

An Introduction to Wagner's *Lohengrin*

(A paper given to the Patrons and Friends of Opera Australia, Sydney 2001)

Peter Bassett

In October 1877, Wagner received a letter from Emil Sander of Melbourne, telling him of the recent staging of the first Australian production of *Lohengrin*. The opera had been sung in Italian, as was the custom in English-speaking countries at the time. Two years earlier it had been performed in London for the first time, in Italian, and a year before that in New York, also in Italian.

Cosima Wagner referred in her diary to Sander's letter to her husband. Her entry for 21st October 1877 reads: "He receives a letter from a theatre director in Melbourne, according to which *Lohengrin* last month made its ceremonious entry there, too."

Wagner's reply to Sander is now in the Grainger Museum. In it he expressed the wish that Australians should "endeavour to have my works produced in English; for only then can they be fully understood by an English-speaking audience". Of course, those were the days before surtitles!

Since then, *Lohengrin* has been performed in Australia on numerous occasions, in one language or another. There were notable performances in 1911 and 1928 championed by J.C. Williamson and by Nellie Melba, who had sung Elsa in London, New York and St Petersburg. In the 1928 performances, the role of Ortrud was sung in German and that of Telramund in French, while everyone else sang in Italian!

Lohengrin remains one of the most popular works in the Wagnerian canon. Franz Liszt was amongst the first to recognise its unique qualities, and he championed and conducted the first performance in Weimar in 1850. But not everyone shared his enthusiasm. The correspondent of *Die kleine Musikzeitung* of Hamburg attended that performance and reported as follows: "Wagner reveals himself in this work to be utterly *unmusical*; he has supplied us not with music but with noise – and such an infernal din at that, that only a general cannonade on stage was missing from the thunder of hell itself...."

Wagner made friends and enemies with equal abandon throughout his life, and he certainly made enemies in Dresden in the 1840s, while writing *Lohengrin*. As Royal Saxon Kapellmeister he was expected to toe the line on artistic matters and refrain from meddling in politics but, typically, he did neither. He upset very influential people, some of whom continued to pursue him in later life, even to the Bavarian court of Ludwig II.

In 1848, revolution was in the air. Popular revolts and uprisings had broken out in Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Frankfurt and Prague, and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had just published their *Manifesto of the Communist Party* – in German. Wagner sympathised with the revolutionary movement in Dresden and was actively involved in the violent uprising of 1849. A warrant was issued for his arrest. One of his closest friends, August Röckel, was caught and spent thirteen years in gaol. This could easily have been the fate of Richard Wagner. However, with the help of Liszt, and assuming the disguise of an acquaintance called Professor Widmann, he escaped to Zürich, where there was a sizeable community of Saxon refugees.

The young Wagner's fervent but rather unworldly idealism explains a lot I think, about his state of mind when he approached the ideal and unworldly subject of *Lohengrin*. Before the uprising, the actor Edward Devrient noted in his diary: "Met Kapellmeister Wagner on the terrace, another discussion about his theories for changing the world. He still thinks that only by destroying property is it possible to civilise mankind....(he) believes in the absolute and original perfection of the human race, a perfection lost only as a result of the state....Finally, he had to agree with me that only moral amelioration can put an end to our misery and that this would produce the right types of state, based on the law of love."

The first performance of *Lohengrin* in 1850 was a modest affair, with an orchestra of just 35 and a chorus of 23! But, of course, the composer wasn't in the audience. On that memorable evening, August 28th, Goethe's birthday, Wagner was in Lucerne, sitting with his first wife, Minna, in a tavern called, appropriately, The Swan, watching the clock and following the opera's progress in his mind. Eleven years would pass before he could see a performance on the stage, in Vienna.

Perhaps the critic from *Die kleine Musikzeitung* had also spent most of his evening in a tavern. He can't possibly have remained in the theatre long enough to have heard music like the love duet in Act Three [*Fühl ich zu dir so süß mein Herz entbrennen*].

That exquisite melody of Lohengrin and Elsa on their wedding night was one of the first musical phrases written for the work. It was jotted down on the margin of a page of the prose sketch of 1845. So, even at that early stage, Wagner was seeing the characters and situations in terms of the music. In this case, the music predated the poem, because the page on which it had been written was simply a preliminary exposition of the story.

