OVERTURE OPERA GUIDES

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We are delighted to have the opportunity to work with Overture Publishing on this series of opera guides and to build on the work English National Opera did over twenty years ago on the Calder Opera Guide Series. As well as reworking and updating existing titles, Overture and ENO have commissioned new titles for the series and all of the guides will be published to coincide with repertoire being staged by the company at the London Coliseum.

The updated reissue of this guide to *Parsifal* marks the return to the London Coliseum of Nikolaus Lehnhoff's acclaimed staging of Wagner's final music drama. First produced at ENO in 1999, the production has travelled to San Francisco, Chicago, Baden-Baden and Barcelona, as well as having been filmed for DVD. This revival at ENO in 2011 will be the production's final performances. Nikolaus Lehnhoff returns to ENO to direct his staging of Wagner's final masterpiece, with a cast which includes the distinguished British Wagnerian Sir John Tomlinson (Gurnemanz), Stuart Skelton (Parsifal), Jane Dutton (Kundry), Tom Fox (Klingsor) and Iain Paterson (Amfortas). Mark Wigglesworth conducts.

We hope that these guides will prove an invaluable resource now and for years to come, and that by delving deeper into the history of an opera, the poetry of the libretto and the nuances of the score, readers' understanding and appreciation of the opera and the art form in general will be enhanced.

John Berry
Artistic Director, ENO
February 2011

The publisher John Calder began the Opera Guides series under the editorship of the late Nicholas John in association with English National Opera in 1980. It ran until 1994 and eventually included forty-eight titles, covering fifty-eight operas. The books in the series were intended to be companions to the works that make up the core of the operatic repertory. They contained articles, illustrations, musical examples and a complete libretto and singing translation of each opera in the series, as well as bibliographies and discographies.

The aim of the present relaunched series is to make available again the guides already published in a redesigned format with new illustrations, some new articles, updated reference sections and a literal translation of the libretto that will enable the reader to get closer to the meaning of the original. New guides of operas not already covered will be published alongside the redesigned ones from the old series.

Gary Kahn
Series Editor

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Recapitulation of a Lifetime

Dieter Borchmeyer

Wagner's last music drama was seventeen years in the making. He wrote the first prose draft towards the end of 1865. Twelve years later, during the early months of 1877, he drew up a second draft and the libretto. He began composing the music that same year and completed the full score on 13th January 1882. The work received its first performance in the Bayreuth Festspielhaus on 26th July of that year.

In almost every one of its characters and in the essential elements of its plot, *Parsifal* is a recapitulation, or what might be called a summation, of Wagner's oeuvre. It is enough to read Cosima Wagner's diaries from the period during which Wagner was composing the music of *Parsifal* to note the remarkable frequency with which he related each of the characters of his 'last work' to the dramatis personae of his earlier music dramas. A few examples will suffice.

In a conversation with Cosima on 19th February 1878, he asked, 'Who is Titurel?' His answer was: 'Wotan. After his renunciation of the world he is granted salvation, the greatest of possessions is entrusted to his care, and now he is guarding it like a mortal god.' On 2nd March 1878, a comparison suggested itself to him 'between Alberich and Klingsor'. Power at the cost of love and as revenge for its loss! 'R. sees a resemblance between Wotan and Kundry,' Cosima noted on 4th June 1878: 'both long for salvation and both rebel against it, Kundry in the scene with P., Wotan with Siegfried.' And on 29th April 1879 Wagner observed that 'in fact Siegfried ought to have turned into Parsifal and redeemed Wotan, he should have come upon Wotan (instead of Amfortas) in the course of his wanderings – but there is no antecedent for it, and so it would have to remain as it was.'

To a certain extent Parsifal is a more intense version of Siegfried; like the latter he is characterized by an erotic mother complex, an 'inexperienced fool' and unthinking muscleman who soon renounces brute force and heroism. His breaking of his bow and throwing away his arrows is an act of purification whereby physical strength is spiritualized, and an ancient Germanic hero is transformed into a Christian anti-hero who learns what it is to suffer and whose very existence becomes a *passio* in the fullest sense of the word. Unlike Siegfried, who never attains to supreme 'knowledge' (this is reserved for the Norns' half-sister Brünnhilde) and who basically remains 'the stupid Siegfried' (to quote Nietzsche), Parsifal becomes worldly-wise as a result of Kundry's kiss: made wise by pity, he ceases to be a fool.

