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DOCTORAL THESIS, summary

Kundry.
Wagner’s Maria Magdalena.

ART DISCIPLINE: VOCAL STUDIES

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SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Richard Wagner's music appeared in my opera life only in 2013. Previously, I had had contact with the works of German composers (Richard Strauss, Gustav Mahler) and with Czech operas performed in German (Rusalka by A. Dvorak, BARTERED BRIDE by B. Smetana) but I was never fond of that language because of its hardness and lack of melody. The proposal to prepare the role of Kundry (Parsifal) for the production of the Danish Hotel Pro Forma company, which had come from the Great Theatre in Poznań, completely changed my opinion about Wagner's works and the features of the German language, while Kundry became one of my favourite parts.

CHAPTER ONE

RICHARD WAGNER. BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Richard Wagner (1813 - 1883) grew up in an artistic family, though he was not a child prodigy. He studied grand piano and composing, however with no formal education, as he would get discouraged quickly from regular learning. Carl Maria von Weber, then an eminent composer and a friend of the family, ignited an interest in music in him. In his youth, a vision of musical theatre grew in him wherein music serves drama; an idea he remained faithful to while creating all his works. Out of all his compositions, 11 operas gained the most recognition, the librettos to which he also wrote himself.
The most well-known and still played works include:
Rienzi 1842
The Flying Dutchman 1843
Tannhauser 1845, corrected 1861
Lohengrin 1850

Tetralogy THE RING OF THE NIBELUNG, premiere 1876
   The Rhine Gold
   The Valkyrie
   Siegfried
   Twilight of the Gods
Tristan and Isolde 1865
The Master-Singers of Nuremberg 1876
Parsifal 1882

His greatest work, alongside his music, was the Festival Theatre erected in Bayreuth. He fulfilled his lifelong dream of staging his operas in one place.

CHAPTER TWO
STAGE MYSTERY

Wagner based his last musical drama, Parsifal, on medieval Arthurian legends about the search for the Holy Grail which could give miraculous strength to those able to resist sensual love. The work tells the story of the suffering King Amfortas, who succumbed to carnal love and waits, along with his knights, for a clean-spirited man who will bring him salvation. The man turns out to be a nameless young man who sets off on a difficult journey full of carnal temptations, at the same time learning about life and emotions which were hitherto unknown to him. His greatest obstacle is the temptress Kundry who, revealing his name - Parsifal - and telling him the unknown story of his parents, wants to talk him into engaging in carnal love and to interrupt his mission granted by the prophecy. However, Parsifal turns out to be a strong man and does not fall for the temptress’s charms. His chastity and strength will rescue not only the terminally ill king but also the temptress and sinner Kundry, who will obtain redemption and die as God’s servant.
PARSIFAL is one of the best examples of Wagner's use of the leading motives technique, which enables to introduce order to the romantic music full of "neverending" melodies and turn it into a clear and coherent work.

CHAPTER THREE

KUNDRY. WAGNER'S MARIA MADDALENA

Kundry, a mysterious woman unrestricted by space and time, remains under the spell of the evil warlock Klingsor and has been his servant for ages, tempting knights searching for the Holy Grail. She has been cursed for the deeds committed in her previous incarnations. She is a suffering woman, seemingly sentenced to do evil, who fears any goodwill gestures which could change her life. So far, she has not met a man who would resist her charms, which leads her to commit further evil deeds. Only a man of great faith and strength may help her in her redemption.

In my opinion, Wagner based that character on biblical Maria Maddalena, a loose woman who was redeemed after her encounter with Christ. Kundry meets Parsifal, the first man who does not fall for her. His faith and purity weakens her evil powers and brings awaited salvation. Just as Christ evicted demons from Maria Maddalena's house, Parsifal brings salvation to the drama's heroine, who had already lost her hope for a change of fate. Kundry turns into a faithful servant of the fellowship of the knights and, just as Maria Maddalena followed Jesus as a fervent advocate of salvation, she follows Parsifal like a convert in order to serve a good cause.
CHAPTER FOUR
KUNDRY BY HOTEL PRO FORMA TEAM

Hotel Pro Forma is an international company of artists producing avant-garde performances and installations involving images, lights and sounds. The company was set up in 1985 and is mainly based in Copenhagen. Its founder and artistic director is Kirsten Dehlholm, who is involved in the so-called visual arts. The artists of the Danish company for the first time worked on an opera production, and for many of them it was the first encounter with this music genre. In line with their experience, they presented the plot as a series of flexible and changing "tableau vivant", disregarding all the stage directions provided by the composer. The protagonists were set in satirical positions, and as a result, the entire work was composed of living images, unfortunately not always reflecting the message of the libretto. This innovative approach to directing (nevertheless visually very appealing) was met with extreme reactions from audiences and opera reviewers. The Danish company, previously unknown in Poland, sparked a lot of controversy even at the preparation stage of the production. The opinions about the show — ranging from definitely negative to euphoric — resulted in a steady popularity of this version of PARSIFAL among the audiences.

For me, who debuted in this beautiful and difficult role, the fact that scenic plot was removed, proved helpful in building a musical interpretation which will form the basis for my future experiences with this opera.

CONCLUSION

My unexpected confrontation with Richard Wagner's music resulted in this paper. The part of Kundry is in harmony with the nature of characters which I have the pleasure to portray on polish and international stages. I am convinced that the experiences from the avant-garde Poznań production and the knowledge of the message of Wagner's mystery, gained in the process of writing this paper, will provide the basis for my future encounters with Kundry the witch and will help me develop and add colours to this controversial and — all in all — positive character.