Newman’s *The Wagner Operas*, in which the thematic element is often denuded of the harmonic support that gives it its musical sense—a particularly crass instance offers treble clef material only for the *Ring*’s Valhalla theme (p. 89). Nor does the reductive discussion of tonal symbolism, however legitimate in principle, add much to our understanding of the ways in which themes and leitmotifs evolve across particular tonal contexts.

Commendably, Kirby freely acknowledges the limitations of his own initial typology. As he says of the *Ring*, ‘there is plenty of equivocation here: for who is to say which characters are “good” and which “evil”? One of the most arresting features of Wagner’s tetralogy is the complexity and ambiguity in many of the characters and the situations in which they find themselves’ (p. 90)—the very aspect, of course, which themes and motifs can only reflect through processes of transformation and development over time. In the case of *Tristan und Isolde*, Kirby proposes to move from dealing ‘with the expressive character of the leitmotivs . . . to a second aspect . . ., the way Wagner has treated these themes. We will see that in doing this he has varied, and mostly intensified, their degree of expressive power, in accordance with the action’ (p. 148). Nevertheless, the result amounts to little more than a brief tabulation of descriptions rather than a discussion of the place of motifs within the overall formal design. Perhaps Kirby is so concerned with what he might view as the dangerous shade of Alfred Lorenz that he cannot bring himself to contemplate such analyses. But his own perspectives seem even more restricted as a result, and so it continues with the chapters on *Die Meistersinger* and *Parsifal*.

The accounts of the three romantic operas are the most satisfactory parts of the book. Because reminiscence themes require less convoluted categorization than leitmotivs, and their character and function in relation to the whole is much less multifarious, it is easier to pin them down in a summary narration of plot. But once, with *Das Rheingold*, the dialogue between the ‘art of transition’ and ‘rhetorical dialectics’ becomes central, as John Daverio and others have shown, making use of Wagner’s own comments in his late essay ‘On the Application of Music to the Drama’, Kirby has less to offer: and this reinforces the probability that those ‘further investigations’ of Wagner’s ‘associative magic’ which he calls for are likely to continue on a different level from the one outlined here.

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Almost the only incontrovertible statement that can be made about *Parsifal* is that it is problematic. Calling the work his *Bühnenweihfestspiel* to distinguish it not only from all other operas but from his own music dramas, Wagner set up a special aura round *Parsifal* that was intensified by his widow Cosima’s almost successful attempt to reserve performances of it to Bayreuth for the thirty years of copyright after the composer died in 1883. This aura inspired a particular kind of enthusiasm and a particular kind of irritation both in audiences and in critics. Enthusiasm and irritation were further fuelled by the Christian imagery of the work, by a few extravagant claims made for its significance by Wagner in old age, and by the piety, confused as to its object, of the Wahnfried circle after Wagner’s death. The Nazification of Winifred Wagner’s Bayreuth in the 1930s with its subsequent effect on all responses to Wagner, and the mixture of embarrassment and cynicism that have marked productions of *Parsifal* since the waning of Wieland Wagner’s influence, have only increased the noise on this critical battlefield. Yet the work remains the last masterpiece of an extraordinary creative figure at the peak of his powers, its music some of the most complex yet also the most lucid ever written for the opera house. Difficult, intriguing, beautiful, to some ever since Nietzsche deeply rebarbative, *Parsifal* is an excellent subject for a Companion.

