

VICTORIAN OPERA



PARSIFAL Education Resource

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ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This resource is designed for school students in Years 7-12. All the activities can be used in the classroom alongside or separate to Victorian Opera's production of *Parsifal*.

The activities for Years 7-10 suggested in this resource align with the following Australian Learning Areas:

- The Arts – Music, Drama and Visual Arts
- Languages – German

The table below outlines how the activities designed around each Learning Area align to the Australian Curriculum General Capabilities.

CAPABILITIES	Literacy	Numeracy	ICT	Critical and Creative Thinking	Personal and Social	Ethical Understanding	Intercultural Understanding
THE ARTS - MUSIC							
Activity 1		✓					
Activity 2		✓		✓			
Activity 3	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
Activity 4	✓			✓			
Activity 5		✓					
THE ARTS - DRAMA							
Activity 1	✓			✓			
Activity 2	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
Activity 3	✓			✓	✓		
Activity 4	✓			✓	✓	✓	
THE ARTS - VISUAL ARTS							
Activity 1	✓			✓			
Activity 2	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Activity 3	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
LANGUAGES - GERMAN							
Activity 1	✓		✓	✓			✓
Activity 2	✓						✓

Activities devised for Years 11-12 have been done so in accordance with the Victorian Certificate of Education Study Design for:

- Music Performance
- Music Investigation
- Music Style and Composition
- Drama
- German
- Studio Arts
- Applied Fashion Design and Technology (VET)
- Philosophy

GLOSSARY

Act – A component of the total work, consisting of its own partial dramatic arc.

Aria – An elaborate composition for solo voice with instrumental accompaniment.

Arioso – A recitative of a lyrical and expressive quality.

Bar – Also called a measure. The section between two bar lines containing the number of beats as indicated by the time signature.

Baritone – The male voice between the tenor and bass.

Bass – The lowest male voice.

Baton – A white stick used by conductors to conduct with, allowing the conductor greater visibility.

Beat – The regular pulse of the music.

Castrato – Historically, a singer who was castrated as a boy to retain the boyish quality of the voice. The pitch of castrato singers was similar to a soprano.

Choreographer – The person who designs and creates the movement of the performance, usually in dance form.

Chorus – In opera or music theatre this refers to a large body of singers.

Chorus master – The person responsible for the rehearsal and preparation of the chorus prior to production.

Coloratura – A rapid passage, run, trill or other virtuoso-like feature used particularly in music of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Composer – The person who writes the music.

Concertmaster – The lead violinist of the orchestra.

Conductor – The person who interprets and leads the orchestra or musical performance, coordinating the performers and keeping the time through the technique of hand movements.

Contralto – The lowest female voice.

Countertenor – The highest male voice.

Designer – The person who designs the overall look of the production, including the sets, costume, props and lighting.

Director – The person who is in charge of the artistic features of the production.

Dress rehearsal – Often the final rehearsal of all the component parts of the production in full costume.

Duet – A composition for two performers of equal importance.

Ensemble – A group of performers performing together.

Excerpt – A short extract from a piece of music.

Finale – The last movement of a work that contains more than one movement.

Grand Opera – A large-scale serious opera without spoken dialogue.

Harmony – The chordal structure of a musical composition in contrast to the linear structure.

Hero / Heroine – In its modern form, the hero/heroine is a protagonist character who fulfils a task and restores balance to the community. He/she is a born leader, whether they know it or not, as well as a real survivor who has faith in good. Others are willing to believe in this hero and will follow him/her.

Interlude – A section of music between acts.

Intermission – A break in the performance that allows the audience to leave the auditorium.

Key – The tonal centre around which a composition is based, often indicated by a key signature.

Leitmotif – The representation of characters, typical situations and recurring ideas by musical motifs.

Libretto – The text of an opera or music theatre work.

Mezzo-soprano – The second highest female voice.

Mise en scène – The arrangement of the scenery, props, etc., on the stage of a theatrical production.

Necromancy – The practice of communicating with the dead in order to predict future events.

Opera – A staged drama set to music, made up of vocal pieces with instrumental accompaniment and usually with orchestral overtures and interludes.

Opera buffa – Also known as ‘comic opera’, an opera with a large mixture of music, on a light subject with a happy ending, including comic elements. An 18th Century form.

Opera seria – Also known as ‘serious opera’, an opera with dramatic, serious content often with a tragic ending. Very formalised and stylised. An 18th Century form.

Orchestra – A large ensemble of instruments divided into four main sections: strings, woodwind, brass and percussion.

Orchestration – Utilisation of the instrumentation of an orchestra in the writing of a composition.

Overture – An instrumental composition intended as an introduction to an opera or other music theatre work.

Principal – One of the main characters.

Proscenium – A large rectangular arch that surrounds the stage and gives the appearance it is framed.

Pulse – The underlying beat of a piece of music.

Range – The range from the lowest to highest notes that are played or sung.

Recitative – A vocal (singing) style designed to imitate the natural inflections of speech, used in opera where dialogue might be used in other forms of music theatre.

Rehearsal – Where the performers and the creatives develop the production, shaping lines, songs, movements etc.

Rhythm – The regular and irregular pattern of notes of different length in the music.

Repetiteur – A pianist who works as an accompanist and vocal coach for opera.

Scale model box – A scale miniature of the set design made from foam core and card.

Score – The notation showing all the parts of a work, both instrumental and vocal.

Solo – A piece of music performed by a single performer either alone or with accompaniment.

Soprano – The highest female voice.

Soubrette – A light operatic soprano.

Sound Designer – The person who designs the additional sound used in a production.

Stage Manager – The person who manages the running of rehearsals and performances, managing all the components of the production during performance.

Surtitles – A translation of the words being sung on stage projected onto a screen above the stage.

Synopsis – A summary of the story.

Tempo – The speed of a composition.

Tenor – A high male voice.

Tessitura – The general range of vocal parts.

Tetralogy – A group of four related literary or operatic works.

Time signature – A notation used to specify how many beats in a bar and the note value equivalent to the beat.

Tone – The interval of a major second or a sound of definite pitch and duration.

Tutti – A marking in a score that indicates the use of the whole orchestra and/or all the vocal parts.

Vibrato – A very slight fluctuation of pitch in rapid succession to create warmth in the sound.

Villain – Often the antagonist. In literature, this is the evil character in the story, the character who has a negative effect on the other characters.

Vocal range – The human voice falls into a range from the lowest to highest notes they can reach. The normal range is around two octaves and is traditionally broken into seven voice types, (from highest to lowest) soprano, mezzo-soprano, contralto, countertenor, tenor, baritone and bass.

Western music – Music produced in Europe and deriving from European cultures that spans from ancient times until the present day.

Workshop – An exploration of a new work (production, text, music, design).

PARSIFAL – ABOUT THE OPERA

Composer and Librettist

Richard Wagner

Characters, cast and voice types



James Roser - Baritone
Amfortas, King of Monsalvat



Teddy Tahu Rhodes - Bass
Titurel, founder and former King
of the Grail



Peter Rose - Bass
Gurnemanz, a veteran
knight of the Grail



Burkhard Fritz - Tenor
Parsifal, a “pure fool”



Derek Welton - Baritone
Klingsor, a magician



Katarina Dalayman - Soprano
Kundry, a wild woman

Other roles

First and Second Knights of the Grail – Tenor and Baritone

Four Squires – Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano and two Tenors

Klingsor’s Flower Maidens – Sopranos and Mezzo-Sopranos

Male and Female Chorus

Sopranos, Mezzo-Sopranos, Tenors, Baritones and Basses

Creative team



Richard Mills
Conductor



Roger Hodgman
Director



Richard Roberts
Set Designer



Christina Smith
Costume Designer



Matt Scott
Lighting Designer



Elizabeth Hill
Choreographer

The story

Entrusted to watch over the Holy Grail and Holy Spear, Titurel gathered a brotherhood of noble knights to help him protect these sacred relics. Each time the Grail is unveiled in a ritual ceremony, it nourishes the knights and extends their mortality.

Klingsor, a former knight rejected by the brotherhood, turned to black magic and created a garden of desire filled with enchanting Flower Maidens to lure the knights and destroy them. When fiery Amfortas, the son of ageing Titurel, attempted to defeat Klingsor he was seduced by Kundry, a shape-shifting seductress working under Klingsor's spell. While Amfortas was distracted, Klingsor stole the Holy Spear and pierced Amfortas' side, inflicting an incurable wound.

Amfortas now awaits 'an innocent fool, enlightened by compassion' who, according to a prophecy, is the only one that can cure him.

In the forest by a lake where Amfortas bathes, the knights encounter a naïve boy called Parsifal who impetuously shoots a swan without understanding the consequences of his actions. The old knight Gurnemanz suspects Parsifal could be the saviour they have been waiting for. But first Parsifal will need to undergo a series of trials and tribulations to learn the true value of compassion, including a soul-searing encounter with the sorceress of the eternal feminine, Kundry, in Klingsor's enchanted castle.

Synopsis

Place: Around the sanctuary of the knights of the Holy Grail

Act One

At daybreak, in a clearing at the centre of a shady forest, Gurnemanz, a senior knight of the Grail, and two young squires lie asleep. They are awoken by the morning bell that rings out from the Grail Castle nearby and begin to prepare for the King Amfortas' bath. Before long, two knights enter and report that the King's pain has worsened overnight and he is already on his way to the holy lake, eager to bathe. Kundry rushes in looking dishevelled after a long journey, and presses into Gurnemanz's hand a small crystal phial containing a balsam for the King. A procession of squires and knights appear carrying Amfortas in on a litter. In agony from a wound in his side that will never heal, he declares that he will have to wait for the appointed one, 'an Innocent Fool, enlightened through compassion'.

After Amfortas and his party leave, two squires begin to torment Kundry, telling her that she should not have anything to do with the King and the Knights of the Holy Grail. Gurnemanz scolds the squires for their behaviour, defending Kundry's loyalty as a servant of the Grail Knights. He tells of how Amfortas received his wound at the hand of the sorcerer Klingsor by the Holy Spear – the same spear used to pierce the body of Christ after he was crucified. The Spear and the Grail were originally entrusted to Titurel, Amfortas' father, who formed a company of Knights to guard and protect them. Klingsor, a knight at the time, was excluded from the company because of his sinful ways and after a second rejection transformed the desert into a garden of bliss that would lure knights into damnation. Titurel eventually passed the kingship on to his son, Amfortas, who was determined to end the sorcery but became distracted by the lures of a beautiful woman, allowing Klingsor to seize the Holy Spear. Amfortas has since prayed before the Grail for a sign of salvation and it answered 'Enlightened through compassion, the innocent fool; wait for him, the appointed one.'

