

# RICHARD WAGNER

# PARSIFAL

Christian Elsner

Franz-Josef Selig

Michelle DeYoung

Evgeny Nikitin

Eike Wilm Schulte

Dimitry Ivashchenko

Rundfunkchor Berlin

Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin



Marek Janowski

Live recording  
of the concert performance in the  
Berlin Philharmonie  
on April 8 , 2011

**Amfortas**  
**Titirel**  
**Gurnemanz**  
**Parsifal**  
**Klingsor**  
**Kundry**

**Evgeny Nikitin**, baritone  
**Dimitry Ivashchenko**, bass  
**Franz-Josef Selig**, bass  
**Christian Elsner**, tenor  
**Eike Wilm Schulte**, baritone  
**Michelle DeYoung**, mezzo-soprano

**Gralsritter** (*knights of the Grail*)

**Clemens Bieber**, tenor  
**Tuomas Pursio**, bass

**Knappen** (*squires*)

**Olivia Vermeulen**, soprano  
**Ulrike Schneider**, mezzo-soprano  
**Michael Smallwood**, tenor  
**Timothy Fallon**, tenor

**Blumenmädchen** (*flower maidens*)

**Julia Borchert**, soprano  
**Martina Rüping**, soprano  
**Lani Poulson**, mezzo-soprano  
**Sophia Klußmann**, soprano

**Blumenmädchen** (*flower maidens*)

**Olivia Vermeulen**, soprano  
**Ulrike Schneider**, mezzo-soprano

**Stimme aus der Höhe** (*voice from above*)

**Michelle DeYoung**, mezzo-soprano

**Rundfunkchor Berlin** | Chorus Master: **Simon Halsey**

**Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin** (Radio Symphony Orchestra Berlin)

**Rainer Wolters**, Concertmaster

**Robin Engelen**, Assistant conductor

conducted by **Marek Janowski**

Live recording of the concert performance in the Berlin Philharmonie on April 8, 2011

Executive producers: Stefan Lang, Maria Grätzel & Job Maarse

Recording producer: Job Maarse | Balance engineer: Jean-Marie Geijssen

Recording team: Wolfram Nehls, Ientje Mooij, Henri Thacon, Johanna Vollus, Annerose Unger

Editing: Ientje Mooij | Design: Netherlads

## Act 1

	<i>playing time</i>
1 Vorspiel ( <i>Prelude</i> )	11. 36
2 He! Ho! Waldhüter ihr ( <i>Gurnemanz, 1. Ritter/1st knight</i> )	4. 52
3 Seht dort, die wilde Reiterin ( <i>Knappen/squires, Ritter/knights, Kundry, Gurnemanz</i> )	2. 59
4 Recht so! Habt Dank! Ein wenig Rast ( <i>Amfortas</i> ) Gawan! Herr! Gawan weilte nicht ( <i>Amfortas, 2. Ritter/2nd knight, Gurnemanz</i> )	6. 28
5 He! Du da! Was liegst du dort wie ein wildes Tier? ( <i>Knappen/squires, Gurnemanz, Kundry</i> )	5. 46
6 O wunden-wundervoller heilliger Speer ( <i>Gurnemanz, Knappen/squires</i> )	3. 21
7 Titirel, der fromme Held ( <i>Gurnemanz, Knappen/squires</i> )	9. 43
8 Weh! – Hoho! – Auf – Wer ist der Frevler ( <i>Knappen/squires, Ritter/knights, Gurnemanz, Parsifal</i> )	6. 39
9 Nun sag! Nichts weisst du, was ich dich frage ( <i>Gurnemanz, Parsifal, Kundry</i> )	6. 40
1 Vom Bade kehrt der König heim ( <i>Gurnemanz, Parsifal</i> )	1. 44
2 Verwandlungsmusik ( <i>transformation music</i> )	2. 39
3 Nun achte wohl und lass mich seh'n ( <i>Gurnemanz</i> ) Zum letzten Liebesmahle ( <i>Chor/choir</i> )	6. 24
4 Mein Sohn Amfortas, bist du am Amt? ( <i>Titirel, Amfortas</i> )	3. 06
5 Wehvolles Erbe, dem ich verfallen ( <i>Amfortas, Chor/choir</i> )	6. 35
6 Enthüllet den Gral! ( <i>Titirel, Chor/choir</i> ) Nehmet hin mein Blut ( <i>Chor/choir, Titirel</i> )	7. 01
7 Wein und Brot des letzten Mahles ( <i>Chor/choir</i> )	5. 54
8 Auszug der Ritter ( <i>departure of the knights</i> ) Was stehst du noch da? ( <i>Gurnemanz, Stimme aus der Höhe/voice from above, Chor/choir</i> )	5. 09

