



Parsifal, Royal Opera House,
Live in Cinema, 18 December 2013

Unauthorized introduction by Andy Ross

Parsifal is an allegorical story set in a grandiose musical frame. The story concerns a quest for the holy grail and is packed with ingredients from legend and religious myth. But telling the tale in bare words would fall flat. The production as grand opera with overwhelming orchestral music makes for a magnificent theatrical experience that transforms the story by resetting it at the emotional level. The plot is as incidental as the lyrics in a heavy metal rock concert.

This is the opera that Richard Wagner seemed to regard as his summary masterpiece. His Ring cycle is his defining work, of course, and amply explains his fame and notoriety over the generations. But Parsifal is rich in symbolism at a level that works viscerally. Wagner saw it as a consecration rite for his opera house at Bayreuth. He took over a quarter of a century to write it, during which time he managed to compose the Ring cycle as a kind of distraction from the deeper themes of Parsifal. So something about this work is worth understanding.

Wagner saw himself as an artist in the grandest tradition. He sought to fuse music

and drama in works of such overwhelming intensity that his audience would be shaken and stirred for life by the experience. He sought to create a new mythic foundation for the solidarity of the Germanic peoples, no less. His aim was to replace the oddments of myth and art that defined the Germanic cultural heritage with a new core that would unify the fragments and lend a new confidence to a people whose main impact on world history was still largely in the future.

His vision panned out within a century. The outcome would surely have thrilled and horrified him beyond his wildest dreams, but at least the Germanic peoples set bold footprints on the path of the long march toward the ultimate goal of the human race on planet Earth. Wagner inspired the Nazis, and Adolf Hitler was a devoted fan of his operatic blockbusters. Wagner still inspires a cultural elite among the German privileged classes, and his place as an icon of German national identity in a world of shifting loyalties and artificial cultures is unshakable.

Wagner lived and worked before and after Germany achieved political unification under Otto von Bismarck. Before unification, Germany was a patchwork of small principalities stretching from Prussia in the north to Bavaria in the south. All these

states and statelets came together in a nation that became the second Reich. The first had been the Holy Roman Empire, which endured in more or less coherent form for a thousand years, until Napoleon destroyed its last remnants. That destruction caused ferment in a Germany often dismissed as the land of poets and thinkers, where great musicians like Beethoven and Brahms, writers like Goethe and Lessing, and philosophers like Hegel and Schopenhauer dominated the cultural landscape. The new Reich under Bismarck was strong and confident as it built up its industrial might, and Wagner saw himself as inheriting the mantle of Beethoven and Goethe. Beside him, in the world of philosophy, Friedrich Nietzsche announced the twilight of the gods and prophesied the coming of the superman in writings as grandiose in their own way as Wagner's stage productions. Meanwhile, mad King Ludwig in Bavaria built his fairy-tale castle at Neuschwanstein, which exceeded in excess if not in hubris his grandfather Ludwig's massive neoclassical pagan temple of Walhalla on the Danube. This was the world of Wagner.

The impact of Wagner's art took time to grow, and Wagner himself was often short of money to fund his latest big idea. He also suffered chronic migraines, which so afflicted him that some see his operas as migraine auras writ large so that his audiences could share the suffering and the ominous foreboding they seemed to embody. Indeed a marathon night out like Parsifal, which minus the two intervals is still between four and five hours long, could induce headaches in those of a delicate disposition.

More to the point, however, is the ambition of the work. Parsifal aims to recycle in a medieval Germanic setting the timeless myth of the holy fool finding redemption.

The resonance with the Jesus myth of a prophet of love who suffers torment and finds a grail of sorts is strong and fundamental. The Arthurian story of knights of the round table is there too, along with more ancient tales of sexual temptation and wounds of battle healed by magic. All this is soupy sustenance to accompany the heady draughts of intoxicating music and to mellow its effects on sensitive stomachs. The aim throughout is to replace Christian myth with something more Nordic or Aryan, as if to undo the fixation on Jewish biblical history that had subverted the spirit of the entire Holy Roman Empire.

This is where the explosive theme of anti-Semitism rears its ugly head. Wagner became notorious for writing a shameful pamphlet attacking the influence of Jews in the German classical music scene, and this pamphlet apparently grabbed the attention of the young Hitler in Vienna. Whether Wagner was anti-Semitic in any of the more damaging senses of that epithet is for historians to debate, but he was certainly prejudiced enough for his former friend Nietzsche to break with him in part over this issue, and certainly enough for the whole Bayreuth tradition to become perilously tainted by association.

Animosity against Jews is nowhere in evidence in Parsifal. Only the big theme of quest and redemption is essential to the experience, and this is universally human and quite independent of Jewish biblical history. But anyone wishing to be moved and edified by the psychedelic experience of this grandiose operatic production needs to be aware of its roots in the rank soil of Germanic fear and loathing of Jewish influence in a cultural heritage that seems in retrospect to be all but inseparable from that influence.

