

## **TIME BECOMES SPACE**

The Mastersingers, St Botolph's Church Hall, 5<sup>th</sup> September 2015

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Photography: Richard Carter

The day began with an enthralling lecture by David Edwards. As he noted, *Parsifal* is one of Wagner's most controversial creations, and a huge amount of ink has been spilled over what it is all about - Christianity? Buddhism? Racial Purity? Part Five of *The Ring*? Edwards concluded that it is probably about all of them, but this talk took a broader theme: Wagner's theory of the relativity of time and space. One of the most philosophically challenging lines he ever wrote occurs in Act I of *Parsifal* when Gurnemanz, escorting Parsifal to the Grail Chapel, tells him, *Du siehst, mein Sohn, zum Raum wird hier die Zeit* which translates "You see, my son, here Time becomes Space."



Kelvin Lim at the piano played the Transformation music magnificently while Edwards noted how the steady movement of the march, interspersed with a foretaste of Amfortas' agony, gives way to fanfares and the sound of bells as Gurnemanz and Parsifal reach the Grail Chapel. Time and space become one as the scene changes around them.

Technical problems posed by the demands of Bayreuth's inaugural *Ring* cycle in 1876 led Wagner to require simpler effects for the première production of *Parsifal* in 1882. Edwards showed a wonderful diagram of the original scenic solution for the Transformation scene, for which designer Paul von Joukovsky and technical director Karl Brandt devised a series of 250-metre cut cloths on rollers which were moved slowly from left to right, with the forest giving way to a rocky cave and then to the interior of the Grail chapel. This technique was not new - it had frequently been used in the theatre since the Baroque era and in pantomimes, but its use in opera was an innovation. Predictably, even this caused difficulty in 1882 because the stagehands took too long to wind the panoramas. Wagner angrily declared that he "did not write music by the metre",

but his assistant, the 28-year-old Engelbert Humperdinck, devised a 'loop' in the music which could be repeated until the panoramas had been wound. Wagner disliked the solution but accepted its necessity, and in the 1883 revival it was no longer needed. The roller system remained in use in Bayreuth until 1933 (by which time it was wound by electric motors) and remains a major part of Wagner's scenographic heritage.

However, Wagner did not favour realistic depiction in this scene, and stated that he never meant the scenic transformation to be a decorative effect: "the idea was that the music should lead us quite imperceptibly, as in a dream, along the "pathless" way to the Gralsberg". He had replaced the realistic-Romantic approach in *The Ring* with something more symbolic, "deeds of music made visible": as Edwards put it, "the music sounds and what you hear is what you see". Due to its spiritual nature, the subject matter of *Parsifal* is ideal for this approach.

In Act III of *Parsifal*, time is in stasis. The past is represented by the dead Titurel, under whose reign the Grail knights knew a golden age; the present by Amfortas, whose sin has caused the loss of their Utopia, and the future by Parsifal, whose quest for recovery will bring them redemption. Kundry, who lives through all time, serves both the knights and their enemy Klingsor, and only she and Parsifal appear in all three acts.

Wagner defined Monsalvat as being a castle in the mountains of northern Spain, with Klingsor's domain on the southern slope of the same mountain. One is Gothic, the other Moorish. The northern Spanish cities all contain notable examples of Gothic architecture, and indicate the type of castle Wagner had in mind for Monsalvat, but as he never visited Spain, his inspiration for the Grail chapel was the Duomo in Siena, whose towering columns lead up to a cupola with daylight shining down through a central aperture. In the original set design, he did not want the cupola to be seen, retaining only a suggestion of sunlight shining down. When Wieland Wagner redesigned the opera for Bayreuth in 1951 he removed the particularities of the architecture but retained the shape of the 1882 design. Time moved slowly at Bayreuth. The original design for Act II, inspired by the gardens of Ravello in Naples, contained huge, deliberately unrealistic, expressionistic flowers. The production was an attempt to fuse time and space onstage, a magical communication between the audience and performers - exactly what the Festspielhaus was intended for, in the only opera written specifically for it. Yet Wagner still despaired of the visual results and confided to Cosima: "I'd now like to invent the invisible theatre" - a theatre in which the mind, as observer, would have free rein to travel beyond physical view to an imaginary world.

*Parsifal* is set in a medieval era in which the sense of time and space was very different from what it is today. In the modern world maps show physical distances, but in mediaeval times distance was shown as travelling time rather than a geographical distance. The Ebstorf map of 1235 and the Mappa Mundi in Hereford Cathedral are both organised around religious axes of space, with Jerusalem at the centre of the world and the Garden of Eden at the top. Wagner took this view of space and time for Parsifal's wanderings between Acts II and III,

which represent a psychological rather than a topographical state, exemplifying Schopenhauer's philosophy of the renunciation of will, the overcoming of sexual desire to achieve compassionate love for others. Time, space and causality are our tools for experiencing reality, and intuitive emotion and the denial of selfhood are necessary to transcend intellectual perception.

