

Non-Musical Spanish Exoticism in Massenet's *Le Cid* and Wagner's *Parsifal*

By Hannah Greenstein

I. Introduction and Methodology

To begin our discussion of Spanish exoticism, it is worth asking the question “why Spain?”. What about Spain allowed for such prevailing exoticism in the nineteenth century? What led to all of the cultural stereotypes about Spain that we see in classical music and even in popular culture today? In the immediate historical context of Massenet’s *Le Cid* and Wagner’s *Parsifal* one can look to the Franco-Prussian war for answers.

The fallout from the Franco-Prussian war (1870-1871) led to a period of intense nationalism in both France and Germany. Each nation left the war wanting to identify itself as the superpower of Europe. Jann Pasler wrote in his article, *Theorizing Race in Nineteenth-Century France: Music as Emblem of Identity*, that “what differentiated the West from the non-West grew particularly compelling after the Franco-Prussian war.”¹ Both French and German colonialism were manifestations of that renewed and magnified interest in the “other” and was also a manifestation of the desire to expand their respective empires. In conjunction, France and Germany also had a robust inclination to look at how they wanted to identify themselves as nations and as races. Race was a very visible signifier of something shared and something that could be a bedrock for identity. Pasler elaborates on this idea of national identity by saying that “race as national identity had encouraged a sense of geopolitical unity among the French people, a connection beyond differences of class and politics, it also empowered a sense of strength and indomitability vis-a-vis others.”² Given that context and Spain’s previous history as a cultural “other”, the 1870s-1890s were a period of incredible Spanish exoticism in classical music. During this period, France produced works about Spain such as *España* (1883) by Emmanuel Chabrier, *Carmen* (1875) by Georges Bizet, and *Symphonie Espagnole* (1875) by Eduardo Lalo,

¹ Pasler, “Theorizing Race in Nineteenth-Century France: Music as Emblem of Identity”, 460.

² Ibid, 491.

and Germany produced *Don Juan* (1888) and *Don Quixote* (1897) by Richard Strauss. It is not difficult to believe that these works, all depicting an exotic Spain, were all written in the wake of all of the nationalist sentiments following the Franco-Prussian war.

In her book, *Creación musical, cultura popular y construcción nacional en la España contemporánea*, musicologist Celsa Alonso encapsulates the relationship between Spanish exoticism and nationalism by expressing that, “thanks to nationalism, Spain’s symbolic incorporation into European culture could be achieved, creating a fictitious musical identity based on a restrictive vision of the country’s folkloric reality.”³ Alonso’s book critically examines Spanish musical exoticism in the construction of Spain as a nation and Spain in popular culture. Her unique understanding and insight as a Spaniard provide a lot of substance and tangibility to her argument.

The “fictional musical identity” that she describes has a long history in Europe both musically and culturally. The creation and perpetuation of that fictional musical identity is one of the most salient components to fully understanding Spanish exoticism. In this paper, I will attempt to both explain some of that history and to analyze how exoticism permeates two late nineteenth century operas by composers Jules Massenet and Richard Wagner.

Despite their stylistic differences and lack of traditional sonic markers of Spanishness, Massenet’s *Le Cid* and Wagner’s *Parsifal* are unique examples of Spanish exoticism ultimately both inspired by and rooted in intense nationalism following the Franco-Prussian war. Using Ralph Locke’s “All the Music in Full Context” Paradigm, I would argue that *Le Cid* and *Parsifal*

³ Alonso, “Creación musical, cultura popular y construcción nacional en la España contemporánea”, 90.
Spanish Translation: “Gracias al nacionalismo se podría lograr la incorporación simbólica de España a la cultura europea, creando una identidad musical ficticia basado en una visión restrictiva de la realidad folklórica del país”

use dance and Jewishness, respectively, as devices to portray Spain as the exotic “other” (both temporally and geographically).

In trying to conclude whether a piece of music is exotic or not, musical exoticism scholar Ralph Locke coined the paradigm “All the Music in Full Context” in his article, *A Broader View of Musical Exoticism*. He describes that in “musicodramatic” works, such as oratorios and operas, exoticism can often appear in the nonmusical elements (plot, lyrics, costuming, setting, dance, etc)⁴, and just because they don’t appear musically, doesn’t mean that they aren’t important for understanding and conceptualizing the work as “exotic”. The “All the Music in Full Context” paradigm is his way to view exoticist works “where exotic musical codes are only one kind of tool available to a composer seeking to carry out an exoticized scene or drama.”⁵ It is with this framework and methodology that I will be analyzing *Le Cid* and *Parsifal*; both “musicodramatic” works using the non-musical devices of Jewishness and dance to portray medieval Spain as exotic.

Before we begin analyzing these two operas, I would like to provide a little background on the history of Spanish exoticism leading up to the 1880s, as well as lay out some information about the Franco-Prussian war that will be helpful to know in reading further.

