

Comparing Receptions as a Result of Political Climate:

*Wozzeck* and *The Death of Klinghoffer*

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Opera has always been an important barometer of evolving social, political, and artistic norms. Periodically, works ignite turmoil when they undermine the political ideology and social norms of influential groups or classes, or when they challenge fundamental social narratives such as obscenity, racism, or terrorism. Alban Berg's expressionist opera *Wozzeck* is championed as a quintessential work of the Interwar Period, and perhaps the most important of the expressionist movement.<sup>1</sup> However, in 1925 and 1926, when the work was premiered in Berlin and Prague respectively, critics and audience's reception widely varied, from recognition of its artistic significant to ruckus protest in the theater and surrounding streets. This was a reaction and backlash to the rise of modernism, its class struggle, and the rise of nationalism.

Almost seventy years later, John Adam's *The Death of Klinghoffer* stirred comparable controversy. Premiering in 1991 in Brussels and most notably at Brooklyn Academy of Music, and later staged in 2014 at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, *The Death of Klinghoffer* piqued political sentiments, discussions of anti-Semitism, and critiques of the Avant-Guard. It subsequently incited picketing on the streets of Manhattan and disrepute by the news media in an effort by

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Jarman, *The Berg Companion* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989) 2-4.

prominent groups, particularly the Jewish community, to suppress its rise to repertoire prominence.<sup>2</sup> While these protests were enough to cancel the broadcast in movie theaters, they seem to do little permanent damage to the work's long-term success, as critics still praise the work's artistic merit. This is strikingly similar to the "Wozzeck Affair," which took place at the Prague première, and resulted in a ban on the opera.

This paper examines the events surrounding the most controversial performances of *Wozzeck* and *The Death of Klinghoffer* in an effort to understand and compare how political context, the power of social classes, current events, and artistic movements and their proponents come together to ignite and extinguish competing convictions. It first looks at the events individually, then underlines similarities between them.

### ***Wozzeck's Premier in 1925 Berlin and 1926 Prague***

Berg's *Wozzeck*, completed in 1922, was an adaptation of the newly rediscovered play *Woyzeck* by Buchner, originally drafted in the 1830s.<sup>3</sup> The hundred-year-old drama by Buchner, who in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century had fled Germany due to his radical political ideology and aristocracy bashing, had recently gained a new audience because of the progressive chord it struck with Interwar Period society.<sup>4</sup> The rise of expressionist theatre shined a light on Buchner in both

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2 "Met Opera's 'The Death of Klinghoffer' Draws Protest." (*New York Times*, YouTube, 21 Oct. 2014.)

3 George Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg: Wozzeck* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 192.

4 Karen Monson, *Alban Berg* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 146.

the scholarly community and the general public.<sup>5</sup> For Germans, torn apart by senseless violence and atrocities of WWI, the fantastic fairytales of valor that previously permeated the German opera tradition seemed incongruous with their reality to be captivating.<sup>6</sup>

Berg's *Wozzeck* stood in stark contrast to the Wagnerian era. Excerpts of *Wozzeck* were initially premiered at the ICSM festival in 1924. The following year the Berlin State Opera, under the direction of the young conductor Erich Kleiber, programmed the first fully staged production. This action was met with ample controversy, which manifested prior to the debut. While the artistic community moved toward Expressionism, an anti-Modernist sentiment grew along side it amongst more conservative Germans and the majority of the German press. The war's dismantling of longstanding and far-reaching empires brought attention, amongst conservatives to the importance of preserving a national heritage from progressive "outsiders."

The audacious Modernism of the work itself created a divide between artistic progressives and conservative nationalists. By the time reviews of *Wozzeck's* dress rehearsal had come out, it was evident that the work had become barometer of the press's attitudes on various intersecting ideological, aesthetic, social, political, professional, and personal issues.<sup>7</sup> Anticipating the work's failure, many critics used Berg's work as an opportunity to attach failure to modernism, expressionism and

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5 Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg: Wozzeck*, 192.

6 Jarman, *The Berg Companion*, 212.

7 Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg: Wozzeck*, 197.