As early as 1848/9, in his essay *Die Wibelungen*, Wagner had associated the Grail with the Nibelung hoard. In the chapter headed 'The merging of the ideal content of the hoard with the "Holy Grail"', he had written: 'The quest for the Grail now replaces a striving after the Nibelung hoard', which is reduced to its 'real content' as 'an actual possession', 'ownership' or capital. 'Whereas, according to the oldest religious notions, the hoard appeared as the earth's splendour revealed to all by the light of day' – which is how the Rhinemaidens sing its praises – 'we later see it in condensed form as the hero's booty which gives him his power.' In other words, the Grail is the complement to the Nibelung's ring: whereas the Rhinegold, whose ideal and real meanings have not yet been divorced from each other, is reified as the ring or 'a power-giving possession', the ideal content of the gold passes over into the 'anti-capital' of the Grail. This, then, is the extent of the relationship between *Parsifal* and *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

Clear links, however, can be seen between Wagner's *Bühnenweihfestspiel* (Stage Consecration Festival Play) and almost all his other music dramas. As early as 30th May 1859, in a letter to Mathilde Wesendonck, Wagner called Amfortas 'my third-act Tristan infinitely intensified'. Bent upon dying, the king is reduced by the sight of the life-giving Grail to the same raging despair as that which Tristan is forced to suffer when, returning from the night of death, he is brought back to life by the power of the love potion. The reason why they die and the meaning of their deaths and, by analogy, the significance of the Grail and love potion are, of course, diametrically opposed to each other in the two works. Wagner originally planned to introduce

Parsifal into the final act of *Tristan* as a stage in his quest for the Grail. Parsifal, who has felt within him the 'Qual der Liebe' ('torment of love') as a result of his fellow-suffering with the tortured Amfortas – a fellow-suffering intensified to the point of self-suffering, 'Die Wunde! – Die Wunde! – / Sie brennt in meinem Herzen!' ('The wound! The wound! / It burns within my heart!') – would have had a compassionate word to say about Tristan's 'furchtbares Sehnen' ('terrible yearning'). Yet it would have been only 'sündiges Verlangen' ('sinful desire') for him, whereas Tristan lives beyond the categories of sin and purity, seeking salvation and redemption in the very love (of death) from which Parsifal would have had to cure and redeem him, just as he heals and redeems Kundry. Two worlds would have appeared here side by side, but without any link between them – which is yet another good reason why Wagner refrained from weaving Parsifal into the work.

There is a further work with which Parsifal's name is linked: *Lohengrin*. Here, of course, the Grail king has a son, who is none other than Lohengrin, since at the time when this Romantic Grail opera was written, Parsifal had heard of neither Schopenhauer nor the Buddha, and had therefore not yet wholly renounced erotic love. Only the name, but not the character, of the later Grail king is heralded here. Yet one can scarcely fail to notice that the Grail mysticism of *Parsifal* is related to *Lohengrin* (musically, too) and that, to a certain extent, the former is an intensified version of the latter. (Wagner's thoughts were revolving around the subject of Parsifal even as early as 1845, the period between the conception of *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*.) But Wagner's final work also refers back to his other Romantic operas. Kundry is a female variant of the 'Wandering Jew', as Wagner himself noted in the 1865 prose draft. She is therefore the counterpart not only of the Flying Dutchman ('the Wandering Jew of the sea' as Heinrich Heine called him) but, at the same time, of Wotan, whom Wagner similarly described to Cosima as 'a kind of Flying Dutchman'.

Klingsor identifies Kundry as a reincarnation of Herodias, 'Herodias warst du' ('Herodias you were'), who appears as the female counterpart of Ahasuerus in legends and poems from the Middle Ages onwards; like the Wandering Jew, she is condemned to a life of restless wanderings over the earth. Kundry, the Wandering Jewess,

'endlos durch das Dasein [ge]quält' ('endlessly [afflicted] through this existence'), is therefore by no means a pure invention of Wagner's. The medieval myth was taken up again by Eugène Sue in his best-selling novel *Le Juif errant* of 1844. Here Herodias accompanies Ahasuerus restlessly throughout history until, like Wagner's Kundry, she finds redemption. And there were other writers, too, who recast the medieval motif in the years around the middle of the nineteenth century. There is no doubt that Wagner was directly inspired by Heinrich Heine's *Atta Troll* of 1843 in his conception of Kundry. Here – as in many other nineteenth-century poems, including Mallarmé's *Hérodiade* – Herodias merges with her daughter Salome. Thus Wagner's Kundry is a reincarnation of both Herodias and Salome. As such, she has left behind her clearly definable traces in the poems of other *fin-de-siècle* authors, including Oscar Wilde and Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, both of whom wrote about Herodias/Salome. It is the curse of Ahasuerus and Kundry/Herodias that they must constantly repeat the very sin that was the reason for their having been cursed in the first place. In Nikolaus Lenau's ballad *Der ewige Jude* (*The Wandering Jew*) of 1839, we find the following strophe:

Weh' mir, ich kann des Bilds mich nicht entschlagen,
Wie er um kurze Rast so flehend blickte,
Der Todesmüde, Schmach- und Schmerzgeknickte,
Muß ewig ihn von meiner Hütte jagen.

Alas, the image haunts me evermore
Of how he begged to rest awhile, who came
Aweary of this life, bowed down by shame
And grief, and whom I ordered from my door.