The European perception of Spain began to shift negatively following the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815). Despite being victorious at the end of the Peninsular War, Spain was not in great economic shape and was on the verge of losing its colonies in the Americas. As European tourism became more popular and accessible during the nineteenth century, fellow Europeans were able to travel to Spain and they were not the biggest fans of their slightly less developed neighbor to the South. James Parakilas describes how Spain was the perfect place for Europeans

⁴ Locke, “A Broader View of Musical Exoticism”, 487-488.

⁵ Ibid, 491.

to have a what I like to call a “safe adventure” into the exotic in his article *How Spain Got a Soul* when he said that “Spain itself represented an intermediary exoticism, a more manageable, imaginable exoticism than that of Japan or Fiji or Timbuktu.”⁶

The idea of Spain as an exotic place began to take shape as Europe’s concept of the “Orient”⁷ developed. The quote “Africa begins at the Pyrenees”⁸, often credited to Alexandre Dumas or Jules Michelet, famously helped establish Spain as being part of the Orient. The idea that Spain wasn’t fully European prevailed through the nineteenth century. Michael Iarocci elaborates on this notion by saying that, “the figure of Spain as ‘between the hat and the turban’ acknowledges a quasi-European status that rarely appears in the West’s construction of the Orient”⁹. Parakilas describes how certain elements of Spanish culture and history represent Spain’s status as not fully European such as “Granada, the last stronghold of the Moors in Spain and, with its Alhambra, the place that most strikingly symbolized Spain’s Moorish past – symbolized, that is, a Spain not European in origin and not Christian in religion.”¹⁰ The framing of Spain as not being fully part of Europe had a great impact in the country’s perception continuing into and beyond the nineteenth century.

One of the ways that Spain’s exotic perception grew, and permeated culture was through archetypal characters. One of the first characters to be seen in classical music was in Manuel García’s song, “Yo que soy contrabandista”¹¹ (I am a smuggler). Other Spanish archetypes included the Conquistador, the bullfighter, the flamenco dancer, and the Spanish Gitano woman.

⁶ Parakilas, “How Spain Got a Soul”, 161.

⁷ I am referencing the term “Oriental” as described by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*, describing the West’s perception of the East. Although I did not pull anything directly from Said’s book for this paper, I figured it was still worth giving him credit because his ideas about exoticism are still very prominent in this research.

⁸ Lyons “The Pyrenees of the Modern Era: Reinventions of a Landscape 1775-2012”, 138.

⁹ Iarocci, “Properties of Modernity: Romantic Spain, Modern Europe, and the Legacies of Empire”, 20-21.

¹⁰ Parakilas, “How Spain Got a Soul”, 145.

¹¹ Ibid, 141.

These stereotypical characters were marred by prevailing European attitudes toward Spain and thus have a negative connotation. In her article, *Spanish Music as Perceived in Western Music Historiography: A Case of the Black Legend?*, Judith Etzion says that “the Spaniards gained ill-repute for their haughtiness, cruelty, ignorance, religious fanaticism (as manifested in the Inquisition), superstitions of all kinds racial impurity (due to Jewish and Moorish ‘contamination’), sexual promiscuity, indolence, passivity, and extreme jealousy.”¹² These “representations” of Spaniards had more to do with what Europeans wanted to represent about Spain, rather than creating true depictions of Spanish culture. The smuggler wasn’t just a smuggler, he was a depiction of Spain as deceptive and sneaky. The Gitano woman wasn’t just a representation of Spanish Gitanos, she was a depiction of a sexually free and dangerous Spain to both lust after and be afraid of. Derek Scott makes this same point in his article *Orientalism and Musical Style* by saying that “when Orientalism appropriates music from another culture it is not used simply to represent the Other; it is used to represent our own thoughts *about* the Other.”¹³

II. Ars Gallica, the French Perception of Race, and Massenet’s Le Cid

During the final days of the Franco-Prussian war in 1871, a group of French composers including Camille Saint-Saëns, Gabriel Fauré, and César Franck created the Société Nationale de Musique. The organization was “designed to encourage the composition and performance of what they referred to as ‘serious’ French music”¹⁴ and their slogan was “Ars Gallica”, Latin for French Art.

¹² Etzion, “Spanish Music as Perceived in Western Music Historiography: A Case of the Black Legend?”, 96.

¹³ Scott, “Orientalism and Musical Style”, 314.

¹⁴ Strasser, “The Société Nationale and Its Adversaries: The Musical Politics of L’Invasion germanique in the 1870s”, 225.

There were many reasons for the creation of the Société Nationale de Musique. The impending defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian war was bound to have its negative consequences on the morale of the nation. The idea of musical patriotism had been around long before the Franco-Prussian war, but it became even more prominent and important in the years following. In his article, *The Société Nationale and Its Adversaries: The Musical Politics of L'Invasion germanique in the 1870s* Michael Strasser describes that “through the promotion of a worthier music, the founders hoped to contribute to the rehabilitation of their defeated and humiliated renewal”¹⁵. Although music is an important part of our culture and identity today, in the age of nineteenth century nationalism, it was one of *the* defining markers of what identified a nation and what made it distinct from others.

