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Parsifal

Wiener FestWochen, 23.06.2026 [ENA]

Richard Wagner's Parsifal at the Wiener Festwochen presents itself not merely as an opera performance, but as a total theatrical experience: solemn, visionary, and unsettlingly contemporary. In the production by Susanne Kennedy and Markus Selg, Wagner's final work is not treated as a museum monument of German repertory, but as a living ritual that grapples with the most persistent human questions: guilt, compassion.

Also it is redemption, and the fragile possibility of transformation. What emerges is an evening of striking visual ambition and spiritual intensity, one that seeks not to explain Parsifal, but to immerse the audience in its mysterious atmosphere. Kennedy and Selg approach Wagner's sacred drama with a bold sense of reimagination. Rather than relying on traditional medieval imagery, they transpose the work into a world shaped by both archaic symbols and futuristic aesthetics, including digital and AI-generated visual language. This is not a gesture of novelty for its own sake.

The result is a stage environment that feels suspended between myth and technological afterimage, as though Wagner's dream of a redemptive community were being filtered through the anxieties of the present. The production creates a ritual space in which the audience is invited not just to watch, but to undergo an experience. That is especially effective in a work like Parsifal, which has always occupied an unusual position in the operatic repertoire. Wagner called it a "Bühnenweihfestspiel," a consecration of the stage, and the work still carries the aura of ceremony. Kennedy and Selg take this seriously while refusing to fossilize it.

Their staging suggests that spiritual yearning in the twenty-first century is no less intense, but perhaps more fragmented, mediated, and unstable. The Gralsgemeinschaft is shown not as a stable order, but as a community in crisis, waiting for healing while already marked by exhaustion and doubt. What gives the evening much of its power is its scale of concentration. Parsifal is a large work, both musically and philosophically, yet the production seems intent on distilling its emotional and metaphysical core rather than inflating it.

The Hall E setting at the MuseumsQuartier supports this approach well, allowing the piece to feel immersive and close without losing its grandeur. In such a space, the opera's long arcs of waiting, revelation, and ritual can unfold with a peculiar intensity. The audience is drawn into an environment where stillness matters as much as action, and where symbolism becomes a mode of thought.

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At the center of Wagner's drama is the paradox of Parsifal himself: the "pure fool" who comes to know through compassion. That paradox remains one of the opera's deepest strengths, because it resists simple moralization. Kennedy and Selg's production appears to embrace this ambiguity, allowing the figure of Parsifal to remain open, responsive, and incomplete rather than turning him into a heroic savior. This matters because the opera's redemptive power does not lie in triumph but in recognition: the realization that suffering can be understood only through empathy, and that salvation, if it exists, emerges slowly and at great cost.

The performance's musical dimension is equally important. Yi-Chen Lin's direction, with the forces assembled for the Festwochen production, gives the work a sense of ceremonial pacing and large-scale coherence. Wagner's score depends on long-breathed tension, luminous orchestral color, and the ability to sustain mystery across vast temporal spans. A successful Parsifal must make the listener feel time stretching and deepening, and this production seems particularly attuned to that requirement. The result is music that does not merely accompany the stage action, but shapes its atmosphere from within.

One of the most impressive aspects of the production is its refusal to simplify the opera's spiritual dimension. Parsifal is often approached either as a religious work or as a critique of religious ritual, but Kennedy and Selg seem more interested in the unsettled space between those poles. The production does not answer the opera's questions so much as dramatize their unresolved nature. What is holiness in a secular age? What form can compassion take when institutions are in collapse? What does redemption mean when belief itself has become unstable? These questions are not treated as abstract philosophical problems, but as theatrical realities.

As a whole, this Parsifal stands out for its courage and seriousness. It does not try to make Wagner easy, and it does not reduce his final opera to a single interpretive key. Instead, it offers a richly layered encounter with a work that still resists final definition. The production's strength lies in its confidence that ambiguity can be illuminating, and that the most powerful theater often emerges when image, music, and thought remain in productive tension. The result is an experience that feels both challenging and deeply rewarding.

In the end, the Wiener Festwochen's Parsifal reminds us why Wagner's final opera continues to matter: not because it offers neat answers, but because it stages the longing for meaning with such unmatched force. It is an evening of ritual, vision, and unease — and precisely for that reason, it leaves a lasting impression. Its power lies in the way it keeps uncertainty alive, turning contemplation itself into a dramatic event. Long after the performance ends, its images and silences continue to resonate, as though the work were still searching for the redemption it so vividly evokes.

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