Michael William Balfe, an unwitting cultural bellwether

Russell Burdekin, July 2025[1]

Three of Balfe's operas included black characters: - *The Maid of Artois* (1836), *Diadesté* (1838) and *The Bondman* (1846). Each of them showed a quite different picture of attitudes to their black characters and can be matched to some of the stereotypes identified in Hazel Waters' book *Racism on the Victorian Stage*.[2] Waters traces these from the noble or vengeful black through the accommodating, sentimental, black to the grotesque and comic blacks, who were so badly maligned and traduced that any serious drama could no longer use them but turned to mixed race characters in their place.

The Maid of Artois with a libretto by Alfred Bunn was first performed on May 27, 1836. The basis of the libretto was Abbé Prevost's 1731 novel, *Manon Lescaut,* but the immediate source was Eugène Scribé's scenario for an Halèvy ballet of 1830 based on the story. In the original, Manon is desperate for the good life and prepared to scheme in any way necessary to attain it while also hankering after the insufficiently rich Des Grieux, who is besotted with her. Their attempts to reconcile these incompatibilities end up with her being transported to a penal colony in Louisiana, then a French colony, where she dies while trying to escape from New Orleans with Des Grieux. In the Scribé adaptation, Manon is naïve rather than calculating but ends up dead in much the same way, although at the point of being pardoned. However, one addition that Scribe makes is her friendship with a young black slave, Niuka, who helps her and Des Grieux to escape.

In Bunn's libretto, it is the male lead, Jules, who gets sent to French Guiana and Manon, renamed Isoline, who follows. They plan their escape but are interrupted by the overseer, Synnelet, who aims to seize Isoline. They escape, imprisoning Synnelet in Jules' place. Out in the desert, they are found just as they are about to die and are saved and pardoned, a happy ending being mandatory in English opera at this time. As in the Scribé, a black slave, here called Ninka, is critical to their escape, rescue and pardoning. Four points can be noted. As with almost all black characters by this time, she is only seen within the context of slavery. Secondly, the setting is a French colony thus avoiding recognition of Britain's previous role in slavery. Thirdly, Ninka speaks perfectly intelligible English rather than the later near incomprehensible, distorted, thickly accented, rambling supposedly mimicking "black" speech. Finally, she is pro-active but essentially for the benefit of the white characters rather than for herself.

This last attitude can be found in other plays and operas of the period, such as Thomas Morton's *The Slave* (1818), Douglas Jerrold's *Descart, the French Buccaneer* of 1828, George Alexander Macfarren's *The Devil's Opera* (1838) and James Tully's *The Forest Maiden and the Moorish Page* (1847). This could be interpreted as blacks showing gratitude to whites for their freeing from slavery. This division between bestower and receiver gave rise to the unspoken racial hierarchy we see in operation here, reinforced by the moral dimensions of the two roles.

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[1] This article was adapted from a paper given at a conference at Oxford Brookes University on June 5, 2013, entitled *Mastering the Mix: Interdisciplinarity in Musicology and Compositional Practice*

[2] Hazel Waters, *Racism on the Victorian Stage* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007). In November 2009, Hazel Walters gave a talk, "People must be entertained" at the Institute of Race Relations in which she touched on many of the issues raised in her book. See https://irr.org.uk/article/people-must-be-entertained/

Although this idea could only pertain to previously enslaved blacks, it was only a small step to assume it related to all blacks. The black as supplicant could only ever be a temporary state and there was a question as to how blacks would fit into the current British social hierarchies. Any ideas of equality were beyond the ideas and sentiments of the time and instead new ways were devised to keep blacks at arm's length and in an inferior position.

There was one element in the opera that may have pointed forward to the feckless black characters that superceded the supplicant black. The name Gim-Gom of a negro played by the pantomimist, George Wieland, rather suggests this. However, the brief description in the *Morning Post* (May 28, 1836) does not really support this, suggesting instead a serious ballet rather than some farcical or humorous send up:

> A negro ballet, the invention and arrangement of Oscar Byrne,[3] …has been got up with a very pretty arrangement of the groups and figurings. Mr Wieland, by the activity and neatness of his *pas*, and by his expressive pantomime, contributed greatly to its success.