Another important reason for the creation of the Société Nationale de Musique was the widespread influence that Germans had in classical music during the early and mid-nineteenth century. In the years leading up to the Franco-Prussian war, France had not produced a great and “serious” composer other than Hector Berlioz (1803-1869). Much of the music in the French concert halls around and following Berlioz’s death was written by Germans. Strasser articulates that “‘serious’ music had long been synonymous with that emanating from across the Rhine”¹⁶. As history would come to see in the next 30-40 years, the founders of the Société Nationale de Musique arguably succeeded in creating their own unique style of “serious” French music. However, during the early days of the organization, there was much debate about what that meant and where influence and inspiration should come from. Opposition to the Société

¹⁵ Strasser, “The Société Nationale and Its Adversaries: The Musical Politics of L’Invasion germanique in the 1870s”, 236.

¹⁶ Ibid, 238.

Nationale de Musique came from musicians and composers who believed that the members were too influenced by German music, and particularly Wagner¹⁷.

Despite the various motivations for the creation of the Société Nationale de Musique, the overarching theme throughout all of them was the idea of establishing national identity in an era of nationalism. Pasler makes the point that “music reinforced a sense of connection to the world - the present to the past, the local to the global.”¹⁸ Pasler’s acknowledgment of how important music was to national identity following the Franco-Prussian war just shows how crucial the Société Nationale de Musique was and how music could be used as a way to connect with others and more importantly, oneself.

Looking at the surrounding cultural background and history of post Franco-Prussian war France allows us to critically think about pieces of art during this time that depict the exotic. Again going back to the question of “why Spain?”, in the quest to create a strong French identity, French artists and composers often used Spain’s distinct characteristics and history to prop themselves up and exhibit superiority. Alonso emphasizes “the French needed Spain to be exotic in order to continue to consider itself the only country capable of exercising Latin cultural leadership.”¹⁹

Jules Massenet (1842-1912) was a prolific opera composer in late nineteenth century France and he was one of the founding members of the Société Nationale de Musique. In 1885,

¹⁷ Ibid, 247.

¹⁸ Pasler, “Theorizing Race in Nineteenth-Century France: Music as Emblem of Identity”, 460.

¹⁹ Alonso, “Creación musical, cultura popular y construcción nacional en la España contemporánea”, 84.
Spanish Translation: “Los franceses necesitaban que España fuera exótica para poder seguir considerándose el único país capaz de ejercer un liderazgo cultural latino”

he adapted the play, *Le Cid*, by seventeenth century playwright Pierre Corneille into a four-act opera. The play and opera detail the medieval love story (and all its complications) between Rodrigue, a Spanish knight, and Chimene, a count's daughter. Meanwhile, Rodrigue and his army continue to fight the Moors advancing into Spanish territory.

Le Cid is French for El Cid; a Spanish derivative of the Arabic word meaning “lord” or “master”. Le Cid is a perfect example of the Spanish grandee character; one of the oldest and most quintessential archetypes relating to Spain. James Parakilas even uses Corneille’s *Le Cid* in describing this character in his article, *How Spain Got a Soul*, by saying that “for centuries, the French literary and theatrical imagination had defined Spain for itself through the figure of the grandee, the male character of noble estate who represented either the highest ideals of chivalry or the impossibility of living up to such ideals: the Cid, as recreated by Corneille.”²⁰

One interpretation of France’s affinity for the Spanish grandee can be read as “reinforced French identification with the Spanish Christians in the reconquest of the Iberian peninsula from the Moors,”²¹ This particular view of the grandee character as described in Christoforidis’ article, *Re-Imagining the Reconquista*, sheds light on how the subject matter of *Le Cid* was perhaps meant to be a positive representation of French values. He elaborates on this further by saying that “Massenet’s opera was written from a decidedly French point of view, and his Spaniards could be construed as surrogate Frenchmen effectively mapping the reconquest of Spain onto the French colonial enterprise.”²² Christoforidis’ analysis of *Le Cid* is compelling because rather than focusing on how Spain is depicted as exotic, he demonstrates how medieval Spain is used as an exotic locale for France to express its nationalist and colonialist sentiments via the grandee.

²⁰ Parakilas, “How Spain Got a Soul”, 140.

²¹ Christoforidis, “Re-Imagining the Reconquista”, 265.

²² Ibid, 264.

Le Cid does not have any of the traditional sonic markers of Spanishness we tend to see in classical music (use of the augmented second, melismatic writing, etc). However, because musical exoticism can exist outside of composition and style, we'll be looking at how Massenet constructs two dance sequences, the contexts in which they occur, and how because of that dance can be read as a way to mark Spain as exotic.

