

STANDPOINT.

BLOG ENTRY

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If only this was unbelievable...

The arts world, including music and book publishing, has been so full of people behaving badly, stupidly or arrogantly for so long that after a couple of decades observing and sometimes experiencing it, I'd thought nothing more could shock me. Wrong. [Today The Arts Desk carries news from the Royal Opera House](#) that had me spluttering with such outrage that it's taken me several hours to string a sentence together.

Natalie Wheen, who has seen the relevant documents, goes into the issue in depth - follow the link above. But in short, here's what's happening:

"The ROH is demanding that its entire stable of creative talent – directors, set and costume designers, lighting and special effects designers, even composers, choreographers and librettists - sign over to the Royal Opera House all their copyright in their work there - in perpetuity."

This comes hot on the heels of [Norman Lebrecht's report last week](#) that certain record companies are allegedly demanding that their artists hand over a percentage of their fees for their *other, non-recorded work*, the justification apparently being the prestige of the company, in the reflected glory of which the artist is supposed to bask, and say thank you for the privilege of it.

One problem is that it's not new: for decades some publishers have demanded that authors 'waive their moral rights' in a book; and a composer in the know tells me that this has become the norm in writing music for TV. And many people cheerfully pirate music on a daily basis. Once people start to get away with something, the others start to jump on the bandwagon.

But where exactly do opera houses think they'd be without their operas? Where would a record company be without its artists? Where is a publisher without authors to write books? TV would be nowhere without its music. Wherefore this unbelievable, stonking, corporate arrogance?

Most companies that have the power to wreck musicians' livelihoods are run by people who can neither play a note nor compose so much as an eight-bar melody. Most publishers cannot put together the outline of a novel or imagine how to research a biography. Most lawyers cannot spin 32 fouettes or choreograph even 30 seconds of a great score by Tchaikovsky or Prokofiev. Why should they believe that for the privilege of association with their hallowed company names, anyone who can do any of the above should hand

over their rights in their creativity? Is it jealousy? I doubt it. Rather, it's contempt. It's their assumption that anybody stupid enough to follow a creative pursuit will also be stupid enough to agree to their demands. But the artists, composers and writers are not total chumps: they are pushed into a corner where they (and their agents, who depend on commission) have no choice.

Wonder how it feels? I know. And I can promise you that to sit back and watch someone walking off with your work scot-free is like watching someone steal your reflection. You look in a mirror and you see nothing - while they troll off to the shops with their latest trophy, which is half your actual being, never mind your breakfast, under their arm.

The sense of entitlement, the evil of the arrogance involved, is beyond simple moral degeneration. I don't know where it comes from: perhaps it's the logical end-point of Thatcherism, or perhaps of the school bully - who usually picks on the arty kids, remember. And I don't know what can be done to stop this pernicious development, other than a rallying call that can result in a concerted resistance to it. *Just say no.*

If artists and audience apply their awareness to resisting by boycott - a word we've overused recently, but sadly out of necessity - then the stance may help to force the issue. Artists may find another way to function, because we have always had to adapt and we always will. If we prevail, the set-ups that seek to rob us will hopefully find themselves hoist on their own petards, since no artist will touch them and their audience, which they do need, will turn elsewhere.

I've encountered several occasions when individuals faced with muggers have refused to cooperate. In France, I met an air steward who had faced down a mugger in Brazil: "Go on, kill me - do you want to do time for murder?" It was a huge gamble, but the guy, who had a knife, cut his losses instead and ran away. My husband was once mugged at knifepoint at a cash point in, of all places, West Hampstead. After handing over the 50 quid, he realised that the chap was smaller than him and gave chase, yelling that he wouldn't give up until the robber threw down the money. It worked. It does often look as if muggers operate from a position of such arrogance that resistance wrong-foots them, so little do they expect it. They don't know what to do - and they run off, like the school bullies they really are.

I'm no fan of the Pope, but in this case perhaps he's right: we need a dose of moral education. It certainly wouldn't go amiss in the upper echelons of the arts business. Because what artists have in their work is, in legal terminology, *moral rights*. If a whole zeitgeist lacks any semblance of morals, it's those who have them, and have rights determined by them, who will be trampled. And in their arrogance, those people who are shamelessly on the make have no idea how to behave. They are robbing the very people they should be supporting. Shame on them.