
Parsifal At Bayreuth

By Marion Wilcox



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[69]

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by Marion Wilcox

No one who follows with attention the tendencies in the musical world to-day will ask, Shall Wagner's greater works be frequently presented and generally appreciated in America? The question rather is, *When* shall the Master become known to the American public? It is a question of time. Meanwhile, those who lead the musical world and know their public thoroughly, offer Wagner's compositions in small portions. Evidently it is a question of no little time. In Germany, the debate upon the merits of the new music has culminated and has gradually subsided. Quiet satisfaction in the possession of a good thing is taking the place of heated discussion. If we wish, therefore, to look into our own future, we may turn for suggestion to the critical period in the German controversy. We may revert for most valuable suggestions to the events which transpired at Bayreuth in July and August, 1882. At that time Parsifal was brought out. Its appearance had been awaited with universal interest and the most contradictory expectations. Our simplest plan will be to take up the point of view of one of the audience at the first performance. We shall see memorable and imitable things—memorable scenes also which can never be repeated. (1)

I.

Ever since 1876, when the production of the Nibelungen Trilogy was the occasion of a great Wagner festival, the attention of art circles has been directed with greater or less intensity to this North Bavarian town. One may have been [70] devoted to Wagner, cold, or even actively hostile, with like result. Bayreuth was still to be the source of events in the musical world. One may have been musical or not, and in either case have asked, What is Wagner, the thinker, the poet, to add next to our prosy life; what old tale of human passion, splendid, difficult of access, hard to be understood, will he next make glowing, real, present to us? Throughout the past winter, in all parts of Germany at least, we have been talking about the coming of Parsifal. That was to mark the first month of summer holidays; and a run down to Bayreuth was included, or only for good cause shown excluded, when we planned for the dull month of August. To-day I was present at the first public rendering of the opera.

Arrived at the Bayreuth station, one sees immediately that the town is overcrowded. Thronging towards the incoming, an eager mass of men and women are offering, urging, lodgings. The least bit of a girl insists upon carrying your hand-bag, and hotel porters say their rooms are all engaged. One selects the least objectionable among the petitioners and follows his lead. It is a plain little town of twenty thousand homely inhabitants. There are not the jolly old corners and dives that the western tourist demands and the native would be glad to see replaced by western regularity. Its streets are broad and straight and its shops shabby. The French have been here to make a piece of that long history which is written in books, to destroy that very readable part written upon the dingy house-walls which they burned. It is a town unredeemed for the tourist unless it be redeemed by its one idea. We have seen that its one idea has crowded hotels and spare bed-rooms; look at it in the shop windows. Here is a tobacconist's, and the image carved upon his cigar-holders is Wagner's image; a stationer's, and his fine paper is stamped with a bit of the score from "Tannhäuser." Busts, photographs, engravings innumerable, everywhere show the well known features, and in the book-stores everything possible to be told in word and picture about everything Wagnerian, by everybody. Pause a moment if you would have offered you by yon peddler a dictionary of all the unpleasant expressions which have been directed against the Master by his critics. Quite nicely got up, [71] this little book, and instructive, if one would cultivate racy invective. If you have come in at ten o'clock this Friday morning, and are passing one of the few dignified buildings which the Gallic fire spared, the town church, you will hear from a balcony quite high up on the tower strains of a fine old hymn descending the "all-echoing stair" on the north side. The half-dozen musicians lean lazily against the railing, and now they repeat, addressing themselves to sinners east of the tower. How fortunate, since the tower is four-sided, that the hymn has four verses!

It is a flat, not very picturesque district, with no fine waters, no fine hills. Small hills there are about the town, and on the best of these, which is crowned by the soldiers' memorial of '71-2, rises half way up the slope Wagner's opera-house. Standing quite alone in a park so far from town, the building might seem from the distance a large villa; suggests rather as one approaches and notices the roughly-laid red brick with yellow parallels and the simple constructional decoration, an exposition building.

The audience beginning to assemble for the four o'clock performance approaches on foot. A few carriages convey parties of ladies in afternoon-tea costume; but it is a plain and sober crowd picking its way along the road heavy with recent rain,—men and women who have come in spite of the thirty marks entrance fee, sacrificing not a little to attend this remote festival. We follow them into the auditorium. My admiration for the decoration and arrangement of this hall is quite unqualified. The audience gathers and disperses without a bit of delay or crowding, the lighting is pleasant, the air fairly good. Consistently with its general

plan as a reproduction of the classical theater, the decoration of its ceiling represents stretched canvas awning, bits of blue sky showing between it and the side walls. There are no galleries. The seats rise in terrace fashion, with the lowest on a level with the stage and the orchestra out of sight naturally. The effect of the entire arrangement is to concentrate attention upon the stage. One could not rest in this hall without facing the stage, even if auditorium and stage were quite unpeopled.