Before dissecting the two dance sequences, It is important to look at the cultural history of Spanish dance exoticism. The history between French and Russian ballet and exoticism is quite long, complicated and would truthfully be a whole other paper. However, James Parakilas succinctly explains the origin of the Spanish dance exoticism tradition:

“Marius Petipa, the French dancer and choreographer who became the main arbiter of Russian ballet for the entire second half of the nineteenth century, learned Spanish stage dance (of the bolero school) in Madrid in the early 1840s, would have stayed in Spain and founded a national school of ballet if he could have, and instead migrated to Saint Petersburg, where he made Spanish dance one of the favorite forms of ballet exoticism.”²³

Throughout the nineteenth century, it became a ballet convention to have a series of exotic dances, one of which was almost always a Spanish dance. Given the history of Spanish ballet exoticism, it is not entirely surprising that *Le Cid* has two Spanish dance sequences that could be read as exotic²⁴. As we look at them, we will be analyzing how we aesthetically view

²³ Parakilas, “How Spain Got a Soul”, 171.

²⁴ I am not a dancer or a ballet scholar, so I will not be examining the actual dances and choreography typically used in various productions of *Le Cid*. Rather, we will look at the art of dance as a whole and all of the connotations and perceptions surrounding dance.

and understand each dance sequence both in the context of the opera and in narratives told about Spain.

The first dance sequence in *Le Cid* takes place in Act II of the opera. The Infanta (Princess) of the Iberian Kingdoms of Spain and Portugal introduces a Castillane, Andalouse, Aragonaise, Aubade, Catalane, Madrilène, and Navarraise dance, all corresponding with a region of Spain.

Massenet's choice of using the Infanta as the agent for sharing these dances is important to consider during this analysis. The Infanta is a royal Spanish woman. When it comes to Spanish representation, and particularly Spanish dance representation, it is important to understand the implications and associations of Spanish dance with Romani/Gitano culture, as well as perceptions of femininity.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Europeans were fascinated with the Romani people around Europe thanks to the mass publication of travelogues, diaries, and early ethnography. Spanish Gitano women were of particular interest and Flamenco dance was an important part of that. Flamenco (which was coming into mainstream European culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) has Byzantine, Jewish, and Gitano origins²⁵. Flamenco music sounded and looked very different to Europeans who were used to strict allemandes, gavottes and other courtly dances. As a result, there was a “public appreciation and demand for Gypsy²⁶ dance [that had] often been conditioned by the idea that it is unadulterated by civilization, natural and

²⁵ Piotrowska, “Gypsy Music in European Culture”, 67-68.

²⁶ In the last few years, there has been more public awareness surrounding the use of the term “Gypsy” and the negative connotations that the term has. I will be using the terms “Romani” and “Gitano” in this paper to describe the general ethnic group once referred to as Gypsies, and to describe the specific subgroup located in Southern Spain, respectively. Because some of my source material was written prior to the 2010s, my direct quotes from those readings will include the word “Gypsy” and is not meant to offend or exclude.

original”²⁷ Further elaborating on that idea, Anna Piotrowska describes in her book, *Gypsy Music in European Culture*, that “the exotic aspect to the dance appeared, in Engel’s view, in women’s performances characterized as ‘wild’.”²⁸ Understanding that there is a male gaze cast upon the dancing feminine Gitano body and that it is viewed as uncivilized and in a “natural” manner harkens back to the Etzion’s point I highlighted in the introduction. Spain’s exotic past and location signify that Spaniards possess all of the “natural” emotions and their dance reflects that in a very observable and kinesthetic way. Although the Infanta is far from Gitano in terms of her blood status, ultimately the act sharing these regional Spanish dances has exotic connotations because of the long historical association of Spanish dance with the Gitano people.

Besides the Infanta introducing this particular representation of the Spanish dancing female body, the performance history itself is also rather interesting to look at with regard to exoticism. Although the Infanta introduces the dances, she doesn’t actually dance them. Rather an unnamed ballerina soloist leads them. The ballerina for whom this regional dance suite was originally written for²⁹ is Rosita Mauri and she was a very popular Spanish ballet dancer during the nineteenth century. With regard to her Spanish background, Michael Christiforidis says in his book *Carmen and The Staging of Spain: Recasting Bizet's Opera in the Belle Epoque* that “at times Mauri’s Spanish background and much-admired dark hair provided the excuse for casting her in exotic roles.”³⁰ Although it is likely that the woman playing the Infanta in any production of *Le Cid* does not have much dance experience (since the Infanta is a sung role), it is interesting to think about how Massenet is almost protecting the royal character from having to dance and display her body in an exotic and potentially sexual way. The royal princess of Spain will not

²⁷ Ibid, 66.

²⁸ Ibid, 54.

²⁹ Christoforidis, “Carmen and The Staging of Spain: Recasting Bizet's Opera in the Belle Epoque”, 46.

³⁰ Ibid, 46.

have to dance these lowly regional dances with their implications of “otherness”. So instead, he gives them to an unnamed character, who, at the premiere, just so happens to be the premium exotic prima ballerina of the late nineteenth century.