Suddenly, cries are heard coming from the lake and a wild swan falls out of the sky with an arrow through its breast. It was shot by the reckless youth Parsifal, who is brought before Gurnemanz to account for his actions. Gurnemanz's rebuke has the desired effect and Parsifal breaks his bow and throws away his arrows. Gurnemanz questions him on his origins however Parsifal is unable to tell him anything, leaving Gurnemanz to consider him no more than a fool. Parsifal explains that he was brought up by his widowed mother in a forest and one day encountered a group of knights who laughed at him then rode away after he expressed his wish to join them. He decided to follow them and in his travels, overcame numerous challenges.

Amfortas and his party are heard travelling back to the castle and Gurnemanz invites Parsifal to join them for their daily feast, stating that if he is pure, the Grail will give him food and drink. He suspects that Parsifal is the innocent fool they have been waiting for. As they pass from the forest to the hall of the Grail, they hardly seem to be moving at all and when Parsifal comments on this, Gurnemanz replies, 'here time become space'.

In the Hall of the Grail, Titurel orders Amfortas to uncover the Grail so that his life might be prolonged another day. At first, Amfortas hesitates as doing so will reopen the wound and make it bleed afresh, but he eventually relents. The Grail is unveiled, and the rite of the sharing of bread and wine continues. Gurnemanz notices that Parsifal has remained standing to the side through all of this and has not joined them in the feast. Upon seeing him, Gurnemanz is convinced that he was mistaken and that Parsifal is a simple fool, pushing him out of the hall and slamming the door behind him. Voices are heard on high, reciting the words received by Amfortas, 'Enlightened through compassion, the innocent fool', followed by the reply, 'Blessed in faith.'

Act Two

Inside his castle, Klingsor sits surrounded by his tools of magic and necromancy looking through a mirror that reflects the outside world. He spots a young, naïve Parsifal approaching the wall and summons Kundry to bring about the youth's destruction. She refuses, crying out for sleep and death to which Klingsor replies, 'he that defies you will set you free'. Klingsor summons the knights to defend his castle against Parsifal and watches as Parsifal defeats them all.

Parsifal enters Klingsor's magic garden where he is greeted by a group of flower maidens who throw themselves at him, inviting him to join them in their games. Out of nowhere, Kundry's voice is heard calling Parsifal's name, a name he heard his mother call him in a dream he had long ago. Parsifal turns to find Kundry lying on a couch and is instantly entranced by her beauty. In her bid to seduce him, she tells him of his mother's death as she waited for him to return home. Parsifal is overcome with emotion and remorse so Kundry offers him a last greeting of a mother's blessing, pressing her lips to his. He suddenly understands the significance of Amfortas's wound and attempts to escape from her seductive grasp.

Kundry attempts to seduce him once more but this time revealing the reasons behind her suffering and never-ending life. In a past life, she laughed at the Saviour while he was suffering on the cross. His glance fell on her and now she travels from world to world hoping to meet him once again. Parsifal rejects her a second time, so Kundry calls for help from Klingsor who appears from nowhere with the Holy Spear in hand. He hurls the spear at Parsifal but it stops and remains suspended above his head. Parsifal grabs the spear and swings it in the sign of the cross causing the castle to collapse and the garden to vanish into dust.

Act Three

Years have passed. It is very early in the morning of Good Friday and Gurnemanz, now an old man, emerges from his hut that sits on the edge of the forest. He searches for the groaning that drew him outside and finds Kundry lying on the ground under some bushes. Upon being revived, Kundry rearranges her clothing and hair and sets about working as a serving maid, despite there being no work to do.

She notices a figure dressed in black armour with a closed visor and carrying a spear sitting on a grassy mound, and points this out to Gurnemanz. He approaches the person and berates him for being dressed in such a way on so holy a day. The figure takes off his helmet and Gurnemanz and Kundry instantly recognise him as the boy who killed the swan who was sent away in anger. Gurnemanz then spots the spear and rejoices that he is still alive to see its return.

Parsifal recognises Gurnemanz and tells him of his journey and the battles he has faced trying to find Amfortas, throughout which he kept the spear pure. He learns that Amfortas now only longs for death and refuses to perform his holy duty by keeping the Grail locked away. As a result, the knights are in a bad state and without a leader, and have taken to living in the forest. Without the Grail to prolong his life, Titurel has passed away, dying 'a man like all men.'

Parsifal is overwhelmed with remorse for not being able to find his way back to Amfortas sooner and to prevent all that has occurred. Gurnemanz and Kundry are moved by his compassion and realise that he is the person they have been waiting for. They lead him to the spring, bathe his feet and sprinkle water on his head. Kundry pours oil over his feet, drying them with her hair, and Gurnemanz pours the rest of the oil over Parsifal's head, blessing him as the new Grail king.

Parsifal baptises Kundry as his first duty and then Gurnemanz leads both Parsifal and Kundry through the forest and the rocky walls of the castle, into the hall of the Grail. Titurel's coffin is brought in by a procession of Knights while another procession carries Amfortas. Titurel's coffin is uncovered and at the sight of his body there is a sudden break out of wailing. The knights demand that Amfortas unveil the Grail and perform his duty but he resists, tearing open his bandages and pleading with them to take his life and end his suffering.

Parsifal, who has been watching these events unfold, steps forward and places the tip of the spear on Amfortas' wound – it miraculously closes and Amfortas is healed. The shrine is opened and Parsifal kneels down in front of the Grail to pray. The Grail glows brightly and a white dove descends, hovering over Parsifal's head. Kundry sinks lifeless to the ground as Gurnemanz and Amfortas kneel in respect, and Parsifal offers the Grail's blessing to the knights who sing, 'Redemption to the redeemer.'

THE ARTS - MUSIC

What is opera?

Opera is a European art form that has been in existence since the 1600s and became especially popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Today there are many styles of opera performance, but they all have one thing in common – an opera is a play that is sung.

The five main languages of opera are Italian, French, German, English and Russian.

The main difference between opera and music theatre is amplification. Music theatre is usually amplified while opera is not. In addition, music theatre usually includes spoken dialogue as well as music and dance. Opera, on the other hand, uses recitative; a singing style designed to imitate natural speech.

Where did opera come from?

The roots of opera can be traced back to the Ancient Greeks who lived over 2,000 years ago. The advances in society that this sophisticated civilisation developed included the invention of a city-state (polis) and a golden age in culture, music, art, poetry and drama, including beautiful sculpture, remarkable architecture and the creation of classical poetry, such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer. This ancient civilisation had a profound influence on the discovery and advancement of science, physics, maths, astronomy and geometry, and produced the influential philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. They approached the big questions of life often in a genuine scientific way, daring to question and challenge traditional conventions and prejudices of their age. The Ancient Greeks also loved the theatre, with playwrights including Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides writing enduring works that have informed the future dramatic structures of playwriting.

In the following thousand years, after the height of the Greek civilisation, much of the knowledge and skills they had established were lost, particularly in the sciences and arts. While the art in what we refer to the Middle Ages was very beautiful, it had lost some of the scientific application that made it so lifelike. In Italy, from about the 1300s, scholars set out to rediscover many of the Ancient Greeks' innovations. This period was called the Renaissance, which translates literally as “rebirth”. Founded in Florence, it marked a period of enlightenment and the rediscovery and study of culture, philosophy, art, architecture and science. Highly influential artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Botticelli, Raphael and Donatello, philosophers, writers and mathematicians including Galileo, Shakespeare, Erasmus and Copernicus contributed a wealth of knowledge during this era.

One art form the Renaissance scholars were particularly interested in was Greek theatre. The texts had survived time, but the performance practice indications were lost. Scholars knew from writings by philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato that the plays were accompanied by music and this helped raise the emotional moral tone of the works. But how? What did the music do? How were the lines sung?

A group of thinkers and musicians from Florence called the Florentine Camerata met regularly to determine how the musical accompaniment might have sounded and supported the text. They invented a new art form in which the dialogue in a play would be sung. They decided to call the new art form “Opera”, which simply means “a work”. The first truly successful opera was called *L'Orfeo*. It was composed by Claudio Monteverdi and is still performed today.

Following the great success of this work, opera became popular all over Europe and then the world. The style of opera and the way it was performed developed over the centuries to reflect the culture of the time. At its height in the 1800s, opera was performed regularly in theatres in every major city.

Voice types and singing styles

There are seven voice types in opera, each of which is defined by the range of notes they can sing and their vocal quality.

There are three female operatic voice types, although most operas only have soprano and mezzo-soprano roles.

- Soprano – the highest sounding female voice with a vocal range from middle C up to the C two octaves above.
- Mezzo-Soprano – slightly lower than the soprano with a vocal range from the G below middle C to the A two octaves above.
- Contralto – the lowest sounding female voice and rarely used in opera today. The vocal range for this voice type is from the F below middle C to a high F one octave above.

There are four male voice types, although the countertenor voice is usually only used in operas from the Baroque period (1600-1750).

- Countertenor – the highest sounding male voice with almost the same vocal range as a mezzo-soprano; the G below middle C to a high F one octave above.
- Tenor – a high sounding male voice that usually takes the leading male role. The vocal range for this type is roughly from the C below middle C to the C above.
- Baritone – the middle sounding male voice with a vocal range from the second G below middle C up to the G above.
- Bass – the lowest sounding male voice which has a vocal range from the E above middle C to the E two octaves below, however some bass singers can go even lower.

There are further categories of voice defining the kind of voice quality and the type of music they can sing. The composer will consider voice types to highlight the different characters – for example, to differentiate between a King and a Servant or a Princess and a Witch.

A few of these are:

- Coloratura – a very high range with the ability to sing complicated parts with agility.
- Dramatic – a heavy sounding, powerful voice.
- Lyric – an average sized voice with the ability to sing long, beautiful phrases.
- Heldentenor – The ‘heroic tenor’, a big voice for powerful roles.

Follow the links below to hear examples of what these voices sound like.

