



Diverse cast to play composers in Mozart series

Portrayals in Sky adaptation of Amadeus are 'historically inaccurate and misleading', say critics



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Maestro: Will Sharpe as Mozart in the new Sky drama Amadeus Credit: Sky

Craig Simpson

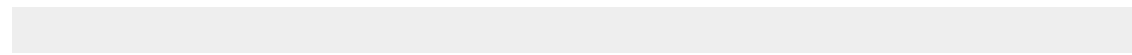
Arts Editor

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A racially diverse cast will play Mozart's historical collaborators in a new series.

The Sky series, based on Peter Shaffer's play Amadeus, explores the rivalries provoked by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's musical genius.

A diverse group of actors will play courtiers and composers, including real historical figures in 18th-century Vienna. Critics have said such portrayals are "historically inaccurate and misleading".



In 2020, following that summer's Black Lives Matter protests, Sky committed to ensure that 20 per cent of all roles went to black and minority ethnic performers.

In addition to the British-Japanese actor Will Sharpe in the role of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Paul Bettany as his Italian rival Antonio Salieri, the cast includes young actors Ényì Okoronkwo and Jyuddah Jaymes in supporting roles.

Okoronkwo, who appeared in Disney's Renegade Nell, will play the Italian librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte, who wrote the texts for Mozart's The Marriage of Figaro, Don Giovanni and Così Fan Tutte.





Enyi Okoronkwo alongside Louisa Harland in Disney's *Renegade Nell* Credit: Robert Viglasky/Disney+

Jaymes, who has appeared in the ITV series Sanditon, will play the Austrian composer Franz Xaver Süssmayr, who completed Mozart's Requiem Mass following his death in 1791.

Lead actor Sharpe, whose mother is Japanese, was nominated for an Emmy award for his performance as American tech entrepreneur Ethan Spiller in *White Lotus*.

The series is a “reimagining” of Shaffer’s 1979 play, which charts the obsessional Salieri’s obsessive envy of Mozart’s talent. In 1984, a film adaptation of the play won eight Oscars.

While 18th-century Vienna, as the centre of the Holy Roman Empire, was home to a range of European ethnic groups, the level of diversity depicted in the new series has been questioned.

Should TV casting be historically accurate?

Yes – it matters

No – it's all about the acting

Total votes: 936

Prof Ian Pace, a pianist and music scholar at City of London University, said such a portrayal was “certainly historically inaccurate and misleading”, adding: “Vienna was a diverse society – Austrians, Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Croats, Serbs and others.

“But the Holy Roman Empire, of which it was then part, had no major colonial holdings outside of Europe and no significant population of African origin.”

He said there was a large Ottoman Turkish population in Vienna at the time, but this group does not appear to feature in the new Amadeus.

While the Amadeus play is set in Hapsburg Vienna, it was not itself a work of strict period scholarship because it bends historical truth by portraying Salieri and Mozart as fiercer rivals than they were in reality.



There is a broader trend of TV programmes depicting the past as more diverse than the historical reality.

The BBC series King and Conqueror, about the 1066 Norman conquest, used a diverse cast to portray Anglo-Saxon nobility, including Morcar, Earl of Northumbria.

A fictional role, that of Thane Thomas, was invented for the series and similarly cast. This character turned out to be central to the series and the closest adviser of the English King Harold Godwinson. Prof David Abulafia, a Cambridge historian, said the series bore “little relation to historical fact”.


Another BBC series, Wolf Hall, returned for a second run with a far more diverse cast than the first series. The TV adaptation of Dame Hilary Mantel’s novels about Henry VIII’s court used a diverse cast to portray Tudor courtiers, including white historical figures.

These included the poet Thomas Wyatt, and Lady Margery Seymour, the mother of Jane Seymour, and Seymour’s sister-in-law, Anne. Seymour herself was played by a white actress.

Bridgerton, a far looser period production set roughly in Britain's Regency, depicted early 19th-century London as a harmonious multi-racial society.

Sky has been contacted for comment on the new Amadeus series.

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