

CULTURE

Staging Parsifal at Temple Church was a high risk operatic paradox that paid off

We were not being served Wagner-lite.



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The Holy Grail was unveiled in its rightful realm on Thursday 3 April. London. "The Temple Church proved to be a setting like no other for Wagner's opera, *Parsifal*" - words of Robin Griffith-Jones, The Reverend and Valiant Master of Temple.

At the bustling legal heart of the city's Inns of Court, the magnificent church, just off Fleet Street, with its Norman doorway dating back to 1162 and Round Church, the Chapter House of London's Knights Templar, boasts a storied history.

As the proud Master is forever reminding newcomers and regulars alike, the Round Church was built to imitate the rotunda of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. To be here, was, to the medieval mind to be 'in' Jerusalem".

Richard Wagner's last opera, *Parsifal*, premiered at Bayreuth in 1882, is based on Wolfram von Eschenbach's 1200 epic *Perzifal*. The chivalric romance tells of a holy order of Templeisen, guardians of The Grail, the vessel used for communion by Christ at the last supper, then to collect drops of the dying Redeemer's blood as he hung on the cross. The stuff of legend.

The Master has previous when it comes to leveraging the history of Temple Church to the advantage of the various charities which support it. When Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, that farrago of religious conspiratorial confections, was filmed in 2006 part of the action was set in and around Temple Church, Robin, capitalised by mounting a debunk.

A series of packed lunchtime lectures delivered by The Master transformed gullible Dan Brown voyeurs into Griffith-Jones illuminati.

No, Mary Magdalen had not been a barmaid at Fleet Street's El Vino, secretly married to Jesus. And hunky Tom Hanks, aka Professor Henry Langdon, did not find a cryptic message stuffed beneath the effigy of William Marshal I, Earl of Pembroke, bearing coded details of the family's bank account at nearby Hoare & Co.

I believe the seeds of Griffith-Jones' ambitious *Parsifal* plan were sown then. Temple Church is famous for its choral tradition and programmes of concerts. The Temple Music Foundation is always seeking out new musical holy grails.

In 2003, the church hosted its most ambitious and spectacular work of musical theatre yet. Sir John Tavener's *The Veil of the Temple*, an all-night seven-hour vigil involving four choirs, several orchestras, soloists spread throughout the church and ending with

a procession at daybreak from the church of the whole caboodle plus surviving members of the audience, led by the indefatigable Director of Music, Stephen Layt to Middle Temple Garden to the earworm chorus *It was Early in the Morning*.

Declaration of interest. My wife, Anne and I had two dogs in that fight. Not quite "dogs". Both our sons were then choristers at Temple. The association proved to be a life-changing experience for them and us. Immersion in the rich musical canon of the Church of England forged a link that has endured.

Some twenty years on, when plans were being laid by Temple Music to fulfil the Master's long-held ambition to follow up the triumph of *The Veil* with a performance of *Parsifal*, we chipped in a modest contribution and were rewarded with the title of "Spear Wielders". No spears were damaged in the execution of our duties. We wielded mostly knives and forks.

A driving force behind this lunatic scheme – how do you perform a Wagner opera in the small space of a church and preserve its artistic integrity? – was Richard Salter, Treasurer of The Inner Temple.

There were then assembled a bundle of enthusiastic talents to see the project through, beside which Wagner's endlessly wandering opera knight-guardians of the grail, who incidentally had carelessly lost their spear in their travels, look like a bunch of amateurs.

Julia Burbach, the director, has experience in mounting performances in unconventional spaces. Verdi's *Tosca* at the Arcola theatre in Dalston, the *Ring Sag* at Grimeborn, that punning alternative festival antidote to Sussex's posh Glyndebourne, *Die Walküre* at the Hackney Empire you get the drift.