Classical Female Voices – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIPFAww8X-U>

Classical Male Voices – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRL7shs23Wc>

To see the voice types used in *Parsifal*, turn to page 7 of this resource.

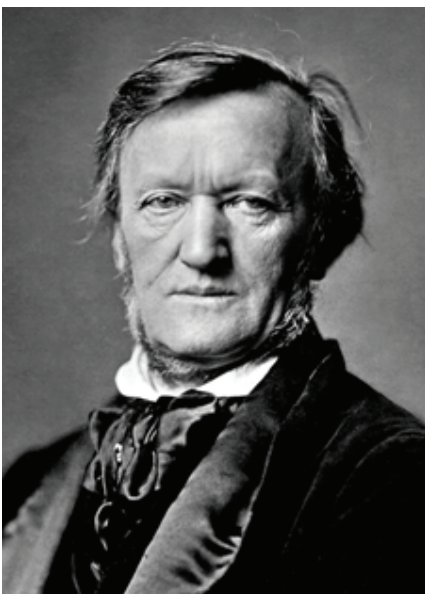
About the composer - Richard Wagner

By Dr. Peter Bassett

Wilhelm Richard Wagner was born on 22 May 1813 in Leipzig in the Kingdom of Saxony during the Napoleonic Wars. He was the ninth child of Karl Friedrich Wagner, a Registrar of Police with a passion for the theatre, and Johanna Wagner (née Pätz) who, in her youth, had seemed destined for an acting career. Karl Friedrich died during a typhus epidemic spread by troops returning from Napoleon's disastrous Russian campaign when the boy was barely six months old. Johanna subsequently married a close family friend, the actor and painter Ludwig Geyer. Richard's eldest brother was a singer, actor and theatre director, and four of his sisters were named after heroines of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich von Schiller. His paternal uncle was a scholar of repute who knew most of the principal literary figures of the day and who had a considerable influence on Richard's awareness of the classics.

Richard Wagner had a somewhat chaotic childhood, enduring six moves and six schools before the age of seventeen, going without the care and affection of his mother for long periods and having no lasting masculine role model after his stepfather died when the boy was eight years old. No wonder he sought refuge in the world of his imagination and in attention-seeking escapades. He quickly learnt to set his own course and follow his own star.

It was during those teenage years that he became obsessed with music and drama and even waggled school for half a year to pursue his secret passion – to the astonishment of his family who thought he had been going dutifully to the classroom each day! He began to study composition, firstly with the help of a borrowed textbook (on which he ran up a fine so large that he had no hope of paying it), then with a musician in the Leipzig orchestra, and finally with Theodor Weinlig who occupied J.S. Bach's former position of Cantor at St Thomas's church in Leipzig. The experiences of those formative years explain much about the adult – above all his belief in himself.



A photo of Richard Wagner taken by Franz Hanfstaengl in 1871.
Source: <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:RichardWagner.jpg>

He wished only to be an artist who was both a poet and a musician. At the age of nineteen he wrote a (somewhat Schubertian) Symphony and started, and then abandoned, an opera to his own text. At the age of twenty, he completed his first opera *Die Feen* (*The Fairies*) after a play by Carlo Gozzi. Again, he wrote his own libretto and finished the music in ten months. In the music, we hear echoes of Gioachino Rossini, Felix Mendelssohn, Carl Maria von Weber, Heinrich Marschner and Ludwig van Beethoven and – now and then – the first indications of an original voice. He then began work on his next opera *Das Liebesverbot* (*The Ban on Love*) loosely based on Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. Soon after marrying his first wife, the actress Wilhelmina Planer, he was forced to flee from Riga where he was music director of the Opera, as he had run up debts he couldn't pay. He then endured a bitterly frustrating stay in Paris before writing *Rienzi* and *The Flying Dutchman*, both of which had successful first performances in Dresden. It is in *The Flying Dutchman* that we first hear the authentic voice of Richard Wagner. While working as Kapellmeister to the King of Saxony in Dresden he also composed two beautiful and highly dramatic operas, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*, and began thinking about several subjects that would

form the basis of his most important works in later years.

The 1830s and '40s were marked by political instability and revolutions in many parts of Europe, and Wagner became involved in the Dresden uprising of 1849. A warrant was issued for his arrest and he fled into exile in Switzerland. He was effectively exiled from his homeland for the next thirteen years. It was during this time that he composed most of the great cycle of four dramas, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, as well as another work which would influence the direction of western music, *Tristan und Isolde*, and his only mature comedy, *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*. It was also during this time that he married his second wife, Cosima, daughter of Franz Liszt, and began to sketch out *Parsifal*, which would not be completed until January 1882.

Wagner's career was, in many respects, the most astounding in the history of opera. Not only did he revolutionise the art form, but he also had a profound effect on composers of many nationalities. He displayed a mastery of orchestral sound and even invented new instruments. He broke new ground in the art of conducting, was one of the first stage directors as we understand them today, and he oversaw the construction of a revolutionary theatre at Bayreuth for the performance of his works. He influenced writers and painters as well as musicians. In short, as a creative artist, Richard Wagner has few parallels in the history of Western culture.



A caricature of Richard Wagner conducting by Gustav Gaul created sometime between 1860 and 1880.

Source: https://www.europeana.eu/portal/en/record/90402/RP_F_2012_96_131.html

The Music of *Parsifal*

By Dr. Peter Bassett

Parsifal's music lifts us out of our worldly lives – detaches us from the preoccupations and obsessions of everyday existence. Claude Debussy described it as “one of the loveliest monuments of sound ever raised to the serene glory of music”, and Alban Berg observed “Words cannot give you anywhere near the tremendous impression, shattering yet life-enhancing, which this work made on me”.

Unlike the huge tetralogy of *The Ring of the Nibelung*, in which Wagner manipulated dozens of musical themes to give expression to characters, objects and ideas within the drama, the music of *Parsifal* follows a different course. Its Prelude features ‘sonic clusters’ from which strands are drawn and developed as the narrative unfolds. It is this approach which gives the work its strong sense of musical unity.

The Prelude begins with a passage that is timeless and floating. It has no obvious pulse or rhythm but is coloured by profound sadness. A solo trumpet emerges from the orchestral cloud, expressing the pathos of compassionate love which lies at the heart of *Parsifal*. Who would have thought that a trumpet – normally such a proud and heroic instrument – could become a vehicle of such sorrow? Then we hear themes associated with the Grail, and a theme that Wagner labelled ‘Faith’. The ‘Grail’ motive has many of the characteristics of the traditional ‘Dresden Amen’; the ‘Faith’ motive is strong and resolute. These themes will become the musical ‘DNA’ of the impressive scenes in the Hall of the Grail in the first and last acts.



The Grail Theme from Wagner's *Parsifal*.

The sufferings of the Grail king Amfortas, together with the Grail and Faith motives, are developed at length and coloured by chromatic references to the threats and dangers which feature in the second act. The Prelude ends with a transition to the opening scene of Act One, set at daybreak in a forest by a lake where the old knight Gurnemanz and two squires are roused from their slumbers to prepare for the arrival of Amfortas to take his soothing bath. The whole Prelude lasts between twelve and fourteen minutes, depending on the conductor, and it captures the essence of the music of *Parsifal*, music that had led Gustav Mahler to observe: “When I came out of the Festspielhaus [Festival Theatre], unable to speak a word, I knew that I had experienced supreme greatness and supreme suffering”.

The music of *Parsifal* was begun in 1877 and completed in January 1882. It was therefore written after the completion of the Bayreuth Festival Theatre and the first complete performances of *The Ring*, and in full knowledge of the acoustics of that marvellous theatre.

There are many key musical points to listen for. One is the melody accompanying the old knight Gurnemanz's reference to the prophesy of salvation through ‘an innocent fool, made wise through compassion’. It will be heard again, intoned by heavenly voices, in the closing moments of Act One. Particularly poignant is the music associated with the swan, shot with an arrow by the foolish boy

Parsifal while it was circling the lake in search of its mate. The ethereal ‘swan music’ harks back to Wagner’s earlier opera *Lohengrin*, about the son of Parsifal. In both cases, swans are objects of pity, and the scene of Parsifal’s thoughtless action will provide his first lesson in compassion. Listen too for the wonderful ‘transformation music’, punctuated by deep, sonorous bells as Gurnemanz leads the boy from the forest, through the rocky mountainside and into the Hall of the Grail. As they walk, Gurnemanz observes: ‘You see, my son, here time becomes space’.

In the second act we hear the agitated, dazzling music of the sorcerer Klingsor, its distinctive chromaticism contrasting with the predominantly diatonic music of the Grail and its guardians. The swaying, waltz-like music of the Flower Maidens reveals their role as Klingsor’s instruments, luring the Grail Knights to their doom. The beguiling, caressing voice of Kundry as she tries to bewitch Parsifal, and the fragrant, intoxicating orchestration, predates by decades Richard Strauss’s vocal writing.

The Prelude to Act Three took western music into regions that were stranger than anything that had gone before, anticipating the music of Gustav Mahler and Arnold Schoenberg. It is followed by the wondrous music of Good Friday, expressing the reassurance – as Gurnemanz puts it – that through the Saviour’s sacrifice on that day, ‘all creation gives thanks and gains its day of innocence’. There could be no greater contrast than that between this serene music and the tortured music that follows, of the knights to whom the blessings of the Grail have been denied. However, Parsifal, now enlightened through compassion, restores to the community at Monsalvat the sacred spear once stolen by Klingsor. The Grail is unveiled, and harmony returns. Voices high above proclaim a heavenly benediction, and *Parsifal* ends with music of unsurpassed beauty that was also Richard Wagner’s farewell to the world.

The orchestra

By Dr. Peter Bassett

The orchestra for *Parsifal* is made up of the following musical instruments, listed in the order in which they are shown on the pages of the full orchestral score, with the highest woodwinds at the top.

