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Musings on Music: Wagner, Redemption, and the Divine

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Musings on Music: Wagner, Redemption, and the Divine

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"How can I atone for my guilt?" This question is asked by the guileless fool, hero of Richard Wagner's final Music Drama, Parsifal during Act Two; it is a sublime scene, and, perhaps, one of the finest examples of artistic mastery in existence. This is certainly open for debate, and subject to personal preference, but please allow me to at least use this as an example, since it has been instrumental in not only my musical growth, but also in my development and the recommitment to my Catholic faith. When I first heard this music, I wept. This was before I knew the words or had the slightest inclination to its meaning. It was also at a time when I was committed to no particular faith."

ORIGINAL ESSAY



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Musings on Music: Wagner, Redemption, and the Divine

I. “Wie büß’ich Sünder meine Schuld?” – *Parsifal*, Richard Wagner

“How can I atone for my guilt?” This question is asked by the guileless fool, hero of Richard Wagner’s final Music Drama, *Parsifal* during Act Two; it is a sublime scene, and, perhaps, one of the finest examples of artistic mastery in existence. This is certainly open for debate, and subject to personal preference, but please allow me to at least use this as an example, since it has been instrumental in not only my musical growth, but also in my development and the recommitment to my Catholic faith. When I first heard this music, I wept. This was before I knew the words or had the slightest inclination to its meaning. It was also at a time when I was committed to no particular faith.

Without belaboring a complete synopsis, *Parsifal* (Percival) is the hero of the grail legend; the only knight, in popular tradition, able to recover the grail. Wagner’s *Parsifal* is similar in purity, but his altered mission is to recover the Holy Spear and to heal the unhealing wound of Amfortas, the grail king. This wound was inflicted by the same spear in a moment of moral weakness. In order to accomplish this, *Parsifal* must first discover his vocation, and he does so at the moment that the temptress, Kundry, believes she has successfully ruined him – In a passionate embrace, he recoils and cries the name of Amfortas....

Mistaking the pain of his lustful longing for the pain of the wound, *Parsifal* remembers the suffering king and finally understands, a fool no more. Kundry

watches on, horrified, always looking for another way to seduce Parsifal so he will forget his mission (while also understanding that if he is indeed the savior of legend, she can be saved by him). Parsifal recalls the error of his ways with one thematic addition:

"Erlöser! Rette mich! Auf Schuld befleckten Händen"
- *Redeemer! Rescue me! From guilt stained hands*

"So rief die Gottesklage, furchtbar, laut mir in die Seele."
- *So called the God's cry, terrible, loud in my soul.*

"Und ich, der Thor, der Feige zu wilden Knaben thaten floh ich hin!"
- *And I, the fool, the coward, flew to wild, childish desires here!*

"Erlöser! Heiland! Herr der Huld! Wie büß'ich Sünder meine Schuld?"
- *Redeemer! Saviour! Lord of Grace! How can I, a sinner, atone for my Guilt?*

That the principle theme of Wagner's final opera is redemption should surprise no one familiar with his works. But in writing about Wagner's music, we are most easily attracted to the words that clearly show their respective themes. But the question remains: Does the music itself convey this theme?

II. Music

Some call music the universal language. While I admire the intention here, I can't agree with the analogy. Language, strictly speaking, is based on words, sentences, grammar, etc. These are constructs developed by humans to communicate. Music is also seemingly constructed, but it is not based on words, but rather on imagination, organized sound, and time. So, do the arrangements of musical fundamentals in Act Two of *Parsifal* indicate any concepts independent of the libretto? This is a challenging question that I believe to be

answerable only by probing more deeply the nature of music itself and its relationship to God.

Of all of the Arts, Music remains the most abstract. Its canvas is silence, time, and the listeners' minds. Unbelievable... This art is not based in language or descriptors or visual images. It is based in pure thought at the location of the indescribable. I can't see it or touch it. I can touch the score, but not the music itself; I can't put it on my wall, it is not meant to be there. It is for everyone, it is universal. The following thoughts occur to me at this point and are worthy of some reflection: only God understands music's beauty without hearing; humans only after a hearing. Therefore, I would propose that Music can only be appreciated in Eternity or by those within the perspective of time. Simply, God does not require a "hearing" to know that Beethoven's Ninth Symphony has beauty, because "hearing" implies an activity that happens within the perspective of time; God does not exist in time, but in Eternity. Perhaps then, God understands its beauty outside any perspective that we're able to comprehend. Therefore, music's nature is partially outside of ourselves and our human perception. These thoughts are worth many years of reflection on my part, and may be beyond the scope of what I'm writing about here, but I believe it may assist in connecting music with something more rich than human will.

