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The Art of Censorship

“I think if you could talk like this, sitting among your enemies, peace would come,” –

Captain to Mamoud, *The Death of Klinghoffer*¹

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¹ *The Death of Klinghoffer*. United States of America: Universal Music and Video Distribution, Corp., 2003. Film.

As a child, I was taught not to judge a person based on one's ideas or opinions, but rather through their actions towards others. I learned that, though some people may not agree with me on every issue, it was how I handled this disagreement that mattered. Most importantly, I was told I should never ignore an opinion I disliked simply because I did not approve; instead, I was challenged to learn from this differing ideals, to make myself and my own opinions stronger. Though this value has been challenged many times, I have grown to extend this idea to other forms of interaction, whether it be arts, religion, or politics.

When I heard of *The Death of Klinghoffer* and the controversy surrounding it, I was astonished by such actions within the arts community. Music and art are often seen as media in which any expression or opinion can be given. Yet, for *Klinghoffer*, this was not the case. And as I researched further, both by reading criticisms and listening to recordings, I could not see the dangers with the performance. In fact, I found *Klinghoffer* to be stimulating and thought provoking, offering up a different side of discussion not always heard in today's political climate. The attempts to silence productions deeply disturbs me. Not only does it go against my personal belief, but also against the freedom to express opinions that this country, was specifically founded upon.

This paper will discuss the need for the freedom of music to express ideas that may be provocative, using *Klinghoffer* and the controversy surrounding it as case study for the argument. Comparing these current situations to censorship in Nazi Germany, a discussion will be had about the dangerous themes in expression and the need for freedom in musical thought. This paper does not seek to dispute whether or not the messages within *The Death of Klinghoffer* are just or politically correct. Instead, a discussion will be had about the consequences of restricting any viewpoint within music, regardless of political context.

Before a case study can be given, an argument made, or history examined, it will be decided whether or not music and art can be considered forms of expression or speech that are protected by laws such as the First Amendment. Throughout history, music has been viewed as a source of power and influence over those moved by its sound. Greek and Roman myth tell of the demi-god Orpheus, who could control the rocks and trees so powerful was the melody of his lyre. Aristotle, in his philosophical musings, debated whether music is solely a form of comfort and joy, or a greater source of power and influence. Regardless of his continued notions on music in culture and education, Aristotle acknowledges its power to change one's soul.²

Though this notion may seem ancient, music continued to be a source of influence and political prowess throughout the medieval era and the Renaissance. Look no further than troubadours and bards, traveling musicians who turned epic story into song, spreading word of great military victories or defeats. Surely this held the audience captive and changed many an opinion on political conflicts. Many such musicians used their ability to attend court to act as spies or diplomats, often performing songs written to employ specific political messages. As music flourished during the Renaissance, so too did its perceived ability to impact those who listened. Music performances became a larger part of entertainment within society with the introduction of opera and other forms of large scale productions.

But what of music in the modern era, does it still hold such influence over the general populace? The answer is undoubtedly yes. Songs written during the Civil Rights Movement empowered its message, becoming symbols of something larger than general enjoyment. Rock and Roll became a scapegoat for the rebellious nature of youth during the 50's and 60's, while Jazz became a symbol for the governments need to regulate drugs. And while music has no

² "Aristotle on Music." Aristotle on Music. Accessed February 13, 2015.

doubt caused many lawmakers to pursue its regulation, societal norms and legal restrictions have kept it from being strictly regulated. But does this mean that promulgation, such as the First Amendment, actually protects music that are perceived as harmful to or disrespectful towards cultures, individuals, races?³

As noted by First Amendment scholars, music is exempt from governmental regulation under the Constitution.⁴ That is to say that Congress cannot pass a law banning classical radio stations, or establishing standards to which hip-hop must be composed. But this does mean that private institutions, such as the Metropolitan Opera or the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, may decide not to produce an opera or performance that may be potentially controversial for those who hold stock or ownership within the entity? Music is protected under the First Amendment as a form of expression, but only from governmental oversight. It is clear that music and arts are seen as powerful tools of discussion and dissemination, which was also shared by the Nazi leaders before and during WWII.⁵

Hitler and his compatriots viewed the arts as a dangerous tool that could undermine their regime. To combat these perceived threats, they weaponized arts within German culture. The use of propaganda against art and music in the forms of degenerative art, *Entartete Musik* and *Entartete Kunst*, portrayed all arts forms not favored by the Nazi's in highly negative light. Specifically, Jewish composers who may have once been known and revered disappeared from history books and concert halls, their names forever erased from music history. Yet, anti-

³ Courtwright, David T. *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001.

