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Black Lives at Lucerne Festival 2022. “Diversity” in Germanophone Switzerland

The Lucerne Festival has taken up a leadership position in Switzerland by taking on the task of “lifting the cone of silence” of Black lives in classical and new music. This text examines the various media communications and responses to the 2022 theme “Diversity”, in particular. The author centres the Swiss context so as to unpack how discursive regimes interact with structural antiblackness. The author reads newspaper articles, blog posts, and promotional videos and places them in conversation with a theorisation of the particular forms that antiblackness takes in Switzerland and in the classical music world. Of particular import is the question of colourblindness and its persistence in discourses, and its effects on critique, curatorial decisions, canon formation, pedagogy, and research. Ultimately, the article aims to propose new ways of thinking about and practising critique so as to move beyond currently available discourses.

In the summer of 2022, the Lucerne Festival made its theme “Diversity”.¹ Nonetheless, it was clear through their curatorial choices that the Festival curators had in mind an attempt at combating antiblackness in the classical music world.² This, albeit not the first nor the only classical music institution that took on the task of thematising antiblackness in some form in the wake of global Black Lives Matter protests, still caused a lot of ‘heated’ responses.³ In this article, I examine the various responses by journalists and the discourses in print and recorded public-facing media around the festival so as to: First, problematise discourses and their relation to antiblackness. Secondly, uncover the importance of this festival’s choice to thematise diversity and blackness through its theme and curatorial decisions in both the classical and new music scene, as well as in Switzerland. Lastly, to begin an elaboration of how blackness presents us with a refusal of a world leading to the destruction of life on Earth.⁴ A caveat: While I do use particular examples, reducing my discussions to those examples would be a fallacy. I am less interested in individual authors and their texts. Rather, I am elaborating on discourses, and how systemic structures reproduce themselves and perform antiblackness in excess of one individual (case).

1 I discuss the efforts of the Lucerne Festival to tackle antiblackness beyond its 2022 iteration, as well as provide a larger analysis and elaboration of the questions of antiblackness and blackness in Switzerland in my dissertation (Cox 2025).

2 Lucerne Festival 2022a, p. 38.

3 Hernández 2022.

4 I use the upper case ‘Black/Blackness’ when referring to Black people. The lower case, ‘blackness’, is used when not directly speaking of Black people. It refers here to antiblackness’s entanglement with the climate crisis and the general claim over the definition of life. See for example Cox 2024.

A current topic in 2022, the Lucerne Festival's theme of "Diversity" was already in the works it had programmed since 2019, according to intendant Michael Haeffliger.⁵ This means that this theme was decided upon before the larger shift in public discourses in both Switzerland and classical music, following the global Black Lives Matter protests, that opened the door to a deeper and more informed confrontation with antiblackness. Antiblackness had before the Black Lives Matter protests and the murder of George Floyd in 2020 not been recognised as a deep-rooted issue in Switzerland in particular,⁶ though it has since been called an "urgent" problem in Switzerland by the UN in a report published in January 2022.⁷ In the Germanophone world there is, namely, not even a term such as "antiblackness".⁸ While the notion of antiblack racism (*anti-Schwarzer Rassismus*) does exist, this term somewhat misses what the term antiblackness bespeaks. By combining it with "racism", it is implied that antiblackness can be reduced to *a particular form of racism* (one amongst others).⁹ On the contrary, "antiblackness" is a term that has become used to describe the very structuring paradigm of the world that requires Black abjection, subjugation, its exploitation, and the continual destruction of all things black towards creating 'good' or 'proper' citizens, or individuals, that is, sovereign subjects.¹⁰ João H. Costa Vargas and Moon-Kie Jung, editors of the book *Antiblackness*, explain that "Antiblackness suggests that rather than with a set of social and institutional practices, the problem lies with the very notions of the Social and the Human underlying these practices and their constitutive rejection of Blackness and Black people."¹¹

We must nevertheless remember that there have been organisations and individuals fighting and discussing these issues for decades, or longer.¹² Similarly, in the classical music world: In 2019 and the years leading up to it, scholars and artists had been advancing incursions in the classical music world to think about diversity and inclusion, and the biases in institutional structures against Black lives. A milestone was arguably the major new music festival Darmstadt's "Defragmentation" project in 2018, upon which followed many other projects and meetings in the new music world.¹³ Another influential milestone was a symposium centred around Black lives in new music co-organised by George E. Lewis and the influential new music group Ensemble Modern, entitled "Afro-Modernism in Contemporary Music" in the fall of 2020, of which I was also a part.¹⁴ Both of these took place on continental Europe and in the

5 König 2022.

6 Antiblack racism has been taken as an issue but not as a fundamental one. There is, for example, a yearly report by the Swiss Service for Combating Racism, which has been discussing, and continues to thematise, antiblack racism. Nonetheless, a more nationwide awareness of antiblackness has been lacking. See for example Boulila 2019; Michel 2022.

7 UN 2022.

8 With regards to blackness, there is also no translation, but there is a unique term that I pair both with blackness as well as Black life, but that describes also something slightly different, namely Schwarz-Sein. See Weheliye: 2019. Similarly with other terms, such as Negro or People of Color, there are no proper translations. Most of the time we are thus required to use English terms. But what it also reveals is that language cannot be separated from lives, that is black study as a concurrent engagement of questions of Black lives and antiblackness that requires abolitionist thought, that requires thematising Blackness. See e.g. Diallo et al. 2019.