One of Wagner's most remarkable musical creations was the prelude to *Lohengrin*. It is just 75 bars long – a slow *pianissimo* gesture of transcendent beauty - broken only by a few bars of glowing brass exactly two-thirds of the way through. It is an extraordinary vision in sound, not really an overture but rather an expression of the mystical nature of the Grail. This sacred object is brought by

angels into the mundane world, its glory is revealed, and then the angelic host gradually returns to a celestial sphere. That's what it's all about, and Wagner was quite specific on the point.

We owe the imagery of the *Lohengrin* prelude to the 13th- century knight and poet, Wolfram von Eschenbach. In his courtly epic *Parzival*, Wolfram tells of a host of angels bringing the Grail to earth:

“A host of angels left [the Grail] on the earth” he says, “and then flew away up over the stars. Was it their innocence that drew them away? Since then baptised men have had the task of guarding it, and with such chaste discipline that those who are called to the service of the Grail are always noble men.”

In the earliest legends, the Grail was neither a chalice nor the cup of the Last Supper. Those associations came later. In some accounts it was a serving dish or, in Wolfram's version, a magic stone. Even before the Grail was given its Christian gloss, it was described as possessing miraculous powers, including the ability to provide all kinds of food and drink and to extend the life of those who gazed on it. Its prototypes in fact were the magic cauldrons and cornucopias of pagan antiquity, and the alchemist stones of the east.

In another of Wolfram's references to the Grail we read:

“Those who took neither side when Lucifer and the Trinity fought – these angels, noble and worthy, were compelled to descend to earth, to this same stone. Yet the stone is always pure.... Since then the stone has always been in the care of those God called to this task....”

In other words, in these legends, the angels associated with the Grail existed 'in between' the forces of light and darkness, the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the temporal, and the Grail itself came to symbolise divine power at work in the world. It was but a simple step to link the Grail to the body and blood of Christ present in the Eucharist. The medieval church was happy to encourage this (unofficially of course) as a means of propagating the doctrine of the real presence of Christ's body in the sacrament. Some of the later Grail stories were probably written by Cistercian monks, expressly for this purpose.

If the Grail is in the world but not of the world, then so too is its servant, the Swan Knight, Lohengrin. He comes mysteriously into the lives of Elsa, Ortrud, Telramund and the people of Brabant. Elsa needs him to defend her honour, but Lohengrin needs her too, for he seeks the love that is perfect trust. With all his heart he wishes to marry her. However, such a marriage is doomed from the start, because, to put it simply, Lohengrin is of the spirit and Elsa of the flesh. It is the hopelessness of trying to reconcile the irreconcilable that is at the heart of this beautiful and poignant opera.

The plot of *Lohengrin* is deceptively simple. Elsa of Brabant is falsely accused by Friedrich von Telramund and his pagan wife Ortrud of murdering Elsa's brother, Gottfried, heir to the Dukedom of Brabant. The matter has to be decided in trial by combat. Elsa's prayers for a champion are answered with the arrival of a splendid but mysterious stranger in a boat drawn by a swan. The stranger offers not only to defend Elsa's honour but also to marry her and protect her people. However, there's a condition: she must never ask nor seek to discover his name or origin. To this condition she readily agrees but, before long, her enemies are busy, sowing the seeds of doubt in her mind.

On her wedding night, Elsa, now racked with doubts, insists on sharing her husband's secret. This causes him pain and sadness because once he reveals his identity he can no longer remain with her. And so, on the following morning, he departs after disclosing that he is Lohengrin, the son of Parzival and a Knight of the Grail. Before he leaves, he invokes divine intervention in restoring Elsa's lost brother who had in fact been transformed by Ortrud's sorcery into the swan.

The juxtaposition of the spiritual and the temporal in *Lohengrin* is nowhere more apparent than in the abrupt descent from the mystical realms of the prelude to the very tangible realm of King Henry the Fowler, in which Act One begins. We are on the banks of the River Scheldt near Antwerp. Wagner was precise about the place and the year – 932. Much of what the King has to say in the opera refers to historical events at that time. Heinrich, Duke of Saxony and the first ruler of the Saxon dynasty, strengthened the power of the monarchy over the German duchies, raised armies, built fortifications, overcame the Danes and the Czechs and defeated the Hungarians in 933. He encouraged the spread of Christianity throughout Germany.

When the curtain rises the first voice that we hear is that of the Herald. Trumpet fanfares punctuate his proclamations, and the King summons the nobles to war against the Hungarians who are preying on the eastern borders. He expresses concern that the people of Brabant are living in disarray, without a leader.

