

# American soprano withdraws from Italian festival that used blackface

After Russian soprano Anna Netrebko shared photos of herself in dark makeup, Angel Blue said she could not in “good conscience” associate herself with Arena di Verona

By [Kelsey Ables](#)

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The American soprano Angel Blue announced on Thursday that she had canceled her planned debut in Verdi’s “La Traviata” at the Arena di Verona in Italy after learning that an earlier production of “Aida” at the summer festival had featured performers in blackface. The Grammy-award winning singer’s decision came after Russian soprano Anna Netrebko [shared photos](#) of herself on Instagram wearing dark makeup to play the title role of an Ethiopian princess.

Blue, who is Black, posted on Instagram that she could not in “good conscience” associate herself with an institution that supports the practice, which has been largely discontinued in the U.S., where it is [widely viewed](#) as racist and dehumanizing.

“Let me be perfectly clear: the use of blackface under any circumstances, artistic or otherwise, is a deeply misguided practice based on archaic theatrical traditions which have no place in modern society,” she wrote. “It is offensive, humiliating, and outright racist. Full stop.”



angeljoyblue  
33.6K followers

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**Dear Friends, Family, and Opera Lovers,**

**I have come to the unfortunate conclusion that I will not be singing La Traviata at Arena di Verona this summer as planned. As many of you know, Arena di Verona recently made the decision to utilize blackface makeup in a recent production of Aida. Let me be perfectly clear: the use of blackface under any circumstances, artistic or otherwise, is a deeply misguided practice based on archaic theatrical traditions which have no place in modern society.**



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have shown support and sensitivity to me and my fellow artists of color.

-Angel💙

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In recent years, several prominent politicians and entertainers, including Canadian Prime Minister [Justin Trudeau](#), Virginia Gov. [Ralph Northam](#), [Jimmy Fallon](#) and [Jason Aldean](#) have come under fire for wearing blackface in the past. The practice has a long, complicated history in theater, stretching from the medieval period to Shakespeare to American minstrel shows. The Metropolitan Opera's 2015 "Otello" was the company's first production of the show that did not use skin-darkening makeup. In some parts of Europe and Russia, however, [blackface has endured](#). A 2019 Post opinion piece called it a "[global problem](#)."

The Arena di Verona controversy comes at an inopportune moment for Netrebko, who is trying to rebuild her reputation after her long-standing support of Vladimir Putin drew criticism after the invasion of Ukraine. In March, Netrebko canceled performances in Europe and the U.S., including [several](#) at the Metropolitan Opera after refusing to comply with the venue's request that she renounce her support for Putin.

Netrebko has been an outspoken proponent for wearing blackface, and has expressed beliefs that it helps maintain theatrical tradition. For a 2018 production of "Aida" at the Metropolitan Opera, she resorted to a tanning salon after the company balked at her desire to use dark makeup. The recent photos Netrebko posted to Instagram, which show her with long black braids and makeup covering her face, chest and arms, received more than 1,000 comments, many calling her out. (Netrebko declined, through a spokesperson, to comment for this article.)

Earlier this week, a spokesperson from Arena di Verona told [OperaWire](#) that the performance of "Aida" are meant as a restaging of the venue's 2002 production directed by Franco Zeffirelli, which was "made when these sensitive topics were not such an issue." The spokesperson added that "it is very hard to change" historical productions. Other singers in the cast also performed in dark makeup.

In statement responding to Blue's cancellation, the Arena di Verona further defended the decision and questioned why the soprano hadn't withdrawn her performance commitment earlier. ("Aida" premiered on June 18.) The statement also said that company officials still hoped to meet with Blue to discuss the issue further, noting, "We have no reason nor intent whatsoever to offend and disturb anyone's sensibility." Blue remains listed for performances of "La Traviata" on July 22 and 30 on the venue's website.

Many from the opera world took to social media to applaud Blue's decision and send messages of support. Fellow opera singer Ryan Speedo Green, who is also Black, thanked Blue "for standing up for us" in a comment. "This practice needs to stop and all the artist/administrations who support it should be put on blast so their support of racist practice can be brought to light," he wrote.

Blue's withdrawal comes amid increasing international accolades for the singer, who has been described as an "[operatic sensation](#)." In 2019, she was the first Black woman to play Violetta in a fully staged performance of Verdi's "La Traviata" at Italy's Teatro alla Scala. Earlier this summer, she made her debut at the Paris Opera in Charles Gounod's "Faust."