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THE MUSICAL TIMES

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JUNE 1, 1882.

"PARSIFAL"

AN ANALYSIS OF WAGNER'S FESTIVAL DRAMA
BY F. CORDER.

WE have now to consider Wagner's latest achievement, a work constructed on the same lines as those we have just dealt with, and one which—when performed—we hope will prove in no wise inferior to any of them. Wagner has been even more original and happy than ever in his choice of a subject, and (save for a few points which will be commented on later) the libretto may be reckoned one of his very best. The source of the legend is mainly Wolfram von Eschenbach's poem of "Parsival and Titurel," but the "Morte d'Arthur" and other books of the same kind have also been consulted. The mysterious character of *Kundry* (the only female in the drama) is almost wholly Wagner's own. The verse in which the drama is written is quite a novelty, being principally blank verse of very irregular metre, with occasional rhymes and alliterations. The lyric portions, such as the choruses, are in regular rhymed verse of considerable beauty.

Now as to the music. It was generally reported and believed, while as yet only a favoured few had had portions played to them by the composer, that Wagner had entirely changed his style. Not a bit of it. The music is very like a combination of "Tristan" and the "Götterdämmerung," with the chromaticness and passion of the former and all the weird wildness of the latter—both, if possible, intensified. That is to say, "Parsifal" is fully as "advanced" as anything that Wagner has written. The music has, as usual, a special characteristic, in this respect differing from all the other works. In "Tristan" this characteristic was intense passion, in the "Meistersinger" a genial mediævalism, in the "Ring" a wild heathen savageness. In "Parsifal" it is a holy and solemn grief which pervades the music. We are constantly being reminded of the Divine Tragedy of Calvary; the whole legend is, in fact, an allegory of the Redemption. Not one of the characters but is afflicted with the sorrow of sin in some form. This profound tone of gloom may be detrimental to the success of the drama with the public, but incontestably enhances its dignity and nobility as a great work of art.

We would here pause to remark upon the extraordinary attention which a work of this composer now commands. The libretto was written and published in 1877, when a large edition was immediately sold; the music was only completed a few weeks ago, yet musicians have eagerly striven for a sight of it before publication, and two full analytical accounts have appeared in German papers, while a minute thematic guide by Herr von Wolzogen and some drawing-room arrangements by J. Rubinstein have been for some little time before the public, the vocal score being only just now, as we write these words, completed. Not only this, but nearly three months before the production at Bayreuth photographs of the scenery and dresses are being sold. What a triumph for the genius who thirty years ago could not gain a hearing anywhere!

The drama opens, as usual, with a short orchestral prelude announcing the principal motives, but doing little else. The greater part of it we meet with again, note for note, at the end of the first act. Three

motives first claim our earnest attention, the first especially. This is the "blessing"-motive, used at the consecration of the bread and wine in the sacramental "Grail" scene. It is here given out by strings and wood in unison, followed by brilliant harp *cadenzas*, and then repeated in harmony. It is then repeated in the same manner in the minor, and we must again quote it to show the remarkable union attempted between the alien keys of C minor and E minor:—

No. 1a.

Take my Bo-dy . . and eat, take and drink my Blood:

No. 1b.

. . . thus be our love . . re - mem - ber - ed.

Take and drink my Blood, take my Bo-dy and eat:

. . . do this and think . . . of me.

The beginning and end of this theme, it will be noticed, are taken from the Gregorian tones. The phrase *a* is used as a distinct motive—that of the magic spear. Next we have the motive of the Holy Grail itself announced by the brass. This phrase is a very old friend—that intonation of the Credo which exerts such a strange fascination on musicians. Without stopping to think of others, we can name the "Jupiter" Symphony finale, the Crusaders' Chorus in Liszt's "St. Elizabeth," and the first movement of Raff's second Violin Sonata, besides fugues innumerable, all founded on those first three notes:—

No. 2.

Brass. Wood.

Then, after several imperfect attempts, a hymn-like Song of Faith is uttered by the wood-wind, and taken up by strings and brass in turn:—

No. 3.

&c.

It reminds us of the chorus of *Younger Pilgrims* in "Tannhäuser." Following this we have some working, against a *tremolo* accompaniment, of No. 1 and the spear-motive, out of which springs a short but pregnant phrase, the "mercy"-motive—

No. 4.

and this quickly melts into the subject of a chorus heard later: the anguish-telling motive of the Redeemer. After this, the last of the religious motives, the prelude fades away on syncopated chords of the seventh on E flat.