William Kinderman, one of the editors of this substantial collection of nine essays by seven hands, contributes an introduction to the work and its history that broaches a number of the contentious issues that both have raised. It is good to have, at the outset, a clear statement from Wagner in straightforward mode of the distinction, actually sustained in the work despite all claims to the contrary (some in this book), between *Parsifal* and *Christ*. Kinderman’s brief account of the impact of Schopenhauer on Wagner at a crucial moment in the decades-long process of the gestation of *Parsifal* is crisp and accurate. He overrates the significance of the obvious connections between *Parsifal* and *Lohengrin*; there are more profound connections with the *Ring* and *Meistersinger*. Although *Parsifal* certainly has its Oedipal moments, there is no useful parallel to be drawn between Kundry and Oedipus’s sphinx, nor does Kundry’s death have a dramatic impact that is at all similar to that of Isolde’s. More serious is Kinderman’s use of the
phrase ‘the undisclosed redeemer’, also favoured by other contributors. To pretend even for the sake of argument that the Grail of the opera does not symbolize the presence of Christ in the chalice of the Last Supper, or that the crucified redeemer of Good Friday is not the Christ of ordinary Christian belief, is no more than politically correct defiance of common sense.

This is, however, in general a useful introduction, its most valuable passage a demonstration of the influence on the music of Parsifal of Liszt’s cantata The Bells of Strasbourg Cathedral, which the composer sent to the Wagners at a critical moment in 1875. Kinderman’s quotation, mostly in footnotes, of some bizarre over-interpretation of aspects of the work is more warning than example, though his last point, derived from the work of Sandra Corse, vanishes into an abstraction which he himself usually avoids: ‘[Parsifal’s] reopening of the shrine can be seen as claiming subjectivity not merely as rationality but as a newly integrated state of feeling.’ Most people in the theatre, if allowed to by the production, will see it as the reopening of the shrine.

The first section of the book, ‘The Text: Sources and Symbols’, consists of three chapters that shed varying amounts of light into some notorious literary and philosophical undergrowth. Mary A. Cicora’s essay on the literary background of Parsifal is titled ‘Medievalism and Metaphysics’ and proceeds as if these two concepts were mutually exclusive. Her objective is to show how Wagner ‘transformed’ what she calls the ‘chivalry and religiosity’—as a translation of Religiosität, ‘religiosity’ is a false friend—of the medieval world of Wolfram’s Parzival into a ‘depiiction of Schopenhauerian metaphysics’. She seems to believe that is what Wagner consciously set himself to do. But the dichotomy that runs through her argument is a manufactured one. It is not the case that Wagner’s Parsifal is based on a very different value system from one found in any medieval work. Far from it: there is more ordinary Christianity in Parsifal, and also in Schopenhauer’s ethics—rather than metaphysics, of which there is little in the work—of ascesis and denial of the will than Cicora thinks, and also more metaphysics in medieval Christianity. She says ‘According to Wapnewski, Good Friday, for Wagner, represented the idea of redemption’, and ‘For Wolfram, God was the means to love and redemption’, as if these assumptions were peculiar to them or to their times. Nor is there the ‘revision of Christianity’ that Cicora attributes to the Grail scenes. This claim is based on a passage in Cosima’s diary (26 Sept. 1877) that actually shows Wagner musing with (typically) more emotion than reasoning, let alone theology, on the Grail, the eucharist, and the passion of Christ, but in an entirely orthodox spirit. Nor does Wagner ‘shift the dramatic center from the title character to Amfortas’: he was aware of this danger, said so, and avoided it. The contention, not Cicora’s alone, that the work is intended to move us ‘towards a this-worldly religiosity’ (not an enlightening phrase) founders precisely on the Good Friday scene that is supposed to support it: if Good Friday has no transcendent meaning, fully acknowledged in Gurnemanz’s words in the opera, which speak of the penitence and forgiveness that have just been granted to Kundry, then it has no meaning at all. Cicora even says that ‘Wagner relativizes traditional values and standards as he portrays the Grail Realm in crisis. In this way Wagner’s drama performs a revaluation of values.’ Nietzsche certainly did not think so, and in any case the Grail realm can be perceived as in crisis only if traditional values are applied.

