

The Metropolitan Opera's Censorship of "The Death of Klinghoffer": Artwork About Oppression of Palestinians Considered Anti-Jewish

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*The decision by New York City's Metropolitan Opera to cancel its plans for worldwide high-definition video transmission and radio broadcast of John Adams' *The Death of Klinghoffer* is a scandalous and cowardly capitulation to right-wing forces, with far-reaching implications.*

Adams' opera, with a libretto by Alice Goodman, recounts the October 1985 hijacking of the Achille Lauro cruise ship by four members of the Palestine Liberation Front, during which the terrorists killed 69-year-old Leon Klinghoffer, confined to a wheelchair, and threw his body overboard.

The claim that the work is "anti-Jewish" (per the cover of Rupert Murdoch's gutter *New York Post* on June 18) is libelous and absurd. It can only be credited by those who have neither seen the opera nor read the text of its libretto—or who have an ideological axe to grind. The musical piece, which opens with choruses of "Exiled Palestinians" and "Exiled Jews," respectively, is a poetic, somber effort to come to terms with the historical tragedy of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The only anti-Semitic lines (often cited by opponents of the opera) are given to a character nicknamed "Rambo," an obvious sadist and thug.

The opera's real crime is to give a voice to the Palestinian people and identify their oppression. The "Chorus of Exiled Palestinians" begins, "My father's house was razed/In nineteen forty-eight/When the Israelis passed/Over our street." Any reference to the historical reality of the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians is intolerable to the pro-Zionist elements. *Munich*, the 2005 film written by Tony Kushner and directed by Steven Spielberg, was subject to a similar smear campaign.

The Metropolitan Opera's decision has outraged many around the world. Nicholas Kenyon, managing director of London's Barbican Centre, termed the action "shocking, shortsighted and indefensible." Contemporary American composer Nico Muhly described *The Death of Klinghoffer* as "one of the most delicious, complicated, and wrenching operas I can think of."

Adams himself commented that his opera "acknowledges the dreams and the grievances of not only the Israeli but also the Palestinian people, and in no form condones or promotes violence, terrorism or anti-Semitism." He further noted that the cancellation of the international video and radio transmission "goes far beyond issues of 'artistic freedom,' and ends in promoting the same kind of intolerance that the opera's detractors claim to be preventing."

Indeed, it is a terrible irony that nothing would delight those who denounce the opera for supposedly equating the Holocaust with the Zionist treatment of the Palestinians than the opportunity to stage their own “book-burning” of Adams’ work.

However, although the present controversy takes the form of a conflict between pro-Israeli forces and those more critical of the Zionist state, the issues go considerably beyond that.

In reality, the action taken against Adams’ work is an operation mounted by sections of the wealthy elite, enraged by an artwork that refers to social oppression of any kind and to the anger of the brutalized. An opera that defended the French or Russian Revolution or, for that matter, suggested that American workers had good reason to revolt would also meet with a hysterical, apoplectic reaction.

The cancellation of the opera’s telecast is only the foot in the door. The reactionary elements are now demanding that the Met drop the live performances of *The Death of Klinghoffer* as well. *The financial aristocracy is now asserting its right to decide what audiences can or cannot see.* Jonathan Tobin, in a bullying and threatening piece on the *Commentary* web site, which lyingly asserts that Adam’s opera “rationalizes terrorism” and “denigrates Jews,” hints at the broader questions involved when he denounces the “offensive views [that] are mainstream opinion in the world of high art these days where productions of classics are often distorted to transform them from their religious and sentimental origins into parables for Marxist or other left-wing ideologies.”

Tobin protests too much when he attempts to preempt the argument that “many staples of the classic operatic repertory were once politically controversial and subjected to censorship. But comparisons with the operas of Giuseppe Verdi, to take just one prominent example...are not apt.” In fact, they are most apt.

“Rigid political censorship was the norm throughout Europe” before the revolutions of the 1830s and 1840s, writes one historian, “and [opera composers] Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini found much the same conditions and constraints in Rome, Naples, Milan, Paris, or Vienna,” circumstances that also prevailed in the German states and, of course, tsarist Russia.

Verdi faced censorship again and again. When informed that his opera *Rigoletto* had been banned in Venice, the composer wrote a friend that he had “almost lost my head” and was reduced to “desperation.”

In general, another historian writes, “nineteenth-century European authorities...viewed a free stage as posing a serious threat to the existing power structure.” For example, the Grand Duchy of Tuscany in 1822 explicitly forbade works “that are politically subversive,” or works “based on a malicious plan threatening to weaken or destroy veneration for Religion or for the Throne and which awaken in people’s minds emotions hostile to either of these.”

This is the type of reactionary political-financial control of the arts we are returning to. Any work that might open the eyes of an audience, educate or broaden it, enlighten it as to significant historical or social realities, arouse protest or indignation, will face the opposition of the billionaire elite. They run everything else in America, why not the theaters and operas?

Many of the comments about the Met include the hint that managing director Peter Gelb

had to give in to the right-wing lobby, because it included many large donors, at a time when the opera, like virtually every arts institution in America, faces a budget crisis.

This is the repugnant, disastrous consequence of museums, opera and dance companies and orchestras—and even entire school and library systems—in the US being dependent on the rich for their continued existence. This is not to excuse the conduct of Gelb or, for that matter, the hierarchy of the Detroit Institute of Arts, but, in the end, their pusillanimity is the subjective expression of an objectively untenable situation. In regard to the *Klinghoffer* incident, Dutch composer Michael van der Aa correctly observed “how dangerous it is to have an opera system with such a dependence on funding through donors. That generosity comes with influence.”

Censorship of opera and theater in Europe was not decisively smashed, at least for a historical period, until the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in other words, as the byproduct of an increasingly self-conscious and socialist-minded workers’ movement.

The current stranglehold of the rich over art and culture can only be broken by the working class, coming to the defense of free artistic expression and innovative and oppositional ideas and currents, as part of its mobilization on a politically independent and socialist basis.

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