

Two Landmarks in Wagner Production: Patrice Chéreau's Centenary *Ring* (1976) and Nikolaus Lehnhoff's *Parsifal* (2004)

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Staging is all-important for opera. An opera is not a score (though scholars often write as if the score is the opera). Indeed, not even a sound recording represents an opera fully; it only exists when produced on stage. It is therefore essential to analyse the work of directors and singing actors, not at the relatively general level of newspaper and magazine reviews, but rather more deeply.¹

Wagner took production very seriously. Although he was a highly experienced conductor, he entrusted the pit for the first season of the *Ring* at Bayreuth to Hans Richter, and he himself took on the then new role of stage director to develop what was clearly, from Heinrich Porges' record of the rehearsals, for some of his cast an entirely novel attention to the details of posture and gesture.² But he was dissatisfied with the costume and set designs for the premiere of the *Ring* in 1876.³ It is clear that Wagner, having created a wholly new kind of opera, felt that his reforms had not extended to the *mise-en-scène*. Indeed, after seeing the designs that he had commissioned for his own production of *Parsifal*, Wagner jested that having invented the invisible orchestra, he now wished he had invented the invisible stage!⁴

¹ This is a shortened version of a paper that I delivered as a plenary keynote address to the conference *Richard Wagner's Impact on his World and Ours* in Leeds in May–June 2013, and again at the *Wagner and Us* conference in Melbourne in December 2013. I am grateful to delegates to both conferences for their comments.

² Many details of his interpretation are recorded in Heinrich Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring': An Eye-Witness Account of the Stage Rehearsals of the First Bayreuth Festival*, trans. Robert L. Jacobs (Cambridge: CUP, 1983).

³ Cosima Wagner (hereafter CW), diary entry, 21 July 1876, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, trans. Geoffrey Skelton (London: Collins, 1978), vol. 1, 917.

⁴ CW, 23 Sep. 1878, *Diaries*, vol. 2, 154.

Adolph Appia was right to diagnose in 1891 a fundamental mismatch between Wagner's demand for realistic scenery in a Romantic style and the evocation in his music of the inner life of his characters.⁵ But unfortunately Cosima presided after Richard Wagner's death over an ossification of the performance style at Bayreuth, with productions very similar in concept and design to the original 1876 staging of the *Ring*. Then Winifred Wagner continued her mother-in-law's tradition. Only after the Second World War, when the Festival Theatre reopened in 1951, did Wieland Wagner at last adopt at Bayreuth the principles for Wagner production that Appia had formulated, in a book that had been loftily dismissed by Cosima.⁶ The stage was stripped to a bare disc with a cyclorama surrounding it on three sides, and there was much use of the play of light on this minimalist acting area. The costumes were intended to be 'time-neutral' and modeled on ancient Greek garments, but it must be admitted that, for example, Hans Hotter as Wotan looked like a one-eyed monk who had unaccountably come to find himself carrying a spear, and by all reports the acting was extremely static.

In retrospect, the era of Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner can be regarded as a twenty-five-year period of cleansing, during which the abstract sets and costumes—especially in Wieland's 1965 *Ring* production—led spectators to view the trilogy as mythical, symbolic and archetypal.⁷ This gradually removed the stigma which Richard Wagner's music dramas had acquired by the use of his music in Nazi propaganda during the Third Reich.⁸ As the centenary year approached, Wolfgang realised that if Bayreuth was to lead the world in Wagner interpretation, something entirely new had to be done with the *Ring*. He saw courageously that the style in which first his brother and then he himself had directed at Bayreuth had had its day, relinquished his role as stage director, and became merely the producer of a wholly new staging of the trilogy.

Even more courageously, he entrusted the centenary *Ring* to a team of two Frenchmen. In 1976 the conducting and staging of Wagner was still an intensely national issue for many of the Germans who regularly attended Bayreuth, and of course animosity between France and Germany stretched back for centuries, including the Franco-Prussian War of 1871, and two World Wars in the twentieth century. By engaging Pierre Boulez to conduct the *Ring*, Wolfgang was inviting the complete deconstruction of the traditional German orchestral approach to playing Wagner, and by inviting Patrice Chéreau to direct (at Boulez's insistence), he was, whether he knew it or not, bringing to Bayreuth a revolutionary new approach to Wagner production.⁹

There was great controversy when their *Ring* was first staged in 1976, but I believe that Richard Wagner would have acclaimed Chéreau's production. In my opinion, three things are necessary for a great Wagner production:

⁵ Adolphe Appia, *La mise en scène du drame wagnérien* (Paris: Léon Chailley, 1895).

