up?’ or ‘Am I going to step out of line?’”³⁴

Even performers like Martinez, who strongly identify with their ethnicity and often enjoy the opportunity to play ethnically specific characters, can still be frustrated if those roles are all they are expected or allowed to do. “Those lines are difficult to differentiate for teachers,” she says, “so if you just let students do it themselves, then no one’s uncomfortable.”³⁵

In her young career, Martinez already operates with the understanding that performers are part of a market, and one element of marketing is choosing repertoire that aligns with a performer’s brand. “Just because society brands you in one way does not necessarily mean that that’s the way you choose to brand yourself professionally . . . It’s about being able to say, ‘I’m not comfortable with this. This does not fit with the way that I want to present myself.’”³⁶

CONCLUSION

Our societal relationship with issues related to race and ethnicity is historically troubled but constantly evolving. Those of us who have benefitted from privilege in our lives and careers can no longer ignore the ways our systems have unequally distributed access to opportunities. The impact that injustices have, both past and present, on the functioning of our institutions is continually being brought to our greater collective awareness. These institutions include those to which NATS members belong, like the music and theater industries, academia, and private businesses like independent voice studios. If we are to truly help our students and clients “find their voices” and prepare for success in these institutions—as well as in society at large—it is incumbent upon all of us to understand how our studio policies either support or isolate our students. Something as simple but meaningful as repertoire selection is one way we can empower

our students to make choices that align with who they are and what they believe.

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