The curtain opens, and discloses a forest-glade on Mount Monsalvat, where an old knight of the Grail, *Gurnemanz*, and two youthful esquires are sleeping under a tree. From the neighbouring but unseen castle of the Grail the solemn tones of trombones and trumpets announce the dawn of day with the motives 1, 2, and 3. The sleepers start up, and then fall on their knees to offer up a silent morning prayer as the strings of the orchestra take up No. 3, and carry it out to a melody twelve bars long. *Gurnemanz* bids the esquires then to go and prepare the king's bath, and on the entry of two knights asks anxiously after the monarch's health. Immediately the motive of the sick king, *Amfortas*—

No. 5.

is hinted at, for in this work Wagner gives us nearly the whole of his thematic material in the first few pages, an arrangement which does not tend to the ready appreciation of the numerous motives. On hearing that *Amfortas* is no better, *Gurnemanz* remarks—

Fools are we, alleviation seeking!
When but one salve relieves him!
For every simple, every potion,
We have sought all through the world,
When helps but one thing—
And but one man—

when the oracle of the Grail (quoted later on—No. 8) explains his meaning. An interruption now occurs. The mysterious wild woman, *Kundry*, is seen riding toward in frenzied haste, the figure representing her headlong ride being this harsh phrase:—

No. 6.

She rushes in with a flask of some rare balsam, which she has ridden to Arabia to seek, this short but wild phrase being the *Kundry*-motive:—

No. 7.

Now King *Amfortas* appears, borne in a litter and attended by a train of knights, on his way to bathe in a neighbouring lake. He suffers from an incurable wound in the side, and therefore has to go through the whole of his arduous part in a recumbent position, which must be unpleasant for the singer. *Kundry* refuses to be thanked for her help, and lies sullenly crouching on the ground like a wild beast. On the departure of the king the young esquires express their opinion that she is "no canny," but *Gurnemanz* takes her part, and reminds them how she has done nothing but good to them. This conversation leads to an explanation—in several very long speeches of *Gurnemanz*—of various matters connected with the plot, which we had better here narrate in due order.

Titirel, a pious knight, was the original holder of the Grail, the sacred cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper, also the spear which pierced His side. In the wild mountains of gothic Spain he built a castle for the preservation of these relics, and he and his true knights guarded them, being endowed with powers of heavenly magic. No profane foot could seek Monsalvat, for it was invisible to ordinary eyes. An evil sorcerer named *Klingsor* attempted in vain to get possession of the relics to use them for his own aggrandisement, but failing, he built a magic

castle as near Monsalvat as possible, and contented himself with enticing the Knights of the Grail by his bands of nymphs, when they became his slaves. When *Titirel* became old, his son *Amfortas* reigned in his stead. One unhappy day he went out boldly to attack the sorcerer single-handed, bearing the magic spear. *Gurnemanz* thus relates the issue of his mad adventure:—

While near the walls the king from us was ta'en;
A woman fair as sin had turned his brain,
He lay bewitched, her form enfolding,
The spear escaped his holding.
A deathly cry! I rushed anigh;
But laughing, *Klingsor* fled before,
The sacred spear with him he bore.
I fought to aid the flying king's returning:
Ah, what a spear-wound in his side was burning!
That wound it is which none may make to close.

Armed with this spear *Klingsor* can attack even the holy knights, and hopes to gain the Grail. Meanwhile the wretched *Amfortas* is in a sad plight. The Knights of the Grail live only on the sacramental supper of bread and wine, at the taking of which the Grail is always exhibited, and fills them with strength and joy. It is only the uncovering of the Grail which keeps life in the aged *Titirel*, who is otherwise, physically speaking, dead. But each time that *Amfortas* uncovers the Grail his wound bursts forth afresh, and his agonies of remorse, as well as pain, recommence. The Grail itself has recently given him a ray of comfort in the following oracular utterance:—

No. 8.

By pi - ty 'lightened, the guile - less Fool:..

wait for him, my cho - sen tool.

Just as *Gurnemanz* relates this, and the listening esquires repeat the oracle with deep awe, there is a strange interruption. Cries of horror and indignation are heard, and a wounded swan flutters feebly from the lake, falling dead on the stage. Knights and esquires rush on with excited exclamations, dragging with them the murderer, as they call him—a strange youth who can give no account of himself, and who does not even know his own name. A martial theme is the "*Parsifal*"-motive, of somewhat the character of the "*Lohengrin*"-motive:—

No. 9.

Gurnemanz rebukes him in touching words for his cruel deed (here the swan-motive from "*Lohengrin*" is prominent), and *Parsifal*, powerfully touched, breaks his bow and arrows, and casts them away. He is then questioned as to his birth, parentage, and intentions, but only makes reply: "I do not know," an answer which causes *Gurnemanz* to remark: "A dolt so dull I never found, save *Kundry* here." *Parsifal* only knows that he has a mother named Heart's Affliction—

No. 10.

and that he dwelt in the desert with her till the sight of some glittering knights made him run away from home to follow them and seek to be like them. Here *Kundry* unexpectedly strikes in and tells more of his history, finishing, to *Parsifal's* horror, with the blunt

information that his mother died of a broken heart on losing him. *Parsifal*, maddened by the news, seeks to do *Kundry* a mischief, but, on being restrained, turns faint and weak, whereon *Kundry* brings water and tends him. On *Gurnemanz* praising her Christian spirit she turns sadly away, saying—

I do no good thing; but rest I long for . .
No! I'll sleep not! terror grips me!
Vain to resist! the time has come:
Slumber—slumber: I must!

