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PERFORMANCE NOTES ON ACT III, SCENE 2 OF *PARSIFAL*

Stephen J. Trygar
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Richard Wagner's final opera *Parsifal* premiered on July 26, 1882 at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, Germany. Like some of his earlier operas, Wagner designed both the score and the libretto himself. From the time of its conception to its premiere, *Parsifal* took 25 years to complete. Wagner put the project aside to write *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, and the four operas encompassing the illustrious *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*). This *Bühnenweihfestspiel* ("Festival Play for the Consecration of the Stage") is loosely based on the epic poem *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eschenbach about the Arthurian knight Percival and his quest for the Holy Grail. The opera establishes Parsifal (Percival) as a foolish young man who was cursed to wander without ever finding the Kingdom of the Grail. Once the curse has been lifted, Parsifal returns home to fulfill his prophesy as the redeemer of Amfortas and the Knights of the Grail.

Within the castle walls, the Knights of the Grail carry the dying Amfortas, the King of the Grail Knights, to the Grail and his father Titurel's coffin. Amfortas wails and asks his dead father to grant him peace and a place by his side in death. The Knights passionately urge Amfortas to unveil the Grail; it had been locked away to diminish the pain caused by the Spear, and in its hidden state, it caused the declining health and death of Titurel. The distraught Amfortas refuses to adhere to the pleas of the Knights, and instead he asks them to kill him for the shame he has brought upon the Knighthood. Parsifal appears in the castle and steps forward with the Spear in hand. He tells Amfortas that the only thing that can heal him is the very weapon that created the wound. Parsifal touches Amfortas' side with the spear; it heals his wound and absolves him of his trespasses. Parsifal commands that the Grail be removed from its shrine and that it never be hidden away again. Parsifal accepts the Knight's devotion as their redeemer and king. He blesses the knights who all genuflect before him. Kundry—the woman enslaved by the magician

Klingsor and who cursed Parsifal—is released from her curse, sinks to the ground, and dies. While these events take place, a dove descends from the heavens and hovers over Parsifal.

Parsifal is one of two Wagnerian operas derived from the legend of Percival and the Knight of the Swan. Wagner's *Parsifal* is inspired by von Eschenbach's incorporation of the epic of *Garin le Loherain* into his own epic poem *Parzival*. *Parsifal* narratively pre-dates the story of the composer's earlier opera *Lohengrin*. *Lohengrin*'s Knight of the Swan reveals himself to be the son of King Parsifal and that he must return home now that he is discovered. Aside from this connection, *Parsifal* hosts several references to its predecessor both musically and narratively. Act I introduces Parsifal as a child with an unknown name who shoots a swan out of the sky. Both of these aspects immediately draw connections to his later son who will arrive to assist Elsa on a carriage drawn by a swan who refuses to relinquish his name in Act I of *Lohengrin*. Wagner creates a flashback to *Lohengrin* by introducing music from *Lohengrin* to the music set during this scene of Parsifal shooting down the swan. This is one of the few musical references back to *Lohengrin*; the music for the Holy Grail changes between the two operas.

At the top of the scene, bells are heard off in the distance harkening the knights to witness the dead body of their injured king's father. The brass erupt into a furor performing the leitmotif associated with desolation flecked with the Grail's theme in the male chorus as if to say the absence of the Grail is slowly eliminating its protectors. The men sing of their sorrows to the music associated with suffering while the dirge of the funeral marches on in the orchestra. Amfortas takes on the suffering theme from the chorus and laments; the orchestra sets a backdrop by transitioning from its funeral motif to that of sorrow. Simultaneously, the leitmotifs for suffering, melancholy, and sorrow ring out with interjections by the Holy Grail. Parsifal's entrance breaks the snowballing density and leaves the woodwind section to let the Holy Grail

theme shine through. The orchestra shifts to playing Amfortas' theme while Parsifal recites the prophecy bestowed upon him. Amfortas' theme quickly disappears and is overpowered by a triumphant return of Parsifal's theme. This music depicts the torch of leadership passing from Amfortas to Parsifal while Parsifal heals the injured and dying king. Parsifal's command that the Holy Grail be removed from the shrine extinguishes all other motives except the Holy Grail theme. The theme is first played by the brass section showing that God's creations are not to be shut away while the harp plays a shimmering line depicting the glittering gold of the chalice. Wagner's borrowing of the Dresden Amen as the theme for the Holy Grail fits well with his music for belief. He blends the two themes together in a way that allows for the tonal plane to constantly shift upward as if the music itself is rising like a prayer to God. Kundry's death set to this music provides a sense of absolution of her sins; the rising nature seems to carry her soul towards heaven with the praise of God and acceptance of Parsifal as their new King and protector of the Holy Grail.

Parsifal as Wagner's final opera is wholly appropriate. Its Christian theme, complex and interactive leitmotifs, and prayer-like final scene encompasses everything that Wagner strived to accomplish throughout his life professionally and privately. Furthermore, the heavy involvement with the Dresden Amen in its final moments promote the idea that Wagner was providing one last goodbye before putting down his opera writing pen.

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