
Parsifal

A Study

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Chapter I.

THE life work of every artist who creates an epoch may be divided into three parts: (1) the period of imitation and reproduction, during which he ensures his position by sending his roots deep into the past; (2) the period of complete assurance, during which his self-expression seems to take the form of an individuality that is greater than his own, and at the same time seems to stand comparatively free of the influence of other men; and (3) a period of comparative diffidence, during which he seems to get glimpses of a future which is beyond his power to reveal, for lack of years to come, or for lack of the divine energy of youth.

No reader of this essay will need to be told which works of Wagner come within the first of the above

categories; but it has often struck me how very inadequately musicians recognise the curious division between the second and third.

We should probably all agree that *The Ring of the Nibelungs* is Wagner's masterpiece. It is equally clear that *Parsifal* is an art work of old age,—old age in its serenity, compassion, and satisfaction in a life worthily lived.

In the work of Bach and Beethoven, Watts, Millet and Shakespeare, the various stages of their life work overlap, the first with the second, the second with the third: they contain no definite break to enable us to say: "Here the man rose to the knowledge of his full power, and here he began straining forward beyond it." But with Wagner each period is declared by means of the most obvious change of attitude in regard to the art of the drama. *Lohengrin* differs from *The Rhinegold* in that the first is a drama for the sake of music, while the second is music for the sake of drama.

But music cannot live for the sake of drama. It has its own curiously elusive laws of creation which cannot be evaded with impunity. And so, during the period of Wagner's fullest self-expression (even at moments of highest sublimity), we are sometimes brought up unexpectedly, as by a gateless wall, when the music is forced to fold its own wings for the sake of some contest of problem drama. The quarrels of Wotan and Fricka form as good drama in their way as anything in the plays of Ibsen; but they are as little suited for a specifically musical drama as *The Doll's House* or *Hedda Gabler*.

But suddenly, when a complete assurance of the rightness of problem drama possessed the master, there occurs, at the most unexpected moment, a significant change of attitude. This takes place at the division

between the second and third acts of *Siegfried*. There is no change in the glorious mastery with which Wagner deals with the tenuous medium of tone. The last acts of *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* are as full blooded as anything of the middle period; but we have to remember that, even while Wagner was at work upon his masterpiece, he was compelled by the stress of his inner emotional life to ignore all his theories in the mystic drama of *Tristan and Isolde*. Returning to the consciousness of his great purpose in *The Ring*, he would scarcely be aware of the fundamental change of æsthetic which *Tristan* declares. But the joys of creation are greater than the joys of the understanding; and from that time onward he would be bound to make his way out of the forest of plot and problem into the sky-sweeping spaciousness of mysticism.

And that, I think, is why the last part of *The Ring* differs from the earlier parts. It is the expression of a man who has lost his self-assurance — and, indeed, every sense of self — because he has suddenly come upon a country which offers him more than he had ever hoped to gain. For a moment he seems to have been possessed with a new vigour, — a new capacity for artistic luxuriance; and the *Götterdämmerung* is gorgeous and even extravagant beyond anything he had done or was yet to do.

But no artist with Wagner's capacity for self-analysis could remain content in a condition of mere enjoyment; and so his remaining work is an almost timid setting forth of the new world which it was his to see indeed, but not his fully to take possession of. What the nature of this new world is I shall try to show as well as I am able in this essay.

It is the delusion of a certain conventional type of mind that Wagner, like many another artist of pagan

passion and power, made his peace with Heaven by finishing up with an avowedly sacred work. The same idea crops up under another aspect when Mr. Runciman assured us that it is the work of a worn-out brain. What caused Wagner's final drama to take a definitely sacred guise was neither a mental penance nor a physical breakdown, but the quite obvious fact that a music-drama, a mystic drama, is simply bound to be associated with those ideas which the commonplace mind regards as specially aloof and sacred, and the clever mind as being beneath contempt. The fact is that the effect made by any kind of great music is so strange and mystic in its very nature that even a rationalist, living in these modern sceptical days, may be freed and enlarged by music in the same way that a common mind is freed and enlarged by imagining that the Deity has his concerns especially at heart and a clever mind is freed and enlarged by a sense of its own cleverness. All his life Wagner had been a religious man, as Bach and Beethoven had been before him, for the simple reason that the material of his life-work was mystical in its very nature ; and his sense of responsibility to the power which gave him his genius, and to the people whom he swayed by it, endowed him with that ethical sense which seems so strangely bound up with all mystical thought.

From this point of view, *Rienzi*, *The Flying Dutchman*, and *The Mastersingers of Nuremburg* were as truly works of religion as those other music-dramas of his wherein the religious element is couched in terms more obvious to the commonplace mind and more offensive to the clever mind.

What distinguishes *Parsifal* from all the rest of his music-dramas is not its religious quality, but the idea set forth in the very libretto and worked out in the scheme at Bayreuth that art is the only trust-

worthy form of religion and the artist the only trustworthy priest. Of course, this idea did not originate with Wagner: it has been implicit in the life work of all the great artists who have ever lived. It was this feeling that caused Blake to say that Art was Christianity and Christianity was Art.

But what does mark out the art of the musician from that of any other manner of worker is that his material itself and its extraordinary power over our emotions do single him out in a definite way as an immediate bearer of an incomprehensible and divine fire.

There is only one other material as spiritual as music,—colour. Perhaps some day, when artists have found the way to our hearts through the eyes by means of pure colour, yet another Jacob's ladder will be flung to bear us out of our fleshly existence into the regions of absolute spirit and imagination. For the time being, however, artists have not seen their way to disassociate colour from the appearances which colour reveals: and so music remains the only art which links our bodily senses to our sense of spirit.

