

Black Tell revisited

Thomas Gartmann in conversation with the composer Charles Uzor

Thomas Gartmann

The figure of William Tell embodies the Swiss notion of freedom. He stands for the founding myth of Switzerland in 1291, even if his legend itself actually originated in Denmark and the best-known version is by the German dramatist Friedrich Schiller (his *Wilhelm Tell* of 1804). Tell's crossbow has formed the emblem of the branding association *Swiss Label* since 1917 and remains today the trademark par excellence for Swiss products, from Aludesign to the Zurich Brickworks.¹ In this artist interview I will discuss why a *Black Tell* with the migrant Charles Uzor as co-composer was created for a Swiss national exhibition in 2002, how the performance was received by the press, and how the composer himself judges it today, when looking back at the production after a quarter of a century.

Almost every 25 years, Switzerland celebrates itself with an affirmative national exhibition (Schweizer Landesausstellung) for a broad audience. The 10.3 million visitors for the last and sixth such event, "Expo.02",² held in the region around the lakes of Neuchâtel, Bienne/Biel and Morat/Murten, offered a largely representative cross-section of both the Swiss population including native-born citizens and immigrants. The last of the four most prominently promoted musical acts on the programme was the world premiere on 29 June 2002 of *Black Tell*, a "Swiss soap opera" (thus its subsidiary title), staged in a tent in the small town of Morat/Murten. It was a "pasticcio" commissioned by the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia from five Switzerland-based composers, among them the Nigerian-born Charles Uzor (*1961).³

Switzerland's authorities and people are proud of their four national languages German, French, Italian and Romansh and their corresponding cultures. Politically and culturally, much emphasis is placed on ensuring that all four are present in the media, in political institutions and administration as well as in cultural manifestations, especially at representative occasions such as the national exhibition of 2002. So for this particular occasion, the commissioning body specified that there had to be one composer each from the German-speaking, Francophone, Italoophone and Rhaeto-Romanic parts of Switzerland.

I was involved in this project as the then head of the music department of Pro Helvetia, a public foundation in Switzerland that supports artists and promotes Swiss culture and art at home and abroad. It also fosters cultural dialogue between the different regions of the country, supports the arts in interregional contexts and issues commissions for important events. As a result, I was directly involved in Expo.02, also in the decision-making process concerning the acts supported by Pro Helvetia. Since the commission for *Black Tell* was awarded by Pro Helvetia after discussions with the production team, I am naturally biased in my own analysis when trying to contex-

1 In a pivotal scene, William Tell is faced with the choice of either dying or shooting an apple off his son's head with his crossbow. Tell drew his crossbow and shot the apple without harming his child.

2 "Expo" is the abbreviation of the French "Exposition" and the number "02" marks the year 2002. It was the sixth National Exhibition in Switzerland.

3 The other composers were all of the same generation: Daniel Weissberg (*1954), Jacques Demierre (*1954), Sergio Menozzi (*1960) and Fortunat Frölich (*1954).

tualise it today. But I also had special insights and access to documents from the creative process (letters between the producers, the composer and Pro Helvetia, reports, programme liner notes, the press release, reviews etc.), which makes my task easier.

In 1998, when Switzerland was celebrating its 150th anniversary as a modern, liberal, federal state, it was the guest country at the Frankfurt Book Fair. It presented itself multiculturally. In addition to the four parts of the country represented by its four national languages, Switzerland also showcased both the so-called ‘fifth Switzerland’, namely Swiss expatriates resident across the world, and what is occasionally referred to as the ‘sixth’ Switzerland: people with foreign passports or origins who are based in Switzerland, such as the Libya-born Ibrahim al-Koni. At that time, immigrants made up just over twenty percent of the seven million-strong Swiss population.⁴ Pro Helvetia was actively committed to including members of this ‘sixth’ Switzerland among its official representatives – something that was received with great astonishment in Germany. Two years later, at the World Exhibition in Hanover in 2000, the Swiss Pavilion was a structure made of wooden beams designed by the later Pritzker Prize-winner Peter Zumthor, with fifty entrances symbolising Switzerland’s open-door policy in cultural matters at that time. Inside the Pavilion was a live sound installation by Swiss composer Daniel Ott (*1960), performed by musicians from very different countries, all playing the folk music instruments of their respective homelands. Once more, Switzerland was keen to present itself as a multicultural nation with open doors, despite the fact that the xenophobic Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP, Swiss People’s Party) was gaining influence at this time and that immigration and naturalisation processes were often less than welcoming.⁵

