

Parsifal

In need of money, as usual, Richard Wagner sent the libretto of Parsifal to his printer, B. Schott Sohne, for publication in December 1877; he had not yet written any of the music and it was not until four and a half years later that the first performance took place.

In early 1878, the critics reviewed and commented on the libretto.

As an example, on March 24, 1878, "The ERA", the noted London weekly newspaper for the Arts, said the following:

"Shortly, we hear, the rehearsals will begin, for a Wagner production which is not like the light, frivolous works of Donizetti and Bellini school. It is tough work indeed to master a Wagner score of the latest period. But are we correct in calling it an opera at all:

Conscious that the title "opera" might suggest catchy tunes, duets, solos for the soprano and tender trillings for tenors, the Wagnerites have baptized the latest contribution to the "Music of the Future" a "stage-dedication-festival-play", but for the outer world the name of the hero will perhaps be more to the purpose.

Wagner has again turned to the legends of 'King Arthur' and the 'Knights of the Grail' as the subject matter for his libretto, but those who delight in the "Idylls of the King", as treated by Tennyson, must not expect the refined, elevated tone adopted by that Laureate.

Wagner's Parsifal deals with very "risky" materials indeed, and it must be confessed that the incidents he has chosen are not made less repulsive by the outspoken language of his libretto. The entire work is a medley of mysticism, religion, fairy fancies, and sensationalism of the most extravagant character.

It is not too much to say that some of the incidents are simply filthy and disgusting! Whatever may be the taste of Bayreuth, we are convinced that Parsifal could not, in its original form, be presented on the London stage; wholesale pruning would be necessary."

However, after the first performance of Parsifal on July 26, 1882 in Bayreuth, it was the beauty of the music which enthralled.

The "London Post" newspaper published the following eyewitness review on August 2, 1882.

"In this new work Wagner exhibits his artistic powers in their present most mature development, that the source of his melodious invention flows as freely and beautifully as ever, and that Parsifal may be considered as his masterpiece in the "new art" of which he is the creator, and to the present day still the unique representative."

This Music Drama introduces us to Montsalvat, where a medieval castle houses two precious Christian relics, the Grail and the Spear, guarded by Knights of the Grail. Wagner described these relics in his diary, August 27, 1865, as follows:--

"The Grail is the crystal cup from which the Redeemer and His disciples drank at the Last Supper: in it Joseph of Aramathea caught the blood that flowed from the Spear-wound in His side when he hung on the Cross"

Over the years, it is the music which has sustained Parsifal! Time and time again, especially in the last 20 years, the staging has caused emotional reactions from 'disappointing' to 'outrage'.

Andrew Clark, in his review of the English National Opera performance in London, February 18, 2011, says it better than me.

“No work in opera’s 400-year history is as puzzling as Parsifal. Wagner’s ‘sacred stage festival consecration play’ bears the outward trappings of Christian symbolism while encoding elements of eastern philosophy.

It speaks constantly of sex, sin and salvation, but shrouds them in philosophical mist. It burdens its characters with guilt and then offers them a release that is neither understandable nor conclusive. Far from illuminating these confusions, the main essay, in English National Opera’s program, only compounds them. The title character, it says, is a reflection of human dividedness – victor and victim in one. Kundry is both temptress and penitent. The Grail, one of Parsifal’s clearest symbols, is a “desperate attempt to reassemble the fragments of the mysteries of existence”.

Wagner’s genius lay in clothing this mumbo-jumbo – the source of endless argument among scholars and fanatics – in music that unifies the contradictions and leaves the audience dumbfounded by its reverent and spiritual glow.”

Directors shun away and even totally reject Wagner’s stage directions in the score, preferring to deliver their own interpretation of what they think. Arguments as to how Parsifal should be interpreted have grown ever more intense and even bitter as the years have gone by.