What in fact happened was that Wagner was impressed by a rambling medieval narrative, read it and a lot of other Arthurian material in search of a way of compressing the story he wanted to tell, which is in none of his sources, into three acts that would hold an audience’s attention in a theatre, and in the course of this long process discovered Schopenhauer as his soulmate among philosophers. The result is more of a muddle than most of the contributors to this book acknowledge, though it is also a work conveying a compelling illusion of coherence through its music. But anyone who forgets that Wagner was an untrained, undisciplined intellectual omnivore who made use of anything that came his way that seemed to help the project in hand—as with the Liszt piece noted by Kinderman—is in danger of imposing on him an ideological consistency he never had.

James M. McGlathery, whose chapter is called ‘Erotic Love in Chrétien’s Perceval’, Wolfram’s Parzival, and Wagner’s Parsifal’ seems unaware of all of this. He writes with the heavy literalness of the ‘How many children had Lady Macbeth?’ school of criticism, regretting the flawed Christian formation of Parzival and Parsifal, suggesting that Kundry, who, he says, ‘dies of a broken heart’, has to ‘disguise’ her beauty to serve the Grail company which ‘attracts, even seeks, novices of misogynist bent’, and wonders who Amfortas’s mother was. He recounts with extensive quotation the random chivalric encounters with women in Chrétien and Wolfram, but conveys no sense of their bearing, if any, on Wagner’s work.

The most ambitious and the most interesting of these chapters is Ulrike Kienzle’s lengthy
exploration ‘Parsifal and Religion: A Christian Music Drama?’. She starts with a useful definition of myth, but her separation of the Grail myth from the rest of thirteenth-century Christianity is misleading. She calls it ‘a synthesis of various religious currents that stood apart from the organized church, which the Grail legend deliberately ignored’: the actual story is of gradual, piecemeal Christian appropriation of various pagan tales, a significantly different affair. Her account of Schopenhauer’s impact on Wagner is accurate and relevant, but her attribution to him of a clear didactic intention, ‘to create a synthesis of Christian and Indian religions on the basis of Schopenhauer’s philosophy’ is (again) some way from an understanding of how his imagination worked. If this was his intention, he certainly failed. His intention was, rather, to create a drama about the learning of passion, compassion, renunciation, and redemption, and in this he certainly succeeded.

One can quibble about some of her statements. Amfortas is not ‘a perverted Christ figure’, nor do Christ, Amfortas, and Parsifal ‘merge together to form one single identity’: Wagner himself is usually clear, and the work (which should always be the critic’s focus) is always clear, that Amfortas and Parsifal are both sinful human beings accountable for their faults. It is not true to say of Kundry that ‘Wagner’s conception [of her] is . . . at furthest remove from his basically Christian scenario’ nor that she is the (Schopenhauerian) ‘embodiment of the will to existence’. Her original sin is against Christ; she is therefore emblematic of all sinners in need of penitence and forgiveness. Condemned to repetition of her sin, she longs above all, like the Flying Dutchman (invented long before Wagner read Schopenhauer), not to live but to die. The root meaning of ‘religion’ is not ‘a sacred event that happened in the past’ but ‘reconnection’ or ‘rebinding’, while the closeness of Kienzle’s engagement with the Christian connotations of the plight of Amfortas and the Grail make her repeated reference to ‘the undisclosed redeemer’ seem only perverse. When at last she mentions the Good Friday music, she says it ‘expresses a utopia’, another word that recurs in this book, but a sinful world redeemed in eternal truth rather than in temporal fact is not the same as a utopia. This essay is, however, a serious and honourable attempt to sort out the real difficulties raised by Parsifal, which deals with them less tidily than Kienzle would like. She puts her finger, incidentally, on the key problem raised by Schopenhauer’s ethics: how can the will renounce the will? ‘Only [in] a philosopher or a saint . . . [can] the will achieve self-consciousness and be redeemed.’ This—‘be redeemed’—begs a large question, not pursued here, which Parsifal actually has a shot at answering.

