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# *Klinghoffer* in Brooklyn Heights

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**Abstract:** Is *The Death of Klinghoffer* anti-Semitic? Performances of the opera at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in September 1991 were at the epicentre of a controversy that continues to this day; the New York audience was – and remains – uniquely hostile to the work. A careful reception analysis shows that New York audiences reacted vehemently not so much to an ideological position on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, but to specific nuances in the satirical portrayal of American Jewish characters in one controversial scene later cut from the opera, a scene that must be read closely and in relation to specifically American-Jewish questions of ethnic humour, assimilation, identity and multiculturalism in the mass media. I understand the opera's negative reception in the larger context of the increasingly severe crises that beset American Jewish self-identity during the Reagan-Bush era. Ultimately the historical ability of Jews to assimilate through comedy, to 'enter the American culture on the stage laughing', in Leslie Fiedler's famous formulation, will have to be reconsidered. A close reading of contested moments from the opera shows librettist Alice Goodman and composer John Adams avoiding the romance of historical self-consciousness as they attempt to construct a powerful yet subtle defence of the ordinary and unassuming.

## An operatic 'clash of fundamentalism'

'After the *Achille Lauro* hijacking in 1985, [Secretary of State George] Schultz pounded the table and became red in the face at a press conference in Belgrade when the Yugoslav foreign minister suggested that the causes of terrorism must be taken into account. Murdering an American, Schultz responded angrily ''is not justified by any cause that I know of. There's no connection with any cause'' '.[1]

### Is *The Death of Klinghoffer* anti-Semitic?

The question has plagued director Peter Sellars, librettist Alice Goodman, and especially composer John Adams since 19 March 1991, when *Klinghoffer* was first performed under high security, and in the full glare of the world press, at the Théâtre Royale de la Monnaie in Brussels, just after the close of Operation Desert Storm. (Belgian interior minister Louis Tobback, fearing bomb threats and demonstrations, had asked in January that the première be delayed until after the war.) Given its topical, perhaps sensational subject – the 1985 hijacking of the Italian cruise ship *Achille Lauro* by four members of the Palestinian Liberation Front, with the ensuing murder of a sixty-nine-year-old disabled Jewish-American, Leon Klinghoffer – and the unfaltering rhythm of Middle East violence, conflict and

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[1] John M. Goshko, 'Schultz angrily denounces terrorism', *The Washington Post*, 18 December 1985; cited in Kathleen Christison, 'The Arab-Israeli Policy of George Schultz', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 18/2 (Winter 1989), 29–47.

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global crisis, there has been a consistent temptation to read *Klinghoffer* through the lens of whatever political conflagration involving Jews, Arabs and Americans is currently preoccupying the cultural psyche. Thus recent, post 9/11 commentary on the opera – largely provoked by the Boston Symphony's cancellation of scheduled performances of the *Klinghoffer* choruses in November 2001, followed by the release in early 2003 of a filmed version of the opera – has tended to construe the work within the context of the Bush Administration's war on terrorism, the global 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington) or 'clash of fundamentalisms' (Ali) that dominates the imagination of the present historical moment.[2]

In this context, the question has expanded from what one might deem the central issue of anti-Semitism in art – how are Jews represented? – into the much wider and murkier issue of whether the opera, through a morally suspect 'even-handedness', gives succour to terrorism, and encourages a false 'moral equivalence' between terrorists and their (in this case, Jewish) victims.[3] Given the long, perhaps questionable tradition within modern Western aesthetics of praising great art precisely for its ability to float above partisan political issues and evoke a sympathetic identification with the general 'human condition', this has proven a difficult attack to sustain, except in the heat of cultural battle. As if in anticipation, *Klinghoffer*'s creators had begun situating the opera alongside the canonical cultural monuments to universalised human suffering, Greek tragedies and Bach's Passions, well before its tense première and subsequent stormy reception. ('This isn't exactly a show-biz event. It's more like a memorial service', said Sellars, as he awaited the Brooklyn première on 5 September 1991.)[4] Their original pride in the fact that 'absolutely no sides were taken' (Adams), that the sombre work strove to reach 'a human level, beyond all political differences' (Sellars), has hardened over the years into a firm conviction that they are being punished simply for their temerity in

[2] See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, 1996); and Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads, and Modernity* (London, 2003).

[3] The phrase comes, most recently, from Terry Teachout's unfavourable *Commentary* review of John Adams's Pulitzer Prize-winning memorial piece for the victims of the World Trade Center bombing, *On the Transmigration of Souls*. In a piece entitled 'Moral (and musical) equivalence', Teachout attacks the work for what he calls the 'ethical neutrality of its content', and complains that 'nowhere does Adams suggest that the tragedy he is commemorating was an act of war wilfully perpetrated against innocent, unsuspecting civilians'. Teachout implies that the composer of *The Death of Klinghoffer* (attacked ten years earlier in the same magazine by Samuel Lipman with precisely the same phrase, 'moral equivalence', and for its 'pretense of not taking sides, of ''even-handedness'' ') could not be expected to provide a truly cathartic lament for the victims of terror, settling instead for 'an almost perfect postmodern requiem'. See *Commentary*, 114/4 (November 2002), 60–4; and Samuel Lipman, 'The Second Death of Leon Klinghoffer', *Commentary*, 92/5 (November 1991), 46–9. There are, of course, many critics who have praised *Klinghoffer* for precisely this even-handedness; see Appendix 2 for a selection of critical and press responses to the opera and its creators between 1990 and 2003.

[4] He was anticipating (quite erroneously, as we will see) the positive reaction of the Klinghoffer family to his work. See David Patrick Stearns, 'Ever-evolving ''Klinghoffer'' ', *USA Today*, 4 September 1991. Sellars compared *Klinghoffer* to Greek tragedies, Bach's Passions, and the mytho-religious dance-dramas of Persia and Java in his programme notes for the original Brussels production.

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giving the Palestinians in their opera any voice at all.[5] Alice Goodman's reaction when the outraged Klinghoffer family went public with their assessment that her libretto was 'biased' towards the Palestinians, and thus anti-Semitic, set the intransigent tone: 'To those who come prepared to see and hear only what they want to see and hear, nothing one can say is of any use'.[6]

Whether *The Death of Klinghoffer* deserves to take its place alongside the *Oresteia* and the *St Matthew Passion* is an open question; if (as this author suspects) it does, the reason will certainly not be its 'fairness', as if the opera were a brief presented before a court of international musical law. Nor can musicological analysis easily adjudicate the work's disputed truth claims. Given that the opera stages a violent confrontation between Jews and Arabs, the representation of the Palestinian people will be an important subsidiary issue, but simply depicting Arabs as both killers and human beings – whether or not one agrees with the choice – will not be considered prima facie evidence of anti-Semitic intent in the discussion that follows. Rather than assume one or another partisan view of the roots of terrorism and the Israeli–Arab conflict, I choose to concentrate on the more circumscribed questions of operatic representation and reception: How does *The Death of Klinghoffer* actually portray its Jewish characters? Within what codes and context would those portrayals have been received in 1991? Why would an art-loving, culturally liberal American-Jewish audience – prepared or not by their relation to Israel to reject the Adams–Sellars–Goodman collaboration – hear deliberate anti-Semitism at work in it?

This essay thus falls roughly into two parts. In the first I will analyse a wide range of wire service reports, newspaper articles and classical music reviews, concentrating on the period 1991–2, in order to outline patterns in the reception of *Klinghoffer* during its first run of premières in Brussels, Lyon, Brooklyn and San Francisco. I will focus especially on reactions from New York-based critics, many of them Jewish, who damned the opera as unbalanced and anti-Semitic. The performances of *The Death of Klinghoffer* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in September 1991 are at the epicentre of controversy; the New York audience was uniquely hostile to the work, and we will need to parse the reviews in detail to understand why. As we shall see, American audiences reacted vehemently not so much to an ideological position on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, but to specific nuances in the satirical portrayal of American Jewish characters in one controversial scene later cut from the opera, a scene that must be read closely and in relation to specifically American-Jewish questions of ethnic humour, assimilation, identity and multiculturalism in the mass media. It will be necessary to demobilise *The Death of Klinghoffer* from the war on terror, and relocate it back to Brooklyn Heights in the long, hot summer of 1991.

[5] See Adams as quoted in David Patrick Stearns, 'Six ports of call for '91 Achille Lauro Opera', *USA Today*, 22 January 1990; and Sellars as quoted in Raf Casert, 'Opera based on hijacking opens to heavy security, applause', *The Associated Press*, 19 March 1991. Many critics have continued to echo this line: 'The shock of "Klinghoffer" was not that John Adams, the composer, put terrorists on stage; it was that Adams's music made them human'. (Philip Kennicott, 'Forcing the issue: opera's brutal mission; in this art form, destruction and terror have a recurring role', *Washington Post*, 28 November 2001.)

[6] Allan Kozinn, 'Klinghoffer daughters protest opera', *The New York Times*, 11 September 1991.

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There we can begin to understand its negative reception in the larger context of the increasingly severe crises that beset American Jewish self-identity during the Reagan–Bush era. Ultimately the historical ability of Jews to assimilate through comedy, to 'enter the American culture on the stage laughing', in Leslie Fiedler's famous formulation, will have to be reconsidered.[7] *Klinghoffer* appears to be where the laughter stopped.

Having established how and why New York Jewish critics rejected the portrayal of the Klinghoffers, I will offer provisional answers to two critical corollary questions. First, what kind of representation *was* deemed appropriate for Jews on the operatic stage in the 1990s? The fiercely positive New York reception of another American opera on a Hebrew theme, Hugo Weisgall's 1993 *Esther*, shows how profoundly the conservators of embattled Jewish identity in late twentieth-century America yearned for representation in the heroic and world-historic mode. Why, then, was this 'historic' mode deliberately denied to Jews by the creators of *Klinghoffer*, who assigned it to Palestinian dispensers of terror? A careful reading of contested moments from the opera shows Goodman and Adams avoiding the romance of historical self-consciousness as they attempted to construct a powerful yet subtle defence of the ordinary and unassuming, the bathetic 'small things' that Goodman's Leon Klinghoffer, in an oft-criticised passage, counterpoises against the self-mythologising pathos of his Palestinian executioners. Anti-heroic, yes, *Klinghoffer* is. And thus, in a strange and perhaps self-defeating way, anti-*operatic*.

Anti-Semitic, no.

*

The single professional musicological intervention into the contested reception of *The Death of Klinghoffer* places it firmly within a twenty-first century clash of civilisations. Barely three months after 9/11, Richard Taruskin was forthright in his condemnation of the opera, arguing within a larger discussion of music and censorship that Adams's wounded pose of even-handed aestheticism (the same pose which Taruskin has consistently, eloquently debunked in discussing the musical politics of Bach, Stravinsky, Shostakovich and their apologists) disguised a not-so-secret romantic attachment to terror – an attachment that, in the light of the World Trade Center bombings, looked dangerously close to providing aid and comfort to the enemy:

> If terrorism – specifically, the commission or advocacy of deliberate acts of deadly violence directed randomly at the innocent – is to be defeated, world public opinion has to be turned decisively against it. The only way to do that is to focus resolutely on the acts rather than their claimed (or conjectured) motivations, and to characterize all such acts, whatever their motivation, as crimes. This means no longer romanticizing terrorists as Robin Hoods and no longer idealizing their deeds as rough poetic justice.[8]

[7] Leslie Fiedler, 'The Jew as Mythic American', *Ramparts*, 2 (Autumn 1963), 34–45.

[8] Richard Taruskin, 'Music's dangers and the case for control', *The New York Times*, 9 December 2001. Taruskin has argued in the New York press along similar lines about celebratory music composed for Stalin ('Stalin lives on in the concert hall, but why?', *The*

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To the musicological reader, Taruskin's essay stands out from the mass of charge and counter-charge around *Klinghoffer* in that he singles out 'the music itself' for special blame. (Most professional music critics – and almost all of the amateurs who piled on – saved their heaviest artillery for the libretto, assuming that Adams's music could do no more than passively reflect its innate bias.[9]) In a virtuoso polemical move, Taruskin turns the composer's Bach references against him, taking quite seriously Adams's claim that his opera treats Leon Klinghoffer as a 'sacrificial victim' akin to the Christ figure in a Passion setting:

> In the ''St. Matthew Passion,'' Bach accompanies the words of Jesus with an aureole of violins and violas that sets him off as numinous, the way a halo would do in a painting. There is a comparable effect in ''Klinghoffer'': long, quiet, drawn-out tones in the highest violin register (occasionally spelled by electronic synthesizers or high oboe tones). They recall not only the Bach-ian aureole but also effects of limitless expanse in time or space, familiar from many Romantic scores. These numinous, ''timeless'' tones accompany virtually all the utterances of the choral Palestinians or the terrorists, beginning with the opening chorus.
>
> They underscore the words spoken by the fictitious terrorist Molqui: ''We are not criminals and we are not vandals, but men of ideals.'' Together with an exotically ''Oriental'' obbligato bassoon, they accompany the fictitious terrorist Mamoud's endearing reverie about his favorite love songs. They add resonance to the fictitious terrorist Omar's impassioned yearnings for a martyr's afterlife; and they also appear when the ship's captain tries to mediate between the terrorists and the victims.
>
> They do not accompany the victims, except in the allegorical ''Aria of the Falling Body,'' sung by the slain Klinghoffer's remains as they are tossed overboard by the terrorists. Only after death does the familiar American middle-class Jew join the glamorously exotic Palestinians in mythic timelessness. Only as his body falls lifeless is his music exalted to a comparably romanticized spiritual dimension.

