

Parsifal, Victorian Opera

Many Society members attended the Melbourne performances of *Parsifal* in February 2019. Sheena Burnell, Colin Mackerras and Stephen Emmerson share their observations on the production.



Photo Jeff Busby/Victorian Opera

One of Wagner's most mystical and layered operas and possessing at times heart-wrenchingly beautiful music, *Parsifal* recently had its first staging in Melbourne at the Palais Theatre by Victorian Opera in February.

In a visually spare and yet profoundly moving staging, Roger Hodgman's production stripped away much of the knightly pageantry associated with *Parsifal* and staged the action using the same set throughout, a set that appears to have been violently torn apart to evoke both the mortal wound of the dying king Amfortas and the dramatic mind-shift heralded by the arrival of the 'Holy Fool', Parsifal.

As Parsifal, the German *Heldentenor* Burkhard Fritz was in fine form vocally and although physically somewhat more mature than one might expect, his beautiful tone and evident experience in the role more than made up for any

disparity. Similarly, Swedish mezzo-soprano Katarina Dalayman sounded far more sensuous and emotionally appealing than she looked at times in her rather drab outfits, but her justly celebrated interpretation conveyed the fear and loathing of her unenviable position with authenticity and she evoked emotional conflict even when not singing. British bass Peter Rose on the other hand was an entirely convincing Gurnemanz and possessed an authority and gravitas reflected in his rich, assured singing throughout.



Photo Jeff Busby/Victorian Opera

Our local talents more than rose to the occasion and Australian bass-baritone Derek Welton in a spectacular sequined suit and kabuki-inspired makeup conveyed the cold menace and otherworldly power of Klingsor with convincing, unforced acting and a wonderfully dark vocal quality. James Roser as Amfortas was also excellent in an arduous role and evoked genuine pity in his scenes in Act I. Teddy Tahu Rhodes as his father Titurel was perhaps a little too disembodied in this production - singing as he was from the back of the stage - however it was a minor complaint and overall the quality of the main characters' singing was hard to fault.



Photo Jeff Busby/Victorian Opera

The larger company also sang wonderfully and the Flower Maidens in their flapper-style dresses and cloche hats were a mixture of innocence and insolence completely bewildering to poor Parsifal. The assembled Knights sang very ably and, although perhaps lacking the visual interest of the rest of the production, there was enough happening with Richard Robert's set and the lighting design of Matt Scott to maintain the mood. Particularly enjoyable was the creative staging of the singers from the Victorian Opera Youth Chorus Ensemble who were placed in a somewhat disembodied way around the perimeter of the stage which gave their voices an ethereal, floating quality which worked perfectly with the overall mystical feel of the production.

The Australian Youth Orchestra also played remarkably well under the baton of Richard Mills and, in particular the strings and percussion had a clarity and control that one might expect from an orchestra of far more seasoned players; they rightly received an enthusiastic ovation at the conclusion of the evening.

My only slight caveat with this production was the relative simplicity of the costumes. Apart from Amfortas's vividly blood-stained shirt, Klingsor's fabulous appearance and the prettiness of the Flower Maidens, the rest of the company were rather dull, or in the case of Kundry, conveyed a slightly unhinged bag-lady look which I felt didn't quite do her justice as a renowned

temptress. However, on the plus side this made it easy to focus on the music as no doubt was intended by the costume designer Christine Smith.

Overall this was a restrained and yet imaginative production of *Parsifal*. I thought it showed an understanding of Wagner's original intentions while managing to make some of the deeper ideas more accessible, particularly the themes of compassion and redemption. The world-class performances were, in the end, well-served by the simplicity of the set and costumes and like many of us, I came away with a sense of having seen something magical.

Sheena Burnell



Photo Jeff Busby/Victorian Opera

Victorian Opera's *Parsifal* was a wonderful experience. With two members of my family, I attended the 22 February performance and enjoyed it thoroughly. It's only the second series of stage performances of this great work in Australia, and the first in Melbourne. For one who has long loved Wagner's last opera, this was something very special indeed.

The Australian Youth Orchestra, conducted by Richard Mills, provided the orchestral music. Considering this is, after all, a youth orchestra, their mastery of this complex score was extraordinary. I must admit I found some of the tempi

much too fast, especially the Transformation Scene in Act I. But the tone was beautiful throughout, and the solos for particular instruments were all good.

The singers were all excellent. All were international, apart from the two Australian baritones, James Roser (Amfortas) and Derek Welton (Klingsor), both superb with powerful but beautiful voices very appropriate to their roles. For me the British bass Peter Rose as Gurnemanz stood out. I have always loved that role and disagree strongly with some friends who describe Gurnemanz as an old bore. Rose is an immense man and towered over the others on the stage. His voice is firm and confident, and again very appropriate to this role.

Of course, German tenor Burkhard Fritz as Parsifal was splendid. The part of Kundry is a particularly interesting one. Her singing is overwhelmingly in Act II, and the Swede Katarina Dalayman did very well indeed there. She is on stage for most of Act III but sings only two words. Fortunately, Dalayman is a good actor and has a very reliable voice for the vocally strenuous parts towards the end of Act II, but also a really beautiful legato in the earlier part, especially her main monologue “Ich sah das Kind”.

