

## Wagner's *Parsifal* as Art and Ideology, 1882-1933

lecture by  
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In his essay "Religion and Art" (1880) Wagner wrote that "When religion becomes artificial, it remains for art to rescue the essence of religion by perceiving its mythical symbols. . . according to their figurative value, enabling us to see their profound, hidden truth through idealized representation." A central problem of German *Parsifal* reception during the half-century after Wagner's death is lodged in the role of Cosima Wagner and the Bayreuth Circle as heirs and custodians of an ideological temple of art, a *Gralsburg* with a mission that seemed poised for fulfillment through political means. Did this undertaking convey the "profound, hidden truth" to which Wagner himself referred in his ambiguous formulation? Or did it abuse the artwork as nationalist propaganda during this period in which the political climate in Germany became increasingly reactionary?

New evidence confirms and reinforces the connections between Hitler and members of the Bayreuth Circle including Houston Stewart Chamberlain and "Senta" Klindworth (who became Winifred Wagner), as well as the ideological convictions of Hans Alfred Grunsky and Alfred Lorenz, who did not hesitate to identify Parsifal with Hitler in his book on *Parsifal* and essay "Die Religion des Parsifal" (1933), following Chamberlain's earlier hailing of Hitler as a "god-sent benediction". Nevertheless, the attempt to claim *Parsifal* for National Socialism was highly problematic, since prominent themes such as the emphasis on *Mitleid* (compassion) resist such interpretations, which forced authors such as Lorenz to resort to deliberate distortions. This paper will examine as well the propagandistic representation of Hitler as a Parsifal-like redeemer figure, which appears to be modeled on two illustrations of Wagner's *Parsifal* by Franz Stassen, another member of the Bayreuth Circle.