In Taruskin's reading, *The Death of Klinghoffer* becomes an anti-Passion play; it sympathises musically with the persecutors, not the Christ-like victim they so brutally and senselessly sacrifice.[10] As a quondam newspaper critic, he did not have

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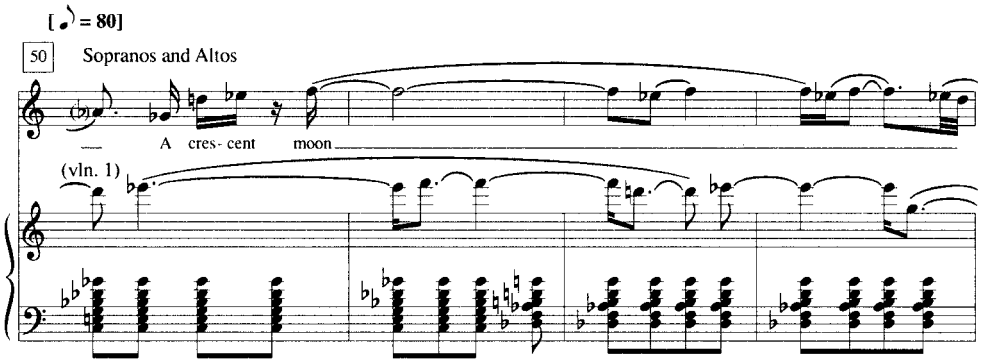
*New York Times*, 26 August 1996), and Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* ('The opera and the dictator: The peculiar martyrdom of Dmitri Shostakovich', *The New Republic*, 20 March 1989, 34–40; 'A martyred opera reflects its abominable time', *The New York Times*, 6 November 1994). His masterful political dissection of the master of defensive musical formalism, Igor Stravinsky, can be sampled in the long chapter 'Stravinsky and the Subhuman' from *Defining Russia Musically* (Princeton, 1997), 360–467; the following essay, 'Shostakovich and the Inhuman', takes on (among many other things) contested readings of the composer's famous Fifth Symphony.

[9] Thus the lead critic of the *New York Times*, who, dismissing Adams as a composer of 'seriously limited range' whose music displayed a generic 'film-score impressionism', saved his real vitriol for the librettist and director. Edward Rothstein, 'Seeking symmetry between Palestinians and Jews', *The New York Times*, 7 September 1991.

[10] Taruskin quite consciously avoids another argument made by critics who pointed out that Bach's passions were anything but 'even-handed' in their treatment of the story: ' ''The Death of Klinghoffer'' is ultimately about the cold-blooded murder of a helpless, innocent man, as is the ''St. Matthew Passion.'' But Bach takes an unequivocal and powerful moral

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Ex. 1: *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Prologue, scene 1 ('Chorus of Exiled Palestinians').

the luxury of musical examples, but he might well have reproduced as evidence the sinuous bars from the very opening moments of the opera's opening chorus shown in Example 1, pointing out the 'numinous' violin obbligato soaring *in altissimo* above the soft lamentation of the Chorus of Exiled Palestinians.

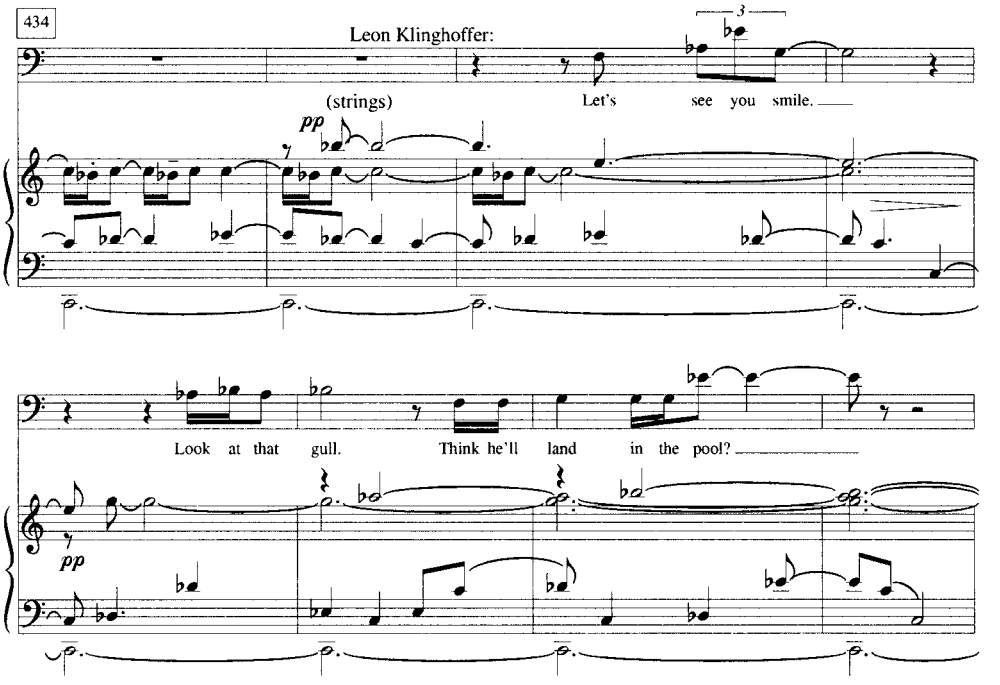
Adams, an Episcopalian by birth whose last major work had been a Nativity oratorio, reacted with asperity. He allowed himself to be coaxed by a British journalist into an uncomfortable *ad hominem*, calling Taruskin 'a true passive aggressive' and his article 'a rant, a "riff", an ugly personal attack, and an appeal to the worst kind of neo-conservatism'. As composer, Adams also dismissed Taruskin the musicologist in the harshest possible terms: '[His] musical "analysis" of my opera wouldn't have stood the test of any of his own Ph.D. candidates'.[11]

As it happens, I myself was once a Ph.D. candidate under Richard Taruskin, and one thing I learned from him is that you can't trust composers talking about their own works – especially when their blood is up. But a simple perusal of the score of *The Death of Klinghoffer* falsifies Taruskin's argument – and backs up the composer – at any number of places. One might point to the final moments of the opera: as Marilyn Klinghoffer ends her lament ('If a hundred people were murdered and their blood flowed in the wake of the ship like oil / Only then would the world intervene'), and the orchestra settles into its final resting place on G, the strings sustain a spectral tonic–dominant fifth in the highest register for twelve long, numinous bars, only fading out with the rest of the ensemble as the work comes to an end. Is this not her *pietà*, halo and all?

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position on the issue; Adams and Goodman flounder all around it'; Joseph McLellan, 'Classical Recordings: Of music and morals [*Klinghoffer*]', *Washington Post*, 22 November 1992. Taruskin himself has argued that the clear moral position of Bach's passions is itself anti-Semitic, since it involves assigning blame for Christ's death to . . . *the Jews*. (The position resonates strongly with current debates around the 2004 Mel Gibson film *The Passion of the Christ*.) The anti-Semitic implications of Bach's passion settings are explored within the context of the 'authentic' performance practice of early music in Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (New York, 1995), 353–8.

[11] Anna Picard, ' "It was a rant, a riff, and an ugly personal attack"; as his most controversial opera opens in London, Anna Picard asks John Adams what all the fuss is about', *Independent on Sunday*, 13 January 2002.

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Ex. 2: *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Act II, scene 1.

Of course, as Taruskin might point out, this moment occurs after Leon Klinghoffer's death. But it is not even the case that Adam's score denies Klinghoffer the 'Bach-ian aureole' when he is mere flesh and blood. Consider Example 2, which excerpts from the unpublished January 1991 vocal rehearsal score a key transitional passage after the climactic confrontation between Klinghoffer ('I've never been a violent man') and the most brutal of the hijackers, nicknamed 'Rambo' by the passengers ('You are always complaining about your suffering'). With the disabled old man reeling from Rambo's anti-Semitic diatribe, a tense contrapuntal episode unfolds between electric piano and cellos – one of the most Bach-like moments in the score – which gradually relaxes as Klinghoffer turns his attention to comforting his wife, Marilyn. He gently calls her attention to distracting trivia (a gull circling the ship's swimming pool), coaxes a smile, and, broiling unprotected in the hot sunlight of a Mediterranean October day, jokes gallantly about bringing home a tan. Adams highlights this moment of selfless compassion by surrounding Klinghoffer's loose, conversational vocal line with a growing nimbus of high sustained string sounds, inlaid with sparkling synthesizers, building up into a mournful half-diminished cluster over a sustained bass C, which, in turn, as at the end of the opera, fades out extremely slowly for approximately sixty seconds, under and after Leon Klinghoffer's self-deprecating last words, 'I should have worn a hat'. A clearer musical evocation of the gilded halo surrounding a medieval Crucifixion scene is hard to imagine (Ex. 3).

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Ex. 3: *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Act II, scene 1.

How could Taruskin fail to hear this? (At least one amateur critic noticed the disarming sweetness of this spot, and even saw that it provided a necessary foil to

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the belligerence, accompanied by 'American Hero' parallel fifths in the horns, of Klinghoffer's previous aria.[12]) Even a sympathetic observer might conclude that Taruskin, a sensitive musicologist but also an *echt* New Yorker by temperament and upbringing, jumped a little too quickly to his own conclusion in those traumatic and polarising months after carnage and destruction struck lower Manhattan. But returning to Brooklyn in the autumn of 1991, and surveying the critical reaction to *Klinghoffer*'s American première, we will see that Taruskin's moment of critical deafness has little to do with post-9/11 patriotism, irresponsible publicity seeking, or passive aggression. It was an absolutely characteristic response for New York intellectuals who were also Jewish, and it is most profitably understood in terms of larger cultural and sociological trends reshaping and problematising the self-image of American Judaism. Taruskin can hardly be blamed for failing to listen to the philo-Semitic moments in *The Death of Klinghoffer*; by the time he wrote about the opera in 2001, it was ensconced in a decade-long pattern of journalistic reception whose overall effect was to draw his attention entirely away from the unsettling possibility that any such moments might even exist.

## The second death of Leon Klinghoffer

> In New York – far more than in any other city in which the opera has played – [*Klinghoffer*] was greeted with hostility.[13]

Looking back from 2002, John Adams ruefully admitted to a British journalist that 'taking *Klinghoffer* to Brooklyn, the white-hot epicentre of Jewish culture in the US, was probably a daft thing to do'.[14] At the time, though, its creators were relatively sanguine about *Klinghoffer*'s reception in New York. Reviews of the March 1991 Brussels and Lyon performances had been uniformly respectful, if not always positive, and even the American journalists who sent back reports mostly praised the production for its 'humanity' and lack of sensationalism.[15] One powerful dissent ought to have functioned as a straw in the wind, though: hewing to its customary editorial position on Middle East affairs, *The Wall Street Journal* sarcastically savaged the opera for 'turning the sport killing of a frail old Jew in a wheelchair into a cool meditation on meaning and myth, life and death. And without a penny of subsidy from the PLO'.[16] Still, Adams was able to conduct excerpts from his new opera at

[12] 'At first it is easy to see how aggressively irritating [Klinghoffer] is – almost to blame him for bringing events upon his own head – but then his first scene with his wife is so compassionate that all previous thoughts are immediately assuaged'; Brian Hick, 'Klinghoffer at the Barbican', *The Organ* [web journal], 17 January 2002.

[13] John Rockwell, 'Political operas happen to cross paths [record review]', *The New York Times*, 18 November 1991.

[14] Quoted in Andrew Clark, 'Substance rather than style', *The Financial Times*, 11 January 2002.

[15] American reviews of the Brussels première were filed by, most notably: Paul Griffiths and John Rockwell for *The New York Times*, Robert Commanday for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Katrina Ames for *Time*, and Michael Walsh for *Newsweek*. See Appendix 2 for a fuller list and details.

[16] Manuela Hoelterhoff, 'Opera: Adams/Sellars ''Klinghoffer'' ', *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 March 1991.

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Santa Cruz's Cabrillo Festival in late August; National Public Radio did broadcast the Brussels première nationwide a few days later without incident; and just days before the 5 September Brooklyn Academy of Music première, Sellars was able to report that he was in cordial telephone contact with the remaining members of the Klinghoffer family, formally inviting them (just as Richard Nixon had been to *Nixon in China*) to the opening night.[17]

Adams was somewhat more worried, and yet even as he defended the opera's depiction of the Palestinians, he inadvertently outlined the complex matrix of domestic issues that defined its New York reception. No one was trying to justify murder, the composer argued, 'but there was also violence perpetrated on the other side. Keeping someone bound up in a refugee camp his entire life is a different kind of violence than assassination, but nevertheless violence. I think that's very hard for comfortable, middle-class Americans watching the world go by via their TV sets to get in touch with'.[18] In Brooklyn the sweeping geo-political canvas proffered by Sellars, Adams and Goodman was received on more parochial terms. It would not be the operatic adumbration of a rough moral equivalence between Israeli occupation and Palestinian terror alone that would outrage New York Jewish critics. What would prove truly intolerable was how the shadow of that moral equivalence fell across an opera containing a direct, insider's attack on their own position as passive, assimilated 'comfortable' members of the American bourgeoisie.