It is an interesting crowd now gathered, but with less of the [72] extravagant element than one might expect. Just behind me is a slender, long haired Wagnerian from Prag, who will surely cry, "Master, Master," when the curtain falls; but just before me is a Leipzig merchant who swears by the *Gewandhaus*—who will cry not at all, but will mutter, "Stuff!" At my left are several ladies of good country families dressed in English style, and so on. Quite noticeable also is the sprinkling of foreigners.

It is right that the overture should be greeted with this strained, eager attention. Its first half contains the *Gralmotiv*, and it will become evident upon examination that of the whole work—of the poet Wagner in remodeling an old story, of the composer Wagner in interpreting his story to the emotions through the medium of music—there has been little freedom of choice granted except as touching the character of this motive, and this motive is to give its character to the whole work. This we must make our own and hold fast to, if the succeeding six hours are to be really hours of insight; to this we must finally appeal in judging of the work, whether it be true or false. The attempt to convey an adequate impression of it, however, I should expect to prove quite futile. A score which lies open before me would have it to be a simple matter enough, but for myself I get no proper notion from it. The whole situation is necessary to be recalled,, the situation as it had been in the composer's mind and was being expressed before his very eyes. I prefer, therefore, to confine myself to general terms, saying, this is a strain neither martial nor monkish, exultant nor despondent. It suits neither the extravagant mediaval chivalry nor extreme mediaval piety. Neither of these is it nor both together. IRather it is the thought of a student of those times, keenly alive to both forces and prizing the noble manhood growing out of the union of the two. Edward Schella, in his readable critique upon Wagner, would have it *churchy*. Certainly. An eminent newspaper critic has much to say about sensuousness. Certainly. Hans v. Wolzogen is nearer the mark when he notices that it mediates in this prelude between the resignation of prayer to the suffering Christ and the triumph of victorious faith.

The scene is "Monsalvat," the territory and castle of the [73] Holy Grail. It is the mountainous northern district of Gothic (Christian) Spain. Where the path leading pp Monsalvat begins in the shadow of a forest, by the shores of a mountain lake, Gurnemanz and two pages lie sleeping. A trnmpet call from the mountain annonnces dawn and awakens them. From the castle there arrive knights saying the sick king is no better and his bath mnst be prepared. Just now Knndry is descried in the distance, monnted like a Walkure. Dismounted without, she rnshes upon the stage, her tattered garments in wild disorder, her hair falling in heavy tresses to the girdle of snake skin and almost concealing her dark face with its piercing black eyes. She gives a small crystal vase to Gurnemanz. ft is balm for the king's wound, brought from far Arabia. A train of knights and squires, bearing or accompanying the litter on which the sick king reclines, arrives upon the stage. Amfortas, the king, describes his sufferings piteously and thinks death near; receives the balm and with his attendants retires for the bath. Now only Kundry, Gurnemanz and four squires are left upon the stage. The woman has thrown herself exhausted upon the ground, and by means of the dialogue carried on between the others the audience is instructed in the nature of the situation.

When Titurel was building the castle, he found Kundry sleeping, rigid as though dead, in the thicket. Since that time, she has been the brotherhood's zealous messenger, serving with eagerness as though to expiate some crime. The kingdom of the pure faith had been

threatened by the might and treachery of fierce enemies. Then in "holy, brooding night," the Healer's angel had descended to Titirel, given into his keeping the cup (Grail) from which He drank at the last love feast, into which the Crucified's blood flowed, and the spear which shed that precious blood. For these treasures the castle was built. Only the pure can enter the service of the Grail, be miraculously fed and strengthened by it for chivalrous, merciful deeds. Klingsor had sinned deeply and desired to become holy. Unable to conquer his evil nature by force of will, he lays an impious hand upon himself and his offer of service to the Grail is spurned. In boundless rage withdrawing, he devotes himself to magic arts and the work of decoying members of [74] the now hated order from their pure service. his garden of delights arises in the waste not far away. Enchanting women grow there like flowers, and their seductions have cost the order many a good knight. When the aged Titirel resigned the kingly office to his son Amfortas, it was with the injunction never to rest until the accursed enchantment was at an end. Amfortas had undertaken the conquest, fallen unhappily himself into the snares of a woman terrible in her beauty, and the holy spear he bore had been turned in Klingsor's hand against himself, inflicting the incurable wound. Before the despoiled sanctuary Amfortas had lain in fervent prayer when a light had streamed from the Grail and on its surface were read the words,

Wait for him whom I have chosen:

The chaste fool, by pity enlightened.

