

Playing the system: 'Race'-making and elitism in diversity projects in Germany's classical music sector

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores to what extent diversity initiatives in the Western classical music sector can be associated with progressive institutional change, or the reproduction of elite formations and processes of 'race'-making. Drawing from interview and ethnographic data, I examine a self-described 'intercultural' children's choir project, which has been developed by an established classical music institution in Berlin. Set against the project's institutional setting and its political context, where the legacies of German imperialism and racialised guestworker policies continue to manifest, I interrogate how diversity is negotiated in the organisational and social workings of the choir. My analysis documents the ambivalent ways in which diversity becomes commodified into a strategic approach to cultural recognition, social mobility and the remaking of white elitism, leading to the continuous construction of racialised others whose (symbolic) labour is extracted for the reproduction of classed and raced hierarchies. The paper therefore shows how diversity initiatives in the Western highbrow sector, even when pushed for with genuine intentions of institutional change and social justice, operate on a hierarchical terrain and risk being turned into an elite-making and 'race'-making endeavour which secures privileged positions of middle-class whiteness.

1. Introduction

The cultural and creative industries have undoubtedly become a key topic for contemporary sociology (Casey & O'Brien, 2020). While scholars have shown a long-standing interest in studying the ways in which inequalities of access to, engagement with and representation in cultural activities contribute to the remaking of wider inequalities, these concerns have recently come to the fore again with new force. On one hand, the widening cultural tastes of social elites and an increasing advocacy for more diversity in Western arts institutions seem to indicate that we are moving towards a less unequal cultural system; on the other hand, in most Western countries, socioeconomic inequality remains steep (Piketty, 2014) and intersects with structures of systemic racial marginalisation (for Germany see e.g. El-Tayeb, 2016; Foroutan, 2016; Mandel, 2008). Scholarship around the cultural omnivore debate has hence aimed to find out how elites guard their privilege while seemingly engaging with more diverse cultural forms (Bennett et al., 2009; Friedman, Hanquinet, Miles, & Savage, 2015; Friedman and Reeves, 2020; Lena, 2019; O'Brien, Allen, Friedman, & Saha, 2017), whereas critical race literature has discussed how inequalities of 'race' and ethnicity persist and reproduce not despite but because of institutionalised diversity and inclusion strategies (Ahmed, 2012; Banks, 2019; Erigha, 2018; Puwar, 2004; Ray, 2019; Saha, 2018). However, although addressing parallel debates, close conversations between these two scholarly strands are still scarce. Against this backdrop, my paper's contributions are twofold. First, I seek to help fill the gap between these bodies of literature by analysing the ways in which current diversity interventions in the Western art music sector¹ tie in with intersecting processes of 'race'- and

elite-remaking. Second, through an in-depth exploration of the choir project, I add to contemporary scholarship around the institutionalisation of diversity in the cultural industries, studying the specific relations and processes that enable the on-going exploitation of racialised others, their continuous construction as otherness, and the extraction of value from their existence and labour to sustain privileged positions of middle-class whiteness.

The classical music sector presents a prime site for these queries. Having been framed as the utmost expression of cultural value, intrinsically interlinked with the power of social elites as embodied by white Western upper- and middle-classes, classical music institutions are undergoing a major crisis of legitimation that shows in decreasing audiences and a growing need for funding justification. In response, more and more concert houses and opera institutions across European countries are aiming to review their traditional connection with highbrow elitism and to present themselves in a more open and democratic way. Connected with such efforts to tackle the sector's class-based hierarchies, issues of gender inequality, institutional whiteness and entanglements with Orientalist and racist narratives of otherness have become key debates in both Western art music institutions and their study (Bull, 2019; Nooshin, 2003; Scharff, 2019). Here, the article analyses a self-described 'intercultural' Turkish German choir project developed by an established opera institution in Germany to explore how a culturally and socially elitist setting is being pushed to open up, reach out and modify itself. This paper discusses the deep-seated ambivalences engendered by the choir initiative and unpacks the ways in which its managers and members claim different objectives of the project's diversifying aims. These possibilities, I argue, differ between grounded approaches to institutional change and more strategic approaches to cultural recognition, social mobility and the remaking white elite privilege which extort, willingly or not, the emotional and symbolic labour of minoritised cultural producers. My data thus document how, rather than challenging structural inequality in the creative industries, diversity initiatives within the Western cultural sector can become socially commodified: they perpetuate hegemonic power relations of 'race', ethnicity and class by ultimately using the rapprochement to multiculturalism as a way to reaffirm the white highbrow as the dominant site of cultural and social legitimacy.

2. De(hierarchising) culture? Theorising diversity in the cultural industries

Diversity initiatives have become an increasingly pronounced issue for cultural institutions, causing much discussion about whether they help push for progressive institutional transformation and social change or lead to the re-inscription of racialised concepts of difference and the perpetuation of class inequality. Contributing to these debates, this paper interrogates how diversity initiatives in the Western classical music sphere are implicated in both the reproduction of class-based hierarchies and processes of 'race'-making.

At a moment in which the tastes of contemporary elites seem to move away from traditional high culture and towards an appreciation of eclectic cultural forms (Bennett et al., 2009; Friedman and Reeves, 2020; Lena, 2019), established institutions face the pressure to distance themselves from the overt snobbery of highbrow art (McAndrew, O'Brien, & Taylor, 2020). From broadening their audiences and production staff to offering a wider array of cultural repertoires, there seems to be a shift 'away from traditional forms of cultural excellence venerated from earlier periods, towards an insistence on the value of the new' (Friedman et al., 2015:2), blurring the boundaries between popular and highbrow spheres. However, rather than this being an indication of a less unequal cultural sector, scholarship around the omnivore concept (Peterson & Kern, 1996) or the emerging cultural capital thesis (Priour & Savage, 2013) has documented that we are instead seeing a modification in the ways in which elite cultural distinctions are achieved and reproduced. Or, to put it with Shamus Khan's (2014: 146) words, '[t]hrough the elite have been opened, and have opened themselves to the world, the world has not opened to all. [...] But what is crucial is that no one is explicitly excluded [...] From this point of view, those who are not successful are not necessarily disadvantaged; they are simply those who have failed to seize the opportunities afforded by our new, open society.' Diversity initiatives might then first and foremost serve the cultural sector to portray itself as meritocratic, inclusive and cosmopolitan while disguising durable, institutional inequalities and reaffirming themselves as hegemonic sites of legitimacy, value and elite culture.