Schoenberg's entire musical movement. They called Berg "the most intransigent of all the Schoenbergians."<sup>8</sup>

Critics also directed their attack at Erich Kleiber. The new conductor for the Berlin State Opera, the young Viennese Kleiber, who was already controversial because of his age and background, planned to revamp the repertoire. In welcoming Kleiber to the position, the intendant, Max von Schillings, wrote to him, "We must realize that a part of the press will be very much in arms against you. Already they are creating a most horrible atmosphere in readiness for your arrival.... But once you are really installed, we will make it clear that you can revise the whole repertoire as you like".<sup>9</sup>

Schillings was right about the press. Opponents circulated false rumors attacking Kleiber's character. The press falsely reported that Schillings's abrupt resignation shortly before *Wozzeck*'s première was influenced by Kleiber. When Kleiber took on the project of *Wozzeck*, the press attacked him for putting time and resources into what they called an "un-performable" opera. They claimed that he had thrown the rest of the repertoire into disorder by devoting "137 full rehearsals" to *Wozzeck* even though those in the production only recall thirty-four orchestra rehearsals.<sup>10</sup> *Wozzeck* became the stick with which the conservative press tried to beat Kleiber. Berg notes the tension between Kleiber and the press in a letter to his wife writing, "Whether Kleiber stands or falls depends on the success of this premiere" and those rooting for his failure were predisposed in their judgment of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid 197.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 195.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 196.

the opera.<sup>11</sup> Some went so far as to publish false new-reports in an attempt to create fictional scandals that would boot Kleiber from the stage. The *Berliner Lokalanzeiger* ran the headline “Scandal at the Berlin Opera House – Riot at the Dress Rehearsal – The *Wozzeck* Performance Leads to Heated Altercations”.<sup>12</sup>

Despite this, when the work finally debuted on December 14<sup>th</sup> 1925, it was met with wide public and scholarly acclaim and generally positive reviews by the mainstream press. On the first night, Berg was met with ovation after ovation when he walked on stage.<sup>13</sup> Despite a potent campaign to incite disruption and sink the production, *Wozzeck* was performed seven times during its first season.<sup>14</sup> Many critics and scholars immediately recognized its future as landmark opera.<sup>15</sup> Aside from the relevance of the libretto, the musical community was interested in its immaculate formal design, as “absolute” music elements in opera were trending in the post-Wagnerian interwar period.

But even after the public had voiced its overwhelming praise, a conservative section of the press continued to publish fabricated accounts of disturbances. The *Lokalanzeiger* published a blatant lie, that the fourth performance was stopped before the end of the third act because demonstrators, including members of the

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11 Alban Berg, *Alban Berg: letters to his wife*. \c Edited, translated and annotated by Bernard Grun. (London: Faber & Faber, 1971)

12 Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg: Wozzeck*, 197.

13 Alex Ross. *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Picador, 2007.) 225

14 Mark DeVoto. “Wozzeck in Context.” In *Wozzeck*, edited by Nicholas John, (London: John Calder, 1990) 12.

15 Jarman, *The Berg Companion*, 70.

orchestra, disrupted the performance.<sup>16</sup> This did not happen, but foreshadowed what would be referred to as “The *Wozzeck* Affair” in Prague a year later.

On November 11<sup>th</sup> 1926, the curtain rose for the opera that would instigate the single most important event in the Czech’s National Theatre during the Interwar Period.<sup>17</sup> It is obvious that Berg and the conductor Otakar Ostrcil knew that the production would make waves in Prague, particularly among conservative, upper and middle-class audience members. This audience historically had a strong hand in the repertory selection and had forced the Czech theater to perform a conservative repertoire since the theater’s inception.<sup>18</sup> The previous conductor Karel Kovarovic had conceded to the demands of his constituents and had programed almost exclusively Czech works interspersed with light French and Italian operas, rarely reaching further than a few Czech “moderate Modernists”.<sup>19</sup> This work might have been more at home in secondary German Theatres in Prague. For Czech opera patrons of the era, the Czech National Theatre was considered reserved for Czech artists and works representing Czech culture. Presented at the Czech National Theatre, the Germanic heritage and modernism of *Wozzeck* alone was enough to cause a sizable uproar, but its content also made the upper class worried. Ostrcil, a colleague of Kleiber, knew that the Berlin production had received contradictory reviews and widely polarizing reception. He must have been well aware of the

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16 Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg: Wozzeck*, 197.

17 Brian S Locke, "The “Wozzeck Affair”: Modernism and the Crisis of Audience in Prague." *Journal of Musicological Research* 27, no. 1 (2008): 64.