⁶ Geoffrey Skelton, *Wagner at Bayreuth: Experiment and Tradition*, 2nd ed. (London: White Lion Publishers, 1976), 130.

⁷ Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), xvi.

⁸ Incidentally, I believe that Robert Donington's Jungian interpretation of the *Ring* would not have been created without the inspiration of these abstract visual images. See Robert Donington, *Wagner's 'Ring' and its Symbols: The Music and the Myth* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963).

⁹ On the strengths of Chéreau's production, see J. Engstrom, 'Chéreau's *Ring*, 1976-1980', *Theater* 12.3 (1981): 86-90; Michael Ewans, 'The Bayreuth Centenary *Ring* by Patrice Chéreau and Pierre Boulez', *Miscellanea Musicologica* 14 (1985): 167-74; Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Tétralogies: Wagner, Boulez, Chéreau — Essai sur l'infidélité* (Paris: Bourgois, 1983).

1. a concept, clearly demonstrated in the *mise-en-scène*, which engages fully with Wagner's intellectual and emotional conception of both text and music;
2. credible, effective and functional sets and costumes; and
3. stage direction that is responsive to the text and the music in the blocking, the movement, and the postures, gestures and expressions of the singing actors.

Chéreau's *Ring* fulfilled all three of these requirements. He started from the frequently ignored fact that Wagner was a left-wing revolutionary when he conceived and wrote the texts for the cycle. The composer was living in exile in Switzerland, having been obliged to flee Germany after his role on the barricades in Dresden during the abortive revolutions of 1848. And he took three years, during which he composed no music, to work through in substantial theoretical writings the issues which the creation of the *Ring* raised.¹⁰ Only then did he begin to compose the music for the first three 'stage festival plays' up to the end of *Siegfried* Act II.

In 1898 Bernard Shaw argued that the *Ring* was a socio-political allegory. He wrote that *Das Rheingold* depicts a world which:

is waiting for Man to redeem it from the lame and cramped government of the gods. Once grasp that, and the allegory is simple enough. Really, of course, the dwarfs, giants and gods are dramatizations of the three main orders of men: to wit, the instinctive, predatory lustful greedy people; the patient, toiling, respectful, money-worshipping people; and the intellectual, moral, talented people who devise and administer States and Churches. History shows us only one order higher than the highest of these: namely, the order of Heroes.¹¹

In other words, the whole Nibelung cycle, which begins with Wagner's crucial addition to his source material—Alberich's rejection of love for power—is a Romantic revolutionary's diagnosis of the problems of nineteenth-century capitalist society. Chéreau and his designers (sets by Richard Peduzzi and costumes by Jacques Schmidt) presented for the first time on stage a reading of the trilogy which reflected Shaw's long disregarded interpretation, and staged the *Ring* in a *mise-en-scène* which for the most part evokes the period of the Industrial Revolution, for which its Old Norse gods and mediaeval Teutonic heroes are an allegory, though for *Götterdämmerung* the period moved forward to the 1920s and '30s.¹² The giants are the hard-working peasants of the nineteenth century, the Nibelung dwarves are the greedy money-makers—and since Wagner's well-known anti-Semitism is very evident both in the vocal lines given to Mime and in Siegfried's descriptions of him, let us name them: they are the Jews. The gods are the aristocracy, doomed and blind to their fate, as Loge sings at the end of *Das Rheingold*.¹³

¹⁰ 'Die Kunst und die Revolution', 'Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft', and 'Oper und Drama', *Richard Wagners Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Julius Kapp, vols 1–2 (Leipzig: Hesse & Becker, 1914).

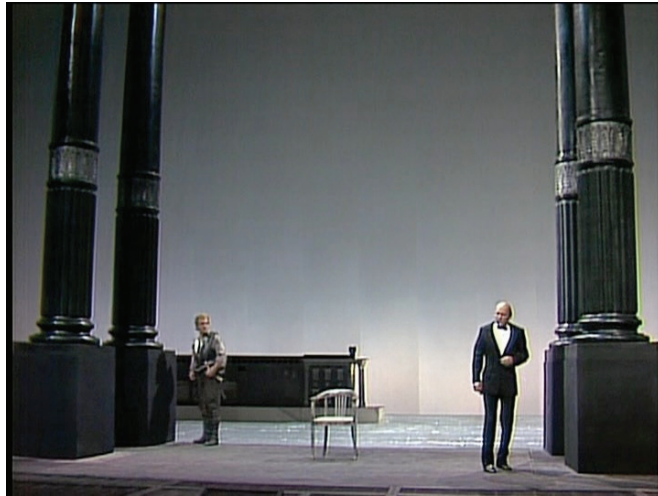
¹¹ Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Nibelung's Ring* [1923] (New York: Dover, 1976), 29.