How does this apply to our fundamental reception of music? Does music, then, speak? To put it succinctly: No, except if composed with words. Music alone does not speak, and to give it descriptors that relate it to language only is to weaken and lessen what music's nature actually is. Music is the organization

of sound through time; it is also eternal: Discovered by humans, not created by them. When Wagner wrote this scene, God blessed him with the faculties to discover the words, the music, and the orchestration. It was inspired by God's blessings and grace. Again, after reflecting and writing on this, it is my firm belief that to say that this music is adequate in describing redemption is to grossly undervalue what music truly is. If I am correct in saying that music is eternal, then this scene must not only describe atonement, but must also in part be atonement itself or, at the very least, a reminder of atonement from the very person of God. Music cannot then simply be descriptive (although it is); it must be something more. It must exist in pure thought; communicating ideas that are indescribable with language; communicating with the soul (in addition to the mind). I must conclude that my own tears shed over this (and other) piece(s) of music are a result of being given something, and in some cases, I'm being given something that I don't believe I deserve. The end result is my gratitude, because no matter what I have done, the gifts are not being withheld from me. I have been led to redemption by music and therefore the grace of God without a thought in words.

III. Wagner

This question might occur to some of you: "Did Wagner think this?" It doesn't matter... Wagner may give himself the credit or not, who cares? We know it is inspired by the way we respond to it, by how it affects us. By the fact that there is enough merit in this work to continue to perform it. We do know this about Wagner: During the composition of *Tristan und Isolde*, he stated that Act

Ill is becoming “something frightening”; indicating that the composition was leading itself. That allowance (release of control, I would say, or deference to God’s guidance) made Wagner effective as a composer, and arguably of the three greatest composers of all time (of Wolfgang Mozart, Ludwig Van Beethoven, and Wagner). At the premier of *Tristan und Isolde* (Munich 1865) people were scandalized that the overture was “too sensual”. This is a compliment to the culture that stated it (for at least they recognized sensuality in music), and to the composer who was blessed enough to allow the inspiration to bear its fruit. This does not mean that we accept the clichéd extreme either. The truth is, to say that God wrote Wagner’s works is erroneous; Wagner did in fact write these works (by choice he used his God given abilities), but they were conceived in Eternity. Music, in this sense then, is a beautiful example of humankind seeking communion with the divine.

Since no conversation about Wagner would be complete without discussing his questionable behavior and lurid opinions, I will attempt not to disappoint the readers on this. There may be some among you who are aghast that I am calling this “odious” man divinely inspired (let alone bringing in *Tristan und Isolde* as an example, given the scandals around its production), but I cannot accept a disgust of what is heavenly on the irrelevant grounds that his character may be drawn into question. Would I reject the work of Chesterton due to modern frequent and annoying misinterpretation? Do I reject all of Augustine because I believe his ideas about sexuality may be unhealthy? Or more strongly, do I reject Christ because of my repulsion to the intolerance of some Christians? How then can I reject what is beautiful in Wagner because of

my repulsion of that which is not? If I reject what is human in one human being for his or her failings, I must reject all humans because we all fail. This is a loneliness that is inconceivable. I do not know how God has judged Wagner – I could not begin to presume to know the mind of God on this, but what I do know is that Wagner was a human being, a child of God, and very gifted. All of these things obligate me to realize that my mission is not Wagner's, so any comparison is absurd. Would I have disagreed with the man? Yes. Was his earthly mission fulfilled? God knows, only... I know that Wagner contributed as much musically to our culture as was possible for a person to do. He remains controversial, but indisputably blessed. I hope only to be given that same credit.

What I can say from where I am about Wagner is this: God used his work to facilitate my conversion. *Parsifal* reminded me of the Christian Difference: Redemption. No other faith or system of belief that I tried out in my time as an agnostic was as forgiving as this Catholic (Universal) principle. That God loves me and has done great things for me in spite of how arrogant I was is an immense lesson; that the true God was a more forgiving God than I was for myself was a liberation! God prepared me with *Parsifal*; Can I then believe that God used an uninspired work in my reclamation? I do not assume that; humans can judge and reject, but to presume that God judges and rejects based on our perceptions, is dangerous and actually fairly ridiculous. Simply, God is far more creative than us when it comes to our callings.

IV. Final Thoughts

What conclusion can be drawn from this study? I think that it presents an area of thought that is gentle to some, frivolous to others, and perhaps even frightening to some as well. I have begun something here that I know I will be considering for the rest of my life. The answers I have suggested are very strongly compelled by the theme of the overwhelming force of God's love; music at its best is a clear, shining gleam from that place. It represents what we long for, and, perhaps, where we fell from. Its combination with the human tool of language is proof of our humanness; that we are indeed constructed blood, bone, mind, heart, soul, and the thought that at least in some small way we can know and attain the divine gives us hope. At a time when hope is failing in the capacity of human beings to do good, it is this thought that restores our dignity. This is not news to many of us, but that music can have such a powerful role in our lives might be. So listen well, let tears or laughter come. "So called the cry of God... Terrible, loud in my soul" - Wagner spoke well here in words and music.

***** Michael Costik**