

Class 8 : A Failed Utopia

A. Wagner, Politics, Production

1. Title 1 (*Parsifal Flower Maidens*)

Richard Wagner (1813–83) was always 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. If they weren't, they could not have been adopted by **Hitler** for his own ends—though for the most part, those ends involve a perversion of what Wagner was actually saying.

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

3. — the same, without title

But Wagner's political messages are seldom doctrinaire, and always concealed under the romantic mythology that was his contribution to the grand opera tradition. And for 80 years, they were always played that way, as grand heroic spectacle, albeit with a nationalistic edge. This design by Max Brückner for an 1896 production of *Götterdämmerung* (The Twilight of the Gods) at Wagner's home theater in Bayreuth is an excellent example. Essentially, the Met was doing the same thing up to about 2010, and the new version by Robert Lepage was simply reproducing the old romantic spectacle by hi-tech means.

4. Wieland Wagner: *Götterdämmerung* (Bayreuth 1956)

5. Patrice Chéreau: *Götterdämmerung* (Bayreuth 1976)

When the composer's grandson, **Wieland Wagner**, reopened the Bayreuth Festival after the War, his main concern was to purge the works not just of the stain of Naziism, but of any political content whatsoever. So his stripped-down productions played only the archetypal mythic elements of the dramas, and later the Jungian ones. It was only with the centennial *Ring* production in 1976 that the guest director **Patrice Chéreau** introduced elements of the modern world. His setting of the final scene of *Götterdämmerung* with a mass of working-class people emerging from their tenements to watch the immolation of the old gods was a break with both the romantic and stripped-down traditions, though it was not immediately taken up elsewhere.

6. Frank Castorf: *Götterdämmerung* (Bayreuth 2013)

7. Frank Castorf: *Siegfried* (Bayreuth 2013)

However, the most recent *Ring* production at Bayreuth (now retired) is this 2013 one by **Frank Castorf**. As you see, he has doubled down on Chéreau's tenements, moving the action of this opera to the back streets of Berlin, colonized by Turkish immigrants. The overall villain of his interpretation is Big Oil, but

each of the four opera in the cycle has a different setting. If you look at the figures on the version of Mount Rushmore he uses for *Siegfried*, you will see that his political message is loud and clear.

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

What about the other operas? We can leave out *Tristan und Isolde* because it is the least political of all the major works, and I am going to spend most of today's class on his final opera, *Parsifal* (1882). I have already devoted a class in another course to show **Barrie Kosky's** brilliant production of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in which Wagner himself stands in the dock at the 1945 Nuremberg trials; a Jew himself, he was the first at Bayreuth to strip the opera of its cosy *Gemütlichkeit* and reveal the toxic racism that might be read into it.

9. Wieland Wagner: *Lohengrin* (Bayreuth 1958)

But there is a surprising political content in a much earlier opera: *Lohengrin* of 1850. Its title character is a Grail Knight, sent out into the world to right wrongs. The picture shows **Wieland Wagner's** 1958 production, as pristine and apolitical as you could wish. This was my own first experience of Wagner at Bayreuth, which I visited when I was 17. I still remember the shimmer of that silver-blue mist, with the unearthly music rising from the unseen orchestra pit.

10. King Henry the Fowler

But *Lohengrin* has a definite political subtext. It takes place under the aegis of **Henry the Fowler**, a 10th-century king credited with bringing a number of separate states together to form the first kernel of the German nation. So its message, like Verdi's in Italy, was Unification. But Wagner did not content himself with just writing an opera; he manned the barricades in Dresden, earning him exile to Switzerland. *Lohengrin* was mounted in Weimar in 1850 by **Franz Liszt**; Wagner would not see it until 1861.

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

There is a splendid 2016 DVD of *Lohengrin* from Dresden a century and a half later. The production is a revival of a much earlier production by **Christine Mielitz**, who sets it in the time of the opera's premiere, in the middle of the 19th century; the costumes in particular are a marvel. Usually I sit through the first ten minutes of the opera waiting to get to the interesting parts when the main characters appear. But watching this just now, in an historical rather than mythological setting, I was struck by the opening monologue of **King Henry**, and how prescient it was of the rhetoric that German leaders have probably used for centuries, and Hitler most certainly resorted to in the late 1930s. I'll follow it up with this production's staging of the interlude between the two scenes of Act III. It is rather dark, but there is no question of the militarism latent in this opera, despite the unworldliness of its chivalric myth.

