

Twilight at the Met: Capitalism's contempt for culture

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The Metropolitan Opera—for generations the stage on which the greatest dramatic tragedies have been performed—now finds itself the setting for one that is all too real. The largest performing arts organization in the United States is staring into the abyss.

The company's announcement this week of yet another round of devastating cutbacks exposes, with brutal clarity, the incapacity of American capitalism to sustain even its most celebrated cultural institutions. What is unfolding at the Met is not merely a financial crisis; it is a cultural execution in slow motion, and a scathing indictment of a system that has long since abandoned any pretense of nurturing the higher aspirations of human civilization.

The figures speak for themselves. The company has hemorrhaged \$120 million from its endowment over just three years, leaving a mere \$217.5 million, barely two-thirds of its annual \$330 million operating budget. Twenty-two administrative positions will be eliminated. Executives will absorb salary cuts between 4 and 15 percent. The 2026–27 season will offer a pathetic 17 productions, down from 25 before the pandemic.

Most damning of all, the Met is now contemplating the sale of its iconic Marc Chagall murals, “The Triumph of Music” and “The Sources of Music,” commissioned for the opera house's opening at Lincoln Center in 1966 and valued at \$55 million. Management, acutely aware that removing these masterworks would be tantamount to a declaration of bankruptcy, is desperately stipulating that any buyer must leave them hanging in the Grand Tier. The murals would remain, but with a plaque commemorating their new owner as a grotesque visual reminder of institutional humiliation.

To grasp the enormity of this collapse, one must understand what the Metropolitan Opera once represented. Founded in 1883, the Met rapidly became the premier opera house in the Western Hemisphere and one of the greatest in the world. For over a century, virtually every legendary voice in opera graced its stage: Caruso, whose golden tenor made him a household name across America; Maria Callas, the volcanic dramatic soprano who redefined operatic acting; Kirsten Flagstad, Lauritz Melchior, Rosa Ponselle, Renata Tebaldi, Jussi Björling, Birgit Nilsson, Franco Corelli, Luciano Pavarotti, Plácido Domingo, Jonas Kaufmann and many others. The roster reads like a pantheon of vocal immortals.

For decades, the Met brought opera into millions of American homes through its legendary Saturday afternoon radio broadcasts, which began in 1931. These weekly transmissions, sponsored for years by Texaco, created an enormous national audience for an art

form that might otherwise have remained the exclusive province of the wealthy. Families gathered around their radios to hear live performances from the Met stage. Opera was not an elitist curiosity; it was a vital part of American cultural life. Caruso and Callas were not obscure names known only to connoisseurs. They were celebrities whose fame rivaled that of film stars.

Under the management of Rudolf Bing, who led the company from 1950 to 1972, the Metropolitan Opera achieved historic significance in ways that extended beyond artistic excellence. Bing, though he fastidiously avoided public political pronouncements, integrated the company in 1955 by hiring the great African American contralto Marian Anderson. Six years later, Leontyne Price made her debut in Verdi's *Il Trovatore* to a 42-minute standing ovation—one of the most celebrated moments in operatic history. Price, Grace Bumbry, George Shirley, Shirley Verrett and others of their generation found at the Met a stage worthy of their extraordinary talents. The opera house, for all its dependence on wealthy patrons, served as a vehicle for transcendent artistry that spoke to something universal in the human experience.

In 1966, the Metropolitan moved to its magnificent new home at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, a complex conceived as the nation's premier venue for the performing arts. The new Met, with its soaring travertine arches and its Chagall murals, was intended as a monument to American cultural ambition. But the unveiling of the new opera house coincided with a critical turn in the fortunes of American capitalism. As was soon to become clear, 1966 was the high-water mark of American liberalism.

What has happened since then? The growing political reaction that has engulfed American society over the past half-century has taken a devastating toll on culture. The assault on living standards, the decimation of public education, the relentless coarsening of public life—all have contributed to a growing indifference toward the arts. Opera, once accessible to a broad audience, became the preserve of an ever-narrower stratum of the wealthy. Ticket prices at the Met soared to staggering heights—\$300, \$400, \$500 and more for decent seats—placing attendance beyond the reach of ordinary New Yorkers. The art form that had once entered millions of homes through the radio increasingly retreated behind walls of exclusivity.