A long story for Gurnemanz to tell. Only Scaria's magnificent voice could carry it off. And now for the first bit of action. The forest territory of the Grail knights is sacred ground. All creatures found there are protected by the inviolability of the place. What profane hand has harmed the swan which pierced by an arrow ends its last flight at Gurnemanz's feet! From the lake an excited throng approaches surrounding and crowding forward a defiant country lad. The scene is very effective. Garments of knights and squires, long blue mantle flowing over pink tabard. On the shoulder stitched, a white dove. Parsifal, for he is the offender, standing sturdily apart, his one garment of coarse stuff leaving arms and legs bare, holding bow and quiver in his hand: "Certainly, I shoot what flies!" Moved to pity by the reproving words of Gurnemanz and the sight of the dead swan, he breaks and throws away bow and arrows. "I did not

know my fault."

"Whence come you?"

"I do not know."

"Who is your father?"

"I do not know."

"Who sent you this way?"

"I know not."

"Your name, then I"

"I had many, yet I no longer know one of them."

[75] "You know nothing of what I ask you. Something you must know."

"I have a mother, by name Herzeleide. Our home was in the woods and wastes."

"Who gave you the bow?"

"That I made for myself, to drive the harsh eagle (Adler) from the forest."

taught to use better weapons?"
"Yet noble (adelig) do you seem and well born. Why did not your mother have you

Kundry (still lying on the ground, glancing keenly at Parsifal, in rough tones). "His mother bore him after Gamuret, his father, had fallen in battle. To guard the son against such an early hero's death she brought him up in the wilderness, strange to weapons. The fool would have made him a fool."

Parsifal. "Yes, and once by the forest's edge came riding on beautiful creatures shining men. I wanted to be like them. They laughed and rode away. I ran after, but could not overtake them. Through the wilds I came uphill and down; my bow my protection against beasts and huge men."

Kundry. "Yes, robbers and giants felt his strength. They all feared the dangerous boy."

Parsifal. "Who fears me?"

Kundry. "The evil."

Parsifal. "They who threatened me, were they evil? Who is good?"

Gurnemanz. "The mother from whom you ran away and who now sorrows for you."

Kundry. "Her sorrow is ended. His mother is dead."

Parsifal. "Dead! My mother,? Who says so?"

Kundry. "I was riding by and saw her die. She bade me greet you, fool!"

(Parsifal, enraged, springs upon Kundry, to throttle her.)

Gurnemanz. "Crazy boy!. Violence again? How has the woman harmed you? She spoke truth; for Kundry never lies, though she has seen strange things."

(Parsifal is overcome with emotion. Kundry brings water from a spring, dashes it into his face and gives him to drink.)

Gurnemanz. "Well done and mercifully like the Grail. Who returns good for evil, banishes evil."

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Kundry. "I never do good: will only rest." (Retiring again into the thicket) "Rest, alas, for the weary! Only to sleep, that no one should wake me." (Starting up) "No! No sleep for me. Horror seizes me!" (As though threatened by some invisible foe and finding resistance vain.) "My defense is powerless. The time is come. Sleep—sleep—I must!"

The sun is high. It is time for the repast at the castle. Gurnemanz will take Parsifal thither and, the scenery shifting from left to right, they are seen as though advancing together up the mountain, entering a portal in the rocky walls, again mounting until they find themselves in the grand banquet hall of the castle. Here music of distant bells, choruses of knights and boys