These are fairly prosaic goings-on and the music merely creates atmosphere and underlines the formality of the occasion. We are a long way from angelic hosts and the dazzling Grail. Nevertheless, it is interesting to compare this treatment with the recitative or spoken dialogue that once would have been typical operatic fare.

The King calls on Friedrich von Telramund to explain the reasons for the unsettled state in which he finds Brabant. Friedrich promptly blames Elsa for the disappearance and presumed murder of the young Gottfried, heir to the dukedom, and explains that because of this crime he had renounced her hand, granted by her father, and had married Ortrud instead. He accuses Elsa of

harbouring a secret paramour and plotting to become the ruler herself. Friedrich now lays claim to Brabant. The King calls for Elsa to be brought before him.

The music that accompanies Elsa's diffident entrance evokes memories of the prelude with its transparent scoring and melancholy phrasing. Her mind is on higher things. The King asks her to respond to the charge and, as in a trance, she tells of her anguish and her vision of a shining knight sent by heaven to be her champion. This is the first clue that we have had as to the significance of the music of the prelude. During the second stanza, when she describes the knight who will come to her rescue, we hear the theme of the Grail, familiar from the prelude, and then one that, ever after, will be associated with Lohengrin.

Lohengrin is subtitled 'A Romantic Opera in Three Acts', and romantic it certainly is. It followed in the wake of Weber's *Euryanthe* (whose influence is apparent, both dramatically and musically) the works of Spohr and Marschner, and of course Wagner's own operas: *Die Feen* (The Fairies) written when he was twenty, *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser*. Wagner admitted that the ending of Act One owed something to the example of Spontini, an Italian composer who had worked in Paris and Berlin during the first half of the nineteenth century. There are also echoes of Gluck, whose operas Wagner had revived and conducted in Dresden. To some extent then, *Lohengrin* marks the end of a tradition.

During the five years of exile that followed, Wagner deliberately turned his back on that tradition, wrote practically no music, and engaged in much theorising about art and revolution, the artwork of the future and so on. In this 'thinking aloud' he was probably trying to convince himself as much as anyone else as to why and how he should strike out in a new direction. But so determined was he to burn his boats that he fearlessly, recklessly even, denounced the shallowness and unworthiness of the arts of his day, together with their most successful practitioners such as Giacomo Meyerbeer.

The ultimate fruits of this ferocious intellectual assault were of course the great works of his maturity: *The Ring*, *Tristan*, *The Mastersingers* and *Parsifal*. Nevertheless, with hindsight, we can see that *Lohengrin* too points to the future. This is apparent in its continuous musical style, as distinct from the more traditional division into numbers, its dramatic unity, its distinctive sound worlds associated with characters, and the way in which musical motifs are already being invested with great psychological subtlety. The 'art of transition', to which Wagner attached such importance in his later works, finds its first true voice in *Lohengrin*.

The novelty of the work puzzled Robert Schumann, according to Wagner in his autobiography, *My Life*. In 1845, he had read the *Lohengrin* poem to a circle of friends including Schumann. "Schumann liked it" said Wagner, "yet couldn't figure out the musical form I had in mind for it, as he couldn't find any passages

suitable for traditional musical numbers. I then had some fun reading him different parts of my poem just as if they were in aria and cavatina form, so that in the end he laughingly conceded the point.”

Confronted with Telramund’s appalling accusations, Elsa can only pray for the intervention of her champion, the shining knight sent by heaven. Twice the Herald calls for a champion to come forward, and each time there is an ominous silence. Then in the distance, a swan is seen approaching, drawing a boat in which stands a knight in silver armour. As the excitement grows, the orchestral writing acquires a frenzied, dazzling halo of sound high in the violins, expressive of the miraculous vision witnessed from the river bank.

The stranger steps ashore and farewells the swan, and we hear some of Wagner’s loveliest music, beginning with the mystical theme of the grail. “My thanks to you, my beloved swan!” he says. “Glide back over the waters to the place from which you brought me; return to where alone our happiness lies!”
[Nun sei bedankt, mein lieberSchwan!]

Lohengrin offers his services as Elsa’s champion and asks if she will, without doubts or fears, entrust herself to his protection. Again the music is that of the Grail, whose servant he is. She replies: “My hero, my deliverer, take me! I give myself wholly to you, as I am.”

He says to her: “If I am victorious, will you take me for your husband?” She willingly agrees. Then we come to the heart of the matter. “Elsa” he says, “if I am to be your husband and defend your land and people, and nothing is ever to tear me from you, one thing you must solemnly promise me: you must never ask me or be at pains to discover from whence I journeyed here, or what is my name and lineage!”