She is seized with a strange kind of fit, while *Gurnemanz* is attending to *Parsifal*, and crawls into a thicket, where she sinks down and is seen no more. Now the king and his people pass homewards, whither *Gurnemanz* offers to take *Parsifal*, with the secret hope that he may be the "pure Fool" named by the Grail. The scene changes with an elaborate panorama, showing the whole way to the castle of the Grail. During this, a phrase, usually taken in imitation (No. 12 below), and founded on the notes of four great bells, which are presently heard pealing—

is powerfully worked out in combination with the Grail themes. As we approach the castle bells are heard nearer and nearer, forming a "ground-bass" to the solemn march, while trombones behind the scenes occasionally weave No. 1 into the musical web.

The new scene is a mighty domed hall, like a cathedral, where the guardians of the Grail assemble. The knights enter in procession, singing a solemn unison chorus against the pompous march and pealing bells—

No. 12.

The Ho - ly Supper du - - - ly pre -

- pare we day by day.

a truly splendid specimen of Wagner's abilities in polyphony. During this chorus and the two following a procession enters the hall bearing and attending *Amfortas*, who is deposited on a couch in the centre, while another procession brings in a draped shrine containing the Grail, which is set down before the king. After the chorus of knights the voices of youths (altos and tenors) are heard from an unseen gallery in the mid-height of the hall, singing to this chromatic and mournful theme (the motive of the Redemption)—

As anguished and lowly,
His life-stream's spilling,
For sinners He did offer;
For the Saviour holy,
With heart free and willing,
My blood I now will proffer.

which is then followed by a chorus of boys (sopranos and altos) from the summit of the dome, singing the Hymn of Faith (No. 3):—

His love endures,
The dove upsoars,
The Saviour's sacred token.
Take the wine red,
For you 'twas shed;
Let bread of life be broken.

There is a solemn silence after this, and then the faint voice of the aged *Titirel* sounds from his grave, calling on *Amfortas* to quicken him once more with a sight of the Grail. The wretched sufferer answers with a wild outburst of anguish, a lengthy solo, of which the written notes probably convey but little idea of the effect. Mental and physical torment are vividly portrayed in every word and note. It ends with *Amfortas* falling back senseless, after a wild appeal to Heaven for mercy. The sweet voices of the boys from the dome respond with the oracle (No. 8), the knights whisper—

Thus came to thee the fiat.
Wait on in hope:
Fulfil thy duty now!—

and again *Titirel's* voice urges him to uncover the Grail. Then comes the exquisite climax. The Grail is taken out and set before *Amfortas*, while the voices on high sing the blessing (No. 1) just as it stands in the prelude, with the lovely harp passages which thrill one to the heart. Darkness spreads over the hall; but from the Grail, as the king waves it above the kneeling crowd, issues a bright purple light, which *Titirel* hails with rapture. The pages now distribute the consecrated elements to the knights, while the Grail's light fades, and, the cup being returned to its shrine, the hall resumes its normal appearance. During the meal a beautiful hymn is sung by the different choirs in turn: the verse sung by the knights is perfectly electrifying in its bold vigour. In place of an "Amen" at the end, the Grail theme (No. 2) is taken up by the three choirs, rising higher and higher till it seems to vanish in heaven, with the words "Blesséd in loving—Blesséd believing."

The wretched *Amfortas's* wound has again burst forth; he is carried away senseless, the various trains of knights and esquires leave the hall, and there only remain *Gurnemanz* and *Parsifal*. The latter, from the first anguished cry of *Amfortas*, has stood as if petrified, clutching his heart and noticing nothing, not even sharing in the meal. *Gurnemanz* now roughly shakes him and asks if he understands what he has seen. *Parsifal* only shakes his head vacantly, whereon the disappointed knight turns him out of the hall without ceremony, saying, as he slams the door on him:—

Come! away on thy road begone,
And put my rede to use:
Leave thou our swans for the future alone,
And seek thyself, gander, a goose!

But as the curtain closes a voice on high is heard singing "By pity lightened, the guileless Fool," and the boys' voices repeat the "Blesséd believing," while the faintly pealing bells are heard—a mysterious end to this mysterious and exquisitely poetic act.

(To be continued.)