Despite its theoretical importance, evidence of how diversity initiatives in the cultural production sector remake elites is still lacking. As Cousin, Khan and Mears (2018) discuss, there needs yet to be closer interrogation of the ways in which the reproduction of social elites in the West links to the remaking of white supremacy. In this context, Hage (1998) stresses how discourses around cosmopolitan openness – in the cultural industries and beyond – not only play a reproductive role for class hierarchies but also for inequalities of 'race' and ethnicity. He argues that even under conditions of multiculturalism a form of 'white power' prevails 'in all societies dominated by a European cultural tradition and imbued with the tradition of "tolerance" and "cultural pluralism", unless it opens up to the decentralising effect migration and globalisation have had on the status of Whiteness' (1998:26) itself. Cultural organisations are hence not only sites of class struggle but play an equally central role in the 'process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed' (Omi & Winant, 2015:109; see also Ray, 2019), and diversity initiatives need to be investigated within this context.

For instance, while acknowledging the progressive potential of a greater representation of cultural diversity in Western mainstream cultural institutions, Titley (2014) cautions us that mainstreaming diversity can also have depoliticising effects. He recognises the risk of 'a post-racial valorisation of diversity' as the basis for a turn away from the 'contested ideological terrain of cultural representation' (ibid.:253) by proposing a reductionist understanding of diversity as freed from and proceeding outside of broader political and power. As further specified by Saha (2018), under today's conditions of neoliberalism, diversity discourses might therefore neutralise the political struggle around 'race'. Rather than opening up a critical lens through which to explore the lived experiences of multicultural life, diversity would act as a depoliticised signifier and marketing tool for cosmopolitan consumerism and lifestyles. Diversity would thus not engender a critical interrogation into bounded concepts of ethnic or cultural difference but would instead rely on and re-inscribe reductive constructions of otherness. While he also identifies the potential for critical change because of diversity strategies,

Saha further argues that these would most often not only miss to review racial inequalities in the cultural industries but that it is indeed the very notion of diversity itself that would make ‘race’: ‘diversity initiatives rather than failing, actually serve an ideological function that sustains the institutional whiteness of the cultural industries even while they claim (often genuinely so!) to do something more inclusive’ (ibid.:22). As Banks (2019) elucidates, diversity then becomes a form of capital which enables predominantly white organisations to signal an ethos of awareness and openness in relation to ‘race’ and multiculturalism. In this way, the notion of diversity perpetuates what Leong (2013:2153–2154) conceptualises as ‘racial capitalism’ – the system by which mostly white institutions or white individuals would extract social or economic value from the presence and labour of non-white people.

These critical approaches to diversity crucially motivate my research in that they all call attention to the ways in which diversity – rather than challenging racialised histories and hierarchies – can ultimately cement and reproduce inequality of ‘race’ and ethnicity. At the same time, they speak to the importance of understanding diversity not as a fixed set of meanings but as a discourse shaped by social, institutional and economic processes and with both material and symbolic consequences for how ‘race’ and racism operate today. I want to build on these debates by investigating how the notion of diversity takes shape in the cultural sector, how it relates to histories and systems of ‘race’ and racism in Germany, and to explore whether it can indeed unsettle racialised inequality or rather contribute to its remaking. To that end, I turn deliberately towards the sphere of cultural production to trace how diversity is institutionalised and negotiated in cultural practice. Advocating for a closer, intersectional analysis (see Crenshaw, 1989 on intersectionality) of the effects that diversity initiatives bear for social inequality, I specifically enquire under which conditions diversity becomes commodified into a strategic, reproductionist approach which sustains privileged positions of middle-class whiteness rather than disrupting structural inequalities in the cultural industries. To that end, I specifically draw on the work of Ahmed (2007a:254) who elucidates that ‘[w]ords such as “diversity” do then enable action, and even social change, but the actions they enable depend on how they get taken up, as well as who takes them up. [...] the “take up” of such words is dependant on institutional histories that maybe forgotten or concealed in the present’. As my study of the choir project details, diversity becomes socially commodified when it is ‘taken up’ by standardised institutional structures that allow elite actors to extract value and distinction from the symbolic and emotional labour of classed and racialised minorities, linking racial capitalist logics with elite-making projects.

3. The site: Germany’s classical music sector

Classical music’s implication in inequality, elitism and institutional whiteness has been well-documented. The framing of its social position has certainly changed over time – from emphasising its assumed ‘universal character’ (Dahlhaus, 1991) and ascribing a ‘civilising mission’ to classical music (Beckles Willson, 2013) to promoting its democratisation in the name of cultural participation and inclusion. However, as Bull (2019) argues, such discursive shifts have merely reworked Western art music’s status of high art rather than marking an actual redefinition of hegemonic notions of musical value. Simultaneously, having been frequently portrayed as a symbol of Western civilisation itself, Western art music bears profound entanglements with Europe’s imperial legacies and with wider discourses around institutional whiteness. According to Nooshin (2003:245), Western art music’s relationship to other musical systems has historically ‘draw[n] from a deep-rooted discourse of binary opposition – a language of difference – in order to mark the boundaries between Europe and its “ethnic others”’. Such boundary-drawings have played out not only in the aesthetic musical material and long-standing Orientalist and racialised character depictions but have also underwritten the very study of and discourses around music and legitimacy (Stokes, 2004). The classical music sector therefore presents a particularly contested site for studying diversity in the arts initiatives, the ways in which these might help bring about long-needed institutional change but also how and under which conditions they end up strengthening cultural elitism and institutional whiteness.