Ott enjoyed much success at the Hanover World Exhibition and it was originally planned that he should also work on *Black Tell* as the representative of German-speaking Switzerland. However, he had to withdraw when an appointment to the Berlin University of the Arts meant he had too little time.⁶ Ott was replaced by the Basel composer Daniel Weissberg, which meant that now the Jewish minority in Switzerland was also represented. The pianist and composer Jacques Demierre from Geneva, Sergio Menozzi from Bellinzona and Fortunat Frölich from Chur were the representatives of the French, Italian and Rhaeto-Romanic speaking minorities respectively. Women, however, were not included – at that time, hardly any women in Switzerland had experience of composing for the operatic stage, not least because no such commissions had ever been issued to a woman composer in the country; they thus really did constitute a minority in Switzerland.⁷

In an endeavour to continue this new tradition of openness (towards migrants, though not yet towards women), Pro Helvetia proposed Charles Uzor as the fifth composer for *Black Tell*. He was already known to Pro Helvetia through several joint projects at home and abroad, such as *Echnaton’s Hymnos to Aton* (1995/97) that was premiered in the Cairo Opera House, i.e. on the African continent. Uzor was also chosen because his music had already attracted attention for its melodiousness, placing him apart from the avant-garde mainstream that still prevailed in Switzerland. Born in Udo Mbaise in Nigeria in 1961, Uzor came to Switzerland in 1968 as a refugee from the Biafran War. He went to the Royal Academy of Music in London to study oboe and also trained

4 Naturalisation in Switzerland is possible only after a minimum of 10 years of residence.

5 Thomas Gartmann, “‘Un événement live qui tient de l’œuvre totale’: Le pavillon sculptural de Peter Zumthor pour l’Exposition de Hanovre et la musique composée par Daniel Ott pour le Corps sonore Suisse,” *Sonorités* 11 (2017): 77–96.

6 In 2016 he also assumed the position of artistic co-director of the Munich Biennale, the first festival for new music theatre, which only performs world premieres.

7 Although women gained the right to vote in Switzerland in 1971, it was not until 1990 that the last canton, Appenzell Innerrhoden, approved it. The first women professors in composition were only appointed in 2002 and 2004 (Bettina Skrzypczak in Lucerne and Isabel Mundry in Zurich respectively). Of the composing members of the Swiss Association of Musicians, only 7% were women in 2002.

there as a composer of chamber, symphonic and stage music, taking his final diploma in 1990. He wrote his doctoral dissertation *Melody and the phenomenology of internal time-awareness* (2005) at Goldsmiths College of the University of London. His works are recorded on Neos and col legno.⁸

For a further discussion of the opera and its reception, I rely on in the following on an interview, which is based on a presentation given at the conference “The ‘African Operatic Voice’ - Opera and Music Theatre in Africa and the African Diaspora”, held at the University of Bern from 8 to 10 September 2023.⁹ I interspersed it with related comments and background information. For publication in this volume, the interview text has been expanded and my comments further elaborated to include additional reflections.

Thomas Gartmann: Charles Uzor, how did you react when you were asked to participate in this pasticcio, which was a very special, prestigious project? Did you feel honoured as an ambassador of this so-called ‘sixth Switzerland’, or did you feel imposed upon? Or even somehow used or abused? What were your feelings about it, and how did this commission relate to your personal experiences at the time?

Charles Uzor: It’s a long time ago. In these 20 years I experienced many layers of feelings. I remember I was very happy when I got the commission. It was quite a big thing to get a commission for an opera production. But to be honest, I did feel a little bit instrumentalised, because I knew they needed a Black composer and there wasn’t a bunch of us running around... Being a Black person living in Switzerland, you are always faced with some kind of racial bias, be it negative or positive. Therefore, I knew what my role was. It was a double role. I had to represent the opposite of the ordinary Swiss guy and at the same time I had to be the very Swiss guy. For me, everything is a matter of how you do it. Whom do I represent, how do I remain myself? I may feel instrumentalised when I just do things the way I am supposed to, but if I do it my own way, when I succeed in undermining expectations and in changing the outcome, it feels fine, like playing my own tune with the instrument they gave me. I think I succeeded, but I was a bit scared because the other composers were older, more experienced, and more known, too. And it’s not very easy to work with composers. Everyone wants to set the tone.

Thomas Gartmann: As a pasticcio, this work can be seen in the tradition of the Baroque practice of juxtaposing different pieces by different composers to create a conglomerate work for a specific occasion.¹⁰ But it also recalls more recent projects, most of them occasional works like the hilarious *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (“The bride and groom of the Eiffel Tower”, Paris 1921), the ballet by the collective Les Six.¹¹ The *Black Tell* production had similar ingredients: parody, humour and surrealistic moments. Plus the fact that it never takes itself seriously. The idea arose of turning a certain DJ Ogui Dolphy into a Swiss icon, equipping him with crossbow and tunic and sending him on tour with rap versions of traditional Swiss folk music to festivals in the four corners of the country.