18 Ibid 66

19 Ibid 66.

controversy he was about to unleash upon his home country when he decided to add the piece to the Czech National Theatre repertory for the 1926 season.<sup>20</sup>

The backlash was immediate. During the first rehearsal, the National Theatre Orchestra refused to play the difficult parts of the score. They demanded the opera be withdrawn from the repertoire and adopted a policy of passive resistance.<sup>21</sup> The orchestra was publicly outspoken about their contempt for the work, which fueled an already predisposed negativity towards the German opera. Additionally, before the Prague premiere, Universal Edition reprinted both the positive and negative reviews of the Berlin première, which circulated through Prague and triggered the Czech press to bolster a negative campaign.<sup>22</sup>

On the premier night, “enthusiastic applause alternated with angry whistles and other expressions of distaste”.<sup>23</sup> At the intermission, the audience pored into the streets and roared with opinions about what they had attended.<sup>24</sup> Remarkably, the overall response at the end of the evening was generally positive; just like in Berlin, a substantial part of the audience realized that they were encountering a landmark work of opera history.<sup>25</sup> However, critics of Berg claimed in their reporting that the apparent success of *Wozzeck* was only because the audience was overwhelmingly German, and that the Czechs attending “remained silent or expressed their

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20 Jitka Ludvova, “Causa Wozzeck 1926.” *Czech Music*, no. 2 (2006): 19.

21 *Ibid* 19.

22 *Ibid* 19.

23 *Ibid* 20.

24 *Ibid* 20.

25 *Ibid* 20.

disapproval by clapping during the silences”.<sup>26</sup> The critics conceded that the only Czechs in the audience whose reception was favorable were the conservatory students who had been given free tickets, but to exploit the response of these select attendees as rational for claiming “success” was unqualified.<sup>27</sup> The Czech right-wing daily paper, *Narodni listy*, published a piece titled “In the Service of Foreigners”.<sup>28</sup> It was a damning condemnation of Ostrcil for programing “costly experiments of foreign rubbish” in a theatre that they viewed should highlight only Czech composers.<sup>29</sup> This publication, indicative of the mood of both older conservatives and the far right fascist youth, was a call to arms.

The historical incident referred to as the ‘*Wozzeck* Affair’ took place on the third night of the production. In the second act, during the choir of sleeping soldiers, a signal was given from the theater boxes for the beginning of a demonstration that involved catcalls, whistling, trumpeting, hooting, sirens, and other noise from various parts of the auditorium: it lasted for a half hour.<sup>30</sup> Another segment of the audience tried to get the noise to stop by applauding over it. According to witness reports, there were only about twenty to thirty people causing the problem, but the performance was suspended.<sup>31</sup> Outside, many theatregoers stayed on the pavement long into the night in fierce discussion.<sup>32</sup> The next day, the Province Administrative

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26 Locke, “The Wozzeck Affair” 73.

27 Ibid 74.

28 Ludvova, “Causa Wozzeck 1926.” 20.

29 Ibid 20.

30 Ibid 20.

31 Ibid 20.

32 Ibid 20.



Committee decided to ban further performances of the opera in order “to prevent the abuse of the National Theatre for the purposes of political demonstrations.”<sup>33</sup>

Reportedly, young fascist thugs caused the commotion, however it is highly unlikely that this was their doing alone. One attendee, Dr. Vaclav Boucek, a lawyer and antifascist lobbyist, published an eyewitness account that mentions the presence of “thirty or forty young-Czech fascists”- students and workers who could only have been brought into the boxes by bourgeois subscribers.<sup>34</sup> Traditionally, on a Tuesday night such as November 16<sup>th</sup> 1926, the vast majority of the audience would have been wealthy, conservative, upper-middle-class businesspeople: a collective that distained modernist music, but not the sort that would cause a large commotion.<sup>35</sup> That night, it appeared as though a different demographic had been planted in their place.<sup>36</sup> Eyewitnesses reported that the high-priced seats were filled with middle-of-the-road workers and thugs of the fascist youth.<sup>37</sup> Those who truly wished to incite this scandal relied on these poorly informed commoners, whose hatred of anything anti-nationalist was already a motivation to carry out their protest.

In addition to the bourgeoisie’s dislike of Ostrcil’s programming, and their disdain for modernist music, the communist themes of Buchner’s text were not lost on the Prague audience. For this production, Buchner’s text had been translated and performed in Czech. This was certainly an ideologically intentional decision by

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33 Ibid 20.

