



PARSIFAL – STORY OF THE OPERA

TIME: The Middle Ages

PLACE: The northern mountains of Gothic Spain

ACT ONE

Scene One: A forest in the Grail kingdom of Monsalvat

Scene Two: The sacred hall of Monsalvat Castle

Intermission

ACT TWO

Scene One: Klingsor's castle

Scene Two: Klingsor's magic garden

Intermission

ACT THREE

Scene One: A flowering meadow in Monsalvat

Scene Two: The ruined hall of Monsalvat Castle

Before the opera begins

The spear that pierced Christ's side during the Crucifixion and the Holy Grail in which Joseph of Arimathea caught His blood were entrusted by a band of angels to Titurel. He and his fellow warriors established the kingdom of Monsalvat as a shrine for the relics. One postulant for Grail knighthood was Klingsor, a man with a disabling weakness for carnal thoughts and behavior. To further his candidacy, Klingsor castrated himself; but at Monsalvat, chastity was a matter of choice, not compulsion. Exiled from the brotherhood of knights, Klingsor built his magic castle in the desert near Monsalvat. In his garden, the Flowermaidens lie in wait to corrupt the questing Grail knights.

In spite of the Grail's life-enhancing qualities, Titurel drifted into old age and abdicated in favor of his son, Amfortas. The new king resolved to end the conflict with Klingsor and set off for his domain, armed with the spear. But Amfortas was seduced by a beautiful woman in Klingsor's service. While the couple was lost in passion, Klingsor stole the spear, and struck Amfortas in the side, leaving a Christ-like wound that would neither heal nor allow him to die. Amfortas has lived on in agony, while Klingsor plots to capture the Grail itself. Amfortas's only hope is the coming of a prophesied hero to vanquish Klingsor, return the spear, and

restore the brotherhood of Monsalvat.

ACT ONE

Scene One. At daybreak, a group of young esquires are awakened by Gurnemanz, an old knight, and they say their morning prayers. Two other knights herald the approach of Amfortas for his daily restorative bath in the lake. The wild sorceress Kundry arrives through the air on her magical steed, bringing a balsam from Arabia to ease Amfortas's pain. The king is carried into the clearing, still suffering after a terrible night. He is resigned to await the prophesied savior, one "made wise through compassion – the holy fool." Amfortas thanks Kundry for her efforts, but she is scornful. After he is carried to his bath, some of the esquires torment Kundry, but Gurnemanz protects her, telling of her years of service to the knights, and that she may be atoning for transgressions in a former life.

Gurnemanz now explains how the Grail community came to be (Narration: *Ja, wann oft lange sie uns ferne blieb*) and repeats the prophecy of the holy fool. A swan rises from the lake and the youthful Parsifal appears and shoots it down. He is soon captured, and unaware of any wrongdoing, he freely confesses to killing the swan. When Gurnemanz shames him for destroying one of God's most beautiful and harmless creatures, Parsifal weeps. Gurnemanz discovers the depth of his innocence: he does not know his home, who his father was, or even his own name. Kundry reveals that the boy's father, Gamuret, perished in battle and that his mother, Herzeleide (Heart's Sorrow), raised him in the wilderness to keep him ignorant of the knightly arts that caused her husband's death. Parsifal remembers how he once saw a group of knights riding through the forest and followed them to the outside world. When Kundry reveals that Herzeleide died from grief when her son deserted her, Parsifal furiously springs at her and has to be restrained by Gurnemanz. Kundry disappears from sight, drawn into some other place and time.

It is noon, and Amfortas's bath has ended. As a test of his purity, Gurnemanz invites Parsifal to the ceremony of the Grail. Parsifal can only ask, "Who is the Grail?" Gurnemanz responds that if he is chosen, the Grail will answer all his questions.

Scene Two. The Grail knights file into the sacred hall of Monsalvat Castle (Chorus: *Zum letzten Liebesmahle*) with Parsifal observing them in stunned silence. Amfortas is carried in, while unseen choirboys intone the invitation to the Communion celebration of bread and wine. Titurel demands that his son fulfill his ritual office and uncover the Grail, but Amfortas knows that renewed sight of the holy relic will refresh his agony (Monologue: *Nein! Last ihn unenthüllt!*).

Finally Amfortas orders the Holy Chalice to be uncovered, using it to bless the bread and wine of the communion feast. He cannot partake himself, for his wound has started to bleed afresh. Gurnemanz motions to Parsifal to join in the feast, but he remains transfixed, unable to understand what he sees or to feel compassion for Amfortas's suffering. The knights proclaim their resolve and unity (Chorus: *Nehmet vom Brot*). When Gurnemanz asks Parsifal to react to what he has seen, Parsifal can only shake his head. The old knight, disappointed that Parsifal has not identified the prophetic hero, gruffly sends him on his way as an unseen voice intones the prophecy of the Holy Fool.