8 Charles Uzor, “Works,” accessed August 17, 2025, <https://www.uzor.ch>.

9 The conference was convened by Prof. Dr. Lena van der Hoven at the institute of Musicology at the University of Bern. For more information see the conference schedule: https://www.musik.unibe.ch/unibe/portal/fak_historisch/dkk/musik/content/e39911/e155112/e178366/e1248270/e1419641/ConferenceScheduleAOV09-23_ger.pdf.

10 Cf. Curtis Price, “Pasticcio,” *Grove Music Online*. 2001, accessed August 6, 2025, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000021051>.

11 *Les mariés de la tour Eiffel* (*The Wedding Party on the Eiffel Tower*) is a ballet to a libretto by Jean Cocteau with music by five members of the composer group Les Six: Georges Auric, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc and Germaine Tailleferre.

In the press release for the Expo's events, you can find the following announcement as it was published on the front page of the Agenda section in the *Basler Zeitung* on 22 November 2001:

Soap opera in a tent. 'Black Tell' only fits halfway into an open-air tent but is entirely open in its approach to form: It creates nothing less than a new genre, 'Opera Savone Suisso' ('Swiss soap opera'). The Swiss fear of losing their roots is contrasted with a Nigerian's euphoric perspective of the country. Four composers are responsible for this work: Jacques Demierre, Fortunat Frölich, Sergio Menozzi and Charles Uzor.¹²

Incidentally, the Basel composer Daniel Weissberg was left out here – which is ironic, given that it was a newspaper from his home city that omitted him. This may be sheer coincidence, or perhaps his name was missing in this press release because he only joined the team later as a “substitute”. The synopsis states:

After failing to get proper work in Switzerland, DJ Ogui makes a living representing the black man rapping for the whites, with all the abusive positive and negative racism involved. He goes on tour to various Swiss festivals, but finally he is forced to leave the country. Eventually Ogui falls in love with Trudi, a Swiss girl who, by marrying him, legalises his stay in a rather hostile environment. The marriage takes place against her father's wishes, who eventually gets shot by Ogui by accident. He had been aiming with his crossbow at Ogui, so mistook him for a bat [sic]. After shooting the bat (his father-in-law), a symbol for the past suffocation life [sic], Ogui is able to breathe freely again.¹³

Thomas Gartmann: This plot is very crude. It is a parody of Friedrich Schiller's and Gioachino Rossini's *William Tell* (1829) and a satire on the Swiss policy towards asylum-seekers, referring specifically to the political propaganda of the populist Schweizerische Volkspartei suggesting that asylum-seekers are potential terrorists. As a member of the creative team, were you also able to participate in working out the plot?

Charles Uzor: No, the libretto was entirely written by Nicolas Ryhiner and I thought it was very bad, because it was full of clichés. But the way it played with those clichés was quite amusing. Now I see myself enacting this fake story and at the same time trying to make fun of its attempt to make fun. In the end nothing is serious in that story. The clichés are so abundant and just always over the top. *Black Tell* as a production mirrors itself in its critique of a conservative multicultural Switzerland. Adolf Ogi was one of the seven Swiss federal ministers, he represented the party of the conservative right – now this Black guy, a rapper, is called Ogui. This black-and-white painting is rather primitive. I tried to adjust it in my way, by using Swiss yodel and connecting it with African yodelling. That's how I instrumentalise 'Swissness'.

Thomas Gartmann: When we study its libretto, it is indeed full of obvious clichés and satirical exaggerations. It ridicules festival directors, fighting in a battle of the three tenors, and implicitly includes the artistic director of the Expo himself, Daniel Rossellat. But it is also degrading to women, makes fun of the Swiss fear of foreigners, and often sounds racist, using taboo expressions. But we also have to ask: Where is the libretto actually racist, and where, by contrast, does it actually criticise the racism of the Swiss? The N-word in its various forms is said several times, I quote here from the subtitles of the video.¹⁴ In another passage, the libretto reads: “He is really black.” In his first performance, *Black Tell* appears as a savage, a terrorist who tears up the Swiss

12 Christoph Heim, “Tanz, Musik, Theater: Die Expo als multikulturelles Festival,” interview with Daniel Rossellat, *Basler Zeitung*, November 22, 2001, 3, translation by the author.

13 Text given here as in the original English wording. Exposé of September 24, 1999.

14 There is no libretto available, so I here refer to the subtitles in the private video recording made by the production team.

flag. He is a zombie, an avenger and a killer, characterised by wild rap. He comes from what is called “pepper land,” he’s described as “dirty,” and signifies the supposed hordes of asylum seekers. And he also cries: “I Tarzan – You Jane.” However, the libretto also offers a Shakespearean version of this: “I Juliet – you Romeo.” And yet, on the other hand, this Black man also develops into a sympathetic figure, a flag-waving Swiss who grills sausages.

The character of Tell – performed by the Black singer Laurence Albert, cf. fig. 1 – has a positive connotation here.