in petition and joy of faith, the really impressive beauty of the scene, combine in an effect worthy of the inspiration of mediæval chivalry. The knights are seated at long tables, so disposed that, extending parallel from background to foreground, a space is left free between them. Partly filling this space is the dais where Amfortas lies upon his couch. Before him is placed, on an altar-like table the life-dispensing cup, as yet veiled. From a recess of the hall, one hears the plaintive voice of Titurel bidding his son uncover the Grail and perform his office. That sight of the Holy Grail which has long held him in life and which he must now enjoy or die, his own son must deny him. The bitterness of self-reproach, the burning wound where the spear entered his side in punishment of sin, fettering him still to the world of passions (for the wound is sin itself), unfit him for the priestly office. This last time, however, it may be allowed him. The ancient crystal vase is unveiled. Dimness in the hall has become an ominous darkness; distant boy voices intercede in pure, ringing tones. A ray of light pierces the darkness, falls upon the vase which glows as a purple flame. All have arisen from prayer. Amfortas elevates the Grail, that it may rain influence throughout the assembly. Its glow has paled now; light returns to the hall; the sacred bread and wine have been distributed; glorious choruses hail the new revelation.

After the momentary exultation, Amfortas has sunk back, overcome by renewed agony. Parsifal has stood rigid, absorbed, throughout it all, showing no apprehension of the [77] wonder, motionless except for a gesture of pain at his heart when Amfortas' suffering seemed greatest. The knights embrace each other and depart solemnly. Gurnemanz comes up to Parsifal and shakes him by the arm. "Why are you standing here still? Do you know what you have seen Parsifal can only reply in the negative by a motion of the head. "You are nothing but a fool. Out with you. Go your ways. Gurnemanz advises you to leave the swans alone in future and to hunt the goose!"

II.

Half an hour's pause between the first and second acts. One is glad to light a cigar and stroll along the gravel paths outside the theater; to watch the heavily-booted tramping across and the daintily-booted tripping across to the restaurant in the garden; to sniff the cool air and compare what he has just seen with his anticipations.

The story took on its form and pressure in the last years of the twelfth century and the first years of the thirteenth. Some of its features are indeed much older, are indeed what we are pleased to call mythological; but it assumed the form as we have just been seeing it no earlier. That form we were prepared for by the great poems of Wolfram von Eschenbach, composed at the time just mentioned, "Parzival" and "Titurel," by the saga in the so-called *Mabinogi* (MS. 14th century), Robert de Boron's "Petit St. Graal" (12th century), Chretiens von Troyes' († 1190) "Perceval le Galois," Albrecht v. Scharffenberg's "Der Jüngere Titurel" (1270). Much ingenuity has been expended upon the story first and last, and it is interesting to recall some of the turns and embellishments. The Grail, for instance: According to one account, the Grail was originally in heaven, having angels as its ministers. When Lucifer rebelled and fell, from his crown fell a splendid gem. His associates in rebellion, expelled from heaven, must now minister to the Grail on earth. According to another version, for centuries the grail hovered between heaven and earth, borne by those angels, until in the form of a cup sent him by God it should serve the Saviour at his last feast of the pass-over. Afterwards the vessel came into the possession of [78] Joseph of Arimathea, who received in it the blood from the wounds of the Crucified. Again, the Grail was said to be a bowl formed of a gem from the earthly paradise. A fourth version makes it a present from the Queen of Sheba to Solomon; a fifth would have its first possessor Noah. It appears in Wolfram's account as a stone, by angels entrusted to the custody of Titurel's pious knighthood on the *mount of salvation*, "Monsalvättsch," inaccessible to the sinful. There also it feeds and strengthens its champions; and a dove descending from heaven each Good Friday reestablishes its union with the divine forces of which it is the manifestation. In Chretiens, the spear is that of Longinus, which pierced the side of Christ on the cross. In Wolfram, this meaning has disappeared. It is a poisoned weapon which in the hand of a heathen enemy inflicts an incurable wound upon Amfortas, engaged in a love adventure. This Amfortas is the sick king, a figure common to all the Parsifal sagas. In *Mabinogi* he appears as a lame old man, Peredur's (Parsifal's) uncle; but his sickness has little importance in the action. Lance and gory head are signals for Peredur to avenge his murdered father, and such is the hero's task. In Chretiens, the sick king is the Grail king, and in Wolfram, the name Amfortas,—i.e. *powerless, suffering*,—is given him; but his ancestor Titurel appears also in the Grail castle as the ancient, bedridden man. Amfortas is representative of the suffering which has found its way among the brotherhood through their fault. The offense is sensuality, disobedience to a fundamental rule of the holy order. Healing shall be brought by a knight who shall come and ask. This knight is Parzival. (2) Gurnemanz is the union of two several characters, an old knight of that name who appears in Wolfram as Parzival's host and counsellor, and Trevecent, brother to Amfortas, whom Parzival meets on Good Friday, when he returns after five years of wandering to the Grail territory.