ACT TWO

Scene One. In a mirror, Klingsor watches the exploits of the approaching Parsifal (Monologue: *Die Zeit ist da*). When the sorcerer summons Kundry, she rails against her accursed life. He gloats over his victory against Amfortas, revealing that Kundry had been the one who seduced the king. Now Klingsor awaits his confrontation with Parsifal. Kundry tries to resist being the instrument of another righteous man's downfall, but Klingsor has her in his power and forces her to do his will. She infuriates him by asking if castration has made him chaste, though he consoles himself by looking forward to the day when he will control both spear and Grail. Kundry longs for eternal sleep and salvation. Klingsor transforms his castle into a lush garden and disappears.

Scene Two. Klingsor's Flowermaidens lament the defeat of their lover knights, but they are delighted to encounter Parsifal (Chorus: *Komm, komm, holder Knabe!*). Initially entranced, he is becoming irritated by their demands when an enticing voice calls his name – the first time he has heard it pronounced since his mother said it to him in a dream.

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The voice belongs to Kundry, who orders the Flower Maidens to disperse.

Kundry now appears, breathtakingly beautiful, and speaks to Parsifal about his childhood (Narration: *Ich sah das Kind*). The evocation of Herzeleide's love for her son leads Kundry to kiss Parsifal. When the kiss turns passionate, a wave of empathetic understanding for Amfortas overcomes Parsifal (Monologue: *Amfortas! Die Wunde!*). He traces the line of compassion back to the bloodshed of Christ's Passion, and knows that in expiating his own guilt, he can close one circle of God's redemptive work. Kundry pleads for redemption from the curse incurred when, in an earlier life, she laughed at Christ on the Cross. But she defines redemption in terms of a sensual union, which Parsifal knows would be disastrous for them both. When he continues to resist her, Kundry curses him to an existence of bitter wandering and summons Klingsor to destroy him. Klingsor hurls the spear at Parsifal, who seizes it in midair and uses it to make the sign of the Cross. Klingsor is destroyed and his castle crumbles into dust. Parsifal tells Kundry and the other surviving women of the realm: "You know where you can find me again."

ACT THREE

Scene One. Ten years have passed. On Good Friday morning Kundry returns to Monsalvat. The aging Gurnemanz appears and manages

to wake her from her enchanted sleep. Dressed as a penitent, she has lost her former wildness and begs only to be allowed to serve. Gurnemanz reveals that the Grail community has fallen into decay and despair.

A knight in black armor now approaches, armed with a spear and wearing a helmet with its visor closed. Gurnemanz chides him for bearing arms on such a holy day. The mute stranger thrusts the base of his spear into the ground, removes the helmet, and kneels in prayer. Gurnemanz recognizes the wild youth of ten years ago in the life-hardened Parsifal of today, his mind seasoned by time and circumstance. He shares the story of his years of wandering (Narration: *Der Irrnis und der Leiden Pfade*). Although he sustained many wounds in his violent encounters, he never used the holy spear in combat.

Gurnemanz enlightens Parsifal about the Grail community's wretchedness: Amfortas, wishing only for death, refuses to uncover the Grail and perform his office. Titurel, whose fragile life had been sustained by the sight of the Grail, has died. Without the divine bread of the communion feast, the knights have lost their heroic strength and now wander aimlessly, unable to embark on their righteous quests. (Narration: *O Gnade! Höchstes Heil!*). Parsifal's emotion is so intense that he nearly loses consciousness. Gurnemanz and Kundry bathe the dust from his feet, and sprinkle his head in baptism. Kundry dries Parsifal's feet with her hair, and she and Gurnemanz apply

oil to his head. Parsifal, in turn, baptizes Kundry.

Gazing at the morning sun on the meadow, Parsifal is reminded of the flowers he met in the magic garden and comments on the discrepancy between the beauty of nature and the deep sadness of Good Friday. Gurnemanz responds that all living things die; these flowers cannot see Christ as He was on the Cross, but smile and shed tears of dew on a redeemed world. With full understanding, Parsifal now accepts his kingship.

Scene Two. In great sorrow, the Grail knights blame Amfortas for Titurel's death and demand that he perform his duties one last time (Chorus: *Geleiten wir im bergenden Schrein*). Amfortas tears open his tunic and begs the knights to end his misery with their swords (Monologue: *Ja, Wehe! Wehe über mich!*). Parsifal now steps forward with the spear and touches it to Amfortas's side, instantly healing his wound and simultaneously redeeming Kundry. Assuming his kingship and restoring Monsalvat to spiritual health, Parsifal commands that the Grail be kept unveiled for all time. As all the men and women declare, "Redemption to the redeemer," the Grail begins to glow and a white dove descends.

Synopsis by Thomas Holliday for Lyric Opera's 2013-14 Season Companion, edited and amended by Roger Pines and John Caird.

TONY ROMANO



Tatiana Troyanos (Kundry) and Jon Vickers (title role) in Parsifal at Lyric Opera, 1986-87 season.