34 Locke, "The Wozzeck Affair" 83.

35 Ibid 81.

36 Ibid 81

37 Ludvova, "Causa Wozzeck 1926." 20.

Ostrcil, who was a disciple of the communist sympathizing music critic Zdenek Nejedly.<sup>38</sup> At the end of the war, political movements across Europe were disseminating in frenzy, and while Czechoslovakia was one of the few countries to be spared dictatorship, those who managed to maintain their wealthy status had a vested interest in maintaining a status quo. Berg's success would be equated with sympathy for *Wozzeck's* anti-hero, whose fate is ultimately caused by the abuse of those socially above him. The plot explicitly addresses the dehumanizing effects of capitalism.<sup>39</sup> This was not a message that the wealthy in Prague wanted to advocate. To the contrary, these bourgeois patrons aspired to condemn the opera to obscurity.

The result of the demonstration's effort halted the production of *Wozzeck* as it intended to, however the larger intended impacts did not come to fruition. The hope that the calamity would oust Ostrcil from the theatre and end programming of a politically charged controversial modernist works by foreigners was not realized. In fact, when Ostrcil protested the ban, a faction of the conservative movement who disliked *Wozzeck* on the basis of musical aesthetics joined him on the basis of freedom of artistic expression.<sup>40</sup> At the end of November that year, musical, literary and visual arts organizations came together to draft a letter objecting to the ban on the basis that the disruption in the third performance had been a "prepared disturbance".<sup>41</sup> They accused the Province Administrative Council of "placing itself one-sidedly behind a portion of the public that poses the standpoint of terror

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38 Locke, "The *Wozzeck* Affair" 67.

39 Bernadette Meyler, "Adorno's Shifting *Wozzeck*" in *Modernism in Opera*, edited by Richard Begam and Matthew Wilson Smith. (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press 2016.) 161

40 Locke, "The "Wozzeck Affair" 85.

41 Ludvova, "Causa *Wozzeck* 1926." 20.

against artistic works".<sup>42</sup> In a rare turn of events, conservative organizations such as the Artists' Union (Umelecka beseda) and pro-modernist advocates, like the Society for Modern Music (Spolk pro moderni hudbu), stood together under the realization that the modern content of the work was not the central issue. "The *Wozzeck* Affair" as papers would brand it, was the result of larger political motives rooted in fascist and nationalist ideology.<sup>43</sup> While the incident itself faded from Prague newspapers after about a month, the ramifications of the turmoil extended through the Interwar Period.<sup>44</sup>

### ***The Death of Klinghoffer* premiers in 1991 and 2014**

*The Death of Klinghoffer* debuted in Brussels on March 20<sup>th</sup> 1991 against the backdrop of the Gulf War and decades of ongoing conflict between the Israeli and Palestinian people. Given that the same creative team of Adams, Goodman, Morris, and Sellars, whose previous collaboration *Nixon in China* had drummed up controversy, critics were already aware of how the artistic team's depiction of the Israel-Palestinian conflict would factor into the work's reception and legacy. There was fear among Belgian government officials, such as Belgian Interior Minister Louis Tobback, that the subject matter of the work would incite violence or terrorism, and the debut was postponed from January until March to allow the fiery rhetoric to subside.<sup>45</sup>

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42 Locke, "The "Wozzeck Affair"

43 Ibid 84.

44 Ibid 69.

45 Robert Fink, "Klinghoffer in Brooklyn Heights," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 17, no. 02 (2005): 173

The night of the debut there was an international audience, including a noted Middle Eastern presence in the crowd, but there does not seem to be evidence of actual protest or threat of attack at the performance.<sup>46</sup> In Belgium, an international European city without a large Jewish population, the audience was disconnected from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the drama of the *Achilles Luras*. As a result, they were able to absorb the work at face value. Early reviews from critics, such as Michael Walsh of *Time Magazine*, mentions the controversial material at the forefront of their assessments, but much of the critiques address the performance itself.<sup>47</sup> There were comments about the performance's execution, such as the Belgian singer's poor English diction, and Peter Sellars choice to double cast singers making the story confusing, but consensus was that the opera was a musical success with a powerful and controversial message. Several reviewers, with the notable exception of the *Wall Street Journal*, even reported that the portrayal of the Israeli-Palestine conflict was balanced, respectful, and not anti-Israel.<sup>48</sup>

It was only when the production came to the Brooklyn Academy of Music later that year that it received more widespread condemnation. The American audience's dominant political ideology, New York's large Jewish population, and global and local events at the time, contributed to a more contentious situation in the U.S. than aboard.