These debates carry a particular weight in contemporary Germany. Grappling with its imperial and racist legacies of the Third Reich, the consequences of its post-war racialised guestworker policies and recent immigration in the context of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’, Germany finds itself in a contingent political moment that pends between a fundamental recognition of its long-standing multicultural and multi-ethnic configuration and a resurgence of white nationalism and racist violence that works its way back into the political mainstream (El-Tayeb, 2016; Foroutan, 2016). The self-described ‘intercultural’ children’s choir project that this paper is concerned with is situated precisely within these wider debates: having been established by a leading German opera institution as part of a wider diversity strategy, the project has sought to make the opera’s in-house children’s choir more diverse by promoting participation of children of different class and ethnic backgrounds (mostly of Turkish heritage) and widening the choir’s aesthetic repertoire beyond classical genre precepts. As common for many opera institutions, the in-house children’s choir offers free musical and theatrical education and grants its members significant stage exposure and performance opportunities as part of the wider opera ensemble. Prior to the launch of its intercultural reworking, the choir was mostly comprised of white German children, many of whom were of middle-class background, which raised concern about access barriers amongst the opera house’s directorship. Consequently, the idea behind the children’s choir initiative was to review precisely the inequalities around ‘race’ and class at work in Berlin’s highbrow music sector. In what follows, I interrogate in detail to what extent the concept as well as the organisational workings and social negotiations of the choir initiative reflect both practices of institutional change as well as of social reproduction. In this vein, my analysis of the choir project provides inasmuch insight into the challenges of contemporary diversity in the classical music sector as it does into broader discourses around elite- and ‘race’-making in the cultural industries.

4. Methods

Ethnographic methods are well-equipped to observe the meso-level workings of cultural industries and to reveal how organisational and aesthetic practices of production act as sites of creative negotiation, social contestation and institutional inequality (Born,

1995, 2010; Saha, 2018). Interviews help make sense of these contestations and situate individual narratives within wider political, economic and cultural systems. The article draws from 16 months-long qualitative study of diversity efforts made at a German opera house that I conducted in 2016 and 2017. These efforts pushed for a process of institutional diversification on all levels of the opera's workings – staff, programme and audience – with a special focus on Germany's Turkish diasporas. During the course of my fieldwork, I spent most of my time following the diversity managers in their daily work, spoke to the wider opera staff involved in the project as well as to external partners and participants and, to the extent possible, sat in rehearsals, performances and dramaturgical discussions. Having a background in musicology and sociology allowed me to make sense of the creative and institutional practices of production from multiple analytical standpoints. By turning deliberately towards the sphere of cultural production, I intend to contribute to a better comprehension of the ways in which hegemonic notions of cultural value and legitimacy are being formed, reproduced or disrupted in cultural practice and how such dynamics interlink with social and racial divisions more broadly. Indeed, it is precisely about developing a keener understanding of the ways in which systems of class and 'race' inequality intersect, how they permeate contemporary cultural production and how they shape, challenge or remake patterns of cultural legitimacy, capital and power, and the article brings these dynamics to light by studying their interactions 'on the ground'.

For the purposes of this paper, I focus specifically on one aspect of the opera's diversity strategy, namely the intercultural choir initiative. To that end, I bring together 30 qualitative interviews with the opera's diversity managers, the choir conductor and choir members as well as ethnographic snippets on the choir's organisational and social practices. Across this interview sample, 14 participants identified as 'having a migration background', most of whom described themselves as Turkish or Turkish German and five respectively as Kurdish, Arabic or Russian, while 16 participants identified as white Germans. As a white German pursuing an academic career, reflecting on my own positionality has been integral to my research process from gaining access and collecting data to data analysis and writing up. I coded and analysed my interview transcripts and fieldnotes with the help of the software Nvivo, specifically interrogating how the choir reform links to the renegotiation of racialised hierarchies and changing modes of elite distinction. I changed the names of the research participants to pseudonyms and took out all potentially identifying information.

5. Findings

5.1. Diversity as institutional change

Before discussing the ways in which the choir initiative ties into processes of class- and 'race'-making, this first section shows how it also pushes partly successfully for institutional change. I suggest that this becomes possible because Emre and Nicolai, who were hired to plan and implement the opera's diversity strategy, actively carry a critical outsider perspective into the opera which translates into a grounded approach to diversity work. This shows not only in their intersectional conceptualisation of diversity but also manifested in the practices of choir, challenging the standardised workings of the opera institution as a 'white space' (Ahmed, 2007a; Anderson, 2015; Meghji, 2019).

I meet Emre for the first time in a little Turkish restaurant in Bergmannstraße in Kreuzberg, Berlin. 'This is my *Kiez* [Berlin slang for urban neighbourhood], you know. This is where I was born and grew up.' Emre, in his early 40s, seems somehow younger. A loose, casual shirt and blue jeans styled up with a pair of colourful, slightly worn out sneakers – cool without caring too much his appearance reminded me of a 'real' Berliner, not the stereotypical hipster yuppie with designer glasses, but a neighbourly guy who seems somewhat unimpressed by the new 'edgy' hype his city has experienced during the last years. With his keen eyes and tousled hair Emre seemed brim-full of energy. He immediately addressed me with the informal 'you' and after only a little while of small talk, he started to casually call me by my last name – 'as football players do' he jokes with a very noticeable Berlin accent. The relaxed atmosphere made me feel instantly comfortable. He seems genuinely interested in what I have to say and ask and feels even more passionately about his own responses. 'Berlin has such a long-standing Turkish community, but there is still a reluctance in this country to let us have a seat at the table... A project like this is long overdue'. He tells me how he never worked in a musical institution before, how he trained as a plumber, then worked as an entertainer on a cruise ship before transitioning into the neighbourhood management of a Berlin neighbourhood. When applying for the job to create a diversity project at the opera, he didn't think he would stand a chance against all the musicologists and pedagogics that showed up for the interview. 'I didn't know music at all, really', he says, 'but I know the city and the Turkish communities, and I know how to bring people together to create something' (fieldnote, March 2016).

