

Parsifal (First Performance 1882)

A "Festival Play for the Consecration of the Stage" in three acts by Richard Wagner
New version for soli, men's chorus and small orchestra op. 78 by Eberhard Kloke
(status: December 2016)

Synopsis and Scenery

The action takes place in a mountainous region "characteristic" of the Pyrenees, which functions as the boundary between the Christian/pure ("Gothic") and pagan/sinful ("Arabian") world. The Grail Castle of Monsalvat is situated on the precipitous north hang, on the south hang is Klingsor's magic castle.

Act 1: A grove in the region of the Grail, later transformed into the interior of the Grail Castle

Act 2: A room in the tower of Klingsor's magic castle; Klingsor's magic garden

Act 3: In the region of the Grail, pleasant landscape in spring; dawn on Good Friday, later transformation into the interior of the Grail Castle

Time:

Middle Ages (probably tenth century)

Sound characteristics

These relate first of all to the description of the Parsifal music, but apply as well as starting point for the results of the present transcription for small orchestra.

Act 1:

Dark, muted sound colours, richly varied register changes and mixed technique, vibrating sound clusters through dense polyrhythmic texture (Prelude). Uncanny spheres of the Grail music.

Kundry theme characterised through awkward tone leaps, disrupted phrases, downward-cascading tone sequences, varying each time, expressionistic in effect.

Act 2:

Sound impulses from low strings, contrabassoon, and low horns

Kundry music with the entire dramatic range of expression, fissured sounds in the orchestra

Act 3

Differentiated harmonies and part scoring in the Prelude, change from almost static sound passages (Good Friday Magic, departure to the Grail Mountain with ritual, final scene).

Intention of the Adaptation:

Wagner's original material was basically retained in terms of vocal notation, harmony and rhythm.

The basic intention for the adaptation was to reduce the large Wagnerian orchestra to a small orchestra. Countering this, the expressive range is augmented through the extra use of certain alternating instruments (alto flute, heckelphone, contrabassoon, Wagner tuba in F, vibraphone, xyloimba).

The set decision to arrange the transcription for a small orchestra naturally had the "unavoidable" consequence of composing combinations with more differentiation and sound mixtures. This approach and differentiation of the mixed technique (between the instrument groups) yielded the utmost sound density yet with simultaneous transparency.

Naturally, the expectation of sound – which has been augmented, sharpened and altered by twentieth-century sound experiences – also influenced the sound mix of this adaptation. The intention was to keep a balance between the sound structure prescribed by Wagner and the sound intention relating to the small orchestra, which was necessarily accompanied by not inconsiderable changes.

The identifying features of the new instrumentation:

1. extra use of several alternating instruments
2. new sound mix technique
3. differentiation of the balance within the small orchestra
4. new balance between vocal scoring and orchestra and what results from this
5. modification of the dynamics

It is imperative that the vocal parts are not swamped – even if we cannot presume a "mystical abyss" = covered orchestra pit as performance location, Wagner's narrative and dialogue structure was extremely compliant with this requirement. Meanwhile, it greatly sustained Kundry's singing and speaking nuances. The specifications on *Parsifal* sketched by Heinrich Porges and Julius Kniese based on the first performance were also taken into account. Several noticeable deviations occurred in that the first Seidl score (for coaching the singers) had been produced based on the orchestra sketches and not on the later finished score. Wherever the deviations were relevant and interesting in view of the adaptation, they were fused into the work. As Egon Voss impressively showed in his essay "Parsifal-Probleme" (in *wagnerspectrum* Schwerpunkt Parsifal, 2016), Parsifal is actually unfinished in many unclarified details. But most problems could be solved because the author had access to extensive material on differences between the score and the piano reduction, also several authentic reports and letters on questions of detail.

The chamber orchestration made the register changes even more striking, on the other hand the combination and sound-mix technique was given all the more impetus by the introduction and more frequent use of several new (alternating instruments see above). It is conspicuous that Wagner – in contrast to the precise notation of dynamics in the orchestra parts – makes almost no specifications for the dynamics of the voices. This is maintained on principle in order to allow a very individual interpretation in speaking and singing expression. The accommodation to specific spatial acoustics and balance is left in any event to the team realising the project.

