This dissertation is a study of John Adams’s opera *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991), which portrays the hijacking of a cruise ship by Palestinian terrorists who murdered one of the ship’s passengers, Leon Klinghoffer. An important factor in the creation of the opera is the portrayal by the mass media of the events surrounding Klinghoffer’s death. Marshall McLuhan’s analytic term “the mosaic” will be proven a useful concept in the evaluation process. The opera reflects qualities of the media and utilizes a mosaic framework rather than a dramatic operatic narrative in the libretto, a feature that is critical to the structure and musical expression of the score.

It is argued in an analysis of the plot and music that the introduction of elements not directly concerned with the hijacking serve to elucidate both sides of the opposition and broaden the scope of the drama, engaging the audience in the consideration of the age-old conflict. Although the media story of the capture and arrest of the murderers of Klinghoffer in a dramatic military intervention by the United States with the satisfying arrest of the terrorists might have made a more conventional opera libretto, it would likely have failed to explore the underlying causes of the strife in the Middle East.

This dissertation examines the treatment of the text which can guide the critical analysis of structure, language, and the confluence of musical styles and aesthetic concepts.