Fig 1: Rosita Mauri in her Le Cid Act II costume³¹

The other dance sequence in Act III is rather just a short scene with some dancing involved. Rodrigue and his soldiers are at their camp drinking and being entertained by their Moorish prisoners. The music that Massenet wrote for this scene has hardly any inklings of Spanish or Moorish exoticism. The soldiers and Rodrigue, drunkenly singing, are celebrating their recent victory against a group of Moors. The Moors don't retaliate, and they don't sing their own counter-song. They are merely just props in this scene displaying the heroic protagonist's

³¹ Sánchez, S. 2013. “Rosita Mauri, La Española Que Pintó Degas.” August 18, 2013. <https://balletomanos.com/2013/08/18/rosita-mauri-la-espanola-que-pinto-degas/>.

success. Another interpretation of this scene is that it could be viewed as a moment of comic relief. Massenet was one of the few French opera composers who would regularly mix elements of opera seria and opera comique, noticeably seen in his opera *Manon*³². Musically, there may not be any hints of exoticism towards Spain and the Moors, but using Locke's "All the Music in Full Context" Paradigm, it is clear that Massenet is trying to establish and keep the local color of medieval Spain by including the Moorish prisoners in this scene at all and by having them be essentially human props. This dance scene is a bit different from the one in Act II because it is less extensive and does not go to the same lengths to associate exotic dance with the country of Spain. Nevertheless, it is still worth analyzing because it is another instance of dance being used as a device to exoticize and it immediately marks the Moors as the adversarial "others" despite not sounding musically exotic.

With regard to the question of "why Spain?", dance is the short answer when analyzing *Le Cid*. Spain and France both have very unique and different dance histories from each other and the choice to combine them in these two dance sequences is seemingly very innocent (since the opera takes place in Spain). However, there are a lot of exotic connotations and history behind how dance is aesthetically understood due to the connection of Spanish dance with Gitano culture. In addition, there is also the added element of identity. National dance and framing one type of dance as "Spanish" helps establish difference between France and Spain, something that was at the forefront of music following the Franco-Prussian war and during the era of the Société Nationale de Musique.

³² Franke, "The Impact of Jules Massenet's Operas in Milan, 1893-1903", 83.

III. Medievalism, Jewishness, and Wagner's Parsifal

Throughout the nineteenth century, German Romantics looked to the past for inspiration. The artistic, literary, and architectural aesthetic that was achieved through this retrospective look to the past was called medievalism. Medievalism is “the romantic longing for the rebirth of the Middle Ages.”³³ Although the Middle Ages were looked upon with a romantic lens of desire and longing, medievalism can be viewed as somewhat of a rejection or contradiction to the movement of Romanticism. Medievalism praises masculinity, patriotism, and brotherhood, whereas Romanticism is often described as a more feminine aesthetic. So, given that contradiction, why was medievalism such a popular aesthetic during the Romantic era? The answer lies within the budding concept of nation and nationalism.

As described in the previous section about *Le Cid*, when the idea of the nation came to fruition, intellectuals began trying to identify national characteristics that could define a nation and connect people through something shared. Besides using race as a marker of nationality and identity, some Romantics “were convinced that these national characteristics [were] never as pronounced as in the Middle Ages”³⁴ and that the “original moral character of a people, its customs and peculiarities, must be regarded as sacred.”³⁵ German artists, writers, and composers in particular were inspired by those ideas of identification through a shared and sacred medieval history. Richard Wagner capitalized on this concept greatly, but more on that in a little bit.

Due to the profundity of medievalism across Germany, and later other European countries, scholars have explored the different uses of and approaches to medievalism that were

³³ Davis, “Medievalism in the Romantic: Some Early Contributors”, 34.

³⁴ Kohn, “Romanticism and the Rise of German Nationalism”, 446.

³⁵ Ibid, 460.

taken by intellectuals during the Romantic movement. Historian David Barclay created a taxonomy describing the five types of medievalism that he has found in Romantic art and literature.

Cosmopolitan: predates the Napoleonic wars and is an “innocent nationalist enthusiasm”³⁶ for a different period of history.

Christian-German: a rejection of French ideas and values and glorifies Protestant religion and the history of religion in Germany.

National-Liberal: connected to liberal thinkers of the nineteenth century being disinterested in logic and reason.

Escapist: most prevalent during the time of the Industrial Revolution, “rejects industrialization and urban mass society”³⁷ and longs for a simpler time.

Official: “use of medieval imagery to promote the empire as legitimate and unified through a long-standing history.”³⁸ According to Barclay’s model, official medievalism was exclusively happening after the end of the Franco-Prussian war in 1871.

I wanted to introduce Barclay’s model not only to show a progression of Medievalism through the nineteenth century, but also to establish how Wagner’s use of Medievalism in *Parsifal* was not only a stylistic choice, but also a political one. As I will discuss later, Wagner’s choice of the temporal and geographic setting of medieval Spain in *Parsifal* was not random and is an example of official medievalism being used to promote the German empire through the heroism of Parsifal and the knights of the Holy Grail.