*Klinghoffer* opened in Brooklyn Heights on a Thursday; by Saturday its reputation for fairness, balance and humanity was in shreds. Edward Rothstein's review in *The New York Times* was a take-no-prisoners deconstruction. Under the headline 'Seeking symmetry between Palestinians and Jews', Rothstein – who liked neither the music ('film-score impressionism . . . [with] a seriously limited emotional range') nor the text ('casually random in its use of imagery and portentous statement') – systematically disassembled what he saw as a complex aesthetic scrim of creative and production choices (obscure texts, repetitive music, ritualistic choruses, stylised movement, abstract set) designed to fool the spectator into believing that the work was 'beyond politics'.[19]

Instead, Rothstein chose to focus on one of the most 'realistic' moments of the original production, an intimate family scene for a trio of soloists that was framed by the two large symmetrically constructed choruses, one for Exiled Palestinians, one for Exiled Jews, that opened and closed the opera's Prologue. This suburban vignette, set in New Jersey, attracted little attention in Europe, even from American critics, who at worst found its 'skittishness' somewhat at odds with the general elegiac tone, and felt that it got the opera off to a slow and confusing start.[20] But

[17] David Patrick Stearns, 'Ever-evolving "Klinghoffer" ', *USA Today*, 4 September 1991.
[18] Mary Campbell, ' "The Death of Klinghoffer": composer braces for U.S. première', *Associated Press*, 1 September 1991.
[19] Edward Rothstein, 'Seeking symmetry between Palestinians and Jews', *The New York Times*, 7 September 1991.
[20] Nicholas Kenyon, 'Tunes that terrorists sing', *The Observer*, 24 March 1991. See also the 1991 reports by Miller, Loppert and Rockwell listed in Appendix 2.

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for Rothstein, the scene was not inept or out-of-place; it provided the key to unlocking the opera's anti-Jewish bias:

> [The opening chorus and its] empathetic evocation of the intifada suddenly comes to an end as a family gathers on a couch and chair on a raised platform in midstage. They are the Rumor family, Jewish friends of the Klinghoffers. Mr. Rumor sits crankily with a television remote control in hand, squabbling with his missus over the tourist items she picks up every time they travel. She berates him for spending so much time on the toilet overseas, and also manages to suggest to her son that he check out Myrt Epstein's daughters. The music burbles along like a theme song from a 1950s television show, raising its voice along with the family's. In the midst of this bourgeois fricassee, Mrs. Rumor spots an item in the newspaper about Yasir Arafat, the Palestinian leader, and is outraged. Then, as if on cue, begins the languorous chant of the 'Chorus of Exiled Jews' . . .

*The Wall Street Journal* had also objected strenuously to this scene ('so kill them for their knickknacks, these tasteless shoppers!'), but Rothstein went much further, reading the rest of the opera through the lens of this domestic situation comedy. The Chorus of Exiled Jews (which, at the Brussels première, caused the audience to burst into spontaneous applause) sounded to him, after meeting the Rumors, like 'a sort of tourist's recollection of devotional sentiment about the Promised Land', whose words have 'no historical weight'. While the Palestinians are made articulate and self-conscious of history, 'their victims continue to be little more than variations of the offensive Rumors: narrow in their focus and vision, singing primarily about their physical condition, revealing the simple-minded historical blindness that the avant-garde has long attributed to the bourgeoisie'.

Lisa and Ilsa Klinghoffer decided not to attend the opening as the guests of the Brooklyn Academy of Music; they bought tickets anonymously and went on Saturday night. There is no concrete evidence that the surviving Klinghoffers read *The New York Times* that morning, but it hardly seems possible that they could have been uninterested in what its head classical musical critic had to say about the operatic treatment of their family tragedy. One can only imagine their shock when this authoritative source declared that their parents were played for cheap laughs in a pro-Palestinian game of *épater-les-bourgeois*. Rothstein, meanwhile, was working on another long piece about *Klinghoffer*, placing its 'morally tawdry ideological posing' within the larger context of 1980s minimalist operas (Glass's *Satyagraha* and *Akhnaten*) and their left-wing 'avant-gardism': callow attacks on middle-class values and allegorical attempts to re-enact the 1960s in world-historical disguise.[21] On Wednesday, 11 September, the Klinghoffer family released a terse press statement that finally and explicitly levied the ultimate indictment: 'We are outraged at the exploitation of our parents and the cold-blooded murder of our father as the centrepiece of a production that appears to us to be anti-Semitic'.[22]

[21] Edward Rothstein, ' "Klinghoffer" sinks into minimal sea', *The New York Times*, 15 September 1991.

[22] The statement went on: 'While we understand artistic license, when it so clearly favors one point of view it is biased. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the plight of the Palestinian people with the cold-blooded murder of an innocent disabled American Jew is both

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The die was cast. 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. In a letter to the editors of *The New York Times*, one Brooklyn reader conflated the libretto's portrayal of the Rumors both with the Klinghoffers and with the actual anti-Semitic invective it puts in the mouth of Rambo, the most unsympathetic Arab character ('The Klinghoffers, guiltless victims, are trivialized as the type of middle-class people who go on cruises only to shop – hardly a capital crime. America is described as a ''fat Jew'' ').[23]

Even Edward Said, whose long review of *Klinghoffer* in the November issue of *The Nation* lauded the opera as a gratifying exception to 'the neoconservative attack on the literary and pictorial arts [which] has also taken a significant toll in the world of classical music', and who as a prominent Palestinian activist could hardly be accused of pro-Israeli bias, found himself somewhat ambivalent about 'the studiously anti-bourgeois quality' of the work. He had to admit that 'in sticking to the American-Jewish, banal, middle-class aspect of the episode', Goodman had biased the libretto against its Jewish protagonists. Even a staunch defender of Arab nationalism could not, as a New Yorker, really defend the Prologue's bridge-and-tunnel comedy, which he agreed provided the lens through which the author meant us to view the work's Jewish characters:

> As part of the Prologue, the easy satire of a New Jersey suburban family – the Rumors – is supposed to define the Klinghoffers' background as a way of limiting or deflating it. Most of the critics found the scene offensive; they alleged that it was anti-Semitic in portraying the Rumors as representative of the worst kind of consumerism and bargain hunting. Actually, there is no conclusive indication they are Jewish, but I thought the scene was far too long for what it was trying to do, which I also thought was not so important to do in any case.[24]

Said might well have been reacting with deliberate care to the much more intemperate view of *Klinghoffer* on display in *The Nation*'s ideological rival, the rabidly pro-Israel *New Republic*, whose editorial positions in the 1980s basically defined what was then called 'neo-conservatism'. Leon Wieseltier, the journal's editor and a deeply religious Jew from Brooklyn, personally launched a stinging attack on

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historically naïve and appalling'. Allan Kozinn, 'Klinghoffer daughters protest opera', *The New York Times*, 11 September 1991. The Klinghoffers were, by this time, a highly politicised family well aware of how the media worked: they were in the midst of a long, drawn-out, and very public lawsuit against the PLO, attempting to bring Yasir Arafat to civil trial for the wrongful death of their father. Developments were regularly covered in the Jewish press, and they had an official family spokesperson, Letty Simon.

[23] Raymond Sokolov, 'Adamsweek: Klinghoffer dies again', *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 September 1991; Samuel Lipman, 'The Second Death of Leon Klinghoffer', *Commentary*, 92/5 (November 1991), 46–9; Shirley Fuerst [Brooklyn], ' ''Klinghoffer''; sympathy for wanton murder [letter to the editor]', *The New York Times*, 6 October 1991.

[24] Edward Said, 'Korngold: *Die tote Stadt*; Beethoven: *Fidelio*; John Adams: *The Death of Klinghoffer* [opera reviews]', *The Nation*, 253/16 (11 November 1991), 596–600. Pace Said, the libretto leaves no ambiguity about the Jewishness of the Rumor family (see below).

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*Klinghoffer*, though he was not the house music critic.[25] That position has on many occasions fallen to Richard Taruskin, and Wieseltier's broadside, though it says little about music, anticipates much of what Taruskin was to present musicologically a decade later.

For Wieseltier, the opera has nothing to do with any actual Arab–Israeli conflict; it is rather a 'cheap and self-satisfied attack by a self-styled American avant-garde upon the ordinariness and the philistinism of the American bourgeoisie tricked out as the study of a tragic clash in Zion'. The Rumors come in for the usual drubbing, with special attention paid to the stage details (matching ivory carpet and sofa; pastel coloured 'Jackson Pollock' on the wall) that mark them as suburban and middle class. Wieseltier, like Rothstein before him and Taruskin after him, proceeds to read the entire opera as a long trope on the opening domestic scene. The banality of the Rumors' domestic chit-chat is not accidental; it sets the libretto's tone, and Wieseltier goes to some lengths to discover it in specific moments in the narrative of suffering and grief that dominates Act II:

> Most important, [the Rumors] introduce the peculiar manner of discourse that has been inflicted by the librettist upon their friends the Klinghoffers.
>
> The Klinghoffers do not have much to say in this adaptation of their torture. Leon has one air, Marilyn has two. Leon's is an apologia (''We both / have tried to live / Good lives. / We give / Gladly, receive / Gratefully, love / And take pleasure / In small things''), which is followed by a denunciation of his captors (''You just want to see / People die. / You're crazy''), which concludes with the rousing observation that ''I should have worn a hat.'' Like he said, small things. Before she learns that Leon has been shot, Marilyn sings a long and irritating piece about diseases and doctors. After she learns that Leon has been shot, Marilyn still sings in her trivial, dilatory way, still sings of her ailments, and remembers her martyred husband for bringing her aspirin from the kitchen. More small things.

Clued in, perhaps, by the mention of Klinghoffer's hat, an alert reader will already have noticed that Wieseltier's 'rousing observation', the offhand line of Goodman's dialogue that clinches the belittling portrayal of Leon Klinghoffer, and thus betrays the anti-Semitic, anti-bourgeois taint of the opera, happens at the precise moment when Adam's score is bestowing upon the doomed tourist its most refulgent halo of sustained strings and synthesizers. Wieseltier may have missed this because he is no Taruskin; but I submit that Taruskin missed it because of Wieseltier, and the platoon of New York critics who preceded and followed him. Their gambit of reading the whole of *Klinghoffer* through the second scene of the Prologue was so deeply engraved into the opera's reception by 2001 that Taruskin continued to do so, *even after the composer and librettist had cut the scene from the score*. For Taruskin, Adams's and Goodman's strategic retreat became an admission of guilt, proof that the opera is, at least implicitly, in sympathy with its most anti-Semitic protagonists:[26]

[25] Leon Wieseltier, 'The Death of Klinghoffer (Brooklyn Academy of Music) [opera review]', *The New Republic*, 205/14 (30 September 1991), 46.

[26] For the record, here is what Adams said in 1995 about the removal: 'Many people who saw this scene felt it made fun of American Jews and therefore was anti-Semitic. For those listeners it sent the wrong message, making it very difficult for them to take the rest of the

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The portrayal of suffering Palestinians in the musical language of myth and ritual was [in 1991] immediately juxtaposed with a musically trivial portrayal of contented, materialistic American Jews. The paired characterizations could not help linking up with lines sung later by ''Rambo,'' one of the fictional terrorists, who (right before the murder) wrathfully dismisses Leon Klinghoffer's protest at his treatment with the accusation that ''wherever poor men are gathered you can find Jews getting fat.''

If Taruskin and Wieseltier were wrong about Leon Klinghoffer's final moments alive, perhaps they are also wrong about the Rumors. A closer look at their exchanges on the ivory sofa under the fake Pollock is in order. We shall see that they are not so bad after all; in fact they are admirably, engagingly funny and self-aware, in their own *haimish* way, like your favourite Jewish relatives often are. But, first, we need to understand why it was that none of their critical neighbours from *The New York Times* and *The New Republic* were willing to greet them when they showed up in Brooklyn Heights in 1991.

Was it because, maybe, they were, in an old-fashioned, familiar, self-mocking way, just a smidgen *too Jewish*?