Peter Selwyn, conductor of the Orpheus Sinfonia, the band for the evening, was assisted by a very deft re-orchestration of Wagner's score to the manageable dimensions of a chamber work, at the hands of Matthew King. King collaborated with Tomas Leakey and his orchestra, The Mahler Players, based in the Scottish Highlands.

The good citizens of Strathpeffer were the first audience to hear the scaled-down score in November 2024. Leahey conducted one performance and distinguished Wagnerian, the musical director of Longborough Festival Opera, Anthony Negus the other.

I spotted and chatted with Negus at the premiere. He is the "meister" of pared down Wagner. Longborough's orchestra is 72 compared with a typical Wagner full force of 120. At Temple, the Orpheus Sinfonia numbered 38.

The piccolo seems to have been the only instrument completely sacrificed, along with a reduction in timpani. Otherwise, the watchword was a crafted concentration of forces. One trumpet had to do the work of three. A single harp. Numbers may have been down, but the sound world was Wagner's and in the confined space as convincing as in any opera house. We were not being served Wagner-lite.

Act III of *Parsifal* finds the knights of the grail in turmoil. Their world turned upside down by their once fellow, turned traitor, Klingsor. Much as Wall Street's Masters of the Universe find themselves today after a round of Trumpian see-saw tariffs. A synopsis of the whole opera *Parsifal* can be found [here](#). The libretto for *Klingsor Tr the Man who Speared the World Economy* is still a work in progress.

Before Act III gets underway, we are introduced to the opera by the Prelude to Act Burbach wastes no time in setting the scene. The action takes place on an elevated stage running the full length of the nave. It is set as a scene of dereliction, overture chairs, draped in white, diaphanous covers. Management needs to get a grip at Gr Airbnb.

We are greeted by a procession of "ordinary" people, a mix of London's population be found any day on the escalator of Temple Tube Station. They progress slowly from the east end of the church along the length of the stage. They will return as knights but the effect is to draw the audience into the heart of the action.

This is not to be a medieval Good Friday, an interesting curiosity. It is Good Friday 18th 2025. Our Good Friday yet to come. Pay attention.

Dead giveaway. Amongst the motley crew sporting suits, casual gear, even a yellow safety helmet, emerges a tall figure clad in chain mail. He has no Senior's pass for Underground. Let me introduce Parsifal, badly concealed under a dark, fustian cloak. The moment of his revelation completes the link with the mythological past.

Gurnemanz, one of the Order's senior figures, now very old and living as a hermit in the Grail's sanctuary, finds the penitent Kundry, who runs occasional errands for the knights and is a cursed woman, previously in sexual thrall to the traitor knight, Klingsor, in a deathlike sleep. Condemned to her fate for laughing at the crucified Jesus.

Klingsor's enchanted forest kingdom has been destroyed by Parsifal, who made a copy of the cross with the spear at the end of Act II. Kundry is asleep in the forest. Gurnemanz awakens her from a deathlike torpor.

As the unknown knight approaches, Gurnemanz soon recognizes him as Parsifal. Another clue is that he's the only guy in the tube station crowd bearing a Holy Spear.

Act III is a difficult role for Kundry. A soprano without a singing role could be seen as a bit of a bum casting. Kundry screams once when awoken. That's it. Burbach deploys her as a guide, ranging the stage, examining everything in close detail, encouraging her to focus on what grabs her attention. It was artful not to make her seem peripheral.

Natasha Jouhl, soprano, gamely stepped into the last act role and used every ounce of her dramatic skill and fluid expression to command constant attention. Determined to explore her unarticulated voice, I found this performance of Strauss' *Four Last Songs* a Nutshell assessment. Jouhl vocalises as well as she acts.

Parsifal describes his years of wandering, trying to find his way back to Amfortas, wounded by Klingsor with the spear, a wound that cannot heal, and the Grail.

Gurnemanz tells him that he has come at the right time. Amfortas, longing for death but has refused to uncover the Grail. It sustains life. The brotherhood is suffering, and Titurel, the previous king, Amfortas' father, has died.

