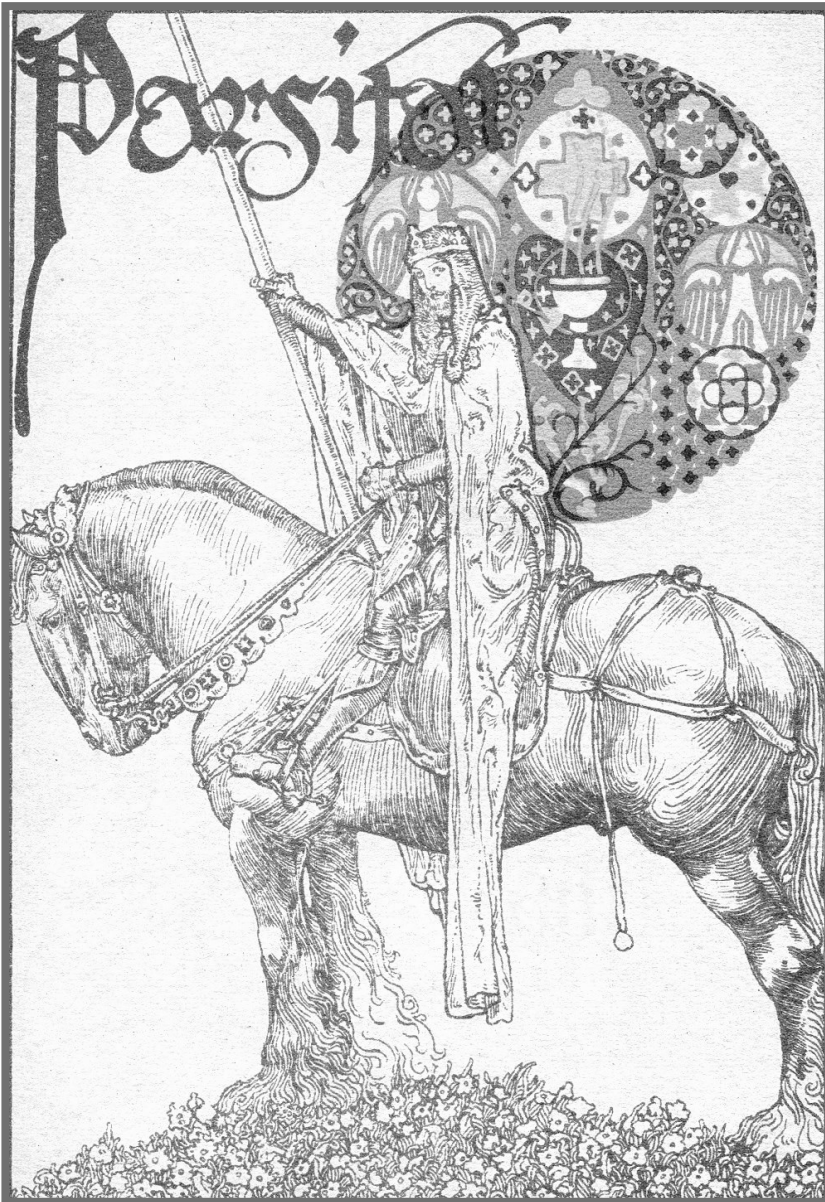


Opera & Real Life

A Flawed Utopia



8. A Flawed Utopia

April 19, 2022

MY TITLE derives from my original intention for this class, to expand on the notion of Wagner's last opera, *Parsifal* (1882), as a paradigm of the conception, decline, and restoration of an anti-capitalist Utopian republic, an idea expounded by John Bokina in *Opera and Politics*. However, other ideas have taken precedence: the way that Wagner's operas reveal political agendas in often surprising ways, the trend in recent productions to come to terms with this, and the particular challenge *Parsifal* presents.: namely, how can you take an esoteric, reactionary opera marinated in Christian mysticism, and make it relevant to real-life concerns in the more secular world we inhabit today? I shall offer several examples of how this might be undertaken. *rb*.

A. Wagner, Politics, Production

Richard Wagner (1813–83) was a political animal; he was exiled for two decades for his participation in one of the revolutions of 1848, and you can hardly get stronger political credentials than that! And all his operas are, on some level, political too. After a brief survey of the production history of his later operas, we look at a couple of scenes from an earlier one, *Lohengrin* (1850), which the exiled composer never got to see on the stage until years later. As Lohengrin in myth was the son of Parsifal, you could call the later opera a prequel to the earlier one, although they are worlds apart in musical style. Although we shall not go into the plot in any detail, a synopsis of the opera is available as a separate handout.

Max Brückner: design for *Götterdämmerung* (Bayreuth 1896)

Wieland Wagner: *Götterdämmerung* (Bayreuth 1956)

Patrice Chéreau: *Götterdämmerung* (Bayreuth 1976)

Frank Castorf: *Götterdämmerung* (Bayreuth 2013)

Frank Castorf: *Siegfried* (Bayreuth 2013)

Barrie Kosky: *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (Bayreuth 2019)

Wieland Wagner: *Lohengrin* (Bayreuth 1958)

Christine Mielitz : *Lohengrin* (Dresden 1983/2016)

David Alden: *Lohengrin* (London 2018)

♪ **Wagner:** *Lohengrin*, opening and Act III interlude
Dresden 2019; c. Christian Thielemann, d. Christine Mielitz; Derek Welton (Herald), Georg Zeppenfeld (King Henry)

Laufenberg updates the action to the present day, but by moving the action out of Europe he both addresses current geopolitical concerns and finds a way out of the claustrophobic Christianity typically associated with this very hermetic opera.

Uwe Eric Laufenberg: *Parsifal* (Bayreuth, 2016)

♪ **Wagner:** *Parsifal*, various excerpts
Bayreuth 2016; c. Hartmut Haenchen, d. Uwe Eric Laufenberg; Elena Pankratova (Kundry), Klaus Florian Vogt (Parsifal), Ryan McKinny (Amfortas), Georg Zeppenfeld (Gurnemanz)

B. Christianity in Retreat

We make an equally brief survey of the history of *Parsifal* productions, before looking at the final scene of the opera in two contrasting productions from the past decade, by **François Girard** at the Metropolitan Opera and **Dmitri Tcherniakov** in Berlin respectively. A synopsis of the opera is available as a separate handout, and in this case it matters, as the unusually complicated back-story is essential to explain the later action.

Max Brückner: design for *Parsifal* (Bayreuth 1882)

Wieland Wagner: *Parsifal* (Bayreuth, 1958)

François Girard: *Parsifal* (NY Met, 2013)

Dmitri Tcherniakov: *Parsifal* (Berlin, 2015)

♪ **Wagner:** *Parsifal*, ending of the opera
NY Met 2012; c. Daniele Gatti, d. François Girard; Jonas Kaufmann (Parsifal)

♪ **Wagner:** *Parsifal*, ending of the opera
Berlin 2015; c. Daniel Barenboim, d. Dmitri Tcherniakov; Andreas Schager (Parsifal)

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C. Bayreuth Opens Out

In the second hour, we look at excerpts from the current *Parsifal* at Bayreuth, a production by **Uwe Eric Laufenberg** that premiered in 2016. Like the Tcherniakov production we sampled in the first hour,