Three chapters are devoted to the score. The first, again by William Kinderman, is an account, based on minute examination of fragmentary (literally, because cut up by Wagner and others) sketches and longer drafts, of the composition of the music. This scholarly detective story, much of it new, gives a fascinating, detailed insight into the workings of the musical imagination of the old composer and craftsman, who thirty years after thinking of a possible drama and ten years after working out his scenario settled down to realize his vision in sound. Kinderman describes music so as to suggest the experience of hearing it—this is a rare gift—and his report on Wagner’s gradual progress towards the web of tonalities and forms in the finished work strongly supports his case for hearing the ‘treatment of motives [as] far more flexible and complex than is usually conveyed’: there is no lapsing here into the fuss about labels for motifs that is the default position of Wagner commentary. The essay includes a close-up, sharply focused account of the evolution of the Act I transformation music, which transports Gurnemanz and the so far clueless Parsifal from out of doors to the Grail temple. Wagner found this theatrical challenge, beset with technical difficulty, both enjoyable and infuriating. Of Gurnemanz’s words ‘Du sichtest, mein Sohn, zum Raum wird hier die Zeit’, Kinderman admirably says: ‘As so often in Wagner, the temporal unfolding embodied in the music exposes dramatic elements that will be displayed visually on stage, or in “space”, at a later point.’ He does not add that this, if ‘imagery’ is allowed to replace ‘music’, applies equally to Shakespeare, as in Hamlet holding an actual skull in his hand or Lady Macbeth carrying a candle in the dark.

Only Kinderman in this section of the book attempts, successfully, to give the reader a sense both of the scale and of the detail of the score in relation to the action and the words. His co-editor Katherine R. Syer begins her essay on the Act I Grail scene, ‘Unseen Voices’, with a portentous claim for the significance of offstage sound ‘intended in part to evoke objectively real or phenomenal music making’: this is an issue far more central and fruitful in Meistersinger than in Parsifal, and Syer soon abandons it for a thirty-page descriptive analysis of 500 bars of music. This analysis is hard work to read and adds little to the five-page tabular summary, given at its start, of the keys, instruments, and voices, off-stage and onstage, which make up the scene. The ‘undisclosed redeemer’ reappears often, confounded by unavoidable references to his disclosure,
as in ‘the chalice that caught the blood of the dying Redeemer on the cross’. Syer’s dramatic sense is fitful. She has a clear view—as well she might since it is obvious—of the central knot of connections between Amfortas’s lament and Parsifal’s response to Kundry’s kiss in Act II. But it is eccentric to describe the lament, which she rightly compares to the Flying Dutchman’s, as an ‘emotional account of individual experience to which we would not normally be privy’ as if she had never heard of the Shakespearian soliloquy, or any operatic aria of self-revelation.

Warren Darcy’s essay, on “Die Zeit ist da”: Rotational Form and Hexatonic Magic in Act 2, Scene 1 of Parsifal, subjects the tortured music of the scene between Klingsor and Kundry to two new analytic methods because ‘its musical structure has stubbornly resisted traditional methods of formal and tonal analysis’. Darcy’s response to this academic challenge contains a clear paragraph on form and tonal analysis. His ‘thematic seed’ that ‘will flower into the academic challenge contains a clear paragraph on form and tonal analysis’. Darcy’s response to this has stubbornly resisted traditional methods of formal and tonal analysis’. Darcy’s response to this academic challenge contains a clear paragraph on the ‘thematic seed’ that ‘will flower into the telos of the scene’, but this idea is swathed in many pages of dense analytical paragraphs, tables, and diagrams that are hard to understand, almost impossible to hear without the help of the score, and useful, one would suppose, only to those who could, with the right instruction, draw the tables and diagrams for themselves. Occasional sentences of ordinary description—Kundry breaks into demonic laughter, surely one of the most chilling moments in Wagnerian opera—are enough of a relief to seem more striking than they really are. Darcy hopes that his use of ‘neo-Riemannian theory, especially its hexatonic subset’ interacting ‘with octatonicism and enneatonicism’ which can ‘ultimately give way to functional diatonicism’ (as at last one may be able to hear) will bring new life to ‘the sophisticated musical analysis of Wagnerian opera [which] has declined into an almost moribund state’. There may be those who will see this essay as a kiss of life. Others may think it kinder to let the patient die.