## Act 2

1 Vorspiel ( <i>Prelude</i> ) Die Zeit ist da ( <i>Klingsor</i> )	5. 45
2 Ach! Ach! Tiefe Nacht! Wahnsinn! ( <i>Kundry, Klingsor</i> ) Furchtbare Not! ( <i>Klingsor, Kundry</i> )	7. 10
3 Ho! Ihr Wächter! Ho! Ritter! ( <i>Klingsor</i> )	3. 19
4 Hier war das Tosen! ( <i>Blumenmädchen/flower maidens, Parsifal</i> )	3. 43
5 Komm, holder Knabe! ( <i>Blumenmädchen/flower maidens, Parsifal</i> )	4. 51
6 Parsifal! Weile! ( <i>Kundry, Parsifal, Blumenmädchen/flower maidens</i> )	2. 47
7 Dies alles hab' ich nun geträumt? ( <i>Parsifal, Kundry</i> )	3. 14
8 Ich sah das Kind an seiner Mutter Brust ( <i>Kundry</i> )	4. 58

9	Wehe! Was tat ich? Wo war ich? ( <i>Parsifal, Kundry</i> )	
	Bekenntnis wird Schuld in Reue enden ( <i>Kundry</i> )	5. 08
10	Amfortas! Die Wunde! ( <i>Parsifal, Kundry</i> )	6. 44
11	Grausamer! Fühlst du im Herzen ( <i>Kundry, Parsifal</i> )	
	Ich sah ihn ( <i>Kundry, Parsifal</i> )	
	Nun such' ich ihn von Welt zu Welt ( <i>Kundry, Parsifal</i> )	10. 46
12	Vergeh, unseliges Weib! ( <i>Parsifal, Kundry, Klingsor</i> )	3. 35

**Disc 4** (5186 417)

**Act 3**

1	Vorspiel ( <i>Prelude</i> )	4. 24
2	Von dorthier kam das Stöhnen ( <i>Gurnemanz, Kundry</i> )	7. 58
3	Heil dir, mein Gast! ( <i>Gurnemanz</i> )	6. 13
4	Heil mir, dass ich dich wiederfinde! ( <i>Parsifal, Gurnemanz</i> )	1. 12
5	Zu ihm, des tiefe Klagen ( <i>Parsifal, Gurnemanz</i> )	2. 03
6	O Herr! War es ein Fluch ( <i>Gurnemanz</i> )	
	Die heil'ge Speisung bleibt uns nun versagt ( <i>Gurnemanz, Parsifal</i> )	5. 59
7	Nicht so! Die heil'ge Quelle selbst ( <i>Gurnemanz, Parsifal</i> )	4. 01
8	Gesegnet sei, du Reiner, durch das Reine! ( <i>Gurnemanz, Parsifal</i> )	4. 42
9	Wie dünkt mich doch die Aue heut so schön – Karfreitagszauber ( <i>Good Friday music, Parsifal, Gurnemanz</i> )	2. 33
10	Du siehst, das ist nicht so ( <i>Gurnemanz, Parsifal</i> )	6. 02
11	Mittag. Die Stund' ist da ( <i>Gurnemanz</i> )	
	Verwandlungsmusik ( <i>transformation music</i> )	4. 12
12	Geleiten wir im bergenden Schrein ( <i>Chor/choir</i> )	3. 31
13	Ja, Wehe! Weh' über mich! ( <i>Amfortas, Chor/choir</i> )	6. 42
14	Nur eine Waffe taugt ( <i>Parsifal</i> )	4. 23
15	Höchsten Heiles Wunder! - Erlösung dem Erlöser!	3. 20

Total playing time disc 1:	58. 11
Total playing time disc 2:	38. 38
Total playing time disc 3:	62. 06
Total playing time disc 4:	67. 25
Total playing time:	3.46.20

*Perceval* - the story of the "Taldurchdringer" (= invader of the valley) and his knights of the Holy Grail is based on oral traditions dating from the 9th century. The first person to record them (in part) was the French author Chrétien de Troyes (ca. 1140 – 1190). A few years later, Wolfram von Eschenbach (ca. 1170 – 1220) wrote his epic poem of the Grail in Middle High German, in which he not only corrected Chrétien's version, but also added extensive detailing to the tale, despite not having any demonstrable access to other written sources. In 1836, Wolfram's *Parzival* epic was first published in High German. After first reading the poem in 1845, Richard Wagner continued to return to it; and long before he actually wrote his *Ring des Nibelungen*, he had already decided that *Parzival*, would be his final work, the capstone of his oeuvre.

From 1857 onwards, against the background of his all-consuming (and disabling?) love for Mathilde Wesendonck, the theme of redemption surrounding Parzival gained an increasingly powerful hold on him. He wrote a first prose sketch (unfortunately, since lost), and shared with Mathilde Wesendonck in a number of letters various vivid ideas regarding *Parzival* that essentially amount to a radical compression of Wolfram's book. In April 1857, within the grounds of the Wesendonck villa, he wrote the introduction to the "Good Friday spell" music.

In 1865, Wagner finally gave in to the insistence of King Ludwig II of Bavaria, presenting him with a prose draft of *Parzival*. "His" king reacted joyfully: "... Oh, how I love you, my blessed and adored friend." And in January 1877, Wagner began drafting the text. On March 14, he decided to opt for the spelling of "Parsifal", thereby creating a linguistic misunderstanding ("Incidentally, that does not bother me," he wrote in a letter to Judith Gautier). As always, he first drafted the libretto, which took him until April, and began the sketches for the music in August. The composition was spread out over several years, undergoing a variety of impulses (and setbacks). On December 25, 1879 – Cosima's birthday – the prelude to the first act was first performed in a try-out at Villa Wahnfried in Bayreuth, for which occasion Wagner had specifically called on the Meiningen Court Orchestra: "It has changed a lot, becoming even more obscure! The beginning sounds like the echoes of an extinct star, on which one perceives Kundry's arduous wandering and plea for redemption as mere gestures," thus wrote Cosima in her diary. In 1880, the garden of the Palazzo Rufolo in Ravello on the Sorrento peninsula served as a model for Klingsor's magic garden, as did the cathedral of Siena for the dome of the Grail temple.