My first in-person encounter with Emre left me both enthusiastic and sceptical. It was hard not to be swept away by the passion with which he was discussing his work and his relationships to Berlin. Clearly, he was someone who cared deeply about the city and about Berlin's Turkish German communities, someone who seemed unapologetically aware of inequalities in the city's cultural sector and Germany more broadly and who was ready to jump in at the deep end and take action. Set against the stereotypical images of Germany's so-called *Hochkultursektor* [high culture sector] as somewhat dusty, detached and elitist, Emre's biography seemed promisingly unorthodox. Yet, a feeling of scepticism remained. Although I had been interested in Western classical music almost all my life and attended performances at Berlin's opera and concert houses on a regular basis, I felt a growing uneasiness about precisely those institutions in concern. While the classical music scene in Berlin never occurred to me as fancy or dissociated as similar institutions in Munich, London or Paris, their entanglement with Western elitism and hierarchical forms of cultural distinction seemed undeniable still. And while the field of opera and classical music more generally is certainly internationalised; socially diverse, multicultural and multi-ethnic it seems not. On the contrary, not only did I myself only rarely see a person of colour on Berlin's opera stages or even in the audience, but reductive constructions of racialised difference also appear to be part and parcel of many canonised opera repertoires.

Emre did not glance over these divisions, however. On the contrary, throughout our many conversations, he stressed time and time again how 'diversity is not just about access for diverse people, it is first and foremost about us as an institution. It provides an

opportunity to rethink what actually constitutes the classical music world and musical theatre, where it is unequal and where it would need to change if it wants to stay relevant' (interview March 2016). Working closely together with his colleague Nicolai, a sociologist by training, Emre hence put forward different projects in the name of diversity to promote institutional change on distinct yet interrelated levels – programming, staff and audiences. Making the in-house children's choir of the opera institution more diverse by specifically promoting participation of children of different (mostly Turkish) backgrounds and from various urban localities seemed to be a natural first step. As Nicolai elaborated:

'German high culture often acts as a hypocritical ivory tower which claims that its doors would be open. Well, if they were, we would have had at least one child of foreign heritage in the choir when we started the reworking of the choir. [...] So, the children's choir is really about reviewing the opera institution as an institution' (interview, October 2016).

Associating the highbrow sector in Germany with a 'hypocritical ivory tower', Nicolai not only recognises its inbuilt inequalities but also insinuates that these are not just an organisational default but are actively reproduced precisely by the sector's rhetoric to be open-minded and welcoming without, however, reviewing its exclusionary institutional logics. Moreover, the 'high' in highbrow is not only interpreted as a social category – inferring a classed division between highbrow and popular forms of culture – but evaluated in the wider context of racialised debates around citizenship and belonging that operate in Germany. Within these debates, it is particularly Germans of Turkish descent who have been cast as the eternal other, being subjected to the legacies of Germany's racialised guest-worker policies, to structural racism and islamophobic violence (Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2014). Against this backdrop, rather than interpreting diversity solely as a reductive call to 'add colour to a production' (Saha, 2018:106), Emre and Nicolai aimed at linking their work to the specific histories and demographics of Berlin, collaborating with various local partners from media outlets to schools to neighbourhood centres.

In our many coffee breaks between meetings and rehearsals, Emre repeatedly highlighted how Berlin has become a truly Turkish German place, 'but we are not seen as part of the German culture although our histories are so intermingled and constitute each other. These ways of thinking do not only play out in musical or cultural terms in the highbrow sphere, but Turkish people just don't have the same standing in Germany' (conversation, November 2017). To review both the classed and racialised biases of the opera's children's choir, the duo therefore sought to reach out specifically, although not exclusively, to children of Turkish descent. Here, Nicolai added that 'we particularly wanted to account for the specific guestworker histories that shaped the biographies of many Berliner families. That also meant for us to specifically reach children of socioeconomically less advantaged backgrounds' (conversation, November 2017). From a conceptual angle, then, the opera's diversity team envisioned the children's choir as a way to push for a wider institutional reform in favour of a critical commitment to multiculturalism, paying attention to urban inequalities along both racial and classed lines.

This approach also translated into the concrete organisational practices that have constituted the choir reform. Notably, the very idea of the choir reform was born out of a qualitative survey which the opera's diversity team conducted in the beginning of 2011 to get a better sense of how Berliners felt about the city's highbrow music sector. Taking the survey specifically into the city's traditional working-class neighbourhoods, they knocked on doors, listened to local migrant cooperatives, family hubs, Turkish cultural centres and neighbourhood associations, always asking people about their expectations for a diversity program in the music sector. Further, central figures of Berlin's Turkish communities, including representatives of the city's Turkish media and neighbourhood managements as well as teachers, community workers and artists, were invited to the opera institution to discuss ideas about diversity, multiculturalism and music. The survey data and the outcome of these networking sessions primarily indicated a wish for more youth activity in the cultural realm. The decision led the opera institution to rethink the admissions of its children's choir. Instead of publishing specialised audition invitations through the opera's usual communication channels (through particular music schools, Berlin's mainstream newspapers or word-of-mouth), the opera team translated the casting calls into Turkish and Kurdish language and distributed them via Berlin's popular Turkish media outlets but also through postings in schools, local community centres and youth clubs across the city. The opera was especially keen on spreading the choir's casting call across diverse and less privileged areas of Berlin which, I suggest, stands in line with an intersectional understanding of multiculturalism. Besides changing the ways in which the choir auditions were publicised, the opera's diversity team also worked in close collaboration with the choir directorship and decided that children responding to the casting call would no longer need to present a certain canon of classical pieces as was previously the case, but could sing whatever song, genre and in whatever language they felt most comfortable. According to the choir conductor, 'it was interesting for us who're mostly used to the traditional opera repertoire. Many children auditioned with Turkish or German folk songs or popular melodies they know from the charts. That was definitely an adjustment on our part' (interview, May 2016). As she further explicated,

'we aren't necessarily interested in any vocal pre-education but in the child's musical potential. Adapting the admission criteria was the right choice – regarding every child no matter their background. But I also believe this might have contributed to the success of this initiative as around one third of the choir's members are currently from a Turkish background with many of them not having had any exposure to classical music education before' (conversation, March 2014).