The remaining two chapters of the Companion, under the heading ‘Reception and Interpretation’, are very different from Darcy’s display of analytical technique, but also from each other. Katherine R. Syer, here in her specialist field, contributes the longest essay in the volume, the most extensive survey yet published of the stage history of Parsifal. This begins brightly, comparing the opera’s career in the theatre to its hero’s in the work: ‘both lost their fathers in infancy, had an extremely protected childhood, and left home only to encounter war and political strife’, but is thereafter somewhat laboriously written. Syer says less than a reader new to Parsifal might need about the original Bayreuth production, but gives a full account of the early history of Wagner performance in America and of the breaking of the Parsifal copyright, with Cosima blacklisting ‘traitor’ conductors and singers for ever, in 1903. It is an astonishing indication of Wagner-mania in turn-of-the-century America that there were more than 200 performances of Parsifal in the United States, and eight in Canada, in the 1903–4 season, while there were 205 performances of the work at Bayreuth in the fifty years 1882–1933.

Syer describes in considerable detail the flurry of European productions in 1914 as the copyright expired and the atmosphere thickened towards war, the revival of many of them after 1918, and the chequered story of production plans both realized and abandoned in inter-war Germany. Nazi Bayreuth did not much care for Parsifal; nor did Soviet Russia; nor, after 1945, did the German Democratic Republic: that this is much to the work’s credit is the kind of value judgement Syer avoids. She reports that when Hitler discussed Parsifal with the very young Wolfgang Wagner, he suggested disposing of ‘the religious aspects of the temple scenes’ by taking ‘a more mystical, indefinable and indeterminate approach’. As in ‘the undisclosed redeemer?’, Wieland Wagner’s 1951 production had an uncluttered purity of conception and execution but was nevertheless faithful to the work, not at all ‘indeterminate’. Syer rightly sees it as a major gesture of repudiation of the recent Bayreuth past, but to deplore its preservation until 1973 as ‘ironically recapitulating the cult-like fame and fate of the original 1882 production’ is to miss the point. Wieland Wagner’s Parsifal, constantly amended by him in his lifetime, survived at Bayreuth, and influenced many other productions, on account of its superlative quality.

Syer’s account of the staging of Parsifal from 1973 to the present day makes dispiriting reading. As ‘post-modernism took root’ (surely the definition of postmodernism is its rootlessness), productions became increasingly destructive of the work. Having decided, under critical barrage, that Parsifal is anti-Semitic or misogynist or both, directors and designers have set out to muffle the impact of the work by filling the space on the stage with visual references to Nazi thugs, to Auschwitz, to space, Buddhism, Islam, any war, any mechanistic industrial imagery. A production that obliterates the contrast between a sinister garden and nature’s springtime, or works against the tension between the harmony of the diatonic and the rending of the chromatic, is out to wreck the work. Sometimes directors have changed the action: Kundry does not die but wanders off alone. Or is happily united with Amfortas. Or Parsifal.

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Or a cohort of Grail maidens. The justification, no doubt, is that since we live in a world in which there is no belief in the transcendent or in the possibility of redemption, we must have a happy ending that precludes death, as, in the eighteenth century, virtue had to be rewarded, so Cordelia married Edgar in a happy ending to King Lear.