Wagner decreed that the work be reserved exclusively for the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, in order to ensure that it was not "desecrated" for

the amusement of the theatrical world in general. As it was, Ludwig II had already agreed to send the entire ensemble of the Munich court opera to Bayreuth for the first production of *Parsifal*. While working on the score, Wagner simultaneously expressed his ideas on the messages and ideology contained within *Parsifal* in his highly controversial "Regenerationsschriften" (= regeneration writings). In 1881, he invited the theorist of the "Aryan master race" – Arthur de Gobineau – to Wahnfried, wrote the essay "Heroism and Christianity", and in his fanatical anti-Semitism had the presumption to assert on December 18, 1881 in a crude joke that "all Jews should be burned in a performance of *Nathan*" – as recorded by Cosima in her diary. A week later, Richard Wagner handed over the last page of the score of *Parsifal* to his wife – "For you!" He completed the penultimate page, as well as several others, by January 13, 1882.

July 26, 1882 saw the première of *Parsifal*, a festival play for the consecration of the stage, at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus. Text: Richard Wagner. Music: Richard Wagner. Staged and directed by: Richard Wagner. To this day, opinions remain divided on whether Wagner's "religion of art" offered a serious replacement for the undermined values of late 19th-century Christianity and Buddhism, or whether it was simply a monstrous, self-congratulating blasphemy. On February 13, 1883 Richard Wagner passed away in Venice.

Ludwig II, who was not present at the première, heard the work for the first time in a private performance in Munich in 1884/85. Since 1914, it has been officially permitted to stage *Parsifal* in locations other than Bayreuth.

### Time becomes space here

The breath-taking demonstration of the power of masculine virtues, the subtle projection on the female of masculine fears and longings, the subliminal theme of the Wandering Jew, the abundance of well-nigh sacred analogies to the Christian religion, the subtle interweaving of the ancient traditions of Buddhism and the Orient, the philosophical dimension of Schopenhauer's conception of the world, the countless deeply psychological allusions, the courage in creating a virtual snap-shot of the dream theatre of the unconscious, ultimately, the grandiose, inescapable music that strives to possess the soul – all this ensures that *Parsifal* remains to this day eternally topical and fascinating. All characters and situations call for an infinity of interpretative possibilities, or at least permit these. We are forced to accept that Wagner took his role as "founder of a religion" most seriously, and at the same time felt little more than contempt

for the weakness of people who were so easily seduced. We have to note that the Nazis considered *Parsifal* to be the ideal anticipation and confirmation of their entire doctrine of sovereignty. We are faced with performance cults and traditions that have been taken to ridiculous extremes in Bayreuth. We are permitted to be horrified or excited about flashy productions, which push the author, but especially the musician Richard Wagner, ever closer to the edge of perception. The flood of images has grown steadily since the stagings by Siegfried, Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner, passing through Hans Jürgen Syberberg, Rolf Liebermann, Harry Kupfer, Götz Friedrich up to Bernd Eichinger, Stefan Herheim, Christoph Schlingensiefel and Calixto Beito. "During the performance, the flow of the dialogue in the music-drama is simultaneously confronted with the exuberance of symbols, images, movement, and light and dark phases in the production that qualify the narrative inherent in the resolution of conflicts and analyses the coherence of the dramatic text in *Parsifal*. In the performance, not everything is as it is written and sung. And in any case, that which is written and sung, is not all there is." (Lodemann 2010: 159)

A concert performance – in which an orchestra can be both seen and heard, with soloists performing in ergonomic postures, and choirs concentrated solely on the singing – deliberately avoids any visual overload. Intentionally, it does not fall back on (thereby bypassing Wagner) a barren, stripped-down version of *Parsifal*, but it transports us to a post-multimedia era, in which the images (are able to) resonate in the mind of the listener as an associative background, while the inevitable priority of the music is once again reinstated.

### Exorcism of fear

On July 21, 1902, a young Jewish philosopher from Vienna created waves within the intellectual circles in Europe. Otto Weininger graduated with honours on "Geschlecht und Charakter" (= sex and character). This book consists of almost 700 pages and is full of an unprecedented hatred towards both the Jewish people and the female sex. A few days after graduating, the 22-year-old writer travelled to Bayreuth for the last time to hear *Parsifal*, which he truly loved and appreciated, and which had served as inspiration for his thesis. In May 1903, Weininger celebrated the publication of his book. In September 1904, he rented a room in Vienna – the room in which Beethoven had died – and on October 4, he shot himself. Stefan Zweig, Karl Kraus and the then 14-year-old Ludwig Wittgenstein accompanied his coffin to the grave. August Strindberg sent a wreath from Stockholm, and wrote him an obituary. Later, Adolf Hitler designated Weininger as

“the only decent Jew.”