## Meet the Rumors: American Jewish identity and the sitcom in the Reagan–Bush years

Our own inadequacy, rather than Orthodox scorn, leaves so many American Jews futilely wishing for one more Israeli miracle.[27]

Years later, Adams would characterise the second scene of *Klinghoffer*'s Prologue as 'a satyr play', by which he meant a comic intermezzo designed both to introduce the theme of American consumerism, and to lighten the tension of the tragic episodes around it. Many sympathetic critics, especially in Europe, agreed, accepting it as a gentle satire on American tourists abroad, or even a simple 'portrait of urban Jewish life' – and highlighting its structural function as a 'semi-comic scherzo' between two large and powerful choral movements.[28] Others found the scene too long, or felt that it got the opera off to a 'confused, trivial start'.[29] But a significant phalanx of critics, particularly those hostile to the opera's politics, found something unpleasantly vaudevillian about it; it felt like bad TV, comedy with a little too much *shtick*

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opera seriously. They really felt they were being dished out a political tract that sympathized with the Palestinians and ridiculed the Jews. So, we took it out, and I don't regret its loss, since it was alone a half-hour long and it did not really integrate well into the structure of the rest of the opera. So I don't miss it.' Interview with David B. Beverly, University of Louisville, 25 October 1995.

[27] Samuel J. Freedman, *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry* (New York, 2000), 352.

[28] 'Satyr play': John Adams, interview with David B. Beverly at the University of Louisville, 25 October 1995; 'portrait of urban Jewish life': Joseph Mazo, 'Getting some distance on the Achille Lauro', *Bergen County Record*, 8 September 1991; 'scherzo': Max Loppert, 'The Death of Klinghoffer; Monnaie, Brussels', *The Financial Times*, 21 March 1991, and Richard Dyer, 'In its finest moments, ''Klinghoffer'' is superb', *Boston Globe*, 7 September 1991.

[29] Richard Campbell, ' ''Klinghoffer'' is passionate opera that avoids choosing sides', *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 11 April 1991.

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in it. Adams himself later characterised the humour as 'the kind you might see in a Woody Allen movie or a Neil Simon play', a sentiment darkly echoed by *The Wall Street Journal*, which in 1991 had found the 'piece of Neil Simon domestic comedy' to be, in context, 'thoroughly obnoxious'.[30] Edward Rothstein complained that '[Adams's] music burbles along like a theme song from a 1950s television show'; perhaps Paul Griffiths put it most succinctly and suggestively when he labelled the Rumors an 'American sit-com family'.[31]

On one level, the accusation that the Rumors are characters out of a situation comedy is simply a concrete way of complaining that *Klinghoffer*, dealing a worse slight to Jewish pride than siding with the Palestinians, refuses to take American Jews seriously at all, denying them even the role of heroic antagonists to Arab nationalism. Jewish composer Leo Kraft, writing in *Perspectives of New Music*, found the entire production exciting and a hopeful portent for the fate of new music in the US – but confessed himself personally alienated along just these lines: 'Doesn't the work show a remarkable degree of insensitivity to what Jewish members of the audience might feel on seeing their fellows portrayed on stage so condescendingly?'[32]

On the other hand, Eastern-European Jews in America have been producing and consuming self-mocking borscht-belt humour quite happily since the turn of the twentieth century. Not even juxtaposition with the most horrific anti-Semitic persecutions and violence could damp the tendency. For evidence, consider texts as divergent as the 1942 Jack Benny comedy *To Be or Not to Be*, set in Nazi-occupied Poland, and remade without incident by Mel Brooks in 1983; Brooks's own over-the-top film *The Producers* (1968), later to triumph as a Broadway musical, uninterrupted by the events of 11 September 2001, with the gloriously transgressive production number 'Springtime for Hitler' intact; or even the grim 'comic book' *Maus* (1986–91), exactly contemporaneous with *Klinghoffer*, and dominated by the dryly unsparing portrait of Art Spiegelman's father, tormented Holocaust survivor and unbelievably obnoxious jerk. Let's take the critical reception of the 'gently comic' scene in which we meet the Rumors quite seriously. What if it were a episode of an imaginary network sitcom, *c.* 1991? We could then consider its reception within the complex history of Jewish representation on television situation comedies, a history that will not only provide clues as to the reasons for its failure, but will allow us access to larger issues surrounding multicultural politics, American Jewish identity, Arab–Israeli politics, and the often painful negotiations among them in the post-1967 era.

The first American sitcom family was in fact Jewish. When the long-running radio serial *The Rise of the Goldbergs* made the transition to television in 1949 as *The Goldbergs*, it became the prototype for all future half-hour network situation comedies.[33] *The Goldbergs* led off a cluster of 'ethnic' sitcoms (*Mama*; *Life of Riley*; *Hey,*

[30] Adams as quoted in Anna Picard, ' "It was a rant" '; Sokolov, 'Klinghoffer dies again'.
[31] Rothstein, 'Seeking symmetry'; Paul Griffiths, 'Stories striding the stage'.
[32] Leo Kraft, 'The Death of Klinghoffer', *Perspectives of New Music*, 30 (1992), 302.
[33] The following discussion is most deeply indebted to Vincent Brook's recent and quite unique study *Something Ain't Kosher Here: The Rise of the 'Jewish' Sitcom* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2003); several other useful texts appear in J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler, ed., *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting* (Princeton, 2003).

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*Luigi*; *Amos 'n' Andy*), and it was chock-full of homey Jewish stereotypes: matriarch Molly made gefilte fish and gossiped happily across a Bronx tenement airshaft with her neighbours, while Papa Jake sewed dresses and led rent strikes. No one except Jewish network TV executives had any problem with the thick Yiddish accents and *shtetl* humour; the show's aspirational, assimilationist message was consistently popular with the urban New York-area viewers that made up the bulk of the early TV audience. According to media historian Donald Weber, the entire career of Gertrude Berg, the Vassar-educated writer and star, 'amount[ed] to a giant effort to soften the jagged edges of alienation through the figure of Molly Goldberg and her special accommodating vision – a vision of a loving family, of interdenominational brotherhood, of middle-class ideals, of *American* life'.[34]

If the TV sitcom was, in a sense, invented to enact the assimilation of American Jews (the 'rise' of its title) into the white American middle class, by 1955, when the Goldbergs moved to the more genteel (and Gentile) upstate community of 'Haverville', Molly's work was done. The classic situation comedies of the 1950s and 1960s, relentlessly WASP-ish shows like *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver*, ushered in a long drought of Jewish representation in sitcoms. American Jews would have to wait a full sixteen years before another Jewish-themed situation comedy was broadcast on network television. It is doubly strange, then, that as soon as *Bridget Loves Bernie* debuted in the autumn of 1972, Jewish advocacy groups began a concerted effort to get it taken off the air. The show, a witty comedy of exogamy and ethnic stereotyping – Bernie Steinberg (David Birney), a New York cabdriver and aspiring actor, falls for, dates, and eventually marries WASP princess Bridget Fitzgerald (Meredith Baxter) – was attacked unmercifully by Jewish critics in ways that bear close comparison with the uproar around *The Death of Klinghoffer*.

As in the *Klinghoffer* affair, the stated provocation was anti-Semitism, specifically the treatment of intermarriage 'in a cavalier, cute, and condoning fashion', and the fact that Bernie's parents, generational and class contemporaries of the Goldbergs, were depicted as 'loud and vulgar'.[35] (They don't have a fake 'Jackson Pollock' on the wall, but at one point Bernie upbraids his lower-middle-class mother and father for not knowing the difference between 'a Matisse and a matzoh ball'.) But none of these complaints really ring true. If it was not kosher to represent intermarriage on stage, what about *Abie's Irish Rose*, which ran on Broadway for five years (1922–7), and begat dozens of imitators as well as two very successful movie adaptations? And why did the Steinbergs have to be less New York-Jewish than the Goldbergs? What had changed?

Large-scale sociological trends conspired to put *Bridget Loves Bernie* at risk: by 1972, American Jewish identity, the assimilated model-minority identity that Karen Brodkin, in a different context, has called a post-war 'whiteness of our own',[36] was

[34] Quoted in Brook, *The Rise of the 'Jewish' Sitcom*, 23.

[35] The complainant is Rabbi Balfour Brickner, head of the Synagogue Council of America. See Brook, 51.

[36] 'My first and central argument is that a group of mainly Jewish public intellectuals spoke to the aspirations of many Jews in the immediate postwar decades, and in so doing developed

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in structural crisis, attempting to adjust to three new and disorientating facts of 1970s Jewish-American life. First, the unanticipated prospect of hyper-assimilation: *Abie's Irish Rose* and *The Goldbergs* had been harmless fantasies when the Jewish outmarriage rate was less than 5 per cent, but in 1970, the national Jewish Population Survey disclosed for the first time that mixed marriages had risen to over 30 per cent of the total. Jewish survivalism, the fear that America's secular embrace would, by tempting the next generation of Jews to total assimilation, destroy their identity, began to vie with the traditional aspiration to fit in. It had always been a problem in American culture to be 'too Jewish'; now, it seemed, one might run into even deeper trouble by not being Jewish enough. Media historian Jack Kugelmass puts it well: 'No wonder some people hated the show. It violated one of the most tenacious of Jewish beliefs – namely, that the majority culture was sufficiently impervious to provide a thick, clear, and enduring line of demarcation between Us and Them'.[37]

Ironically, at just this time, events in the Middle East were making it less and less possible for Jews who wanted to cross that line to maintain their liberal, multicultural identity. The dramatic expansion of Israel's power and territory after the Six Days' War pushed multicultural Jews back into a less and less attractive whiteness of their own, as ethnic allies, most painfully black and Chicano liberation movements, began to see Israel, and by extension American Jews, as the oppressors of colonialised peoples. (It is about this time that openly anti-Semitic positions were publicly taken by groups like the Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam.)

Finally, and perhaps most disruptively, the relationship with Israel, for a generation the foundation of American Jewish identity, the rallying and unifying point for American Jews of all degrees of orthodoxy, now began to divide them. Ought one identify with the 'muscle Jews', Revisionist Zionists and *haredim* who after the effortless victories of the Six-Days' War dreamed of – and fought for – a Greater Israel?[38] Or should American Jews hold fast to the pacifist, universalising spirit of diasporic Judaism, performing *tikkun olam*, standing apart and redeeming the (whole) world – not just the parts wrested from the Arabs?

Obviously a piece of mainstream popular culture like *Bridget Loves Bernie* did not engage consciously or even allegorically with all these issues; in fact, only hyper-assimilation, in the form of intermarriage, was addressed, perhaps too lightly, within the world of the show. (*The Jewish Spectator* read the show's Pollyanna attitude as a sign that 'the state of being Jewish has become so attenuated that for many the very term ''intermarriage'' has no meaning'.[39]) But we can argue that whenever

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a new, hegemonic version of Jewishness as a model minority culture that explained the structural privileges of white maleness as earned entitlements . . . a specifically Jewish form of whiteness, a whiteness of our own.' Karen Brodkin, *How the Jews Became White Folks, and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1998), 39.

[37] Jack Kugelmass, 'First as Farce, Then as Tragedy: The Unlamented Demise of *Bridget Loves Bernie*', in *Key Texts in American Jewish Culture*, ed. Kugelmass (New Brunswick, NJ, 2003), 155.

[38] *Haredi* is the Hebrew adjective that corresponds to what English-language commentators usually call 'ultra-Orthodox' Judaism.

[39] Robert J. Milch, 'Why Bridget loves Bernie', *The Jewish Spectator*, December 1972; quoted in Brook, *The Rise of the 'Jewish' Sitcom*, 51.

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American Jewish identity was felt to be in crisis – threatened by over-assimilation, under multicultural attack, and bereft of the comforting embrace of Israel – the tolerance within the Jewish community for stereotyped representations of Jews, especially those that reinforced specifically American-diasporic patterns of denigration, fell to near zero. *Bridget Loves Bernie*, both too Jewish and not Jewish enough, 'hip' and multicultural yet retailing the same old shtick-ey stereotypes, fell victim to such a moment of zero tolerance. Despite more than respectable ratings, the show was abruptly cancelled in March 1973.

It would be another sixteen years in the wilderness before the Jewish-themed situation comedy returned – but when it did, it came back with a vengeance. If *Klinghoffer*'s scene in the Rumors' living room seemed like a sitcom to contemporary observers, perhaps it was because the opera's first performances took place at the height of what Vincent Brook has analysed in detail as 'the first phase' of an unprecedented late 1980s/early 1990s trend towards 'Jewish' sitcoms on prime-time television.[40] Between 1989, when Adams began composing *The Death of Klinghoffer* in earnest, and the opera's Brooklyn run in the autumn of 1991, no less than eight Jewish-themed situation comedies made their debut. Several of them, including *Seinfeld*, *Anything but Love*, and *Dream On*, went on to have long and successful runs; one, *Brooklyn Bridge*, set in an idealised 1950s Jewish neighbourhood right around the corner from the Academy of Music, debuted in the same month as *Klinghoffer*.

So what was the problem? As we shall see, most of these sitcoms took extraordinary pains to displace their Jewishness (thus the scare quotes around the word in Brook's formulation above), or to remap older stereotypes into what Brook calls 'postmodern' or 'conceptual' Jewishness. The explosion of Jewish representation in sitcoms came at the end of a crisis-ridden decade for America's Jews; by 1991 a fast-evaporating, deeply fragmented, politically ambivalent community was proving that it would react explosively to almost any direct representation of its own middle-class American-Jewish culture.