Edward Fitzball's libretto for Balfe's *Diadesté or the Veiled Lady* in May 1838 at Drury Lane was adapted from Jules Godefroid's *La Diadesté ou La gageure arabe*, a French operetta of 1836.[4] Fitzball's libretto was pretty much a straight translation from the French except for a change from a French, presumably white, servant with minimal involvement to a much more prominent black slave, Zambo, who was clearly meant to be a comic figure speaking barely comprehensible "black" speech, as opposed to the clear English of Ninka in *The Maid of Artois*. At one point, the jealous husband says to him "Would that prouder hearts might borrow one ray of the pure honesty which glows in the breasts of you poor Africans", a sentiment of original innocence that could be fitted with the earlier picture from *The Maid of Artois*. It was also a Venetian, i.e. non-British, slavery setting. However, the main thrust of the character resulted from a new and different source.

What caused the switch in the space of under two years from a picture of an empowered black character, even though confined within the constraints of slavery and racial hierarchy, to one completely witless whose one saving grace was his innocence? The person responsible was Thomas Dartmouth Rice, born in New York in 1808.



T.D. Rice (Wikipedia)

Black face roles, i.e. whites blacking up to imitate supposedly black behaviour, were already being played both here and in the US but Rice concocted a portrait that particularly caught the public fancy with his Jim Crow act, first performed in the late 1820's in New York. It made him tremendously popular. His main song seemed to have had an elastic number of verses with a chorus including:

> Weel about and turn about and do jis so
> Eb'ery time I weel about and jump Jim Crow.

when he did a little dance. It seems to have been the dance that really caught the imagination.

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[3] Byrne (1795? – 1867) was a British ballet master. In the 1850s he was employed by Charles Kean in his epoch-making productions at the Princess's Theatre. *Dictionary of National Biography*, 1885-1900, Volume 08

[4] Fitzball wrote some plays with black characters, the best known probably being *The Negro of Wapping*, staged a month before *Diadesté* at the Garrick theatre. It harked back to the earlier, vengeful stereotype.

One can understand why such a portrayal might have been popular in the United States. Such an impersonation clearly played into the pro slavery view with its portrayal of apparently simple and irresponsible black people as well as a reaction to a fear of blacks. However, W. T. Lhamon in his recent books on this has raised doubts as to whether things are that clear cut and sees a more subversive element in Rice's work.[5]


T.D. Rice (Wikipedia)

These same forces were at play in Britain but less stridently and it is not obvious why it should have proved so popular in Britain after Rice first performed his act at the Surrey in July, 1836. Here it seemed to have found favour with all classes. For example, in Dublin, the Lord Lieutenant and his entourage turned up.[6] Lhamon says that Rice's act owed much to earlier comic English acts and that there might have been a greater responsiveness to the humour regardless of the racial aspects.[7] Charles Matthews' early 19th century monologues mocking various black characters probably also helped to prepare the ground.[8]

Although slavery had been abolished in the British Empire, it was still being dismantled and there was some backlash from that as well as pro slavery support that would have found it an outlet for anti-black feeling in much the same way as in America. For many though, it must have been the sheer novelty that drove its popularity and gives support to Lhamon's contention that blackface and Crow in particular was the first Atlantic popular mass culture.[9]

Charles Mackay writing of his memories of half a century of artistic life stated that "Nothing like it was ever before seen or known in England. … It became an indescribable nuisance" (apparently, as one can imagine, all the youngsters were imitating it, many of whom would not have seen or even been aware of the original). He went on "its popularity was so great that it became the first of a series … to disgust and plague the real lovers of music"[10] - a sentiment that has been repeated in many guises since with its implicit assertion of a true and proper music.

While a simple equation of the minor theatres, such as the Surrey, with popular entertainment would be an over simplification, their existence provided, for the first time, a means of transmitting, recording and building popular entertainment and thus of establishing it as a separate entity to the longstanding and traditional, royal licenced, theatres, such as Drury Lane. This growth of popular culture was fuelled by the demands of rapidly increasing city populations drawn there by industrialisation. Exacerbating this divide at around the same time, critics were starting to develop the works' concept and the idea of art as encapsulated by a canon of such works that demonstrated certain qualities or met certain criteria. Thus, a gap was beginning to

