

Wagner: Parsifal (San Francisco Opera, November 2, 2025)

Parsifal is Wagner's most challenging work. Many (me included) would also say it is his most sublime. Its use of explicitly Christian symbols and liturgical rituals misled even Nietzsche, who mistook it for a surrender to Catholicism. But Wagner was never interested in any religion at the doctrinal level. Rather, as author Barry Millington observed, Wagner held that "the value of religion ... was to be found not in a fundamental acceptance of its tenets, but in a presentation in symbolic form of its universal truths." And Wagner passionately believed it was the duty of the music drama to revive for society those hidden truths that institutional religion had obscured.

Paul Schofield, in the program notes, says "Wagner fully intended to have Parsifal serve a religious purpose in his time, just as the Passions of Bach and the tragedies of the ancient Greeks had done in their times."

Heady stuff, indeed.

Now couple that with the fact that this opera equals, if not exceeds, Tristan und Isolde's explicit and obsessive focus on sex and you have the quintessential "problem work." If done successfully, it can be a transcendental experience. But it is just so easy to fail, falling into risible pretension.

What's a director to do? Too many try to downplay the spirituality of the piece by making it all unequivocally mean something specific about something else. Whether it be man's destruction of the natural environment or society's oppression of women, or whatever issue they hope will bring real world "relevance" to the production, they generally fail. Often, in addition to being doctrinaire, such productions can't avoid succumbing to the ironic. It is just too embarrassing to accept the intensely spiritual intentions of the work at face value.

I think director Matthew Ozawa got it just right in this production. To be sure, in its staging and design it is full of rituals and symbolism vaguely suggestive of not only Christian, but also Buddhist, Hindu, pagan and mystery religions. But rather than looking for a fixed and specific meaning, you need to abandon your Apollonian determination to find intellectual clarity and embrace the Dionysian trance-like state in which the boundaries between the individual and the rest of humanity (social, environmental, spiritual) dissolve. We are all fools (some more innocent than others). We can all learn wisdom (be redeemed) through compassion.

Yes, I was puzzled and confused by much of it. Why were the squires joined in pairs by their ponytails? As visually stunning as the effect was, why in the world did two of them float off into the heavens during the prelude? What were those very specific and stylized hand gestures by the red clad members of the Grail community supposed to mean? And was their headgear intended to look as much like female genitalia as they did?

But if you let it, in true, Gesamtkunstwerk fashion, the totality of the music, the words, the movement, the gestures, the color, the light, all combined into an inexplicably coherent sense of narrative and meaning.

Not only is the production visually beautiful, SFO Music Director Eun Sun Kim managed to suspend time with tempos so broad, they put Furtwängler and Levine to shame. She wasn't afraid of the long silences in the prelude. But there was an unflagging, sustained line. The music never rushed, still managed to sound urgent when it needed to, and it always felt like something important was going on.

She was matched by uniformly fine soloists. Brandon Jovanovich, in a role debut, not only sang beautifully, but was always fully dramatically present and reacting, even in the long stretches where he, like the audience, is a passive observer. Tanja Ariane Baumgartner was an electric Kundry. Kwangchul Youn was a steady and sonorous Gurnemanz, his voice betraying just a trace of its age. Brian Mulligan was more convincing vocally than dramatically, but still a fine Amfortas.

The SFO gift shop was selling t-shirts reading "Das Leben ist kurz; Die Oper ist lang; Wagner ist immer." Truer words about this production could not be said.

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