Moving quickly through the first half of the decade: the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 ushered in a period of intense political anxiety for most American Jews. A series of embattled Likud governments drove wedges into the façade of liberal unity that support for Israel had always been able to shore up in the US; after the massacres of Palestinians at the Sabra and Shattila refugee camps, the 1985 arrest of Jewish Navy contractor Jonathan Pollard for spying on behalf of Israel, continuing battles over Soviet emigration, and the sickening waves of violence associated with the first intifada (1987–92), it was less and less possible to believe that the relationship with Israel could ever again provide comfort to an embattled secular Jewish identity in the United States.[41] Looking

[40] See Brook, 66–97.

[41] 'Israel, [Arthur Herzberg] argues, is not just a place to be supported; it is a place whose existence helps to make American Jews more comfortable and secure in America. Jews in America are now like other ethnic groups – they have their own homeland, and this helps them to seem a more normal part of the American scene . . . US Jews want an Israel that makes them feel good, that reflects their liberal outlook and values.' Jonathan Marcus,

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back on the decade in 1990, Jonathan Marcus wrote that 'throughout the 1980s the US Jewish community has spoken with increasingly discordant voices. . . . In part this is a reflection of the deep divisions within Israel itself, where national unity governments have pursued at least two, often contradictory, foreign policies at one and the same time'.[42]

Between the 1985 *Achille Lauro* hijacking and the première of *The Death of Klinghoffer*, almost every year brought a new attack on the integrity of American Jewish identity – and most of the pain was coming from the erstwhile source of comfort, the increasingly fractured and embattled State of Israel. In 1987 came the *intifada*, transforming Yasir Arafat and his PLO from stateless international terrorists to the leaders (for good or ill) of a genuine popular uprising against Jewish rule *inside* Israel's occupied territories. In 1988–9 the Jewish state dealt another stunning blow to American Jewish identity: electorally beholden to far-right religious parties, Yitzhak Shamir's Likud coalition triggered the (for our purposes ideally named) 'Who is a Jew?' controversy, proposing an amendment to the Israeli Law of Return which would have de-legitimised conversions performed by Reform or Conservative rabbis.[43] In Israel, where practically all religious Jews are Orthodox, this was a non-issue. But in the US it had the effect of erasing the identity of the vast majority of American Jews, whose non-Orthodox rabbis would no longer be able to guarantee the Jewishness of their offspring by converting their children's gentile spouses. The result was the most violent break with Israel in the history of American Judaism, with the American Jewish Congress speaking for the vast majority of American Jews when it attacked the amendment as 'a betrayal of Israel's partnership with Diaspora Jewry'.[44] The amendment was dropped with the formation of a Likud–Labour coalition which no longer required *haredi* support, but it would fester in US Jewish memory, especially since the issue was revisited every time a fragile coalition government needed the support of ultra-orthodox political parties in the Israeli Knesset.

One could outfox the *haredim*, of course, by simply resisting intermarriage; but the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey brought grim news on that contested front. For the first time in history, the Jewish outmarriage rate was reported at over 50 per cent, thus providing the mathematical certainty that, if trends continued, Judaism in the United States would eventually cease to exist. As American Jews digested the fact that they now made up less than 2.5 per cent

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'Discordant Voices: The US Jewish Community and Israel in the 1980s', *International Affairs*, 66/3 (July 1990), 548.

[42] Marcus, 546.

[43] The 'Law of Return' guarantees citizenship to any Jew returning to Israel. Since in Orthodox Judaism, Jewish identity is matrilineal, children of women who convert to Judaism are Jewish only insofar as the conversions are recognised by the Israeli religious authorities. The amendment in question would have given the Orthodox establishment in Israel sole right to determine which conversions were 'real', and thus to determine 'Who is a Jew?' See Freedman, *Jew vs. Jew*, 71–9. Freedman points out that since several of the right-wing religious parties in Israel were actually run from Brooklyn, the battle was actually a battle within *American Jewry* over the future of American Jewish identity.

[44] Freedman, 77.

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of the US population (and 20 per cent of that number self-reported as 'non-religious'), the Council on Jewish Life created a task force on acculturation, and more and more Jews began talking about a self-inflicted 'Silent Holocaust'.[45] For the first time in American Jewish history, hyper-assimilation was firmly and publicly in the driver's seat.

Meanwhile, the Jews' status as America's 'model minority' was crumbling – in particular the special relationship that Jews had enjoyed for decades with black and Hispanic civil rights groups. The situation was particularly dire in New York City, where the closely fought 1989 mayoral election between David Dinkins and Rudolph Giuliani pitted Jews and blacks against each other directly in an orgy of racist and anti-Semitic campaigning. Giuliani lost, and a collateral casualty of the campaign was one of his most outspoken supporters, comedian and freshly minted sitcom star Jackie Mason. Mason had garnered huge success in the previous five years with his spicy updating of the old-style Catskills stand-up comic, mainstreaming the kind of Yiddish-inflected blue humour that had been a secret pleasure for Jews since the 1930s. His network comedy, *Chicken Soup*, was the very first hit of the 'Jewish' sitcom revival, achieving tolerant reviews and decent ratings when it debuted in the autumn of 1989.

But, perhaps predictably, given the litany of bad news above, Jewish groups were in no mood to tolerate Jackie Mason's shtick. As Vincent Brook relates, 'the politically liberal, religiously moderate *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, which had praised Mason's Broadway show three years earlier, excoriated *Chicken Soup* both for its exogamy theme – "As if this problem isn't bad enough already" – and negative stereotypes – "a pathetic reminder of an era long ago . . . as inappropriate and offensive to Jews as *Amos and Andy* [*sic*] would be to blacks today".'[46] Some of this was simple shame at Mason's 'too Jewish' persona on the show (it is worth noting here that the historical Leon Klinghoffer looked more like the pudgy Mason than the muscular Jewish actors – Burt Lancaster and Karl Malden – dragooned to play him in two forgettable TV movies); but perhaps worse was the fact that this atavistic voice from the Jewish cultural id was also openly racist. He had, unforgivably, allowed himself to refer to David Dinkins as a *schvarzer* – not quite the Yiddish equivalent of the N-word, but close enough. *Chicken Soup*, filled with stereotypes, dramatising hyper-assimilation, and demonstrating in the person of its star the complete collapse of Jewish multicultural identity, was taken off the air after only two months.

How significant it is, then, that the Brooklyn première of *The Death of Klinghoffer*, with its satirical portrayal of politically conservative, upper-middle-class, suburban, *white* Jews, took place in a borough and a city traumatised by the single most terrifying eruption of urban Jewish – black violence in American history: two days of inner-city rioting in which a Jewish rabbinical student was killed, 188 other New Yorkers were injured, and angry crowds of blacks broke Jewish windows, shouted

[45] The term is a corruption of Yeshiva University professor Sol Roth's 1980 description of intermarriage, 'a holocaust of our own making'. See Freedman, 74.
[46] Brook, *The Rise of the 'Jewish' Sitcom*, 69.

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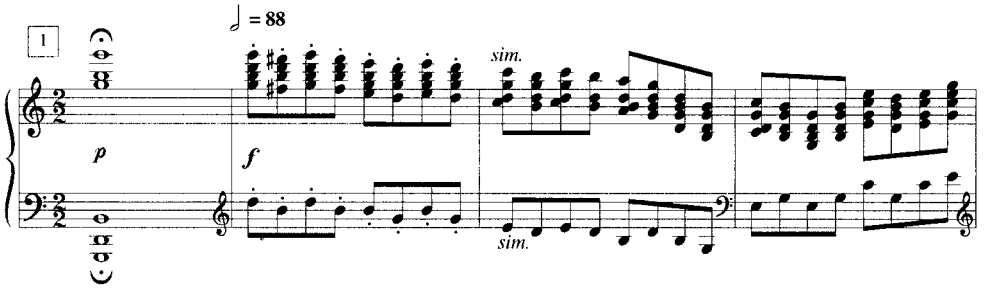
'Heil Hitler!' and burned the Israeli flag. Few critics have pointed out that *Klinghoffer*'s Brooklyn première occurred less than a month after the Crown Heights riots of 19–21 August 1991; for those who have, it is taken simply as a reason why tempers might generally have been on edge that September. But, as we shall see, *Klinghoffer* engages with the tensions underlying the riots quite overtly (if inadvertently). In fact, almost every facet of the gathering identity crisis that assailed American Jews during the late 1980s was addressed – sometimes even thematised – in *Klinghoffer*. The opera may have been a painful experience for many New York Jews; but it was only pouring salt into wounds, many of them self-inflicted, that were already open.

Let's consider how the three major forces undermining American Jewish identity – hyper-assimilation, epitomised by the 'Silent Holocaust'; the contentious relationship with Israel, symbolised by the 'Who is a Jew?' controversy; and the collapse of multicultural leadership, terrifyingly acted out in the Crown Heights riots – appear in the text, structure and casting of *The Death of Klinghoffer*. All the named American Jewish characters in *Klinghoffer* are highly assimilated. The fictional Rumors may be somewhat more assimilated than the real-life Klinghoffers, who, though they had a house in Long Branch, NJ, never gave up their place on the Lower East Side; but no one in this opera wears a *kippah*, the mandatory head covering of the Orthodox Jew. We know this because of the off-hand remark that so exercised Leon Wieseltier – 'I should have worn a hat' – which, in context, is not such a 'small thing' after all: it tells us that Leon Klinghoffer is not Orthodox. Whether librettist Alice Goodman meant to suggest that Klinghoffer is unprotected at this crucial moment by the *halakhah*, the ring of regulations that define Jewish identity through Jewish life, is not clear. If she did, though, wouldn't the effect be the opposite of anti-Semitic? Klinghoffer is singled out not as too Jewish, but as *not Jewish enough*, the not-so-secret fear of the highly assimilated American Jew.

The Rumor family struggles directly with hyper-assimilation in the person of their soon-to-be lawyer son, Jonathan. (All following discussions of this scene assume familiarity with its full text; see Appendix 1.) It is Jonathan who provokes most of the shtick-ey humour in the scene, as his mother, a latter-day Molly Goldberg, tries to stuff him with food, enthuses over grandchildren, and worries about his future. As Edward Rothstein sourly noted, Alma Rumor is worried in a familiar Yiddish-sitcom way about her son's marriage prospects; she wants him to 'be more serious about his social life', in particular to meet the Epstein sisters, some nice Jewish girls. He parries effortlessly ('You know I've got a bar exam'), and we are left with the uneasy feeling that he will probably show up as an intermarriage statistic in the next decade's Jewish Population Survey.

Adams's music for all this does indeed sound like the music of a 1950s television show. But those shows were emphatically *not Jewish*, and his opening theme, which recurs periodically under the casual *parlando* of the Rumors, sounds nothing like the musical themes of *The Goldbergs*. It doesn't sound Jewish at all. It resembles, rather, the kind of upbeat, bouncy industrial music used under black-and-white TV images of impeccably dressed gentile women gliding through what were just beginning to

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Ex. 4: *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Prologue, scene 2 (February 1991 version).

be called suburban 'shopping malls' (Ex. 4).[47] The Rumors have risen; they have made the leap that the Goldbergs dreamed of in 1955; but by 1991, their secular, suburban, consumer-based identity was simply no longer equal to the strain of being Jewish in America.

Jonathan appears to have wandered into his parents' living room, in fact, from another sitcom, one more characteristic of the 1990s 'Jewish' sitcom trend – *Seinfeld*. He views Mom and Dad, and their attempts to enfold him in an old-fashioned American Jewish identity, with detachment bordering on contempt. (It is central to the structure of the opera as originally conceived that the high tenor who plays this part later comes back to play Molqui, the 'idealistic' leader of the Palestinian terrorists.) At one point he makes wicked fun of the Klinghoffers, to whom Alma and Harry have recommended the *Achille Lauro*. He imagines Marilyn as the overprotective Jewish mother, organising a whirlwind tour for her incapacitated husband:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Harry* | The dollar's up – |
| *Jonathan* | Good news for the Klinghoffers. |
| *Harry* | Hope all the logistics get worked out. |
| *Jonathan* | Oh, Marilyn will see to that. |
| | Friday, Manhattans by the pool, |
| | Saturday, Eretz Yisroel! |

In this brief but significant passage, Alice Goodman puts an insider's thumb in the eye of American Jews anxious about their relationship with Israel. If making *aliyah* (i.e., fulfilling the duty to return) has been reduced to breaking the Sabbath followed by a shallow tourist swing through the Holy Land, aren't the Klinghoffers particularly vulnerable to the question 'Who is (*really*) a Jew?' The contempt in Jonathan's voice is not just that of a younger, hyper-assimilated generation for their parents' 'Jewish' affectations or that of the PLO mocking Jews' attachment to 'their' land; it resonates with the voices of right-wing Israelis and ultra-orthodox Jews, for whom all American Jews, like their Labour allies in Israel, are too comfortable and self-indulgent in their Diaspora to have anything but 'a sort of touristy attachment

[47] Adams's music is eerily reminiscent of one of the most famous pieces of 'shopping music' ever written, Laurie Johnson's 'Happy Go Lively', written in the 1950s for British production music house KPM. It can be heard on *Music for TV Dinners*, Scamp Records SCP 9721–2 (1997).