³⁶ Stokes, “Medievalisms in Early Nineteenth-Century German Musical Thought”, 19..

³⁷ Ibid, 19.

³⁸ Ibid, 19.

Richard Wagner's (1813-1883) final work, *Parsifal*, takes place in the Montserrat mountain range just north of Barcelona, Spain during the Middle Ages, and takes place over the course of many years in various parts of Catalonia. *Parsifal* is the story of the knight, Parzifal, on a journey to save the Knights of the Holy Grail by retrieving the Holy Spear from the magician, Klingsor. The Holy Grail and Holy Spear are incredibly important religious relics from the crucifixion of Christ and were common subjects of medievalist art and literature. This is not the first opera Wagner has set in the Middle Ages, but it is his first and only work set in Spain. This temporal and geographic backdrop gives us a distinct glance into the way that medieval Spain was perceived not only by Wagner, but by his contemporary audiences. Although the characters of *Parsifal* never fight outside Moorish or Jewish influence directly, there are allusions of something foreign and unsafe through the character, Klingsor. He is meant to represent the exotic, adversarial "other" and he has long been regarded as a Jewish caricature³⁹. I believe that that interpretation of Klingsor allows for a nuanced reading of Spanish exoticism in a work that seemingly doesn't have any of the traditional sonic markers of "Spanish" music. In this analysis, I will look at Klingsor's character as a Jew to show how his racial difference is used as a device to exoticize Spain and label them as "other".

Before I continue, I would like to clarify an important point. Although there was an extremely prominent Muslim influence in medieval Spain, I will be focusing primarily on the interpretation of Klingsor's suggested Jewishness. I believe that the exclusion of Muslim

³⁹ Kinderman, "Wagner's Parsifal", 22.

characters and influence in this work about medieval Spain already says a lot about Wagner's and his audience's perception of race and the "other", but that could be a whole other paper.

It is no secret that Wagner had rather public displays of antisemitism, such as his essay *Das Judenthum in der Musik* (Jewishness in Music), his complex (and sometimes envious) relationship with Jewish musicians and conductors⁴⁰, and his request that the conductor of *Parsifal*, German-Jew Hermann Levi, be baptized before the premiere⁴¹. Given all of that, one might find it a little surprising that Wagner would choose medieval Spain, a country far from being racially pure and with a large Jewish influence, to be the muse to create his final, sacred work. I believe that Wagner's choice to set the opera in medieval Spain was crucial, not necessarily for the plot, but for the political and medieval ideals that Wagner was trying to uphold. In addition, I would also go back to my point in the introduction about the idea of a safe adventure. The setting of Spain is perfect because it is just geographically exotic enough, and the Middle Ages provide a temporal exoticism that was in style and was encouraged following the Franco-Prussian War, as per official Medievalism.

The second reason is that the power of difference and "othering" through this geographic, temporal, and racial exoticism was greater than what the country lacked in racial purity. Writing from the perspective of a Spaniard, musicologist Celsa Alonso describes how the Spanish "other" was signified by religion by saying that "the explanation is that the 'we' cannot develop without referring to the idea of the other: in the case of Spain, 'the other' had a religious look and identifies with Jews and Muslims."⁴²

⁴⁰ Werner, "Jews Around Richard and Cosima Wagner", 177.

⁴¹ Cusack, "Wagner's Parsifal: Christianity, Celibacy, and Medieval Brotherhood as Ideal in Modernity", 18.

⁴² Alonso, "Creación Musical, Cultura Popular y Construcción Nacional En La España Contemporánea", 93.
Spanish Translation: "La explicación está en que el 'nosotros' no puede desarrollarse sin referirse a la idea del otro: en el caso de España, 'el otro' tenía un cariz religioso y se identifica con los judíos y musulmanes".

The final reason for the setting of medieval Spain is that the impact of the story of *Parsifal* and the Holy Grail is not solely based on the content. The impact is also felt by creating an evil and adversarial “other” in the image of the medieval Spanish Jew, knowingly or unknowingly, and as a result Wagner elevates Parsifal, the German Christian audience surrogate.

When looking at *Parsifal* and the choice to set the opera in medieval Spain, it is important to understand how Klingsor is coded as Jewish. Going back to Locke’s “All the Music in Full Context” paradigm, exoticism can be viewed not only through the music, but the extra-musical elements incorporated into a performance, such as references to a character’s non-Whiteness. Throughout the opera, there are several instances that suggest Klingsor’s potential Judaism. Each of these instances can be extrapolated to show how German nationalist and medievalist themes use Spain as a locale for the exotic and racial “other”, rather than as a true representation of medieval Spain.