In an early project description, the focus was even clearer: *The other Switzerland. Black Tell*. His name, DJ Ogui Dolphy, is reminiscent both of the Black American jazz musician Eric Dolphy and, as you have just mentioned, of the popular Swiss Sports and Defence Minister Adolf Ogi. “Long live Tell” and “A shining example for Switzerland”: this enthusiasm is interrupted by the story, in which he is passed around like an exotic trophy, not unlike the world exhibitions of the 19th century, when people from foreign countries were exhibited like exotic animals.

Thomas Gartmann: How do you judge this ambiguity between racism and what seems almost like positive discrimination?

Charles Uzor: This is a difficult question, because 20 years ago the context was different, more personal. Being Black was something owned by myself in an almost private way. I was used to this kind of negative and positive racism. I could fight back. Nowadays, it feels less like a personal fight than a social issue, it’s not so much about me and my feelings and how I sublimate them. It’s about being Black. Today I couldn’t participate in a project like *Black Tell*, with this libretto. For example, the N-word is spoken out loud many times, and in fact my role was doing exactly what the libretto wanted Ogui, the ‘nigger’, to do, which is to become a good Swiss citizen, who must be integrated, who tries to adjust to life, tries to connect and to be liked – tries to be part of an opera production for a big Swiss festival. Nowadays I couldn’t do it. But back then it was a personal thing and I thought, you know, if they laugh at me, I laugh at them without letting them know how loud I laugh in the end, cashing in the money.

Thomas Gartmann: In the programme notes, the synopsis expressly mentions how the Black title character raps for white people, “with all the abusive positive and negative racism involved.”¹⁵ Could you explain how this was understood by the producers of this opera – and how you understood it yourself? Were there any discussions at all about discrimination? Between the composers, or with the librettist? Were certain positions also specifically assigned to different participants in the creative team? How much influence were you able to exert on the libretto?

Charles Uzor: I remember we talked with Ryhiner about the libretto, but I must say it was chaotic. We gave it up because we were five composers with different interests, and Ryhiner knew exactly what he wanted. So this idea of collaboration didn’t really work. But in the end, it functioned as an opera. It was fun and I think people liked it, but we didn’t compose it as a team, as we had initially wished. A team would need to “live” together, I mean physically be together, its members need to confront each other for a longer time. But we had to rush to meetings of two, maybe three hours, coming from all parts of Switzerland, and the setting was just impossible for that. And then we rushed back home, and everybody was composing for himself.

¹⁵ *Black Tell*, programme notes, 2002.

Thomas Gartmann: We have to distinguish between Tell as a figure, and the Black man as a composer. The composer and the main character here become one person, which is not unproblematic. Tell himself comes explicitly from Nigeria. Was this ever considered a problem, and how did you approach it?"

Charles Uzor: I read the libretto and realised, this guy is from Nigeria too. But you know, we are so different. He is a rapper, I'm not, this guy is tall, I am short – it was a completely different scenario... I didn't feel offended, it was no problem for me, really.

Thomas Gartmann: A friend of mine always criticises Western concert organisers who assume that they know only too well how non-European music should sound – and he also criticises those musicians who are all-too-ready to fulfil such expectations and play exactly in the way they believe is wanted by these promoters. What did the producers expect from you? Did they want you to provide a certain African flavour?

Charles Uzor: No, not at all, at least not explicitly. We really were free. And it shows. The result is so heterogeneous. We are such different composers. One of them didn't write one note. I mean, he didn't write notes. He went to train stations and recorded the sounds and put them together. Perhaps I was the one who wrote the most traditionally.

Thomas Gartmann: Three things strike me in this context. Cultural appropriation and cultural attribution cross paths here, so to speak. Your co-composer Frölich tries his hand at rap, though he doesn't know it that well. It soon comes across as embarrassing. On the other hand, you bring the alphorn onto the stage and provide a yodelling aria about milking cows. Was this cross-appropriation agreed in advance?

Charles Uzor: No, we just realised it afterwards. Maybe we were each shocked by the other's music. I guess some colleagues were shocked by my music, too, and must have found it inappropriate. I think on one level this is a good thing, perhaps it's the "Swissness" about the whole thing, like live and let live. It was not a masterwork, not something well fitting, but a potpourri of styles and ideas – something amusing and quite colourful. But luckily, we did not have more time, because we may have ended in war.

Thomas Gartmann: Concerning the percussion: these are instruments that most Swiss people immediately associate with Africa. You chose two percussion players and many instruments, but no African ones. Was this on purpose?

Charles Uzor: The worst form of appropriation is to steal something and throw it to the audience clapping on. I didn't want to dance for the white man. I used the xylophone and the marimba-
phone, instruments I like very much. The piece is scored for two percussionists, but unfortunately, they could only pay for one musician, so the part had to be reduced.

Thomas Gartmann: The identity discourse of today didn't even exist back then, let alone in Switzerland. How did you experience this 20 years ago?