¹² There are other dimensions to Chéreau's production (see Nattiez, *Tétralogies*) and the director preferred in interviews to refer to Adorno rather than to Shaw. But to my mind the Shavian foundations of Chéreau's *Ring* are undeniable.

¹³ The political impotence of Donner and Froh in the class struggle is captured in Chéreau's production by Schmidt's costumes, which take them back a little from the production's overall mid-nineteenth-century period; they are portrayed as Regency dandies, and Donner's small hammer is no serious threat to the giants.

As Chéreau has said, Wagner provides in the *Ring* a stunning vision of political power, society and the modern state.¹⁴ Capitalism is enshrined not only in the magnificent hall that is Valhalla in Peduzzi's design, but also in Hunding's impressive dwelling in *Die Walküre* Act I, and even more so in the four huge black marble columns of the Gibichungs' palace, where Gunther and Gutrune preside over their kingdom in impeccable evening dress. Siegfried's reaction shows that he has never seen anything like it before (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Siegfried (Manfred Jung) is impressed by the palace of Gunther (Franz Mazura); *Götterdämmerung*, Act I, sc. 2, dir. Chéreau. DVD 00440 073 4057, Deutsche Grammophon, 2005



There are two flaws in Shaw's reading: his hailing of Siegfried as a Bakunin-like anarchist hero, and his dismissal of *Götterdämmerung* as sub-Shakespearian revenge melodrama.¹⁵ Though Shaw praises the race of Heroes, the plain fact is that the glorious hero, to whom Brünnhilde gives her virgin love at the end of *Siegfried*, cuts a sorry figure when he descends in *Götterdämmerung* to the world of human society, and falls instantly in love with Gutrune. Shaw was more than a little misogynistic, and he failed to give proper emphasis in his essay to the fact that, after Siegfried has been killed, the world of the *Ring* is only saved by the self-sacrifice of a woman. It is Brünnhilde, not Siegfried, who returns the ring to the Rhine-daughters, gives Wotan the release that he desires by setting Valhalla on fire, and leaves the world hopefully a better place, bequeathed—as Wagner once wrote in a letter—to the *Gesamtheit*, the totality, of mankind. As I have argued elsewhere,

The past action of the *Ring* offers no prospect for the future to the human beings who survive the action of *Götterdämmerung*. They must make their own world, unaided by gods or heroes.¹⁶

Chéreau matched this vision marvelously: as Boulez presided over the serene last orchestral bars of *Götterdämmerung*, the humans who had watched the catastrophe turned questioninglly to face the audience, as if to say, 'The gods, giants, dwarves and heroes are now all gone, and

¹⁴ Program for the 1978 cycle, quoted in Nattiez, *Tétralogies*, 78.

¹⁵ On this charge against *Götterdämmerung*, see Michael Ewans, 'Music and Stagecraft in Wagner's *Ring*', *Miscellanea Musicologica* 14 (1985): 83–98.

¹⁶ Michael Ewans, *Wagner and Aeschylus: The Ring and The Oresteia* (London: Faber & Faber, 1982), 248.

it is now up to us to shape our future for ourselves.' As the director himself expressed the point, the actors who play the surviving Gibichungs are saying à *vous de jouer*—your turn.¹⁷

All this demands a rather different reading of the character of Siegfried from that which had generally been made, and Chéreau duly supplied it. Manfred Jung played Siegfried as a rather unattractive young thug, not overly bright and very much an easy victim for the sophistication of Jeanine Altmeyer's Gutrune and the machinations of Fritz Hübner's sinister Hagen.¹⁸ Some may not like this view of Siegfried, since for many he is the central heroic figure of the *Ring*. But I think it is a valid reading, and it has the added advantage that it throws focus back onto Wotan and Brünnhilde; unlike Siegfried, they are evolving characters whose emotionally intense dilemmas are central to the meaning of the cycle.¹⁹ In Chéreau's production two truly superb singing actors, Donald McIntyre and Gwyneth Jones, played these parts. And they are seen at their best in his version of the second act of *Die Walküre*, an exemplary staging which makes perfect sense of crucial events in the development of the trilogy.