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[5] W.T. Lhamon, Jr., *Raising Cain*. (Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 205-215.
[6] W.T. Lhamon, Jr., *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics, and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture* (Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.63.
[7] W.T. Lhamon, Jr., *Raising Cain*, p.155.
[8] Hazel Walters, *Racism*, pp. 91-94, describes some of the black characters that Charles Matthews introduced into his monologues following a trip to America in 1822-23, but that these did not have the impact that Rice had.
[9] As reflected in the title of his book, *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics, and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture* and in W.T. Lhamon, Jr., *Raising Cain*, p.58.
[10] Charles Mackay, *Through the Long Day*, Volume 1 (London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1887), p.133

open up between popular music and art music: Mackay's comments above illustrate this divide. Jacky Bratton has written of a similar divergence at this time in the spoken theatre.[11]

To return to *Diadesté*, as well as the clumsy dialogue, Zambo was also given his own song, which had a silly chorus like Jim Crow's. Balfe set the song to a rather wistful tune in keeping with Zambo's lament for his lost love, Chickaboo, in the main part of the song, whereas Fitzball probably intended something comic and jauntier in the spirit of Jim Crow, particularly as it was described as a buffa opera, which, as *The Musical World* (May 25, 1838) pointed out, it was not. Reaction amongst critics was generally negative. The *Morning Post* (May 18, 1838) thought Zambo's Jim Crow type song "was unworthy of Balfe's power", *The Observer* (May 21, 1838) that "the curtailment of a negro part...might be recommended; it occasionally borders on the nonsensical". Clearly, pandering to popular taste in this way, rather than any opposition to its racial portrayal, was frowned on as not in keeping with the artistic pretensions of English opera and Balfe never attempted it again.

Balfe included a black character in a further opera, *The Bondman,* staged at Drury Lane on December 11, 1846. By this time, the Crow stereotype had become quite entrenched through reinforcement by a stream of further minstrel and blackface acts that left a permanent, unsympathetic, change in attitudes to black people. Waters puts this change down to a growing fascination in Britain with things American as well as there being no real experience of blacks to set against these various American stereotypes however ridiculous.[12] The often well-received performances of the much praised, though also vilified, black actor, Ira Aldridge, could make little headway against this.[13] This picture of the irresponsible black together with the gathering pace of ideas of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority were two important strands that led to the violent and exploitative imperialistic racism that was becoming established by the middle of the century.

The Bondman's libretto by Bunn was based on yet another French play, Mélesville (Anne-Honoré-Joseph Duveyrier) and Roger de Beauvoir's *Le Chevalier de St Georges,* first given in Paris in 1840. This was loosely about an historic 18th century black character, Joseph Boulogne, well known in his day and sometimes called the Black Mozart for his musical accomplishments. In it, a freed slave ran rings round various white men and ended up marrying a white (Creole) heiress. Here a black character seemed to have reached parity with his white counterparts. The play had been given in French at the St James's in January 1845 and in English at the Princess's in May 1845, at which *The Times* (May 21, 1845) noted that the liveliness of the action together **"**with some anti-slavery sentiments freely intermixed and vigorously expressed, procured a favourable reception". Thus, the moral glow of abolition was still strong even if society was oblivious to or tolerant of the evils still being perpetuated on the basis of race.

Although *The Bondman* rejected the Jim Crow stereotype it still embraced elements of racial bias. The action in France again avoided any British connotation and by being set in the previous century avoided any contemporary implications. More pertinent was that the bondman, Ardenford, is of mixed race, a mulatto, someone who could not identify fully with either black or white but could in certain circumstances be seen as part of either. They became the tool of

[11] Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.10
[12] Hazel Waters, *Racism*, pp. 98-113
[13] Hazel Waters, *Racism*, pp. 58-88

dramatists needing a serious black character, the idea of serious fully black character having become hopelessly compromised by the flood of inane blackface acts.[14] Further Ardenford is set to marry Madame Corinne, a Creole, someone who might well have some black ancestry but who was, even if white, seen as inferior to European whites. Thus, his marriage was not so disruptive of social norms, as it might first appear.

Balfe, Bunn and Fitzball could not be called insightful, original or have any pretensions to social commentary but they did have a shrewd idea of what the public wanted, indeed their livelihoods depended on it. In these unassuming operas they inadvertently reflected contentious issues of the day, issues to which consciously they may well never have given any thought.

[14] Hazel Waters, *Racism*, pp. 130-154