9 See for example Ross 2020; Costa Vargas/Jung 2021, p. 7.

10 See *ibid.*, pp. 1–9.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

12 E. g. Carmel Fröhlicher-Stines, see *Histoire* n.d.

13 This conference specifically centred on the question of curation. IMD 2018.

14 This symposium convened to address the lack of representation of Afro-diasporic composers in new music institutions. It was co-curated by George E. Lewis and Ensemble Modern, with invited speakers Naomi André, Jessie Cox, Björn Gottstein, Vimbayi Kaziboni, Hannah Kendall, Andile Khumalo, Daniel Kidane, Harald Kisiedu, Tania León, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung and Alvin Singleton, moderated by Martina Taubenberger. See EM 2020.

Germanophone world. Another current of Black advocacy in Europe’s classical music world for diversity took its incipit in the UK: spearheaded by Chi-Chi Nwanoku, the Chineke! Orchestra is an orchestra that was “founded in 2015 by the double bass player, Chi-chi Nwanoku CBE, to provide career opportunities for Black and ethnically diverse classical musicians in the UK and Europe. Chineke!’s mission is: ‘Championing change and celebrating diversity in classical music.’”¹⁵

The Chineke! Orchestra book-ended the Lucerne Festival 2022 with a performance of their junior orchestra opening the festival and their main orchestra closing it off. In an interview with Haefliger, Nwanoku explains the importance of Chineke! as both a way to change “perceptions” but also to create a way for young Black musicians to have a way into the professional world.¹⁶ A shortened excerpt of Haefliger and Nwanoku’s conversation is worth reprinting here:

Haefliger: We have received some criticisms that we are doing this for marketing purposes, communication, and that led me to a lot of thinking. I mean the whole theme led me to a lot of thinking. You take a big stone in the forest, in the woods, and you lift it and all of a sudden you see what’s underneath and you think: “Oh my god. Maybe I should have never lifted it.” And there were these moments we had in the team also about the theme. But we’re so certain about it, and determined that it’s important to do it. [...] But, why do you think it is important to present such a theme at a festival like ours?

Nwanoku: I could ask you the same question. I mean, obviously I think it’s important. And I think it’s... I commend you cause it’s a bold move to bookend the festival with Chineke! Orchestras. We’re incredibly excited about it [...]. I think change is frightening for people and I think it’s so important to show your support to... supporting the underrepresented, the people that you don’t just see every day in concert halls.¹⁷

What interests me in this brief excerpt is how there comes to the fore how the theme of diversity seems to present, in a certain milieu, a series of uncomfortable questions, problems, and discourses. It functions doubly: it brings an opening to thematising antiblackness in a world that erases antiblackness and Blackness but it also obscures and hides away that which it attempts to thematise. As I elaborate below, by reducing antiblackness to a matter of racism and making it one amongst others, a discourse of colour-blindness is reified that resists thematising the way in which racism and discrimination require a world structured by antiblackness in the first place. The inability to thematise antiblackness is itself, of course, not only a symptom but fundamental to the antiblack structuring paradigm. How to thematise antiblackness, Black lives, and blackness, when there are no (known or national) socio-political discourses that allow such? In this scene, ‘diversity’ functions like a ‘stone’ – it both uncovers a series of fears, problems, lack of thought, and at the same time it is the very thing that can cover them over. Thus we must come to grips with two things: The term “diversity” can on the one hand be thought as a kind of what I have elsewhere called a ‘hack’, so as to thematise something that is claimed not to exist (in Switzerland and in classical music) – namely antiblackness and Black lives.¹⁸ That is to say that terms can function as an opening for discourses that exceed these same terms. Clearly, the term “diversity” allowed for an opening of a series of questions in Switzerland and

¹⁵ Chineke! 2025.

¹⁶ Lucerne Festival 2022b, 28:35–28:50.

¹⁷ Ibid., 30:24–32:18.

¹⁸ Cox 2021.

in the classical music world. On the other hand, the need for such a term is in some ways tied to the inability of a discursive engagement with those questions behind this term. In fact, the term “diversity” has also been levied as a way to erase those very topics it is invoked for – such as sexism, antiblackness, racism, and discrimination. As Sara Ahmed puts it, “speech acts” such as diversity “are nonperformatives. They ‘work’ precisely by not bringing about the effects that they name.”¹⁹ In this sense, the term “diversity” functions doubly, but such doubleness appears only by way of its presence. That is to say that the inadequacy of the term and the surrounding discourses only becomes apparent by way of raising such a term. Of course, on the one hand, this might be thought of as a question of context, but it also bespeaks the way in which discourses (and terms) are tied to structures (such as national belonging, institutions, the archive). Thus the term uncovers, by its very presence, a series of questions that the relegation of it to unarticulated claimed fact is meant to erase.

In the case of Switzerland, this becomes particularly evident. At the Lucerne Festival 2022’s opening ceremony, Member of the Swiss Federal Council Ignazio Cassis highlighted in his speech the apparent diversity of Switzerland, and its exemplarity:

The FDP Federal Councillor from Ticino also contrasts the events in Eastern Europe with the history of Switzerland and its diversity: “In Switzerland, we still manage to live together in security and peace, even though we have four different national languages. This is because we have learned to deal with differences and disagreements in a peaceful way.” And Cassis is certain: “Our diversity enriches us. We have learned this over generations.”²⁰