Despite the vitriol in many scholarly assessments of Wagner, Parsifal affects listeners’ lives deeply and challenges them to adopt a philosophical or even a religious stance towards this work. This development, in the direction of the programmatic statement, culminates in the response evoked and provoked by Parsifal, which Wagner himself called a “Sacred Stage Festival Play”.

Wagner turned to a medieval source for his material, “Parsifal” by Wolfram von Eschenbach, written around 1200 in 16 Books!

However, Wagner only used a few stories from this enormous work, compressed the actions and invented others.

In writing this introduction I've decided, for the most part, to go back to what Wagner actually wrote in his private letters and diaries.

His letters to his 'muse', Mathilde Wesendonck, show his frustration with Wolfram and the difficulty he is finding with constructing his own story of Parsifal. On May 30, 1859, Wagner writes from Lucerne a very long letter, of which this is a portion.

"Then think of all I should have to set about with Parsifal himself! For with him, too, Wolfram knows not what to do: his despair of God is absurd and unmotivated, still more unsatisfying his conversion. Here, accordingly, I should have to invent just everything. Added to that is one more difficulty with Parsifal. As the longed-for savior of Amfortas, he is wholly indispensable: but if Amfortas is to be set in the true light due him, he acquires such intensely tragic interest that it becomes well nigh, more than hard, to let a second main interest crop up beside him; yet Parsifal must be accorded that main-interest."

The music for Parsifal was the last written by Wagner. He started it in January 1878 and finished it in January 1882.

Thus it is considered to be his last opera.

However, he completed the first draft of the libretto in April 1857 and sent a copy to his sponsor, King Ludwig II in August 1865, just after the first performance of Tristan & Isolde, and before Meistersinger and all of the RING.

So the story of Wagner's Parsifal was set in place in 1865, with only minor differences from the final libretto published in 1877.

It is a very important document but I don't have time to read it to you completely. I will, however, include sections of it throughout this lecture.

I have included a complete copy in the "Playlist and Further Reading" handout.

So, now on to the STORY!

Parsifal, as interpreted by Wagner, is a lengthy epic tale of good vs. evil, lost hope, despair, longing and ultimate redemption, presented in the language of 19th Century European Christian beliefs, which, at that time, were heavily endowed with relics from early Christian lore.

The work is divided into three acts. The first act represents scenes on the sacred mountain where the Grail is kept. Amfortas, whose duty it is to administer the Sacrament to the Knights of the Grail, lies ill of a deadly wound, which reopens each time he attempts to fulfill the office, and which will never be healed until the spear be recovered which has been stolen from the Grail Mountain.

King Amfortas, leader of the knights, is adrift in a sea of angst and suffering after the spear that pierced the side of Christ is stolen from him, its guardian, by the evil sorcerer Klingsor.

As punishment for yielding to temptation and losing the Spear, Amfortas is condemned to suffer an incurable wound and the Knights of the Holy Grail are left without an able leader or mission.

In addition, Kundry, who is supposed to have laughed at the Savior on the cross, is now forced, for ever, to laugh at all sorrow, all suffering, all that can ever be moved to tears. All she seeks now is to lose, in the oblivion of sleep, all recollection of the misery of her waking hours, and the tortures of having to laugh where tears should flow.

Only one who is perfectly pure, and absolutely ignorant of sin, will be able to recover the Spear, and to deliver Amfortas from his sufferings. For such a person they have been waiting in vain. Amfortas has lost heart, and prays for death to release him from his misery.

Will it be Parsifal that heals the king, unites the Spear and Holy Grail inside the castle at Monsalvat, redeems the knighthood, and frees Kundry from her cursed existence?

The short answer is, yes he is, but I won't spoil the story.

It is time for the first video clip

It is from a MET performance in March 1992, conducted by James Levine, with staging by Otto Schenk, following reasonably close to Wagner's original direction.

In the first scene of Act 1, in a forest glade near the Castle of the Grail, Amfortas is carried on a litter to morning prayers, suffering pain from the wound inflicted by Klingsor.

