

Synopsis

Act I

Near the sanctuary of the Holy Grail, the old knight Gurnemanz and two sentries wake and perform their morning prayers, while other knights prepare a bath for their ailing ruler Amfortas, who suffers from an incurable wound. Suddenly, Kundry—a mysterious, ageless woman who serves as the Grail’s messenger—appears. She has brought medicine for Amfortas. The knights carry in the king. He reflects on a prophecy that speaks of his salvation by a “pure fool, enlightened by compassion,” then is borne off. When the sentries ask about Klingsor, a sorcerer who is trying to destroy the knights of the Grail, Gurnemanz tells the story of Amfortas’s wound: The Holy Grail—the cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper—and the Spear that pierced his body on the cross were given into the care of Titurel, Amfortas’s father, who assembled a company of knights to guard the relics. Klingsor, wishing to join the brotherhood, tried to overcome his sinful thoughts by castrating himself, but the brotherhood rejected him. Seeking vengeance, he built a castle across the mountains with a magic garden full of alluring maidens to entrap the knights. Amfortas set out to defeat Klingsor, but a terribly beautiful woman seduced him. Klingsor stole the Holy Spear from Amfortas and used it to stab him. The wound can only be healed by the innocent youth of which the prophecy has spoken. Suddenly, a swan plunges to the ground, struck dead by an arrow. The knights drag in a young man, who boasts of his archery skills. He is ashamed when Gurnemanz rebukes him, but he cannot explain his violent act or even state his name. All he remembers is his mother, Herzeleide, or “Heart’s Sorrow.” Kundry tells the youth’s history: His father died in battle, and his mother reared the boy in a forest, but now she too is dead. Gurnemanz leads the nameless youth to the banquet of the Grail, wondering if he may be the prophecy’s fulfillment.

The knights assemble. Titurel bids Amfortas uncover the Grail to give strength to the brotherhood, but Amfortas refuses: The sight of the chalice increases his anguish. Titurel orders the sentries to proceed, and the chalice casts its glow about the hall. The nameless youth watches in astonishment but understands nothing. The ceremony ended, Gurnemanz, disappointed and angry, drives him away as an unseen voice reiterates the prophecy.

Act II

At his bewitched fortress, Klingsor, the necromancer, summons Kundry—who, under his spell, is forced to lead a double existence—and orders her to seduce the young fool. Having secured the Spear, Klingsor now seeks to destroy the youth, whom he knows can save the knights of the Grail. Hoping for redemption from her torment, Kundry protests in vain.

The nameless youth enters Klingsor's enchanted garden. Flower maidens beg for his love, but he resists them. The girls withdraw as Kundry, transformed into an entrancing young woman, appears and addresses him by his name—Parsifal. He realizes that his mother once called him so in a dream. Kundry begins her seduction by revealing memories of Parsifal's childhood and finally kisses him. Parsifal suddenly feels Amfortas's pain and understands compassion: He realizes that it was Kundry who brought about Amfortas's downfall and that it is his mission to save the brotherhood of the Grail. Astonished at his transformation, Kundry tries to arouse Parsifal's pity: She tells him of the curse that condemns her to lead an unending life of constantly alternating rebirths ever since she laughed at Christ on the cross. But Parsifal resists her. She curses him to wander hopelessly in search of Amfortas and the Grail and calls on Klingsor for help. The magician appears and hurls the Holy Spear at Parsifal, who miraculously catches it, causing Klingsor's realm to perish.

Act III

Gurnemanz, now very old and living as a hermit near the Grail's sanctuary, finds the penitent Kundry and awakes her from a deathlike sleep. An unknown knight approaches, and Gurnemanz soon recognizes him as Parsifal, bearing the Holy Spear. Parsifal describes his years of wandering, trying to find his way back to Amfortas and the Grail. Gurnemanz tells him that he has come at the right time: Amfortas, longing for death, has refused to uncover the Grail. The brotherhood is suffering, and Titurel has died. Kundry washes Parsifal's feet, and Gurnemanz blesses him and proclaims him king. As his first task, Parsifal baptizes Kundry. He is struck by the beauty of nature around them, and Gurnemanz explains that this is the spell of Good Friday. The distant tolling of bells announces the funeral of Titurel, and the three make their way to the sanctuary.

Knights carry the Grail, Amfortas, and Titurel's body before the assembly. Amfortas is unable to perform the rite. He begs the knights to kill him and thus end his anguish—when suddenly Parsifal appears. He touches Amfortas's side with the Spear and heals the wound. Uncovering the Grail, he accepts the homage of the knights as their redeemer and king and blesses them. The reunion of the Grail and Spear has enlightened and rejuvenated the community.