In the Orchestra Pit

One Piccolo	Four Horns	Cellos
Three Flutes	Three Trumpets	Double basses
Three Oboes	Three Trombones	<u>Off-stage</u>
One Cor Anglais	One Contrabass Tuba	Six Trumpets
Three Clarinets	Timpani	Six Trombones
One Bass Clarinet	Two Harps	Tenor Drum
Three Bassoons	Violins	Bell Plates
One Contrabassoon	Violas	Thunder Machine

The off-stage instruments can create a wonderful sense of spaciousness and distance appropriate to the drama. *Parsifal's* instrumentation is large, although not as large as that for the tetralogy *The Ring of the Nibelung*, which was scored for an orchestra of 119 for the first performance in 1876, including quadruple woodwinds, eight harps, sixteen first violins and sixteen second violins, twelve each of violas and cellos and eight double basses. Wagner used large orchestras partly because many instruments in his day were not as strong as modern ones (most string instruments used catgut strings for instance, natural horns were not as effective as later valve horns, and some woodwinds were weaker than today's instruments). Principally though, he wanted the richest possible musical palette from which to draw, and this enabled him to compose in a highly expressive way. Much of the orchestral music of *Parsifal* is delicate and in no way overwhelms the singers.

Parsifal is Wagner's most subtle and beautiful score. Ever since its first performance in July 1882, audiences, critics and musicians alike have struggled for words to describe it: 'exquisitely refined', 'lingering sensuousness', 'impressionistic', 'floating', 'dissolving', 'weightless', 'spacious', 'gossamer', 'aloof', the list goes on. Claude Debussy, in a famous phrase, spoke of "that orchestral colour which seems lit from behind, of which there are such wonderful examples in *Parsifal*".

Wagner himself said of the orchestral score that it should be "like cloud layers, dispersing and then forming again". He was a master of orchestration and influenced many other composers. He was also renowned for creating new instruments if he found existing ones to be inadequate for his purposes.

Among particular aspects of the *Parsifal* orchestration worth noting is the transformation music in Act One which requires the sound of deep bells as Gurnemanz leads Parsifal to the Hall of the Grail. Various mechanisms and combinations of instruments have been used since the first performance, with greater or lesser success. Wagner was very particular that the sound of the bells should be just right and, when it is, the effect is marvellous.

The heavy, majestic sound of the Contrabass Tuba has been graphically described as the sound of the earth moving, when, deep underground, layers slowly shift and cover each other.

MUSIC – ACTIVITIES

Years 7-8

Activity one: Singing

As a class, sing the chorus's melody found in the excerpt below. This can be sung on 'la'.

Chorus for young voices and knights: Parsifal Act 1

Richard Wagner

117 Jünglinge

6

11

14

2 **118** Ritter

18

23

28

32

Activity two: Transcribe a melody

Identify the key of the excerpt in Activity one, then transcribe its melody up a minor 3rd and down a perfect 5th.

When you have finished your transposition, play the melody on a keyboard or piano and listen to how it has changed in sound from the original. Can you describe the changes in words?

To make the activity more challenging transcribe the entire excerpt, melody and accompaniment, up a minor 3rd.

Activity three: Research

Write a 300 word essay that explores one of the following topics:

1. How did Richard Wagner expand the role of the orchestra in opera?
2. How did the tradition of opera change under Wagner's pen? Consider characteristics around the voice types used, its structure, the relationship between the orchestra and voice, the text it was based on, the themes explored, etc.
3. Listen to the opening 'Prelude' of Wagner's *Parsifal* and identify what you do and don't like about it. Think about the instruments you hear in the orchestra, the use of dynamics and harmonies and how they change the mood of the work. How does it make you feel?

Visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZgit1ufick> to listen to the excerpt.

Years 9-10

Activity four: Listening

Listen to the first 6:55 of the 'Prelude' from Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* via the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZgit1ufick>

Without reading the opera's storyline, compose a synopsis for the opera around what you hear to present it to the rest of your class.

Finally, read the synopsis of *Parsifal*, found on pages 9-11 of this resource.

Activity five: Aural Training

Complete a rhythmic and melodic transcription of the melody found in Activity one of this section, on pages 19-20.

Years 11-12 VCE

Activity six: Listening

Listen to the different recordings (found below) of 'Ich sah das Kind an seiner Mutter Brust', sung by Kundry in Act 2 of *Parsifal*. Read the corresponding part of the libretto in order to understand the context surrounding this aria.

As you listen to the different recordings, think about the following and write a 400-500 word essay that analyses the stylistic differences that occur.

- Do the singers sing their parts differently?
- Does the orchestra play its part differently?
- Is there a difference in tempo, colour, voice types, etc.?
- Do you think the differences in interpretation change the expression of the same piece?
- Which is your favourite interpretation and why?

Version 1:

Kundry – Dunja Vejzovic

Orchestra – Berliner Philharmoniker

Conductor – Herbert von Karajan

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rZrTyPa_9k

Version 2:

Kundry – Jessye Norman

Orchestra – Metropolitan Opera Orchestra

Conductor – James Levine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpyQr279pdw>

Version 3:

Kundry – Christa Ludwig

Orchestra – Wiener Philharmoniker

Conductor – Georg Solti

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Udvn4aFjXsU> until 5:18

For a copy of the libretto, visit <http://www.operafolio.com/> and select Richard Wagner then *Parsifal*.

To follow the melody, turn to pages 23-24 of this resource.

Activity seven: Composition

Take the melody from Kundry's aria 'Ich sah das Kind an seiner Mutter Brust' found below and compose a piece around it.

It can be for any instrumentation or ensemble size of your choosing.

'Ich sah das Kind an seiner Mutter Brust', Act 2 Parsifal

Ku. Ich sah das Kind an sei-ner Mut-ter Brust, sein er-stes Lal-len
 Ku. lacht mir noch im Ohr: das Leid im Her-zen, wie lachte da auch Her-ze-
 Ku. lei - de, als ih - ren Schmer - zen zu-jauchzte ih-rer Au - gen Wei - de.
 Ku. Ge - bet-tet sanft auf weichen Moo-sen. den hold ge-schläfert sie mit
 Ku. Ko - sen, dem, bang in Sor - gen, den Schlummer be-wacht' der Mut - ter
 Ku. Seh-nen, den weckt' am Mor - gen der hei - ße Tau der Mut - ter-trä -
 Ku. - - - nen. Nur Wei - nen war sie, Schmerz-ge - ba-ren, um dei-nes Va -
 Ku. - ters Lieb und Tod: vor glei - cher Not dich zu be-wahren, galt
 Ku. ihr als höchster Pflicht Ge - bot. Den Waffen fern, der Männer Kampf und Wü-ten,
 Ku. woll - te sie still dich ber - gen und be - hü - ten. Nur Sor - gen
 Ku. war sie, ach! und Ban - - - gen: nie soll - te Kun - de zu
 Ku. dir her - ge - langen. Hörst du nicht noch ihrer Kla - - ge Ruf.

'Ist sah das Kind an seiner Mutter Brust', continued

Ku. wann spät und fern du ge - weit? Hei! Was ihr das Lust und La - chen

Ku. schuf, wann sie su - chend dann dich er - eilt; Kl. wann dann ihr Arm dich wütend um -

Ku. schlang, ward dir es wohl gar beim Küs - sen bang?

Ku. Doch, ihr We - he du nicht ver - nahmst, nicht ih - rer Schmerzen

Ku. To - ben, als end - lich du nicht wie - der - kamst und dei - ne Spur ver -

Ku. sto - ben. Sie harr - te Nacht und Ta - ge, bis ihr verstummt die

Ku. Kla - ge, der Gram — ihr zehr - te den Schmerz, um stil - len Tod sie

Ku. warb: ihr brach das Leid das Herz, — und Her - ze - lei - de

Ku. starb.

THE ARTS – DRAMA

An interview with Director, Roger Hodgman

How did you become a Director? Do you prefer directing for the screen or stage?

I just fell into it really. I started directing school plays at my school which encouraged participation in drama, then directed a lot at University, after which I got a job as a trainee TV director for the ABC. Five years later I started concentrating on live theatre and have been directing (or teaching acting) ever since. When I left the position of Artistic Director of MTC (Melbourne Theatre Company) in around 2000 and became a freelance director, I started directing TV drama as well as plays, musicals and operas. I have been very lucky to have been offered many great things to work on.

I don't really have a preference – screen and stage have different challenges and technical requirements, but both involve collaboratively telling a story. What I like most is being able to go back and forth between the two media. I learn from each and I think have improved as a director because of it.

Do you have a clear idea of how you want each of the characters to be portrayed on stage or will you wait to see what each singer brings to his or her role?

A bit of both. I certainly have ideas as well as an overall sense of how the production will feel, but my first love is collaborating with performers and developing things with them. Most of this cast have played these roles before and I'm eager to see what they have to offer – although they and I have to ensure it fits with the overall concept. Katarina Dalayman, for example, recently played Kundry in a fascinating and conceptually very particular production at the New York Metropolitan Opera. Much of the specific things she did were only appropriate for that production, but her overall sense of the character was brilliant and will work well for this production.

What do you think will be your biggest challenge in directing this work?

It is very long and, at first glance, has very little plot or action, but the music is mesmeric and the story gradually reveals itself. The challenge will be to keep it visually and dramatically interesting while honouring the extraordinary form of Wagner's masterpiece (in many ways the summation of his career).

How will you use the stage directions laid out by Wagner in the score to direct this production of *Parsifal*?

As well as being a great composer, Wagner was a hugely accomplished dramatist. All his stage directions are useful in terms of understanding his intent. Many can be followed, others are not appropriate for this design or, really, contemporary theatrical taste. But we can honour them in spirit.

What themes central to *Parsifal* are you looking forward to exploring on the stage?

The redemptive power of compassion and empathy.

Are you familiar with the texts and philosophy Wagner was inspired by when composing this work?

A little. I've devoured a wonderful book by the English philosopher Bryan Magee called *Wagner and Philosophy* and that has helped me understand the importance of Schopenhauer in particular to Wagner's conception of the opera.

Do you think *Parsifal* is relatable to a modern-day audience? If so, in what way?

Absolutely. Great classics survive because they are still relevant in some way, even if the particular events happened in the distant past. Wagner was writing about a mythical world already a thousand years old. But the central themes that were relevant to nineteenth century Germany are as they are to us.

Can you give readers an idea of what your process involves when it comes to directing a work such as this? How much preparation is involved before you walk into the first rehearsal?

It varies. I always do a lot of preparation but of various kinds. It usually involves thinking about and conceiving an overall concept, and reading around the subject of the piece. I rarely spend much time working out the physical detail of each scene preferring to leave that to work on with the performers.