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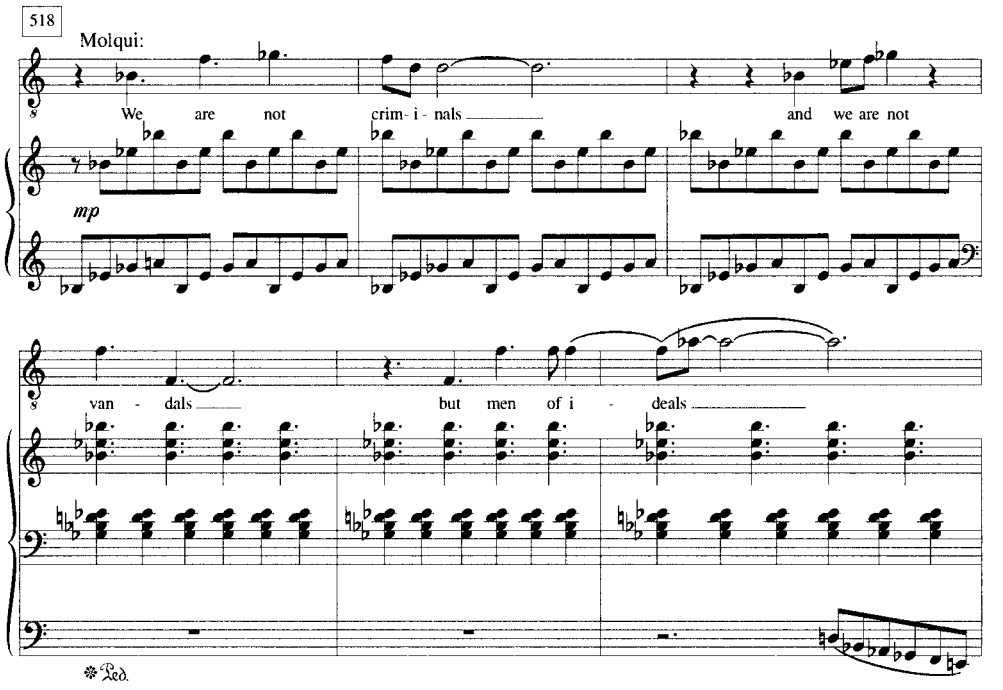

Ex. 5: *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Prologue, scene 2 (February 1991 version).

to an ancient land'.[48] Adams's setting is brilliant here (Ex. 5): the accompaniment rocks back and forth between two lounge jazz dominant-ninth chords a semitone apart as Marilyn and Leon sip Manhattans by the pool; then, on the words 'Eretz Yisroel' (one of the very few Hebrew phrases in the libretto), a melodramatic leap up to the high register of the tenor voice, over a self-important D minor triad. The mock-heroic tone is clear – especially because it is precisely this range of this voice, in the character of Molqui, which will carry the most strident and self-righteous ideological pronouncements of the Palestinians (Ex. 6).

In terms of American politics, the Rumors are split, as one assumes the Klinghoffers might have been before their tragedy. Harry thinks Reagan is a *mensch*, while Alma calls him an 'asshole'. Alma is angry at Arafat – perhaps she has read about his Fatah group's amphibious attack on Israeli bathers north of Tel Aviv – but, more fundamentally, apolitical: 'You wash your hands and go on through'. One presumes that the Rumors moved out to the suburbs because their old neighbourhood, in the Bronx, Brooklyn or the Lower East Side, was too cramped, too dirty – and a little too multicultural for their comfort. (That, in my reading, is the significance of the 'ivory' carpet and walls of their living room; on a stage dominated by a completely abstract metal scaffolding, this 'whiteness of our own' would be highly and symbolically salient.)

[48] The quote is Edward Rothstein's ('Seeking symmetry'), but it resonates with many of the American and Israeli *haredim* quoted on assimilated Diaspora Jews in Samuel Freedman's *Jew vs. Jew*.

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Ex. 6: *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Act I, scene 1.

During Act II of *Klinghoffer*, in a nightmarish coincidence with the real-life trauma of the Crown Heights riots, these American Jews, marked as white, suburban and politically neutered, run into at least two machine-gun toting Palestinians who, in an incredibly unfortunate (though not entirely innocent) turn of events, had been cast by Sellars, Goodman and Adams as black. Both Thomas Young, who created the part of ringleader Molqui, and Eugene Perry, who played the sympathetic terrorist Mamoud, were African-American singers specialising in the operatic portrayal of controversial black characters. Young would have been familiar to New York critics for his icy portrayal of Elijah Muhammad, leader of the violently anti-Semitic Nation of Islam, in Anthony Davis's 1986 opera on the life of Malcolm X; Perry had just the previous year played a junkie gang-lord Don Giovanni in Peter Sellars's PBS updating of the Mozart opera to contemporary Spanish Harlem. Sellars's dramatic rhyming of Palestinians and African-Americans was no doubt intentional, and arguably tendentious – but he could have had no idea of the raw panic, rage and fear that his imagery would tap that September. (Providentially, perhaps, the actor playing Rambo was white.)

In summary: to call *The Death of Klinghoffer* anti-Semitic is to claim that it offends because it is an ideologically driven distortion of American Jewish identity, a caricature, 'agit-prop', as Rothstein would have it. But looking closely at the opera (and the controversial Rumor scene) in historical context, it becomes clear that the portrayal of American Jews was offensive and upsetting to New York Jewish audiences because *it reflected perfectly their worst nightmares about their own conflicted identity as Jews back to them*. Beset by Jewish-Gentile hyper-assimilation, the collapse of

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American–Israeli Jewish dialogue, and the incineration of Black–Jewish multicultural solidarity, American secular Judaism simply did not function anymore. With *Klinghoffer*, we are dealing not with an anti-Semitic caricature from outside, but a devastatingly accurate insider's reflection of what Irving Howe sensed in 1989 as an unprecedented 'deepening crisis in Jewish identity'.[49] Two difficult years later, watching *Klinghoffer* laid the crisis bare for its New York audience; it was, evidently, akin to standing culturally naked in front of an unflattering music-dramatic mirror.

American Jews did not like what they saw.

## *Salome* and *Seinfeld*, or, The aesthetics of displacement

Estelle Harris (who played Mrs. Costanza) averred in an interview, somewhat ambiguously: 'We're not supposed to be Jewish. I once asked Larry David [*Seinfeld*'s Jewish co-creator], ''What are we, Jewish?" He said, ''What do you care?" '[50]

The foregoing is the main thrust of my argument here; but before I present a tentative reading of the opera disentangled from its 'anti-Semitic' reputation, I need briefly to clear up a pair of music-historical questions. First, and most importantly for late twentieth-century reception history, why was *The Death of Klinghoffer* so categorically denied the kind of aesthetic pass traditionally given an opera like Richard Strauss's 1905 *Salome*, a notorious '*Juden-Oper*' filled with much more overt and grotesque anti-Semitic caricatures?[51]

It will be expedient to enter into this question indirectly, by returning one last time to the realm of the 'Jewish' sitcom. Premièring in the same Autumn season as the ill-starred *Chicken Soup* was another network comedy built around the persona of a successful New York Jewish stand-up comedian. *The Seinfeld Chronicles*, as it was then known, raised no hackles, and went on to become the most successful and imitated television show of the millennium, earning its creator and star well over a billion dollars as of this writing. *Seinfeld* epitomises a whole series of 'Jewish' sitcoms that succeeded in the 1990s by displacing their representation of Jewish stereotypes, often in virtuosic and postmodern ways. A simple, obvious example was the series *Brooklyn Bridge*, which gained a loyal and vociferous Jewish following by displacing Molly Goldberg-style shtick into the past, where it took on a comforting nostalgic glaze. Yuppie-centred shows like *Mad About You* and *Anything But Love* displaced their Jewishness onto the older generation, placing Jonathan Rumor front and centre while demoting Harry and Alma to the status of amusing recurring characters. *Seinfeld* used the widest variety of displacement strategies, focusing on

[49] Irving Howe, 'American Jews and Israel', *Tikkun*, 4/3 (Fall 1989), 73.
[50] Brook, *The Rise of the 'Jewish' Sitcom*, 106.
[51] *Salome* did in fact become controversial right around the time of Taruskin's post 9/11 attack on *Klinghoffer*: in January 2002 Toronto critic Tamara Bernstein declared Atom Egoyan's recent production of the opera to be anti-Semitic and misogynist (not without reason, given the director's decision to have the five infamous quarrelling Jews execute Salome's death sentence as a gang rape). Interestingly, she quoted Taruskin's essay as an *amicus curiae* brief in support of her argument that Strauss's opera should be, if not, banned, then at least stripped of the political camouflage of canonic 'greatness'. See Tamara Bernstein, 'We have no moral obligations to ''great" art', *National Post*, 25 January 2002.

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young hip New Yorkers; often taking an overtly satirical and irreverent attitude towards American Jewish sacred cows like relatives from the old country and Holocaust survivors; programmatically refusing, in its much-vaunted attempt to be a 'show about nothing', any real engagement with social or cultural issues.

The biggest displacement also displayed the most *chutzpah*: although all four main characters were played by Jewish (or at least Jewish-looking) actors, only the 'normal' one, Jerry, was allowed actually to *be* Jewish. In particular, the show deliberately, with a straight face, claimed that the character of George Costanza, played by Jason Alexander and written by Jewish creator Larry David as a satirical exaggeration of himself, was not 'supposed to be' Jewish. Even when George's parents were portrayed as *über*-Rumors, the Jewish Parents from Hell, their 'Italian' heritage was never allowed to slip. This may have been a postmodern representational pun, given the interchangeability of Jews and Italians on the American stage and screen; but it also allowed the show's larger project, one that Brook calls the 'televisual Judaizing of America', to take effect.[52] George Costanza could embody to a truly fantastic degree all the most annoying essentialist Jewish stereotypes (short, pudgy, whining, *nebbishy*, Mama's boy; cheap, vulgar, materialistic, neurotic, self-absorbed) and yet the show could still be lauded by the Jewish Defence League's Abraham Foxman ('there were no bizarre or eccentric Jews on *Seinfeld*'), because *George wasn't technically Jewish*. He was just . . . a typical New York American. In the words of Goodman's Palestinian terrorist Rambo, appropriated by me here to describe a brilliantly postmodern exercise in 'conceptual' Jewish representation: for the creators of *Seinfeld*, America (or at least the part of it that fell within the five boroughs) truly was one big Jew.

In a seminal and highly influential article on Strauss's *Salome*, historian Sander Gilman makes a similar claim about the reception of that opera within the cultured Jewish bourgeoisie of Vienna and Berlin. I cannot do justice to the full complexity of Gilman's argument here, but one of his hypotheses is that highly assimilated Austro-German Jews happily consumed the grotesque representation of biblical Jews in Strauss's opera, because they were able to displace the anti-Semitic stereotypes onto another, threatening group of racialised interlopers:

> The conflation of ''Oriental" and ''Eastern" was one that acculturated Western Jews of the *fin de siècle* made easily. Liberal Jews were not portrayed on stage; it was rather the ancestors of those loud, aggressive, materialistic, incestuous, mad Jews whom the Viennese and Berlin Jews saw everyday on the streets and in shops; it was the Jews from the East, the embodiment of the anti-Semitic caricatures that haunted the dreams of the assimilated Jews. It was the ''Pharisees," already condemned as the ''bad" Jews of the New Testament, who now walked the streets of Vienna dressed in their long, black caftans, gesticulating and arguing.[53]

When Gilman evokes the image of 'Eastern Jews' in the assimilated Viennese-Jewish mind ('nouveau riche, conservative, materialistic, and disputatious'), he

[52] This discussion is based largely on Brook, *The Rise of the 'Jewish' Sitcom*, 104–7.
[53] Sander Gilman, 'Strauss and the Pervert', *Reading Opera*, ed. Arthur Groos and Roger Parker (Princeton, 1988), 325.

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echoes eerily the critical complaints made about the portrayal of the Rumors in *Klinghoffer*: 'squabbling' (Rothstein); 'tasteless, whining' (Wieseltier); 'representative of the worst kind of consumerism and bargain hunting' (Said); 'self-absorbed, cranky' (Kraft); 'gossiping, materialistic' (Taruskin).