A trumpet-call from the theater summons us for the second act, a total change of music, scenery, action. A few wild strains which we had caught whenever the thought of Klingsor's [79] enchantment had swept like a shudder through the music of the first act, swell now into a chorus of strange voices—such tones as were never heard before. The prelude is Walpurgis-Night described in music. Scene, Klingsor's castle of enchantment on the southern slope of the same mountains, that is, the side next Arabian (Mohammedan), Spain. Within a tower, surrounded with necromantic appliances, Klingsor sits before a metal mirror. The hour has come. Parsifal) the fool, is nearing the wizard's castle; and Kundry, now in the power of

death-like sleep, shall be transformed into a mistress of fascinations to his destruction. Compelled by invocation, Kundry's form appears, rising in bluish vapor, with a shriek like one in horror awakened from deep sleep. The same magic power which she now desperately struggles against had before compelled her to become Amfortas' temptress. Sleep had then as now not brought the coveted rest, but only surrendered her spirit to the sorcerer, to become his servant and her own enemy. Taunted now with the weakness of those she serves, who alone can befriend her and who fall as soon as adequate temptation is offered, she is bidden to prepare for the most dangerous of all,—him whom simple innocence shields.

He has reached the castle, and its defenders oppose his entrance, fall upon him—to their sorrow. Klingsor describes the encounter, with exultation seeing the boy's bravery; for Parsifal disperses the watch and enters only to find his real enemy and real danger within. Kundry has meantime disappeared, and now the tower sinks out of sight, in its stead appearing a tropical garden, filling the entire stage. Parsifal is seen alone, from the enclosing wall gazing with wonder upon the gorgeous flowers which carpet the place, reach down fantastic, glowing arms from the overhanging trees and build delicious bowers of rainbow lines. A palace at the side, from which as from every nook of the garden, lovely maidens come running in wild dismay. Half-dressed in garments like the petals of flowers, they are bitterly complaining of interrupted repose and seeking lovers who had hastened from their arms to meet the intruder. Their delicious chorus of complaint is directed against Parsifal so soon as he advances towards them, presently converting their spite into caressing appeals and [80] jealous competition for his favor. I cannot venture to describe in words of my own choosing what follows. Poetry, music, scenic-effect, are here in exquisite concord. Only through that combination can the scene have its proper value. In description,—yes, upon a less perfect stage,—the effect would be grotesque and vulgar.

At last the delicious songs of these creatures, "flowers the master plucks in spring, fragrant spirits growing here in summer and sun," are interrupted. Parsifal has behaved to these temptresses simply with boyish good humor; but the arch-temptress is still to be met. A voice startles the flower-spirits into silence. "Parsifal!—Stay!" That name is a spell. "Parsifal! So the mother once called me in her sleep." Transformed into a beautiful woman, Kundry is seen reclining upon a couch of roses. By that spell, recollection of his mother, she holds him. With that theme she stirs the tenderness of his whole nature, recalling the incidents of his life, and last of all the pang when Herzeleide waited in vain for her son to return, when her heart became heavy with sorrow that she died. Totally overpowered by painful emotion, Parsifal has sunk at the feet of the enchantress, who now begins as artfully to comfort him. His suffering has given to consolation and caress amplest opportunity. His shield of boyish innocence is withdrawn when Kundry presses upon his lips "as the mother's last greeting and blessing, love's first kiss." A new world has disclosed itself to him. He knows what love is, and in the instant *Amfortas' sin and wound have become intelligible*. With a gesture of horror he springs to his feet. "Amfortas! The wound, the wound burns in my heart!" He had seen the wound bleed; now it bleeds for him. Kay, the wound it is not; no mere wound, but a burning torment at the heart which *knowledge of sin* has entered. And he now sees that he had been called to rescue the sufferer, but in his folly had not understood the divine mission. Kundry approaches to renew the caresses in which he now sees only the arts which won the Grail king. "Yes, this voice! So she called to him; and this look—that I clearly recognize. This also, destroying his peace with a smile. The lip,—yes, it quivered so for him; so the neck bent beseechingly and again [81] so was the head proudly poised; so waved the locks when she laughed, so did the arm encircle his neck, the cheek nestle against his! Leagued with all pains did her mouth kiss away his soul's health." All artifice is at an end. The two natures—the man's nature and the woman's—stand revealed to one another, each passionately urging its claims.