In Focus

Richard Wagner

Parsifal

Premiere: Festspielhaus, Bayreuth, 1882

Wagner's final opera is a musical journey unlike any other. The composer preferred to call his mature works "music dramas" to distinguish them from "conventional" opera, but he set *Parsifal* even farther apart by naming it a Bühnenweihfestspiel, a "festival play for the consecration of a stage." The stage in question was that of the Bayreuth Festival House, which Wagner had built to produce the *Ring* cycle, and the remarkable acoustic qualities of that theater informed much of the unique tone of *Parsifal*. The opera tells the tale of a young man who, despite—or perhaps because of—his extreme naiveté about the ways of the world, is destined to renew a brotherhood of knights charged with guarding the relics of Christ's last days—the Holy Grail (the chalice used at the Last Supper) and the Spear that pierced Christ on the cross. The psychological, mythical, and mystical possibilities of such a story are obvious, and Wagner's accomplishment results in an air of reverence that surrounds this piece. The solemnity of large parts of the score and its great length and musical demands also contribute to the notion that this as a unique work in the repertoire.

The Creator

Richard Wagner (1813–1883) was the complex, controversial creator of masterpieces that stand at the center of today's operatic repertory. Born in Leipzig, Germany, he was an artistic revolutionary who reimagined every supposition about music and theater. Wagner insisted that words and music were equals in his works. This approach led to the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk, or "total work of art," combining music, poetry, architecture, painting, and other disciplines—a notion that has had an impact on creative fields far beyond opera.

The Setting

Parsifal takes place in and around the sanctuary of the knights of the Holy Grail, at the mythical location of Monsalvat in Spain, during the Middle Ages. The Met's current production places the action in an unspecified but roughly contemporary setting.

The Music

The score of *Parsifal* is an extraordinary blend of musical transcendence and dramatic cohesion. The use of bells and offstage choruses are among the unusual effects that create an almost liturgical atmosphere. The magnificent

and expansive prelude conveys the important role that the orchestra will play in creating a world in which time itself is experienced in an unusual way. The vocal parts call for superior breath control to sustain the long melodic lines. Many passages demand a high degree of sheer lyrical beauty, most notably Gurnemanz's narration in Act III—which accompanies the rapturous orchestral music known as the Good Friday Spell—and Parsifal's final solo at the end of the opera. There are also jarringly dramatic moments, such as Kundry's shrieks and groans of agony and her chilling vocal drop of almost two octaves in Act II when she confesses how she laughed at the Crucifixion. The use of the chorus is equally remarkable: In the first Grail scene in Act I, a muscular, hymn-like melody seamlessly evolves into a succession of arching phrases beginning in the lowest voices (basses on stage) and rising to the highest (boy sopranos, invisible above the stage)—a musical bridge from earth to heaven. The Flower Maidens' scene in Act II includes passages that depict the allure of attractive women with the traditional exoticisms of 19th-century Romantic opera. Conversely, passages in the second Grail scene, in Act III, are striking early explorations of atonality. While the score of *Parsifal* contains endless opportunities for musicological study, it also remains approachable for newcomers to the composer's oeuvre. As Wagner's wife Cosima commented, "It's all so direct!"

Met History

The first staged performance of *Parsifal* outside the Bayreuth Festival took place at the Met on Christmas Eve, 1903. The Wagner family had tried to keep the work exclusive to Bayreuth, but its German copyright had no force in the U.S. Alfred Hertz conducted a cast led by fellow Bayreuth veterans Alois Burgstaller, Milka Ternina, and Anton van Rooy. The Met toured *Parsifal* extensively during the 1904–05 season, giving much of the country its first full experience of the work. German operas did not appear at the Met during the First World War, but *Parsifal* returned when Artur Bodanzky conducted a new production in 1920, designed by Joseph Urban and sung in English (German was restored in 1922). Between 1926 and 1948, Lauritz Melchior was the dominating presence in the title role, alongside other artists of the era including Frida Leider, Kirsten Flagstad, and Astrid Varnay (Kundry); Friedrich Schorr and Herbert Janssen (Amfortas); and Michael Bohnen, Emanuel List, and Alexander Kipnis (Gurnemanz). Fritz Stiedry conducted a new production by Leo Kerz in 1956, and 1970 saw another new staging by Nathaniel Merrill, with Leopold Ludwig on the podium. Otto Schenk's production, with sets by Günther Schneider-Siemssen, premiered in 1991 with a cast that included Plácido Domingo, Jessye Norman, Robert Lloyd, and Franz Mazura. The current production by François Girard opened in 2013, with Daniele Gatti conducting Jonas Kaufmann, Katarina Dalayman, Peter Mattei, Evgeny Nikitin, and René Pape in the lead roles.