Just as Ahasuerus prevented Jesus from resting outside his door on the Via Dolorosa, so did Kundry laugh at Christ carrying the Cross. This is a radical reversal of the attitude which informs the metaphysical centre of *Parsifal*, namely elemental compassion for the suffering individual. That is why Kundry is forced to repeat her 'accursed laughter' with compulsive regularity, in addition to suffering the constraint of embodying time after time the depravity of Herodias/Salome.

It is in *Tannhäuser* (and above all in the Paris version of that opera), however, that the most striking parallels between *Parsifal* and any of Wagner's earlier works are to be found. Klingsor's *paradis artificiel* resembles the Venusberg; Kundry is a second Venus; and in both works the cave of wanton delights disappears at a stroke, in the one case at the sound of the blessed name of Maria or Mary, and, in the other, at the sign of the Cross. Tannhäuser experiences the same duality of heavenly and earthly love as does Parsifal, and is torn apart by the same conflict between erotic desire and an ascetic willingness to atone such as is felt by Amfortas. And just as Tannhäuser abandons the god-like status conferred upon him by erotic ecstasy in order to experience human suffering, 'aus Freuden seh'n ich mich nach Schmerzen' ('from joys I yearn to suffer anguish'), so Parsifal rejects, in a spirit of renunciation and for the sake of fellow-suffering, the supposed apotheosis promised him by the 'serpent of evil desire'.

In a letter to Ludwig II of 7th September 1865 (the year of the first prose draft), Wagner himself emphasized the connection between *Parsifal* and the Christian myth of the Fall as described in the Bible. In answer to the king's question, 'why does it take Kundry's kiss to convert our hero?', Wagner replied with an appeal to the mythology of paradise, the serpent and the tree of knowledge: 'After all, you know the serpent in paradise, and its beguiling promise: "eritis sicut Deus scientes bonum et malum" ("Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil"). Adam and Eve become "knowing". They become "conscious of sin". The human race had to atone for that consciousness by suffering shame and misery, until redeemed by Christ who took upon Himself the sins of the world.' In Kundry's kiss – that 'archetypal miss' as Wagner once described her to Cosima – we find a re-enactment of Eve's seduction of Adam, and in Amfortas's fall from grace Adam's original sin.

Kundry is, as it were, the serpent of paradise. Just as Eve is promised that 'Ye shall be as gods', so, in the prose draft of 1865, we find Kundry inviting Parsifal to 'Enfold me now in love, and you will be God Himself this very day!' (In the final version of the libretto, this passage reads: 'Mein volles Liebes Umfangen / lässt dich dann Gottheit erlangen' ['The full embrace of my love / then would raise you to godhead']) Original sin is therefore of an erotic sexual nature. Christ's act of redemption, in the context of Amfortas and Kundry,

corresponds to Parsifal's act of salvation. Wagner's formula in his letter to the king reads: 'Adam – Eve: Christ […] Amfortas – Kundry: Parzival' (Wagner retained the medieval orthography of this name until March 1877). As a result of Kundry's kiss Parsifal gains an awareness of sin that grants him entry to the race of those who 'know good and evil'. He who has not yet eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge knows nothing of good and evil until kissed by Kundry.

The analogy between Christ and Parsifal should be drawn only 'with a good deal of caution', Wagner stressed. He later opposed Hans von Wolzogen's view that Parsifal was a reflection of the Saviour: 'I didn't give the Redeemer a thought when I wrote it', he is said to have told Cosima on 20th October 1878. Wagner himself, then, clearly stated that he had never for a moment thought of regarding Parsifal as God or of making him a figure of redemption. There is not a single passage where a reference to the 'Erlöser' (Redeemer) could mean anyone other than Christ. Parsifal is plainly conscious of the distance that separates him, as a sinner, from his Saviour: 'Erlöser! Heiland! Herr der Huld! / Wie büß' ich, Sünder, meiner Schuld?' ('Redeemer! Saviour! Lord of grace! / How can I, a sinner, purge my guilt?'). The closing formula, 'Erlösung dem Erlöser!' ('The Redeemer redeemed!'), can in no sense be interpreted to mean that the new redeemer Parsifal has superseded the old one in the way that each new Grail king replaces the previous one. If Parsifal participates in the redemptive acts of God, it is in the manner of a Christian saint, rescuing the Saviour, who is immanent within the Grail, from the guilt-tainted hands of Amfortas. This closing formula, which is in no sense enigmatic, in spite of the speculative attempts to inflate its meaning, can be easily interpreted on the basis of the text itself, and specifically of the so-called 'Saviour's lament' in the second act: 'Erlöse, rette mich / aus schuldbefleckten Händen!' ('Redeem me, rescue me / from hands defiled by sin!').

Having placed himself in mortal hands in the shape of the Grail and having assumed material form as a sacred object which itself now stands apart from all action, Jesus needs a pure individual to redeem Him. This act of redemption is a *restitutio in integrum* which finds visual expression in the reunification of two objects that had become separated, namely the Spear and the Grail – the weapon which had wounded Jesus in the side and the vessel into which His blood had