We hear in the orchestra the motif of the forbidden question, which will reappear at various points throughout the opera. Elsa assures him that she would never ask such a question, but Lohengrin, with even greater urgency, asks whether she has really understood him, and he repeats the condition. When Elsa reaffirms her promise to him he ardently replies: “Elsa, I love you!” *[Elsa, soll ich dein Gatte heißen]*

Wagner’s practice was to bring together a variety of legends and other ideas when fashioning his operas, and this is certainly true of *Lohengrin*. The quite distinct legends that are joined here include those of the Swan Knight, the forbidden question, the identity of Lohengrin himself and, of course, the Grail.

Firstly, the legends of the Swan Knight. These were well known in the 12th century and their roots go back even further. The incentive for many of the stories seems to have been the need to ascribe a supernatural origin to a ruling

house. A mysterious stranger arrives among a people, becomes their ruler and the ancestor of the reigning house and then disappears again.

The oldest literary version, from the early 13th century, is associated with the French house of the famous crusader, Godfrey of Bouillon, and contains many of the narrative features that we find in the opera. It is a historical fact that when Godfrey was in the Holy Land with the First Crusade, he was offered, but declined, the title of King of Jerusalem, preferring instead that of 'Defender of the Holy Sepulchre'. As we shall see, when Lohengrin is offered the title of Duke, he chooses instead that of 'Protector of Brabant'.

In the French version of the legend of the Swan Knight, the Duchess of Bouillon pleads before the Emperor Otto for justice against a Saxon Duke who has made grave charges against her. She is unable to find a champion to establish her innocence in trial by combat, when suddenly an unknown knight appears in a skiff drawn by a swan. He defeats her opponent and marries her daughter Beatris, imposing the condition that his wife must never ask his name or lineage. When she breaks this command, the Swan Knight, whose name is revealed as Helias, leaves her, after having fathered a daughter who becomes the mother of Godfrey of Bouillon.

If we translate this situation into the opera, it can be said that, just as Helias was believed to have fathered the Bouillon ducal line and, in particular, Godfrey, so Lohengrin had, in a sense, fathered the Brabantine ducal line and, in particular Gottfried, by restoring him to human form.

Incidentally, the name Helias suggests an even more ancient connection with a solar deity, from the Greek *helios*, the sun, whose dazzling nature of course parallels the splendour of Lohengrin and the Grail. In his essay *A Communication to my Friends*, of 1851, Wagner himself compared Lohengrin's 'forbidden question' with that in the Greek myth of Zeus and Semele.

In that story, Zeus, whose name means 'bright sky', assumed human form and had a secret love affair with the mortal woman Semele. But the jealous goddess Hera disguised herself as an old neighbour and, like Ortrud, persuaded Semele, who was then six months with child, to request that her lover no longer deceive her but reveal himself in his true form and nature. At first Zeus refused, for he knew that such a revelation to a mortal would destroy her. But ultimately, at her urging, he appeared to Semele as thunder and lightning and she was consumed. However, her son was saved by Hermes and sewn up inside Zeus' thigh until, in due time, he was delivered as Dionysus, who thereafter was called 'twice-born'. In the opera, Gottfried too might be considered to have been 'twice-born'.

The French legend of the Swan Knight passed to other lands, England for instance, where it took the form of a prose romance called *Helyas, Knight of the Swan*, and Germany, where it was taken up around 1260 by Konrad von

Würzburg in an epic poem *Der Schwanritter*. In this German version the knight goes unnamed, but the lady in distress is the Duchess of Brabant, the emperor this time is Charlemagne, and the Swan Knight becomes the ancestor of the Dukes of Cleves.

In Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, written at the beginning of the 13th century, there are numerous references to 'Loherangrin' as he is called, (that is, Garin of Lorraine), one of twin sons of Parzival and the beautiful lady Condwiramurs. In the concluding pages of the epic, Wolfram tells how Loherangrin grew to manly strength and became a knight in the service of the Grail. And it happened that the Duchess of Brabant, a lady 'free of all falsity' as he says, was approached by many suitors, but rejected them all. She had vowed to take only the husband whom God had chosen for her. This provoked considerable resentment and, as Wolfram puts it: "many tormented her for her innocence". Then Loherangrin, whom God had chosen, was sent from Munsalvaesche (Monsalvat) and brought to Antwerp by a swan. The people declared him to be beautiful and manly, courteous, generous and innocent of all wrongdoing.