In this narration, Gurnemanz, an old squire of Titurel, explains to the young squires, or cadets, of the Grail, the 'back story' about Titurel, Klingsor and the revelation to Amfortas that his suffering will be assuaged only by an innocent fool;

"Enlightened through compassion, the innocent fool – wait for him, the appointed one!"

I've chosen this performance because Kurt Moll, who sings Gurnemanz, is at the top of his form, with beautifully rounded tone.



Video Clip 1 – Gurnemanz Narration 10:57 min

Continuing the story, as written by Wagner in his ‘prose draft’ of 1865.

“While the King is bathing in the sacred lake, a wild swan circles over his head: suddenly it falls, shot by an arrow; the swan flutters nearer and drops bleeding to the ground. Parsifal emerges from the forest, bow in hand: Gurnemanz stops him.

The young man confesses to the deed. To the violent reproaches of the old man he has no reply and no apparent understanding.

Gurnemanz' amazement at this stupidity, which hitherto he has encountered only in Kundry, gives way to emotion as he prevails upon Parsifal to stay awhile and tell Gurnemanz something about himself.

All that Gurnemanz can get out of the shy boy, however, is that he knows only his mother, Herzeleide; she has brought him up in great seclusion, and so that he was ignorant of arms and knighthood.

As Parsifal knows no reason, Kundry, recumbent in her corner, who all along has been staring hard at Parsifal, quickly throws in, "His father was killed before his son was born; his mother wanted to protect her son from a similar violent death - the fool!" She laughs.

Parsifal's memory and understanding of his past are thus awakened. Kundry confirms that he has made himself feared through his heroic deeds and incredibly bold strength. "Who fears me?" - "The wicked." - "Were those who barred my way wicked?"

Gurnemanz begins to realize that Parsifal might be the innocent fool prophesized by the Grail

He sees that the King, with his attendants, has long set off back to the castle. The sun is at its zenith; the time for the sacred meal approaches."

The transformation scene, which follows at this point in the music drama, is the subject of the next video clip. I have taken it from a performance made at the Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin, conducted by Daniel Barenboim, also in 1992, with a futuristic staging by Harry Kupfer.

Gurnemanz, sung by John Tomlinson, leads Parsifal, sung by Poul Elming, to the sanctuary of the Grail, to resplendent orchestration, hoping that Parsifal could be the 'innocent fool' able to release Amfortas from his sufferings.



Video Clip 2 – Transformation Scene 8:42 min

“Amfortas is carried in on a litter: in front of him a knight bears a shrine covered by a purple velvet cloth. At the rear is the couch to which Amfortas is led: before it stands an altar-like table upon which the covered shrine is placed. When all are in their places, the singing stops. Gurnemanz takes his place at a table, staring the whole time at Parsifal who stands still and speechless with amazement.”

The ceremony of uncovering the Grail continues, but Amfortas is reluctant to proceed because it will result in reopening of his wound. His father Titirel demands that the ‘life giving’ bread and wine be produced for the knights.

Amfortas alone feels worse than before: he has to be carried off in the litter; his wound has reopened; the Redeemer has remained silent. The procession forms up in the order of arrival. To sad, solemn music, all depart again: above them, the bells grow silent and the light fades.

Parsifal has remained motionless with amazement: but during Amfortas' complaint, he once put his hand hastily to his heart. As last to leave, Gurnemanz turns to him ill-humouredly and shakes him: "Why are you still standing there? You are nothing but a fool! Out you go, do your thinking there!" He pushes him out of a side gate and bangs it after him, muttering.-"

Act 2

“Now it is necessary for Klingsor to have Parsifal in his power. He knows the prophecies about this wonder-child. He fears that he may have been summoned to deliver Amfortas and take his place with a power that cannot be overcome. It is against him that Kundry must now exert all her power.

