

# Acting in Concert

By Gregory Sandow

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*Parsifal*, which I saw at the Met on April 10, made me think again about Julius Eastman's *Sacred Songs*, which he sang at 33 Grand Street on April 3.

*Parsifal* is less forbidding than its reputation. It's long, of course, and as subtle as Beethoven's last quartets, but Wagner gives the score a disarmingly simple shape: it breaks down into 10 or so massive sections (very few for a five-hour piece), each with its own distinct color and tone. The flower maidens' music, for example, is all in a high register; the first 40 minutes of the last act (after the prelude) are mostly in the middle and low range of the orchestra, until a single ray of light high in the violins—a symbol of redemption easing the agony of sin—announces a transition to the next large episode, the Good Friday spell: the opera's very still climax, and perhaps the most serene, most raptly beautiful music ever written. Sin and redemption can be obscure or even repellent concepts to a modern New York audience, but Wagner's music (by turns harrowing and seductive before it becomes peaceful at the end) makes the feelings they represent tangible.

An opera so rich in feeling, so empty of overt dramatic action, and (despite its profundity) so uncomplicated needs hardly any acting; instead it needs singers who are dignified, unpretentious, intense, and able to reflect nuances of music and text.

Consider Jess Thomas, who sang the title role at the Met: his lurching in the first two acts showed that he's no actor, but when he returned at the end transformed into a saint, he stopped trying (a condition of sainthood, perhaps); he stood or sat quietly, made only simple gestures, and, thanks to his conviction and his long experience with the role, was both plausible and touching while having his head and feet bathed and doing other things that could easily seem silly. Jerome Hines, by contrast, is a reasonable actor (as operatic acting goes), and gave a strong performance as Gurnemanz, but it

wasn't enough: the part needs the fine detail of a song recital more than it needs the broad gestures of opera, and he lost his audience at times because he wasn't specific enough about small changes in tone.

Norman Bailey, as Amfortas, was better. He sang with rare honesty, and from the bottom of his soul, in a magnificent voice with the grain of fine, dark wood. But his behavior on stage was too pat to convey the emotion in his singing, so it was left to Tatiana Troyanos to show how the opera should be performed. Troyanos doesn't playact or pretend; with fierce energy but no apparent effort, she simply becomes whatever her roles require. To see her most impressive moments, don't watch the grand climaxes, which play themselves and allow any competent professional to make an effect; look at the details that other singers miss. In Verdi's *Don Carlo*, she crowned her performance as Eboli with a single desperate, fleeting glance just after her big aria, before she rushed offstage. And in *Parsifal*, she was powerful in the first two acts but strongest in the third, in which she sings only two words: her mute, imploring presence in the remaining hour of music could have taught a lesson in honesty, feeling, and sheer beauty to almost any mime or dancer in this sophisticated town. It's easy to hear that her voice is not the stunning instrument other international opera stars have, though it's perfectly adequate. But as a complete operatic performer—vocalist, musician, and actress—she's supreme, a model (to quote an admiring soprano just starting her own international career) for any young singer who aspires to become an artist.

On to Julius Eastman, who's a strong performer himself. He sang his own music, which meant that he didn't have Wagner to live up to. But then he didn't have Wagner to inspire him, either.

He improvised music to his own texts, about religious principles which uphold him without bringing joy or good fortune. By the standards of *Parsifal*, that's a severe

faith: Wagner's Good Friday music is beautiful just to tell us that proper living can bring peace. Eastman's principles might have come from the ancient Chinese writer Lao Tzu, who said that a life lived according to the *tao* will get no understanding and no support from the world at large. But Lao Tzu also said that, even so, a virtuous person can influence others; Eastman's bleak principles promise less reward than any other religious doctrine I know.

The music was chanted; it was blunt, forceful, as stark as the words. It was varied, but still seemed repetitive; there were recurrent, almost obsessive patterns that were striking but never graceful (one was made up of repeated, heavily emphasized skips, usually of an octave and a minor third but always more than an octave). Sometimes he sang in a bright, cold falsetto; sometimes he made loud, inhuman, almost ghastly sounds far below the bass staff. He may have damaged his singing by extending his range, just as conventional vocal wisdom would say he would. He has a rich, classically trained voice (easily good enough for the Met, I'd guess, though I'd have to hear him in a large hall to be sure), and of course began his career singing more normally; now his vocal production sounds tight, and he had trouble, especially toward the end of his performance, singing with good sound and intonation in his middle range, where everything should be easiest. Only his falsetto and a few soft passages were at all lyrical.

But these are judgments I'd make at the opera; at 33 Grand Street, Eastman's presence seemed more important than verbal, vocal, or musical details, and his performance finally impressed me as uncompromising, a little frightening, quite powerful, not in any way pleasant, but impossible to forget. Standing half in shadow, alone before his audience, singing for more than an hour with no accompaniment, he was the perfect embodiment of everything he sang about. In the D.C. Lau translation, Lao Tzu says that "truthful words are not beautiful; beautiful words are not truthful." Compared to Eastman's brutally spare performance, *Parsifal*, except for moments, was dross, done too much for show and not enough for art (though of course it was very well done by the normal standards of opera). If everyone in music were like Julius Eastman or Tatiana Troyanos, the Met—and life—would be very different. ■