Wolfram continues: "The mistress of the land received him graciously. Now hear what he said. Rich and poor heard it as they stood about on all sides. He said, 'My lady Duchess, if I am to be the lord of this country...hear what I am about to ask of you. Never ask me who I am; then I shall be able to remain with you. But if I am subjected to your question you will lose my love'. That night he received her love, and therewith he became prince over Brabant. The wedding took place with splendour....he frequently performed feats of chivalry (and) together they acquired lovely children. There are many people in Brabant even now who know of these two, of her welcome, and of his departure, and how her question drove him away....He left much against his will."

"Then his friend the swan again brought him in a little boat. As remembrances he left behind a sword, a horn, and a ring. Then Loherangrin departed, for, if we are to tell this story right, this was Parzival's son. Streams and roads he travelled back to the tending of the Grail."

And so ends Wolfram's account, which combines the legends of the Swan Knight, the forbidden question, Lohengrin and now, the Grail, and provides most of the ingredients for Wagner's opera.

Towards the end of the 13th century, a rambling German epic called *Lohengrin* was written down by unknown authors. This drew on Wolfram's outline but added extraneous details. Here the Lohengrin story is merely an episode of the legendary minstrel contest held at the Wartburg castle (the setting of Wagner's *Tannhäuser*) and the story is put into the mouth of Wolfram himself who, of course, appears as a character in *Tannhäuser*. In this version, the accuser is Count Friedrich von Telramund, the King is Heinrich der Vogler (Henry the

Fowler), but it is the Duchess of Cleves who persuades Elsa to put the forbidden question.

There are also other precedents that shouldn't be overlooked, notably the recurrent theme, found in early nineteenth century operas, including Wagner's own *Die Feen*, of the incompatibility of the mortal and spirit worlds. In *Die Feen*, which is based on a fairy tale by Carlo Gozzi, Ada, who is half fairy, half mortal, agrees to marry Arindal, on condition that he refrain from asking her identity. Unable to curb his curiosity, he asks the forbidden question, whereupon Ada's magic realm disappears.

We have seen that the idea of the forbidden question can be traced back to antiquity, to the Athenians and probably beyond into the mists of time. But we do find a more particular explanation in Wolfram's *Parzival*. At one point, Parzival's half brother, the Muslim Feirefiz decides to be baptised – not out of religious conviction I have to say, but so that he can marry a beautiful Christian woman! When Feirefiz is baptised, he at last sees the Grail, which hitherto had been invisible to him. On the Grail (which, remember, was a sacred stone) now appear the words:

Any Templar appointed by God's hand to be master over a foreign folk must forbid the asking of his name or race and help them to their rights. But if the question is asked of him, they shall no longer have his help.

Feirefiz, like Lohengrin, does indeed go off to be 'master over a foreign folk' – in his case to India. Therefore, behind the forbidden question in the opera is the Grail's own injunction to all who serve it. Lohengrin simply has no choice.

In due course, Lohengrin and Friedrich do battle, after the Herald has thoughtfully reminded us that any freeman who interferes with the combat shall lose a hand and any serf who does so shall forfeit his head! The fight itself is given musical expression, something that Wagner will do more seamlessly in *Die Walküre*, with the fight between Hunding and Siegmund. Lohengrin is victorious, of course, to the joy of Elsa and the consternation of Friedrich and Ortrud. He spares Friedrich's life and the act comes to an end with a splendid ensemble and the triumphant and repeated statement of the motif of Lohengrin.

Act Two of *Lohengrin* is a masterly piece of theatre. For a composer in his early thirties, it displays remarkable maturity of technique, characterisation and dramatic instinct.

As the curtain rises, we find ourselves in the citadel of Antwerp by night. The atmosphere of brooding resentment and evil anticipates uncannily the great scene in *Götterdämmerung* (still twenty-five years away) in which Alberich and Hagen plot the downfall of Siegfried. We hear a theme associated with Ortrud

and then, on the cor anglais, a reminder of Lohengrin's warning to Elsa. In *Götterdämmerung*, the doom-laden atmosphere is punctuated by moonlight breaking through the clouds. In *Lohengrin* the evil communion of Ortrud and Friedrich is disturbed by bursts of gaiety from the knights' quarters within the citadel.