Program Note

When he finished orchestrating *Götterdämmerung* on November 21, 1874, Richard Wagner added a brief but emphatic postscript to the score's last page: "I will say no more!" He had a good deal more to say with his art, though—never mind how much the fading ebb of D-flat major that ends the *Ring* may sound like closure. Inevitably Wagner was drawn back to a project he had begun to consider even before embarking on the *Ring*. He first encountered the early-13th-century chivalric romance by Wolfram von Eschenbach that provided his chief source for *Parsifal* in the remarkably productive summer of 1845, in the spa town of Marienbad, while on vacation from his duties as a conductor for Dresden's opera house. With his confidence boosted by the recent completion of *Tannhäuser*—Wagner had feared he would die before finishing it—he sketched out plans for *Lohengrin* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and also made his earliest contact with the characters who would appear in his swan song for the stage.

Wagner was an ambitious and determined man of 32 that summer; by the time he began writing the music for *Parsifal*, he had reached his mid-60s, a weathered and withdrawn composer suffering from angina. He completed the full score in January 1882, just a little more than a year before his death in Venice. *Parsifal*'s gestation thus exceeded that of the *Ring*. Such patience over the long game allowed Wagner to return to the subject periodically as new associations emerged. In a letter in which he notes that "*Parzival* is again coming very much to life in me," Wagner compares the increasing clarity with which the still-to-be-written opera takes shape to the process of ripening and acknowledges that many years "may yet have to pass" before that state is achieved. (The composer later settled on the spelling "*Parsifal*," his idiosyncratic variant on the medieval sources.)

In 1865, responding to a request from King Ludwig II, his patron, Wagner produced a detailed sketch—including elaboration of the backstory pertaining to the Grail itself and the origin of the order of knights assigned to protect it—which closely anticipates the synopsis of *Parsifal* as we know it. But with his attention taken up by projects already underway, most notably the remainder of the *Ring*, Wagner continued to let this ripen. He needed barely more than a month to write the libretto itself when *Parsifal* at last became his central preoccupation in January 1877, following the first-ever staging of the *Ring* cycle the previous summer. During the three intervening decades, Wagner's thinking about the *Parsifal* story had absorbed the dramatic changes in his worldview, from the materialist revolutionary convinced the world could be improved to the adherent of Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy of the life force as blind illusion that must be overcome by renunciation, which in turn encouraged the composer's interest in Buddhism.

For several reasons, though, despite the coexistence of so many layers, *Parsifal* has a reputation for being a single-mindedly Christian work. The composer's champion-turned-foe Friedrich Nietzsche set the tone for this

reading by portraying Wagner as “fallen sobbing at the foot of the Cross.” The solemnity with which *Parsifal* was originally introduced only enhanced the impression of performances as a quasi-liturgy accompanied by sacred music. Yet Jesus is never actually referred to directly, and Wagner uses Christian imagery and symbols much as he had incorporated those of pagan myth and legend in the *Ring*. As Wagner wrote in his late essay *Religion und Kunst (Religion and Art)*, art is able to reveal the “deep and hidden truth” of the “mythic symbols” which religion “would have us believe in their literal sense.” François Girard, director of the Met’s current production, observes that “Wagner was trying to reconcile all the aspects of his spirituality” in this final period of his life. “He wanted to turn them into one gesture that would sum up his idea of the ‘total work of art.’”

There are many parallels between Wagner’s treatment of myth and legend in the *Ring* libretti and in *Parsifal*. In both cases, he concocted a unified narrative of his own invention by isolating what he wanted from the episodic sprawl that he found in his primary sources and from recent scholarly glosses on them. In fact, Wagner disdainfully complained that Wolfram’s poem “blunders about” from one adventure to another and that the author “understands nothing whatever of the real content.” It was the composer’s decision to align Parsifal’s quest for the Grail with the medieval Christian legends defining the Holy Grail as the chalice that collected the blood shed by Jesus during the Crucifixion. The pre-Christian Celtic sources of the Parzival epic are reflected in Wolfram’s depiction of the Grail as a supernatural gemstone. Wagner actually interpreted the “Nibelung hoard,” which in material terms symbolizes the power conferred by Alberich’s ring, as another pagan version of the Christianized Holy Grail; in *Parsifal*, meanwhile, the Grail’s life-sustaining efficacy is reminiscent of Freia’s golden apples.

At the same time, Wagner applied what he had learned dramaturgically from *Tristan und Isolde* to his representation of Parsifal’s epic quest. (His interest in the Grail knight had been reawakened while composing the former by the parallel that he sensed between Tristan and Amfortas—both trapped by desire—and Wagner even contemplated introducing a cameo appearance by the wandering Parsifal in the earlier work’s last act as Tristan lies dying.) *Parsifal*, like *Tristan*, abstracts the onstage action into a few potently concentrated and highly resonant encounters. These reveal the “real content” of the quest to be an interior journey toward enlightenment. The entire opera is structured by an overarching symmetry of lucid simplicity: Parsifal’s incomprehension when he first observes the Grail ceremony presided over by the suffering Amfortas and his act of healing in the final scene form the two great pillars that are connected by the hero’s intervening trial.