Charles Uzor: As I tried to explain before, for me it was a personal thing. The newspapers didn't talk much about identity at that time. I had to deal with my circumstances, my daily life, and how to become strong. As a Black person at the time, I was constantly confronted with the fact that I

was different on the one hand but pushed myself to be like them on the other hand. That meant always being super polite, being super intelligent. It meant always being a bit better than the white guy, in order to be equal. So you have to be strong and try to be yourself and resist wanting to fulfil the other's expectations.

Thomas Gartmann: In an early article by the German-Swiss journalist and musicologist Thomas Meyer, we read: "he doesn't seem to be looking for roots, doesn't want to peddle his origins."¹⁶ And we can also find a quote from you here: "You see, I am Black and count myself among the whites,"¹⁷ which you said at a public lecture. Is this still the case?

Charles Uzor: I think I lost my Blackness more and more. But maybe I'm not aware of traces of Africa that are still there in my music, Black traces. It's so beautiful to meet young Black composers like Jessie Cox, who know how to explore these traces and who can see our common Blackness with young, fresh eyes. Although my way of composing is very European, there is a longing for Blackness in my music. But I never want to use it as a tool for showing off with the very absence of what is in my desire.

Thomas Gartmann: Let's come again to the composition of the work. As one of the five composers, how did you link all its heterogeneous elements? Your task was indeed difficult, as you wrote in the preface to *Black Tell*: 'My part of the production was to write choruses and orchestral interludes between the acts and, by adopting certain motives and languages used by the other composers, to unify the whole piece. My Interludes and Finale establish the recurrent theme of the musical ideas, connect them or integrate them into one language.'¹⁸ On one occasion, you named the challenges associated with all this: 'Working on the Interludes and Finale was very difficult at the beginning, especially since my connecting function had nothing to connect for a very long time.'¹⁹ How did you manage this job, unifying and building bridges? Or did you do this the other way round?

Charles Uzor: The problem was that the other music was not there. We only had a short time to complete the opera, and my colleagues were also concerned with other pieces. My interludes were meant to be written after the acts. To wait for the acts to be delivered while running out of time to do my own part was quite horrifying. I couldn't write all that music just in a couple of days. I am a slow writer. The situation just got impossible. So, I decided to attack. I think I was the first to finish. I wrote the interludes and the finale without having a clear idea of what the others were doing. For me, this was a way not to submit to servile waiting, fitting in and connecting, but rather to state my own argument. In fact, I didn't change anything of my music when the acts finally came. Perhaps this did infuriate some of my colleagues. My interludes are not just interludes. They became long and establish their own form. The finale is probably the longest part of the whole opera. This was my way of survival.

Thomas Gartmann: Your parts of the work reveal a musical counter-world. They are mostly sung from the music – which in itself creates an element of distance – and often in chorus, sometimes in fugato, artfully, even when the material is 'popular', such as a medley of 1970s hits, clichéd dances or folk songs. Everything here makes a decidedly serious impression, and the spectral sounds contribute to this too. But you also use yodelling for the cows, the *ranz-des-*

16 Thomas Meyer, "Beglückung oder Zerstörung? Der Komponist Charles Uzor," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 6 (1997): 26.

17 Meyer, "Beglückung oder Zerstörung?," 27.

18 Charles Uzor, "Preface" to *Black Tell*, unpublished.

19 Charles Uzor, letter to Thomas Gartmann, October 16, 2001, translation by the author.

vaches, set pieces situated between folklore and Romanticism; sometimes your music also sounds Wagnerian or like expressive salon music, which is probably also due to its being scored for salon orchestra. As a result, we can find this somewhat crude collage of different styles not only in the plot and the libretto, but also in the music.

Charles Uzor: You are completely right in your musical analysis. I just want to differentiate between polystylistic composition as a strategy and the moody medleying of catchy bits and pieces as an expression of pleasing the listeners and fulfil their expectations, which I call eclectic. The difference not only lies in the seriousness of the endeavour, but also in its motivation. Polystylism is an attempt to juxtapose different realities and reflects an abundance of expression, whereas eclecticism is a proof of lack. Especially in the Finale of *Black Tell*, Bernd Alois Zimmermann's aesthetics with its rejection of the notion of high and low-value music is very noticeable.

