

OPERA THAT'S FOR US

It sounds like a cliché debate, but it seems that it's still relevant today. The question is: Why don't black people like opera?

This week, as Pegasus Opera Company gears up to present their latest work, *Koanga* at Sadler's Wells, the company's founder and Artistic Director, Lloyd Newton, is urging black audiences to "claim this opera as theirs." Founded in 1992, Pegasus is a well-respected touring opera company, which aims to demystify opera by making it accessible to as wide an audience as possible.

Still, Newton feels that black people just aren't taking enough interest and they should – particularly in *Koanga*, which he tells us more about. "Koanga is about an African prince who's caught up in the slave trade. He's taken to England to work on the plantation, but he refuses to work because he's a prince. But he's tempted into work by being offered the plantation owner's daughter to marry.

"He agrees to work, but it all takes a nasty turn. So as well as being about slavery, it's also about love, betrayal, treachery and much more. But of course, the play's subject matter commemorates the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade, which is important.

"And it's great that it will be running at Sadler's Wells, which is a very prestigious venue. The music in it is wonderful and the cast is 95% black, which is something you don't see very often!"

Newton reflects on the growth and development of Pegasus over the company's 15-year history.

"We started out doing educational work and we've gone on to do national tours.

We've been from the Bloomsbury Theatre to Hackney Empire to the Barbican and now we're at Sadler's Wells. So we really have grown and I think black people need to claim this production in particular."

MARKETING

Evidently, Newton doesn't feel that black people are "claiming" opera. He feels that this is because black people don't often know when such works are showing.

"I went to Sadler's Wells earlier this year to see Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* and I couldn't see one black person in the audience.

"I do believe that many black people enjoy opera. I've got many black friends who enjoy it. But I don't think it's marketed enough to us. That's why I'm so keen to stress that black people need to claim this particular opera because it's theirs. It's not Mozart or Puccini or Verdi – it's not an opera that deals with European history. It's about black people– our history. And it's a major production with a great orchestra and some fantastic singers.

"But as I say, I think the major problem is with marketing. If black people know about these productions, I believe they will go."

Well, you've read it here! But apparently, not all media institutions are as keen to promote opera...

"I've tried to approach radio stations like Choice FM or Kiss, in a bid to get them to promote us, and been told it doesn't fit their remit because it's not R'n'B-driven.

"As far as I'm concerned, if there's something going on that's about us and our history, it should be marketed to us in the places or on the stations that we listen to."

But perhaps this is the problem. Though it's without a doubt wrong to suggest that black people only listen to hip-hop, R'n'B or reggae, perhaps there is an issue with our familiarity – or lack of – with opera. Perhaps the majority of young black children aren't growing up listening to the symphonies of Beethoven or other classical composers.

Or maybe the old fashioned notion of opera being an 'elitist' thing isn't far off the mark. Perhaps it is only upper and middle class people that are interested. Newton has heard it all before, but he disputes all of the excuses.

NONSENSE

"I think some black people find the musical element of opera inaccessible because they think it's not theirs and that's nonsense.

"Music is music – it's universal. I was in New York last year at an opera by a company called Opera Noire (led by African American singers) and the amount of black people coming to see it was incredible. There were all these black people looking sharp and looking good and it was a wonderful sight.

"And as for the elitist idea, Opera Noire's production wasn't high-brow. Black people from all walks of life come out to enjoy their shows."

"You only have to look at our history and all that we've had to do to survive. Black people can take on any art for and excel – any one. This is not the white man's problem. This is our problem and we need to take the initiative to claim these productions and not tell ourselves opera isn't for us. It's a wonderful art form everybody can enjoy."

Koanga is at Sadler's Wells, Rosebery Avenue, London EC1

from April 12 to 14.

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