Marco Frei responds to this speech in his news article as such: “Cassis, on the other hand, did not want to narrow the topic, for example with regard to skin colour, ethnic roots or even gender issues. Seen in this light, it was a plea for a holistic approach.”²¹ This points to the way in which discourses of diversity can be utilised as a way to divert from their aims. How diversity “does not ‘fail to act’ because of conditions that are external to the speech act: rather, it ‘works’ *because* it fails to bring about what it names.”²² But in the same moment, Frei’s comment also highlights the issue with such a view of diversity – that is the one espoused as a strength by the Councillor. Frei’s comment unveils how there is an aim to use diversity, as speech act, to erase the very issue that caused the need for the term “diversity” in the first place. Thus, both of their discourses move to a divestment from those issues that required the engagement of “diversity” as a term in the first place. As Eike Marten has critically analysed, this is a common narrative of diversity as exceeding the mere matters of gender and race, where Black feminist work is claimed to be “integrated and reduced” to a mere step towards a more inclusive and advanced conception of diversity.²³

19 Ahmed 2006, p. 105.

20 “Der Tessiner FDP-Bundesrat stellt dem Geschehen in Osteuropa auch die Geschichte der Schweiz mit ihrer Vielfalt gegenüber: ‘Es gelingt uns bis heute in der Schweiz, in Sicherheit und Frieden zusammenzuleben, obwohl wir vier unterschiedliche Nationalsprachen haben. Dies, weil wir gelernt haben, auf friedliche Weise mit Unterschieden und Differenzen umzugehen.’ Und Cassis ist sich sicher: ‘Unsere Diversität bereichert uns. Wir haben dies über Generationen hinweg gelernt.’” (FreiS 2022, p. 20). All translations by the author if not otherwise stated.

21 “Auf eine Verengung des Themas, etwa im Hinblick auf die Hautfarbe, auf ethnische Wurzeln oder gar auf Gender-Fragen, wollte sich Cassis hingegen nicht einlassen. Es war, so gesehen, ein Plädoyer für eine ganzheitliche Betrachtung.” (FreiM 2022).

22 Ahmed 2006, p. 105.

23 Marten 2016, pp. 137–139.

A case of national and historic importance for Switzerland might aid us in unpacking these kinds of interrelations between discourses and power structures: the well-known black-sheep ad created by the Swiss People's Party (SVP) in 2007 and its reception. What this example may show us is how the use of discourses of diversity functions doubly. But specifically, it clarifies how the questions opened up by the presence of such a term, by way of an erasure of the matters that required the term, can take place. The poster ad portraying three white sheep inside a red space, symbolising Switzerland, and one black sheep being kicked out garnered a lot of critique in Switzerland, but national discourses diverted from questions of race and antiblackness in the very attempt to critique the SVP's antiblackness. Telling is the response by the Geneva municipality, which responded with a counter poster with 23 different looking sheep, representing Switzerland's cantons (Fig. 1). The rhetoric around this counter was to affirm the diversity of *origins* of Switzerland as a nation, and that Switzerland is essentially made of immigrants. As Noémi Michel observes, the responses played into the SVP's attempt to circumvent racism by referring to the blackness of the black sheep as a matter of *mere* colour.²⁴ By highlighting an apparently already-there diversity and resorting to a discourse of pluralism, the counter amplified that the matter of the sheep being black is unimportant. The counter, in a first step, takes race as a determining factor of the initial ad – since the critique engaged in the recognition that it was a scene of exclusion based on the colour of the sheep – but in a second step erases race, or antiblackness, by highlighting an already-there diversity that has nothing to do with race. Michel summarises it poignantly: “In both versions, Switzerland emerges as an already-existing exceptional subject that needs to be protected. Also in both versions, the historical association of ‘Swissness’ with ‘whiteness’ remains unquestioned, if not reasserted.”²⁵ The production of whiteness is both the normalisation of white bodies and the abjection of all things black,²⁶ as the erasure of this very racialising process. This both makes “whiteness as property”²⁷ and at the same time *unmarks* it by erasing blackness, as that which then encapsulates race itself.



Fig. 1 Left: SVP 'sheep', ad of 2007. Photo: Patricia Purtschert. Right: 'Vivre-ensemble' – Poster campaign by the City of Geneva, 2007, artists: Albertine and Wazem (Michel 2015, pp. 411 and 418).

²⁴ Michel 2015, pp. 417–419.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 420.

²⁶ Gordon 1997, p. 63.

²⁷ Harris 1993.

There seems to me to be a relationship between this case and the graphic design for the ad of the 2022 Lucerne Festival. The Lucerne Festival ad presents black, white and colourful chess pieces, often with a dividing line horizontally across, where bottom and top present different colour-schemes – the bottom black and white and the top with various colours, sometimes including black and white as well (Fig. 2). As Hannah Schmidt points out:

On the chessboard there are usually only black and white pieces, but here in Lucerne we play with green, striped and pink ones. Critics suspected because of this visual language, among other things, that the whole thing was intended to serve the good reputation of the festival and was not really a serious initiative, but rather so-called ‘diversity washing’ – real change would not actually be wanted in this context. Some insinuated that the festival team is painting the chess pieces colourfully this year, while nevertheless still playing according to the old rules (and that we’d be playing back in black and white again next year).²⁸



Fig. 2 "Diversity" theme ad, from the front page of the programme (Lucerne Festival 2022a).

28 "Auf einem Schachbrett stehen sonst nur schwarze und weiße Figuren, hier in Luzern aber spielen wir mit grünen, gestreiften, rosafarbenen. Kritiker:innen schöpften unter anderem aufgrund dieser Bildsprache den Verdacht, das Ganze möge eher dem guten Ruf des Festivals dienen und sei kein wirklich ernstgemeinter Vorstoß, nämlich vielmehr sogenanntes 'Diversity-Washing' – echte Veränderung wäre in diesem Kontext eigentlich nicht gewollt. Man male eben dieses Jahr die Schachfiguren bunt an, unterstellten manche dem Festivalteam, spiele aber nach wie vor Schach nach den bekannten Regeln (und im nächsten Jahr dann wieder in Schwarz-weiß)." (Schmidt 2022).