Kundry. "Barbarous! Does your heart feel only others' pain, then feel also for me. Are you saviour, why not grant me union with him to my salvation? Through eternities have I waited for you, for the Healer, whom once I scorned. Know you the curse which stealed in sleep, awake, in death and life, pain and laughter, to new misery?—I saw Him, Him the Crucified, and *laughed*. . . . His look fell upon me Now, from world to world I seek Him that I may again find Him. When my misery is greatest, when I ween Him near, *that look* upon me again. The curse is upon me and I must laugh, laugh. It is no saviour, but a sinner who sinks into my arms! Weep, I cannot, but must laugh, writhe, rave, in the ever-recurring night of madness. One hour united with you, to weep upon his breast who may take my sin upon him, were salvation!"

Parsifal. "To forget my mission for an hour in your embraces, were damnation eternal for you and for me."

So they must stand facing and opposing each other—the woman's nature and the man's. Parsifal has seen the perfect ideal, must leave all and follow after it, distracted though he be by a revelation of the whole sweetness and bitterness of humanity. His entire aspiration is centered in an object beyond himself, at the extreme limit of his thought. *Kundry* is passionately conscious of her immediate need; cannot discriminate between that divine love which is universal—is harmony—and the human love which may be blind self-seeking. To her it is all one—it is *love*; and in love she must look for rest. Both natures are to find satisfaction at the same instant.

Last temptation of all: How shall he find again the inaccessible castle of the Grail without her assistance? She knows the world, while he has no wisdom of experience. That instruction she will give—the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them—in exchange for his love. A vain hope; and [82] cursing him that he may err hopelessly as she has done, *Kundry* calls upon *Klingsor* for aid. *Klingsor* hurls the sacred lance, which, as though arrested by an invisible shield, hovers above Parsifal's head. Parsifal seizes and makes with it the sign of the cross. Castle of enchantments and garden of delights are transformed into a heap of ruins in a desert place. *Kundry* lies helpless upon the ground; and turning to her as he hastens away, Parsifal: "You know the only spot where you may see me again." The curtain falls quickly.

The second act deserves most careful study. *It is the work*, one may say, so subordinate are acts first and third dramatically. An eminent German critic asks, Why the peculiar character of these scenes?—and suggests that for contrast's sake they were introduced here in the median position. It were perhaps more in point to ask, Why the first and third acts? What we have just been watching contains the kernel of the whole thought. It is a magnificent effort to tell in words and music of the growth of the human soul. What there is more than this, is only to tell what grand passions are the life of the soul's growth. First act and third can be little more than circumstantial, for the first introduces the situation and the last can merely carry into fulfillment the promise already perfect.

Is this *Kundry* Wagner's creature? Yes and no. As the accursed for her heartlessness, as Grail messenger, as temptress, —no; as uniting these three characters in one, as representative of "Das ewig Weibliche," as Parsifal's instructress, revealing to him the heart of humanity,—yes. Already in the German saga, Herodias, who laughed as she bore the Baptist's head upon the charger, had been condemned to eternal wandering. In Wolfram, (*Cudrîe la Surziere* is Grail messenger, a more grotesque figure than here in the first act. (3) Orgelûse is in Wolfram's version the fair in whose service fighting Amfortas receives his wound. Parzival is indeed tempted by her, but *after* he has discovered his fault. Clinschor in Wolfram is Wagner's *Klingsor* with some variance, especially as personifying the spirit of heathendom and as identified with the heathen opponent of Amfortas. In the poem of the [83] 13th-14th century, the *Wartburg Krieg*, where Wolfram himself appears as the chief opponent of *Klingsor*, the latter is a very different figure from this enemy of the Grail. To point out more

particularly the elements of these characters which are elements common to the saga-material of the whole North, this is hardly the fit opportunity. In a word, Wagner has combined often remote elements with tremendous dramatic effect. A study of this Kundry would well introduce one to the three greatest factors in mediaval story-telling: Germanic mythology, the play of the Christian spirit upon that, and the addition of features directly borrowed from the Orient. By comparison of this Kundry with the Venus of Tannhäuser, one gains little, unless it be a sense of the grandeur of the former, who includes this Venus, the German Frau Holda, as a minor component of her complex being.

III.