Kundry washes Parsifal's feet. Gurnemanz blesses him and proclaims him king. Parsifal is the simple fool whose compassion brings redemption. Burbach kept him barefoot throughout, emphasising the pain of his hard road of travel.

As his first task, Parsifal baptises Kundry. He is struck by the beauty of nature around them, and Gurnemanz explains that this is the spell of Good Friday. The distant toll of bells announces the funeral of Titurel, and the three make their way to the sanctuary.

Knights carry the Grail and Titurel's coffin into the Hall of the Grail. The wounded Amfortas is incapable of performing the rite. He begs the knights to kill him and to end his anguish—when suddenly Parsifal appears.

He touches Amfortas' side with the Spear and heals the wound. Uncovering the Grail, he accepts the homage of the knights as their redeemer and king and blesses them. The reunion of the Grail and Spear has enlightened and rejuvenated the community. Kundry, released from her curse, gazes on the Grail and dies.

The moment of the revelation of the Grail, the climax of the piece, was a coup de théâtre. At the east altar end of the stage, there shone a great light, diffused through the faint special effect haze that had cloaked the scene. The whole cast turned in a moment to worship that sacred sight.

English bass Simon Wilding sang the role of Gurnemanz, Neal Cooper, tenor, was a suitably grizzled Parsifal, bass-baritone Freddie Tong performed Amfortas. All were firmly committed to the two-performance project – chamber operas are not big money spinners for singers. They captured the essence of mystery and wonder which lies at the heart of *Parsifal*.

I remember a 2015 production from Staatsoper Berlin directed by the controversial director, Dmitri Tcherniakov, which dissolved into a fiasco as Amfortas decided to seduce Kundry during the almost sacrosanct closing bars. Burbach set her team on a course determinedly leading toward the light. No gratuitous distractions.

The chorus, twenty strong, was led by a "chorus fixer" – never heard that term before – soprano Cressida Sharp, one of their number. I assume they were brought together specifically for the event. No easy matter to deliver seamlessly when spread about long stage, each facing in a different direction. Discreet screens showing the conditions helped.

Paul Carey Jones, a Welsh-Irish bass baritone, was the deceased King Titirel, so like Kundry didn't sing a lot. Not much to do but lie with attitude. He cut a fine figure as a corpse.

An intriguing side story. In the initial flyer, I spotted the role of Titirel was assigned to none other than the Master, Robin Griffith-Jones. I would give anything to have been a fly on the wall as the casting decision was taken to go with Jones!

Probably for the best, as Robin and the rest of the Temple regulars had their work cut out making sure the audience was welcomed with customary enthusiasm, and Spear Wielders plonked in their allotted pews.

It would be easy to glibly dismiss a project such as a "chamber" Parsifal in a church as an interesting curiosity. It would also be wrong. A hallowed space and a hallowed subject. Yes, shortened by two acts, but delivering the emotional climax with a purity. That victory of the Parsifal, the compassionate fool.

The relevance of that climax for the present day was self-evident. I am certain even in the audience had current tragic headlines running through their thoughts as they watched Wagner's Bühnenweihfestspiel (Sacred Festival) deliver its message of hope.

Marian Turski, the Polish historian, one of the last survivors of the Holocaust, gave an interview shortly before he died in February. Of the perpetrators of the Nazi horrors and the mindless bureaucrats who passively supported them, he said this. "They know not what compassion is".

It is a paradox that the victory of Parsifal's compassion, in all its musical splendour, grounded in the Good Friday of the Christian tradition, was conceived by a composer

who did not believe in God and thirty-two years earlier penned that antisemitic ho
Das Judenthum in der Musik – Judaism in Music.

Staging *Parsifal* in Temple Church was a high-risk operatic paradox in its own right
the credit of the Temple Music Foundation, that was a paradox emphatically resolv
Bring on Temple's next paradox.

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