Wagner put these theories into action in *Parsifal*, where Gurnemanz's crucial line shows how the boundaries between the aesthetic and the spiritual, space and time are blurred. Music can transcend time: Wagner worked to include a spatial element in the music in the *Liebestod*, which depicts a transcendental nirvana, but where *Tristan* focuses on the love between two individuals, *Parsifal* deals with compassion for others and the redemption of the soul.

Claude Lévi-Strauss has noted that Parsifal does not understand the riddle of the Grail and remains unable to solve it until he relives the catastrophe at its source. Time comes full circle at the end of the opera, when the Grail and Spear are reunited.

The singers had spent the previous day in private masterclasses with Sir John Tomlinson, who was present to hear them sing extracts from Act III to illustrate Edwards's lecture: *Wer nahet dort*, Parsifal's arrival and duet with Gurnemanz, the Good Friday scene, beginning *Du salbest mir der Fusse* and Amfortas' lament, *Ja - wehe!* and the ending of the opera.

Donald Thomson, the Gurnemanz, is a name new to me, but I have no doubt at all that I will hear it again. He has a most beautiful voice, with lovely full, rounded tones, like a bass bell. I was astonished to learn that he is only 28. There is a lot of work still to be done, but already he shows enormous promise. Understandably, he concentrated on singing well and made little attempt to create character.



Eddie Wade's mourning, suffering Amfortas displayed the maturity and mastery of character that Thomson has yet to acquire, and Brian Smith Walters' intense portrayal explored Parsifal's widely ranging emotions throughout the act, from the joy of recognising Gurnemanz through a Tannhäuser-like outpouring, channelling Amfortas' pain, as he described his wanderings. There was a sense of relief and lightness in the Good Friday scene as his emotional burdens were removed along with his armour, but Parsifal was still on a knife edge and plunged anew into despair at *O wehe!* before regaining his hard-won serenity in the baptism of Kundry. His floating of *es lacht, die Aue!* was beautiful and at the end there was a sense of having achieved the purpose for which he was born, radiant, yet with an undertow of grief as he continued to feel Amfortas' suffering. He was so deeply into the role that he stood gazing at an imaginary Spear in his hands.

The second half of the day was devoted to Sir John's public masterclasses, again accompanied by the indefatigable Lim, with the three singers performing with the Rehearsal Orchestra on 18<sup>th</sup> October. Having worked with all six the previous day, Sir John observed that they all have great strengths and some weaknesses, and that all present a very different picture. "As singers, we mustn't be dazzled by the big picture. As an actor, we cannot play a myth, an analogy." (Recently, he said, a producer told him that his character was a metaphor, to which he riposted, "No, we are playing real, flesh and blood characters.") He began by setting the scene for Act III, which he described as "the low point of the piece... the ultimate depression," with the Grail knights powerless and Gurnemanz living alone in despair.

Again, the Gurnemanz, James Platt (who impressed me enormously as Charon in the Royal Opera's recent *Orfeo* at the Roundhouse) was the least experienced of the three singers. He has a magnificent natural instrument, but, like Thomson's, it still needs work. Sir John began with the solo after the awakening of Kundry, *Du tolles Weib*. He placed great emphasis on the importance keeping the text flowing in a natural rhythm, frequently speaking lines from the libretto and encouraging Platt to speak to them, to give him the feeling of how they should flow when sung. "The words are all on a line, like clothes pegs," and the grammatical structure is also important.



Sir John was relentless in his insistence on proper preparation for every note and phrase. He identified what he described as Platt's slight tendency to 'dig' at the beginning of a phrase (that is, to attack the first note from beneath, instead of cleanly at the correct pitch). "It's all about preparation, the more you'll prepare for the start of the phrase, the less you'll dig." To help eradicate this problem, he felt Platt's chest and abdomen to check his breathing and learn when he started to prepare for a phrase.

He suggested that *Du tolles Weib!* can sound slightly accusatory: "is this all the thanks I get?". "I don't want to tell you exactly how to play the part, but if you get the music and text on the level, you can do anything you want with it. *Wie anders schrietet sie als sonst* can be really quiet and intimate." He demonstrated how the whole phrase should be sung in a single breath. "Wagner does rests in the middle of a phrase a lot, not as a break in the phrase but a break between two consonants." When he sang the phrase to demonstrate what he meant, I held my breath as he rolled back the years to the glory days of hearing him sing the role at Covent Garden, the Coliseum and the Proms. It was magical. In *O Tag der Gnade*, another single phrase, "the attack is very important. Your understanding of the text and grammar means that you paint the words as you sing." Again he stressed the vital importance of preparation: If the singer is

prepared, the sound will be open, but if they are not prepared, the sound will be closed. "Like Reggie Goodall used to say, the voice is on the D string."