⁴ "First Amendment Center." First Amendment Center. Accessed February 10, 2015.

⁵ "First Amendment Center." First Amendment Center. Accessed February 10, 2015.

Semitism in arts began before the Nazi rise to power, and had pervaded German culture for almost a century.⁶

Discrimination in German music and art did not begin in the 20th century as history is so inclined to highlight. Instead, anti-Semitism and discrimination of minority works began in the early 19th century through the writings of Wagner and some of his contemporaries. In his writings, Wagner states a hatred for Jewish music, and makes many *ad hominem* attacks on Jewish composers. Despite the notion that, at the time, Jewish music was a large part of German music culture, Wagner denied its validity within his much beloved German culture. Though his writings have been criticized for containing overt racism, Wagner's ideas inspired a young Adolf Hitler and helped transform his own ideals.⁷

On the night of May 10th, 1933, Nazis and their sympathizers took to the streets to burn books they deemed unfit for German readers. Authors of these works included Einstein, Freud, Hellen Keller, and Hemingway. The violation of free speech was not focused solely on Jewish works, but on those that seemed to degrade what the Nazis viewed as German Nationalism. Earlier that same year, Joseph Goebbels had been named head of the Propaganda Ministry, an appointment which would lead to some of the worst censorship atrocities to ever occur in modern times.⁸

Yet, the night of May 10th would pale in comparison to what was soon to come. In November of 1933, music was centralized by the *Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und*

⁶ *Entartete Musik*. Gala Productions. Film.

⁷ Haas, Michael. *Forbidden Music: The Jewish Composers Banned by the Nazis*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

⁸ Gilbert, Shirli. *Music in the Holocaust Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005.

Propaganda, the State Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. While this excited many musicians at the chance to have a structure in place, the real reason for such a plan was yet to be revealed. Since musicians were mandated to register with the government, those who registered as minorities, or any part Jewish, were eventually censored, arrested and exiled. This end result insured complete control over arts and music by the Nazi party. Any and all who attempted to speak out through their works were quickly and efficiently silenced.⁹

As Nazi reign strengthened, Goebbels released the ultimate form of censorship propaganda – *Entartete Kunst* and *Entartete Musik*, “degenerate art and music”. The word *entartete* was used to describe works of art that were harmful to society, specifically those composed by Jewish or minority members of society, as well as works that were experimental and Expressionist. Cubism, twelve-tone, and Jazz were all labeled under this degenerative title, as well as many other forms and styles of art. To make their point known, the Nazis constructed museums which housed such arts, showing the public what would not be acceptable or tolerated. Composers such as Korngold and Schoenberg had works displayed in these performance halls, as well as many Jewish composers whose names and works are now lost.¹⁰

But why were experimental and Expressionist forms of art targeted so fiercely? The Nazis feared that by allowing composers and artists such as Schoenberg and Picasso to change the landscape of accepted art, the foundation of German culture would change. Hitler idolized Wagner and his works, which were composed during the high Romantic era and contained what he believed to be the epitome of German culture. Works such as *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, displayed Aryan views found in mythologies, and these ideas proved to be Hitler’s own beliefs. Expressionism and experimental genres changed this ideal, instead making music and art less

⁹ Gilbert, Shirli. *Music in the Holocaust Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps*.