Wagner's original setting for Act II was a distant gorge leading to a high ridge of rocks, somewhere in the wild mountains. But in a stroke of creative genius Chéreau and Peduzzi relocated scenes 1 and 2 to a large room in Valhalla, which had two notable features: a freestanding, full-length mirror, and a ball with a spike on its underside. This ball, suspended on the end of a long wire stretching down from the flies, swung in slow circles over a low dais. With these two simple props, Chéreau went straight to the heart of the first two scenes; the revolutions of the pendulum symbolise the fatal bonds in which Wotan is now entangled, while the mirror dramatises the god's introspective brooding after Fricka has defeated him. In practical terms they also, together with a chair, provide points of focus for the action which are not available in Wagner's original *mise-en-scène*, or in a modern bare-stage production like that presented by Harry Kupfer at Bayreuth in 1988–91.

Fricka's total dominance in the first scene was established by Hanna Schwarz's impeccable poise, perfect costume and exquisite physical appearance, and her performance of Fricka's successive exactions from Wotan was inexorable. Then in the second scene Wotan, after a violent outburst of despair, confides in Brünnhilde. Brünnhilde asks him gently to tell her what is hurting him; she sings 'I am faithful to you'—an ironic remark, in view of what will happen later on in the act. Here the stage direction is: 'she lays her head and hands with loving concern on his knees and breast. Wotan looks long in her eyes, then he strokes her hair with unconscious tenderness.'²⁰ Chéreau went further than this, to establish his more complex vision of the psychology of the scene. At this point, Donald McIntyre as Wotan does indeed caress his Brünnhilde's hair affectionately, but then he goes across to face the mirror. And as his monologue begins in almost total orchestral silence, Jones sits on the edge of the low dais above which the pendulum is revolving, watching him anxiously and—this is the key point—facing the mirror, so that when Wotan looks into it, he sees both his own image and that of Brünnhilde behind him. This perfectly symbolises the complex relationship between

¹⁷ Nattiez, *Tétralogies*, 84.

¹⁸ Hübner wore a shabby suit, with his tie loose at the neck; as the Bremen industrialist in the next seat at Bayreuth in 1979 whispered to me, when Hagen summoned the vassals, 'They are the workers, and he is the trade union boss!'

¹⁹ Wagner himself abandoned his initial focus on Siegfried as the man of the future, and concentrated his attention on Wotan, as does Chéreau. Nattiez, *Tétralogies*, 47, 63–4.

²⁰ Richard Wagner, *Die Walküre*, ed. Christa Jost (London: Eulenberg, 2009), 356–7.

Wotan and his daughter, whom he describes here as ‘my will,’ as he removes the band over his blinded eye to confront his vulnerability, and confides his deepest thoughts to her; she is both a part of him, and independent (see Figure 2).²¹

Figure 2. Wotan (Donald McIntyre) gazes into the mirror and sees both himself and Brünnhilde (Gwyneth Jones); *Die Walküre*, Act II, sc. 2, dir. Chéreau



A notable feature of this *Ring* production was the intense physicalisation, both of sexual attraction and of violence, which caused some controversy when it was first performed. Sexual love, and by contrast the violence caused by the quest for power, are of course the two main axes around which the *Ring* pivots, and Chéreau staged them both very vividly by the standards of mainstream stage production in the mid-1970s. One of the most startling outbreaks of violence comes at the end of Act II. Notung breaks in two, Hunding pierces Siegmund from in front with his spear, and to show his complicity Wotan stabs his son from behind with his own.²² Siegmund writhes for several minutes in his death-agonies; he does not ‘go gentle into that good night,’ and this increases the pathos of Wotan’s anguish, both now and in his confrontation in Act III with Brünnhilde, who has disobeyed him and done what he inwardly wanted to do.