I was a bit less impressed with the costumes and production in general. The costumes were much better in Act II than the other acts. Klingsor and the flower maidens had exotic costumes appropriate to their nature, but those for Parsifal all through, Gurnemanz, Amfortas and the knights of the Grail were too mundane for me, with no sign that the opera is set in the middle ages.

As for the production, it was minimalist and generally uninspiring. It really didn't do much for me. However, to be fair, it wasn't silly either. There were none of the politically correct tricks I've seen elsewhere that leave me wondering if the producer had really read the words of the opera. Wagner was a great genius, and I'd rather producers left the stories alone.

The venue at the Palais Theatre in St Kilda, Melbourne, was just great. I love its old-fashioned interior and its setting by the bay. And I also love the fact that there are a few very good restaurants nearby where one could have dinner during the 90-minute interval between the long Act I and Act II.

There were a few things I'd prefer had been otherwise but overall, I give the Victorian Opera's *Parsifal* a very big tick for a marvellous performance of one of the greatest operas ever written and one I've especially loved since I was teenager.

Colin Mackerras

I found the recent production of *Parsifal* by the Victorian Opera to be a deeply satisfying experience on many levels. Among the most deeply gratifying aspects for me was the utterly professional playing of the Australian Youth Orchestra under the direction of Richard Mills, not only to hear young musicians in command of such a demanding score, but to witness their level of skilled involvement. I expect the experience for many of those young people will be one they will never forget and, for me, that dimension gave the performance a wonderful glow.

The venue - the recently refurbished Palais Theatre right beside St Kilda beach - was a surprisingly splendid aspect of the performance for me. The incongruity between the Wagner's elevated subject matter and the Luna Park amusement next door had a rather delicious irony to it. (Never before have I enjoyed fish and chips on a beach between Acts 1 and 2.) But, more seriously, not only is the space so obviously from another era, but the fine acoustics had both warmth and clarity of sound that allowed the voices to project without undue force or strain. Richard Mills was obviously careful to ensure that the orchestra did not drown the singers – an over enthusiastic youth orchestra could have done that so easily. I can think of few venues for opera in the country that would be preferable.

I have rarely experienced a Wagner opera live where the quality of the singers was so uniformly excellent across the board. Burkhard Fritz (*Parsifal*), James Roser (*Amfortas*) and especially Derek Welton (*Klingsor*) all sang with strength and conviction. I was particularly keen to hear Katarina Dalayman live - she sang *Kundry* opposite Jonas Kaufmann in the Girard production from the Met from a few years ago – and she did not disappoint vocally. Before the performance I attended - the last one on the Sunday afternoon - one's heart sank when Richard Mills announced that Peter Rose (*Gurnemanz*) had succumbed to a throat virus which would regrettably affect his singing that afternoon. While this was evident on a few high notes (and Richard Mills was clearly accommodating this in moving along the tempo of much of *Gurnemanz's* music in Act 3 and keeping AOO relatively subdued when Rose was singing), nonetheless it was abundantly clear that Rose has a magnificent voice and stage presence. He must be among the leading exponents of the role today and it remained a privilege to hear him even if not on his top form.

The major reservation I had in relation to the performance was a surprise to me. It seems obvious to me and many others that what matters most in Wagner is the music. I have heard *Parsifal* in concert performances a couple of times and, as with audio recordings, it can be a completely transporting experience without any staging. At times I have even wondered whether the work may be more

powerful in the concert hall allowing the suggestive power of Wagner's music to provide the scenic dimension for our imagination. I'm sure that all Wagnerians have seen annoying productions that are insensitive to, and ultimately distract from, the music or which seek to impose an incongruent vision on the work by having a particular ideological axe to grind. Too many times we've seen productions from directors who seem to have little understanding and respect, let alone, love for Wagner's work. (The recent *Parsifal* from Berlin's Staatsoper comes immediately to my mind.) This was certainly not the case with this production in Melbourne. It was deeply respectful and largely allowed the work to speak for itself through the music. Such an approach should be welcome. Nonetheless, even with these priorities in mind, the plainness of this production and its direction should have appealed to me more than it in fact did. The set of Act 2 was especially effective but that of the outer acts reminded me of a rather milder version of the famous Lehnhoff production. But beyond the look of it, ultimately, for a work of such immense richness, whose meaning is so multi-layered and indeed challenging, I found myself ultimately unsatisfied by the production's essential blandness. It didn't try to suggest or show any awareness of the work's many controversial aspects, let alone offer any opinion or insights on such matters. In short, I found the drama of the work underplayed and lacking the intensity that the best *Parsifal* performances can convey. The experience reminded me that, despite the music's wonderful sense of transcendence, Wagner's works are at their most powerful when music and drama are effectively fused. While preferable to an intrusive production, I was left with the sense that the work has more to say to us today than this production offered.

Stephen Emmerson