

# 7 July 2019 - Seminar by Dr Antony Ernst on *Parsifal*

1-5pm: Seminar by Dr Antony Ernst on *Parsifal*

Goethe Institut, 90 Ocean Street, Woollahra



"*Parsifal* is Wagner's most enigmatic work, at once apparently simple and yet containing deep symbolic and musical complexity. We will be exploring how this last, and in some ways most sophisticated work, of Wagner's relates to his personal concerns, the world around him, and the changes in culture and society which had happened around him. Not least of all, we will explore the position of *Parsifal* as a piece of polemic about the state of humanity and its future."

Antony Ernst is currently the orchestra director of the Royal Danish Orchestra, the world's oldest orchestra. He has worked as a dramaturg, opera director, translator, writer, lecturer and artistic planner, most recently as Artistic Planning Manager of the Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg. Previously he has worked with the Semperoper Dresden, Deutsche Oper am Rhein, Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, Oper Frankfurt, Teatro de la Maestranza, Seville, Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra, Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, and Opera Australia, as well as being a tour leader for Renaissance Tours and regular contributor of programme notes, articles, surtitles, translations and lectures for Symphony Services and numerous other organisations. Antony was born in Sydney and obtained his doctorate from the University of Newcastle.

He is a frequent very popular guest lecturer on opera and previous presentations to the Wagner Society include *Tristan und Isolde* (2018), *Lohengrin* (2017), *Bach to the Future: Wagner's Roots and the German Nation* (2016), *Beyond the Twilight of the Gods: Wagner's Musical Legacy* (2014), *From Malediction to Valediction - curses and dramatic resolution in Wagner* (2009), *Tristan und Isolde* (2007), *A survey of Ring Cycle production styles* (2004), *Parsifal* (2003) and *Die Feen* and *Das Liebesverbot* (2002).

## Report by Mike Day, from the September 2019 Quarterly

This talk was the eighth that Antony has given to the society, over a period of 16 years, on many aspects of Wagner's work and was, as usual, full of wisdom and wit, amplified with musical examples and slides. I will attempt to summarise a few key elements of his nearly 4 hour presentation, which gave original insight into *Parsifal*, the most enigmatic of Wagner's works, through a Jungian lens. He observed that *Parsifal* was much misunderstood when it premiered – it didn't speak to the older generation and it was only accepted many years later when Mahler, Sibelius, Reger, Hugo Wolff and Debussy all acknowledged its profound influence on their work.

Antony started with the historical background of the time when the work was written. Everyone was affected by the rapid changes due to the Industrial Revolution – the transformation of nature by industry and the rise of Prussia to military dominance. In 1870 Prussia integrated all the German states to fight France. Prussian culture was brutal and rigid and its leader, Otto von Bismarck, ruthless, authoritarian and cynical. (Alberich? Trump?)

In 1877 the first Ring Cycle was performed but Wagner was disillusioned as he considered that the Ring had failed in its aims to change society. *Parsifal* was the only opera written after the Ring, and all the big changes in society, and Wagner wanted to produce a work to counter militarism.

Antony observed that *Parsifal* is its own self enclosed world; it takes you out of the everyday conscious world into a dream, which you need to interpret, and he proposed undertaking a Jungian analysis – based on Jung's teaching of the need for balance – the need to integrate all aspects of the self.

An important aspect of Jung's understanding is *shadow projection* – rejecting in others what you don't like in yourself - and Antony suggested that the German Self at the time Wagner was writing *Parsifal* was unbalanced – the new German empire was stoic, masculine and disciplined but devoid of feeling and compassion. *Parsifal* is a critique of the German empire – it's about the search for self, compassion, the feminine principle and the acknowledgement of the unacknowledged. The Knights are pure, virtuous and chaste but embody toxic hyper-masculinity, rejecting femininity.

Antony talked us through the opera, scene by scene, explaining the symbolism of the key elements: the Grail is a symbol of enlightenment, allowing yourself to be who you truly are; the Spear is a witness, not a weapon, it shows us what is; the Grail needs the Spear to be complete; the never-healing Wound – the uncontrolled emission of what is inside; the unacknowledged elements that the knights don't want to come out.

He then analysed the key characters in accordance with Jung's ideas of **Self** (Titurel, awaiting transformation); **Ego** (Amfortas); **Anima** (Kundry, a messenger bringing things from another world – the unconscious); **The Shadow** (Klingsor - Amfortas' shadow) and **Mana** (Gurnemanz, the spirit guide). Parsifal is the only character who *feels* - the other characters *think*. He has no self-knowledge – he is formed by experience.

Antony concluded by summarising ACT 1 as having no energy, because of Amfortas' wound; ACT 2 as bursting with Klingsor's sensual energy and ACT 3 as transcendental when the incomplete Amfortas ceases to be needed as an independent entity and is integrated into the Self which is symbolised by Parsifal at the end. Wagner is telling a story about the need for compassion – Parsifal needs to gain experience in the world so he can care enough to ask what is wrong. Then the wound is cured.

Anthony sees *Parsifal* as a parable for our times – we are at peril if we don't acknowledge what we don't like about ourselves – referring to the perversion of German virtues in 1933 and suggesting that President Trump is America's Shadow.

A wonderfully stimulating talk.