It goes without saying that the adaptation was realised without cuts, since the quasi epic length and breadth correspond to the content and compositional style of *Parsifal*.

Some special notes on the stage music:

It was arranged so that it can be played from the orchestra. Of course it can also be recorded and played via a sound recording medium and mixed for the respective performance space.

The problem of the Parsifal bells:

A letter of 1 April 1881 from Wagner to Eduard Dannreuther gives a first impression of the still unsolved problem with the Parsifal bells:

“Ich treffe jetzt – schande halber – Vorbereitungen zu der Aufführung des Parsifal. Sind wir mit dem englischen Lindwurm schlecht gefahren, so wollen wir sehen, ob es nun mit den Gralsglocken besser gelingt. Nach einer Besprechung mit Sachverständigen über die Darstellung des nötigen Glockengeläutes kam man darin überein, dass dies immer noch am besten durch chinesische Tamtams zu imitieren sei. Also auf welchem Markte sind diese Tamtams in größter Anzahl und zu bester Auswahl anzutreffen? Man denkt: in London. Gut! – Wer übernimmt die Auswahl? Natürlich: Dannreuther. Also: versuche, liebster Freund, ob du 4 Tamtams auftreibst, welche – wenigstens annähernd – folgendes Geläut liefern: C-G-A-E. Zu bemerken ist, dass – um tiefen Glockenton herauszubringen, diese Instrumente nur sanft am Rande geschlagen werden müssen, während sie sonst, stark in der Mitte beklopft, einen hellen und ganz unbrauchbaren Ton angeben. Also – sieh’ zu!”

Wagner did not provide for specific instruments or bells for the bell sounds in the *Transformation Scenes* in the first and third acts (C-G; A-contra low E). At the first performance a bell piano commissioned from the firm of Steingraeber was used, otherwise the sound was augmented by four Chinese tamtams. As performance practice developed in Bayreuth there was further experimentation until an electro-acoustic instrument was introduced by Winifred Wagner (1931), later the use of special synthesizers. If an electro-acoustic version is not set up, the use of tubular bells and bell plates augmented with tamtams and piano might provide an excellent sound basis. Also the use of low-tuned Java gongs and/or high-tuned Thai gongs could complement the sound mix. Since the acoustic conditions are of course basically different in every performance situation, the “fitting” sound mix should always be targeted.

Con Sordino instructions:

The first con sordino notations for the strings, in part introduced afterwards, are mostly dispensed with in the adaptation because of the very small-scale scoring; but it is applied in some parts deliberately as a means of expression.

staff Soli and Choir:

Soli:

Amfortas, Doppelrolle mit Klingsor *)

Titirel

Gurnemanz

Parsifal

Klingsor, Doppelrolle mit Amfortas *)

Kundry

Erster und zweiter Gralssritter (Tenor, Bass)

Vier Knappen (Sopran, Alt, Tenor, Tenor)

Klingsors Zaubermädchen: Sopran und Alt in 2 Gruppen à 3 (kein Damenchor!)
auch 1. Akt: Knappen (Sopran und Alt), auch Stimmen der Jünglinge aus der Kuppel (1. Akt, Takte 1204 und 1404), auch Stimmen aus der äußersten Höhe der Kuppel (1. Akt, Takte 1229: „Der Glaube lebt...“), auch Stimmen aus der Höhe (1. Akt, Takte 1440 und 1459 und 1: „Nehmet hin...“), Knaben und Jünglinge aus der Höhe (1. Akt, Takte 1493 „Wein und Brot...“ und 1567); auch 3. Akt: Stimmen aus mittlerer und höchster Höhe, 6 Stimmen auf 4 Systeme verteilt

Choir:

Brüderschaft der Gralssritter

Jünglinge und Knaben, siehe oben unter Zaubermädchen

6 Blumenmädchen ohne Frauenchor, Aufteilung: s.o.

*) The question of a double role for Amfortas and Klingsor.