Summoned by Klingsor, Kundry's soul trembles. She resists. He threatens. She curses. Fearful secrets. Finally, discord within Kundry's soul: hope for deliverance through defeat: - but then a mad desire to enjoy love for one last time. Klingsor's laugh. - Sound of weapons. From outside, the threatening voice of Parsifal. Kundry disappears”

“Now, Parsifal has entered Klingsor's wonderful, magic garden: his astonishment at the unspeakable charm is mingled with an uneasy combination of alarm, hesitation and horror. But he is not to compose himself: from various directions, singly, beautiful women rush in, their hastily-donned clothing disordered, their hair dishevelled, etc.

They are fascinated at the sight of the hero and the realization of how handsome, child-like and artless he is. Some mock him, but soon he is being flattered and petted. Amazed, but quite artless, Parsifal abandons himself to what he takes to be a childish game without any thought of there being something serious behind it.”

Then he hears the loud, loving sound of a woman's voice calling him by his name. He stops, shaken, believing it to be his mother, and stands, greatly affected, rooted to the spot.

The voice admonishes Parsifal to stay: here he will experience great happiness: she orders the women to leave the youth alone; he is for none of them: their lovers have been preserved: they would like to return; and urges them to be at peace.

Hesitatingly, the women obey: dejectedly they leave Parsifal, each secretly preferring him to her own lover: gently and flatteringly they leave him and go separate ways.

Parsifal, now sure that he is dreaming, gazes timidly to see where the voice has come from.

Then, in a grotto, upon a couch of flowers, he sees a young woman of the greatest beauty; Kundry, in new, quite unrecognizable form."

In the next video clip, Kundry, sung by a 36 year old Waltraud Meier, tries to seduce Parsifal, sung by Poul Elming. This is a benchmark performance. She is very persuasive and finally is able to lure him into a lover's kiss.



Video Clip 3 – The Seduction 10:31 min

“Suddenly the youth springs up with an expression of utter terror. With this kiss a dreadful change has taken place in him: he puts his hand to his heart; all of a sudden, he feels burning there the wound of Amfortas; hears rising from deep within him, Amfortas' lamentation. "The wound! The wound is bleeding here! Miserable one, and I could not help you!"

At this critically dramatic point in the opera, I'm continuing with Jonas Kaufmann, in fine voice at a concert performance in Munich, Germany, May 2010, with the Munchner Rundfunkorchester conducted by Michael Guttler.

This will give you an indication of what you might expect from Jonas Kaufmann, singing Parsifal next February at the MET.



Video Clip 4 – Kaufmann Concert 8:43 min

“Kundry, amazed and lost in passionate admiration, seeks vainly to silence Parsifal.

He sees her every gaze, hears her every word, as if from Amfortas' soul; this is how the wretched woman looked, this is how she spoke, this is how she wrapped her arms around his neck; these are the fearful agonies he has had to bear away with him as his prize!

"Corrupter, depart from me!"

Now the woman's soul blazes with insane desire. "Cruel one! If you feel the agonies of others, then feel also mine! In you I am to find deliverance, in you alone to die!

For you I have waited through eternities of misery: to love you, to be yours for one hour, can alone repay me for torments such as no other being has ever suffered!" -

Parsifal: "You will be damned, with me, for eternity if for a moment I forget my mission in your arms! I have been sent for your salvation also. Madwoman, do you not realize that your thirst is only increased by drinking: that your desire is extinguished only through its frustration?"

All the torments of the human heart lie open to him: he feels them all and knows the only way of ending them.

The woman: "So was it my kiss that made you see clearly? Oh, you fool! Embrace me now with love, so shall you be God himself this very day."

"Take me for just one hour to your heart and let me be damned for eternity! - I want no deliverance: I want to love you!" Parsifal: "I shall love and deliver you if you will show me the way to Amfortas.

She rages. "You will never find it. Let the fallen one perish." He persists. She demands as payment, an hour of love. He repulses her. She beats her breast, calling madly for help. (calling to Klingsor)

She is still powerful enough, she says, to lead him astray so that he will never find the Grail Castle: she curses the tracks and paths!