The measures taken by the opera institution to help accommodate children, who might not have had a formal (Western) classical music education prior to applying to the choir, do indeed contribute to mitigating inequalities of access to formal music learning which often benefit children from middle-class, white German families. However, the children's choir initiative has not only been about reviewing and widening possibilities of access; it has also aimed to change the standardised workings of the opera institution more widely. Here, Emre specifically referred to a change in the social environment of the opera brought about by the choir's reform.

Emre: 'Sometimes it's hard to convey to people in the industry why the cultural sector needs to change. You can see that with the orchestra, singers and dramaturges, they're musicians, not sociologists. Obviously, it's hard for them to imagine that the environment they've trained in their whole lives is not designed for everybody and needs to change'.

Me: 'How do you convey the need for change?'

Emre: 'When talking diversity in the arts, most of the opera staff can learn more much from the children and parents than vice versa. They're all embodied "interculture". They carry very different experiences into this institution, they change the space' (interview, October 2017).

Indeed, most of the opera staff I encountered during my fieldwork has been in and around the classical music sector for a long time, often since early childhood, and worked within corresponding institutions all of their professional life. Accordingly, in breaks between rehearsals or at after-show drinks, people would commonly talk about their experiences as professional musicians, the current repertoire or review a past performance, often leaving little room to talk about something, anything else. These topical commonalities overlapped significantly with commonalities of positionality: while mixed in terms of gender, the vast majority of the opera's ensemble was white, with many of them being born and raised in Germany. The clear lack of ethnic and cultural diversity, however, did not seem to spark any controversy but appeared to be accepted as the standard status quo in the opera world. Even more so, whenever I tried to initiate a conversation about classical music's implication in inequalities of 'race' or class, most people were not receptive. Yes, many were willing to talk about urban poverty, class inequality and even about racism in Germany but the focus was consistently placed outside of their own cultural environment. In such conversations, I encountered statements like 'most people in the creative sector are very open-minded', 'classical music is so international anyways' or 'opera in other places can be certainly elitist, but in Berlin everything is more low-key' (fieldnotes, February-May 2017). Not only was there little reflexive awareness about classical music's entanglements in wider divisions of class and 'race' but even when brought to the table, these issues were played down or ignored. Difference, in whatever shape or form, was kept out of the classical music space, physically and figuratively.

As such, the opera world (and the classical music sector more generally) seems to epitomise precisely what Ahmed (2007b: 157) designates as 'a sea of whiteness' or what Anderson (2015) and Meghji (2019: 56) conceptualise as 'white spaces' characterised by 'the constant arrival and circulation of certain (white) bodies and exclusion of racialised others'. Here, Meghji highlights how white spaces bear both a physical dimension – predicated by the absence and/or policing of racialised bodies – and a symbolic dimension characterised by symbolic violence against people of colour whose contributions to and experiences of a specific cultural form would be seen as less legitimate or ignored entirely. In the (failed) conversations with the opera musicians about classical music, 'race' and inequality, these symbolic logics of white spaces were continuously mobilised and re-inscribed. It is these insider dynamics of whiteness which Emre and Nicolai hoped to challenge by bringing other perspectives and other(ed) bodies into the opera space. Including and training more and more children of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds to become an active part of the classical music sector, Nicolai specifically wished to 'change a traditional view of what opera and music theatre can do for people and who is in charge of doing it' (conversation, April 2016). Rather than only pushing for a greater representation of people of colour in opera, he sought to change the very gatekeepers of the classical musical space. Receiving a free musical education and gaining prominent stage exposure in one of Germany's most renowned opera houses certainly opens up the possibility for young people of Turkish descent, whose voices have often been systematically ignored and dismissed in the German highbrow sector, and helps them establish themselves in the long run as independent cultural producers. As Emre elaborated: 'Maybe they go on and become musicians, maybe directors or critics – but whatever they end up doing, they will do so in their own right' (conversation, April 2016).

5.2. Diversity as other(ed) labour

However, while indeed realising pockets of change that challenge institutional whiteness, the choir initiative also reifies racial and class hierarchies by largely outsourcing the diversity labour to minority producers. The latter are thus not only tasked with negotiating institutionalised inequalities in their daily work but also need to prove their 'worthiness' to the institution by performing the 'right degree' of difference. On one hand, the choir participants of Turkish descent have to work against the assumption of being 'a diversity hire' by showing that they are just as equipped and talented to be part of the classical music world and by subscribing to the cultural exclusivity of the opera space. On the other, however, they also need to present themselves as useful diversity resources which can be symbolically harnessed by the opera institution.

It's 2pm on a Thursday. I'm meeting Emre in the cafeteria of the opera. Our plan is to head out immediately again for a meeting with the founder of a local Turkish-speaking radio station. Emre has been invited to pitch his work at the opera and to talk about his own career in the cultural industries. When he joins me in the cafeteria, however, he seems exhausted. We sit down for a quick tea, giving him the time to catch a break. He tells me how he has been running around Berlin since the early morning, trying to help some choir parents make sense of some last-minute emails from the opera about choir scheduling. Some parents would struggle a bit with reading German and for some he actually had to set up an email account altogether. 'They trust me with these things' he says. 'But you know', he sighs, 'I can't be everywhere at all times' (fieldnote, September 2016).

As captured by this fieldnote, much of the diversity work in the context of the choir has been placed on Emre's shoulders and took up his time and effort way beyond standardised working hours. As one of the few Turkish speaking permanent staff at the opera, he was called upon whenever there would be a linguistic issue or when his colleagues felt a situation called for a 'cultural mediator'. 'Of course, there are amazing colleagues who go out of their way to support me, Nicolai and our work, but some tasks I cannot delegate... this just happens when you are basically the only Turk in a place like this', he says (conversation October 2017). As Ahmed (2012: 4) cautions, however, the ways in which institutions organise diversity and equality work are by no means arbitrary and highlights the political nature of the uneven distribution of that labour: 'if diversity and equality work is less valued by organizations, then to become responsible for this work can mean to inhabit institutional spaces that are also less valued.'