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46 John Rockwell, "From an Episode of Terrorism, Adams's 'Death of Klinghoffer'." *New York Times*, March 21, 1991, National ed., The Arts sec.

47 Michael Walsh "Art and Terror in The Same Boat." *Time Magazine*, April 1, 1991.

48 Fink, "Klinghoffer in Brooklyn Heights," 181.

The fact that the victim, Leon Klinghoffer was a Jewish-American played a central role in how the American audience perceived the opera compared to European audiences. Musicologist Robert Fink noted that American audiences reacted vehemently not so much to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but to the portrayal of the American Jewish characters, the Rumors.<sup>49</sup> The portrayal of American Jews was perceived as offensive because the Rumors were depicted as materialistic and unconcerned with global injustices. This extends to a criticism of the American bourgeois as a whole, a common thread amongst the Avant-Garde movement.<sup>50</sup> European audience would not have reacted to the Rumors portrayal, but Americans, especially Jewish Americans, interpreted the nuances in the Rumors very differently, and felt personally attacked by the materialist and apathetic depiction. This scene caused the opera as a whole to be labeled anti-Semitic, and the scene was cut in future productions, perhaps to lessen the label of anti-Semitism. However one can argue that other political ideology and current events of time and place also contributed to the hostility towards the opera.

American political ideology had been strongly aligned with Israel since their independence and through the 1973 Yom Kippur War. America's support for Israel intertwined the fate of American and Jews passengers on the hijacked cruise ship, the *Achille Lauro*. Thus, the murder of wheelchair-bound Klinghoffer was both a loathsome attack of violence against Jews and an affront to Americans' perception of their government's global power. Furthermore, the 1985 *Achille Lauro* hijacking,

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid 175.

<sup>50</sup> Edward Rothstein, "'Klinghoffer' Sinks Into Minimal Sea." *The New York Times*, September 15, 1991, Late ed., Classical Music sec.

occurred only six years before the performance. Terrorists connected to the hijacking had been in the headlines in February of 1991, as two terrorists convicted for providing money and false passports were released from an Italian jail; and again in May, when another terrorist who helped plan the attack was extradited to Italy after a thwarted bombing in Greece.<sup>51</sup> Americans were still traumatized, which contributed to the visceral negative response to the opera.

Lastly, the Crown Heights Riots had inflated anti-Semitic tensions less than a month before *Klinghoffer* arrived at BAM.<sup>52</sup> This incident, where a rabbi was accused of killing a black child while driving, incited a three day riot where Jewish business were vandalized, Israeli flags were burned, and Jews were attacked in the Crown Heights neighborhood by black protestors. The fact that the singers cast as the ringleader, Molqui, and the sympathetic terrorist, Mamoud, were both black led to an unintentional, but visually distasteful moment in Act II that evoked imagery of the recent the Crown Heights Riots.<sup>53</sup>

Set against this background, critical reception of the Brooklyn performance was not as warm as it was abroad. While there was not a notable protest, the work was attacked by the press. Whereas abroad critics had noted that the material was respectful of the sensitive political issues, critics in the U.S. immediately attacked

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51 "Extradition Agreed To In *Achille Lauro* Case." *New York Times*, May 29, 1991, National ed., International sec. Accessed November 7, 2018. <https://nyti.ms/29u0M6C>. and "Terrorists Get Early Release." *New York Times*, February 6, 1991, National ed., International sec. Accessed November 7, 2018. <https://nyti.ms/29vPaNL>.