¹⁰ *Entartete Musik*. Gala Productions. Film.

concrete, less stabilized to the Romantic ear or eye, and progressive in its meaning. No longer were the high societal ideals of Wagner championed, instead, they were challenged, torn apart, and mocked. To Hitler and his campaign, this was dangerous – any music or art representing such ideals had to disappear.¹¹

This was not all the Nazis did to censor minority groups. To show the outside world that Jewish culture was not being destroyed under the Third Reich, the Theresienstadt ghetto was designed to showcase the advancement of Jewish culture. Though German and Jewish culture and art were thoroughly intertwined, the Nazis persisted in separating them, to epitomize what Hitler believed as German ideals. Films and pictures were distributed of inmates thriving and creating art, yet the world was not fooled by such propaganda. Theresienstadt was the ultimate form of Nazi censorship, pretending that Jewish culture existed, while officials undoubtedly determined what the outside world would see.¹²

Music policy only got worse throughout the war; artists going missing and assumed dead for their work against the Nazis. All works that Goebbels and Hitler viewed as harmful were censored and written off as degenerate. It was not substantial enough for the German culture they championed. Those composers who did not fit Hitler's ideal had their works labeled as degenerate; manuscripts were burned, performances cancelled, while the composers or artists themselves often fled or were killed. A dark age for music and arts, the *entartete* label was perhaps the most brilliant form of censorship ever created and implemented. Thousands of works were lost, and an entire generation of musicians will forever be lost to history.

¹¹ Haas, Michael. *Forbidden Music: The Jewish Composers Banned by the Nazis*.

¹² *Entartete Musik*. Gala Productions. Film.

For two decades, the Nazis waged a war on arts and music, censoring and destroying those who threatened their power and mission. Today, the Western world has taken many steps to prevent such events to occur again. Yet, while the ability of governments to censor works of art has been lessened, the idea of self-censorship has taken its place. Instead of ever powerful entities telling organizations to cancel performances or galleries of arts, the organizations themselves have taken up this torch. Whether from fear of losing donors, causing controversy, or pleasing a larger public, groups such as the Metropolitan Opera and Boston Symphony now censor themselves. It is here that the controversy surrounding *The Death of Klinghoffer* arises.

Originally premiered in 1991 in Brussels, *The Death of Klinghoffer* was composed by John Adams, with Alice Goodman as the librettist. The opera details the events that occurred in 1985 when the cruise ship *Achille Lauro* was high-jacked by members of the Palestinian Liberation Front. Most importantly, it centers on the death of a paraplegic Holocaust survivor, Leon Klinghoffer, who was thrown overboard and killed by the Palestinian radicals. Premiering in Europe, the opera met no controversy and was widely accepted. This changed, however, when it appeared in New York later that same year.¹³

Groups such as the Jewish Defamation League criticized the opera for being anti-Semitic, its message focusing too much on the struggles of the terrorists rather than the views of Klinghoffer and his family. Arguments stated that the opera sympathized too closely with those who were doing harm to the Jewish culture. All involved with the opera denied such claims, stating it was written, directed, and composed to give an equal voice to each party – an open, fair

¹³ Kraft, Leo. "The Death of Klinghoffer." *Perspectives of New Music* 30, no. 1 (1992): 300-02. Accessed February 10, 2015

political commentary. Defenders of the opera stated that the libretto and music offer up a challenging viewpoint, one that is undoubtedly acceptable in Western society.¹⁴

Despite such claims by those involved with the opera, it has continued to receive negative criticism and, at times, harsh censorship. In 2001, The Boston Symphony Orchestra cancelled performances due to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Julliard School performances a few years later aroused criticism and debate. Currently, the opera is undergoing struggles in New York over its viewing, a streamed version cancelled due to pressure from special interest groups and the mayor's office.¹⁵

Censorship is a dangerous tool and it does not always have to be imposed by a power on high. In some cases, as with this opera, it can be self-imposed. The decisions to cancel showings in 2001 as well as 2014 were not exacted by the government or some powerful entity. They were decided upon by the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Metropolitan Opera. Such decisions were made for a variety of reasons: respect for members who lost family in 9/11, the need to remain neutral in political dealings, membership retention, and financial or social factors. The list is well justified. But is this the right course of action for such entities to take?¹⁶

In a *New York Times* article published on December 9th, 2001, Richard Taruskin, a well-respected music historian, argues in favor of Boston's decision. Taruskin believes that the opera idealizes criminals, in this case Palestinian radicals. He states that, "If terrorism -- specifically, the commission or advocacy of deliberate acts of deadly violence directed randomly at the

¹⁴ Kraft, Leo. "The Death of Klinghoffer."