Thomas Gartmann: Finally, let's move on to the reception of the work in Switzerland. Personally, I only have vague memories of it myself. My own impression was also rather negative. The French and German-speaking radio stations TSR and DRS broadcast a performance at prime time on 1 August, the Swiss National Day. The leading Swiss newspaper, the *NZZ*, did not bring any report of it, nor did the Swiss music journals. If I may presume here, it was perhaps for reasons of genteel restraint, because it was too entertaining for them, not serious enough. But other German-language newspapers reviewed the opera. Among them the tabloid newspaper *Blick* was quite enthusiastic:

The opera begins with a provocation. A black DJ, an overexcited, freaky killer and avenging figure in Swiss combat gear, tears the Swiss flag to shreds and shoots at it like a madman with his rifle. Uzor unites the solo voices in homophonic vocal movements reminiscent of Frank Martin's *Vin herbé* to form a commenting chorus as in a Greek tragedy. [...] A musical, cabaret-like firework ranging from modern classical music to rap and Swiss folklore can be heard here. And it succeeds: Laurence Albert as Ogui arouses sympathy with his energetic manner, and the mix of styles and cultures provides upbeat entertainment.²⁰

David Wohnlich offered a neutral report in the *Basler Zeitung*:

Five composers wrote the individual acts and intermezzi – true to the dictates of federalism ... In accordance with the libretto, they managed to create a postmodern smorgasbord full of quotations, allusions and swansongs to traditional dramatic models.²¹

The successful rapper who is the title character is referred to here as the 'Schwarzer Goldesel',²² the 'Black cash cow'. And this critic also offers an interpretation of the story:

'Only those who erase the shadows of horror from their life can be happy in Switzerland; the alternative would be the kind of confrontation that is supposedly so much feared in this country.'²³

Martin Etter in the Bernese newspaper *Der Bund* criticised the opera purely from an aesthetic point of view as being too heterogeneous:

The result, however, is not fully convincing – too many cooks may not have spoiled the broth, but they were not able to combine it into a coherent whole. [...] All this seems quite original and amusing – but it is also too detailed, too complicated and too laden

20 Walo von Fellenberg, "Schwarzer Tell als Retter der Schweiz [Black Tell as the saviour of Switzerland]," *Blick*, July 5, 2002, 13, translation by the author.

21 David Wohnlich, "Expo-Theater: 'Black Tell' im Schokoladenstaat [Black Tell' in chocolate country]," *Basler Zeitung*, July 1, 2002, 30, translation by the author.

22 Wohnlich, "Expo-Theater."

23 Wohnlich, "Expo-Theater."

with symbols. [...] Time and again, witty ideas make an impact (such as the yodelling sequence by Charles Uzor, which was met with applause), and time and again there are delicious moments garnished with cleverly used quotations. But the individual parts just don't come together to form a self-contained, Helvetic festive opera.²⁴

Bettina Kugler of the *St. Galler Tagblatt* acknowledged the good intentions but criticised weaknesses in how the opera had been drafted:

Why should I leave paradise to return to hell where they will kill me? An African in exile asks this question and forces us to think about the security of our own situation in Swiss society. [...] What is put on stage, however, is little more than a Swiss jigsaw puzzle in bright colours. [...] Elements of a soap opera are put together with blind fervour, dialogues in a mangled Alpine Esperanto are cobbled together from all over the place... and once again, albeit in the form of ironic quotations from political propaganda, national symbols are shredded. As an act of provocation, however, this parodistic panorama remains blurred.²⁵

Only Olivier Senn in the Zurich newspaper *Tages-Anzeiger* commented on the central question of “the Other”, the irony, and the questions about identity and racism. He saw the opera as an all-too-banal act of self-praise by Swiss pretending to be open-minded to other cultures:

Simplistic and uncharming. The story is as complicated in its details as it is banal in its idea. A Black man has to show us Swiss how fantastic our country is. He becomes the hero ‘Black Tell’, has a son with a Swiss woman who stands for a multicultural, cosmopolitan Switzerland, and finally kills racism in the form of a bat with a crossbow. [...] The characters are nothing but flat allegories (the Black man, the racist, the film diva) [...] Thus Black Tell presents itself as an incoherent parade of commonplaces. Neither funny nor serious, nor anything at all that justifies the effort of putting it to music.²⁶

Overall, what was criticised in the press was the heterogeneity, and the lack of wit. But never racism or cultural appropriation. How do you assess the work's reception?

Charles Uzor: It is quite interesting to hear these critiques now for the first time. I can appreciate them in essence, although I have a different approach to the opera. Well, I must have, I guess, standing on the other side. For me, this opera was an opportunity to try out my skills and to see how I might manage to work together with four male Swiss composers on a single work. I didn't expect too much aesthetically or from the social context. I mean, the libretto is horrible. When I read it the first time, I thought, oh no, how can somebody write something so stupid? But this feeling vanished more and more the longer I was working on the text. In the process of composition, the text became a part of myself. I think this is what often happens when you throw yourself into a text. The lyrics can be cheap, and still the music becomes sincere.