Apart from the fact that the notion of colourful sheep as overcoming black and white mirrors the erasure of Blackness through a colourblind diversity in the sheep ads, the poster could also be seen as an engagement of the very issue presented by the discourses available in Switzerland as exemplified in the sheep ad case. By overlapping these two colour-schemes there seems to be a kind of tension that returns us to the moment of discussion, which is also that moment in which antiblackness is revealed. That is to say that it makes us sit with the term “diversity” and its questions, not allowing an a priori answer to diversity by proclaiming it to be already there, or not to be about issues in society that have to be raised. Rather, it seems to me that in some ways we can read the combination of these two discourses as inviting us to ask questions about our world, exactly as the need for a word like “diversity” does. Thus, in other words, returning to the scene of antiblackness’s self-erasure is necessary, but it must also be shifted over into a moment of blackness’s radical refusal of the control over this moment: On the one hand, it can be read as a moment and thus as something that already happened, thus antiblackness is now and inevitable. On the other hand, in the revealing of antiblackness lies also the potential to hear blackness as that which asks us to think not only the conditions of but also in excess of an antiblack world. “Diversity” as a term is thus a way to open discourses, but only so long as we do not fall into the trap of claiming that it as a term (as speech act) is already the solution. “Diversity” has to be, as a term, an opening of our possible discourses, and questions, to thinking about that which makes our society uncomfortable, exactly because it bespeaks a series of problems, and not a series of successes.

Colourblindness

The notion of diversity as more than a question of ‘mere’ skin colour has been taken up by multiple commentators on the 2022 Lucerne Festival in a variety of ways.²⁹ The issue with discourses of colourblindness is that Blackness is erased, an erasure that is paramount to antiblackness’s workings. Discourses of colourblindness make examples out of Black people and, in the same turn, erase race. For example, to posit that it is not a question of race, the example of *white* diversity is put to use. Here the same problematic begins to emerge as the response to the black sheep ad. Similarly, by taking up blackness as example, while denying to see their skin colour, by way of a recourse to diversity, a critique is advanced that both hypervisibilises and erases blackness and Black lives. If the person was not Black, and there was not a normalisation of antiblackness, then the recourse to diversity would not be necessary, and by erasing their Blackness, these critiques turn blackness itself into the problem – into that which needs to be erased/abjected. In other words, the very erasure of the issue is what makes, and performs, the issue (that is antiblackness).

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva identifies four frames of colourblindness: “abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism”.³⁰ First, the frame of minimisation. This concept can help us to think through this idea of, as example, the notion that “People of Color also make a career, if the artistic quality and the concrete circumstances allow it”.³¹ Seen in the context of an antiblack world this statement *implicitly* erases antiblackness by reducing the issue to colourblind notions of class, economics, and access – which are, of course, entangled in

29 Wildhagen 2022; FreiM 2022; Brug 2022.

30 Bonilla-Silva 2006, p. 26.

31 “Auch People of Colour machen Karriere [sic], wenn die künstlerische Qualität und die konkreten Umstände es gestatten.” (Oberholzer 2022). See also Stallknecht 2022.

racialisation.³² The fact that many Black lives face economic and other ‘circumstances’ that hinder their access to classical music has to be engaged on the basis of the question of the role of antiblackness to such structural conditions, otherwise such a statement could be made, so as to then erase race and Blackness again.³³ Another implicit claim presented by such statement is that the reason for a lack of Black presence is, at least partly, due to a lack of skill. We might hear it under the rubric of the fabrication of a delimitation according to merit, where merit is derived from the very fact of not being Black. Lewis elaborates how there is an institutional “investment in a certain sector of the society, and a complementary disinvestment in other segments of the population.”³⁴ Lewis’s examples bespeak institutions of learning and employment, and while this could be understood on the level of access to these specific institutions, this question of investment/disinvestment bespeaks a more fundamental structuring principle.³⁵ Loosened from a notion of an a priori given equality amongst individuals, a critique of which is necessary to problematise antiblackness,³⁶ it bespeaks how resources are taken from Blackness towards fabricating whiteness, or a normalised *proper space*. In other words, the very borders of access are fabricating also the norm and a set of values by way of exclusion. This involves the erasure and destruction of Black spaces, archives, knowledge, practices, and lives, towards establishing the legitimacy of the claimed inherent goodness of white spaces.³⁷ For example, we might ask how discourses not only rely on readily available historical records and narratives but also define what data becomes studied and what stories archivable. How might certain forms of critique, as part of larger structural discourses, fail to problematise the continuation of the erasure of Black lives and their stories/music? For example, how do critiques rely on larger societal discursive regimes?

Newspaper reports and critiques of Black composers have historically relied on tropes that cannot be disentangled from the general erasure of Black lives, and composers, from the archives of history/knowledge. Lewis, for example, has identified “three consistent tropes in the reception of Afrodiasporic classical music: that its composers, librettists, directors, and performers are out of their place, out of their depth, and perhaps out of their minds.”³⁸ For example, how might questioning Golda Schultz’s experience rely on the systemic exclusion of archival material of Black lives in general, and Black classical musicians in particular?³⁹ Similarly, how might normalised historical and disciplinary narratives cause the erasure of certain kinds of histo-

32 Robinson 2021; Williams 2022.

33 We might mention this example: “Trotzdem hat das Philadelphia Orchester, das aus einer Stadt mit bis zu 40 Prozent dunkelhäutiger Bevölkerung kommt, nur einen schwarzen Kontrabassisten auf dem Podium sitzen. Und bei vielfach inzwischen verdeckt vonstatten gehenden Vorspielen für neu zu besetzenden [sic] Stellen gibt es gewiss keinen Rassismus.” And: “Wenn schon in Deutschland der türkische Bevölkerungsanteil auch in der dritten oder vierten Generation kaum in den Konservatorien und Hochschulen zu finden sind, weil von den meisten Familien keinerlei Anstrengung ausgeht, auch dieses Terrain zu besetzen, wie sollen dann der Betrieb oder die Orchester diese Schieflage lösen? Mit der Beachtung islamischer, asiatischer oder schwarzer Komponisten ist das allein sicherlich nicht zu lösen.” (Brug 2022).