52 Fink, "Klinghoffer in Brooklyn Heights," 193.

53 Fink, "Klinghoffer in Brooklyn Heights," 196.

what they perceived as an unfair bias towards Palestinians.<sup>54</sup> *New York Times* writer Edward Rothstein wrote the most notable scathing review that not only attacked its perceived political bias and its portrayal of Americans and Jews (i.e. the Rumors), but the music, text, choreography, and production elements.<sup>55</sup> Rothstein would later use *The Death of Klinghoffer* as an attack on the Minimalist and Avant-Garde movements as a whole. Fink's article notes that "Both Raymond Sokolov, in *The Wall Street Journal*, and Samuel Lipman in the Jewish journal *Commentary*, headlined their reviews with the journalistic conceit that the anti-Semitic authors of *The Death of Klinghoffer* had in effect killed Klinghoffer a second time."<sup>56</sup> Even John Adams would later admit "taking *Klinghoffer* to Brooklyn, the white-hot epicenter of Jewish culture in the US was probably a daft thing to do".<sup>57</sup>

By 2014, *The Death of Klinghoffer* had been performed many times, mostly abroad, but a handful of times in the United States as well. While the work had never caused quite the same stir as the original production, and had been performed without much controversy abroad, it nonetheless cultivated a notorious reputation. In the years between 1991 and 2014, anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism had spiked up immensely. Some far left-wing ideologues, perhaps as a reaction to George Bush's unpopular war, had turned to champion the plight of Palestinian liberation. In England, where the work was performed in 2012, the audience seemed indifferent towards the Israeli side of the Israeli-Palestine conflict and the potential for the

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54 Ibid182.

55 Rothstein, "'Klinghoffer' Sinks Into Minimal Sea."

56 Fink, "Klinghoffer in Brooklyn Heights," 184.

57 Fink, "Klinghoffer in Brooklyn Heights," 181. quoting Andrew Clark 'Substance rather than style' *The Financial Times*, 11 January 2002.

opera spreading anti-Semitism.<sup>58</sup> A fraction of the American audience had shifted the same way and was predisposed to sympathize with the terrorists' motives in *Klinghoffer*. This was bolstered by the fact that among those who espoused pro-Palestinian beliefs was the opera's librettist Alice Goodman, an aspect that further complicates the argument of bias in the work.<sup>59</sup>

When *Klinghoffer* arrived at the Metropolitan Opera in 2014, it was in an even tenser political climate than its last New York appearance. This was mostly due to the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 (9/11), which had brought Israeli-Palestinian tension to a whole new level. With the "War on Terrorism" having been in the headlines consistently for more than a decade, an opera known for humanizing terrorists was certain to cause an even bigger commotion than it did 23 years ago, especially in New York City.

A few months after the terrorist attack on 9/11, a Boston Symphony performance of the choruses from the work was cut from a concert, briefly putting the opera back in the spotlight. Richard Taruskin staunchly defended the decision in a *New York Times* piece, where he likened it to the informal ban on performing Wagner in Israel, and denounced the work as a whole for its potential danger of spreading a pro-terrorist message.<sup>60</sup> This is indicative of how the political climate after 9/11 vastly changed the reception of the work and ramped up its controversy.

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58 Jonathan S. Tobin "Why the Death of Klinghoffer Matters: An Opera That Humanizes Anti-Semitic Terror Finds Its Moment and Its Audience." *Commentary*, no.5: (2014):30

59 Ibid 33.

60 Richard Taruskin, "Music's Dangers And The Case For Control." *New York Times*, December 9, 2001, National ed., Music sec.



If the Metropolitan Opera thought they were immune to the backlash of this provocative opera, then they could not have been more wrong.<sup>61</sup> Their announcement that *Klinghoffer* would appear on stage for the 2014 season caused a tidal wave of protest larger than any production of the opera had drawn before. The rebuke made mainstream media headlines, and both Democratic and Republican politicians made public statements.<sup>62</sup> Prominent Lincoln Center donors withdrew their support from the Met because of this production, and groups like the Israeli Independence Fund called for the work to be canceled.<sup>63</sup>

The night of the première, hoards of protestors touting signs that said, “The Met Opera Glorifies Terrorism,” “No Tenors for Terror,” and “Gleb, Are You Taking Terror \$\$\$” lined the sidewalks and shouted “Shame on you!” from wheelchairs as the audience entered the theatre.<sup>64</sup> How protestors attacked the work, and what they attacked, demonstrated a difference from 1991. More importantly, much like *Wozzeck* in Prague, the real motive for suppressing the work came from the power of a particular class, Jewish bourgeois bent on diminishing the work by propagating nationalist ideology.

Unlike the Brooklyn performance in 1991, the Met controversy seems focused on the murder of Leon Klinghoffer as an innocent and disabled American Jew and on the sympathizing of terrorists, rather than using anti-Semitism as the center of the argument, as had occurred in 1991. This is clearly seen in the use of

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61 Tobin “Why the Death of Klinghoffer Matters” 31.