When Parsifal appears, "Perhaps you're frightened, paranoid, perhaps angry at seeing this shadowy figure. I think Gurnemanz has been in this corner of the wood for five years. He hasn't seen a soul; he's a bit intimidated." He demonstrated by speaking a literal English translation, showing the character's increasing annoyance and nervousness. "Good morning. Aren't you going to introduce yourself? Won't you say something? How do you have the *nerve* to walk into someone's back yard like that?"

Asked by Platt how he had memorised all his massive roles, Sir John explained that he never listens to a recording more than once because "it is very easy to pick up bad habits". One can listen to a variety of recordings, but his way of learning has been to read the score, translate his role, play through it on the piano, sight-read it while on train journeys, decide how the role would go dramatically, and - crucially for Wagner - work out what the orchestra will be doing at any given time. "Don't try to learn it in a hurry. By the time you're ready to perform it, you'll know it!"



Returning to work on the text, he encouraged Platt to speak the German words of Gurnemanz's speech to Parsifal, and concluded, "You did it benevolently, beautifully, but there's something more, because each line ends with a question. Call to him, not loudly, but call to him." Gurnemanz should show "a little bit of anger and tension" at *Hei! Was?*, and again Sir John acted out an English translation to demonstrate the character's growing exasperation: "Your oath may be not to talk to me, but my principles tell me to tell you what is appropriate behaviour." As an aside, he noted how interesting it is that Gurnemanz should mention the Spear without recognising it.

By this stage of the masterclass, he felt that "generally the voice is in a good place now, we're on the right track." At *Bei welchen Heiden* he again stressed the importance of the phrasing, and at *dass heute der allerheiligste Karfrietag ist*, where for a moment Gurnemanz is in his own ecstasy, "you need a lot of muscular effort so that you can begin with the bow on the string at *dass heute*", singing *on* the note rather than attacking it from beneath. "You're listening

like mad to the orchestral theme and you're singing with it. Listen to it, and you won't be clumsy when you sing that phrase."

At *Erkenns'st du ihn?* "In this wonderful music you've recognised Parsifal. We need as much astonishment as possible." The mention of *Den Schwann* is "embarrassingly painful to remember - Gurnemanz sent Parsifal away," and as the music continues there are "more painful thoughts" until the moment when Gurnemanz recognises the Spear.



At this point Mark Le Brocq joined the masterclass as Parsifal. His voice has developed since I heard him in a masterclass with Petra Lang in 2012 into a substantial, lyrical heldentenor, and his first line was beautifully poised, radiant, almost unearthly. Sir John commended his beautiful vowel sounds. To Platt, he observed that after "this incredible outburst about the Spear... you're filled with humility that Parsifal recognises you... I'm not asking for agitation, just for simple, tranquil humility. Everything has to be beautifully legato, but you need the perfection of the language."

Le Brocq was told that he sounded "too serene, not quite in character" in *Zu ihm, des tiefe Klagen* - "there is a lot of tension in this sentence; there should be echoes of Parsifal's struggle. Think about what you're saying. It's one long span until the very last phrase." In Le Brocq's final rendition of the aria Sir John praised his supportive legato "with perfect German on the top of it," and his "great buildup".

Sir John then worked with the magnificent Stuart Pendred. He was



allowed to sing right through Amfortas' *Ja - Wehe!* without interruption, after which they moved straight to the final section, *Nein - Nicht mehr!* where, again, Sir John spoke the German words, with huge passion, and encouraged Pendred to speak them. "These are long, long phrases." They worked intensively on vowel sounds, with Sir John advising Pendred to "think about the tip of the tongue against the front of the bottom teeth" and to be "rock-solid" in the diaphragm. An impurity in vowel sounds is "the difference between being very beautiful and unacceptable." Pendred admitted that in the five years since he had started in opera, this was the most exposed singing he had ever done, and Sir John expressed his immense admiration for all that Pendred has achieved in that time.

Le Brocq returned for Parsifal's final solo, which Sir John described as "wonderful", but advised him always to "feed the voice with the breath so that quality can be sustained through the whole phrase. In this repertoire, the breath must flow through every note." Occasionally, small notes at the beginnings and ends of phrases had not been on pitch: again, preparation was vital. "It makes a difference when every note is nourished and supported and fed. It's to do with perpetual nourishment of the sound. It takes a lot of breath to do *Der deine Wunde* without a breath; it's only mezzo forte but needs a lot of support."

The result was utterly beautiful, but Le Brocq was concerned that he might be singing the phrase too loud. He tried it again more softly, but Sir John found that it had too much artifice and lost its naturalness. "Parsifal is very human; that's his essence. He's not sophisticated." Singing on a stage filled with people, Le Brocq's mezzo forte level would not be too loud, and "Your voice sounds resplendent at that level."

As the masterclass reached the finale of the opera this crowded day came to its end. What a day it was. We all learned so much about an opera which we thought we already knew well, but surely those who learned most were the six young singers who benefited from Sir John's tuition. It is impossible to describe the experience of witnessing his boundless energy and enthusiasm as he passed his knowledge on to them, and it was truly inspirational to see how deeply he cares about nurturing the voices of the next generation.