34 Lewis 2020.

35 Lewis particularly mentions the “deleterious results of this disinvestment appear in the very low number of women and people of color that I have found over more than forty years (in several countries) of evaluating applications for graduate school, grants, academic employment, and more, as well as decidedly non-diverse outcomes in contemporary music programming.” (See *ibid.*) Of note to my elaboration is also Lewis’s reference to bell hooks’s notion of “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” in the same paragraph. This bespeaks the need to theorise structural antiblackness in excess of a possible reductive reading to economics and education only.

36 Wilderson 2010, pp. 20f., 79–84.

37 Jenkins 2021, p. 119.

38 Lewis 2023, p. 149.

39 Brug 2022.

ries? That is also, who are the figures, and what are the texts (composers and pieces of music, but also journalists, scholars, historians) that define the narrative and how we listen to music. Discourses are entangled in structural antiblackness and cannot be separated from the structural negative conceptions of blackness, which is performed economically, geopolitically, socially, and otherwise. In other words, while critiques could be claimed to be a question of individuals, the analysis of antiblackness as structural means that such statements are tied to a whole host of ways in which blackness is marked as lesser. It is through the erasure of Black lives, of their contributions to the world, whether that contribution be wilful or not (in other words extraction, exploitation, slavery and so forth), that the proper and its authority is justified. Thought in relation to music, we can thus state that the destruction of Black music, erasure of Black composers, performers, and lives in general, is continually necessary to claim a set of values, a metric of worthiness. In other words, what we must confront is the way in which the structural erasure of Black lives is not only the effect of a set of values, but how the very erasure of Blackness is put to use towards the articulation of values.

Bassoonist and composer Joy Guidry explains in their Lucerne Festival blog post that the audition pieces were a deterrent. The selection gave them an idea of what kind of music would be programmed at the festival, and how the music “is just very white and mostly by men. So I think it definitely needs decolonization.” Followingly, Guidry opens readers to ponder the question of how many Black composers might have been performed there, ever.⁴⁰ What this points to, in a more general sense, is that the racialised exclusion of some voices creates a feedback loop that causes further exclusion. The exclusion of Black people from the archive reinforces their exclusion from those spaces that *house* the archive. It is the erasure of Black lives and their stories, as Schultz elaborates – an artist and singer featured at the 2022 Lucerne Festival. As she mentions, this is why it is important to not only thematise Black stories but also to let Black lives tell them.⁴¹ Thus, the call to hiring Black lives for the performance of *Porgy and Bess*, for example, is a refusal of the continuation of colourblind erasure of Blackness. Guidry’s piece written for the 2022 festival for the trumpeter Aaron Akugbo thematises this kind of erasure of history. Its title *They Know what They’ve Done to Us* is a line from a speech by civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer. The phrase is a call to confront history and the erasure of the Black lives whose dead bodies built the modern world. The erasure of blackness is the erasure of antiblackness – slavery in this case, but already standing as a metaphor for the antiblack world – and with such also the erasure of the ‘blood’ of Black lives, those ‘ancestors’ that fought against antiblackness.⁴²

That the erasure of blackness is fundamental to the formation of *value* comes also to the fore in two further frames of colourblindness identified by Bonilla-Silva: normalisation and the transplanting of race onto culture,⁴³ which I extend to other factors as well, such as kinship discourses, economics, national belonging, and so forth. Normalisation bespeaks how the effects of antiblackness are simply explained away, evading thematising their formation in and as antiblackness. In Switzerland, and Europe in general, this often appears under the heading of ‘no racism here’.⁴⁴ The transplanting onto culture and other factors of racialisation happens of course also in those examples mentioned above that minimise antiblackness. Another appearance of normalisation is the erasure of the Blackness of those who ‘make it’. Often under the

40 Guidry 2022.

41 Lucerne Festival 2022c, 22:10–26:35.

42 Hamer 1968.

43 Bonilla-Silva 2006, pp. 28f.

44 See Boulila 2019.

heading of proper ‘assimilation’,⁴⁵ but also, in the classical music world in particular, as the claim to the universality of the music over the appearance of the performers. Kira Thurman elaborates how racialisation has been present since the nineteenth century in classical music, espoused in the reception of performances of German *Lieder* by Black people. While on the one hand, there was the idea that one must see Black performers when they sing Negro spirituals, when singing German music, their appearance posed a problem and/or became transcended: they were “applauded [...] for ‘becoming white’ on stage”.⁴⁶ This reflects the general narrative of emancipation and erasure of Black lives, that is also the erasure of racialisation itself and the very act of racialising the proper (singers and music) – i.e., normalising whiteness. A continuation of the notion of civilising the Negro that existed as the justification for slavery.⁴⁷ But in the revealing of Blackness within, Thurman unveils a possibility: “Black performances of classical music in Germany and Austria take on new meaning when we consider them not only as musical interpretations of canonical works but also as performances of cultural citizenship in Europe.”⁴⁸ What emerges is a shift in the a priori givenness of Germanness in her historical elaboration of Black Germans.⁴⁹ For me this is most striking, and becomes evinced, only when considering her act of writing history, her intervention into the history of Germanness, which brings wilfully erased Blackness back into the picture. This is an intervention in the normalisation of whiteness as Germanness and of classical music.