62 Alex Ross, “Long Wake “The Death of Klinghoffer,” at the Met.” *The New Yorker*, November 3, 2014.

63 Tobin “Why the Death of Klinghoffer Matters” 31.

64 Ross, “Long Wake “The Death of Klinghoffer,” at the Met.”

wheelchairs in demonstrations, the rhetoric of the signs, and most poignantly, in sound bites of protestors from the media.<sup>65</sup> While anti-Semitic accusations never disappear from the discourse, they seem sidelined in favor of attacking the opera on other grounds.

The new assault on the opera was something that a broad cross section of Americans could rally around. While some people may be indifferent about the portrayal of Jews in the work, the message of a work of art glorifying terrorism and giving a voice to the enemy drew nationalist outrage. The Zionist Organization of America dubbed the work not just anti-Zionist, but more importantly “Anti-American,” “Anti-British,” and “anti-Western world”.<sup>66</sup> This shift to calling the opera un-American, because of the balanced voice it gives to an opposing worldview, allowed those who were trying to suppress the opera’s message to mask their intentions under the guise of patriotism.

On the night of October 20<sup>th</sup> 2014 most of the commotion stayed outside. Alex Ross mentions sporadic disruptions, specifically recanting one brief outburst from the crowd when an audience member shouted “the murder of Klinghoffer will never be forgiven,” but the conductor continued and kept the show from falling apart.<sup>67</sup> At curtain-fall the audience reacted enthusiastically, and Adams received a huge ovation when he walked to the stage.<sup>68</sup> Ultimately, the protest’s goal of removing this work from the repertoire failed because it was built on the false

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65 “Met Opera's 'The Death of Klinghoffer' Draws Protest.” *New York Times*, YouTube, 21 Oct. 2014.

66 Ross “Long Wake “The Death of Klinghoffer,” at the Met.”

67 Ibid

68 Ibid

premise that showing terrorists self-justifying their actions is equivalent to supporting terrorist causes, and that providing context for the killing of Leon Klinghoffer is both anti-Semitic and anti-American.

## **Discussion**

*Wozzeck* and *The Death of Klinghoffer* are an apt comparison, as they embed their ideological message in their stories by sympathizing a murderous anti-hero and justifying their heinous acts as the result of abuse and oppression by unsympathetic characters. *Wozzeck* and *Klinghoffer* are also both historic operas, but are less concerned with the events themselves, than with their ethical and metaphysical implications.<sup>69</sup> The two works part ways in one key distinction. Where Berg clearly wants the audience to feel that the murder of the innocent Marie was justified because *Wozzeck* had been abused and traumatized, Adams's intention was not to sway his audience to one side of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, but to have them see that the conflict is a more nuanced than realized in the common public narrative. Berg paints *Wozzeck* as justified in his murder, whereas Adams only intends to show the terrorist's self-justification. These operas are not perfect mirror images, but because the audience perceives a different message in Adams's opera than is intended, and thus reacted similarly to *Wozzeck*, a comparison of them is still appropriate.

The political climate in 1925 Berlin and in 1991 Brussels and Brooklyn, compared to 1926 Prague and 2014 New York, share similarities in how the opera

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<sup>69</sup> John Ginmann, "Opera as 'Information': The Dramaturgy Of The Death of Klinghoffer." *Contemporary Theatre Review* 14, no. 1 (2004): 52.

was received. In both *Wozzeck's* Berlin première and *Klinghoffer's* Brussels performance we see initial apprehension before début, followed by a warm reception of the work, with only outlying conservative press denouncing it. In the Brooklyn performance we see some protest, mostly aimed at the stereotypical depiction of the characters, but not to the explosive level we see later both with *Wozzeck* in Prague and *Klinghoffer* at the Met. The cause of escalation has far more to do with the political context surrounding the performance, than with the music itself. In Prague, the instinct to reject anything foreign following World War I set the scene for nationalists to rise against the German opera. Similarly, at the Met, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan incite a nationalist message against "giving the enemy a voice".<sup>70</sup>

What is most analogous however, was the organized effort to suppress the opera's success and rise to repertoire because its message, or perceived message challenged the ideology of powerful and influential constituent groups. Much like the disruption of *Wozzeck* in Prague, the protest in 2014 appears to be organized by specific groups with a particular interpretation of the opera's motive. To suppress that message, opponents use a widely appealing nationalist argument that would incite a heated demonstration.