Klingsor appears on the tower of the Castle: armed men rush in: Parsifal recognizes the spear with which Amfortas had been wounded, and wrests it from the knight:"

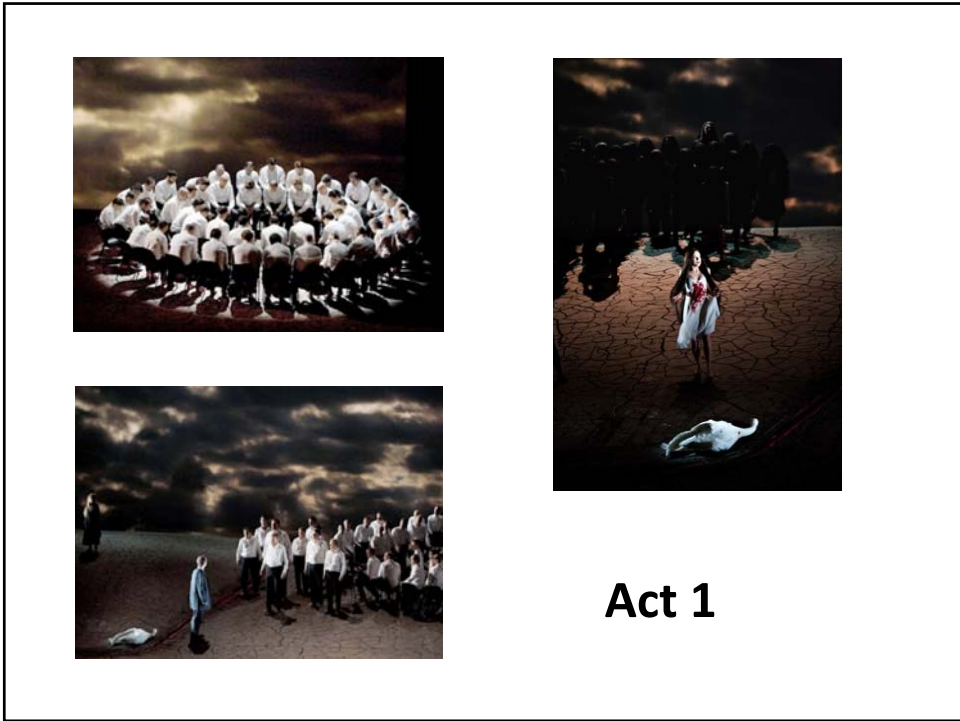
"With this sign I banish you all! As the wound that this spear once made shall close, let everything here perish, and its splendor fall in ruins!" He brandishes the spear: the castle collapses with a frightful crash; the garden withers to a desert.

Parsifal, from afar, gazing back at Kundry, who has collapsed screaming: "You know where you can find me again!" He hastens away through the ruins."



The next video clip of the last four minutes of Act 2 is from the Francois Girard production of Parsifal at Lyon in March 2012. This is the same production that will be seen at the MET next year, one which has the bloodiest Act 2 ever. Parsifal is sung by Nikolai Schukoff, Kundry is Elena Zhidkova, Kingsor is Alejandro Marco-Buhrmester and conducted by Kazushi Ono.

"Francois Girard did not want to make his Parsifal about the religious beliefs, or the role of spirituality in the modern society, the solitude in the post-modern society. His Parsifal is about the relation between man and Nature"





Act 3

“This Parsifal is both traditional and contemporary, offering new insights into a work that has received many interpretations. It will be interesting to see how Met audiences react to it in February 2013 when it transfers there and also by audiences around the world when it forms part of the 2012-13 *Live in HD* Season. It deserves attention.”

**Text © Michael Sinclair
Photos © Jean-Louis Fernandez**



Video Clip 5 - Lyon 2012 Act 2 Finale – 3:35 min

Act 3

The third act opens again upon the Grail Mountain some years later, where Gurnemanz, one of the soldiers of the Cross, now grown into an old man, dwells in a hermit's hut.