Yet even the patronage of the rich has proven insufficient. The Met, like opera houses throughout history, has always depended on the largesse of wealthy donors. But the American ruling class,

bloated with wealth beyond all historical precedent, has demonstrated a bottomless contempt for sustaining the cultural heritage of humanity.

New York City—the world capital of financialized capitalism, home to the Wall Street banks and hedge funds that have looted trillions from society and presided over levels of inequality that almost defy comprehension—cannot apparently muster the resources to support its own opera company. Berlin maintains three opera houses. Vienna, Milan, Paris, Munich and London sustain thriving companies with substantial public funding. The difference is not that American capitalism lacks the resources. It is that American capitalism, long before Trump, became the spearhead of global social counterrevolution.

And now the Met has descended to begging for alms from the blood-soaked Saudi monarchy. The deal announced months ago would see Met productions touring to Saudi Arabia annually for eight years, in exchange for \$200 million. Let us be clear about what this represents: the Metropolitan Opera, one of the most storied cultural institutions in the world, has agreed to serve as a propaganda vehicle for an authoritarian regime implicated in the assassination and dismemberment of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, in the starvation and slaughter of tens of thousands in Yemen, in the systematic repression of women and dissidents.

General Manager Peter Gelb, defending this squalid arrangement, told the *New York Times* with breathtaking cynicism: “All the democratic governments that I know of are engaged in business with Saudi Arabia. I have to put the survival of the institution of the Met first. ... I don’t operate the Met according to my personal feelings on every issue.” This from the same Peter Gelb who transformed the Met into a virtual propaganda outlet for the imperialist proxy war in Ukraine, who fired the world-renowned soprano Anna Netrebko because, while she condemned the invasion of Ukraine, she declined to denounce Putin by name—a distinction Gelb found unacceptable. Gelb’s “personal feelings” align perfectly with the policy imperatives of dominant sections of the American ruling class. When it comes to Russia, he is a moralist; when it comes to Saudi Arabia and its cash, he is a pragmatist. The hypocrisy is nauseating.

Even this Faustian bargain now hangs in doubt. “I understand the Saudis have had to recalibrate their budgets because of their own economic concerns,” Gelb admitted to the *Times*. “I’ve been assured it’s going to go forward. But we have been waiting for some time.” The Met has sold its dignity and may not even collect the payment.

The opera house is also pursuing the sale of its naming rights, following the degrading example of its Lincoln Center neighbors. Philharmonic Hall became Avery Fisher Hall and is now Geffen Hall, after the billionaire media executive donated \$100 million. The New York State Theater was rechristened the David H. Koch Theater, honoring the right-wing billionaire whose fortune helped fund the dismantling of environmental protections and the assault on workers’ rights. The world-famous Metropolitan Opera, which once seemed immune to such indignity, is now on the auction block.

The crisis at the Met recalls the 2013–2014 assault on the Detroit Institute of Arts during that city’s bankruptcy, when emergency

manager Kevyn Orr sought to appraise and potentially sell the museum’s \$20 billion art collection to pay creditors. The same logic is at work: the cultural heritage of humanity is to be liquidated to satisfy the demands of capital.

This broader assault on culture now extends to the highest levels of the American state. The Kennedy Center has been thrown into turmoil since Trump was named chairman of its board in February 2025. Artists across genres—from *Hamilton* to the Martha Graham Dance Company to the Washington National Opera—have canceled appearances, refusing to perform at a venue transformed into a vehicle for the glorification of a would-be dictator. The Trump administration has threatened the Smithsonian Institution with funding cuts if it does not submit to ideological demands. The proposed budget eliminates funding entirely for institutions including the Anacostia Community Museum and the National Museum of the American Latino.

The defense of culture cannot be entrusted to the ruling class, which has demonstrated its utter indifference to sustaining the artistic achievements of civilization. It cannot be entrusted to administrators like Gelb, who during the height of the COVID pandemic collected nearly \$1.4 million annually while stagehands and chorus members were thrown out of work. The working class—the inheritor of all that is progressive in human civilization—is the only social force capable of defending the cultural heritage of humanity.

The Achilles heel of American artistic institutions has always been their dependence on private donors, on the whims of the wealthy. But art is not a charitable indulgence; it is an indispensable element of human existence. Society must guarantee the resources necessary for its flourishing. That this elementary truth is even contested exposes the barbarism of a system that subordinates every human need to private accumulation. The fate of art is inextricably bound up with the struggle for socialism and the reorganization of society’s resources in the interests of all humanity.



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