In a letter to the conductor of the first performance Hermann Levi (3 March 1882), Wagner noted the following: "Was Amfortas und Klingsor betrifft, so nehmen wir wohl an, da es kürzere Partien sind, dass sie durchaus Reichmann und Hill angehören, dass Fuchs für Beide nur im Notfall eintritt, hierfür aber die Zusicherung erhält, dass er – auch ohne Notfall – in jeder der Partien ein paar Mal singt?"

This gave me a hint that the parts of Amfortas and Klingsor could indeed be performed by one and the same singer – also keeping in mind the conceptual analogy to the dual character of Kundry.

Starting point for the adaptation:

The actual starting point and impulse motivating the author to produce an adaptation of *Parsifal* was a letter from Wagner to the concert master Friedhold Fleischhauer of the Meiningen Hofkapelle (26 November 1878), in which he reports that the Duke consented to place the Hofkapelle at Wagner's disposal for four days (from 23 to 26 December 1878) for a sort of house concert in Wahnfried (as celebratory birthday music for Cosima).

He stated furthermore that he had heard that the band was reduced, but he needed the following, absolutely necessary strength for the orchestra in view of the following programme:

Wagner's Prelude to *Parsifal*, Beethoven's Symphony No. 8, Wagner's Siegfried Idyll and possibly Weber's Freischütz Overture.

He proposed:

6 VI, 6 VII, 4 violas, 3 violoncellos and 2 contrabasses, also 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 1 cor anglais, 2 clarinets, 1 bass clarinet, 3 bassoons;

4 horns, 3 trumpets., 3 trombones., 1 tuba, 1 harp, thus a total of 34-44 musicians.

If we consider the cramped rooms there, it nevertheless seems logical to me to assume it would have been intended to sound as authentic as possible under the given circumstances, especially in the Parsifal Prelude – written just beforehand .

The experiences I made in my adaptations of the *RING*, and several further points arising from reading extensive documentation on the work procedure and first performance series of *Parsifal* were not the least of factors that led to my tackling of the fascinating, challenging but not unproblematic enterprise of a *Parsifal* adaptation.

cast:

Parsifal by Richard Wagner

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sources:

Alte Partitur (Schott) und kritische Neuauflage, Schott-Verlag (1972), Dokumente zu Parsifal

cast Soli and Choir:

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Titirel

Gurnemanz

Parsifal

Klingsor, Doppelrolle mit Amfortas *)

Kundry

Erster und zweiter Gralsritter /Tenor, Bass)

Vier Knappen (Sopran, Alt, Tenor, Tenor - siehe Blumenmädchen)

Klingsors Zaubermädchen (6): Soprane und Alti in 2 Gruppen à 3 (kein Damenchor!);

Jünglinge und Knaben

Brüderschaft der Gralsritter: Herrchor

Cast Orchestra:

Flöte 1

Flöte 2 (auch Altflöte in G und Piccoloflöte)

Oboe 1 (auch Englischhorn)...1. Akt 105/112/121

Oboe 2 (auch Englischhorn, Heckelphon im 1. und 3. Akt)

Klarinette 1 in B-A (auch Es-Klar)

Klarinette 2 in B-A (auch Bassklarinette in B)

Fagott (auch Kontrafagott), ab dem 2. Akt dazu 2. Fagott (auch Kontrafagott)

3 Hörner in F, 2. Hr auch Basstube in F

1 Trompete in B

2 Tenorbassposaunen

Pauke/Perc (Vibraphon, Xylorimba; Becken, Tamtam):

2 Spieler; Harfe

= 16 (17) Bläser, Perc, Hfe,

Streicher: 5-5-4-3-2 = 19

gesamt: 35 (36) SpielerInnen

Spieldauer: 1. Akt: 1h, 20', 2. Akt: 63', 3. Akt: 70'; Gesamtdauer netto: 3h 33' ca.

(Eberhard Kloke, status: December 2016)

Translation: Abigail Prohaska