

The Limits to Art

Painters, sculptors, musicians and playwrights with racist and bigoted messages are nothing new. Outrage followed insulting depictions of Muhammad and outrageous portrayals of Christ. The German composer Richard Wagner, who lived prior to the rise of the Third Reich, was a favorite of Adolf Hitler. Wagner promoted the elimination of the Jews as a legitimate political doctrine.

Act I; Enter American composer John Adams' Opera, "The Death of Klinghoffer." Leon Klinghoffer was an elderly wheelchair bound Jewish man who was thrown overboard when the Achille Lauro Italian Mediterranean cruise ship was boarded by Fatah terrorists under the direction of the master monster himself, Yasser Arafat. The murder became the backdrop for Adams to construct the libretto in which the killers expound upon their grievances. When the opera was first performed in 1991, it was immediately recognized as controversial. Even the New York Times trashed both the opera and its content.

Act II; Enter the Metropolitan Opera of New York determined to broadcast a worldwide simulcast of "The Death of Klinghoffer" and to have it performed live at The Met in Lincoln Center. I have a personal stake in all of this. Aside from helping to raise money for Lincoln Center in high school, like many other New York era youth, my Aunt Ethel sang for many years in the chorus of the Metropolitan Opera. As a result of this fortuitous family connection, my parents went to the opera virtually every Saturday night that I can remember. One of the few disputes my parents had was about opera. My mother, whose entire family was slaughtered in the European Holocaust, would not go to a Wagnerian opera. My father, fourth generation Broadway raised Swiss Jews, admired the soaring melodies and lush stories of Richard Wagner's operas. In my mother's absence, I was forced to attend the opera with my father. By the time I was 12 years old, I had heard the entire Ring Trilogy, a perfectly horrible collection of fat, screaming women and portly bellowing men. My father loved it. My sister served as an extra at an opera in Tanglewood.

Act III; Enter the protest over Klinghoffer which resulted in the cancellation of the worldwide simulcast broadcast, but not the live performances at The Met. This is art, defended Peter Gelb, General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera. When does art or the artist become so heinous that it simply should not be performed by a legitimate and respectable company of performers?

We generally do not subject artists to scrutiny of their political views if we admire the beauty of their work. On the other hand, when the works content is racist, bigoted or anti-Semitic, that is where the curtain should fall.

The Klinghoffer's family open letter to The Metropolitan Opera of New York said it best. When the message of the media is to justify murder of innocent civilians as a legitimate political act, the show must not go on! Not all art is acceptable regardless of content, merely because it strikes a melodious cord. In "The Death of Klinghoffer", we do not have to guess what the music means since we have the words to tell us the intent of the composer.

The New York Metropolitan Opera performed "The Death of Klinghoffer" to protest, some boos, and an explanation in the playbill by the Klinghoffer family as to why they found the opera objectionable. None of this can mask the dalliance that the American liberal left has with anti-democratic values.

At some point the left and the right meet. So extreme can either point of view be that there is no room for the values of diversity, acceptance and tolerance. When an individual on either extreme of the spectrum can find it in their heart and head to extol bigotry in defense of individual choice, we have then lost our moral compass.

The opera, which properly should be titled "The Murder of Klinghoffer," will not change any minds politically. Nobody will run around humming catchy tunes from the score. No pop group will soon be remaking the Arias into 3-minute recordings. All we have lost is a bit more of our virtue and commitment to decency. No one has suggested banning the opera; that is not the American way. On the other hand, should a magnificent and august institution like the Metropolitan Opera of New York distort art, making it a dirty word and equating it with the old intolerance of the right? The answer should be a resounding "no." We should demand better of our artists and musical interpreters.

There are those who doubtless feel that the controversy caused by the Metropolitan Opera over "The Murder of Klinghoffer" is a good thing. Opera seems to be a dying form of culture. The New York City Opera recently was forced to close, and The Met is hanging on by its fingertips. The opera is an art form that has lost its relevancy in a world where a long piece of music is unplayable in the iPhone universe. Whether controversy and compositions lacking moral worth are the answer to opera's survival is the question awaiting an answer.

Islamic terrorists and Fatah murderers deserve no more of the stage than an opera devoted to the motives behind the Ku Klux Klan, who terrorized American southern blacks with lynchings. Anyone who has spent time in person can testify to the fact that there is no guilty man in a penitentiary and none without a compelling story to justify their behavior. "The Death of Klinghoffer" is neither art nor a story deserving of reiteration.

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