In the case of an opera – and especially *Parsifal* – I spend a lot of time with the libretto making sure I understand its meaning (I don't speak German) and getting to know the music. There are many sections, some short, some very long with no words, and I have been listening to them to try and work out what happens visually to enhance the music and fill the space dramatically. A very useful part of the preparation was several days spent with Richard Mills (the conductor), going through the text line by line and talking about the music.

When in the process did you begin to work with the designers (Set, Costume and Lighting Designers) and how do their designs influence what you want to do on stage?

We started our discussions well over a year ago (the four of us together) and gradually came to a unified concept, which hopefully will illuminate the piece. There were many practical considerations – budgets, time, number of stage personnel etc. – that had to be taken into account but luckily, we share a love of simplicity. Much of the production is conceived at this stage. The rehearsals fill in the detail.

What advice might you have for students who want to become a theatre or screen director?

It sounds glib, but only do it if you have to – in other words not because it seems like a glamorous or interesting option but because you can conceive of nothing else. It can be a difficult and not always financially rewarding life. You need talent, hard work *and* luck to succeed. Courses can be good – but research them to make sure they're reputable and useful. If possible find ways to practice directing – getting your own shows up somehow, persuading people to let you direct, making short inexpensive films, getting attached to good directors as an assistant. All easy to say, but harder to do! The best courses prefer to see evidence of this kind of thing before accepting students. Finally, no course can teach you to direct, only give you tools to be better. Many directors (I'm one) are not formally trained.

DRAMA – ACTIVITIES

Years 7-8

Activity one: Study the libretto

Before you go to see Richard Wagner's *Parsifal*, read the libretto of the work. Consider and list key points in the action of the work and how you might imagine them translated to the stage.

For a copy of the libretto, visit <http://www.operafolio.com/> and select Richard Wagner then *Parsifal*.

Activity two: Performance analysis

After attending the theatre, write a 500 word analysis of the production of Richard Wagner's *Parsifal*. In your analysis, you should consider:

- What you liked and disliked about the production;
- The themes of the work and how they influence the action that takes place on stage;
- How the director presented a number of key points in the action laid out in the libretto and whether you agree with the decisions made; and,
- How it compared to what you imagined, as per Activity one.

Years 9-10

Activity three: Character Analysis

Write a 500 word character analysis on one of the following characters featured in Richard Wagner's, *Parsifal*.

- Parsifal
- Kundry
- Klingsor
- Gurmenanz
- Amfortas

To complete this task, you will be required to either view a performance of the production or read the synopsis and libretto.

The synopsis can be found on page 9 of this resource. For a copy of the libretto, visit <http://www.operafolio.com/> and select Richard Wagner then *Parsifal*.

Activity four: *Parsifal* for a different audience

Develop a concept of a production of *Parsifal* for primary school children based on the synopsis of the work, found on page 9 of this resource. Consider the following:

- How would you convey the key points of the drama and the themes that are at the core of the production?
- Would you change the mood or atmosphere of the work to suit this new audience, or would you keep it the same?
- Would the role of the characters change? If so, to what extent?

Years 11-12 VCE

Activity five: *Parsifal* the play

This Activity should be completed over several weeks.

As a class, compose and perform a play around the libretto of *Parsifal*. You will need to assign:

- Writers
- A Director
- Principal roles based on the cast list found on page 7 of this resource

You might consider turning to your peers studying Visual Arts to create costumes and a set.

THE ARTS – VISUAL ARTS

In this production of *Parsifal*, there are separate designers creating the set and costumes. How they work not only together, but with other members of the creative team, is vital to ensure that each of their ideas and visions of the world of *Parsifal* correspond to each other.

Read how the process unfolds in the interviews with the set and costume designers below and see an example of their designs in the pages that follow.

An interview with Set Designer, Richard Roberts.

Can you tell me a little bit about your designs for this production of *Parsifal*?

Where to start with that? It's being directed by Roger Hodgman, and Roger and I have a long designer/director relationship going back to the 1980s. So, we've got a shorthand about working together, which is fantastic because we've done many shows together. He always gets the ball rolling by saying something that gets your imagination fired up. I remember one of the first things he talked about were the original designs by a famous designer called Adolphe Appia, which I immediately went to. They had obviously resonated with him, those designs. That's immediately a kind of way into it because you're basically starting with this amazing, most incredible music that you sort of need to allow to communicate to you. I suppose it's kind of important to say too, that designing for opera is such a different experience from designing for drama because you begin with something incredibly rich in opera, which is the music. The music has the capacity to describe scale and colour and texture and even space, I think, in quite an abstract way that you don't get with drama. Drama: it's words on a page, it's dialogue and stage directions. You get that in opera as well when you get to read the libretto and you read the stage directions, but they're very much secondary to the primal thing that's going on, which is the music. That's unique to opera, and for a designer that's a complete gift.

With *Parsifal*, the first thing Roger said was, even if we could afford to do it (which we couldn't) he didn't want to do a sort of big, scenic evocation of a forest and a great hall. When you look back to the original productions of it they were all literally depicted on stage, on very big stages too. The Palais Theatre, it's a big auditorium but it's not actually a huge stage, it's not terribly deep and it's not really wide. So, he [Roger] didn't want to do that and he wanted a contemporary feel without it all being just dressed in contemporary clothes, even though, what Christina's sort of come up with has got a very contemporary feel about it. So, that was a really good start.

I'm also conscious of the fact that – and I've always have this in my mind any time I'm designing an opera – I think about the acoustics of the set, like what are its acoustic properties? To try and make life easier rather than harder for the singer because some certain surfaces are a much more reflective sound than others. If we did it all in soft velvet drapes the singers would hate me for it because it's so absorbent. Whereas, if you do it in a sort of bright surface like wood, it's got a kind of resonance about it. So, there's a whole bunch of things at the beginning of any design process that are feeding your imagination; from technical things like that, something Roger might have said about the early designs of it, and of course, the music itself.

Besides having gone to the original designs to have a look at what they involved, what other research did you do before or even during the design process?

Well, we did quite a lot of hunting around at other productions of it. Some designers and some directors don't want to see what anyone else has done, they want it to completely spring from their

own mind and don't want to be influenced by another style. But you know, I don't have that problem. I'm quite interested to see how other designers and directors have solved little technical issues as there are some tricky things involved. Like when Parsifal gets the spear. How do we do that? It's interesting to see how other people have solved that little conundrum. So, I don't have a problem with that. We did see a couple of quite stunning productions of it which did feed our imaginations, there's no doubt about that.

Listening to that and having a look at various different librettos in English because they do vary a lot. Seeing how one translator had translated particular stage directions compared to another. I did quite a lot of reading about Wagner and what he was. Roger gave me a quite a lot of really fabulous things to read about him and what his preoccupations were, but perhaps trying to uncover some of the motivations behind that opera.

Do many of the stage directions that Wagner provides in the score influence how you design the set?

Oh, definitely! I mean, it's interesting with stage directions, it's the same with plays actually, that you definitely read them, you don't ignore them. But the thing about a stage direction is it's never going to be sung or spoken. No audience is ever going to hear those words. They are words there for us to read as interpreters of it. In that sense, while you can't obviously cut anything in a libretto, you can not do what they're suggesting in the stage direction because no one's going to hear, 'She walks in in a red dress'. That's never going to be said. So, unless someone actually says in the libretto, "What a beautiful red dress you have on", then you don't have to have a red dress. If no one ever says it and it's just described in the stage directions, you're not beholden to that. You definitely read them because there's often – certainly with some playwrights – incredibly beautiful poetry in their stage directions. Tennessee Williams is a good example of that. The stage directions that he wrote are quite poetic. But it doesn't mean that if he writes, 'There's a door stage left and a door stage right and a table in the middle', that that's his suggestion for the scenic solution for the play. If you don't need it in the way you're conceiving of it, you don't have to have it. You do have to say the words though.

The stage directions in the *Parsifal* libretto are very specific in many respects. For instance, when they describe the Grail, you obviously have to have the Grail, you can't not have a Grail because it's sung about and it's a central kind of object in the opera. But what it looks like, Wagner describes it as crystal. I said to Roger, "I love the idea of it being made from something transparent", and being crystal sounded fabulous, so we're trying to do that. But you know, you could just as easily make a Grail out of gold or pewter or pottery even. We did discuss what the Grail might look like. I don't know if you remember but there's a scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* where they find the Grail and it's a very simple little terracotta thing. We even thought about that. Is this holy relic a very simple little cup the redeemer drank from? But Wagner describes it as crystal and we're going to go with that because I like the idea of that.

You've mentioned that you've worked closely with Roger. What about Christina? How much of an interaction do you have during the whole design?

Oh, it's so important. As soon as I have any kind of notion about where we might be headed, for example, I might have had a meeting with Roger and we may have discussed a few different things, I always usually start with a very rough model. The moment that I have any kind of offering to put on the table, I talk to Chris about it. What you really want ultimately, when the audience is sitting down and they're experiencing this opera, is that what the singers are wearing and the world the singers are inhabiting, need to look like they're from the same world. Sadly, it's not uncommon to go to the

opera or go to the theatre and to see two completely different takes on the same thing when the costume designer and set designer are two separate people. You could separate that set of costumes and put it in another set and it would make no difference. What you're obviously aiming for is that the costumes and set are so deeply entwined together, philosophically and visually and technically, that you can't separate them. So, you obviously have to have a lot of dialogue.

There was an interesting experiment in the 1970s conducted by Merce Cunningham, a choreographer who worked a lot with John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg, the famous painter. They did exactly the opposite. For example, Merce Cunningham would develop a set of steps and dance movements, John Cage meanwhile would be making some music somewhere else in his studio completely separate from that, and Robert Rauschenberg would be designing a set and costumes again somewhere else, and then they would just put them together. That was an experiment in chance in a sense. What will those three things do when they collide with each other? But that's exactly the opposite to what we're doing. The lighting designer is another person that needs to be consulted. But we're always aiming for the meshing of those four elements so that they come together and make one whole thing.

Do you also consider materials to use based on the lighting?

Completely. And colour, of course, and how reflective the surfaces might be. In this instance, we're using plywood and I'm getting them to bleach the plywood so that it looks like it's gone very, very pale. That means that Matt [the Lighting Designer] has got something to bounce light off, but it can also give him problems if Roger says, "I want this moment to be pitch dark." That's quite difficult to do if the set is very pale. So, it's always a dialogue between the various designers and the director with regards to that. Again, the four of us – Roger, Matt, Christina and myself – we've done a lot together before.