12. Wagner: *Lohengrin* (Dresden 2016), opening

13. Wagner: *Lohengrin* (Dresden 2016), Act III interlude

14. *Lohengrin* at the Royal Opera House, London (2018)

It is not hard to see how a production of the opera could make the Nazi implications explicit. These may not have been Wagner's intent, but they have certainly become part of his toxic legacy. And recent productions of all the operas at Bayreuth have been trying to come to grips with this; I could show more, but that would be a different class.

B. Christianity in Retreat

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

16. — the same, without title

My main subject today is Wagner's final opera, *Parsifal*, in which he withdrew into a kind of Christian mysticism, creating an opera as an object of pilgrimage to his own theatre at Bayreuth, and for half a century not released for performance outside of it. **Parsifal** is Lohengrin's father, King of the community of **Grail Knights** at **Montsalvat**, and the Keeper of the **Holy Grail**, the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper. The first and third acts end with a Grail ceremony that is Wagner's beautiful but highly personal take on the Catholic Mass. The opera seems to be far removed from political concerns—and far removed from everyday life also.

17. Artists' depictions of Parsifal

The core of the Parsifal legend is that the Temple of the Grail has fallen on hard times, and can only be restored through the actions of a "**Perfect Fool**" who comes to it in innocence seasoned by compassion. The action of the opera is the identification of **Parsifal** as this Redeemer figure. In Act I, he is innocent but has no understanding. In Act II, he gains some understanding and begins to learn compassion. In Act III, many years later, he comes back to the Grail Temple as a weary pilgrim, ready to assume his rightful role. It is an opera with an immense amount of backstory, which the old knight **Gurnemanz** retells at much length. Many years before, a man named **Klingsor** sought admission to the brotherhood, even castrating himself to prove his purity. Rejected again, he builds a magic castle filled with seductresses to ensnare the Christian Knights. One of these was the then-King **Amfortas**, who tried to conquer Klingsor by using the **Holy Spear**—the weapon that pierced Jesus' side at the Crucifixion. But his ambition proves his undoing; he loses the spear to Klingsor, who gives him a wound on the side that causes great agony and will never heal.

I should also add a word about the mysterious **Kundry**, condemned to endless life for the crime of laughing at the Crucifixion. Half the time, she is bound to Klingsor's service; in the rest, she serves the Grail Knights in an attempt to atone for her sin. Let me summarize the action of the opera with some stills from Wieland Wagner productions of the 1950s and 60s.

18. Wagner: *Parsifal* storyboard

19. *Parsifal* at Bayreuth (Wieland Wagner, 1958)

But what on earth has this esoteric opera got to do with Real Life, the ostensible subject of this course? How many of us can identify with this austere all-male community? How can any theater continue in the assumption that the majority of its audience will identify as Christians, let alone be regular attenders at the Mass? Most directors working today stage the opera from an agnostic or non-denominational perspective, and they take different views on how to relate its action to the real world. In the second hour, I'll show some scenes from the current Bayreuth production. First, however, I would have you sample two slightly older productions whose views are radically different, and have you compare them: the **François Girard** production from the Met in 2013, and one by **Dmitri Tcherniakov** in Berlin in 2015.

20. *Parsifal* at the Met (François Girard, 2013)

Girard makes no bones about the unworldliness of this community. His *Parsifal* is set in what might either be a scorched post-nuclear landscape of earth, or on another planet entirely. But he sets this up by a brilliant device. When the audience enters the theater, instead of the familiar gold curtain, they see a huge mirror reflecting the auditorium. And when the overture starts, they see reflected in his mirror a group of people who might well be themselves. What follows is spread over ten minutes of music; I have kept three minutes of the music as played so beautifully under **Daniele Gatti**, but I have speeded up the action by a factor of three. It looks jerky at times, but I think it will give you the idea.

21. Wagner: *Parsifal* (Met 2013), the overture, speeded up (omit if short of time)

22. — still from the above

Let me follow that with the final scene, in which Parsifal (**Jonas Kaufmann**) uses the Spear to heal Amfortas (**Peter Mattei**), and then performs the Grail ritual. The men and women, who up to now had been separated by that fissure running down the middle of the stage, now begin to mingle, and the fissure becomes a stream bed running with water.