In Prague, wealthy elites, worried that socialist ideology in the opera could destabilize their place in society, organized the protestors in the theater. In New York, Zionist organizers and prominent Jewish patrons, afraid that those attending

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<sup>70</sup> Michael Walsh. "'The Death of Klinghoffer'; Then and Now, Human, All-Too Human." (PJ Media. October 19, 2014.)

the performance would become pro-Palestinian if any voice was given to the cause, activated the protests. Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionist sentiment was already on the rise, and seeing what they perceived as a justification for those views concerned them. Alex Ross, along with other writers, noted that the people protesting had not seen the opera; they had just heard what it was about.<sup>71</sup> Often they cherry-picked lines out of context to argue that the artistic team behind the production shared the same point of view as the Palestinian terrorist characters.<sup>72</sup>

Fearing the dissemination of controversial rhetoric, both dissenting groups used nationalist rhetoric to rally support from otherwise apathetic people to create a louder voice. Wealthy Prague citizens gave their seats to young middle-class Fascist who would willingly disrupt anything non-Czech. Similarly Zionists told protestors that the opera glorifies terrorism. In the post 9/11 environment, Americans, even non-Jews, were angered by sympathy towards Middle Eastern terrorism and willing to join the chorus of dissent put forth by Zionist interests.

Additionally, in both cases, the artistic management was attacked for their role in the production, arguably to a greater extent than the composers were attacked. Like *Wozzeck* in both Berlin and Prague, protestors of *The Death of Klinghoffer's* 2014 production took aim at specific people that were responsible for the production. Ostrcil and the Met's General Manager Peter Gleb, both took the brunt of the criticism, receiving threats and public scrutiny for allowing the

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71 Ross "Long Wake "The Death of Klinghoffer" at the Met."

72 Walsh "'The Death of Klinghoffer'; Then and Now, Human, All-Too Human."

production to continue. Even after the broadcast of *Klinghoffer* was canceled in movie theatres, Gleb, who was Jewish, was accused of taking money from Hamas.<sup>73</sup>

Some critics also chose to attack the musical movement the composers were working in as a way to deter attendance. *Wozzeck* was endlessly attacked for its modern aesthetic in the style of Schoenberg. A critic of *Wozzeck* wrote, "Where anarchism in political life will take the nations may be a question of future politicians. Where it has taken us in art is already manifested. The young talents have had their fling and left us a rubbish dump, on which for years henceforth nothing will grow or prosper".<sup>74</sup> *Klinghoffer's* music in the Minimalist style took less criticism, perhaps because Minimalism was already more established in the opera genre than Expressionism was at the time of *Wozzeck*, but was not spared all together. Rothstein's *New York Times* article "*Klinghoffer* Sinks Into Minimal Sea" criticizes the entire minimalist opera movement for becoming cliché in their self-aggrandized takes on controversial topics, being ineffective in their abstract narrative, and constant criticism on middle-class lifestyle.<sup>75</sup> Rothstein targets Adams, saying, "This ideological posing is morally tawdry, given the horrific events of "*Klinghoffer*," but its libretto is too confused and Mr. Adams's music too limited in range to really evoke the skewed sentiments it strains for." He concedes that some minimalist works, namely Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* and *Satyagraha*, are standouts, but ends with saying "The yearning for a vital American operatic

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73 Ross, "Long Wake "The Death of Klinghoffer" at the Met."

74 Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg: Wozzeck*, 197.

75 Rothstein, "'Klinghoffer' Sinks Into Minimal Sea."

tradition is almost palpable. But this Minimalist variety is stillborn; for the American avant-garde to become truly Avant-Garde it will have to leave itself behind".<sup>76</sup>

Despite controversy, criticism, and organized efforts to suppress their message, these operas were ultimately successful because of their artistic merits and topical subject matter. Innumerable analyses on every facet of *Wozzeck* have been written and will continue to be written. Adam's *The Death of Klinghoffer* might well follow that trajectory. Their socially relevant subject matter paints a vivid image of the conflicts and discourse in their eras. The controversial episodes in these opera's early performance history prove that the works are a touchstone of their time and political climate, and therefore historically cement their place in the repertoire.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid

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