*Salome*'s present-day status as 'great art' is hardly relevant; when it premièred in 1905, it was just an instance of what Rothstein would later call 'left-wing avant-gardism', no more sheltered by canonical proprieties than *The Death of Klinghoffer*. The difference in reception on the part of the two Jewish audiences is due, it seems to me, almost entirely to the fact that, unlike *Salome* in Berlin, *Klinghoffer* in Brooklyn Heights left its audience no possibility of face-saving displacement, no room for internalised anti-Semitism to murmur 'well, at least we're not like *that*'. Every index of the situation in *fin-de-siècle* Germany was reversed in *fin-de-siècle* Brooklyn Heights: the American Jewish audience for *Klinghoffer* was made up not of cultured German Jews, but of descendants of the very Eastern Jews the Viennese despised and feared; complete assimilation was an imminent threat, not a visionary dream; the Jews represented in the opera were specifically *not* placed back in a pre-diasporic Middle East, but were Exiled Jews no different from the exiled Jews in the audience. How striking then that Leon Wieseltier misread the Chorus of Exiled Jews in a failed attempt at just such a re-displacement: 'The ''exiled Jews", by the way, turn out to be Israelis, who are not exiled Jews'.[54] He got it wrong, as the libretto makes clear: the Chorus of Exiled Jews tells of the post-war reunion of Holocaust survivors in some Diaspora city, probably New York, definitely not Jerusalem. (The error has now been graven in celluloid: Penny Woolcock's 2003 film explicitly casts the 'Exiled Jews' as the very Israeli settlers who, fleeing the 'cemetery' of post-war Europe, force the Palestinians of the opening chorus into exile.[55]) *Klinghoffer*, which in its original version placed its American Jews in a New

[54] Wieseltier, 'The Death of Klinghoffer'. Many critics repeat this misreading, taking the allegorical imagery of Goodman's text (an aging lover's body compared to the landscape of Israel) for literal description.

[55] Woolcock is clearly determined to literalise the 'moral equivalences' that so exercised American neo-conservative critics. Her historical Prologue is intricate, non-linear, interlocking, symmetrical and quite brilliantly plotted. (The violent Israeli with a gun who terrorises a defenseless Palestinian family in the first chorus turns out to be one of the traumatised Holocaust survivors during the second; by the end of the Prologue he and his wife are happily ensconced in a stateroom on the doomed Achille Lauro. Bad karma, eh?) By placing the opening focus so firmly on Jews as violent occupiers, Woolcock might seem to be stacking the deck against Israel: a few grainy shots of emaciated corpses hardly compensate for the extended dramatisation of the ethnic cleansing that attended the creation of the Israeli state, complete with weeping mothers and a teenage boy felled by a rifle butt to the groin. When we recognise the terrorist Mamoud as the eventual son of the beautiful young girl whose family is dispossessed in the opening moments of the film, historical causality – the 'claimed (or conjectured) motivations' for terrorism that Taruskin categorically dismissed as an aesthetic luxury above – is given a compelling human face. But the film's representation of Jewish identity creates exactly the kind of opportunity for displacement and fantasy that the opera's libretto consistently frustrates. The image of an angry, tormented Israeli Jew sticking a gun in a helpless old Arab woman's face is unpalatable. But, in the context of the opera's New York reception, it might well be less unpalatable than the image of a schlubby, contented American Jew sitting in front of a TV set.

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Jersey living room and on a luxury cruise, and which based its story on an actual New York Jewish family, had no possible recourse to the aesthetics of displacement and comparative anti-Semitism. Its American Jewish audience could not help but see themselves represented directly, unmistakably on stage. There could be no dodging the consequences.

Corroboration for this hypothesis comes from an unexpected quarter. Richard Taruskin felt justified in discussing the Rumor scene in 2001 because, he claimed, Adams had implicitly brought it up when the composer pointed out after the cancellations in Boston that the European audiences (who of course saw the entire Prologue in its original form) did not seem to have a problem with the work's politics at its 1991 première. As it appeared to Taruskin in those dark days after 9/11, the 1991 version had appealed to European gentiles precisely because it 'catered to so many of their favourite prejudices – anti-American, anti-Semitic, anti-bourgeois'. If, on the other hand, my reading of the situation through Gilman is correct, one might expect that European Jews – and even Israeli Jews – would also have had little trouble with the Prologue in its original form. They had the same attractive opportunity as did the Jews of *fin-de-siècle* Berlin and Vienna for displacement of 'nouveau riche, conservative, materialistic, and disputatious' stereotypes onto the remnants of Eastern Jewry, now living, thanks to the intervening Holocaust, mostly far to the west of them in America.

And so it turns out to be. One of the most interesting reports on the Brussels première of *Klinghoffer* appeared in *The Jerusalem Report*, hardly a hotbed of anti-Semitism. The author, Brett Kline, sought out a representative of the Belgian Jewish community to comment on *The Death of Klinghoffer*, hoping perhaps for a modicum of outrage. Instead, he got a calm disquisition on American consumer culture:

> Belgian-Jewish theater director Richard Kalish, the only figure in the local Jewish community who would comment on the production, sees the opera's strongest condemnation being of the generic middle-class American-Jewish family, depicted between the opening choruses as sitting around a soundless television, making mindless chit-chat as the hijacking of the Achille Lauro is being reported on the TV set. ''It shows the banality of their lives," says Kalish. ''They calmly eat cold spaghetti and talk about tennis as the drama unfolds."[56]

Untroubled by its representation of Jews, Kalish bought entirely into *Klinghoffer*'s dramatic pretensions, as Kline reports: 'Kalish is among those who approve of the opera's depiction of the Israeli–Palestinian struggle as a kind of Greek tragedy. ''Each side is there with its pain", he says, ''and as in classic Greek tragedy, each side expresses itself in the conflict".' Call Richard Kalish a self-hating Jew, if you will – but he is self-hating in precisely the same way as early German-Jewish audiences for *Salome*. An easy presumption of residual European anti-Semitism, as invidious in its

[56] Brett Kline, 'A death at the opera', *The Jerusalem Report*, 18 March 1991. Rather than fill the quote above with [*sic*]s, I will point out that the description given by Mr Kalish of the Rumor living room scene is barely recognisable from other reports of the original production.

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xenophobic way as anything on display in *Klinghoffer*, need not be invoked to explain the opera's European successes, both before and after the World Trade Center bombings. (Successful stage productions of *Klinghoffer* were mounted in Germany in 1997, in Finland in early 2001, in Britain and Italy in January 2002, and in the Czech Republic in early 2003.)

## In praise of small things

> [The terrorists] are creatures of symbolism and deep themes. They soar with the birds above the boat toward God. They sing of lovers, and they experience their guns with their senses. They remind themselves of Esau. In sum, no small things. The terrorists are killers, but they are romantics. Regular flowers of evil with 5 o'clock shadows.[57]

If, as Sander Gilman argues, Richard Strauss 'read his [Jewish operatic] audience extraordinarily well'[58] – and, as their bank accounts attest, Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld read their Jewish sitcom audience with unnerving perfection – Sellars, Goodman and Adams seem to have completely failed to read theirs. What on earth were they thinking?

It is not that difficult, in retrospect, to ascertain what kind of operatic representation American Jewish critics craved for themselves and their coreligionists. In 1993 Hugo Weisgall's grand opera *Esther*, an 'uncompromisingly modernist'[59] setting of the Old Testament story of persecution and triumph, was premièred at the New York City Opera after a long and troubled gestation. (The work had been commissioned over a decade earlier by the San Francisco Opera, and was scheduled to première in the same season as *The Death of Klinghoffer*. But Weisgall's score was rejected in San Francisco, largely, one suspects, due to the difficulty of its atonal musical language.) Many of the same Jewish critics who savaged *Klinghoffer* responded enthusiastically to *Esther* – often in articles that directly compared this 'Jewish masterpiece' invidiously to the work of Adams, Sellars and Goodman.

Weisgall himself epitomised the discursive power of a heroic, uncompromised Jewish identity. Born in Moravia before the First World War, he came from a long line of Jewish cantors, emigrated to the United States in 1920, and remained an observant, publicly Jewish musician and composer for almost seventy years. In addition to his career as a modernist opera composer (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, 1956), he was considered one of America's foremost authorities on Jewish liturgical music; he chaired the Cantor's Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary for almost fifty years (1952–96), and periodically directed the choir in his own liturgical compositions at the Har Sinai Temple (where his father had been Cantor) near his old family home in Baltimore.

Weisgall's reputation as the most important American *Jewish* musical modernist was crucial to the reception of his opera; witness, for instance, Samuel Lipman's introduction of the composer and his project: 'Weisgall's new work, however, a

[57] Wieseltier, 'The Death of Klinghoffer'.
[58] Gilman, 'Strauss and the Pervert', 326.
[59] Edward Rothstein, 'Impatience is not the same as urgency', *The New York Times*, 24 October 1993.

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setting of the biblical Book of Esther, is in a narrow sense about the experience of the Jews under their enemy Haman; in a wider sense it is about the eternal Jewish paradox of divine chosenness and material suffering. Only a Jew – and only a conscious, believing Jew like Weisgall – could have written *Esther*. Its theme is nothing less than the fate of the Jewish people . . . it is about the mystery of Jewish survival, which it places before our ears, our minds, and our hearts'.[60] It is clear from the above that Lipman embraced Weisgall's 'new masterpiece', which he considered a solitary effort towering above postmodern detritus from composers like Philip Glass and John Adams, because *Esther* ratifies the world-historical significance of the Jewish people and presents their perennial struggle against oppression in an explicitly heroic light. The contemporary allegorical significance of the assimilated Esther's dramatic reclamation of her Jewish identity, and her subsequent triumph over her enemies at the Persian court, could hardly be missed.

Edward Rothstein's response was more measured, but still positive. He found that both Weisgall and Steve Reich, in his video opera *The Cave*, had faltered somewhat as they attempted to make relevant to contemporary audiences Old Testament texts in which the world-historical role of the Jewish people was paramount. Steve Reich, by this time an observant Jew, could not be accused of anti-Semitism, but Rothstein is predictably sensitive to the moments where *The Cave*, by focusing on one of the less attractive moments in the story of the Hebrew Patriarchs – the casting of Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness – seemed to 'tip the emotional balance of "The Cave" toward the Arab side'.[61] (*Klinghoffer* also features a prominent symbolic role for Hagar and Ishmael; see the text of the so-called 'Hagar Chorus' that opens Act II.) Weisgall, on the other hand, had used an unsentimental atonal expressionism to give the text of his opera (a modern retelling of the Book of Esther by Charles Kondek) 'the urgency of Scripture', while his arching vocal lines 'gave that urgency a human character, making the singing seem personal and involving'; thus 'the ancient and contemporary seem united'.[62]

Rothstein also registered the opera's deliberate attempt to use Old Testament history to shore up contemporary Jewish identity, a feature of Kondek's libretto which did bother him a little: 'The weakest aspect of "Esther" may be its moments of self-consciously contemporary interpretation. When Mordecai lectures Esther on the need to accept her identity and the impossibility of assimilation, or when the opera imposes a humanist and tragic message on an almost Baroque tale of disaster and revenge, something is awry; something understated in the original is being exaggerated for impact'. But he is quick to forgive this 'minor flaw', finding the opera 'an interpretation of the Book of Esther true to its origins yet vital for contemporary listeners'. His earlier review of the opera's première concludes with an unequivocal endorsement: 'The composer's triumph could not have been more

[60] Samuel Lipman, 'A New Masterpiece [review of Hugo Weisgall's *Esther*]', *Commentary*, 97/1 (January 1994), 53.
[61] Edward Rothstein, 'Complex delving into myth [review of Steve Reich's *The Cave*]', *The New York Times*, 15 October 1993.
[62] Rothstein, 'Impatience is not the same as urgency'.

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complete. One hopes [*Esther*] will return in following years'.[63] Gentile reviewers were less impressed: Philip Kennicott found the libretto 'a thinly veiled and relatively unsubtle allegory of the Holocaust. Its theme of Jewish self-determination and empowerment is hammered home with blunt and blatantly banal lines, such as ''Never forget! Let us never forget!" '[64]

*

Sellars, Goodman and Adams can perhaps be forgiven if they chose not to cast the Judaism on display in *The Death of Klinghoffer* in such stirringly (and anachronistically) heroic terms. Further, if this essay has any elocutionary force, the idea that *Klinghoffer* was an anti-Semitic apologia for terrorists can be seen now for what it has always been: a critical defence mechanism mobilised by deeply conflicted Jewish critics, many of them culturally conservative, at a moment of maximum threat to their American identity as Jews. But the question does remain: what were Adams and Goodman trying to do in *Klinghoffer*? Why do they so adamantly refuse the heroic? Why did they insist that Leon and Marilyn Klinghoffer be portrayed in the opera as they undoubtedly were in life: a nice, but relatively ordinary, un-poetic, well-off Jewish couple celebrating their 36th wedding anniversary with a luxury cruise? Doesn't opera *demand* epic characters and heroic emotional displays? Doesn't this privilege the Palestinians in *Klinghoffer*, whose romantic self-mythologising cannot help but read as truly 'operatic' on stage?

I do not believe so, and to explain why, I need to return, one more time, to what might seem the most incriminatingly 'anti-operatic' scene in the score, the lost living-room drama of the Rumor family. Adams's choice to cut this scene from the recording and published score after the debacle in Brooklyn was doubly unfortunate: not only did it imply a guilty conscience (as Taruskin realised in 2001); it has had the effect of sequestering valuable evidence of the creators' complex intent. In fact, the opera is significantly impoverished without this pivotal scene. (Perhaps at some future time, when *Klinghoffer* and the *Achille Lauro* hijacking are as distant to audiences as *La Muette de Portici* and the Belgian struggle for independence, the opera can be performed whole again.)[65] I want to finish this investigation by taking up the implicit challenge of *Klinghoffer*'s New York reception: can we re-read the opera through the lens of that eliminated scene, without assenting to the anti-Semitic intent that it was supposed to encode?