The second *entr'acte* is long enough for one to make quite a leisurely dinner, very well sauced now at eight o'clock. That is, it is long enough if one is more fortunate than Franz Liszt just opposite at the table who genially exchanges compliments with one and another of those who come up to claim his notice. The old autocrat of Weimar looks well, even robust, since his Italian journey of last winter. There is much more than benignity in this face. Catch the expression upon it when the enormous beer-mug, which at this instant conceals certain of his massive features, is lowered, empty. This man enjoys life and has safely passed the three-score years and ten.

Act third restores us to the territory of the Grail. The scene includes the edge of a forest and meadows brilliant with flowers. In the foreground, a spring; opposite which, a hermit's cabin. Early morning. Gurnemanz, now in extreme age, clad as hermit, comes out of the cabin. He hears the sound of faint moaning issue from the thicket, puts aside the underbrush and discovers Kundry, rigid and apparently lifeless. He restores her to consciousness and begins to question her, but receives no answer except, "Let me serve—serve." She is again the Grail's messenger in general appearance, but without the old wildness. She goes like a maid to her duties [84] in the hut. A knight approaches from the forest. He is armed *cap-a-pie*. With visor down and head bowed, lost in reverie, he advances to the spring and reclines at its edge. Scarcely returning the old man's greeting, he receives also in silence a reproach for bearing arms at the sacred spot and on a holy day. Good-Friday calls to prayer. Laying helmet and sword aside, the knight kneels in silence before the spear. Gurnemanz recognizes at once the boy who shot the swan and, thrust before him into the ground, the weapon Amfortas had lost.

Along the paths of error and suffering, Parsifal has finally returned. The sacred power of the weapon in his possession he has not dared to employ. Unaided he has fought his way to the goal. Now he learns that since the day when he was present at the feast of the order, Amfortas has refused to perform his office, because he desires death for himself. No longer miraculously fed, the Grail knights languish and Titurel has died. Parsifal, consistently enough with the emotional nature of such a hero as he is now come to be, is overpowered by the sense of his own responsibility for all this suffering. Supported by Gurnemanz and Kundry, he is conducted to the spring and bathed in its healing waters. And Kundry, this "woman which was a sinner, did wipe his feet with the hairs of her head and anointed them with ointment." Anoint his head also, aged Gurnemanz, for to-day he shall be greeted king. Sympathetic sniferer, beneficently wise, his first official act is Kundry's baptism. "Believe on the Redeemer I,' Here follows recitative, describing lyrically the influence of the festival, Good-Friday's enchantment upon flower and meadow.

Attired as a knight of the order, Parsifal is conducted by Gurnemanz to the hall of the castle as in act first. The knights are entering in solemn procession, one band accompanying Amfortas with the Grail, another bearing in Titurel's body. Their choruses are accusation and condemnation of Amfortas, who is again and for the last time summoned to the sacramental office,—in vain, for all hope has left him save the hope of death. With the rage of desperation he staggers to his feet, piteously calling upon the shrinking knights to pierce his breast with their swords and end his torment, when [85] Parsifal advances, with the spear-point touching Amfortas' side. "One weapon alone avails. That spear which smote yon will heal the wound!" By such token is he known to be king in Amfortas' stead. The shrine is opened. Parsifal takes from it the cup and sinks before it in prayer. The Grail glows and a splendor falls upon the assembly. From heaven a white dove descends and hovers above Parsifal's head. He exalts the sacred cup and voices from out the heights proclaim:

Redemption to the Redeemer!

The curtain falls and the orchestra concludes a moment later, that with *Gral-motiv*,

Glaubensthema and Erlösungswort, the last impression may be purely musical. A storm of applause; and the whole audience is upon its feet, looking anxiously for the composer to appear. This he presently does in a Loge opposite the stage; and joining in the applause he waves his hand toward the stage to indicate that to his artists the praise belongs. That is no fiction. The task set before the artists to-night was gigantic, and their shortcomings in voice and action suprisingly few.