¹⁵ Kraft, Leo. "The Death of Klinghoffer."

¹⁶ Ritter, Jonathan, and J. Martin Daughtery. *Music in the Post-911 World*. Routledge, New York: Taylor and Francis Group, LLC, 2007.

innocent -- is to be defeated, world public opinion has to be turned decisively against it.”¹⁷

Taruskin goes on to describe how *Klinghoffer* embodies an anti-Semitic stance and states his support for the Boston Symphony, as well as all other groups past and future, that choose to censor all such works. Yet, Taruskin misses a vital point in the discussion of both terrorism and censorship – political opinions are determined in the eyes of the beholder. Someone whose ideals align with Israeli culture may take a similar stance to Taruskin, but that does not mean sympathizing with the terrorists in *Klinghoffer* is wrong or discriminatory to any other group? Do those people and viewpoints represented, those committing crimes included, not deserve a voice as well? Should not those that hold such views in contempt be challenged by the opposing opinion, attempting to shatter such close-mindedness? The US Justice System is founded upon the belief that even a presumably guilty party gets the freedom to speak before condemnation. In this sense, Adams and Goodman’s supposed sympathy to the “terrorists” should be viewed as such a testimony. Music is a form of expression that should be open to accepting all ideas, not just those that refrain from insult or are easily accepted.¹⁸

In an article published not long before Taruskin, David Wiegand believes just that about music. Written for the *San Francisco Gate* on November 7th, 2001, Wiegand states that music should be unapologetic for its stances, for music and art are what challenge viewpoints, what makes society think. He states, “Art does not exist in a vacuum but both informs and is informed by the world around it. That is why art endures, why its meaning evolves over time.”¹⁹ This could not contrast more with Taruskin or be more applicable to the situation at hand. Wiegand goes to say that the Boston Symphony should not stop performances because the opera treats

¹⁷ Taruskin, Richard. "Music's Dangers and the Case for Control." *The New York Times*, December 9, 2001. Accessed February 15, 2015.

¹⁸ Taruskin, Richard. "Music's Dangers and the Case for Control."

¹⁹ Wiegand, David. "Boston Symphony Missed the Point on Art and Grieving." *San Francisco Gate*, November 7, 2001. Accessed March 16, 2015.

terrorist as three dimensional human beings, not just bad men. Music does not stop because of tragedy or loss. It cannot ignore such problems, for this is what gives it subject and the power to toy with one's emotions. In this situation, as Weigand states, *Klinghoffer* reminds us that those who have hurt our nation are human, they are like us. By censoring such a viewpoint, we end the discourse and discussion that our democracy affords us. We become no better than those we are condemning.²⁰

The Nazis engineered one of the greatest censorship campaigns ever seen in our modern world. Much of Jewish culture, specifically music, was lost, never to be heard in concert halls or played by high school orchestras. One of the greatest injustices of music history occurred due to the need for a majority group to control the speech of minority groups they feared and detested. The Nazi's sought to champion their own cause by silencing those who opposed them. This cannot be disputed.

And what differences are there between these actions and those taken today? Are not the arguments made by Israel interest groups suppressing speech that they are afraid of, that could be harmful to their cause? To make one thing clear, which Mr. Taruskin undoubtedly ignores, *Klinghoffer* in no way supports terrorism. Written as a reaction to terrorist events, *Klinghoffer* serves as an open discussion to understand and familiarize oneself with struggles of both Palestinians and Israelis, which are thematically different, yet fundamentally the same.