The audience first learns of Klingsor’s past through the elderly knight of the Grail, Gurnemanz. Hektor K.T. Yan suggests in his article, *The Jewish Question Revisited: Anti-Semitism and Race in Wagner’s Parsifal*, that “the audience comes to know Klingsor’s past through a third party, Gurnemanz, [and that] has important implications.”⁴³ One of those implications is that Klingsor cannot be trusted to tell his own story. Wagner’s decision to have Gurnemanz explain Klingsor’s backstory is rather telling of Wagner’s own thoughts on Klingsor and how he wants the audience to perceive him and leads the audience to believe that Klingsor is untrustworthy. Going back to Scott’s point about exoticism representing a person’s thoughts rather than the country itself, Wagner is not saying that Spaniards are untrustworthy as much as

⁴³ Yan, “The Jewish Question Revisited: Anti-Semitism and Race in Wagner’s Parsifal”, 360.

he is saying that Spain is a location for untrustworthy (Jewish) people to exist during the Middle Ages.

Besides the implication of Klingsor's deceptiveness, the actual backstory itself lends to rather negative connotations of Jewishness and infers negatively to "otherness". Klingsor's self-induced castration can be read as a much more dramatic and perverted version of circumcision, which is an important custom in Jewish culture. In addition, it also emasculates Klingsor.

Parsifal is truly a very celibate, and religious masculine opera. Kundry is the only named female character in the whole opera and themes of brotherhood and celibacy⁴⁴ are quite prevalent. By highlighting Klingsor's sexual difference from the main abstinent cast, it is yet another way to elevate the holy protagonist, and diminish the exotic antagonist.

The subtext of the stories we tell as a society are important to analyze because they can tell us a lot about what is valued and what we believe about ourselves and others. Whether implicitly or explicitly, Wagner is telling his audience through this story that Klingsor's sexuality can be read as a marker of difference.

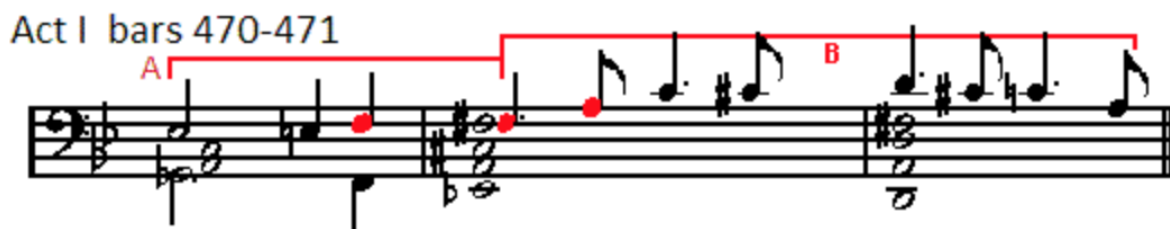
The setting of Spain is also important to consider in how to read Klingsor's Jewishness upon his introduction. Wagner was a very intentional composer and writer and the first time Klingsor himself is introduced in the score his castle is described as being on the "southern slope of the same mountains which looks towards Moorish Spain."⁴⁵ Immediately, this associates Klingsor with Muslim and Jewish occupied Spain.

All of this (his backstory, the implication of circumcision, and his castle being associated with the exotic) is happening before Klingsor even sings a note. This is a great example of how exoticism can be implied and interpreted without musical cues pointing towards a specific

⁴⁴ Cusack, "Wagner's Parsifal: Christianity, Celibacy, and Medieval Brotherhood as Ideal in Modernity", 10.

⁴⁵ Young, "The Southern Slope of Monsalvat", 31.

national style of music and it is in this manner that Wagner set the stage for his villain to be different from the rest of the cast.



⁴⁶ Everett, D. 2024. "Parsifal Motif 14: Magic (Sorcery). Thematic List | Monsalvat." April 24, 2024. <https://www.monsalvat.no/motif14.htm>.



Fig. 3: Grail motif reduction⁴⁷

Yan argues in *The Jewish Question Revisited: Anti-Semitism and Race in Wagner's Parsifal* that the motifs “can be seen as no more than a device to highlight the difference between the holy and the unholy, the threat of Klingsor is particularly insidious due to the potential danger of ‘blood contamination.’”⁴⁸ Wagner’s use of leitmotifs throughout his operas is incredibly intentional and it is no accident that Klingsor’s motif is so harmonically dissonant while the Grail motif is so diatonic.

The difference between Klingsor’s motif and the Grail motif is so important that in William Kinderman’s book, *Wagner's Parsifal*, there is an entire chapter dedicated to analyzing the various ways the Grail motif interacts with the Anti-Grail motif (Kinderman’s name for Klingsor’s motif).

As visible in the musical examples on the previous page, the Grail and Anti-Grail motifs are not that different intervallically. Kinderman analyzes the intervallic structure of the two motifs and discusses how the intervallic similarity works: “hence the rising major third, minor

⁴⁷ Everett, D. 2024. “Parsifal Motif 02: Holy Grail. Thematic List. | Monsalvat.” April 24, 2024. <https://www.monsalvat.no/motif02.htm>.