To him soon appears Parsifal, now grown to man's full estate. He has journeyed far, and enters travel-stained and weary, in full armor, not knowing that this is Good Friday, and that it is an offence to be in warlike apparel on such a day.

Gurnemanz thereupon helps to divest him of his armor, and proceeds to refresh him with water from the near by stream.

Kundry, now delivered from the magician's power, and appearing in this scene as a repentant Mary Magdalene, comes forward and bathes the feet of Parsifal and wipes them with her hair. Parsifal, released from his warlike accouterments, is seen in a loose flowing white garment, the exact counterpart of the most celebrated pictures of Christ.

He promises pardon and absolution to the repented Kundry, and for the first time tears relieve the long torments of her broken heart. Gurnemanz now leads Parsifal forward, the scene changes, and they appear once more in the Temple of the Grail, as in the first act.

The next short video clip shows Gurnemanz, sung by Rene Pape, in the Act 3 narration before the Good Friday spell. Although the video quality is poor, you will here how Rene Pape matches the demanding vocal requirements of singing Gurnemanz, in anticipation of his role in the upcoming production of Parsifal at the MET in February 2013.

This is from a performance at the White Nights Festival in St Petersburg, June 2009, with Valery Gergiev conducting, Rene Pape singing Gurnemanz, Gary Lehman singing Parsifal and Victoria Ulmana singing Kundry.



“Softly unseen, Parsifal scoops water from the spring in the bowl and moistens Kundry's head with it: "My first duty I discharge thus: be baptized and believe in the Redeemer." -Kundry lowers her head and begins to weep.

With gentle delight, Parsifal gazes at wood and meadow. How wonderful that all is in bloom and speaking to him in soft colours, sweet shapes and gentle fragrances: never before has he seen the meadow so beautiful. Gurnemanz:. "It is the magic of Good Friday, lord." Parsifal: "The day of greatest grief? Ought not all creation rather to be mourning?" –

Gurnemanz: "You see it is not so: today all animal creation is glad to gaze up at the Redeemer. Not being able to see Him on the Cross, it gazes up at Man Redeemed: who, through God's loving sacrifice, has a feeling of holiness and purity; the meadow flowers notice that man does not trample them today, but, as God took pity on mankind, spares them: now all that is blooming and soon to die, gives thanks; it is Nature's Day of Innocence."

Kundry, slowly raising her head, gazes up at Parsifal earnestly and calmly beseeching. Parsifal. "Today is the great Day of Innocence: rise up and be blissful." - He kisses her on the forehead."



Video Clip 7 – GoodFridaySpell – 7:27 min

“Ringing of bells, men's voices from afar. - Gurnemanz: “The hour is come: midday, as before. Follow me.” Parsifal, armed by them both, solemnly takes up the spear and, with Kundry, follows Gurnemanz. - As the singing swells and the sound of the bells grows louder, the scene gradually changes as in Act 1. In the corridors - processions of knights dressed in mourning. Nearer at hand - lamentations for the dead. - A funeral procession.

Enter procession of knights: from the other side, Amfortas on his sick bed, behind Titurel's coffin: in front, the shrine containing the Grail. Dim twilight. With all in their places, the lid of the coffin is opened - a violent burst of lamentation: Amfortas raises himself from his sickbed.

His wound, since the ending of reanimation by the Grail, has moved fatally close to his heart: another day, perhaps, and death will be certain. Why this fearful cruelty of forcing him to live? - Again he refuses. Attempts to compel him. Muttering and threats from the knights. Amfortas: "Madmen, with what will you threaten me, when death is my deliverer?" –

Then Parsifal steps forward. "Live, Amfortas, live in repentance and atonement. Your wound I close thus:" He touches Amfortas' thigh with the spear."

The final video clip starts at this point. It is from the 1998 performance held at the Bayreuth Festival, with Parsifal, sung by Poul Elming and Amfortas, sung by Falk Struckmann, conducted by Giuseppe Sinopoli



Video Clip 8 – Finale – 10:00 min