In the case of the choir initiative, I did get the sense that its intercultural reworking was underappreciated by the wider opera institution. Since I spent most of my fieldwork with Emre, Nicolai and a small set of other committed colleagues, it always came as

quite shock to me when I met other opera staff who didn't even know that the house was pushing to diversify itself. Amongst the regular managerial and musical employees who I encountered, there frequently seemed to be a lack of interest in looking beyond the main *raison d'être* of the house – playing and performing music. And even if people had indeed heard about the opera's diversity efforts, they tended to take themselves out of the conversation rather quickly, either excusing themselves as 'not knowing enough about these debates' or for not 'having followed the project in detail' or simply by switching the topic (fieldnotes September – November 2017) – either way, in these instances, diversity work seemed to be relegated to the outskirts of individual and institutional responsibility. Amongst the diversity team, it was especially Emre who was called upon whenever topics around diversity or difference were at stake, either in the context of internal, managerial meetings or when representing the opera to media outlets, symposiums and talks where 'race' and inequality in the cultural industries were debated. While he certainly was in the best position to do precisely that work, there is also a danger in being made 'the race person' as Ahmed writes: '[b]ecoming the race person means you are the one who is turned to when race turns up. The very fact of your existence can allow others not to turn up.' Rather than challenging and disrupting racial hierarchies in the cultural sector, we can thus see how diversity work itself becomes yet another source of racialised labour and inequality with exhausting consequences for minoritised producers.

Moreover, while most of the diversity work has been primarily delegated to minority producers, the opera institution clearly benefitted from such labour. Being one of the very few classical music institutions in Germany striving purposefully for more diversity in the arts, the opera house was frequently mentioned in the news or invited to cultural industry or educational meetings, often heralded for their progressive outlook and action. The diversity work of minoritised producers therefore generates what Banks (2019) calls 'diversity capital' for the institution more widely; that is, it forms the 'cultural practices and values that allow organizations to solve problems and leverage opportunities related to race and ethnicity and other social differences'. Diversity as commodity thus becomes mainly a means for predominantly white institutions or individuals to generate economic or social benefits, whilst evading more challenging questions around racism and racial equality (see also Leong, 2013). Subsequently, not only has the frame of diversity ultimately not created in-depth awareness and broader change at the institution, but the compartmentalisation of such work also sustains the structural racialisation of minoritised cultural producers specifically.

Having to negotiate the expectations and tensions around diversity work also shaped the experiences of choir families of Turkish background. For Dilvin, for instance, a lawyer and the mother of a 11-year old choir child, the experiences at the opera seemed to be overwhelmingly good; yet, there were some moments of hesitation when I asked her more concretely about her first few encounters with other parents after her child joined the choir.

Dilvin: 'I don't know, it's hard to put into words... It just felt like we first had to prove that we are valuable additions to the team.'

Me: 'How do you mean?'

Dilvin: 'Especially in the beginning, I felt somewhat scrutinised... like, you know, as though we would be the diversity-case rather than just families in our own rights who would like their child to get a musical education. In fact, my child was already enrolled in ballet classes and took piano lessons before joining the choir.'

Me: 'Do you think this is something specific about the classical music world?'

Dilvin: 'Yes and no. These feelings of being an outsider in Germany are not new for people with my family background. But yes, the classical music world is in this sense even more... German. And it's such a brilliant institution also, the musical quality is out of this world and the demand is high. So, there is a certain pressure to prove yourself for everybody, but I guess I felt it even stronger.'

Me: 'This sounds like a lot of work...'

Dilvin: 'Oh yes! But it's worth it – it's about time we claimed the stage!'

Feeling the need to prove to be a 'valuable addition to the team' and working against the assumption of being 'the diversity-case' undoubtedly put pressure on Dilvin who, even in the conversation with me, was keen to highlight her child's long-standing engagement with piano and ballet to mark her familiarity with wider highbrow cultural forms. Her account stands in line with what Puwar (2004) describes as the 'burden of doubt' carried by 'Space Invaders': '[b]eing socialized in the same system as the natural occupants, minorities are burdened with doubts about their capabilities perceiving themselves as deviant from the norm.' Subsequently, minorities would frequently feel the pressure to show that they are equally equipped and capable, striving to set particularly high standards and often working harder than their majority colleagues.

While Dilvin seems less concerned about classical music's cultural elitism per se, she is however highly aware of opera's association with whiteness which she again decodes as a racial marker of who can and cannot count as fully German. She thus draws a connection between opera as a dominant middle-class cultural capital and practices of white boundary-drawing. Yet, she does not turn away from the highbrow sphere but uses her engagement with ballet and classical music as a strategy of assimilation to affirm her middle-classness, thus proving her social fit for the opera and, to a certain extent, reclaiming the latter from the grip of whiteness – 'it's about time we claimed the stage'. However, by describing the latter as a 'brilliant institution' of highest musical quality which would make the investment of time and labour 'worth it', she not only validates her own social status against the exclusionary dynamics of 'race' but, in turn, also confirms the highbrow sphere as a hegemonic site of cultural value and legitimacy.

I suggest that the opera's association with highbrow elitism makes it easier for the institution to outsource diversity work at the cost of minorities' symbolic and emotional labour, precisely because it is evaluated as a prime site to accumulate (white) cultural capital. These dynamics were particularly pronounced in the accounts of families of Turkish heritage and working-class background. 18-year-old Gözde, whose parents work in a small import-export business, described participation in the choir as a 'springboard to make it', while Baris (52) who came to Germany as a factory worker, said the choir would be 'a unique opportunity and a big honour' for his sons. He even stated that his wife and him would work in opposite shifts, so that they can accommodate their children's 'rehearsal schedule – 'we sometimes barely see each other, but we're happy to do it'. Diversity here no longer works as a critical reflection of structural institutionalised inequality but is presented as an individual opportunity for other(ed) bodies to claim cultural recognition and social

mobility within a larger racist and classed system – put simplified, if you can belong to the opera, you might be able to belong to the nation. In this way, the institutionalisation of diversity not only reinvigorates the highbrow sphere as a site of elite-making but also fulfils what [Saha \(2018:22\)](#) designates as an ‘ideological function that sustains the institutional whiteness of the cultural industries’. Rather than reviewing institutional structures of exclusion, the pressure to fit it, to be part of it, to belong is externalised onto the individual other who needs to assimilate while also having to perform difference for the sake of the institution.