Weininger's book – which provided the German National Socialists with significant arguments for their manic attempt to exterminate the Jews – remains disturbing to this day. In 1980, it was reprinted for the first time since the end of World War II. Nike Wagner, the German publicist, described the core message of Weininger's book as follows: “[Otto Weininger] infers that women should be valued differently, based on their biological difference. The purpose of his work is to expound his theory of this difference in value as inferiority, and to omit no aspect of the everyday, scientific, psychological and philosophical perspectives. (NIKE WAGNER, 1981). Nike Wagner continues to say that, in such an ominous context, the female was “both a sexual being and mother at once, causing ... an erotic confusion for the male: the confusion from which the colourful panoply of varying images of the female has arisen. The female is the symbol of the compatibility of the incompatible: she represents all that is most desirable and most strongly forbidden in one person. The uncertain ‘shimmering’ between the pleasure to be derived from a sex object and the respect commanded by maternal immunity, between the whore and the saint [...].”

Elsewhere, Nike Wagner commented as follows: “Phrases such as: ‘The phallus is the fate of the female’, ‘the male with the lowest status is still infinitely higher than the female with the highest’, ‘the Jew cannot sing’, ‘however, the absolute Jew does not possess a soul’ ... are not simply ephemeral *bon mots*, but are part of the fundamental components that form the framework of his thinking. Although at first it seems strange or repulsive, at a second reading it reveals itself as an important testimonial within the genres of cautionary and confessional literature that also affects the more knowledgeable reader: it drags him irresistibly on to thin ice, where one can skate one's strange figures between genius and madness, between culture and chaos. Only with hindsight can we now interpret Weininger's words in a different manner. The toxic effect of the two main ingredients of “Sex and Character”, the anti-feminism and anti-Semitism, has now subsided or at least, it is now possible to prescribe an antidote. The historical context has changed and thus – turn in your grave, Weininger! – the treatise against the women has become a document that helps us to understand men's fears and desires, a document that advises an even more urgent emancipation of the male than of the female.” (*Die Zeit*, November 21, 1980). However, this diagnosis made by Nike Wagner can be applied, without beating around the bush, not only to Weininger's “product”, but also to the artistic legacy of her great-grandfather Richard Wagner, to *Parsifal*.

In the end, Weininger's shoddy misogynistic effort can be read as an “elaboration of the philosophy of *Parsifal*,” that “occupies a unique position in both the disclosure and the concealment of the castration complex within the Western culture.” (Scheit, 2004)

### Amfortas

Wagner based his lance and Grail chalice on powerful mythological foundations. The lance used by Longinus, the Roman legionnaire, to wound Christ on the cross, corresponds with the spear of Wotan, but also with Siegfried's sword. Basically indestructible, although unsuitable as a “normal” weapon, it is a symbol of power and exclusively reserved for ritual actions. Amfortas abuses the weapon. Wagner defines the Grail as a chalice, as the vessel shared by Jesus with his disciples, and in which Joseph of Arimathea caught his blood, Wolfram von Eschenbach defines the Grail as a stone with the key messages of faith – the tablets of stone found by Moses? Basically, the Grail represents pure faith, trust in God: it is not some kind of fetish. Therefore, Moses' stone tablet may be without a message, the sheet in the Shinto shrine blank, and the treasure trove in the Arabian tale empty, because the farmer has obtained wealth through the sweat of his brow, the Buddhist monk has already collected all knowledge and experience while searching for the shrine, and Moses has understood God's message without the necessity of a notepad and has translated it for his people. Perhaps we all carry our personal grail within ourselves, as soon as we have received the divine presence into our soul? Unfortunately, this cognition gets in the way of the Christian in search of God.

At first, Amfortas' wound is internal. His faith has been damaged and his confidence in the correctness of his previous actions shattered. The more he is forced to dedicate himself to the superficial pomp of the ceremony, the more painfully aware of this he becomes.

On another level, within the “sacred” theatricals of *Parsifal*, bursting with straining sexuality, the relics consisting of the chalice and the spear possess a deep sexual symbolism. In a rush of blood, the life-giving Grail – the symbol of the female, of the womb, of the receptor – meets the violating spear – the symbol of the male. Amfortas has lost his spear, his blood is infected. He has deployed his body instead of his spirit, in a desire to simultaneously vanquish both the world and love itself – according to Wagner, as if he were Tristan, yet intensified into infinity. But his soul is also infected, he longs for the source of his torment, for love, for a natural life without dogmas and rites. He will not find this in the castle of the Grail.

Thus his only escape is through death “in angry defiance” (Wagner 1984: 77). “Faust's suicidal thoughts also culminate before Easter, and his remark ‘only I have no faith’ could also have been uttered by Amfortas.” (Maier-Eroms 2009: 127) He does not in any way consider the office of the Grail King to be an honourable service in remembrance of the Saviour: to him, it represents the “torments of hell, to be condemned to this office!” (Wagner 1984: 50). “The demand he makes of his Knights to drive their sword deep – up to the hilt – into his body, where the blood flows out, is a clearly sexual innuendo: no analogue can be traced back further than that of the phallus and the sword, upon which Amfortas calls here, in order at least to die as a passive participant in a sexual act, as he is no longer able to actively participate in such in life.” (Maier-Eroms, 2009: 133).

