



Richard Wagner's Operas of Redemption and Salvation

Innumerable composers have written religious music; to wit, Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, and Bruckner's Masses, Te Deums, Stabat Maters, Cantatas, Oratorios, and so on. They were all written for a few singers with a chorus. None of these works of religious art showed any dramatic motion, or acting out, making it impossible to consider them religious dramas, in the true sense of that term. Richard Wagner (1813–1883), during the late Romantic Period, filled that void with brilliance.

Wagner was a revolutionary in both his life and his music. A German to the core, he was born in Leipzig and died at the age of seventy in Venice. He wrote fourteen operas; the first three, to this day are hardly ever performed; of the fourth, *Rienzi*, only the overture is now played; but the other ten are glorious, in musical vision and inspiration far above the insipid themes—although great music—of most other operas. Two of these Wagner famous ten, *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tristan and Isolde*, are tragedies; the *Meistersinger* is a comedy; four comprise his greatest effort, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, with its myriad of ingenious leitmotifs, brilliant treatment of every virtue and vice known to mankind, presented in a continuous story of love and hate, greed and intrigue between gods and humans. The remaining three operas are his quasi-religious operas, written upon medieval themes of faith and salvation.

Wagner was intent on widening the scope of opera into the blending of music,



Tannhäuser at the Met

great drama, meaningful staging, and insightful themes, a union of all the arts in one great visual and auditory assemblage. He wrote his own librettos, researching epic stories of love and hate, virtue and vice, purity and hypocrisy, greed and compassion—in fact, all the vicissitudes and foibles of human nature. To accomplish this he chose primeval and mediaeval themes of gods and humans, the real and the imaginary, the good and the bad, forming a total view of what real epics consist. Followers of his music are a class of their own, ferociously devoted to what he accomplished in

terms of greatness and depth. Once a Wagnerian, always a Wagnerian!

Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, and Parsifal

Tannhäuser is the story of sin, penance, and ultimate redemption. The plot revolves around the great contrast between the hero's sin, with its accompanying guilt, and Elizabeth, the pure maiden who eventually redeems him through her sacrifice and suffering. The opera is preceded by a great overture. When the curtain opens *Tannhäuser* is in Venusberg, (the city or mountain of sin and eroticism) in the arms

of Venus (the goddess of love), both surrounded by a corps de ballet in the trance of sexual excess—a bacchanalian feast. (Apparently, at the opera's Paris premiere the Jockey Club, composed of rich aristocratic young men, caused a furor with cat-calls. They objected to the ballet being presented early in the opera, as it was their custom to arrive quite late after drinking and dining and just in time to see their paramour ballerinas dance. Then they would leave early, even before the performance ended, to drink again and romance their ballerina girlfriends. So they were furious that the ballet was performed very early on in the evening, and consequently ruined all three Paris performances. Thereafter Wagner avoided Paris performances.)

In the first act, Tannhäuser, after initially enjoying life in Venusberg, is troubled by his lifestyle and tells Venus that he wants to leave her and go back to his own land to live a simple life of tranquility and peace. After an emotional struggle, he departs stating that "*Heil ruht in Maria*" (my salvation rests with the Virgin Mary).

In the meantime back at the Wartburg palace in his home town preparations are being made for the *sangerkrieg* (song contest)—à la Meistersinger. Elizabeth, who longs for Tannhäuser and knows not where he's gone, is declared princess of the Contest. Just before the singspiel, Tannhäuser returns, and through Elizabeth's help, is allowed to participate. He proceeds to deride the other contestants for their recitations in honor of chaste and divine love, asserting that they do not know what real love is. To answer their innocent view on love he proceeds foolishly to sing about "the real love" that he encountered in Venusberg. Everyone, including Elizabeth, now learns that he spent his entire absence in the erotic embrace of Venus. They are shocked by the revelation and he is ordered to go on pilgrimage to Rome to beg forgiveness from the Pope (Urban IV). In the last act, all the other pilgrims return forgiven, except for Tannhäuser. Alone and forlorn he returns unforgiven and still desirous of returning to Venusberg. He tells his friends

that he was not forgiven by the Pope who gave him a wooden cane saying he will be forgiven when flowers sprout on the wooden cane.

Elizabeth dies of grief and now appears to him in a procession, her body carried aloft in a bier. Tannhäuser, remorseful, falls on the casket and dies. A boy runs to the stage showing the wooden cane has sprouted flowers and leaves; our repenting hero is thus saved through Elizabeth's suffering and heavenly intercession, as the chorus sings: "The Holy Grace of God is to the penitent given, and now he enters into the joy of heaven."

Lohengrin is a romantic opera in the style of medieval chivalry. Elsa the heroine has been wrongly accused by Telramund, duke of Brabant, and his evil wife, Ortrud, of having murdered her young brother to take his place on the throne. She sinks into despair. Ortrud is not only evil but she is a manipulating pagan who is already planning the fall of Elsa (which takes place later in the opera). Elsa's savior, Lohengrin, comes on the water in a boat drawn by a swan. He disembarks as a knight in shining armor and asks Elsa if she will have him as her champion and marry him on two conditions: never to ask him who he is or where he comes from. Essentially, he is asking her for a commitment of faith and trust in him and the consequent overcoming of curiosity about his past; if so, he will defend her against her evil and pagan adversaries. She agrees to his conditions and swears to abide by them.