[63] Edward Rothstein, 'Hugo Weisgall's ''Esther" [opera review]', *The New York Times*, 11 October 1993. Critical log-rolling appears to have had little effect. *Esther* has not been mounted again since its première, nor is a complete recording available.

[64] Philip Kennicott, 'Opera redux: The old face of new American opera', *The World and I*, 1 January 1994.

[65] It will certainly have to wait until the composer is safely out of the way: 'One controversial scene from ''The Death of Klinghoffer", the Klinghoffer family gathered around the television console, was never recorded, and Adams has dropped it from the score. ''I lopped it off, not only because it was unnecessarily controversial and misleading, but it also made the first act ridiculously long. My only fear is that one day somebody like Roger Norrington will unearth it and perform it!" ' Richard Dyer, 'Composer John Adams listens to his own past [interview]', *Boston Globe*, 28 November 1999.

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An epistemological caveat: I am aware of the risks involved in imagining that a complex text like *Klinghoffer* transmits in some unproblematic way any coherent single 'intention' of its multiple authors. But, it seems to me, one cannot both levy the charge of conscious 'anti-Semitism' – a crime of malicious intent – and demand that those who argue on the opposing side avoid the intentional fallacy. Detach this text from deliberate authorial intent (whether to defame or defend), and where is the transgression?[66]

What is striking about the second scene of *Klinghoffer*'s Prologue (see Appendix 1) is how complex and balanced ('even-handed' would, in fact, be a good descriptor) its portrait of a Jewish family actually is. After every shtick-ey stereotyped exchange there is a reversal that leads to a moment of insight. The elder Rumors are actually quite wry in a way familiar to anyone within Diasporic Jewish culture: they make fun of themselves before others even have a chance. Harry and Alma do a regular George and Gracie routine for their son about their tacky souvenir *tchatchkes*, in which Dad works himself up into mock despair and Mom good-humouredly counters with embarrassing details of his foreign bowel movements:

*Harry* And my wife has vanished in the sweaty crowd
Waving her pocketbook. God in heaven!
What must she endure
Buying her piece of the Old World.
*Alma* We all know where you are while this is going on.
You spent the day parked
In the one clean restroom in all of Athens.

To call this 'materialist squabbling' is to miss the joke; both Harry and Alma are experts, as were most Jews of their generation and background, at playing the *schlemiel*, the archetypically Yiddish lovable self-deprecator. In Goodman's expert libretto, this gambit has its intended effect; Jonathan generously reminds his parents that 'You loved that cruise', and loses himself in a sympathetic (and beautifully lyrical) evocation of the ordinary pleasures of an ordinary pleasure cruise:

*Jonathan* There were those cold buffets at midnight.
When the cooks surprised themselves;
You walked the decks
Carrying gold rimmed china plates,
Half-shadowed by the swinging lights
Until the waiters went below and the band scraped their chairs and blew a couple of wrong notes –
Then what?

Adams's setting, a luxuriously swinging barcarolle marked '*semplice*', has not a trace of irony in it. It is no more alienating than the half-heard dance-band music that drifts

[66] A more thorough consideration of the complexities of authorial intention in *The Death of Klinghoffer* (along with a survey of what its three creators actually said about their artistic goals in the press) can be found in a postscript to this essay which will be published as part of a volume of proceedings from the conference at which it was originally presented. See Robert Fink, 'A *Klinghoffer* Colloquy', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, forthcoming.

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through the meditative final act of *Nixon in China*. Over it, Jonathan's cantilena sounds sincere enough to me. Who is he to begrudge his folks a little romance?

According to John Adams, Alice Goodman based the Rumors on her own Jewish family.[67] A nice conceit, and if true, a good explanation for the powerful moral implication of the words the librettist put into the mouth of her own *Yiddishe momme*: Alma Rumor represents, as her first name might suggest, the ethical soul of the drama. After reviewing the torrents of outrage over *Klinghoffer*'s portrayal of the Rumor family, it is shocking to look at the scene itself – and realise that Goodman's libretto clairvoyantly anticipates that even a Jewish audience will find the Rumors and Klinghoffers a little ridiculous, and out-and-out dares them not to honour what they see. Jonathan can make his smart-aleck crack about the Klinghoffers' *ersatz* Judaism ('Friday, Manhattans by the pool / Saturday, Eretz Yisroel!'), but his mother is right there to bring him up short:

*Alma* Yes –
Go ahead and laugh.
Are you familiar with these people? No.
Maybe to you they seem grotesque,
Your mother's stupid friends.
But ask yourself,
"When I am seventy, will I be glamorous?
Will I be awe-inspiring?" Huh!
If you're a decent man like Klinghoffer
I'll have no reason to complain.

*Are you familiar with these people? No.* Embedded in the text is a direct challenge to critics who, as Goodman would later put it 'come prepared to see and hear only what they want to see and hear' – and Adams is, again, right behind his librettist: Alma phrases her admiration for Leon Klinghoffer, that 'decent man', in a sweet and simple melodic line that sighs gently over the pulsating chords underneath (Ex. 7).

Can one imagine a more bald collective statement of authorial intent? We are *not* meant to identify with the terrorists, no matter how 'glamorous' or 'awe-inspiring' they and their operatic-sounding music indicate they must seem to themselves as they fumble through their botched and deadly mission. Nor should we, as many Europeans did, identify with the voluble rationalisations of the ship's even-handed Captain, whose Solomonic decision to conceal the death of Leon Klinghoffer saved his ship, but let the killers escape. It is the homely Klinghoffers, no more heroic than

[67] Alice Goodman's relation to her own Jewish identity is a complex issue, difficult to research and not totally germane to my argument here. In brief: Goodman was raised in an assimilated Jewish household where, except during visits from older relatives, little Jewish ritual was observed. During the composition of the *Klinghoffer* libretto, she converted to Anglicanism, largely, one suspects, because she had fallen in love with the deeply religious British poet Geoffrey Hill, whom she married in 1987. She thus represents one datum of the 'Silent Holocaust'. One might argue that she thereby cut the Gordian knot of her Jewish identity by jettisoning it – but there is no doubt that what it meant to be a Jew was on her mind during the writing of *Klinghoffer*. Goodman is now an Anglican curate in the north of England, and has numerous Palestinian Christians in her flock. Make of that what you will.

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Ex. 7: *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Prologue, scene 2 (February 1991 version).

any of your mother's stupid friends or mine, who are the moral compass by which the *Achille Lauro* sails. This opera does not romanticise terror. It tries for something much more difficult, so difficult that its failure has been splattered for decades over the pages of the American press. *The Death of Klinghoffer* attempts to counterpoise to terror's deadly glamour the life-affirming virtues of the ordinary, of the decent man, of *small things*:

*Klinghoffer* I came here with
My wife. We both
Have tried to live
Good lives. We give
Gladly, receive
Gratefully, love
And take pleasure

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In small things, suffer,
And comfort each other.
We're human. We are
The kind of people
You like to kill.

The message of *Klinghoffer* is not the message that we have been hearing over and over since 12 September 2001 – that to fight heroic terror, you must become heroic and terrible yourself. That is the message of *Esther*, which ends, as does the Old Testament Book of Esther, with the once-threatened Jews of the Persian empire arming themselves and heroically slaughtering 75,000 of their enemies. Just who is romanticising terror here? (Weisgall's Esther expresses regret; but then so did Abu Abbas, long after the PLO finally settled the civil lawsuit brought against them by the Klinghoffer family for an undisclosed sum of money.[68]) Does anyone seriously think that when the young fanatic Omar cries out 'May we be worth / The pains of death / And not grow old / In the world / Like these Jews', we are supposed to admire him? To want to *be* like him? Yes, he's into the big things – God, Faith, Country, Sacrifice – and that's why his 'soul is all violence'. But the soul of the opera, Alma, is not. She looks out for the Klinghoffers; she asks, *Are you familiar with these people? No*.

If you were, maybe you wouldn't want to kill them quite so much.
Or find their sardonic yet loving portrait to be anti-Semitic.
I say thank God for small things.
It's the big ones that get people killed.

## Appendix 1

Alice Goodman, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Prologue, scene 2 (February 1991 version)

Alma: Jonathan, you should be ashamed.[a]
Jonathan: Hi, Mom.
Alma: We naturally assumed you came for lunch.
You call that lunch?
Jonathan: Mother!
Harry: Look at him! What a mensch.
Alma: Reagan? That asshole?
Jonathan: Guess who I bumped into at the gallery,
Dana. She says they'll bring the wine.
Alma: Can she drink wine?
Harry: There's Evian in the refrigerator.
Jonathan: Steve is crawling backwards.
Alma: God, I love that child!

[68] Cynthia Mann, 'Klinghoffer family finds closure after settling legal battle with PLO', *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 13 August 1997.

[a] Goodman's text is taken directly from the 1991 vocal score; line break and ordering provisionally reconstructed by the author.

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Jonathan: Check out the paper bag next to the stove.
I got some eggplant. You know, little tiny ones.
*Melanzanine.*
Alma: *Melanzanine.*
Remember those Italians,
Carlo and Silvia, on the cruise?
Harry: Would you please not mention that man's name?
Alma: I liked him.
Jonathan: Ho ho ho.
Harry: Someone pass me the *Times.*
Alma: The Klinghoffers will never manage all those stairs.
Those little ladders! Marilyn is so brave.
She's a saint!
Jonathan: Hang on. *He* had the stroke.
Harry: The dollar's up.
Jonathan: Good news for the Klinghoffers.
Harry: Hope all the logistics get worked out.
Jonathan: Oh, Marilyn will see to that.
Friday, Manhattans by the pool,
Saturday, Eretz Yisroel.
Alma: Yes –
Go ahead and laugh.
Are you familiar with these people? No.
Maybe to you they seem grotesque,
Your mother's stupid friends.
But ask yourself,
"When I am seventy, will I be glamorous?
Will I be awe-inspiring?" Huh!
If you're a decent man like Klinghoffer
I'll have no reason to complain.
Now, who wants coffee?
Harry: My caffeine fix for the afternoon
Hooray!
Jonathan: How old –
No thanks Dad –
How old will you be?
Ninety? A hundred?
Alma: I won't die
Jonathan: I said no thanks.
Alma: Until I'm good and ready.
Jonathan: Was this coffee brewed in that machine from Istanbul?
Alma: No – one from Harrod's Winter Sale.
We only used that Turkish thing once
And it made it much too strong.
Harry: Sort of metallic. It's somewhere.
Still in its box.
Alma: I'm not so sure;
I may have given it away –

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Jonathan: You gave that thing to charity?
Alma: Last winter there were all those showers.
Harry: This house is full of souvenirs;
Coffee pots, tea sets, little cups
For drinking sake.
Tourist traps and sweatshops on five continents
Turn the stuff out.
Your mother haunts the markets when we go ashore,
Looking for some hideous relic to bring home.
Out rush the natives at first sight
Of her enormous summer hat
Rubbing their hands.
They have made their fortunes!
And my wife has vanished in the sweaty crowd
Waving her pocketbook. God in heaven!
What must she endure
Buying her piece of the Old World.
Alma: We all know where you are while this is going on.
You spent the day parked
In the one clean restroom in all of Athens.
There were half a dozen angry guys outside.
He'd fought his way in
And I watched him fight to get back to the fresh air.
Jonathan: You loved that cruise.
There were those cold buffets at midnight.
When the cooks surprised themselves;
You walked the decks
Carrying gold rimmed china plates,
Half-shadowed by the swinging lights
Until the waiters went below and the band scraped their chairs
And blew a couple of wrong notes –
Then what?
Women felt chilly,
Wished they'd brought a sweater
And imagined it
Lying across the stateroom bed.
So, the last of your friends retired
And so you followed your friends down
When the Mediterranean
Had swallowed Dad's cigar.
Alma: You ought to be more serious about your social life.
Harry: Did you pick up my suit?
Jonathan: The man had shut the shop.
A family emergency.
Harry: The cat ate the canary.
Alma: Listen, Jonathan,
Harry: The chicken, Alma.

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Alma: I want you to feel free
To introduce your friends to us.
Jonathan: Let me guess. Myrt Epstein has a daughter.
Alma: Two.
Two lovely, lovely girls.
Harry: I'll go and take it out, okay?
Jonathan: Look, Mom. You know I've got a bar exam.
Harry: I'll put those peapods on to boil.
Alma: I'll do it. Don't get up.
[*Alma looks over Harry's shoulder at the newspaper.*]
They're vile!
Jonathan: Who's vile?
Alma: Just about everyone.
Harry: This time I think she's got a bone to pick with Arafat.
Jonathan: You should fold the paper so she can't read the headlines.
Alma: What's the matter with you, anyway?
I'm sick to death of reading about misery.
It's never-ending.
God knows why I still get angry, but I do.
You wash your hands and go on through.

## Appendix 2

The critical reception of *The Death of Klinghoffer*: Select primary sources


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