Amfortas differs from Klingsor in that the latter has opted for one of the two options – power/love – whereas Amfortas want them both. In this he resembles Wotan, who is caught in the net of his inconsistencies. And although Amfortas and Kundry no longer maintain a relationship within the realm of the Grail (Amfortas does not recognize Kundry as the woman who seduced him in Klingsor's kingdom), the Grail King does trust her medicine, even thanking a “mere” female for her loyalty. Well, this is not the usual manner in which the knights of the Grail deal with others!

### Titirel

The old king is the classic father-figure, controlling and commanding his son in a stubborn and self-serving manner. When finally given the opportunity, he promptly makes the biggest mistake of his life. In his rigid selfishness – he does absolutely nothing for the community, yet he demands life eternal – Titirel reminds one of an ultraconservative, who can be stopped only by an act of selfishness on Amfortas' part. The son runs the risk of a kind of (passive) Oedipal patricide, without gaining even the slightest benefit. Incidentally – why does Titirel actually have a son? And how will the next chaste Grail king, *Parsifal*, father his son, Lohengrin? Wagner himself also probably formed a bond with his hopelessly inconsistent Wotan.

### Gurnemanz

He talks incessantly, explains, claims, regulates, mediates. Gurnemanz, initially described as a “sprightly elderly man,” but in Act 3 as “having become very old”, is the most substantial role in *Parsifal* and is also considered the most expendable. No way! The

Peter among the Grail knights keeps everything together with inquisitorial zeal. Without his vigilant and priestly nature, the whole lot of them would have long since fallen apart. The fact that he stands by the ritual, which can get by easily without true faith, is an indication of his common sense. The difference between him and his old warlord Titurel – to whose shortcomings he is amazingly blind – is his sense of community spirit. Gurnemanz accompanies Amfortas on his amorous adventure, rescues him from Klingsor, then takes care of the young man when he is ailing. He integrates Kundry into the community, he spots the future redeemer, at first educates him, then pays court to him, and thus settles the matter of Amfortas' successor. All in all, he stabilizes a system that had long since been physically and morally ruined.

### Klingsor

No, he is not that bad. After all, once upon a time he also strove for the Divine Holy Grail, he would still like to win it, even though he knows that he, often assumed to be a materialist and atheist, cannot buy it. His self-castration was an act of anticipatory obedience. Yet he is despised for this type of servility. Whenever he gives vent to his rage – his voice mostly rising with affirmations such as “Ha”, “Ha ha,” “Ho” and “Heh” – it is in some kind of desperate aggression against himself. Klingsor literally cannot control himself, he is only the master of various inferior beings: plant-like females. And of Kundry, the “nameless one”, “primal female devil”, the “rose from hell”, the “Herod” (Wagner 1984: 55). Only be an emasculated man would Wagner choose to speak of a woman with admiration! Did Wagner perhaps recur to the commonly held “penis envy”, when he contemptuously turned them both into “sisters in adversity”?

### Parsifal

Siegfried kills away blithely, and Parsifal does no less. According to the values of the various communities in Wagner's operas, it is far easier to excuse a murderous attack committed against a stranger than, for instance, the violation of a chastity decree. Parsifal kills a swan, he goes for Kundry's throat, receives a warning and that is it. The fact that he later, for no specific reason, slaughters the fallen knights, and even the flower girls, in Klingsor's garden is hardly even worth a mention. And even his dealing with the transformed Kundry does not demonstrate much of the vaunted compassion that is supposed to make the fool into a wise man. It is probably the prospect of power in

the acknowledged male world that stops him literally half-way through a kiss. He senses his chances of ascending the royal throne. “Thus, he understands more than all the others, including all the knights of the Grail, who always believed that Amfortas was simply bewailing the wound caused by the spear! Now, Parsifal is looking more deeply.” (Wagner to Ludwig II, Munich, September 7, 1865 in Wagner 1984: 108).

### Kundry

In the same letter to the king of Bavaria, Wagner takes a major ideological leap: “What is the significance of his kissing Kundry? – This is a terrible secret, my dear Sir! You already know the serpent of paradise and her alluring promise: ‘Eritis sicut Deus, scientes bonum et malum.’ Adam and Eve lost their ‘innocence’. They became ‘aware of sin itself’. Due to this ‘awareness’, the human race was forced to suffer in shame and misery until redeemed by Christ, who took on the sin of mankind. My dear, dear friend, how else can I speak of such profound matters other than through parables, through comparison? Only the clairvoyant can whisper the inner significance to himself. Adam – Eve: Christ. – Well, what if we gave them: – ‘Amfortas – Kundry: Parsifal’? But with great caution!”