It is the active erasure,⁵⁰ as also destroying, of Black lives from archives and spaces. On the one hand this happens through the lack of circulation of their music, through the purposeful destroying of their works, the lack of commissioning and hiring of Black people, but also through the ‘terrorising’ of Black people – physically keeping them out of these same spaces and channels of information and resources that are built on Black labour and erase it and their lives at the same time. What DeMarcus A. Jenkins observes in relation to schools can also be noted for other spaces:

For Black people inhabiting school spaces, the everydayness of terror is lived in the witnessing of pain endured by their Black peers. The exhibitions of terror consist of forcing students to observe other Black bodies being forcibly removed from the classroom and school community; the constant rejection of Black language, traditions, music preferences, and other cultural forms of expression; the obliteration of Black names and by extension Black identities.⁵¹

45 In German the word ‘Integration’ is used, which brings in a discourse of questions of national/societal belonging, a question of assimilation. See Nyffeler 2022.

46 Thurman 2019, pp. 825f., 848–856.

47 See for example Hartman 1997, p. 44.

48 Thurman 2021, p. 16.

49 Thurman (ibid., pp. 9, 17) states that Germanness can be learnt and is thus not essentialised. I read this in conjunction with her citation of Hoi-eun Kim’s work (KimH 2015), who thinks of Germanness as something produced globally and in excess of proper nationals. We must problematise this, since antiblackness means that the very production of proper national belonging requires Black abjection. In this sense, being able to learn Germanness, to be able to become human for those racialised, does not only not negate antiblackness but actually is fundamental to the articulation of it. It is the control over the influx of blackness that authorises and *makes* antiblackness. Nonetheless, in Thurman’s work there is a kind of critique that emerges because of her revealing of this very border zone, of this producedness of the world, as the control over borders of blackness. Because her work performs an unauthorised and unspeakable crossing of this border, it unravels antiblackness.

50 What Thurman (2021, pp. 14f.) calls “active forgetting”.

51 Jenkins 2021, p. 120.

It is here that we may also engage the last frame of colourblindness that Bonilla-Silva identifies: the use of abstract liberalist ideals.⁵² While we must, for example, advocate for the giving up of power and increased democratisation,⁵³ those ideals themselves do not necessarily bring the end of antiblackness. Switzerland is often seen as an exemplary democratic society, but nonetheless antiblackness exists. It is even worse than that, for scholars have demonstrated that modern democratic ideals have themselves over and over again been articulated on the distinct exclusion of Black lives. This is why antiblackness is the structuring paradigm of our world,⁵⁴ as the “afterlife of slavery”: the freedom of the modern subject is *rooted* in the subjection of Black life.⁵⁵ Tyler Stovall, in his work *White Freedom*, analyses the particular ways in which freedom has, over the course of history, to this day, been claimed against Blackness.⁵⁶ At the same time, he opens holes in this linear narrative by demonstrating the ways in which Black lives, and abolitionists, have continuously refigured, and continue to refigure, what freedom means and is.⁵⁷ We mustn’t reduce this to a positivist set of addendums, or a narrative of emancipation, which itself espouses a kind of leaving behind of the ‘Slave’, or blackness.⁵⁸ Rather, it is in a refusal of the linearity, this reduction to authentic causal events and actants, that we find this refiguring.

One of the two featured artists at the Lucerne Festival 2022, Tyshawn Sorey, was interviewed by Pirmin Bossart for the festival’s magazine, and in this exchange we might be able to begin uncovering the kind of refusal blackness professes into and out of an antiblack world. I can only hear this if I, as a reader of the text, join this refusal, which requires me to read the whole text in excess of language and the writing on the page with its produced protagonists. Bossart’s questions engage discourses I have analysed above and others that circulated around this festival. Moving from questions that *other* Black lives – composers and musicians – towards questions that problematise the distinction between Black music and white music, and other genre delimitations steeped in racialisation (e.g. composition vs. improvisation), the conversation ends with a deliberation on Blackness.⁵⁹ What emerges in this narrative form is thus not a move that erases Blackness, rather it seems that the examination and confrontation with antiblackness *glitches* into Blackness. The movement of assimilation and black abjection is refused. This can only come to the fore when *reading in excess of an antiblack modality of engaging text itself*. By that I mean, taking into account one’s own position – the reader’s – in relation to an antiblack world, and with such also the positions of those lives *behind* the authors of texts, or the utterance of words. Not doing such would continue the normalisation of a racialised position in the world, coveted under the *universal subject*. Michel Foucault points out that every discourse creates its own author,⁶⁰ the composer is herself produced as author, not only by their compositions, or texts, but also by society and the discourses around her. The possibility of a critique without the consideration of how antiblackness always already steals Black voices, continually fails to exit the self-reifying structuring paradigm of antiblackness. Conversely, a denial of the possibility of a critique of antiblackness on the basis of the protection of *individuals* also fails. Such too often simply erases the conditions, that is the structural positions, of those who speak,

52 Bonilla-Silva 2006, p. 28.

53 See Baureithel/Berg 2022.

54 Wilderson 2020, p. 102.

55 Hartman 2007, p. 6.

56 See also Cox 2023.

57 Stovall 2021.

58 A narrative of emancipation fundamental to antiblackness. See Wilderson 2010, pp. 26–28.

59 Sorey/Bossart 2022, p. 38.

60 Foucault 1984.

the author of the text, and language's investment in antiblackness. If antiblackness holds black in an enclave of absolute control, claiming authority over who may have a voice, who gets to speak, who is a subject, then blackness is the break-down of a prefigured author/text (of the delimitation between a proper subject and its *others*).⁶¹ In their conversation, Bossart and Sorey thus engage antiblackness – the white gaze,⁶² colourblindness – but also Blackness.