As to this third act, contradictory opinions will always be entertained. From whatever stand-point viewed, it invites vigorous criticism and furnishes means of vigorous defense. Applying the principles of dramatic criticism, it seems indeed to be unworthy of its position. Act second has developed character with a certain Greek inexorableness. One follows without reserve each step in that development, until at the end of the act the conclusion of the whole matter is irresistible. All conditions necessary to the redemption of Amfortas and the brotherhood are perfect, except the one condition of Parsifal's presence at Monsalvat. The guileless fool has become by pity enlightened, and only distance, physical position, keeps the interest in suspense. Is the traversing a certain number of miles sufficient matter for a third act? Not even that either; for the opening of this act finds Parsifal already at his goal, and half a dozen general words serve to describe his wanderings. But what would have become of Parsifal had he fulfilled his mission immediately after the concluding scene of act second? The nature of his mission associates him with the [86] Grail brotherhood alone. To them alone he belongs. But he could not take a position subordinate to the king whom he had saved by superior virtue. He must himself be king. He is not yet ready for that. In point of fact, substance is given to act third by this unanticipated extension of the symbolism of Parsifal's character. He is no longer a *possible deliverer*; he is *the Saviour*, and golden hair and beard, costume, posture, serve to heighten the physical resemblance to the Christ of popular art. Bad dramatic art for it averts an anti-climax only through the introduction of new matter of which the appropriateness is at least questionable. Orderliness, integrity of development have been sacrificed. But such criticism touches only half the question. From a musician's standpoint, act third is obnoxious to no such objection. On the contrary, it is peculiarly appropriate that after its excursion in the second act, the music should return to and conclude with the *Gralmotiv* and associated motives and themes. For, musically speaking, the central point of the work is the *Gralmotiv*; dramatically considered, the culminating point is Parsifal's enlightenment. If one were to compare Parsifal with the comparatively little known "Heilige Elisabeth" of Liszt, the composition which of all others it most strongly suggests, the suggestion would be found to come exclusively from acts first and third. It would hardly be profitable to deplore in set terms what seems to me the blemish in one portion of a great work, or to make the obvious comments upon a startling employment of themes by common consent set apart. (4)

But what of Parsifal? How did he become what we find him here revived? The sources from which the story is drawn have been already mentioned. As to Parsifal's education, then, in the forest where his mother would have kept him remote from the knowledge of arms and knighthood, the appearance of mounted warriors enticing him into the world, Mabinogi, Chretiens and Wolfram agree. According to Chrétiens, it is in peasant's dress, but in Wolfram it is in fool's [87] motley, that he sets out. The incident of the swan is naturally enough suggested by an incident in Wolfram's poem. In Mabinogi, he comes to the castle of his lame uncle and fails to ask the meaning of spear and gory head. In the other accounts, it is the Grail castle, where it has been announced that his question will heal the sick king. He does not ask, remembering an injunction against curiosity, and is scornfully dismissed, receiving later a curse for his neglect. delivered, as Wolfram tells, by Cundrie. After five years of wandering and adventure, he meets the hermit or knight who reproaches him for bearing arms on Good Friday and instructs him in the mysteries of the Grail and holiness. His search for the castle is successfully terminated. In Mabinogi, he avenges his father; Chretiens recounts his healing

the king by asking about spear and Grail; Wolfram, by asking "Was fehlt euch, Ohm?" In Wagner's hands, then, the thought of the story has simply advanced one step. Wolfram has the thought: Pity is saving; to pity, one must know; to know, must have asked. He throws the emphasis upon the *question*, least dramatically valuable member of the thought-sequence; Wagner, on the *enlightenment* and sympathy through *knowledge*. In other words, it is the change inevitably accompanying transition from the epic form to the dramatic. But Wolfram leaves Parsifal installed as Grail king simply, with wife and son, Lohengrin; while Wagner has given him the likeness of Christ.

It is true then of this character as we have seen that it is true of the others, that Wagner has used the existing material exhaustively, combining, unifying, intensifying. That is to say, the essence of the old saga has been retained. At the same time, he has in Kundry given us the most interesting of his creatures, and in Parsifal himself, I fear, through the deviations from the text in his case, an apple of discord. There is so much to be said about the symbolism and mysticism with which the whole story is impregnated; about its being deepened legitimately, or on the other hand unjustifiably, in this case, that I venture here to show only what is the subject of dispute. If exception, also, were taken only to the peculiar *rôle* which Parsifal is called upon to play in conclusion, the matter would be quite simple, for that might be altered as [88] already in two salient points the action has been modified since the first rehearsals. But were the coloring here less vivid, would there be substance enough left for a third act? One consideration which has been advanced above may however be reiterated because it is believed to lie at the root of the whole matter. Looking at this work as a dramatic composition and as a musical composition, one is inclined to say, If part of the excellence of the former has been sacrificed, it has been that the latter might become the admirable thing which it indeed is, the freest and most perfect expression of Wagner's musical theory.

