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CLASSICAL.

No opera written by anyone in the final decade of the 20th Century has kicked up nearly as much controversy as "The Death of Klinghoffer."

Extravagantly praised and even more extravagantly damned after its premiere in Brussels in 1991 and subsequent performances in the U.S. just weeks after the end of the first Gulf War, composer John Adams' musical meditation on Middle East terrorism, religious intolerance and violence has remained a hot potato among American opera companies.

Lyric Opera has rejected it, while the Los Angeles Opera, which co-commissioned the work, also has refused to stage it, reportedly out of fear of inciting protests such as those that greeted the work at its American premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1991.

Back then, some people denounced Adams, librettist Alice Goodman and director Peter Sellars as having sided with Palestinian terrorists. (A music review appearing under the headline "Singing Terrorists" didn't help.) Other people read a pro-Zionist agenda into their efforts. Some audience members and critics dismissed the opera without having bothered to see or hear it, knowing only that it was based on the 1985 hijacking of the cruise ship Achille Lauro by Palestinian militants who murdered a crippled American Jewish passenger, Leon Klinghoffer, before tossing his body and wheelchair overboard.

Still neglected

A dozen years after "Klinghoffer" was born, the work's neglect persists in the U.S. despite the acclaim it has received from staged performances by the Finnish National Opera, concert presentations in London and Amsterdam and an excellent film directed by Penny Woolcock in 2001 for British TV (and newly released here on DVD). Earlier this year, the Boston Symphony Orchestra canceled concert performances of the "Klinghoffer" choruses out of respect to one of its chorus members whose husband died in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Clearly the strong emotions stirred by "Klinghoffer" make opera presenters uneasy in post-"shock and awe" America. Yet the opera's themes are, if anything, more relevant today than when the work was new.

Given the work's contentious history, it took considerable courage for the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the Brooklyn Philharmonic to revive the work in a staged concert version last week as part of BAM's 2003 Next Wave Festival. This time around, there were no protests, no picket line in front of the theater, although patrons entering the theater had to pass through metal detectors. The opera was allowed to speak its mind. It did so eloquently, in a musically and visually stunning performance by a strong cast under conductor Robert Spano's taut, dedicated direction. The performers and beaming composer received numerous ovations.

Reality has caught up with "Klinghoffer," as television's daily parade of images from various Middle East hot spots proves. Viewed in light of recent world events, Adams' and Goodman's examination of the complex emotions and conflicting motives that drive acts of inhumanity by one group of people toward the other seems uncannily prescient. The collaborators never make excuses for the terrorists, but they do show them as men who believe in their cause. The opera's "crime" is that it takes no sides, that it sees no winners, only losers, on either side of a tragic, centuries-old political and religious divide.

Adams has said that his aim in writing "Klinghoffer" was not to effect social change or alter people's political views but, rather, "to respond to and express my deepest reactions to human behavior." Certain works of art, in his view, should make us uncomfortable; in so doing, they can lead us to a greater understanding of who we are and what our responsibility is to each other.

The music of "Klinghoffer" is like a spiritual balm on troubled waters, from the ineffably sad choruses for exiled Palestinians and exiled Jews that open the opera, to the angry and bitter lament sung by the widowed Marilyn Klinghoffer, to the final chorus for all participants that echoes Bach's Passions in its prayer to God to raise His arm in mankind's defense. Beauty, Adams suggests, may still be possible in a world of brutal ugliness and clashing ideologies.

Simpler production

All this came through vividly in the concert performance at BAM. The production by director Bob McGrath (of New York's Ridge Theater) was much simpler and more representational than the original Sellars staging, which turned the work into an abstract religious ritual, part oratorio, part dance. This "Klinghoffer" was a real opera, with the singers perched on platforms, motionless, while films and projections -- Laurie Olinder created the striking visual design -- created the "action." Amplification was used, but not obtrusively. The performers appeared to be singing from the decks, cabins and railings of the cruise ship, while filmed loops of the roiling and frothing ocean mirrored the undulations of Adams' music.

The composer had tightened his score a bit for the three Brooklyn performances, without sacrificing its gentle, haunting impact. The pulsing post-Minimalist rhythms and the soaring staccato vocal lines were anchored in luminous orchestral textures that Spano shaped with a precise and caring touch. The work's kinship to the Bach Passions was again reinforced by the use of the chorus, the New York Virtuoso Singers, performing in concert attire with scores in front of them, singing as from within the timeless, unending ocean.

Of the singers, only baritone James Maddalena was a holdover from the original "Klinghoffer" cast. He was superb in diction and manner as the weak-willed Captain who considers himself a peacemaker but is cruelly betrayed by the terrorists. As Leon and Marilyn Klinghoffer, Stephen Powell and Nancy Maultsby turned in affecting portraits of decent people trapped in horrific circumstances. Powell's slow-motion aria, sung as Klinghoffer's body is pushed overboard and drifts into the next world, was heart-stoppingly beautiful. No less admirable were Eric Owens as the brutal Rambo, Todd Wilander as the hot-headed Molqui and Nmon Ford as the philosophical Mamoud who dreams of the birds who soar freely above the waves. Phyllis Pancella and Kirsten Blase provided choice quasi-comic relief in several roles.

In sum, this was a triumph for all concerned.

"The Death of Klinghoffer" is just the kind of artwork the world needs to experience at this terrible juncture in time. One hopes the piece won't fall back into neglect simply because it dares to voice un-PC sentiments some people have chosen not to hear. The BAM performances proved a vindication, if one were needed, for the last great opera to be written in the last century.