Brian Large, who filmed Chéreau’s *Ring*, and is therefore at least partly responsible for its global impact in and after the 1980s, described it as ‘the most human, the most witty, and the most cruel’ production of the cycle that he had ever seen.²³ I wonder if in these three very important respects it has subsequently been matched. Chéreau set new standards for Wagner production and acting,²⁴ while Boulez, after some turbulent initial rehearsals, secured

²¹ Ewans, *Wagner and Aeschylus*, 138–41. For a detailed analysis of Chéreau’s staging of this scene from *Die Walküre* see Michael Ewans, *Performing Opera: A Practical Guide for Singers and Directors* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, forthcoming).

²² Nattiez *Tétralogies*, 123–4.

²³ Jeannine Altmeyer (Sieglinde and Gutrune) agreed, and stressed Chéreau’s use of body as well as voice to dramatise the action. *The Making of the Ring*, DVD 00440 073 4068, Deutsche Grammophon, 2005.

²⁴ So too O.G. Bauer, *Richard Wagner: The Stage Designs and Productions from the Premières to the Present* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), 258.

a completely new style of playing from the Festival Orchestra, embodying luminous clarity, attention to detail, eloquence and excellent, quite fast tempi—all of them among the qualities that Wagner himself desired for the performance of his music.²⁵ There was—or should have been—no going back after this production of the cycle.

Wagner's 'sacred stage festival play' *Parsifal* is highly problematic today, because it treats female sexuality, unremittingly, as an evil temptation.²⁶ At the end of Act I, Gurnemanz throws Parsifal out of the temple for apparently failing to understand the Grail ritual, telling him that he is a gander and ought to seek out a goose. Evidently for Gurnemanz lack of spiritual insight makes you fit only for marriage.

The women portrayed in *Parsifal* are firstly the fatuous bimbos of Klingsor's magic garden (whom Parsifal has no trouble in resisting), and secondly Kundry, who appears in Act II 'in skimpy, fantastic clothing approximating Arabian style'²⁷ when she has to try to seduce Parsifal. She can only achieve grace in Act III by becoming a penitent, being baptized, and dying, so that at the end the world of *Parsifal* is totally male. Meanwhile Wagner defines the Christian concept of purity so narrowly that few would accept his vision; his 'purity' has no spiritual dimension, and only one criterion: successful resistance to female sexuality.²⁸ Amfortas has failed as the guardian of the Grail because he allowed himself to be seduced, and Klingsor has failed to become a member of the chaste Knights of the Grail because he could not resist his sensual desire for women, and attempted to attain purity by the drastic—and unsuccessful—means of self-castration. Parsifal, the *Reine Tor* ('pure fool'), passes the test and gains the power to redeem the Knights from the blight which Amfortas' sin has imposed on them, simply because he is able to resist Kundry's seductive power, and so is able to destroy Klingsor's magic castle.²⁹ It is true that there are some elements in Judeo-Christian orthodoxy which foreshadow such a hostile vision of female sexuality, starting with the foundation myth of Adam, Eve, the serpent and the apple;³⁰ and the development in medieval Christianity of monasteries shows that in many men's view supreme devotion to Christ demands complete abstinence from the pleasures of the flesh. But few modern Christians would adopt the extreme position that Wagner wholeheartedly embraces in *Parsifal*.

It is easy for a scholar, in his or her study, to mount a critique of *Parsifal*, such as I have briefly offered here. But a director has to stage the work, and in a modern production of *Parsifal* there are only two ways to do this. One is to adopt a 'crash through or crash'

²⁵ Nattiez, *Tétralogies*, 181, 208.

²⁶ There is also the issue of Wagner's obsession with racial purity.

²⁷ Richard Wagner, *Parsifal*, (London: Eulenburg no. 6403, n.d.), 184.

²⁸ As Beckett correctly notes, this is one of Wagner's own innovations. In the main source, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, the hero is happily married to Condwiramurs. Lucy Beckett, *Richard Wagner: Parsifal* (Cambridge: CUP, 1981), 140–1.

²⁹ Millington claims that he also learns during his subsequent wanderings to channel his spontaneous feeling of sympathy for Amfortas and that his self-denial 'is not a question of chastity but acceptance of moral responsibility.' Barry Millington, *The Master Musicians: Wagner* (London: J.M. Dent, 1984), 267.