5.3. Diversity as elite capital

The ways in which the choir’s diversity strategy sustains elite- and ‘race’-making logics becomes even more pronounced when considering the position of some of the white and predominantly middle-class German parents I encountered during my fieldwork. For many of them, the opening of the children’s choir seemed to be largely pitted against the idea of intercultural learning and the accumulation of emerging forms of (inter)cultural or diversity capital. In identifying the choir as a productive realm in which the children are exposed to different cultural and ethnic backgrounds while still being part of the highbrow sector, the choir initiative seems to establish a reproductive trajectory for white middle-class participants to remake their privileged position within a more diverse and multicultural context. Diversity here becomes socially commodified as an active trajectory for the remaking of elite formations and institutional whiteness. This process is exemplarily encapsulated by a conversation that ensued between me and Irmgard, a middle-aged woman from Berlin, whose daughter joined the choir in 2014. When I asked her for an interview, she seemed eager to tell me how she got involved in the project.

Me: ‘Have you always wanted your child take up singing or was it this choir project specifically that convinced you?’

Irmgard: ‘We are a quite musical household in general. All my kids play an instrument. And this choir does phenomenal stuff, so I thought it would be great to participate.’

Me: ‘Were you aware when you signed up that the choir had this intercultural focus?’

Irmgard: ‘Yes, it certainly played a role when signing my daughter up! I don’t know if you heard about the rumours of other parents being against this initiative... but I certainly have been in favour from the start!’

Me: ‘What do you find particularly good about the project?’

Irmgard: ‘I mean, we live in a multicultural world, it’s important to know about diverse cultures. Why should I worry about kids from other cultural backgrounds joining the choir?! On the contrary, I think it’s an enriching and interesting experience.’

Me: ‘In what way?’

Irmgard: ‘It’s intercultural learning in a fun setting, exactly what you would think of as a successful intercultural dialogue. And not only for the kids! For us parents, too. For example, when I had to go to the Middle East for work, another choir mom showed me how to dress in a culturally appropriate fashion, how to fold the headscarf. These moments are great and quite helpful.’

Irmgard is undoubtedly in favour of the choir initiative, drawing a deliberate contrast between herself and other parents who, rumour has it, would have been against the intercultural opening of the choir. For Irmgard, it is the special interactive setting that she identifies as a ‘successful intercultural dialogue’. The latter would be especially important in view of today’s ‘multicultural world’ in which ‘intercultural learning’ would take on an important societal role. She thus ascribes not only a ‘fun’ leisurely character to the choir but also a more strategic ‘learning’ function wrapped up in an ‘interesting experience’. These descriptions of the choir as both ‘enriching’ and ‘helpful’ mirror the future-oriented, accumulative approach represented by Dilvin and others in an up-side-down manner. Whereas the latter strives towards the accumulation of a white cultural capital to weaponise against the racism, Irmgard’s focus seems to lie on learning about society’s pluralities instead – ‘it’s important to know about diverse cultures’.

The view that diversity training would be an important cultural resource in today’s increasingly globalised society seems to be widely shared amongst the choir parents. As documented by my field observations, a number of choir parents repeatedly highlighted how the intercultural choir would be a great opportunity for all the children ‘to form relationships and gain knowledge across their own culture’, how the choir would provide ‘an insight into today’s multicultural world’ and how such ‘intercultural exchanges are important because they also train children for their future lives’ (fieldnotes, April – June 2017). Such comments show how opportunities for cultural exchange seem to be primarily evaluated as opportunities for developing a cultural profile which is assumed to enable children to take part in today’s global social networks – a form of diversity proficiency, so to say. These findings stand in line with theorisations around the cultural omnivore whose cultural status is increasingly tied to cosmopolitan attitudes and life-styles. Or, as [Friedman et al. \(2015\):6](#) put it, the formation of a ‘cosmopolitan cultural capital [...] whereby cultural capital is intimately connected with a “cosmopolitan” orientation that is outward-looking and able to stand outside any one national frame, culturally’. As such, intercultural exchanges as promoted by the choir initiative seem to become themselves an indicator of social distinction and cultural value. [Hage \(1998:23\)](#) however reminds us that the articulation of this ‘discourse of cultural enrichment concerned with the valorisation of ethnic cultures [...] reveals a white-centred conception of the nation grounded in the White nation fantasy [...] While the dominant White culture merely and unquestionably exists, migrant cultures exist for the latter’ (ibid.: 120, 121). It is in this sense that the discursive notion of enrichment is linked to and further sustains the unequal positioning of racialised minorities within Germany’s cultural industries. Or, to put it with [Leong \(2013:2171\)](#), ‘the diversity rationale values nonwhiteness in terms of its worth to white people’, thereby sustaining and pushing minoritised creatives to the margins of cultural production. This process of marginalisation ever more sharpens when taking the social biases of the children’s choir initiative into closer consideration. As the choir’s conductor recalled, in the beginning of the intercultural launch, there were quite a few children whose families had to struggle in socioeconomic terms:

‘they were really talented kids, but many left the choir again. The parents weren’t really able to provide the logistics. The kids didn’t come to rehearsal regularly or were always late. We tried to get in touch with the parents, but there was little response. It’s really

a shame, but we don't have the means and it's also not our purpose as an opera choir to provide more focused social work' (interview, October 2014).

