

"Durch Mitleid wissend"

William Kinderman. *Wagner's Parsifal*. Oxford University Press, New York, ©2013. 336.p., illus., 93 music examples.

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Most Wagnerians, amateurs and professionals alike, are sick and tired of being reminded of the darkly embarrassing links that connect their hero to Adolf Hitler. For many, the very name of the German dictator constitutes a disquieting irritant that thoroughly spoils their appreciation of Wagner's music dramas. They argue, not without reason, that the creator of the Ring tetralogy, of *Die Meistersinger*, and of *Parsifal* cannot be held responsible for what his heirs and adherents made of his work. Would that it were so simple!

Admittedly, there are good reasons to believe, with Thomas Mann, that the Dresden Kapellmeister and the anarchist revolutionary of 1848/49, had he lived to see it, would have opposed National Socialism and gone into exile, as Mann himself did in 1933. Mann left Germany because, ironically, he was viciously attacked for having besmirched the reputation of the composer, the supreme cultural icon of the opponents of the Weimar Republic on the Right and, as luck would have it, the idol of the Führer. But it cannot be denied that the nationalist and racist spin put on *Parsifal* is not entirely delusional and that such an interpretation was advanced well before 1933. Wagner's "last card," as he jokingly described it, does indeed contain a number of mystifying elements which, with a little bending of the evidence, do lend themselves to ideology-driven appropriation, especially given his many vehement pronouncements about both Germans and Jews. We are dealing here with a case of "sow the wind and reap the storm."

It is to the great credit of William Kinderman, the distinguished musicologist and pianist at the University of Illinois who is an eminent authority on Beethoven, that he tackles the many problems associated with *Parsifal* head-on. Marshaling a broad array of scholarly tools and methods, Kinderman takes particular aim at two questions that have long shaped the perception of this work—positions that may now definitely be assigned to the dustbin of history.

First: Does *Parsifal* have a racist agenda? The Bayreuth Circle and its guru, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, certainly thought so. And even today, a number of eager iconoclasts make a great deal of hay by arguing, following Chamberlain, that Wagner's hostility towards Jews was the driving force behind the creation of this highly auratic work and that its aura is deceptive because it masks its underlying sinister purpose. As early as 1924 Chamberlain, at that time a cultural institution, proclaimed that Adolf Hitler was the new Parsifal, Germany's redeemer, for he alone had not only the desire but also the will and the nerve to rid Germany of its Jews. Kinderman observes correctly that Bayreuth "not only aided and abetted Hitler but helped *create* the future dictator" (p. 25). In order to better clarify the vexed Hitler-Wagner connection, however, it would be useful to distinguish between the notions of self-fashioning and projection. Hitler may be said to have fashioned himself after Lohengrin, Rienzi, and Wotan (alias Wolf, his nickname in the Wagner family). But the role of Parsifal was first projected upon him by Chamberlain and then embraced by Hitler's followers because of their deeply felt collective need for a healer of the many ills that beset Germany after World War I.

In order to show that such a reading is untenable, Kinderman examines in great detail the long process from the conception of the drama to the composer's final touches, concluding plausibly that "the religion of racism [...] was not a prominent feature in the genesis of the work" (p. 36). His careful review of the evidence establishes clearly that the notion of compassion represents the work's philosophical core. Rejecting the notion that heroism is what preoccupied the composer, he points to a rarely invoked piece of evidence: the fact that Parsifal unlike his predecessor, Amfortas, uses the holy spear not for combat but for healing.

The second question to which Kinderman brings his scholarly search and destroy campaign is Alfred Lorenz, the conductor turned musicologist who set down a highly influential theory about the musical structure of Wagner's works. He argued that Wagner's huge musical tapestries are held together by a pervasive pattern of "Bar" forms (known from *Die Meistersinger*). Lorenz also spearheaded many of the Wagnerians' early enthusiasm for Hitler, stressing Parsifal's heroism and will to power, and concomitantly welcoming the arrival of the Führer, by explaining to the faithful that—miracle of miracles!—the new National Socialist Germany was the very Germany that Wagner himself had envisioned.

Following in the footsteps of the pioneering work of his teacher, the late Robert Bailey, Kinderman examines in minute detail (paper type, ink, cut profiles) the sketches and drafts of the music, of which there are a great number: Wagner's work on *Parsifal* is exceptionally well documented. In light of the composer's manipulation of musical architecture and tonality, Lorenz's strained effort to press Wagner's music into the Procrustean bed of "Bar" forms

loses even the semblance of probability, and his much touted “Geheimnis der Form” collapses like a house of cards (or like Klingsor’s magic garden). In a perceptive aside, Kinderman suggests that Lorenz’s compulsive “segmentation” (p. 198) of Wagner’s music may simply have had its origins in the conductor’s need to find his bearings in what is a mighty sea of seamless music.

The very last music Wagner composed for *Parsifal* is that for the so-called transformation scene in Act I. When he discovered during rehearsals that he had miscalculated the time needed for the scene change, he not only supplied—watch in hand—the required number of bars but he also strengthened the structural function of this grandiose orchestral interlude. In order to highlight the “narrative continuity,” Kinderman argues, Wagner recalled the trombone passage (articulating the communion theme) from the outset of Act I and thus established a “correspondence with the final cadence of the entire work” (p. 185f), thereby creating a monumental arch supported by the temple scene. Wagner also underlined the sheer power of the music that leads to the first Grail scene by bringing back the mighty Temple bells. Surely, in the rankings of Wagner’s musical miracles, the Act I transformation scene is very close to the top. In the end, Kinderman agrees with Alfred Einstein’s observation that in *Parsifal* “with a minimum of effort, Wagner achieves a maximum of spiritual effect” (p. 271).

Kinderman admits to a “passion for uncovering forgotten sources and connections” (p. 327). This book, a volume in the “Studies in Musical Genesis, Structure, and Interpretation” series, offers a number of them, such as the insufficiently recognized influence of Liszt. Here Kinderman takes up the plausible argument that Wagner adapted the “Excelsior” theme from Liszt’s “The Bells of Strassburg Cathedral” to create the central “communion” theme of *Parsifal*. Since Liszt’s cantata was inspired by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow—the two men met in 1868 in Rome—there is even an obliquely American connection. Kinderman also points out that the associative use of tonalities, so prominent in Wagner’s last work, is present already in his very first opera, *Die Feen*. And following Katherine Syer, he points to echoes of some of Theodor Körner’s patriotic songs, several of which were known to Wagner through the settings of C. M. von Weber.

With only four pictorial illustrations, and with over 90 musical examples, this book was obviously not intended for beginners. But it is an enormously enlightening book for all who wish to move beyond the beginner’s stage.

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