³⁰ Christ himself is shown, in several incidents recorded in the Gospels, to have valued women more highly and sympathetically than was customary in his contemporary Judaic culture. The same cannot be said about St Paul, or about several subsequent Church Fathers, including the reformed libertine St Augustine.

approach, presenting the piece pretty much as Wagner envisaged it, responding to its many felicities, its beautiful changes of mood, and the contrasting scenic demands of the settings, and hope that the audience will be sufficiently impressed by such a presentation, and by the sheer beauty of the music, to reach in the Finale the state of transcendence which Wagner attempts to give to them; hopefully, when Parsifal raises the Grail and the dove hovers above, they will be in so great an ecstasy that they can disregard the problematic aspects of the work's ideology.³¹

The other, and much more difficult, task is for the director to express his or her dissent from the problematic aspects of Wagner's vision—to mount a critique of the work *from within, during an actual performance*. This is a formidable undertaking, and not to be attempted lightly. Indeed, can it be done at all, without wrecking the musico-dramatic totality of the piece?

That is what Nikolaus Lehnhoff attempted in his 2004 production, which was seen in London, San Francisco and Chicago before being presented at the Baden-Baden Festival, and there recorded for release on television and on DVD. He started from the premise that the world of the Knights, as portrayed in the opening scene of Act I, is sinking into decay. In his interpretation the Knights and Amfortas represent all those secret societies which had initial good intentions to help people, but have lost sight of their original goals, and are now celebrating meaningless rituals.³² Raimund Bauer's set designs for the first scenes of Acts I and III deliberately depart very far from Wagner's imagined forest clearing; they are bleak and confronting, and the walls of the temple have been pock-marked by enemy attacks and smashed by a large meteorite.

Lehnhoff's interpretation and critique are not fully revealed until Act III, and Kundry is central to it because here Lehnhoff confronts head on the narrow masculine bias of Wagner's last drama. Kundry sings only two words in the final Act: '*Dienen ... Dienen!*' ('Let me serve ... serve!' in response to Gurnemanz after he has revived her). But she is onstage throughout, and in this production a new intimacy grows between the penitent Kundry and Parsifal. Already when she has anointed Parsifal's feet, and hands the bottle of ointment up to him, so he may give it to Gurnemanz to anoint his head, Waltraud Meier as Kundry gazes at Christopher Ventris' Parsifal with admiration, and she is profoundly moved when he baptises her, bowing deeply and humbly before him when he has done this. Then she raises her eyes to him, and they stare at each other. The moment is only broken when the music of the beautiful meadows steals in. But in Lehnhoff's reinterpretation, this is the moment when Kundry and Parsifal begin to find compassion and love for each other, and *that* is what makes possible the rebirth of nature in this decaying world, which follows.³³

Gurnemanz now expands at length on the magic of Good Friday and the rejoicing of all creatures in the renewal and redemption by Christ's sacrifice. During this monologue, in Lehnhoff's production, Parsifal and Kundry first stare at each other across the width of the

³¹ For an example, see *Parsifal*, dir. Otto Schenk, cond. James Levine, Metropolitan Opera, 1993, DVD 073 032-9, Deutsche Grammophon, 2002.

³² This approach was foreshadowed by Wolfgang Wagner's 1975 production; he blamed Titurel's 'inhuman insistence upon asceticism' for the Grail knights having lost their original ideal of compassion. See Bauer, *Richard Wagner*, 291.

³³ Borchmeyer had already rightly argued that Kundry's 'redemption through baptism ... is associated, symbolically, with the redemption of extrahuman nature in the Good Friday scene.' Dieter Borchmeyer, *Richard Wagner: Theory and Theatre* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), 393.

stage. Then he crosses to her, she kneels, he too half-kneels very close to her and she collapses, resting her head on his knee. He holds her, gently touching her head and her back.

This goes a bit further than Wagner's direction that she 'has slowly raised her head again and looks up at Parsifal with tearful eyes in calm and earnest entreaty.'³⁴ As Parsifal responds to her tears,³⁵ he cups her chin in his hand, lifts it, and as Wagner instructs 'kisses her gently on the forehead.'³⁶ But the all-important moment in Lehnhoff's production follows that. Kundry and Parsifal stare into each other's eyes for one last time, then she falls onto his chest and they embrace tightly, each with both arms clasped around the other (see Figure 3). Only when the sound of the bells leads Gurnemanz to declare that they must go to the temple do Kundry and Parsifal disentangle, slowly and gently.

Figure 3. Parsifal (Christopher Ventris) and Kundry (Waltraud Meier) embrace; *Parsifal*, Act III, sc. 1, dir. Lehnhoff, DVD OA 0915 D, Opus Arte, 2005



All this is in preparation for Lehnhoff's dissent from Wagner's final scene. It is not Kundry who dies at the end of this production, but Amfortas, who feels that since the new king has come, he can now have the death for which he has longed. He places his crown on Parsifal's head, and then dies in his arms.