As I have already suggested, Wagner did unconsciously vindicate—in *Tristan and Isolde*—mystic possibilities hitherto unsuspected even by him; and, once aware of the fact, it saved him from the blind alley of a musical art which was to be a mere minister to the drama. That is why his last works are—like his earliest works—so much more purely musical than the more individual works of his middle period. But the reason was a different one. The earliest works were musical because Wagner was one of the greatest musicians who ever lived. The last works were musical because Wagner was one of the greatest mystics who ever lived. So long as he was first of all a musician, he asked no more than a mere æsthetic

reform of a degraded art-form ; and, like all reformers, he set about mending matters in the wrong way.

The earlier sections of *The Ring* are opera reformed not only out of its dramatic sins but out of its musical beauty as well. Once realising that any conscious reform is the mere substitution of arbitrary acts of the intellect for lapses from grace, Wagner was too sensitive an artist to pursue the path.

The Ring of the Nibelungs is a magnificent mistake. It is far more of a mistake æsthetically even than *Rienzi* ; for in *Rienzi* there is the life and colour and movement, the vocal and visible rhythms, which connect the work (despite all its staginess) with the primitive sacred choral dance which was the original source of music-drama, and has been present in some form or other in every successful opera ever written. For men make dramas only of those ideas which they hold in common with groups of human beings ; and, among such ideas, those which are least expressible in language — the religious ideas — are just the ones which come to perfect expression in the ritual dance and the mystery of music. Wagner's sheer genius has made *The Ring* tolerable, necessary, and sublime for us, but his reforming and puritanical attitude to the ballet and the chorus has just deprived it of that communal touch which is needed if simple-hearted folk are properly to enter into communication with it. Nay, not merely the simple-hearted ones — the most sophisticated frequenters of Covent Garden, meaning to do the right thing in the way of music, and suffering untold boredom upon the intellectual heights whither Wagner bids them ascend — even they have been only too glad of the welcome relaxation given by the Russian Ballet, for here the common humanity of them responded to the communal dance, and their spiritual desires have been not altogether thwarted by

the music. And it is in this direction, back towards the simple outlook on life, the simple sane joys men have in sharing their irrational but sublime mystical thoughts, the simple but direct appeal of the dance, the casting away of much that is unnecessary in the modern art of music,—it is to all this that *Parsifal* points.

No one who has seen the work can help being struck by the fact that although in it Wagner violates many of his own consciously framed principles, yet the appeal of the work to our ordinary human imaginations is infinitely more profound and overwhelming than the appeal of the more purely dramatic *Ring*. And this is the case independently of any enjoyment or annoyance caused by the ethical cast of the work. Personally, I experienced something of the nausea which seems to hide from many people the real value of the work; but in spite of that I was much more enthralled, more spell-bound, and more convinced than by the many dramatic subtleties and frequent splendours of the tetralogy. The moving power of the work is the more remarkable because of its extraordinary economy, not to say stinginess, in the matter of musical invention; the themes, separately considered as musical entities, are perhaps the poorest that Wagner ever wrote. Consider the chief ones for a moment. Here is the central motive of the whole work:—



Apparently this is a theme of breadth and intimacy, spirituality and expressiveness; and so it is when one considers the effect made upon us by it. But when one remembers how it was made, how the first section arose (not in the inner emotion of this drama but was borrowed from Liszt for the occasion), how the third bar is lifted from *Tristan* and how the remaining fragment is as commonplace a series of notes as can well be imagined, so insignificant that any student would be ashamed to employ it,—when I say, one remembers how these various pieces are gathered up like dropped stitches from old garments, it is surely clear that in the matter of invention, at any rate, Wagner was coming to his end. But that is not all. Throughout the work there are constant examples of borrowings from his own and other men's works and a strange content with second-rate material at that. The young man who wrote the beautiful Pilgrim's Song in *Tannhäuser* would not have dared to offer the public such slight and familiar material. Musical parallels between *Parsifal* and *Tannhäuser* or *Lohengrin* are obvious enough; for example, the music for the worship of the pilgrims at Rome:—



has many touches, thematically and emotionally, akin to the 6-4 tune in the Grail music:—



And as pure music, it seems to me undeniable that the earlier music is finer. And yet in spite of all this, the impression made upon the majority of people by the *Parsifal* music is infinitely deeper than that made by any of Wagner's earlier works. Of course, the superior person may reply to this: "The fact that it makes a profound impression on the majority proves the inferiority of the work!" Such an argument has indeed been used by more than one critic; but its validity is completely shattered by the fact that the very people who are most affected by the music of *Parsifal* are so often the same to whom the *St. Matthew Passion* and the *Choral Symphony* most powerfully appeal.

Revert for a moment to the musical quotation on page 9. Study the use of those first two bars in the passages of Grail ceremonial; how they are of the very essence of the spirit of prayer,—calm, rhythmless like the upward earnest face of devotional rapture. Then take the third bar of which such constant use is made in *Tristan* to say nothing of its recurrence in other works; and when one remembers the fierce, passionate joy of its message in them, is it not something of a marvel that its message in *Parsifal* should be of the very essence of pain? And, greater wonder still, the feeble final phrase? How these four notes of the tetrachord, the most ancient logical consecution of notes in the evolution of music,—observe how they become charged with a most amazing fullness of faith and compassion, in their emotional effect quite as powerful as the most exceptional phrases ever conceived by the mind of man. This bald simplicity of inventive idea and overwhelming effect as expression are one of the most significant features of *Parsifal*. We will consider them more fully in the next section.