Act Two belongs first and foremost to Ortrud. What do we know about her? In Act One we learned that she is the daughter of Radbod, Prince of Friesland, and descended from the race that once gave Brabant its rulers. She is ambitious and resentful. Now Friedrich accuses her of lying to him. She had claimed to have seen Elsa drown her brother in a pool, but in fact Ortrud herself had lured the young Gottfried into the woods and, by witchcraft, had changed him into a swan. Friedrich had been unaware of this when he had accused Elsa of murdering her brother. He is now a humiliated and dishonoured man, despairing and despised. Ortrud calls him a coward and tells him to pull himself together. She is skilled in the magic arts and worships the old gods, Wotan, Freia and the rest. It is to them that she will appeal in *her* hour of need.

She steadies Friedrich's nerve by telling him that the mysterious knight will be forced to disclose his name and race, and then his power will be at an end. Elsa must be persuaded to wrest this secret from him. She explains that anyone who owes his strength to magic would be vulnerable should he be deprived of even the smallest part of his body. If, during the combat, Friedrich had cut off a finger – even a finger joint – then the stranger would have been powerless. Friedrich is enraged at the idea that it might have been Lohengrin's magic, not God's will, that had deprived him of victory, and he resolves to avenge his disgrace. Ortrud offers to teach him the sweet bliss of vengeance.

The idea of neutralising a person's supernatural powers by cutting off a piece of their body seems an odd thing for Wagner to introduce into the opera. Where does that come from? In one of the poetic continuations of Wolfram's *Parzival*, called *Der jüngere Titurel*, Loherangrin marries a noble woman who is told by one of her maids that she can secure her husband's constancy by cutting off a morsel of his flesh and eating it. She cannot bring herself to do this, so her parents plot to mutilate him instead. The idea seems to have been a familiar one in medieval stories, and no doubt Wagner had come across it in various forms.

After the initial exchange between Ortrud and Friedrich, Elsa appears on the balcony. Friedrich slips into the shadows and the deception of Elsa begins. Ortrud presents herself as a woman of misfortune and asks what she had done to warrant such treatment. She plays on Elsa's sympathies until she has the younger woman in the palm of her hand, asking for Ortrud's forgiveness. When Elsa goes inside to open the door of the women's quarters for her, Ortrud cries out to Wotan and Freia: "Now aid my vengeance, ye dishonoured gods!...bless me with guile and deceit."

After witnessing the radiant imagery of Lohengrin's mission and Elsa's innocence, we now gaze into the heart of darkness. *[Entweihte Götter!]*

So completely is Elsa taken in that she insists that Ortrud accompany her to her wedding the following day. Ortrud is all obsequiousness, but expresses the hope that Elsa will not trust blindly in happiness, in case some misfortune befalls her. Elsa is alarmed. What could she possibly mean? "Have you never considered" says Ortrud, "that someone of such mysterious lineage might leave you, in the same way that he came?"

"Poor woman" replies Elsa, "you can't begin to imagine how free of doubts I am. You have never known the happiness that comes with faith. Come in with me and learn how sweet is the bliss of perfect trust". Oh dear! It is almost painful to watch. As the two women go inside, hand in hand, Friedrich steps from the shadows and remarks: "Thus disaster enters this house!"

Day gradually dawns - the wedding day, full of joy and promise. The Herald announces that Friedrich von Telramund is banished and outlawed, and anyone who harbours him will suffer the same fate. He also proclaims that the God-sent stranger, soon to be married to Elsa, shall be given the land and crown of Brabant. But since the stranger does not wish to be given the title of Duke, he shall be known as Protector of Brabant and, on the following day, will lead his forces into battle.

Amidst the general rejoicing that follows, four noble cronies of Friedrich begin to discuss their misgivings. Risking capture, Friedrich joins them and says that before the day is out, the new Protector of Brabant will stand accused of sorcery. As the four nobles shepherd him away into hiding, pages announce the arrival of Elsa. To music of a haunting and melancholy beauty, a long procession of ladies advances slowly to the cathedral, with Elsa in its midst.

Just as Elsa is about to set foot on the cathedral steps, Ortrud bursts from the crowd and confronts her. "Stand back, Elsa!" she shrieks. "I'll no longer follow you like a menial! You owe me precedence and must humbly bow before me!" Elsa is startled, to say the least. Ortrud says that a false judgment condemned her husband. He was known throughout the land and his name honoured, unlike Elsa's husband-to-be, whose name is not even known by his wife!