Kundry has entered the temple after Parsifal, but stands aside while he interacts with Amfortas and the Knights. Lehnhoff rightly views Gurnemanz as the keeper of tradition, who still feels that the rituals of Montsalvat have meaning, has suffered while the world of the Grail has been in decay, and wants it to be restored. So Parsifal gives the spear to him, and as the drama draws to a close Gurnemanz holds the spear up with pride and the Knights gather around him in awe of it. They have their sacred relic once again, and will presumably now renew their rituals.

³⁴ Wagner, *Parsifal*, 129–30.

³⁵ 'Is it not her tears of remorse which conferred on Nature its present radiance? ... Parsifal himself recognizes the secret correspondence between Kundry's redemption and Nature.' Borchmeyer, *Richard Wagner*, 395. If I read Lehnhoff's staging of this scene rightly, it can be viewed as a development of the implications of Borchmeyer's insight.

³⁶ Wagner, *Parsifal*, 132.

Figure 4. Kundry summons Parsifal to follow her out of Montsalvat into the light; *Parsifal*, Act III, sc. 2, dir. Lehnhoff



But Parsifal, led by Kundry, rejects Montsalvat. He gently lays the crown which Amfortas has placed on his head on the skeletal corpse of Titurel, and looks up at Kundry. She beckons to Parsifal, and he follows her slowly out of the temple (see Figure 4). The Grail is unseen, not even represented, as it was at the end of Act I, by a beam of light; on the contrary, a bright light now comes from outside the temple, and it invites Kundry and Parsifal to leave for a new and different life. Seven individual Knights detach themselves one by one during the final bars from the adoring group surrounding the spear, and follow them. Lehnhoff's suggestion is that these Knights see that 'there might be another way, without the religious ideology which has led to many of the greatest crimes committed in the name of God.'³⁷

Gurnemanz and the remaining Grail Knights may have had *their* ideology saved by the return of the spear, but Parsifal, led as Moritz has noted³⁸ by 'woman eternal' (Goethe's *Ewigweibliche*), will have none of their all-male world, and seeks his transcendence outside it. In the penitent, redeemed and still-living Kundry, Lehnhoff gives Wagner's enlightened Tamino the Pamina he conspicuously lacks in the composer's original conception.

So ends a truly remarkable production. It presents an account of *Parsifal* that gladly accepts Wagner's underlying concept of redemption through compassion and love, but opposes and critiques his vision of how it can best be achieved. By dissenting from some central aspects of Wagner's text, Lehnhoff returns to the work the power that in a straight production it no longer holds, because of its male-dominated view of the role of women in human society. In

³⁷ Quoted from his interview in Reiner Moritz, 'Parsifal's Progress', *Parsifal*, dir. Nikolaus Lehnhoff, cond. Kent Nagano, Festspielhaus Baden-Baden in co-production with ENO London, San Francisco Opera and Lyric Opera Chicago, DVD OA 0915 D, Opus Arte, 2005. In Harry Kupfer's 1978 production in Copenhagen Amfortas also died, and Parsifal left the temple, but very strangely took with him the Grail and the spear, as well as Kundry and a handful of knights. Taking the ritual objects makes that a very different interpretation from Lehnhoff's, but not having seen the production, I cannot tell if it anticipated Lehnhoff's most important innovation, the growth of affection between Parsifal and the repentant Kundry. See Bauer, *Richard Wagner*, 292. Kundry also lived on in Wolfgang Wagner's 1975 production at Bayreuth. See Barry Millington, *The Sorcerer of Bayreuth* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), 292.

³⁸ Reiner Moritz, 'By Pity Lightened', booklet accompanying DVD, *Parsifal*, dir. Lehnhoff, 11.

my view, Lehnhoff has given the 'sacred stage festival play' back to us today, as a work that we can accept and live by.

I have called these two interpretations in performance landmark productions because Chéreau's revolutionary *Ring* of 1976 irrevocably changed and re-formed the ways in which we view the cycle, as well as deservedly making a truly global impact, and Lehnhoff's production of *Parsifal* challenged a central aspect of Wagner's vision in this problematic work: he reframed its central message of compassion and transcendence so that it can speak to the audiences of the twenty-first century.