Answering the final question “How has this [access to twentieth century European music] influenced your blackness?”, Sorey states: “In the encounter with modern music, my relationship to being Black was on the one hand questioned, and on the other hand renewed.”⁶³ In one way, reading *colourblindly*, this can be read as a kind of saviourism. But Sorey refuses such a reductive reading: “Because there were other Black people who were into the same kind of music that I was interested in, including Ellington and other great composers.”⁶⁴ What happens is that European contemporary classical music becomes a way to meet Black people. This mirrors for me the formation of the uppercase “Black”, where the white gaze is turned over from a delimitation of being through marking non-being, into the proliferation of non-beingness as the impossible-possibility to live the alterdestiny. And I also hear this with Thurman's work: what if European music also always already meant Black people and not only whites?

New Questions

Asked the question, “[w]hile the lack of ethnical diversity remains a very actively discussed topic in classical music, the industry seems – at first glance – to be relatively open towards LGBT+ musicians. Is this a naïve assumption?”, Guidry's answer, “I do think it's naïve because it's only accepting to the conventional white queer person”, refuses both an answer and the question's implicit delimitation of blackness.⁶⁵ Guidry's affirmative refusal shines a light on the implicit idea that Black and LGBTQ+ don't mix – the idea of Black as a separable space amongst other minority spaces. Guidry instead points out that Black is not only also LGBTQ+, rather, they're refusing the very boundary-drawing necessary to hold LGBTQ+ as a space that can be without Black – which also implicitly, through making it another unracialised category, turns LGBTQ+ into a white space. I extend here Jared Sexton's critique of a certain conception of ‘multiracialism’. He demonstrates how the purity of race is actually reified through displacing impurity onto individuals or relationships that are ‘mixed’. This, rather than end racism, actually articulates it by solidifying the very categories that are apparently being mixed.⁶⁶ As Sexton elaborates: “No miscegenation, no racial identity; no purity without a prior mixture and not the other way around.”⁶⁷

There is another underground story here. Black movements have often been not only invaluable but even essential in advancing many justice movements, such as the women's move-

61 Leaning on Moten 2003.

62 The term white gaze comes from Frantz Fanon (1986), who describes with it the kind of gaze that holds blackness absolutely in black bodies; and, at the same time, claims control over them and marks them as abject.

63 “Wie hat das Ihr Schwarzsein beeinflusst? – In der Begegnung mit der modernen Musik wurde meine Beziehung zum Schwarzsein einerseits in Frage gestellt, andererseits auch erneuert.” (Sorey/Bossart 2022, p. 38).

64 “Denn es gab auch andere Schwarze Menschen, die sich mit derselben Art von Musik beschäftigten, für die ich mich interessierte, einschliesslich Ellington und anderer grosser Komponisten.” (Ibid.).

65 Guidry 2022.

66 Sexton 2008, p. 220.

67 Ibid., p. 218.

ment,⁶⁸ the liberation of colonial powers,⁶⁹ or the formation of ethnic studies.⁷⁰ While all of these movements have also been critical for the Black liberation movements, historically many of them, officially, left Blackness behind.⁷¹ At the same time, we must also see that Blackness has too often been attempted to be made into something containable and thus discounting numerous Black lives, particularly LGBTQ+ Black lives and Black women, but also certain Black experiences, such as Black Swiss. While these are not the same, they do share the fact that the abjection of Black lives continues when Blackness is defined through restrictions imposed by an antiblack world that delimits Blackness. Most recently in the US, Asian-Americans have been used as a group to justify the removal of affirmative action.⁷² Here the supreme court wilfully spoke a rhetoric of colourblindness.⁷³ Similarly, some commentators have used particularly Asians to challenge efforts to begin tackling antiblackness at the Lucerne Festival. They wrongly assume that Asians are properly integrated, and that there is not only no race problem, but that the problem is with Blackness.⁷⁴ Again, race is made to matter in a first step and then erased in a second step, erasing structural antiblackness and localising the problem in blackness, itself being *contained* (delimited and controlled) by this racialised gazing.⁷⁵ These critiques fail when Blackness is no longer reduced to a white gaze that holds it in a separable space while whiteness is normalised and racialisation erased.

Blackness demands us to ask a different set of questions instead of accepting a world where all things black are continually erased, where everyone must conform to an idealised and unarticulated subject position or form of existence/life. Not to thematise antiblackness, nor blackness, itself already follows in the footsteps of an antiblack world’s desire to erase its own articulation. In this sense, we must remember that both the thematisation, failed or not, and the following discourses, are necessary. But only by way of a continuation of critique, where the critiques’ relations to structural antiblackness are revealed, where the very closure of questioning is refused, may antiblackness be exceeded. This is what blackness – that is both the terms and discourses around “blackness” and the uppercase “Black” – bespeaks; it is the breakdown of a self-reifying structuring paradigm. Critique turns into continual study.

