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# Parsifal at Bayreuth, review: 'a triumph'



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Mystical: Parsifal CREDIT: BAYREUTHER FESTSPIELE / ENRICO NAWRATH

By **Mark Ronan**

27 JULY 2016 • 9:21AM

**C**an Christians, Jews and Muslims live in harmony in the Middle East? The final scene of Bayreuth's new Parsifal supplies a message of hope when these three faiths come together in the opera's final act of redemption. The opening performance of the 2016 Festival had been forced to become a low-key affair with a heavy security



clampdown in view of the current atrocities in Germany committed by Middle Eastern immigrants.

In a sign of solidarity with the victims of the recent Munich shootings by a German-Iranian teenager, the State of Bavaria cancelled the high-end reception at the Schloss Tiergarten for the first time ever. Food went to waste, and the usual red carpet at the Festspielhaus where a vast press corps normally awaits Germany's political luminaries was entirely absent. The chill winds of modern mayhem blew against what is arguably Wagner's most religiously sensitive opera, disturbing a warm Bavarian night, but leaving unspoiled the musical and artistic value of a new production that the audience applauded for a full 10 minutes at the end.



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Wagner's final and most abstract opera, Parsifal is set in the mystical Land of the Grail, which once sent its Knights out to perform good works, before the disintegration of their king Amfortas. Seduced by Kundry in Klingsor's magic realm, he can no longer perform his office, but into this decaying brotherhood, beautifully described by the wise old knight Gurnemanz, steps Parsifal, unknown and unrecognised, to save them all. In Uwe Eric Laufenberg's production, he and dramaturge Richard Lorber have taken the brotherhood as a community of Christian monks in the Middle East ready for renewal and rebirth. As Laufenberg says, "Where Christianity is under threat... these are precisely the places where (and this is

something the last three popes have repeatedly emphasised)... it is capable of being regenerated”.

A particular inspiration is the seventh-century monastery of Mar Musa in Syria, where in Act I we see the monks caring for refugees, though the video images in Gurnemanz and Parsifal’s extraordinary Act I journey to the Land of the Grail suggest a location in Iraqi Kurdistan. The location seems to be in deliberately nebulous Middle East terrain rather than Isil-occupied Iraq, as some are reporting. For Klingsor’s realm in Act II, where the magician presides over a collection of crucifixes, the imagery is Islamic, and when Parsifal enters as a US serviceman the flower maidens in their black abayas strip to gorgeous Ottoman-era seductiveness, turning later to an Eden-like beauty and simplicity. Finally in Act III the temple of the Grail evokes the interior of a synagogue with a small painted cross on one wall, where Jews and Muslims join the monks to watch Parsifal bring unity and redemption to an almost ruined world.



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This bold vision, under gripping musical direction by Hartmut Haenchen, with Georg Zeppenfeld as a slim Gurnemanz in Muslim head-covering providing unparalleled vocal command and depth of sympathy, carried all before it. With Klaus Florian Vogt as a powerfully heroic Parsifal, along with the beautiful gold, silver and

piercing iron of Elena Pankratova's voice as Kundry, Gerd Grochowski as a subtle and well sung Klingsor, American baritone Ryan McKinny as a noble and agonised Amfortas, and his father Titurel (Karl-Heinz Lehneras) seen here as an old man rather than a cavernous voice inside a coffin, this was a cast of distinction, helping Bayreuth to recover its reputation for musical and artistic supremacy.

The chorus was exceptional as always, and despite reported artistic differences between Andris Nelsons and music director Christian Thielemann that led to Haenchen replacing Nelsons, the new conductor rallied the orchestra using his own score, creating a musical triumph.




**Until Aug 28. Tickets: [bayreuther-festspiele.de](https://www.bayreuther-festspiele.de)**

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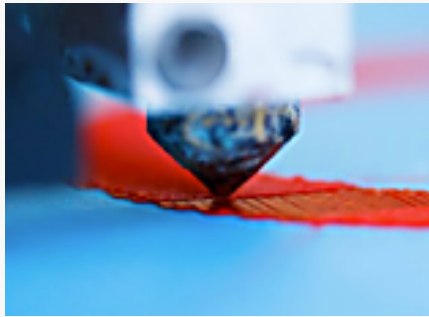
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01 Sep 2016, 5:48pm

2

**Titanfall 2 interview - 'You are going to be doing things in our single-player that you have never done before'**

01 Sep 2016, 12:00pm

3

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26 Aug 2016, 4:56pm







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26 Aug 2016, 11:49am



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25 Aug 2016, 4:32pm



Tales of Offenbach: his wacky duo were brought to life with a bing-bang-bong – review

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19 Aug 2016, 9:23pm



Video: Clendhoume presents Béatrice et Bénédict



16 Aug 2016, 12:05pm



**Warning: this opera may cause offence**

15 Aug 2016, 7:31am



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The Queen of Spades, Opera Holland Park, review: 'enthrralling'



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31 Jul 2016, 11:11am



## Classical music reviews, July 2016

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**Glyndebourne's Béatrice et Bénédict was elegant but needs more emotion**



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24 Jul 2016, 3:04pm



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21 Jul 2016, 3:56pm



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