She has a point. Can Elsa say whether he is of noble birth, where he is from or when he will leave her? Elsa defends her hero, saying that his exalted nature puts him beyond suspicion (not a terribly convincing argument) and that he has God on his side because he defeated Friedrich in combat. Ortrud responds that the stranger owed his victory to magic and that if Elsa is frightened to question him on the point, then that proves she has doubts.

Just in the nick of time, the King and Lohengrin arrive. Lohengrin sees at once the cause of Elsa's distress and tells Ortrud to keep her distance. As he turns towards the cathedral, Friedrich appears on the steps, accusing Lohengrin of sorcery and challenging him to identify himself in front of the king and the multitude. Lohengrin replies that there is only one to whom he is bound to answer – Elsa. Privately however, he has noticed that Elsa seems confused, and he prays that Ortrud's poisonous tongue has not found its mark. We know, of course, that it has. The King and the people, after a moment's hesitation, reaffirm their faith in the stranger.

Friedrich gets close enough to the distressed Elsa to whisper in her ear that if she would let him inflict the smallest wound on her husband his secret would be revealed and he would never leave her. Friedrich adds that he will remain near the bridal chamber, awaiting her call. Lohengrin observes the conversation and drives Friedrich and Ortrud away from Elsa. Then he asks her directly: "Are you not yielding to the power of doubt? Do you wish to question me?" She replies resolutely that her love is greater than all the power of doubt, and so Lohengrin leads her gently to the King. Hearts are pounding, but at least the appearance of serenity has been restored as, together, they advance slowly to the cathedral.

Before we move on to Act Three, I would like to take a moment to look at the various musical themes that Wagner uses in *Lohengrin*, the so-called *Leitmotiven*, a word now absorbed into English as 'leitmotifs', or 'leading motives'. The most sophisticated use of this technique is to be found in the *Ring* and, in particular, in *Götterdämmerung*.

The term 'leitmotif' was not Wagner's; he used other descriptions, but whatever name we give them, they are themes associated with characters, objects, events and emotions. In the *Ring* they are usually quite short and melodic, and they are capable of the most subtle manipulation. They interact with one another, and can be modified or hybridised through a kind of musical genetic engineering to reflect every nuance in the drama.

Of course, simple musical themes were used by composers long before Wagner. A theme or phrase might be introduced to reinforce qualities associated with a particular character – a sweet and gentle theme for a sweet and gentle character and so on. Wagner makes a real advance on this in his psychological use of themes in *Lohengrin*, but they are still much longer and less flexible than the seminal themes of the *Ring*, and he still tends to use them in an unmodified or only barely modified form on each occasion. Strictly speaking, up to and including *Lohengrin*, we should call them 'reminiscence motifs' because they punctuate the music, reminding us of associations, rather than driving the musical development, as they do in later works.

The first theme of any consequence is that of the Grail, in the prelude. Although it is spun and embroidered in very beautiful ways, it doesn't change much

throughout the drama. We hear it, for example, virtually unchanged in the course of Lohengrin's narration in Act Three. The same can be said of Lohengrin's own theme, the ominous theme of the forbidden question, the theme that is so expressive of Elsa and the beautiful motif of the swan, heard on Lohengrin's arrival and his impending departure. There are some clever references to Ortrud's theme in Act Two when the King and the people begin to wonder aloud just what kind of secret the stranger is hiding. It is as if Ortrud's poisonous scheming is beginning to infect everyone.

It is clear therefore, that Wagner's handling of his themes was much simpler and more direct in *Lohengrin* than in later works, but this doesn't detract from the wonderful appropriateness of these themes or the skill with which they are orchestrated. Above all, they match perfectly the long poetic lines of the text and the general air of romantic melancholy that pervades the work. A comparative glance at the texts of Lohengrin's narration and Loge's narration in *Das Rheingold* reveals just how much Wagner's approach to the text changed after *Lohengrin*. Long graceful lines with end rhyme became short pithy lines with alliteration. Nevertheless, Wagner was never more lavish with extended melodies than he was in *Lohengrin*. Those who say that Wagner's music is not melodious have never listened to this beautiful work.

And so to Act Three. It opens with the famous (perhaps notorious) prelude depicting the bustle and gaiety of the wedding feast, so often played as a concert piece. It is customary to say that this flashy prelude bears no relationship to anything else in the opera, but is this true? Actually, it belongs to a whole family of off-stage and on-stage flourishes that provide dramatic counterpoint to the mystical and often melancholy mood of the narrative.