Yes, slowly does it. In Wagner's music, Kundry is no Eve: for her, the role of the serpent has been reserved. Wagner frequently forces Kundry to squirm, crawl, and loll in the dust. “She rides, flies, staggers, drags herself along, or writhes jaggedly on the ground, is full of ‘raging agitation’, is dressed in snake-skins, and has a deeply reddish-brown skin, thus drawing attention to her foreign status. When she is not moving excessively, she is lying petrified and as if dead on the ground. Diverse musical resources are deployed in order to come up with the agitated and shrill tones that accompany her appearance. Extreme intervals and disrupted rhythms define her singing. The sounds she emits range between a ‘primal scream’ and an ‘anxious whining’. She gives ‘a hideous scream’, lets out ‘a wailing lament of the utmost intensity’, she sings in a ‘rough and broken manner’, providing mere scraps, torn out of context. All this is reminiscent of Wagner's fateful essay entitled *Judaism in music*, in which he claimed to be unpleasantly impressed by the ‘hissing, shrill-sounding, buzzing and loudly bungling expression of Jewish speech’. Both Kundry and the Jewish people are thus aggressively ostracised.” (Rieger 2009: 241f.)

“The savagery that so dominantly determines Kundry's behaviour in the first two acts, has now disappeared: analogously, her complexion has become paler, her striding has altered and her demeanour

has become altogether domesticated: the witch-like southerner has been transformed into a dutiful, submissive white woman. She is now guided by humility, and she does not hesitate for a second to dry Parsifal's feet with her flowing hair – one of the most humiliating scenes in the entire operatic repertoire.” (Maier-Eroms 2009: 251).

Wagner prescribes only two possible forms of existence for the female, especially for the Jewess: as either a slave to the male, or as a man-eater. As such, he is in perfect accordance with the medieval image of the witch. “Several times Wagner's heroine announces that she can never help or do any good. In an era in which sexuality in itself was experienced as humiliating, any woman participating in this game deserved to be degraded, and so we are not completely bewildered by the outrageous ‘yearning to affect a complete depersonalization of woman into cunt’ (Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, New York, 1971). She is always breaking one or other taboo; she is never passive and chaste, but bears a resemblance to the concept of the witch through her activity and her cultivation of sexual contacts. The female figure was considered a hysteric and demonized as the result of a crisis in male self-confidence during the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the disappointment over shattered ideals and illusions, the shock caused by the side effects of the ongoing industrialization resulted in the female being chosen as the scapegoat, and her sensuality being condemned. It was their own sexuality that was to be exorcised from the female body; unacknowledged masochistic desires that did not fit into the popular concept of masculinity were processed by means of this hostile projection. Repressed desires threatened the stability and identity of the male figure, which was based partly on the ignorance of seemingly female elements. ... The fantasy turns out to be a repressive utopia, as ‘the flip-side of the sexual insatiability falsely attributed to the female, designed with the intention to liberate [the male] is to languish in eternal torment, with a fatal desire yearning for redemption through death’ (Carola Hilmes, *The femme fatale*, Stuttgart, 1990). ... The female is doubly denounced in *Parsifal*, as the misogynistic assumptions influencing the fantasy now demand their ancestral rights – the last time this occurs is shortly before the curtain falls. Femininity, love and death are combined in a disastrous manner.” (Maier-Eroms 2009: 233).

“... Four months before completion of the fair copy of the score, he wrote as follows: ‘By mixing the races, the noble blood of the male is corrupted by the less noble blood of the female: the male suffers, his character is affected in a negative manner, whereas the female gains so much that she is able to replace the male. Therefore, the female ‘owes’ redemption. Here, in art – as previously, in the bible;

the Immaculate Virgin gives birth to the Saviour.' Therefore, the races had to remain 'pure', because otherwise the male would be corrupted: art was supposed to contribute to this cause. The female was considered doubly vicious, as a contaminated woman could force the male – the dominant force in society – to lose his purity. Here his fear, typical of the times in which he lived, of the ultimately uncontrollable female is combined with his anti-Semitism." (Rieger 2009: 239).

### Musical ciphers

As the music lasts for four hours, a listener could easily lose the thread of the tale, if Wagner did not always grab him by the arm and accompany him through the entangled webs of his heroes. The legendary themes form a proven method. Especially in the case of the *Ring*, where the listener's memory has to encompass a period of several days, the prominent *Leitmotive* (= associative musical themes) create a certain structure in the music. But they are far more than just (mental) road regulations and pleasant traffic signs. These associative themes create a meta-level within the music, in the sense of Victor Hugo's words: "Music expresses that which can not be said, and about which it is impossible to remain silent." And particularly in *Parsifal*, they are applied in a highly differentiated and complex manner that both controls the conscious and involuntarily influences the subconscious perception.

Wagner begins by arranging the *Leitmotive* like erratic musical pillars in the empty musical space. He often repeats them several times at appropriate places, in order to study and establish their order. Then he begins to deploy them in seemingly inappropriate situations, as a form of "secret" comment. Finally, he links the motifs and their parameters to new musical structures. With well-nigh incredible mastery, he places the melody of one motif on top of the rhythm of another, in order to then "borrow" from others the direction of the development, the harmonies and the distinctive instrumentation. In this way, everything is interlinked, yet the result is not in any way chaotic: it is well under control, refined and suggestive.

