

Richard Wagner (1813 –1883)

Siegfried Idyll and Good Friday Music from Parsifal

If one ever wonders where the music of Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms and Liszt is supposed to culminate – consider the triumph of German Romanticism that is Richard Wagner.

There is much to process when considering the music of Wagner and we must try not to see it as an artistic abstraction but as part of a whole lifestyle and philosophy that was the man. Primarily an opera composer, it seems the scope of Wagner would have been trivialized had he written primarily symphonic works. As it happens, this constant artist always had a story to tell; and had to tell it in his own way; with his own directives; and his own music; in his own house; with his own cast; with his own musicians; with an absolute Germanic authority over every aspect. There is a word that has been coined for exactly this Wagnerian premise – it is *Gesamtkunstwerk* – which literally means, the ‘whole artistic undertaking’.

Wagner built an operatic performance from the ground up. He was the composer, the librettist, the stage director, the set designer, as well as being the house manager, the architect, the community officer and the politician. I would dangerously like to put forward the idea that no one man can be a master in all these areas, though it is the perfectionist in him that drives him to try.

The libretti have a tendency to be long and overworked. Wagner was a great poet in his compositions, but not in the written word. One wonders how *Der Ring des Nibelungen* would have turned out, with a Hofmannsthal/Strauss, a Verdi/Boito or even a Puccini/Illica relationship at work. The stage direction and to some extent the set design follow from the written text – as does the music – making the story line the most important factor in this new *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

At the height of German Romanticism, the storyline, more often than not, concerns itself with mythical figures, greater gods, lesser gods, heroes, mortals, woodland nymphs, fairies and witches. The vast expanses of the Bavarian countryside that evoke this story line are also the inspiration for Weber’s *Freischütz*, and Humperdinck’s *Hänsel und Gretel* along with all those other marvelous Fairy Tales set down by the brothers Grimm in 1812. . It is not a passing fancy, - it is deep in the psychology of the German experience. Equally, prevalent at the time, is the storyline that contains Christian mysticism – and the prevalence of good over evil embedded in the Christian story of salvation through purity in Christ. Indeed, both

these story lines provide such good meat that they are often mixed up, with witchery appearing in religious contexts and religious Christian ideals appearing in mythical heroism.

So integral is this in Wagner's life that his son was named Siegfried - the same named hero of his great tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. On Christmas morning 1870 - a small chamber piece was played on the staircase of the Wagners house at Treibsch, in the canton of Lucerne. It was called *Treibsch Idyll with Fidi's Birdsong and the Orange Sunrise*. This intensely personal composition refers to the house, the orange sunrise and Siegfried's bird song, which were all specific to Wagner's life at home with his second wife Cosima, daughter of Franz Liszt. Cosima had recently given birth to their son Siegfried. This small chamber work is often realized with full orchestra and was the basis of the music that is heard in the third great opera *Siegfried*. It is now known as the *Siegfried Idyll*. The work is typically Wagnerian in that it tells a story, but is unlike any other work in that it is very personal to the composer. The joy of the music - from that first trumpet call played by Hans Richter on those steps in 1870, to the bird song and the ebullient themes that follow are all an incidental gift for Cosima in the spirit of joy in their new son.

In contrast - the *Good Friday Music* from Wagner's opera *Parsifal* is totally serious in nature and steeped in religious significance. The Holy Grail - the mystical cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper - the same cup which caught His blood at the crucifixion - the same cup that is remembered at every celebration of Mass - has had powerful import in story telling throughout the ages. That Wagner draws on his deep interest in Grail lore and legend, fueled by accounts in Chretien de Troyes, *Percival*, *The Story of the Grail* and Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, comes as no surprise. He intended that this story be performed in consecration of the opera house at Bayreuth - and autobiographically suggests that the concept came to him in a moment of religious zeal on Good Friday morning 1857. He later tells us that this account made good press, but was not really true. At any rate, the story of Parsifal, the fool who fulfills a prophecy and becomes the greatest of the Grail Knights is a long and involved tale which takes place in Spain.

The Grail and the Holy Spear which guards its purity are compromised by Amfortas, son of Titirel, King of the Grail Knights. He falls prey to the evils of Klingsor and a witch/maiden Kundry - and is wounded in a mortal and lingering way by the Holy Spear that he has defiled. Kundry has an interesting literary place, in that she is a beautiful woman, who is cursed for eternity, turning periodically into a witch. This is her heavenly curse for laughing at Christ on his way to Calvary. Amfortas is seduced by Kundry and thereby is no longer worthy. As the prophecy goes, the restoration of purity and the vision of the Grail is only possible through the compassion of a passing fool, Parsifal. Parsifal fulfills the prophecy by conquering the forces of Klingsor and returning with the purity of the spear to heal the wound inflicted on

Amfortas. Just prior to his returning in purity, to set right the world and its evils, there must be suitable music of a penitent, religious and significant nature to awake in the audience that feeling of Christian salvation. It is this, the Good Friday Music from Parsifal.

These two works, *Siegfried Idyll* and *The Good Friday Music* are so very different in nature, but share Wagner's musical language. As historians we can realize that he is the culmination of a great Germanic line, but as musicians we must realize that the precepts of western musical harmony are irrevocably changed by Wagner – ushering in the modern era of compositional thought. He is therefore also the great conduit to the music of Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler– and the reason that composers like Schönberg, Webern and Berg can claim Bach and Beethoven in their parentage.

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