



MUSIC ARCHIVES

Klinghoffer Must Go Forward, But Composer John Adams Is Insufferable

by DAVID R. ADLER
June 24, 2014



I haven't seen John Adams' opera *The Death of Klinghoffer* but I hope to have a chance to do so. Given Adams' public pronouncements, however, I'm finding it doubtful he has genuine insight to share on the subject of terrorism.

For those who don't know, *The Death of Klinghoffer* depicts the 1985 hijacking of the cruise ship Achille Lauro and the murder of an elderly disabled Jewish passenger, Leon Klinghoffer, by the Palestine Liberation Front. It's of a piece with Adams' historical-political operas *Doctor Atomic* and *Nixon in China*, not to mention his beautiful orchestral and choral work *On the Transmigration of Souls*, for the victims of 9/11.

Since its 1991 premiere, *Klinghoffer* has been staged a number of times, most recently in March by the Long Beach Opera in California. This fall the Metropolitan Opera plans eight performances, despite [angry calls](#) from some in the Jewish community to cancel the production.

Peter Gelb, the Met's General Manager, did agree to scrap a Live in HD transmission to 66 countries worldwide. That move in turn prompted denunciations from the editorial page of the *New York Times*, John von Rhein of the *Chicago Tribune* and others, including [the composer himself](#).

Von Rhein calls *Klinghoffer* “a nuanced meditation on Middle East violence and religious intolerance that examines the social, economic and political conditioning that drives such acts of unspeakable inhumanity.” Detractors claim that Adams and Alice Goodman, his librettist, portray terrorists sympathetically at best, or countenance anti-Semitism at worst.

Concertgoers should be allowed to decide for themselves. Hounding an arts organization to cancel its programming is censorious and sets a terrible precedent.

But if Adams' goal is to encourage reflection, or in the words of *Klinghoffer* director Tom Morris to “spend some time wrestling with the very difficult questions that arise from this very difficult conflict,” then surely there's more to wrestling than a mere pat on Adams' back for his great moral sophistication (and by extension the audience's own).

Of course I'll reserve judgment on the opera until I see it. But Adams' statements in the run-up to the Met production, and at the time of the Long Beach shows, are fair game right now. In his regrettable way, Adams is sparking the discussion of terrorism that he wants, well before the first note is played in October.



In a promo video for *Klinghoffer* (above) [on the Met's website](#), Adams calls terrorism “the act of desperation.” In the *Los Angeles Times* in March, he was quoted condemning terrorism, but then calling it “a last ditch tool. It is the weapon of the powerless.” I wish I could state that these opinions are rare in left and liberal circles. In any case, they are not only morally obtuse but analytically unsound. “Desperation” did not lead Boko Haram to kidnap those girls. Or [Sunni extremists in Pakistan](#) to bomb mosques and markets in an extermination campaign against Shias. Or Ansar Dine to declare war on music and culture in northern Mali. Or Somalia's al-Shabaab to bomb and slaughter Kenyans who had gathered to watch the World Cup. (That happened [just the other day](#), and [four years ago as well](#) in Uganda.) These groups are anything but “powerless.” It is an outrage to paint terrorists as victims.

Yes, there is a reality of oppression faced by Palestinians, but Adams in the *LA Times* explicitly encourages us to draw global parallels and reflect on “universal questions.” And the more one does that — the more one expands the analysis of terrorism to other regions — the more this fashionable “desperation” argument comes to seem like utter nonsense.

Adams outdoes himself, however, in the Met's promo video. “Opera is the art form that goes to the max,” he says. “It's the art form that is the most emotional, the one that goes the furthest. And in a sense terrorism is the same thing, terrorism is the act that goes to the max, it's the act of desperation.”

“To the max”? Would you reach for an '80s valley-girl term to describe the killing and deliberate torment of civilians? And if Adams wants to dissociate his work from any endorsement of terrorism, why is he comparing opera to terrorism?

“Our opera tries to look at the terrorists and the passengers and see humanity in both of them,” Adams continues. “And for some people that's an egregious mistake. I don't feel it. I feel that for all the brutality and the moral wrong that they perpetrated in killing this man, they're still human beings, and there still has to be reasons why they did this act.”

Ah, but see, if you're in thrall to the “desperation” theory of terrorism, then you start to take the stated “reasons” of armed thugs at face value. You start to grant “reasons” a higher moral standing than the principles of international humanitarian law (IHL). From an IHL perspective, “reasons” offered by the hijackers for the death of Leon Klinghoffer are irrelevant. From an operatic perspective? That's another matter. The question becomes whether opera can even handle this issue in a way that truly edifies. On that, I'll keep an open mind.

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NEWS & POLITICS ARCHIVES

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by JOY CONNOLLY
January 17, 2017



POLITICS ARCHIVE

Bill Barr: The “Cover-Up General”

“At the center of the criticism is the chief articulator of Bush’s imperial presidency,” we reported in 1992, “the man who wrote the legal rationale for the Gulf War, the Panama invasion, and the officially sanctioned kidnapping of foreign nationals abroad.”

by FRANK SNEPP
Originally published October 27, 1992



FILM ARCHIVES

Citizen Kael vs. ‘Citizen Kane’

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by ANDREW SARRIS
Originally published April 15, 1971



CRIME ARCHIVES

Kid Kingpin: The Rise and Fall of a Drug Dealer

“At the end of the ‘80s, while America concerned itself with the consequences of crack, and crack dealers continued in that hyper trade, Boy George was running five heroin locations in the South Bronx”

by ADRIAN NICOLE LEBLANC
Originally published December 10, 1991

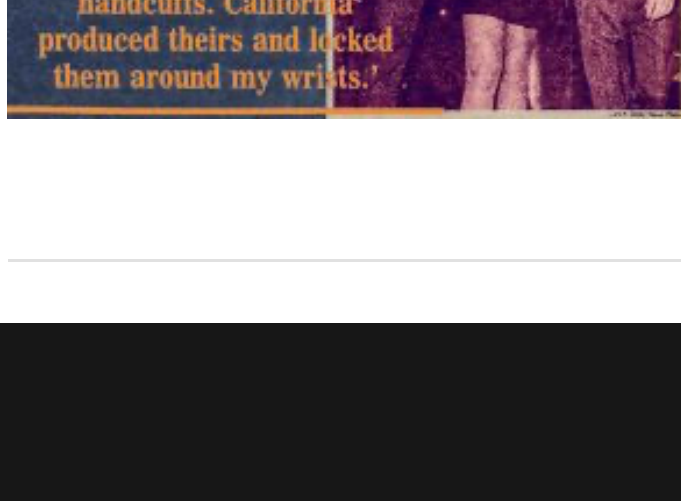


MUSIC ARCHIVES

Girl Groups: How the Other Half Lived

“Girl group records were based in the relationship of a young girl and an older man (white, until Berry Gordy) who put her on a pedestal and held her in thrall; out of that relationship came some of the most urgent and intense rock and roll ever made.”

by GREIL MARCUS
Originally published September 8, 1975



BOOKS ARCHIVES

Prison Memoirs: The New York Women's House of Detention

“When the iron door was opened, sounds peculiar to jails and prisons poured into my ears — the screams, the metallic clanging, officers’ keys clinking. Some of the women noticed me and smiled warmly or threw up their fists in gestures of solidarity”

by ANGELA DAVIS
Originally published October 10, 1974