

'Parsifal' Seminar By Dr David Larkin, 30 July 2017

1.00pm: Seminar by Dr David Larkin

Wagner Society members were well prepared for the opera, with a seminar given by Dr David Larkin at the Goethe Institut on the afternoon of 30 July. We had an audience of 92, of whom 73 were members. David spoke for 4 hours, with a 30-minute break for refreshments in the middle.

He focused on four key aspects of this complex piece. The first section considered what Wagner meant by calling it a stage festival consecration play. David suggested that this enabled Wagner to develop a poetic style for the opera. He emphasised the influence of Liszt, particularly his Dantesymphony, on the music. He also discussed how Wagner had used the Dresden 'Amen' as an important element, drawing on Mendelssohn's Reformation symphony.

In contrast to Tristan's and Isolde's abnegation of their desire to live and their yearning for death, he suggested that in Parsifal the crucial element is the need to sympathise with others, to suffer with them. As a pure fool Parsifal needs to understand suffering.

Before his second section, David introduced images from the 1982 film of Parsifal by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg. David showed the film's treatment of the Prelude to Act 1. This complex film interprets Parsifal by reference to its psychological aspects. Parsifal is played by a boy initially, but by a girl after his kiss with Kundry. It also questions the Wagner family's involvement in controlling the festival, the house at Wahnfried, and militarism.

David moved on then to philosophical aspects, in particular the influence of Schopenhauer. As summarised by Brian Magee, this posits that humans are driven by insatiable desires and cravings which cannot be satisfied in normal life. Redemption is however possible through death, as in Tristan and Isolde, or through compassion, as explored in Parsifal. In the course of being seduced by Kundry, Amfortas receives his injury; when she kisses Parsifal, he understands Amfortas' sufferings and expresses compassion for him.

After tea, David explored the musical language: thoughtful, powerful, often slow. Its richness was then shown in a live performance of the duet between Klingsor and Kundry. Attendees had the opportunity to hear

Warwick Fyfe, a member of the Society, singing an excerpt from Klingsor's role before he gave this performance in the Concert Hall of the Sydney Opera House. It was a powerful spine-tingling experience in the small upstairs room of the Goethe Institut, leaving the audience stunned. He was well partnered by soprano Eleanor Greenwood. She was awarded the Wagner Prize in 2015 and received support from the Society for her living expenses in Berlin. The singers were accompanied by the redoubtable Bradley Gilchrist, who seems to be building an extensive repertoire of Wagner music.

In the final section of his talk, David considered various interpretations of Parsifal, both on and off the stage. He referred to the Stefan Herheim production, which he had discussed earlier, and to Kaufmann's and Rene Pape's performances in the Metropolitan Opera's production in New York. The latter was seen in Australian cinemas some years ago (and watched by some Society members in the tiny cinema of MONA during the first Hobart Baroque Festival).

All who attended left much more familiar with the themes and music of this beautiful and complex opera. In preparing this summary, I have relied on notes kindly provided by John Sanders. But sadly I cannot reproduce the depth and subtlety of David's informative seminar.

By Colleen Chesterman