Wagner not only selected what he considered the essential threads within Wolfram’s epic but also fused traits taken from a variety of its characters—and from other sources—to create the enigmatic figure of Kundry. Her contradictions

make her the most complex personality in *Parsifal* and arguably in all of Wagner. Kundry, who provides the link between the crumbling realm of Monsalvat and the external world, serves as the agent of Parsifal's enlightenment at the very moment she attempts to destroy him. The English scholar Lucy Beckett observes that aspects of Kundry also derive from other works Wagner had planned but abandoned along the way: his sketches for the play *Jesus of Nazareth* (1848), with its premise that art could "recover" the lost essence of Christianity, and for *Die Sieger* (*The Victors*, 1856), a music drama Wagner envisioned that would draw on a Buddhist story of the renunciation of desire.

On account of its prolonged genesis—and of course its status as the composer's farewell to the stage—*Parsifal* is often approached as a work of summation, of backward glances. On one level it does after all reprise the central characters and themes of Wagner's life work. Along with the parallel between Amfortas and Tristan already mentioned, Parsifal bursts on the scene like the guileless, naïve Siegfried, a child of nature, while Klingsor burns with a desire for revenge as intense as Alberich's. Kundry time-travels across generations, a female Flying Dutchman cursed for her blasphemy. These echo effects are even more apparent in the relationships between the characters: Parsifal resisting Kundry has a precursor in Venus's attempt to ensnare Tannhäuser, and Gurnemanz, despite his impatience, recalls something of the wise Hans Sachs in the hope he invests in the young newcomer.

Wagner, moreover, wove personal experiences from across the span of his life into the fabric of *Parsifal's* music, imagery, and scenic conception, such as the "Dresden Amen" from the city where he once harbored revolutionary hopes or the tolling bells he heard in his exile in Zurich. In particular, when Wagner witnessed a hen's helpless suffering as it was slaughtered in a shop one day, it triggered an epiphany that would prove to be the key to the opera he was still years away from writing. Perceiving the suffering that lies at the heart of existence—symbolized by Amfortas's wound—is what awakens compassion (Mitleid) within Parsifal and opens the way toward redemption.

But if *Parsifal* at times suggests another variation on familiar Wagnerian themes and characters, it also stands apart. As director Girard remarks, here Wagner "reaches even beyond" his earlier grand syntheses to create "an elusive piece that speaks to the heart and the soul through channels that we're not used to dealing with."

Wagner even invented a special generic term, *Bühnenweihfestspiel*, for the opera, a pretentious-sounding compound that really just refers to its status as a work to inaugurate the stage of the Bayreuth Festival. Technically the *Ring* had already done that in 1876. But seeing the cycle performed had been depressingly anti-climactic, the palest shadow of what his imagination had carried all those years. In contrast, he created *Parsifal* with a clear sense of the distinctive sonority and immersive experience of the Bayreuth space: a space designed to maximize

the audience's identification with the dreamlike realm represented onstage. *Parsifal's* sound world reverberates with colors, nuances, and textures unlike anything else found in Wagner. In the notes to his 1970 recording, Pierre Boulez remarked that this music "places the emphasis for the first time on uncertainty, on indetermination" and shows "an aversion to definitiveness in musical phrases as long as they have not exhausted their potential for evolution and renewal."

Wagner's widow Cosima tried to intensify *Parsifal's* mystique—more cynical observers would call it a marketing ploy—by restricting staged performances to Bayreuth for the 30-year duration of its copyright. At the time, however, the United States was not party to international copyright law. Incurring Cosima's wrath and causing a scandal, the Met stirred up enormous excitement by staging the first American performance on Christmas Eve in 1903, to front-page coverage.

The desire to control *Parsifal* of course also applies to the ultimate meanings of this lucid yet most elusive of Wagner's creations. Some argue that it encodes the toxic brew of Wagner's late-period racist ravings, with Amfortas's wound as a proto-Nazi symbol of contamination by "inferior" races. Others are profoundly disturbed by what they perceive as deep misogyny or even a blasphemous mimicry of Christianity. *Parsifal's* rich production history only underscores the extraordinary ambivalence that makes the work so endlessly fascinating. Nietzsche himself, who remains among the harshest of the work's critics, reminds us that *Parsifal* can generate contradictory responses even within the same person. Having damned the opera as "a curse on the senses and the spirit," after hearing the Prelude performed, he wrote of its "penetration of vision that cuts through the soul as with a knife."

—Thomas May

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