How does designing for an opera production differ to designing for a theatrical, dance or even TV production?

Well, you know I think I said before, the most powerful thing that you get in opera is the music. I've done a few operas and musicals, and the power of music to articulate a world in terms of colour and space and all of that sort of stuff, is really striking. A long, long time ago, when Roger ran the Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC) as Artistic Director, I was designing this new musical which hadn't been written when I had to design it but it was a sequel to an earlier musical which I was familiar with. It was being directed by someone I hadn't worked with before and the music hadn't been composed, but there was a one page synopsis from the musical telling the story and that's what I had to design by. It was a bit difficult actually. Being MTC they wanted the designs fairly early in order to slot them into their building program. So, I busily went away and designed this thing, it was all accepted and they started building it. I had to confess I was a little uncertain about whether I was on the right track or not, but there was no choice. We had to just go for it.

We were half way through building the set, when one day the director came in and said, "Oh Richard, the composer's sent me the first song, do you want to have a listen?" We got the cassette, plonked it down, pressed play and honestly within about ten seconds of hearing that music, my heart sank because I felt like what I had designed didn't match what I was listening to. I thought about that, and while it was ok and actually did quite well, I immediately thought that if I had had that music before, what I would have done would have been something completely different. What it should look like pretty much popped into my head straight away with the music, but it was too late. What was so interesting about that experience was, I thought about it afterwards and thought, how

communicative those abstract notes are, really, in communicating a whole style and approach to this piece of performance, and it was coming out of the music. It speaks to how powerful music can be.

Is there anything you have to take into consideration when designing particularly for a Wagnerian opera?

Well yes. Well, the acoustics as I was saying before because it's such a massive task for those singers to front up to six hours of music, so anything you can do as a designer to assist them doing that, then you should do it. But other than that, well I've never designed a Wagner opera before so it's not like I can say, "Well when you do Wagner, it's different from Mozart".

Are you finding that you're doing anything differently from any other operas?

No, I don't think so. I think you're always trying to get to the heart, you're trying to uncover what it is that was driving Wagner to make it, to compose it and to imagine it. An audience doesn't necessarily come to an opera or any piece of theatre for that matter, with the same level of background that you come to it. My job and Roger's job and the job of everyone who's working on it, is to dig and sift to find a way into it and then hopefully help an audience find their way into it via that.

Going beyond opera design, my kind of philosophy of design in general I suppose is finding the right trigger for an audience's own imaginations. They've got this music, they've got this incredible singer standing in front of them, they've got this orchestra playing this unbelievable music and the story's unfolding for them, and if you can provide them with the right visual triggers they can imagine the rest of the world of that the opera for themselves. That will always be a much more powerful experience than if you depicted everything and in that sense, that's where I think the live performing arts have it all over film. Film does show you everything. Peter Jackson's vision of Tolkien's books, that's his vision of it but you could just as easily do *Lord of the Rings* on an empty stage if it's brilliantly acted and brilliantly directed and brilliantly designed where you suggested that whole world through some very little props and let the audience's imagination describe the landscape around it. It's like when you read a novel and you imagine the whole world in that novel for yourself and then you go and see the movie of that novel and it's pretty common that it doesn't live up to your own imagination of the world. It's like, "Well that's not how I saw it." Occasionally it is though. I thought *The Handmaid's Tale* described that world perfectly. But very often it doesn't live up to it because it's someone else's imagination and not yours.

What role do the themes of *Parsifal*, of enlightenment and compassion, have in influencing how you wanted the world of the opera to look?

Well, I suppose that's a question that might be better answered by Christina, who's dressing those human beings. I suppose, for the set designer, one of the most powerful things you get your hands on when you're designing a set is scale because you know the human figure is a certain size within a certain range. It's unlikely that someone is going to be over seven-foot-tall, that is, 2.1 meters, and pretty unlikely that they're going to be under five-foot-tall. So somewhere between 1.5 meters and 2.1 meters is pretty much where every human being fits, that's pretty much a given. Unless you put them on platform shoes or you give them a mask that makes their face bigger, you know, you manipulate it in such a way, you're sort of stuck with a certain size. But the world around that figure is yours. You can make that world look quite tiny, quite crushing and small so that the figures look actually quite big in that space, or you can do the opposite and make the space look very big and the look figures very little in it. The human figure's relationship to their world around them is completely in your control.

I think with this opera, this feels like we're in a very big landscape. Even when Wagner describes those

spaces, he says, a great hall or the clearing in a forest. All of those spaces have a sense of scale, I suppose, to make the human figure look kind of frail and vulnerable in a great big landscape. So, ally that sense of scale with also a desire to create an acoustically helpful environment for the singers, and we've ended up with this very, very large plywood box that figures look quite small in. Then oddly enough, there's another little plywood box within the plywood box that is small and when you open it up, it has this crystal Grail in it. There's a sense of layers of boxes in a way but that's a very abstract thing that comes out of thinking about it for a while.

Once the production goes into the rehearsal room, what does your role become?

Being available and spending time in the rehearsal room. Roger and I have talked about it a lot as he's a very careful planner. He's planning from one moment to the next how he's going to tackle it and we've been discussing it on and off for at a least a year. In the rehearsal room, at that point the set is well and truly bolted as it were. But he might discover something in the rehearsal room and he'll say to me, "Is it too late to get that singer to walk in from there?" I do like to try and design something that has space, that has a bit of potential and doesn't lock everything down. Like a bit of a playground really, in the same way that a really good playground that kids go into and think, "What can I do here? This has opportunity". I think while you have to lock down key moments, what you want to try to do is leave it open enough that there are things they can discover in the rehearsal room. Often you go into a bit of a run after they've been rehearsing it for a couple of weeks and Roger says, "Come in and have a look at what we're doing", and you find that they've found something in the design that you never thought of. So that's the rehearsal process and I suppose if you designed it so that every single moment was completely predetermined and locked down it could be a little less interesting for the singer.

Moving away a little bit from the production itself, what for you was it about theatre design that made you want to pursue a career in the field?

I always wanted to do it, actually. When I was very young, about ten or eleven or something, my parents introduced me to a family friend who was a puppet maker. As a ten-year-old, I was taken up to his workshop and he showed me the puppets that he was making and I was completely hooked from that moment on. So, it began with puppets. I remember making these puppet shows where the scenery became incredibly elaborate to the point where there came the day where the puppets could no longer fit on the stage, there was too much encumbering the stage in terms of scenery. I think that's when I realised I wanted to be a set designer. Then I went off to university and pursued it and that's sort of what I've done ever since.

Do you have any career advice for students who are interested in becoming theatre designers themselves?

I do actually teach design. I've had a teaching career that's been paralleled to my design career since the early 1990s. In fact, I'm involved in a new design program at the University of Melbourne which I regard as foundation studies for a designer.

But, I think a designer has to read as many plays as they can, to see as many films as they can. Think about, go to see and listen to as many operas. Read novels. Immerse yourself in art. Go to the galleries, look at paintings and every time, think about what it is you're either looking at or listening to or reading, and develop a set of attitudes toward those art works. That's the most important thing for a designer, I think. You can learn technique about how to make a model and how to do a working drawing, that's all obviously essential for a good designer to do. But that's much easier to

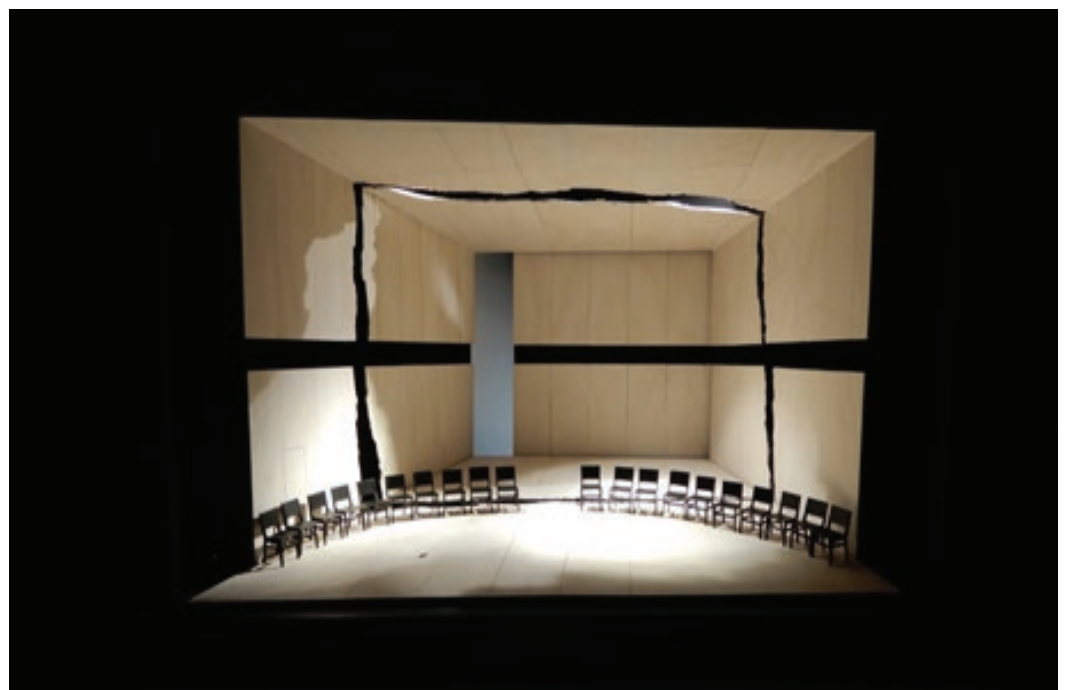
teach. Developing a kind of a response to the world is something very personal. That's what you as a designer bring to the table. When a director asks you to come to the table to help them realise *Parsifal*, they're wanting you to bring your view of the world and look at *Parsifal* through these particular eyes. So, developing the capacity for those eyes to see things and analyse things or think about the meaning behind things, that's the key point. To be curious, I suppose and interested.

Set designs for *Parsifal*

Below are a number of images of the model scale box, illustrating the set that has been created for this production of *Parsifal*, as designed by Richard Roberts.



Act 1 – Scene 1
A forest clearing, outside
the Castle of the Grail.



Act 1 – Scene 2
The hall inside the Castle of
the Grail.