While I did not have a chance to find out more about the parents and could not talk to them directly either, they present a telling silence in my data and the choir itself. The choir, as it stands, seems to tell a success story – one where people of different backgrounds meet and make great music together. The intense logistical demands for the children's families are indeed recognised as challenges but deemed worthy for the otherwise fulfilling learning experiences. However, the moment such challenges are too pronounced and cannot be overcome, the choir's inclusivity seems to exhaust itself quickly. Instead of reviewing the choir's institutional workings and the implicit social biases it bears more deeply, it is the families themselves who are individually being made accountable for their children's dismissal. This mirrors the individualist spirit of contemporary neoliberalist market societies. The parents are described as 'not really able' to foster their children's talents or 'couldn't cope' with the opera's organisational requirements, and thus have to bear the consequences of their incapability. As another choir parent poignantly articulated: 'the choir requires a lot of energy from the children. They have to be focussed, concentrated and invest their time to master these often-difficult pieces, getting them right. It also is very time-consuming and logistically demanding, especially if you work or have other kids. This is not about culture as much as it is about social things. You need the right background for it' (interview, May 2017).

This underlying notion of self-inflicted destiny, however, shifts the responsibility from the structural to the individual sphere. The latter is herein presumed as being the decisive factor for allowing or restricting social mobility. In this vein, inequalities are increasingly seen as the result of individual actions and become delinked from systematic critique. To [Khan and Jerolmack \(2012:12–13\)](#), such a discourse of meritocracy would be particularly championed by social elites as it reflects '[t]he combination of rhetorically embracing openness while practicing protection'; that is, 'saying meritocracy but doing privilege'. This leads to the normalisation of racialised and classed exclusions prevalent in the Western cultural industries which, in turn, disguises the fact of how deeply a system of middle-class whiteness operates in its realm. We can here specifically detect an intrinsic connection between the structures of classical music education and the production and remaking of a particular middle-class subjectivity. As [Bull \(2019:107\)](#) elucidates, the ideas of mastering, correction and 'getting it right' in classical music would be strongly associated with 'a white middle-class morality'. She suggests that '[t]hrough its pedagogies and practices, an accumulative, autonomous, entitled middle-class self [...] is both assumed in classical music education, and also actively formed through its norms' (*ibid.*:34). She specifies that the 'discourse of "autonomous art", which positions classical music outside of any social concerns as a universal form of beauty, camouflages this boundary-drawing much more effectively than other types of social investment' (2019:31). The 'ability to erect boundaries, both geographically and symbolically' ([Khan & Jerolmack, 2012:12](#)) therefore constitutes a defining middle-class practice of reproduction. The families, who could not cope with the choir's demands, are thus literally and figuratively written out of the choir project: they are neither present in the space or the geography of the opera house, nor is their story accounted for a site of critical institutional reflection.

It is this active boundary-drawing which is rendered obscure in the statements above by transferring the question of choir participation merely into the sphere of neoliberal conceptualisations of individualism and meritocracy. This focus towards individual positions of privilege culminates in a liberal form of multiculturalism which continues to reside within a hegemonic system of whiteness, however in explicitly liberal disguise: it ultimately shares in the conviction that the white German middle-classes were, in one way or another, the 'masters of the national space' ([Hage, 1998:17](#)) and thus in a position to regulate who can be part and who is excluded from that space. Consequently, aiming to embrace urban multiculturalism but leaving overarching power relations around class, 'race' and ethnicity untouched, the choir initiative lends itself to the elite pursuit of diversity capital which, somewhat ironically, continues to manifest in the highbrow music sector. Thus, my analysis shows how discourses of cultural omnivorousness and diversity follow intersecting reproductive logics; indeed, distinction seems to be increasingly derived from plurality. However, rather than opening up systematic possibilities for social change, established power relations around class and 'race' are perpetuated precisely by cloaking structures of reproduction in discourses of multicultural openness, while extorting value from the raced and classed other – in this sense, the structures of highbrow whiteness clearly succeed at playing the system.

6. Conclusion

The case of the choir project and the arguments developed in this article have broader implications for understanding how diversity initiatives in the Western cultural industries link to processes of 'race'-making and elite reproduction. I addressed these concerns by looking closely at the organisational and social negotiations that shape the workings of the choir as diversity activity. My analysis showed how diversity strategies in the Western cultural sphere, while indeed pushing for openness and change to some extent, ultimately affirm racial capitalist logics and shifting modes of elite distinction which highlight a connection to diversity while concurrently holding onto exclusionary practices of highbrow culture. I argued that, despite its critical efforts, the choir project continues to reflect a specific standard of middle-class whiteness and sustains hegemonic relations of power precisely by incorporating diversity in a hierarchical manner. Rather than disrupting the standardised institutional workings of the classical music sector, the choir's diversity work gets taken up by institutional hierarchies and elite actors who extract value and distinction from the symbolic and emotional labour of classed and racialised minorities, thus linking racial capitalist logics with elite-making rationales.

My data document how diversity initiatives within the Western cultural sector run the risk of being social commodified as they can perpetuate hegemonic power relations of 'race', ethnicity and class by ultimately using the rapprochement to multiculturalism as a way to reaffirm the white highbrow as the dominant site of cultural and social legitimacy. To harness the critical potential of diversity work in the cultural industries in more profound ways, I suggest that it would need to be delinked as far as possible from the overarching production logics of the highbrow sector in order to mitigate the organisational, social and aesthetic boundaries otherwise imposed by

such standardised institutional workings and their historic legacies. Overall, the article thus contributes to a growing body of work on 'race'-making in the cultural industries with a particular focus on discourses around diversity and inclusion. In foregrounding an analysis of the ways in which diversity is negotiated in cultural practice, I called attention to how processes of cultural production can play into and reinforce racial inequality, even if cultural producers genuinely intend to strive for a more equal cultural sector. This analysis in turn bears insights into how we might need to re-envision difference in cultural production and how cultural work needs to be restructured in order to not only reframe notions of racialised otherness but to indeed contribute to its undoing. Looking ahead, more empirically grounded research is needed on the ways in which the institutional conditions of art and cultural organisations are changing and how such challenges might impact on the ways in which systemic exclusions can be addressed organisationally and aesthetically. At a time where inequalities of various kinds are escalating around the globe, a rigorous understanding of the ways in which discourses of openness and inclusion actually sustain the convergence of white supremacy, of economic capital and cultural legitimacy continues to present an urgent matter for contemporary sociology.

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