

Siemens Festival Night
Bayreuth Festival 2011

***Lohengrin*: The Cast, the Work, the Production**

Romantic Opera in Three Acts

Libretto: Richard Wagner
Original language: German
First performance: Weimar, August 28, 1850

Cast

Conductor:	Andris Nelsons
Stage Director:	Hans Neuenfels
Set Design:	Reinhard von der Thannen
Costume Design:	Reinhard von der Thannen
Lighting Design:	Franck Evin
Video:	Björn Verloh
Dramaturge and Assistant Stage Director:	Henry Arnold
Concept Assistant:	Susanne Øglænd
Chorus Director:	Eberhard Friedrich
Lohengrin:	Klaus Florian Vogt
Heinrich der Vogler:	Georg Zeppenfeld
Elsa von Brabant:	Annette Dasch
Friedrich von Telramund:	Tómas Tómasson
Ortrud:	Petra Lang
The King's Herald:	Samuel Youn
First Noble:	Stefan Heibach
Second Noble:	Willem Van der Heyden
Third Noble:	Rainer Zaun
Fourth Noble:	Christian Tschelebiev

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The Work

Characters

Heinrich der Vogler, King of Germany (Bass) | Lohengrin (Tenor) | Elsa von Brabant (Soprano) | Duke Gottfried, her Young Brother (Silent Role) | Friedrich von Telramund, a Count of Brabant (Bass) | Ortrud, His Wife (Soprano) | The King's Herald (Bass) | Four Nobles of Brabant (two Tenors, two Basses) | Four Noble Pages (Sopranos and Altos)

Place and Time

Antwerp, early 10th century.

Act One

On the banks of the Schelde River, King Heinrich summons the men of Brabant to fight the Hungarians ("Gott grüss' euch, liebe Männer"). Before the King's court, Count Friedrich von Telramund brings a charge against Elsa, his ward, whose hand he had once unsuccessfully sought in marriage. He accuses her of murdering her youngest brother Gottfried, who has mysteriously disappeared. He also presents to the King his new consort Ortrud, the pagan daughter of Radbod, Prince of the Frisians ("Dank, König dir"). Elsa is called upon to answer the charges before the King. Instead, she speaks as though in a trance of a knight who appeared to her and promised his help ("Einsam in trüben Tagen"). None of the knights present dares to fight Telramund on her behalf in a trial by combat. The Herald calls twice for a champion, without an answer; Elsa sinks deep into prayer. Then, at the Herald's third call, a knight in silver armor appears in a boat, drawn by a swan. He tells the King he will fight to defend Elsa's innocence, but demands in return the promise that he will never be asked about his name or parentage ("Nun sei bedankt mein lieber Schwan... Nie sollst du mich befragen"). Against his men's advice, Telramund prepares for the combat, for which the King gives the signal according to ancient tradition, after a solemn prayer ("Mein Herr und Gott, Dich ruf ich jetzt"). Telramund falls after a brief fight. The Swan Knight spares his life. All present recognize that the Knight is sent from above, and celebrate the victory of justice.

Act Two

By the rules of trial by combat, Telramund's defeat has made him an outlaw. At night he lurks before the castle walls with his demonic wife Ortrud ("Erhebe dich, Genossin meiner Schmach"). He says it was only under her evil influence that he accused Elsa. She convinces him that the Knight is a sorcerer, whose power could be broken by the slightest injury. He should also try to shake Elsa's faith in Lohengrin, to get her to ask him the forbidden question. Elsa, blissfully happy, appears on the balcony ("Euch Lüften, die mein Klagen"). Ortrud feigns contrition, arousing Elsa's pity. As Elsa descends to her, Ortrud invokes the pagan gods' help for her dark plans ("Entweihte Götter"). In the morning, the warriors throng into the castle courtyard. The Herald announces Elsa's impending marriage to the Knight, who has also been appointed general in the war against the Hungarians. Suddenly, Ortrud bars Elsa's way into the cathedral, scornfully demanding the name and parentage of her bridegroom. Lohengrin and the King calm the distraught Elsa. But now the outlawed Telramund emerges from the church, where he has sought sanctuary, and before all present accuses the Knight

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of sorcery. Lohengrin again asks the doubting Elsa whether she trusts him. She confesses her boundless love for him. The wedding procession enters the cathedral.