23. Wagner: *Parsifal* (Met 2013), ending of Act III (complete)

24. — still from the above

Compare this to the 2015 production by **Tcherniakov** that seems to have become an annual feature in Berlin. He anchors the work completely to the present by costuming everybody in modern dress, and treating the Grail Knights as some kind of fringe cult. The finale contains the same events as before, but puts a rather different complexion of them. In particular, what is their attitude to Parsifal as a person, and what do you make of the very end?

25. Wagner: *Parsifal* (Berlin 2015), ending of Act III (complete)

26. — still from the above

C. Bayreuth Opens Out

27. Uwe Eric Laufenberg at Bayreuth

28. — the same, without title

In this hour, I will show you clips from the current Bayreuth production of *Parsifal*, directed by the German actor **Uwe Eric Laufenberg**. There is one substantial scene, and several quite short ones, and I shall pause between them for comments. Laufenberg's set has clear echoes of the marble columns and dome of Wagner's original production, but it is moved to a very different place and time, and represents a different kind of community. So, as you watch the first few minutes, ask yourselves: Where are we?

29. Wagner: *Parsifal* (Bayreuth 2016), from the overture

30. — still from the above

What did you make of that? The temple in ruins; it suggests a war zone. The people on camp beds; probably refugees or others displaced by war. There are a very few monks, but **Gurnemanz** (Georg Zeppenfeld) looks more like an Imam, doesn't he? This is a production that clearly wants to make contact with real life and contemporary events; Laufenberg is firmly gripping the third rail of religion. Let's go on to the moments when we first see Kundry (**Elena Pankratova**) and then Parsifal (**Klaus Florian Vogt**). Again I'll ask you: what is going on? And look for episodes of casual violence.

31. Wagner: *Parsifal* (Bayreuth 2016), entrance of Kundry

32. Wagner: *Parsifal* (Bayreuth 2016), entrance of Parsifal

33. — still from the above

Again, what did you think? Kundry in a burqa? Note the way she was harassed for even coming to the sanctuary, but by ordinary people, not the monks. At first I thought that the boy in red who drops to the ground was meant to represent the swan that Parsifal shot. But then he comes on with an actual swan, and I realize that this is just part of the texture of violence against which the action plays out.

34. Ryan McKinny as Amfortas (Bayreuth, 2016)

Gurnemanz now takes Parsifal to the Grail ceremony. I wish I could show you the aria of **Amfortas** (Ryan McKinny), but there is not time. But you must see the ritual itself: is this Christianity, a parody of it, or something else entirely?

35. Wagner: *Parsifal* (Bayreuth 2016), Act I Grail scene

36. — still from the above

Opinions? In the Mass, the body and blood of Christ are symbolized by bread and wine. But here, the blood is real, and the priest, Amfortas, becomes a tortured Jesus, down to the loincloth and crown of thorns. The second act, by contrast, is set in an Islamic world. But though these women first appear in burqas, they soon throw off any pretense at modesty. Again, I wish I could play more, for it is some of the most sensuous music Wagner ever wrote. There is an air of decadence about the entire scene, but I ask you: is this inherent in the music, or added by the director for kicks?

37. Wagner: *Parsifal* (Bayreuth 2016), Act II Flower Maidens' scene, opening
38. — still from the above

Was anybody shocked by this? It would not surprise you to know that this was perceived as anti-Islamic, requiring the presence of armed security guards at the performances. But Laufenberg pulls out a reconciliation in the third act. I'll show you two clips. First, the curtain rise: Gurnemanz is aged and infirm, requiring a wheel chair; Kundry has become an old woman; and the temple is littered with rubble and overgrown with strange plants. I'll move on immediately to the Good Friday Magic scene. Instead of the meadow coming alive with wildflowers, these flowers are human—a wonderful incursion into this hitherto all-male world. And listen to the music; it is Wagner at his most lyrical.

39. Wagner: *Parsifal* (Bayreuth 2016), Act III opening
40. Wagner: *Parsifal* (Bayreuth 2016), Good Friday scene
41. — still from the above

I'll pick up the final scene a little later than the two versions in the first hour. Amfortas has been healed of his wound, and now resigns his office. Parsifal, as the new Grail King, performs the ceremony. But as you watch, ask several questions. Is the ritual the same as before? Who are the people to whom it is offered? What is the significance of all those oddments piled into the open coffin? What do you make of the mist at the end? And why does Laufenberg raise the house lights before the opera is over?

42. Wagner: *Parsifal* (Bayreuth 2016), Act III finale
43. Main title 2 (The End of the Story?)