Syer, who calls Parsifal ‘an uncommonly meaningful work’—as long, presumably, as you impose your own meaning on it—does not comment on the merits or otherwise of these productions. Perhaps she approves of them. In a representative sentence on a representative production, a 1982 film, she says: ‘The emphasis on decadence and kitsch runs high, with the result that the creative void behind the illusion of “high art” is simultaneously exposed.’ Is this ‘exposure’ now the reason for putting on Parsifal at all? In a most unusual 2002 production by Peter Stein ‘the Christian allusions were put forth for consideration without pre-judgement’. This went down badly in Salzburg but well in Edinburgh. ‘The audience was not expected to have achieved some critical distance from the original work.’ Poor innocent Edinburgh. A photograph of a particularly horrible production, showing Kundry as the Grail, presented ‘as a Madonna/whore’, and sitting in a blasted tree with the knights imprisoned under its roots and Amfortas dressed like Klingsor, is chosen for the dust cover of the Companion. According to Syer, Hitler told Goebbels that ‘he would see to it either that religion was banished from Parsifal or that Parsifal was banished from the stage’. What he wanted has been largely achieved.

Roger Allen’s essay on Houston Stewart Chamberlain and the early reception of Parsifal is the best written in the book and makes a point of capital importance against those for whom Wagner and all his work are more anti-Semitic than they are anything else. Chamberlain, of course, was a proto-Nazi ideologue of the most rabid kind, married to Wagner’s daughter Eva and part of the inner circle of Cosima’s Bayreuth. He saw Wagner only once, the old composer’s ludicrous self-dramatization impressing the young fan with holy dread. The hero-worship persisted, but was by no means blind. Chamberlain knew Wagner’s operas extremely well, understood them properly as ‘deeds of music made visible’, that is as works of art, and wrote about them without allowing either events from Wagner’s biography or his own (execrable) opinions to cloud his critical intelligence. His Parsifal summary is much better than most, and, with a common sense rare at the time, he observes that Wagner settled for a Christian rather than a Buddhist story partly because ‘what is generally known requires less demonstration for the understanding’. (That the imagery and beliefs of Christianity are now familiar to many fewer people than they were a century ago is one of the Parsifal problems that is not Wagner’s fault.)

Chamberlain’s racist magnum opus, The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century, infuriated the Bayreuth faithful by scarcely mentioning Wagner. Allen quotes extensively from a defensive preface Chamberlain wrote for the 1901 third edition of his book. This material, here translated for the first time, shows Chamberlain firmly distancing himself from Wagner because Wagner was a muddled thinker with a flypaper mind—Chamberlain is even quite funny, in an English way, about Wagner’s dottier inconsistencies—who picked up this and that from here and there all his life. ‘In scientific matters his mind is peculiarly uncritical, one might almost say childlike and naïve.’ He was incapable of ‘scientific’ racism, he knew nothing about Darwin, enthusiastically picked up Gobineau’s ideas wholesale at the very end of his life (i.e. many years after the full drafting of Parsifal) because he happened to meet him on a journey, and was altogether useless to Chamberlain’s cause of proper intellectual racial theory. This effort to establish clear blue water between Wagner’s fads and his own ‘soundly-based’ racism failed: the association of Bayreuth with the worst of Nazi theory was only encouraged by Chamberlain’s success as a writer. Parsifal itself, however, ‘was not one of the direct links in that chain’, and we owe Allen a considerable debt for demonstrating here, in no uncertain fashion, that Chamberlain, the ‘evangelist of race’, ‘found no racism in Parsifal’.

The essays in A Companion to Wagner’s Parsifal are mixed in quality, and the authors expect a wide range of knowledge and skill in their readers. An excellent editorial decision is to include translations of everything quoted in German (one or two passages have escaped the net). Almost anyone with an interest in Parsifal will find something new and exciting in this volume; almost anyone will also find cause for bafflement or disappointment. Most disappointing, though nowadays alas not baffling, is the careful avoidance of judgement. If Parsifal were merely bad, all the directors and designers (and opera-house managements) who undermine its performance, however musically competent, with suspicion and junk, would presumably ignore it. That they do not is, somewhere, a mark of its quality. But this raises issues that no contributor to this book, at least here, has taken on.

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