“You know, there really are Black composers in the future”⁷⁶

“Why does classical music in particular have such a hard time when it comes to diversity?”, asked Mithu Sanyal at a Lucerne Festival podium’s discussion.⁷⁷ One line of reasoning this question could imply, is that there is a space of less antiblackness and that the space of classical music is self-contained. If taken this way it leads to colourblind reductions of antiblackness to economics or power.⁷⁸ Classical music does indeed present us with a space that has been attempted to

68 See e.g. Davis 2019, p. 40. Regarding Switzerland see also Burke et al. 2020, pp. 57f.

69 See e.g. Rollins 1986.

70 See e.g. Wang 1997.

71 Sexton 2010.

72 When diversity became the only legally permissible way to achieve affirmative action in institutions, it also ‘de-linked’ it from that which it attempted to combat, namely antiblackness. This facilitated the subsequent removal of affirmative action by the supreme court in 2023. See KimC 2018, pp. 223–225.

73 See *NYTimes* 2023.

74 Brug 2022; Nyffeler 2022. Maiko Kawabata’s study demonstrates that Asians experience racial discrimination in European orchestras, see Kawabata 2023.

75 See KimC 2023; KimC 2022.

76 Kendall et al. 2021, p. 145.

77 Quoted after Schmidt 2022.

78 Ibid. See also Sanyal 2022.

be controlled as an extension of projects of nation building that cannot be separated from anti-blackness as a structuring paradigm. For example, Loren Kajikawa elaborates on the interrelation between institutions and genre delimitation in the US context:

Just as most colleges were not designed initially to serve nonwhite students, university music schools were never intended to teach anything other than classical music. They were, in fact, built on a culture of exclusion. Most U.S. music departments were founded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and they reflected the standards and tastes of white, Anglo-Saxon elites who believed that European art music possessed qualities separating it from the music of darker-skinned, lower-class Americans.⁷⁹

That is to say, what work such as Thurman's presents us with, is that just like the national space of Germany, or Europe, or Switzerland, classical music, as the mythological self-image of white Europe, is a space that is figured decidedly not black.⁸⁰ We must extend this to current work around questions of geographic/social space where scholars have demonstrated that white spaces are built on, that is also to say claim their worth in, the destruction of Black spaces.⁸¹ It is important to note, though, that these spaces are not already there. These spaces are articulated in and as the very relation they aim to uphold – a relation of investment/disinvestment, or extraction. The physical spaces, the networks, the archives, that classical music requires to exist, form a kind of 'meta-space' that cannot be separated from an antiblack structuring paradigm. Musical spaces, including genres, with the institutions that make them, exist as a set of structural relations. It is thus impossible to think the formation of a musical genre with its institutional networks by itself. One cannot separate the formation of a space of 'improvised music', or jazz, and another of classical music, from their historical emergence in a colour line.⁸² This means that the question of diversity in classical music exceeds a reduction to classical music as an exceptional space, while other musical (genre or institutional) spaces remain free of anti-blackness. This means that if we come to grips with classical music's entanglement with whiteness as property, as Loren Kajikawa proposes, then we must also come to understand the fabrication of other genre-spaces as part of the question of structural antiblackness.⁸³ This also means that the claim that including other genres that are supposedly less antiblack, and become marked as 'Black', for example, can work counter to our aim to tackle structural antiblackness. As a result, classical music's confrontation with the questions of antiblackness allows for a refiguring that exceeds the spaces articulated (that make our musical and otherwise world). By opening questions through an intervention into the discourses that are possible in a space, such as classical music or Switzerland, new ways of thinking about the world become possible, which also means that we may tackle structures of exclusion. This is how "diversity" as a term, raised in spaces that distance themselves from the questions hidden underneath this term, can bring actual change. Thus, we must hear this term in excess of pregiven discourses, nor should we

79 See Kajikawa 2019, p. 158.

80 The narrative of leaving race behind, which according to scholar Fatima El-Tayeb (2011, p. 6) is a fundamental narrative for 'European' identity – the attempt to keep 'race' out, to keep it from coming in, and to control its influx.

81 Seamster/Purifoy 2021.

82 Thurman's book *Singing Like Germans* (Thurman 2021) outlines the ways in which race was a question of the delimitation of who is fit for classical music. Scholars have outlined the ways in which musical genres have functioned as ways to control the movement and music of Black lives. See Lewis 2008, pp. xli, 13. See also Roach 1972.

83 See Kajikawa 2019, p. 164. For an elaboration of these questions with regards to US popular music, see Morrison 2024.

arrest the discourses at this term itself (which brings with it the erasure of how this term opened a proverbial can of worms in the first place). Rather, the task is now to continue with the questions that surfaced with these interventions.

The Lucerne Festival, as Oberholzer and Schmidt underscore, has through its presence in national and international media the ability to open discourses.⁸⁴ My call is thus to take this opening as a way to exceed the possible discourses and to sit with the uncertainty that such opening proposes. Sanyal, in her text for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, points out that the theme of diversity is about the refiguring of a normalised notion of ‘us’.⁸⁵ I find here the possibility of a series of very different kinds of questions. Moving past colourblindness, recognising the fundamentality of antiblackness, and hearing blackness’s refusals as refigurings. I propose to shift our discourses: What might it mean that there are Black composers (in the past, future, and present)? What might (new) classical music’s reckoning do to an antiblack world? How does blackness refigure our relation to life and the very definition and delimitations of what counts and what does not? These kinds of questions only emerge once antiblackness can be critiqued in a manner where blackness’s exceeding of such structuring paradigms becomes self-evident. Since none of the answers that close those questions opened in and by blackness, we may think of them as ongoing, as unanswerable. As such they present us with the unknown as the refiguring of the world as *we* know it because *we* never really knew it. Let’s rethink what classical music may be, in not-yet-seen worlds where Black lives matter. Entering the uncertainty of living beyond the catastrophes of our time brought forth by a delimitation of *us*.

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⁸⁴ Oberholzer 2022; Schmidt 2022.

⁸⁵ Sanyal 2022.

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