⁴⁸ Yan, “The Jewish Question Revisited: Anti-Semitism and Race in Wagner’s Parsifal”, 350-351.

third, and whole step at the outset of *Parsifal* can be replaced by two minor thirds followed by semitones, as in one of the main musical figures associated with Klingsor and Kundry.”⁴⁹

Kinderman also comments on this saying that “the extent to which Wagner sets the music of the Grail and the anti-Grail against one another, allowing the same underlying intervallic shapes to assume forms so strongly contrasting that they stand for antithetical perspectives.”⁵⁰ Finally, before beginning an extensive musical analysis of the use of the Grail and Anti-Grail motifs, Kinderman points out that “it is not just the contrast between chromaticism and diatonicism that is at issue here, but the use of such contrast in conjunction with other factors including tempo, melodic direction, timbre, and counterpoint.”⁵¹

The similarity between the two motifs is what makes them compelling. It is almost as if Wagner is saying that Klingsor is not that different from “us” intervallically, or at his core, but there is something unholy and sinister still at work inside him that will always mark him as different. This is a noticeably similar thought to how German Jews were viewed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were often seen as “not that different from us” and that they can be saved through renouncing Judaism and being baptized. A parallel instance of this in *Parsifal* can be seen in Kundry’s baptism in Act III. Kundry’s character is often construed as the “wandering Jew” and her baptism in Act III is what sets the final events of the opera in motion. In the eyes of many Germans, her baptism allows her to be close to equals with the rest of the main cast when she dies, thus saving her from damnation.

Although the interaction of the Grail and Klingsor’s motifs is an interesting aspect of *Parsifal*, it would be rather tangential to my argument to dissect them further. The way that the

⁴⁹ Kinderman, “Wagner’s *Parsifal*”, 228.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 227.

⁵¹ Ibid, 228.

idea of Grail vs Anti-Grail reflects on Spain proves that Klingsor's Jewishness and lack of Christian purity, "contaminates" the music. The music of the Grail is diatonic and easy on the ears. Whereas Klingsor's motif is not that different intervallically, but is rather chromatic and uncomfortable. Spain was the mysterious neighbor to the south with traces of "contamination" due to thousands of years of conquest by the Muslims and Jews. Of course, Klingsor's music would be in direct contrast to the pure and holy music of the Grail.

If you listen to or watch *Parsifal*, there truly are no sonic or tangible markers of Spanishness in the opera; it is not imitating anything. However, the opera, and Klingsor's character in particular, are meant to represent greater themes of medievalism in order to promote the rising German Empire, as per official medievalism, by using the device of antisemitism to show that Spain is a multi-heritage, mixed religion locale in contrast to the desired racial and religious purity displayed by Parsifal and the Knights of the Holy Grail.

IV. Conclusion

Massenet's *Le Cid* opera uses dance as a device to exoticize Spain. The regional dance sequence in Act II has few elements of stereotypical Spanish music. However, the association of Spain and Spanish dance comes with cultural associations of Gitano culture, which has an extensive history of exoticization. In addition, the performance history of *Le Cid* also lends to an interpretation of exoticism. Rosita Mauri was the Spanish prima ballerina for whom the dance sequence was originally written, and she had often been the ballerina of choice for exotic dance scenes in late nineteenth century French opera. The dance scene in Act III of *Le Cid* has hardly any hints of musical exoticism but the scene features Moorish prisoners as background characters used to give the scene more local color. It is through these two specific scenes that

Massenet uses dance in *Le Cid* as a way to subtly highlight the exotic parts of Spain, such as the Gitanos and the presence of the Moors.

Wagner's *Parsifal* uses Jewishness as a device to depict medieval Spain as exotic. Using Barclay's taxonomy of medievalism, we can clearly see that medievalism in *Parsifal* (as well as other post Franco-Prussian war works of art) is official medievalism meant to promote the German Empire through a shared history. The antagonist, Klingsor, is often interpreted as a Jewish caricature. The ways that Klingsor is depicted as Jewish have negative and exotic undertones. First, Klingsor is not trusted to share his own backstory with the audience. Rather, it is told by a more trustworthy Knight. Second, the score description of Klingsor's castle heavily associates him with Moorish Spain and implies exoticness. Finally, Klingsor's leitmotif and the Grail leitmotif share a lot of similarities intervallically but Klingsor's is much more dissonant. All of these suggestions of Jewishness lead the audience to associate Klingsor with the exotic and antagonistic "other" because of the history and prevalence of Jews in medieval Spain.

The way that we relate to and understand music tells us a great deal not just about the culture and environment it was created in, but also about ourselves and how we view the world. What is exotic versus what is not exotic has been something that we as musicians have had subtly ingrained in us from a very young age. Works like *Le Cid* and *Parsifal* are special cases because the types of exoticism that they engage have political motivations following the Franco-Prussian war and rather than use typical conventions of Spanish musical exoticism, they use the two surrogate devices of dance and Jewishness to promote themselves, at the expense of the "other": Spain.

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