Act 2 – Scene 1
Inside Klingsor’s magic castle.



Act 2 – Scene 2
The magic garden.



Act 3
In the domain of the Castle of the Holy Grail.

An Interview with Costume Designer, Christina Smith

Where do you begin when working on a production of this size and length? What does your process entail?

Roger, Richard, Matt and myself talked for many months before I commenced – it was important that we had a shared understanding of the world of the piece and what underlying themes would drive our production. These discussions involved knowing the work well, so there was a good deal of listening involved! I actually enjoy listening to the music of the show I'm working on when doing other tasks for other shows such as model building. I find my mind can wander and dream whilst my hands do the technical (and often repetitive) work.

What sort of research did you undertake for this production?

Primarily, my research involved reading. Roger found a wonderful chapter of a book which outlined Wagner's process in creating *Parsifal* and we found this essay really helped us (the creative team) to discuss and consolidate our ideas on the piece. I often find my early research isn't visual at all, but more to seek a greater understanding of how and why a work was initially created.

The libretto provides some description of how the characters are dressed throughout the work. How, if at all, have these guided your designs?

To be honest, they haven't guided me greatly, though certainly Kundry's initial description was a great starting point as it is so emotive! I'm always more interested in what the characters say about each other (especially in terms of character) rather than specific items of clothing mentioned, especially in stage directions.

Do the underlying themes of a work influence how your designs take shape? If so, what role did the themes in *Parsifal*, of enlightenment and compassion, have in influencing how you wanted the costumes to look?

We immediately knew that the knights had to be simple and humble, and the trick is finding what that means to a modern audience. We decided on an 'everyman' approach, so the knights are dressed as simply as possible in modern terms – shirt and pants. The fabrics need to feel humble and simple too, like linen or simple cottons. We then contrast this with the world of Klingsor – who is the most unenlightened – by making every fabric and silhouette as 'fake' as possible, all plastic, shiny and manufactured. Ironically, all these mirrored fabrics will shine very brightly, but will emphasise the superficial nature of Klingsor's pursuits – the brightest person on stage will also be the dullest in terms of compassion and enlightenment.

Are there any designers or artists who influenced your designs for the characters in *Parsifal*?

I looked at the Pre-raphaelite art movement for their romantic take on medieval times – I found this an interesting avenue as these artists were painting at the same time the work was written. In particular, I found Gustave Moreau a great starting point, especially in regards to the flower maidens. I also looked at how modern designers were interpreting the idea of 'knights', such as the great Alexander McQueen (always a great starting point for any designer looking for inspiration!) and John Galliano, especially when it comes to using modern fabrics. I love casting my research net quite wide, and incorporating visual materials from a number of different eras and sources – I have no interest in reproducing a costume the way it was or would have been, I like the idea of incorporating modern elements – after all, we perform for a modern audience.

Richard Roberts talked about taking into consideration the types of materials he would use in his set designs to make it easier for singers during a performance of this work. Is there anything similar that you have to keep in mind while designing the costumes?

Yes! *Parsifal* will be on during Summer, and the Palais is notoriously badly insulated – that is, it is cold in winter and hot in summer! We are mindful of the performers' comfort levels, particularly in Act Two when we are using a lot of sequins and synthetics. There will be some fakery at play – for instance, with Klingsor's suit there will be no full length shirt underneath, even though it will appear that way – I wouldn't dare layer up a performer with that much plastic in hot conditions!

For opera, I'm also very mindful that the performers can see the conductor, and hear each other – this can make masks and headgear challenging, though not impossible.

What role do you play once the production goes into the rehearsal room?

We will have started the build process by the time rehearsals start, so I'm around a lot for fittings. I also like to see how the work is evolving in the room – as it always does – and how I can 'bend' the designs to suit that if necessary. For example, a performer might be a lot more active than we originally anticipated, so I can cater for that in the fit (and fabric) of the costume.

How long have you been a set and costume designer for and what made you want to pursue this line of work?

I've been a set and costume designer now for 23 years and I've been very fortunate that I've done little else for that time (i.e. it is what I've always done). I was very strong at English and Art at school, and I was always fascinated by the school musicals – I loved the camaraderie and the process. My path was cemented in Year 11 Drama, when we were taken on an excursion to see *The Tempest* at Belvoir St in Sydney. My friend and I scored great seats up the front and I was completely mesmerised by John Bell as Prospero conjuring up the storm with his staff and a bucket of water. The idea of this type of theatrical storytelling was a revelation to me, and I've never wanted to do anything else since.

What advice would you give to secondary school students with an interest in design who are looking to get into the performing arts industry?

Be prepared to be poor! That's a terrible thing to say, but I do think it's good to enter the profession with eyes open – it's hard work, and very competitive – there are far more designers looking for work than paid work available. This being said, it is an incredibly rewarding vocation and I wouldn't choose another if I had my time again.

I would suggest that students immerse themselves in both making theatre and experiencing theatre. Go and see as much as you can and also make as much as you can – this is really how you learn. There are some wonderful courses around to learn specialised skills, but to get in you'll need to demonstrate a passion for the work.

Costume designs

P A R S I F A L A C T O N E



P A R S I F A L

F L O W E R M A I D E N 1



P A R S I F A L

K U N D R Y A C T O Z #



P A R S I F A L

K U N D R Y A C T T W O



P A R S I F A L

VISUAL ARTS – ACTIVITIES

Years 7-8

Activity one: Costume analysis

Look at the costumes designed by Christina Smith on pages 38-41 of this resource.

In 200 words, write a visual analysis for each of the designs presented.

Years 9-10

Activity two: A history in designs

Research the different costume and set designs that have been created for past productions of Richard Wagner's *Parsifal*. In a 600 word essay:

- Consider who the designers were for each of the productions;
- The countries and audiences they were performed to and if there was a clear influence on the designs;
- The styles that were incorporated and how they developed or changed over time; and,
- Identify any similarities between each of the productions.

Create a timeline with any images you can find of the costume designs to accompany your written work.

Activity three: Design concept

Read the libretto and develop a design concept for each Act. Using a Moodboard, develop a contrasting design concept for each Act of *Parsifal* so that they each have a distinct look and create a new atmosphere.

For a copy of the libretto, visit <http://www.operafolio.com/> and select Richard Wagner then *Parsifal*.

Years 11-12 VCE

Activity four: Set Design

Design the set for one of the scenes from *Parsifal* then create a model scale box.

When beginning your design, take into consideration some of the factors Richard Roberts points out in his interview on pages 29-34 of this resource. For example, the materials to use so to make it easier for singers to sing throughout the entire production, how the lighting would reflect off them and the role of the music in your design.

For this activity, you will need to read the section of the libretto for the Act or Scene you intend to design, and listen to a recording of the music for this section as well.

For a copy of the libretto, visit <http://www.operafolio.com/> and select Richard Wagner then *Parsifal*.

For an audio recording of a production of *Parsifal*, visit <https://open.spotify.com/album/1vutOX5UaqtRiUYaVcNzuA>.

Activity five: Design a costume

Design costumes for the characters of Kundry, Parsifal and Klingsor. In your portfolio, investigate the materials you want to use and provide fabric samples for each of them.

LANGUAGES – GERMAN

The libretto of *Parsifal* and Richard Wagner as Librettist

By Dr. Peter Bassett

Wagner's usual practice when constructing a libretto involved four steps: a brief prose sketch, a more elaborate prose draft, a verse draft and a fair copy of the poem. Although he had read Wolfram von Eschenbach's thirteenth century romance *Parzival* in 1845, it wasn't until 1857 that he wrote the first prose sketch for a drama. That sketch is now lost. A detailed 'prose draft', still using Wolfram's spelling of *Parzival*, was written in 1865 at the request of King Ludwig II of Bavaria. Much of this prose draft was couched in a form of direct speech that is quite close to the finished libretto. There were no important narrative changes between the 1865 draft and the finished poem of 1877, and so, in all material respects, the narrative content of *Parsifal* (as Wagner eventually spelt the name), dates from the 1860s and perhaps even earlier. A distinctive feature of Wagner's *Parsifal* is its relatively short text compared with its huge musical score.

Parsifal is better known to native English-speakers as Percival of the Arthurian legends. In the spring of 1857, Wagner was moved by a tranquil scene on the Wesendonck estate near Zürich to think of the world's 'new beginning', achieved through Christ's sacrifice on the cross on Good Friday. His mind went back to Wolfram's poem with its references to Good Friday, and the juxtaposition of these ideas provided the spark that ignited his imagination.

The form of Wagner's text draws on his earlier literary practices and, to a degree, it replicates aspects of Wolfram's style. End-rhyme is used sparingly, "the more natural the music, the less appropriate an end rhyme" he once said, and the verse is inclined towards heightened prose. Although Wagner usually published his poems ahead of their musical composition, he did not intend them to be judged independently of the music. Nevertheless, it was useful for audiences to have access to the texts in advance, especially since, after the revolutionary decision in Bayreuth to turn down the house lights, it was no longer possible to read the libretto during the opera.

In the earliest legends, the Grail was neither a chalice nor the cup of the Last Supper. Those associations came later. In some accounts it was a serving dish or, in Wolfram's version, a magic stone. Even before the Grail was given its Christian gloss, it was described as possessing miraculous powers, including the ability to provide all kinds of food and drink and to extend the lives of those who gazed on it. Its prototypes were the magic cauldrons and cornucopias of pagan antiquity, and the alchemist stones of the east.

The Grail came to symbolise divine power at work in the world, and it was but a short step to link the Grail to the body and blood of Christ present in the Eucharist. Wagner's drama is set in the domain and castle of the Grail, called Monsalvat. According to the stage directions, the scenery is like that of the northern mountains of Gothic (Christian) Spain. Later, we move to the sorcerer Klingsor's enchanted castle on the southern slopes of the same mountains, facing Moorish (Muslim) Spain. The setting reflects the fact that the original romances were written at the time of the Crusades, when Christian Europe was coming to grips with alien influences from the Middle East and beyond. What's more, Wolfram says that his information about the Grail came from a document found in Toledo in Spain, a city occupied by the Moors until the eleventh century.

