

As national and international organizations committed to the right to artistic freedom of expression and an open exchange of ideas, we are deeply concerned about the Metropolitan Opera's cancellation of more than 2000 HD live screenings of John Adams' opera, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, in 65 countries. We urge the Metropolitan and its director, Peter Gelb, to reconsider and proceed with the scheduled screenings.

Artistic interpretation of the complexity of contemporary events always carries the potential of stirring controversy, but it also has the ability to enhance understanding of polarizing issues. Cultural institutions can play a crucial role in promoting understanding and peaceful dialogue in a world of conflict, but only if they can stand up to pressure groups from all sides. If they don't, they are likely to become either irrelevant or a tool in the hands of competing political interests.

*The Death of Klinghoffer*, written in 1991 and based on real events, addresses political issues which remain as urgent today as they were at the time of its writing: terrorism and the conflict in the Middle East. The opera has been subject to controversy many times with attacks coming from both Jewish and Palestinian organizations, each side claiming that *The Death of Klinghoffer* was biased against it.

It is not surprising that interest groups would put pressure on the Metropolitan Opera for hosting a work that, by acknowledging the humanity of the terrorists as well as of their victims, shows political conflict in shades of grey rather than as a stark opposition between good and evil. However, for a globally leading cultural institution like Metropolitan Opera, to bend to such pressure is ill-considered and counterproductive.

The compromise decision to go ahead with the production, but cancel HD live screenings is unlikely to appease those who don't want the opera presented at all, and it will discredit both the Metropolitan Opera and US cultural institutions in general in the eyes of audiences worldwide. By agreeing to suppress the distribution of one politically controversial work, the Metropolitan exposes itself to future requests to suppress others, whether Wagner's *Ring Cycle* or *The Merchant of Venice*.

As a leading cultural institution in a country that proudly upholds principles of free speech, the Metropolitan Opera should demonstrate respect for the freedom of creative artists as well as for the maturity of its worldwide audiences, who can surely be trusted with a challenging artistic work. Art helps us all transcend easy right/wrong certainties, creates empathy, challenges the status quo and offers an understanding of why and how people do unconscionable acts – thus pointing the way to a world where such acts would no longer happen. But to do that, art needs the full commitment and staunch support of cultural institutions.