Act Three

The King solemnly escorts the couple into their wedding chamber (chorus: “Treulich geführt”). Alone for the first time, they sing of their love for one another (duet: “Das süsse Lied verhallt”). But Elsa is still plagued with doubt. The Knight can still restrain her with loving words (“Atmest du nicht mit mir die süssen Düfte”). She grows increasingly insistent, until even his earnest warning (“Höchstes Vertrau'n”) produces no effect. As though in a vision, she sees her beloved disappearing with the Swan – and at last asks the fatal question. At that point Telramund bolts into the room with a sword and attacks Lohengrin. The Knight cuts him down, and orders his men to bear the corpse before the King, to whom he will answer. The next morning, Lohengrin and Elsa appear before the King and the gathered army. Lohengrin accuses the assassin Telramund, but also Elsa, whom alone he must answer about his origins. He has been sent by his father, the Grail King Parzival, to help the innocently accused Elsa. But now, because he is no longer unknown, he must return (“In fernem Land”: the “Grail Narrative”). The Swan has already appeared on the river with the boat to take the Knight home. He surrenders his sword, his horn, and a ring to Elsa, to be given to her brother, whose return he says is imminent (“Mein lieber Schwan”). Then Ortrud steps forth in wild triumph and confesses that she herself had transformed Gottfried into the Swan, from which he can never be set free now that Lohengrin is leaving. Lohengrin falls into profound prayer. The Grail Dove appears, the Swan sinks into the water, and Gottfried, set free, steps onto the river bank. As the Dove draws the boat and Lohengrin away and the Brabantians profess their reverence to the young Duke, Elsa falls dead.

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The Production

by Henry Arnold

NO REASON FOR HOPE

Wagner's *Lohengrin* is concerned from the very start with the search for truth. Even if the action at first concerns an accusation and the reconstruction of a crime, it quickly becomes clear that the situation is a tangled one. Human insight is unable to penetrate it; these are events concealed from conventional attempts at an explanation.

In other words: a game is being played, but the rules are obviously being kept from the players.

The attempt continues: at the moment when all seems most hopeless, Wagner brings his central character into play from beyond – Lohengrin. But this new character, who appears to know more, sets a condition for joining the game: his knowledge must remain secret.

The experimental nature of this fundamental situation is the starting point for the production by Hans Neuenfels and his team (production design: Reinhard von der Thannen).

The space is strictly geometric. Everything is organized and has a clearly defined function. It is reminiscent of a laboratory, a place for experiments and autopsies. The characters are exposed and insecure, their emotions are put under the microscope. The space forces the most delicate nerves and blood vessels into the light, it releases what is innermost and turns it inside out. This environment – which might be called clinical – extends even into the choice of materials. There is nothing naturalistic here, none of the visuals is a reproduction of something else. The visuals too remain only ideas.

Three questions press to the fore in any attempt to come to terms with *Lohengrin*:

I. Who is Lohengrin? II. The forbidden question: What's that about? III. And what on earth are the Grail and its Law supposed to say to us?

A fourth question is quickly answered: Wagner chooses a setting that is remote, to be sure, but historically specific – the reign of Saxon King Heinrich I. But that is not the point – *Lohengrin* is not a historical drama. Even more: amid that setting, Wagner tells a fabulous tale that is somehow interwoven with Christian mythology. But that too is not the point.

Wagner's music always has something to do with designs for the world, the individual, and society. He uses myths to reveal how deeply tangled people are in their circumstances.

The key to this strange (and also often parodied) story does not consist in naming or interpreting these complex circumstances. The key lies in the characters themselves.

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A man is thrown into a troubled, uncertain world. He has – as we learn only very late in the game – a mission, and he is subject to a law. And then he falls in love.

Lohengrin is looking for a woman “*who will love him unconditionally,*” Wagner wrote in 1851 in his *Communication to My Friends*. He yearns “*for the only thing that can redeem him from his loneliness, that can still his yearning – for love, to be loved, to be understood through love.*”

This is the hope that love can free him from his existential loneliness.

And the same idea is also linked with the need for unconditional trust, as a radical thesis. But the experiment completely fails.

Failure is inevitable. Nature is stronger. In other words: the circumstance of our finite, temporal, narrowly limited existence is insuperable, and therefore – as Wagner writes in a letter as early as 1846 – “*God would be wiser to spare us from revelations, because after all, he cannot relax the laws of nature: Nature – here, human nature – must take its revenge, and destroy the revelation.*”

There is no escape from this world. *Lohengrin*, as Wagner would later say, is his saddest opera.

This then is the answer to the riddle of the forbidden question and the Law of the Grail. They do not come from outside. They are part of the whole idea, they are inherent in Wagner’s world design.

Lohengrin is an entirely secular, searching, inwardly torn man, who makes a radical, unheard-of demand – from himself, from life, from others – and fails. And he is precisely not an outsider who descends “*from a splendid realm of unsuffering, unearned, cold magnificence,*” who is bound “*will-lessly*” to an “*unnatural law.*”

The group, the people, the masses – and the Chorus is certainly one of the protagonists in *Lohengrin* – tell essentially the same story. People want to exist in a context, and try to expand their existence beyond simply being there, to give it a meaning that points beyond their narrow temporal, physical bounds.

So they greedily take up any opportunity. Telramund, the honest warrior whom Ortrud mercilessly consumes with her hatred and thirst for revenge, is left by the wayside; Lohengrin is proclaimed the new role model, so to speak sight unseen.

Nevertheless, they are able to strip away the first shell of their existence – the Rat. A different uniform comes forth. But this experiment too goes awry.

In the end, in the figure of Gottfried, something new and unknown emerges. It replaces – in purely biological terms – the old generation. And in its turn it too will be replaced someday. There is nothing more.