### The chivalrous motifs

All motifs to do with religion and rituals sound very grand: the Last Supper motif, the faith motif, the Holy Grail motif. They all have the obscure key of B flat in common. Whereas the Last Supper is preceded by a solemnly ascending major triad in A flat, filled in by measured steps to become a perfect octave, after which it descends

in two stages to finally die away on the third, the Grail motif, which is related to the Last Supper motif, confines itself to an ascending melody. It contains no easing of the tension, hovering in the air like a melodic challenge, ready to burst forth at any moment with tremendous potential. On the other hand, the faith motif is like a triple blessing. Its terse formula is repeated three times, each time one step lower – and thus harmonically illuminated. It has an imperturbable and wholesome effect. Finally, the ceremonial bell motif consists solely of a reinforcing harmonic cadenza.

### The hysterical motifs

The Kundry motif is in blatant contrast to this seemingly cast-iron phalanx of "male motifs". It begins with a lengthily sustained, bitonal chord (D major and G major, heard at the same time), and then plummets downwards over three octaves in a series of diminished seventh chords! Here, her image is already clearly audible: first, the schizophrenic double chord, then the diminished chords representing her "diminished" character. Klingsor has to put up with similar intervals – and key signatures – to those of Kundry, but his motif contains bizarre interval leaps as well as a number of jerky upward movements. No consideration whatsoever is given to Amfortas. Together with the bell motif, his is the shortest. And whereas the Grail motif is presented in the solid key of A flat major, Amfortas' motif is in G sharp minor. Although enharmonically this is the same tone, the keys are in fact diametrically opposed within the Circle of Fifths. On top of this, Wagner literally "uproots" his Amfortas, by depriving him of the keynote, of all things. Amfortas' motif consists solely of a descending melody of resignation.

### The purity motifs

The *Parsifal* motif is devoid of any emotion, is without direction, possesses just the one extra characteristic: it is pure. Purely diatonic, it is almost narcissistically in love with itself, using the simplest of chords as harmony. In addition, it keeps to a relatively narrow tonal range. The musical prophecy of the pure fool is represented by an accumulation of four descending perfect fifths. But fifths that lack a third are neither fish nor fowl. They do not contain any harmonic potential, neither do they demonstrate any preference for major or minor. It would be hard to pronounce a more ambiguous oracle.

Finally, the Good Friday Spell. In view of the bleak B-flat key of the Grail motif, this develops in the key of B major, absolutely lost in reverie. Step by step, the Good Friday motif captures the light. It reaches its climax after three cautiously optimistic in-

tervals (third-fourth-third), grasping its way upwards to heaven.

### Grace amidst severity

Wagner's favourite scene was the song of the flower girls in the second act. At the end, he would turn up in Bayreuth just to attend this part of the performance (regularly calling out "Bravo"). A playful, graceful, and at the same time musically accomplished choral movement accompanies the appearance of the flower-girls. It is a true shame that Wagner – as Nietzsche would put it – was no longer "granted" the opportunity of writing another operetta after *Parsifal*. The story of the Holy Grail ends with a solid A-flat major chord.

### Redemption from redemption

"Most of the musical motifs used for Kundry are based on her laughter: and hers is the most frequently employed motif in the work. Kundry's drive and restlessness are also expressed in the music: the riding motif, with its cut-off demisemiquaver runs symbolizing the pounding of the hooves and the snorting of the horse, proves to be extremely taut in its rhythm. Already before Wagner's time, 'strong' women had been depicted in operas and programme music by 'evil' means, such as dissonances, modulations, tritones or hectic rhythms. Kundry's real motif is heard in the cry of the Squires, telling the Wild Woman to leap down off her horse.

"The Last Supper theme that accompanies Gurnemanz' words regarding her penance for previous guilty incarnations reflects the affinity of her situation with that of the Grail Knights. What the text does not mention, is revealed – as is so often the case in Wagner's works – by the orchestra, which takes on the role of narrator superimposed on the narrator of the moment. For Gurnemanz' dark premonition that Kundry was linked to the spell that vanquished Amfortas and brought about the disaster in the Grail, is not specified in the text, but only in the motif that characterizes her, which makes a striking apparition in the instrumental accompaniment. Also, the magic motif turns into the Kundry motif, thus clarifying the unspoken context. In the seduction scene, Kundry makes skilful use of a lullaby, in order to remind Parsifal of his childhood. In calling out to him, she uses the interval of the fifth used for the promise motif, suggesting that she has recognized the pure fool. The Heart's Sorrow theme grows in resemblance to her own motif, in order to reveal her selfish intentions. During the kiss, the magic theme is heard. Kundry describes this kiss

as a 'replay' of parental love: sustained chords, horns symbolizing death in the low register alternate with high woodwinds. The motif of the yearning for love first appears as sensual, in chromatic form, but soon turns out to be the beginning of the sorrow music from the Last Supper motif: Parsifal gains a different insight...

"All in all, it is conspicuous that great chunks of the orchestral part accompanying her have been constructed by means of the compositional devices used for Tristan. Kundry's yearning motif appears as a reversal of the suffering motif that summarizes the agonies suffered by Christ and Amfortas, and represents her hope of redemption, which appears to be self-contradictory.

