

Religious Rivalries in John Adams's *The Death of Klinghoffer*

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John Adams's 1991 opera, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, has frequently been criticized as anti-Semitic, primarily due to its libretto. However, Richard Taruskin, in his essay for *The New York Times*, criticizes the music itself as anti-Semitic, primarily due to John Adams's use of J.S. Bach's *Passions* – works that are also frequently criticized for being anti-Semitic. Taruskin asserts that Adams, while attempting to portray the eponymous Leon Klinghoffer as a Christ-like character, sympathizes instead with the Palestinians, due to the symphonic grandeur with which he frames them. In Robert Fink's response to this essay, Fink argues that Adams's use of Bachian tools found in the *Passions*, such as contrapuntal passages and a strong sense of irony, tools which historically imply nuance and complication, do indeed frame Leon Klinghoffer as a Christ-like character. In both of their arguments, criticisms of the libretto and music are separated; this is also historically the case in analyses of Bach's *Passions*. In his book on the *St. John Passion*, Michael Marissen argues that the *Passions* cannot truly be understood without analyzing the music and libretto together; I argue that the same is true for *Klinghoffer*. This paper suggests that Adams creates, on the surface, a depiction of Judaism vs. Islam (or Israel vs. Palestine); however, I argue that Adams reveals the inherent nuance in religious disputes through his postmodern use of the aforementioned Bachian tools such as irony and contrapuntality. Through an analysis and comparison of *Klinghoffer* and the *Passions*, this paper seeks to show that Adams seems to provide a commentary on the longevity of the damage caused by anti-Semitism, and more broadly, religious rivalries with Bach as a compositional model.