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WAGNER

PARSIFAL
Overture to the Sacred Drama
Vorspiel zum Bühnenweihfestspiel
WWV 111



Eulenburg

RICHARD WAGNER

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Prelude to the Sacred Drama
Vorspiel zum Bühnenweihfestspiel
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PREFACE

Wagner's first closer look at the *Parsifal* material dates back to the period of his studies for the *Lohengrin* libretto, for Lohengrin is known, according to legend, to be Parsifal's son. Wagner therefore read Wolfram von Eschenbach's epic *Parzival* during the summer of 1845.¹ That he was already contemplating the subject matter as a model for a stage work, as has repeatedly been claimed, cannot be substantiated.

In 1857, Wagner considered having Parsifal, who was in search of the Grail, appear at Tristan's sickbed in the 3rd act of *Tristan und Isolde*,² even notating a melody for this.³ After that, the topic seems to have been ever on his mind. The first ideas can be found in his letters of 1858-1860 to Mathilde Wesendonck, the muse of *Tristan*.⁴ Following in the summer of 1865 was the inscription of the first prose draft, at the insistence of Wagner's patron King Ludwig II of Bavaria.⁵ The plan was to première the work in Munich in 1872.⁶ Nothing, however, came of that. To be completed and performed first of all were *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, all of this taking place up to 1876. Only then could Wagner tackle *Parsifal*, starting in February 1877.

The compositional process now proceeded along the same pattern as that of nearly all of Wagner's other stage works. Ensuing after a prose draft, the second in this case,⁷ was the libretto from which a fair copy was immediately prepared as the model for printing.⁸ Thereafter, Wagner began the composing, initially in the form of a pencilled continuity sketch (com-

positional sketch), but accompanied from the outset, with a time lag, by a second, more detailed inked sketch (orchestral sketch). Only after concluding this work (in April 1879) did Wagner move on to the score, which was completed at the beginning of 1882.⁹ The work's first performance took place on 26 July 1882 in the Bayreuth Festival Hall.

During work on the text Wagner changed the title of the work and the name of the protagonist to *Parsifal*, because he made the assumption – though erroneous – that “Fal-par-si”, the syllabic conversion of Par-si-fal, meant “pure fool” in Arabic.¹⁰

Wagner no longer saw his stage works as operas in the traditional sense, and to characterise their distinctiveness, he provided them with unusual subtitles. Thus, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is called “A Stage Festival [*Bühnenfestspiel*]” and *Parsifal*, “A Stage-Consecrating Festival [*Bühnenweihfestspiel*]”. Wagner explained what is meant by this name in his report on the first performance, *Das Bühnenweihfestspiel in Bayreuth 1882* [The Stage-Consecrating Festival in Bayreuth in 1882].¹¹ The word “Weihe” in the title is not to be understood as primarily religious, but is aimed rather at the originally cultic, ceremonially ritualistic sense of theatre. Therefore, for the execution of the music it is wrong to choose tempi that are, in principle, slow and “solemn”.

The Prelude was orchestrated in advance because Wagner wanted to have it performed for his wife Cosima on her birthday, 25 December 1878. For this, he engaged the Meiningen Hofkapelle [court orchestra] to play

¹ Richard Wagner, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 30, *Dokumente zur Entstehung und ersten Aufführung des Bühnenweihfestspiels Parsifal*, eds. Martin Geck and Egon Voss (Mainz, 1970), 11, Document 1.

² *Ibid.*, 12, Documents 4-5.

³ *Ibid.*, 13, Document 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13-17, Documents 9-13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 68-77.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17, Document 16.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 77-87.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 87-134.

⁹ Cf. *Wagner-Werk-Verzeichnis* (Mainz, 1986), 544f. (WWV 111 MUSIK II, III, VI).

¹⁰ Verses 689-691: I named you, pure fool, “Fal parsi”, – You, pure fool: “Parsifal”. (Verse numbering from: *Richard Wagner, Parsifal. Ein Bühnenweihfestspiel. Textbuch mit Varianten der Partitur*, ed. Egon Voss (Stuttgart, 2005).

¹¹ Wagner, *Sämtliche Werke* (see fn. 1), 63-67, Document 241.