"Kundry's mighty reply: 'Oh, cruel one!' (Wagner 1984: 69) is divided into seven periods, in which her personal motif acts as link to the various other motifs: 'If you are a redeemer' is accompanied by the motif of longing and provides a return of the Tristan introduction, representing an inversion of the suffering motif from the second period. The third mediates between the first two and the last, containing fragments of the magic, the riding and the yearning motifs. The harmony is borrowed from the magic theme, the rhythm from the Last Supper theme: the melody intermediates. When she speaks of the unspeakable sight of the crucified Christ, the Last Supper theme and the magic motif can be heard. This sight hit her like a lightning bolt, providing an interesting link to the way in which Isolde was captivated by the sight of Tristan. Does the sight of the saviour truly evoke in her the hope of salvation by God? ... After her final, single and repeated word – 'to serve' – the D-minor cadenza is resolved, thus musically cementing the fact that she has finally found her true calling. None of the characters comment in any way on the fact that Kundry is dying; only the orchestra suggests that a sacrifice is being made here, by means of the transition from D-flat major to A minor, then returning to the original key. This 'queen sacrifice\*', which serves to safeguard the future continuation and functioning of the system, is like the loss of all that is feminine in this world, as director Peter Konwitschny has said." (Maier-Eroms 2009: 247f.)

### **Baptized for destruction**

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"It seems as if Wagner was also searching for a musical solution for Christianity in his last work – a solution for the contradiction between 'brass-band-like diatonicism and obsessive chromaticism' (Adorno in Wagner 1984: 193) that determines its composition. Chromaticism is banished to hell – the Tristan chord, in the low register of the woodwinds, now represents Klingsor's world. And the drama for

the Grail knights indeed consists of how they can disassociate their blood from this world. For, through his sexual encounter with Kundry, Amfortas had contaminated – mixed – his blood. Hagen's relatively casual statement about his blood as a 'semi-Jew' in *Götterdämmerung* – 'it does not flow as purely and nobly as yours' – is elevated, as it were, to the key theme of the music. Once again, Wagner achieves the strongest harmonic effects by abolishing the boundaries between the various spheres he has constructed, and thus confronting the world of the knights with those of Kundry and Klingsor. Thus, the 'fate of the blood' is made identical to that of the tonality: the music is the blood. Several times during Amfortas' monologues in Act I and Act III, Klingsor's wild, chromatic music penetrates the ethereal and auratic atmosphere of the Grail knights. Klingsor's 'sinful blood' is preserved, so to speak, in an independent form in Kundry, and thus, in terms of the harmony, the most advanced part of the score is the seduction scene that takes place between her and Parsifal: here, the danger for pure blood and pure tone is at its greatest. However, Parsifal conquers this danger, and thus he is able to purify the 'tonal' blood, to restore the boundaries leading to the chromatic world of Klingsor, and to conclusively annihilate Klingsor. Parsifal succeeds where Siegfried fails throughout his lifetime.

"The inner destruction of Kundry corresponds with the external destruction of Klingsor. ... Kundry has already been musically demoted after the collapse of Klingsor's power, and at the beginning of Act III – apart from moaning and screaming – is capable only of stammering 'to serve, to serve'. Now, as this pathetic Kundry is baptized by Parsifal, the music announces that she must learn to die: 'she is baptized for destruction' (Holland in Wagner 1984: 27). And this what truly shocks us in this score: that it manages to transform the killing by compassion, as professed by the text, into music, soft, yet painful sounding. When sketching the composition, Wagner himself talked to Cosima of a 'destruction sound'. And it was precisely the introduction of this sound during Kundry's baptism to which Wagner referred as 'one of the finest' he had 'ever written'." (Scheit 1999)

### **Redemption operetta**

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"The fact that such a plot was thought up in Germany and by a German and that nothing similar can be found within the cultures of other nations, as far as the totalization of the anti-Semitic projection is concerned, has so far – despite all criticism poured on Wagner – not really dawned on people, and likewise the question Wagner put to himself: what is essentially German? What is essentially German,

if not this all-encompassing fantasy of destruction, which holds out to the very last?

"Now Klingsor and Kundry are dead, the reproductive cycle of narcissistic Grail knights can again function without interruption – the ghostly supper held as a replacement of sexual intercourse: the spear, with which the body of the crucified Christ was once injured, joins the bowl that contains the blood – the true 'enlightenment', the 'brightest incandescence' of the Grail becomes possible.

"However, in the following lines it also becomes clear why Nietzsche considered Parsifal to be 'operetta material par excellence' (Nietzsche, in Wagner 1984: 165) – after surviving sexual adventures, the champagne corks are popping: as Parsifal sings, 'the sacred spear / I will return it to you', raising his spear ... . All look at the raised spear in the greatest of rapture, and Parsifal continues, gazing up at its tip in enthusiasm: 'O, supreme joy of this miracle! / This that could heal your wound I see pouring with holy blood / yearning for that kindred fount / which flows and wells within the Grail!' All sing: 'Miracle of supreme salvation! Our Redeemer redeemed!' (Wagner 1984 : 83f). Yet this operetta of German blood cost the beautiful Jewish woman her life. The significance of Parsifal is the mythologizing of the phallus, the delusional notion of a purely phallic sexuality that yet denies the physical side of desire." (Scheit 2004).

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