To help repudiate any argument, as those made by Taruskin, that too much sympathy is given towards the terrorist, one must look no further than a line delivered Leon Klinghoffer in Act II, Scene I. Addressing the lead terrorist Mamoud, Klinghoffer states, "We're human. We

²⁰ Wiegand, David. "Boston Symphony Missed the Point on Art and Grieving.

are the type of people you like to kill... There is so much anger in you. And hate.”²¹ He goes on to discuss how the actions of these men are disgusting, evil, and blatantly against good morals. This is not sympathetic to the terrorists, and challenges any other empathetic statement that might be made throughout the opera. Klinghoffer’s words challenge the sympathies one might have towards the terrorists, again leading to a much needed dialogue.

In the opening prologue, a Chorus of Exiled Palestinians is paired against a Chorus of Exiled Jews. Both prologues discuss the challenges of each culture struggles with. From the Palestinians being pushed out of their lands, to the Israelis not having a land to call home, the prologue shows an equal mindset towards both cultures. This shared, mutually educative discussion is not, and should not, be considered anti-Semitic. To do so would be to ignore a part of the message the opera is trying to deliver, that both cultures have had their struggles that have now led to current atmosphere. It is not racist to state a different side of the argument, and to censor or pressure the cancellation of such works is not better treatment than that of the Nazis towards Jewish works during the Holocaust. We as a society cannot make something disappear because we are afraid of it. To do so would be dangerous to the advancement of our culture and equality for all.²²

In our modernized Western world, society needs to learn to accept those ideas that are different from their own, despite potential danger or harm. This is not to say that hate speech should be tolerated. Words or actions that marginalize or hinder certain groups are not protected under the First Amendment in America, and are not tolerated in many other countries. But, this is not the case with *Klinghoffer* or other similar works. Adams and Goodman take no sides – they express sentiments for Palestinians as well as Israelis, but without undermining or discriminating

²¹ *The Death of Klinghoffer*. United States of America: Universal Music and Video Distribution, Corp., 2003. Film.

²² *The Death of Klinghoffer*. United States of America: Universal Music and Video Distribution, Corp., 2003. Film.

against either side. And by petitioning, criticizing, and boycotting performances of such works, we as a society not only close a much needed discussion that could lead to bettering the state of each society, but instead revitalize a dangerous form of censorship in which anything that offends, challenges, or upsets is quickly and unrelentingly silenced.

As my own belief goes, silencing any form of speech, especially music or art, is not a direction in which society need go. During the writing of this paper, a *New York Times* article was published, detailing a very similar free speech issue. In it, the author describes a new trend of creating “safe spaces”, or areas offered to those who may become overwhelmed with fear or negativity during events campuses or other entities host, such as a panel on racism. The author states that these spaces, and other forms of benign censorship, undermine the open mindedness a college education is supposed to instill. Students who experience college without controversy or who never have their ideas challenged will not be able to deal with society. Not all situations that cause emotional pain can be escaped or ignored, and college should be a place to learn how to learn from such experiences.²³

The same can be said for *Klinghoffer* and those that challenge it. Simply because some are hypersensitive to its message does not it should be interrupted or ignored. Those who are too insular in their opinions fail to see that those messages they deem as dangerous are in fact ideas that need to most protecting. By censoring the arts, we mock the courage those composers and artists had during times of greater oppression, when their lives were threatened but their passion never faded. We become the oppressor the world fought to destroy, with no bastion of freedom left to challenge us.

²³ Shulevitz, Judith. "In College and Hiding from Scary Ideas." *New York Times*, March 21, 2015. Accessed March 21, 2015.

As I wrote this paper, I struggled with many issues that probably went through members of the Metropolitan Opera or Boston Symphony when cancelling performances. Should I be saying this, or could it be viewed as offensive? Is my prose too blunt or am I being too passive? While these are questions that everyone must ask before producing a work, speech, or statement that is read by members of different communities, I found them to be ironic. Here is a paper discussing the negativity of censorship by both the Nazis and current entities, yet the writing process developed I found myself censoring words and ideas. This juxtaposition is a problem. Writers, artists, and thinkers need to be able to discuss ideas without fearing the works they produce. As the world discovered during WWII, art is too valuable to be silenced, and is worth dying for. Modern society needs to break free from the fears of political correctness and start to challenge itself once again so that discussions can be had, controversies can be met, and solutions can start to arise.

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