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# Wagner's Parsifal by Roger Scruton review: is this Arthurian fable holy truth – or a mystical muddle?



Trance-like: Wiener Staatsoper's 2018 staging of Parsifal

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By **Rupert Christiansen**

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Ever since the young Nietzsche fell under his spell, Richard Wagner has been catnip to philosophers – and the fathoming of his elusive final masterpiece Parsifal is without doubt the knottiest problem his case raises. In this new monograph, Roger Scruton, who died earlier this year, is only the latest in a legion of post-war British thinkers – Bernard Williams, Bryan Magee and Michael Tanner among them – who have attempted to trace a path through its hall of mirrors.

For many others, Parsifal embodies everything that is most esoteric if not downright tedious about Wagnerism. A penumbra of sanctity clings to it – the ban on staging it outside Bayreuth lasted until the First World War, and the tradition of refraining from applause is still upheld by some audiences today. For all its solemn magnificence, it makes no concession to those in search of accessible entertainment. Very long (not far short of five hours), mostly very slow and dominated by lugubrious bass voices, it contains little overt action and the orchestration is spare, at times almost aqueously colourless.

Yet because it creates a uniquely shimmering and translucent sound world in an atmosphere of ritual that can induce a trance-like state, Parsifal has also inspired rapturous devotion – Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* are only two of many musical works profoundly shaped by its influence, and since its premiere in 1882, its admirers have considered themselves members of opera's most exclusive club.

Briefly summarised, Parsifal tells the story (drawn from the medieval romance of Wolfram von Eschenbach) of an innocent and ignorant boy who stumbles on a demoralised order of Arthurian knights, cursed by the sinful failings of its wounded leader Amfortas and the loss to the magician Klingsor of its sacred relic, the spear that pierced Jesus at the crucifixion. Parsifal recovers the spear from Klingsor and in the process learns the supreme value of compassion or pity: Mitleid.





A 1951 production of Parsifal CREDIT: RALPH CRANE/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION

After years of wandering, he returns to the knights' temple with the spear, redeeming Amfortas and the order from extinction. Kundry, a woman of shape-shifting identities who serves the knights as a penitent and acts as the seductive agent of Klingsor's machinations, plays a continually modulating role in Parsifal's inner journey from fool to redeemer. The implications of this tale have been fiercely contested in relation to the extent to which Wagner's true theme was the purgation of what he considered to be Jewish corruption and the creation of a pure Aryan elite.

Hitler loved Parsifal, but realised that it couldn't be moulded to suit Nazi propaganda: the championing of Mitleid wasn't the upfront aggressive message he required, and performances of the opera were prohibited during the Second World War. When Bayreuth reopened in 1951, Wagner's grandson Wieland mounted a production that stripped away any militaristic connotations and presented the opera as a purely symbolic parable of rebirth; perhaps the greatest of all modern stagings, directed by Stefan Herheim at Bayreuth in 2008, presented a simultaneous multiplicity of interpretations, both benign and malign.

Although Scruton admits the impossibility of playing Parsifal "straight", he deplores Herheim's relativism. Scruton wants to rescue Parsifal, not only from aspersions of anti-Semitism but also ambiguities in its spiritual message, by proving that it is intellectually cogent and theologically coherent. Is this a hopeless enterprise? As pages of dense, patient explication circle around the same conundrums, one can't but feel that the harder Scruton grapples with the task, the more slippery it becomes.

At the heart of his meditation is his belief that like so many 19th-century intellectuals, Wagner was attempting in Parsifal to reinvent Christianity, using opera as a sacrament. "It is reserved to art to salvage the kernel of religion," Wagner wrote in 1880. The opera house he built in Bayreuth was for him as much a temple as a theatre.

Born a Lutheran but never observant, Wagner was fascinated by Jesus and the idea of sacrifice and redemption, but rejected the idea of the authoritarian biblical God. He read deeply in Buddhism and the philosophy of Schopenhauer, both of which emphasise the need for a renunciation of worldliness and the striving for a transcendence of ordinary reality.

Parsifal takes from Christianity the idea of the Eucharist and the blood sacrifice of Good Friday, but regards redemption as something that comes from within ourselves rather than something related to the superstitions of Catholic absolution or the false promise of an after-life. Through resisting the pollution of sexual desire embodied in the blandishments of Klingsor's houri maidens and Kundry's allure, Parsifal learns to dedicate himself instead to the higher love represented by Mitleid.

But how or why his personal enlightenment can regenerate the order of knights is something that the opera never clarifies and Scruton ducks out of explaining, and he is even more non-committal over the possibility that "a defence of Aryan racial purity against the pollution introduced by the Jews" plays any part in this. "Those looking for anti-Semitism", Scruton says, "will find it in Parsifal as they will find it in *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Brothers Karamazov*."



The late philosopher Roger Scruton, who died in January this year CREDIT: ANDY HALL/GETTY

What one is left with is suggestive rather than conclusive, and although every page is illuminated with erudition, intelligence and sensitivity, discussion of the music seems little more than a useful summation of the work of Robin Holloway and older German scholars. Scruton's surpassing love for this opera gives the monograph a glow, but nothing he proposes emerges as startlingly original or controversial.

The more radical possibility ignored by Scruton is that there may be something hypocritical, even bogus, underlying Parsifal. Wagner was obsessed with money and his creature comforts, sexually voracious and signally lacking in compassion for his fellow human beings (to his dogs he was kind). How could someone so ruthlessly egocentric in his own life sincerely champion Mitleid, and where in the opera is there any instance of it to match the sort of human sympathy that we find in King Lear or Middlemarch? Could the machinery of the plot be read simply as a fabulous yarn, not so far from Tennyson and the pre-Raphaelites, and its pretensions to spiritual sublimity mere fancy-dressed posturing?

Scruton's choice is to see in Parsifal's numinous haze an answer to "the question of how to live in right relation with others, even if there is no God to help us". But for others it is the pellucid beauty of the music rather than the mystical muddle of the text that makes it such a compelling work of art.

**Wagner's Parsifal: The Music of Redemption by Roger Scruton is published by Allen Lane at £20. To order a copy, visit [Telegraph Books](https://books.telegraph.co.uk/Product/Roger-Scruton/Wagners-Parsifal--The-Music-of-Redemption/24061430) (<https://books.telegraph.co.uk/Product/Roger-Scruton/Wagners-Parsifal--The-Music-of-Redemption/24061430>).**