Wagner describes the costumes of the Grail Knights as resembling those of the Knights Templar,

the famous religious/military order founded during the Crusades to protect Christian pilgrims going to the Holy Land. He had in mind that the cross on their tabards would be replaced by a dove. In medieval accounts, the Grail Knights were often thought of as the spiritual equivalents of the Templars, and the Grail Castle as a kind of heavenly Jerusalem. In Act One of *Parsifal*, the knights process into the hall of the Grail to share a 'meal of love' of bread and wine, provided by the Grail itself. Bountiful feasts provided by the Grail are colourfully documented by Wolfram.

The most complicated writing in *Parsifal* is to be found in the Flower Maidens scene in Act Two. Wagner began by working out the contrapuntal vocal writing on four or five staves and then he provided the words for it, just as he had done with the finale of the first act of *Lohengrin* and the complicated street fight in the second act of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.

For a copy of the libretto in both German and English, visit <http://www.operafolio.com/> and select Richard Wagner then *Parsifal*.

GERMAN – ACTIVITIES

Years 7-8

Activity one: Vocabulary

Look up either the English or German meaning of the words on the table below then write five sentences in German using these words. Solutions can be found on page 47 of this resource.

German	English	German	English
Burg		Speer	
Gebirge		Stimme	
See			ignorance
Ritter		Musik	
	squire		swan
	flute	Orchester	
dumm		Pauke	
	magic		conductor
Gral			trombone

Years 9-10

Activity two: Translation

Translate the following stage direction from Act 1, Scene 1 of the libretto into English.

Im Gebiet des Grals Wald, schattig und ernst, doch nicht düster Felsiger Boden. Eine Lichtung in der Mitte. Links aufsteigend wird der Weg zur Gralsburg angenommen. Der Mitte des Hintergrundes zu senkt sich der Boden zu einem tiefer gelegenen Waldsee hinab.

Tagesanbruch. Gurnemanz (rüstig greisenhaft) und zwei Knappen (von zartem Jünglingsalter) sind schlafend unter einem Baume gelagert - Von der linken Seite, wie von der Gralsburg her, ertönt der feierliche Morgenweckruf der Posaunen.

To see an English translation, visit <http://www.operafolio.com/> and select Richard Wagner then *Parsifal*.

Years 11-12 VCE

Activity three: Translation

Translate the below text sung by Gurnemanz in Act 1 of *Parsifal*, into German.

Unprecedented act!
You could murder, here in the holy forest,
where tranquil peace surrounded you?
Did not the woodland beasts tamely come near
and innocently greet you as friends?
What did the birds sing to you from the branches?
What harm did that faithful swan do you?
Seeking his mate, he flew up
to circle with it over the lake
and gloriously to hallow the bath.
This did not impress you? It but tempted you
to a wild childish shot from your bow?
He was pleasing to us: what is he now to you?
Here look! Here you struck him,
the blood still congealing, the wings drooping lifeless,
the snowy plumage stained dark,
the eyes glazed do you see his look?

To check the original German, visit <http://www.operafolio.com/> and select Richard Wagner then *Parsifal*.

Activity four: Writing practice

Either complete exercise one **or** exercise two and three of the writing exercises below. All tasks need to be completed in German.

1. Write a 1000 word essay on how the tradition of opera plays a significant role in the history and culture of Germany.
2. Listen to 'Nein! Lasst ihn unenthüllt' from Act 1 of Wagner's *Parsifal* and write a 350 word newspaper article reviewing the work.
Visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwklTt6nGCY> to listen to the excerpt.
3. Read Act 1 of the libretto from Wagner's *Parsifal* and write a 250 word imaginative piece from the For a German copy of the libretto, visit <http://www.operafolio.com/> and select Richard Wagner then *Parsifal*.

Activity five: Conversation practice

Listen to a recording of 'Ich sah das Kind an seiner Mutter Brust', sung by Kundry in Act 2 of *Parsifal*.

In pairs, have a conversation in German discussing what you think Kundry is singing about and the role of the music in conveying the mood.

Visit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rztTyPa_9k for a recording of Kundry's aria.

SOLUTIONS

GERMAN – ACTIVITIES

Activity one: Vocabulary

German	English	German	English
Burg	castle	Speer	spear
Gebirge	mountain	Stimme	voice
See	lake	Ignoranz	ignorance
Ritter	knight	Musik	music
Knappe	squire	Schwan	swan
Flöte	flute	Orchester	orchestra
dumm	foolish	Pauke	timpani
Zauber	magic	dirigent	conductor
Gral	grail	Posaune	trombone

PHILOSOPHY

Philosophical ideas in *Parsifal*

by Dr. Peter Bassett

As a young radical, Wagner argued that the basic goodness of human beings had been subverted by the property-owning classes and the selfish interests of the state. In this he was echoing the ideas of the French philosopher and socialist Proudhon who famously asserted that property is theft. But whereas Marx and Engels saw the future of human society in terms of the emancipation of the proletariat, Wagner saw it in terms of the redeeming power of love. This was a view of the world that owed much to the writings of the contemporary German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, to whom Wagner dedicated his important essay of 1849 *The Artwork of the Future*.

However, after the failure of the Dresden revolution of 1849 and Wagner's flight into exile, he no longer looked to politics for solutions to the world's problems. During his last three decades, he became more concerned with metaphysical issues than with political ones. In his greatest works – those written after the mid-1850s – he looked inwards at human nature, rather than outwards at human society. We can see this happening from *Die Walküre* onwards. It certainly happens in *Tristan und Isolde*, where the lovers' goal is to escape from the harsh glare of separate existences into the perfect union of night and death. Scratch the surface of *Die Meistersinger* and we find metaphysics even there. But most of all we find it in *Parsifal*. It is his most mystical work, based on transcendental notions such as the denial of the will and rejection of the world. It has nothing to do with politics of any kind. Wagner himself said that *Parsifal* owed its conception to his flight from the world, and from a soulless age of unfeeling utilitarianism.

In 1854, while composing *Die Walküre*, Wagner encountered the rather sober writings of the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. These writings made a huge impression on him because they seemed to confirm the direction of his own thinking. Near the end of his life he said that he regarded his embrace of Schopenhauerian philosophy and *Parsifal* as his crowning achievements.

Schopenhauer wrote of the nothingness of the outer world of phenomena with its inevitable frustration, suffering and death, and of the act of renunciation as the only authentic act of free will. For Schopenhauer, compassion was the source of morality, and Wagner expressed this dramatically in *Parsifal*. Schopenhauer called the instinctive, driving energy within human beings, the 'will', and he considered this 'will' to be the cause of all evil and strife. He argued that such things could be avoided only by achieving a state of detachment, in which the 'will' was inactive, a condition not unlike the Buddhist notion of *Nirvana*. In his view, the arts, and especially music, could help in achieving this detachment. This explains much about Wagner's approach to the music and the staging of *Parsifal*.

Schopenhauer's views had much in common with Buddhism, and Wagner too became strongly attracted to Buddhism during the last three decades of his life (having read Eugène Burnouf's *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism* in 1855). Not long before he wrote the first sketch for *Parsifal* in 1857, he had drafted a sketch for a music drama to be called *Die Sieger* (*The Victors*). *Die Sieger* dealt with an event in the legendary life of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, one of whose titles in Sanskrit is Jina – the Victor. His victory was over human desire, one of the key concepts in *Parsifal*. *Die Sieger* was never developed beyond a sketch but some of its ideas ended up in *Parsifal*, especially those concerned with renunciation, reincarnation and compassion. The blending of Christian and Buddhist teachings and legends is an extraordinary idea, but Wagner saw no conflict at

all. He identified many shared elements in Christian and Buddhist thought. He believed that several great religions had expressed fundamental truths in images and allegories which people treated literally and therefore artificially. When religion became artificial, he said, it was for art to reveal its hidden truths.

Wagner didn't call *Parsifal* an opera but a 'Festival Play for the Consecration of the Stage'. Its central theme, once identified, is straightforward: *The deepest contentment is to be found not through the satisfaction of selfish desires but through compassion. The 'innocent fool' Parsifal, made wise through compassion, restores to the community of the Grail, including Kundry, sensitivity to fellow suffering which becomes their path to salvation.*

PHILOSOPHY – ACTIVITIES

Years 11-12 VCE

Activity one: Essay

Choose one of the below topics and write a 2000 word essay. Use a minimum of five resources and two thinkers to support your arguments.

- How do the philosophical themes in Wagner's *Parsifal* relate to modern-day audiences or how are they relevant in a modern-day context?
- In *Parsifal*, Wagner combines the teachings and legends of Christianity and Buddhism. Does his doing so undermine the lessons that each individual strand of religion aims to impart?

Activity two: Letter exchange

For this activity, you will need a partner assigned to you.

Over a semester, undertake a letter exchange with your partner in which you discuss and argue the different philosophical ideas that Richard Wagner incorporates into his operatic works.

A letter exchange should take place every two weeks and be no less than 500 words long. All letters should be submitted for assessment before the end of semester, with the due date to be assigned by your teacher.

As a starting point, read 'Philosophical ideas in Parsifal' by Peter Bassett on page 48 of this resource, or refer to the Resources/Further Reading list on page 50 of this resource.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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RESOURCES/FURTHER READING

Bassett, P. (2008) Wagner's Parsifal: the Journey of a Soul. South Australia: Wakefield Press.

Bassett, P. (2012). 1813 Wagner & Verdi: A celebration. Queensland: PB Publications.

Bassett, P. An Introduction to Wagner's Parsifal.

Parsifal libretto, found at <http://www.operafolio.com/>.

Wagner and Philosophy

To read some of the prose works Richard Wagner wrote himself (English translations), visit <http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/prose/index.htm>.

Magee, B. (2000). *Wagner and Philosophy*. For an excerpt of this work, visit <http://www.richardwagner.be/publicaties/Wagner%20and%20philosophy.pdf>.

The Philosophy of Richard Wagner. Found at <https://severalfourmany.wordpress.com/2013/03/06/the-philosophy-of-richard-wagner/>.

Parsifal Orchestral score found at: http://ks4.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/d/d2/IMSLP63679-PMLP05713-Wagner_-_Parsifal_-_Act_II.pdf.

Parsifal Piano score found at: [http://ks4.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/a/a2/IMSLP21724-PMLP05713-Wagner_-_Parsifal_\(vocal_score\).pdf](http://ks4.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/a/a2/IMSLP21724-PMLP05713-Wagner_-_Parsifal_(vocal_score).pdf).