It's important to remember the context. The national exposition expected millions of visitors as it was advertised in many newspapers. So its cultural events had to try and suit several different target groups. And they followed certain policies and agendas both explicit and hidden, like bringing together what is diverse, crossing borders – especially cultural borders – and popularising music and theatre. In an interview with Christoph Heim of the *Basler Zeitung* before the performances, the artistic director of Expo.02, Daniel Rossellat, expressed the challenges very clearly and what he hoped to achieve:

We want to promote encounters between the regions of the country, the generations, the cultures within the country and those outside, also between tradition and modernity. [...] The Expo is a multicultural festival, so we will certainly not present the most

24 Martin Etter, “Opernmix mit allzu vielen Köchen [Opera pastiche with too many cooks],” *Der Bund*, July 1, 2002, 4.

25 Bettina Kugler, “Kennst Du das Land ...? Oper an der Expo.02: In ‘Black Tell’ mimt ein schwarzer DJ den Nationalhelden [Do you know the country ...? Opera at the Expo.02: In ‘Black Tell’, a black DJ mimes the national hero],” *St. Galler Tagblatt*, July 1, 2002, 27.

26 Olivier Senn, “Simpel und uncharmant [Simplistic and uncharming],” *Tages-Anzeiger*, July 1, 2002, 46.

advanced contemporary music or the avant-garde, but rather a wider panorama that makes people want to discover something. [...] The Expo is an opportunity to try out something new. At the same time, we have to be considerate of the audience we want to seduce. We can initiate debates, favour certain perceptions, but there can be no moralising, no demanding discussions at the Expo. I don't want to be an artistic dictator either, who prescribes to everyone what they should do. Instead, I want to put myself in the position of a visitor, and try to engage with the cultural world of Switzerland.²⁷

The challenges and the possible means of resolving them are understood and acknowledged, but also made somewhat ridiculous. In his own comments after the above interview, Heim harshly criticized the Expo for its polystylistic, heterogenous attitude and its populist approach:

Many things have been 'bought in' from elsewhere, some things have been commissioned especially, such as a music theatre production called 'Black Tell' [...] that tries to bring rap, pop and classical music under the same umbrella. [...] In general, combining what is diverse is very popular with the event organisers. But this seems to be very important to the Cultural Expo: crossing borders, crossing language borders, crossing the specifics of the Expo region itself, popularising dance and theatre. Programme ideas that could almost come from a seminar for cultural managers.²⁸

You can tell from the tone that this journalist is trying to take a critical view. However, his last remark could apply to the entire programme of the Expo, for its organisers were keen to embrace the new openness that was fashionable at the time. And when it became too obvious, they reacted with indignation. In order to gain a personal insight into the composer's perspective, my next question tied in directly with this criticism.

Thomas Gartmann: Christoph Heim wrote that this concept would really only work in a seminar for cultural managers. But what did you gain personally from this project? When you look back after 23 years: what are the most important impressions and lessons that you learnt from this experience?

Charles Uzor: Well, I don't know for sure. It didn't have much immediate impact. As I told you, I didn't see many reviews. My family came to the première, my children saw it and we talked about it. For me it was a beautiful, personal event. My children were able to see what I'd been doing every night, it made sense now. Musically, I think the most interesting thing was meeting Jacques Demierre. We got to know each other a little, and I felt his approach to music was interesting. And working with the singers and the ensemble I learned quite a lot about the voice and instrumentation. But I must admit, my involvement in this opera project lacked the depth that might have taken me beyond mere craftsmanship and simply fulfilling a commission. Today I understand "Black opera" not merely as opera with Black singers or Black stories, but rather as having a different narrative of how Black life is exhibited. Real Black opera is at the same time more realistic, more fantastic, more political and more utopian. I don't mean the kind of Black opera where Black singers and a wealthy Black audience are cloned to represent the looks of whites as you see in Lagos or Johannesburg. Real Black opera questions the hierarchies of high and low, of good and bad – not in the sense of the antiheroic, but in a sense of deconstructing narrative hierarchies of an anachronistic bourgeois society that pleases itself by education, entertainment and morals, thus pleasing its self-sufficiency. And in such cases, new Black opera, which is more a form of exhibition than representation, touches the realm of Black theatre as I experienced it as a child in my African village.

²⁷ Heim, "Tanz, Musik, Theater."

²⁸ Heim, "Tanz, Musik, Theater."

That's how I feel today and how others see it, like Jessie Cox, whose precious thoughts on this I'd like to refer to.²⁹ When *Black Tell* was performed, we didn't think that far, we didn't wonder why a white singer with some black paint should represent Othello. Today political correctness tells us to prohibit it. But is it sufficient?

