

The Guardian

Wagner's Parsifal by Roger Scruton review – in defence of the insufferable

Nietzsche famously called Wagner's last opera poisonous, but does its theme of redemption offer an antidote to our ills?

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Sat 30 May 2020 07.30 BST



An English National Opera production of Parsifal. Photograph: Tristram Kenton/The Guardian

In his 1998 book *On Hunting*, Roger Scruton defended the unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable. In his last, now posthumously published book, the philosopher who died in January stands up for the unbearable responsible for the insufferable. The unbearable? The megalomaniac, narcissistic, antisemitic monster Richard Wagner. And the insufferable? The life-hating curse on the senses that was his last opera.

So at least argued Nietzsche, who damned Wagner's *Parsifal* with the histrionics only a former devotee can muster. "Parsifal," he snarled in the essay "Nietzsche Contra Wagner", "is a work of perfidy, of vindictiveness, of a secret attempt to poison the presuppositions of life – a *bad* work."

Parsifal, which received its premiere at Bayreuth in 1882, unfolds in an unsavoury twilight milieu of death, curdling blood and toxic sex. The castle of Montsalvat is home to a community of grimly celibate knights who guard the Holy Grail, a chalice holding the blood

of Christ collected after the crucifixion, along with the Holy Lance with which he was pierced. Their depressive leader, Amfortas, has an agonising and suppurating thigh wound that won't heal - just like Henry VIII's, if not as smelly. His ailing father Titurel, selfishly, declines to die, but hangs on so he can savour the sight of Christ's blood that is ritually unveiled before the faithful.

Amfortas's wound was caused when a self-castrated magician called Klingsor seized the Holy Lance and stabbed him with it. Klingsor earlier gelded himself so as not to fall prey to the sexual desire that would distract him from his project of seizing the grail for his drearily power-crazed purposes. He controls a bevy of flower maidens whom he weaponises to lure knights from their vows of chastity. He has also ensnared the opera's most interesting character, Kundry, a self-loathing seductress with a shameful past (she laughed at Christ's crucifixion), whom he deploys to destroy his foes with sex.



Amalie Materna as Kundry, Emil Scaria as Gurnemanz, Hermann Winkelmann as Parsifal at the premiere of Parsifal in Bayreuth, 1882. Photograph: Alamy

Into this crypto-Christian bedlam, strolls our eponymous hero, a Siegfried-like simpleton, making his entrance slaughtering a swan for kicks. It is this bird-murdering oaf on whose hopes the future of this community of knights depends.

And yet from this unpromising cast and dramatic material, Scruton convincingly suggests that *Parsifal* is not so much an infection corrupting its listeners as an antidote to our ills - even in the 21st century. He regarded *Parsifal* as an allegory of the Gospel story of Christ, with the twist that we can redeem ourselves and in so doing, effectively, become mini-Christ.

This third and final of Scruton's analyses of Wagner's operas - the first two were *Death-Devoted Heart* on *Tristan und Isolde*, and *The Ring of Truth*, his superb analysis on the Ring cycle - shows Scruton's obsession with a composer whose loathsome views were typified by the fact that he tried to get Hermann Levi, a Jew, to convert to Christianity before conducting *Parsifal's* premiere. It took Wagner's patron "Mad"

King Ludwig to broker a deal whereby Levi conducted without getting baptised first.

His lifelong obsession with Wagner may well seem symptomatic of Scruton's own poisonous brand of elegiac conservatism. That said, this short book is a bracing corrective to Nietzsche's account of the opera. In doing so, Scruton recycles some of his favourite themes,

namely the difference between the sacred and the profane, sexual pollution and the redemption desperately needed by our spiritually degenerate society. Scruton writes: “In our polluted passions, seeking pleasure and excitement rather than respect and love, we scorn the Redeemer’s suffering and surrender to the basest form of control.”

But we can revivify the sacred conception of how we ought to live. For Scruton, Wagner “rightly insists” that “a person can be godly without the belief in God”. At the heart of Wagner’s opera, this book suggests, is the idea that our real task as humans is to take on the burden of another’s suffering without any expectation of reward. Amfortas, Klingsor, Kundry and the rest are too mired in their own woes and machinations to do so. Parsifal, sibling to the blond beast Siegfried from Wagner’s *Ring* tetralogy, is what we need, not just to redeem ourselves but to redeem the Redeemer whose self-sacrifice the grail knights have forgotten. He is the “innocent outsider, perhaps free from specific religious beliefs but with a heart open to the Redeemer’s message”.

The most freighted scene comes in the second act, in which Kundry attempts to seduce this innocent outsider. Sex, for Scruton, has long been the fraught nexus of the erotic and the sacred, an existential zone wherein if you’re doing it right you exalt the other, but if wrong, embark on mutually assured pollution. Apart from drawing him into some pretty dismal views on homosexuality, and a reactionary perspective on the sanctity of marriage, this leads Scruton into a worry about how sex is used as power when it should be sacred communion.

When Kundry kisses Parsifal in Klingsor’s magic garden, she uses sex both to corrupt him and, paradoxically, to win redemption through wooing a chaste man who will resist her, thus lifting the curse. Of all kisses in the operatic canon, this must be the most semiotically dense, sexually weird, not to mention hopeless.

No wonder some critics have seen Kundry as serving not just Klingsor but Wagner’s hidden sexist agenda. The opera’s only substantial female character is conceived of as existential succubus, evil magician’s sex missile, and self-divided ruin of a human being.

Matters get even stranger in act three in which Parsifal, after years of wandering, returns to Montsalvat on Good Friday, now a fully fledged grail knight. He is the personification of compassionate godliness, to which we should aspire. Kundry washes his feet and he baptises her. Then he turns his attention to Amfortas, whose still terrible pains pique his compassion. He touches the wound with the Holy Lance and, miraculously, it heals. The community is revived and revitalised by this act. The Grail is brought out and opened. The knights kneel down, Kundry dies peacefully. In some productions of the opera, a dove is lowered on a string to hover above Parsifal’s head as the music swells to a conclusion.

What are we to make of this? Scruton writes: “Through compassion the Redeemer made a gift of himself and we, by following that example ... renew the world, which flowers like the meadows on Good Friday.” It’s a plausible interpretation of what Wagner attempted, but not one that would have induced Nietzsche to return to the Wagnerian fold. Disenchanted with Wagner, he fell for Bizet’s *Carmen* since the Frenchman’s music was everything the German’s was not – light, loveable, healthy.

Yet if you listen to the opera, as I did while writing this review, you can find in it something other than the Christian message Scruton excavates or the life-rejecting toxicity Nietzsche revolted against. Debussy called its music “incomparable and bewildering, splendid and strong”. Not so much a curse on the senses, then, as an enchantment of them.

● *Wagner's Parsifal: The Music of Redemption is published by Allen Lane (RRP £20). To order a copy go to guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply.*

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