An ordeal by combat ensues. Lohengrin defeats the evil Ortrud's husband, and he proceeds to marry Elsa to the tune of Wagner's justly famous wedding march. The opera then enters an ordeal of trial and fall. Through the evil designs and promises of Ortrud, Elsa fails the trial of confidentiality. She asks Lohengrin his name and origin. Lohengrin, feeling betrayed, reveals himself by telling the King and all the court that he is a knight of the Holy Grail; that he is the son of King Parsifal (the "innocent fool", hero of our next opera below). Ortrud is declared guilty and charged with

pagan witchcraft. Lohengrin departs, as he had come, on water. A dove descends from heaven, and, taking the place of the swan, leads Lohengrin back to the abode of the Holy Grail. Elsa is stricken with grief over her failure to trust her champion and savior and dies.

Parsifal was Wagner's last musical drama. It stands aloft among operas as a work of mystical symbolism, just as Mozart's *Magic Flute* had a hundred years before. Amfortas, King of the knights of the Holy Grail, is wounded by his own Holy Spear, which he loses to the evil Klingsor. The wound refuses to heal because of his fall to the seduction of Kundry, a beguilingly attractive woman in Klingsor's domain.

Earlier Klingsor had wanted to join the knights of the Grail but was rejected because he could not keep impure thoughts out of his mind. He rebels, is expelled from the domain of the knights to the valley below, and takes the Holy Spear with him. He becomes a diabolic magician filling the valley below with seductive flower-maidens whose sole role was to seduce and entrap wayward knights. Amfortas, the stricken King, in despair over his guilt, dreams that the wound will heal only through the intercession of a "pure fool, enlightened by compassion", who will eventually come to his realm to save him.

Parsifal, an orphan, who had never known his parents, and knows not where he comes from, is found wandering in the forest, not knowing where he is. He is brought to witness the ritual of the Holy Grail at the Castle of Montsalvat by Gurnemanz, the elderly chief knight. He is led to witness Amfortas' suffering from his wound and is told that the King lost the Holy Spear by falling to temptation. However, it becomes obvious to Gurnemanz that the young "innocent fool" understood nothing of the holy ritual to which he was invited, and Parsifal is chased out as an ignorant fool. He wanders in the forest for a time, and ends in the domain of Klingsor. The beautiful maidens immediately try to seduce him, but he escapes them, only to meet the seductress Kundry who, under Klingsor's

spell, is also intent on entrapping him. Her charms fail to entice Parsifal. Klingsor rages with fury at being unable to stain the soul of this “innocent fool”. In a test of wills, Parsifal recovers the Holy Spear hurled at him by Klingsor, whose domain immediately collapses consequent to its loss. Parsifal returns to Montsalvat, the castle of the Holy Grail, to heal Amfortas with the Spear. On his way back he encounters a repentant Kundry who pours chrism over his feet and dries them with her long hair. Parsifal baptizes her with water from the holy creek with the help of Gurnemanz.

Amfortas is still too weak to perform the office of the Eucharistic ritual. Parsifal, after baptizing the repentant Kundry, an act of charity, officiates over the Eucharistic sacrifice in place of the King; he blesses the blood of Christ contained in the Holy Grail, and distributes the sacrament to all

the knights assembled in a monastic circle of prayer. The “innocent fool” finally receives wisdom and knowledge through his charity and compassion. I leave it up to the reader to figure out who represents the figure of Christ; who is Gurnemanz; who is Mary Magdalen; who represents Satan; why the name of the Castle is Montsalvat; what cardinal sin is represented by Venus; and so on—provided Wagner meant *Parsifal* to be a religious metaphor. I am certain he did. It is amazing to me how many music critics’ and biographers’ treatments of *Parsifal*, or of the two other operas, are ignorant of this symbolism. It is like visiting Rome and entering its churches and seeing its monuments, paintings or sculptures without being a culturally-aware Catholic. What a pity! And what a great loss!

Several years ago I saw *Sacred Fire*, a film about Richard Wagner’s life. It is one of the

most historically-authentic films on the life of a composer I have ever seen. Near the end of the movie Wagner shows his father-in-law Franz Liszt the score of *Parsifal* resting on the piano. Liszt goes into ecstasy as he looks at the deeply religious score and, fully realizing Wagner’s past erratic life, proclaims, “Now redemption and salvation have come to this house.” As Liszt says this, Wagner, playing the Good Friday spell music from the opera, collapses on the piano and dies, supposedly finally redeemed by the Savior he so ably celebrated in *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, and *Parsifal*.

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The Controversial Genius of Richard Wagner



Maurice Baring

Wagner

O strange awakening to a world of gloom,
And baffled moonbeams and delirious stars,
Of souls that moan behind forbidden bars,
And waving forests swept by wings of doom;

Of heroes falling in unhappy fight,
And winged messengers from eyries dim;
And mountains ringed with flame and shapes that swim
In the deep river’s green translucent night;

O restless soul, for ever seeking bliss,
Athirst for ever and unsatisfied,
Whether the woodland starts to the echoing horn,

Or dying Tristram moans by shores forlorn,
Or Siegfried rides through fire to wake his bride,
And shakes the whirling planets with a kiss.



Joseph Pearce writes: Maurice Baring (1874–1945), one of the major literary converts of the twentieth century, was a popular novelist between the two World Wars, whose work is tragically and scandalously underrated and unread today. He was a close friend of Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton, their friendship being immortalized in 1932 in this marvelous painting by Sir James Gunn. Baring was also a fine poet and a great admirer of the music of Richard Wagner, as this sonnet demonstrates so evocatively.