Thomas Gartmann: Surprisingly, in 2002, none of the participants, nor any of the critics, were bothered by the fact that the libretto was highly discriminatory. So were they all racists? To call them that would be too simplistic. As for the participants, there was simply no time to ask questions or to conduct discussions during the chaotic production process. Given the limited time-frame, they tried to tackle their project with a clear division of labour. And the topic seems to have barely registered with the Swiss press at the time. On the other hand, hardly anyone mentions the fact that an African-born man represented Switzerland at an official event, which could be read to imply that something like this was already taken to be a matter of course in multicultural Switzerland at the turn of the century. Despite the title *Black Tell*, no critic pointed out the fact that a Swiss national hero is played by a Black actor and that the main composer of this festive work was Black. It led neither to an outcry of indignation nor to emphatic approval. One could interpret this as ignorance. Or as something completely normal at a time when debates about identity had not yet taken place in Switzerland. Perhaps ignorance is also the reason why hardly anyone described the libretto as racist. Or perhaps people found its parodic exaggeration to be anti-racist, ridiculing such "pub talk". At least, that was my impression at the premiere: a mixture of amusement at a successful satire and embarrassed silence at its vulgarity. By the way, Charles Uzor, too, was not so political engaged as he became 20 years later, for example with his *Bodycam Exhibit 3: George Floyd in Memoriam*, a musical manifesto of the Black Lives Matter Movement, as Jessie Cox has explained in *Sounds of Black Switzerland*.³⁰

In the meantime, Blackness and diversity have also become topics of discussion in Switzerland, also in Western Art Music. Whereas previously, to my knowledge, only two composers (Jalalu-Kalvert Nelson and Charles Uzor) were active in the Swiss Association of Musicians, but never featured, the international renown Lucerne Festival for classical music organised in 2022 an entire summer entitled 'Diversity'. All the same, the way they attempted to address the issue was strongly criticised by the composer and musicologist Jessie Cox as a sign of "inability of a discursive engagement."³¹

Nevertheless, a revival of *Black Tell* would be almost inconceivable today: people would take offence at the statements and language the opera contains and would be offended by the portrayal of Black Tell, which could be regarded as an act of humiliation. While Switzerland tried to avoid postcolonial discourse for a long time, arguing that it had no colonies, research and discussion about the benefits of the country gained through colonial interactions has emerged, in part because debate on migration and refugees has become more heated.³² The Schweizerische Volkspartei has become by far the largest party, since it began its rapid rise in 2007 with a racially-charged election campaign poster showing several white sheep kicking a Black sheep out

29 Jessie Cox, "Listening with the Unknown: Unforming the World with Slave Ears and the Musical Works *Not-In-Between* (2020), *The Sound of Listening* (2020), *The Sound of Music* (2022)" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2024), <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/72q0-pw23>.

30 Jessie Cox, *Sounds of Black Switzerland. Blackness, Music, and Unthought Voices* (Durham: Duke University, 2025).

31 Jessie Cox, "Black Lives at Lucerne Festival 2022. 'Diversity' in Germanophone Switzerland," in *Musik-Diskurse nach 1970*, ed. Thomas Gartmann, Doris Lanz, Raphaël Sudan, Gabrielle Weber (Baden-Baden: Ergon 2025): 171–88 (in press).

32 Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné, eds., *Colonial Switzerland. Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins*, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial History Series (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Noémie Michel, "Sheepology: The postcolonial politics of raceless racism in Switzerland," *Postcolonial Studies* 18, no. 4 (2015): 410–26. Georg Kreis, *Blicke auf die koloniale Schweiz. Ein Forschungsbericht* (Zürich: Chronos, 2025).

of a field. On the other hand, the heterogeneously composed *Black Tell* also does not work for dramaturgical reasons, as the critics rightly noted. Like many other pasticcios, the work had fulfilled its function, namely as entertainment for a broad, mass audience – a typical work for a specific occasion.

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Thomas Gartmann (born in Chur, Switzerland, in 1961) received his doctorate from the University of Zurich, was a lecturer at the music academies in Lucerne, Basel and Bern, and worked as a music journalist (Radio DRS and NZZ) before becoming responsible for music promotion at the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia. Today, he heads research at the Bern Academy of the Arts and the doctoral programme Studies in the Arts, which is run jointly with the University of Bern. His research focuses on Swiss music, music and politics, opera librettos and interpretation research. Recent publications include *Im Brennpunkt der Entwicklungen. Der Schweizerische Tonkünstlerverein 1975–2017* (Zurich, in print), *Musikdiskurse nach 1970* (Baden-Baden, in print), *Studies in the Arts – New Perspectives on Research on, in and through Art and Design* (Bielefeld 2021), *Von der Fuge in Rot zur Zwitschermaschine. Paul Klee und die Musik* (Basel 2020), *Arts in Context. Kunst, Forschung, Gesellschaft* (Bielefeld 2020), *Rund um Beethoven. Interpretationsforschung heute* (Schliengen: 2019), *Zurück zu Eichendorff! Zur Neufassung von Othmar Schoecks historisch belasteter Oper «Das Schloss Dürande»* (Zurich 2018), *«Als Schweizer bin in neutral». Othmar Schoeck's opera Das Schloss Dürande and its context* (Schliengen 2018).