Remember the fanfares that began the first act? They also summon a champion for Elsa, and there are musical flourishes too to illustrate the physical combat between Friedrich and Lohengrin. They punctuate the sinister, brooding atmosphere that opens Act Two, and they'll announce the dawning of the final day. Now they depict brilliantly the wedding celebrations themselves.

The curtain rises on the bridal chamber and we hear the delicate strains of the famous bridal chorus. The men and women have just accompanied the newly-wedded couple to their chamber. Gradually the chorus fades away and Lohengrin and Elsa are left alone. We are so used to hearing this music played in dull and pedestrian ways that it is easy to forget just how beautiful and transparent it really is. Then follows a scene of the greatest delicacy and affection, with some of the loveliest music that Wagner wrote.

Gradually the trust and happiness of this intimate moment turns into anxiety and pain as Elsa's insistent needling takes its toll. "How sweetly my name glides from your lips!" she says. "Do you grudge me the dear sound of yours?" And again: "O make me proud by your confidence, that I may not die untrusted!"

Lohengrin tries to calm her but Elsa can't leave well alone. "Tell me from whence you came – let me prove my power of silence!"

When Lohengrin tries to comfort her by saying that he came "not from night and woe but from light and bliss" this only makes Elsa more anxious, for she now fears that one day he will tire of her and return to the perfect life he had forsaken. Frantically, she accuses him of coming to her through magic, and wonders aloud how she can obtain the power to bind him to her. She imagines that she sees the swan approaching to take him away. "Nothing can bring me calm" she says, "except – though it cost my life – to know who you are!"

Desperately, Lohengrin tries to stop her, but it's too late. "Tell me your name!" she pleads. "Where have you come from? What is your lineage?"

At that point Friedrich and his four companions burst into the room with swords raised. Elsa gives a warning cry to Lohengrin who grabs his sword and, with a single blow, strikes Friedrich dead. The others drop their weapons and fall on their knees.

For Lohengrin and Elsa, their happiness is at an end, and Lohengrin prepares to disclose all before the King and the people of Brabant.

As dawn breaks, we hear a brilliant interlude with trumpet fanfares sounding from tower to tower. The curtain rises once again on the bank of the river, where the King is urging the Brabantines to rally to the defence of the kingdom. This patriotic summons is interrupted when the body of Friedrich is carried in. Lohengrin explains the circumstances of his death and how Elsa had been misled into breaking her promise. He then proceeds to reveal the secret of his name and origins.

In its original form, Lohengrin's narration is in two parts. Wagner asked Liszt to cut the second part from the 1850 performance because he felt that it might prove something of an anticlimax in the hands of the first Lohengrin, Karl Beck. The second part is now invariably cut from performances, although Daniel Barenboim makes a strong case for not cutting the second part, both on musical and dramatic grounds. Apart from anything else, it explains why Lohengrin set out on his mission, and the significance of the swan. However, I suspect that the practice of cutting is now too well established to reverse, and that Lohengrin must make do with telling only half his story.

After hearing Lohengrin's account, Elsa is contrite and mortified and pleads with her husband to stay, but this is not to be. Lohengrin tells the King that he can not accompany him into battle but he prophesies a great victory against the eastern hordes. On the river, a swan is seen approaching, drawing an empty boat. Lohengrin addresses the swan, saying that he would gladly have spared him this

last sad journey. He tells Elsa that, had he been able to remain at her side for a year, her brother, whom she believed dead, would have been freed from the curse. However, he adds that, in the event that her brother does return, she should give him the horn, the sword and the ring which Lohengrin now hands to her. This detail, of course, was taken directly from Wolfram's *Parzival*.

Ortrud appears to have won, and now steps forward triumphantly to crow. She has recognised from the gold chain on the swan that this is really the bewitched heir of Brabant. Now he will never be freed from her curse. The pagan gods have had their revenge.

Lohengrin sinks to his knees in prayer. The white dove of the grail descends and hovers over the boat. Seeing it, Lohengrin springs up and unfastens the chain from the swan, which immediately sinks beneath the water. In its place, he lifts a handsome youth - Gottfried – from the river onto the bank. Ortrud falls with a shriek.

Lohengrin steps into the boat, which is now drawn away by the dove. Elsa cries out "My husband! My husband!" and collapses in the arms of her brother. With general lamentations, the opera comes to the most tragic ending of any of Wagner's works.

Some of Wagner's contemporaries thought this too cruel a treatment of Elsa and tried to persuade him to give it a happier ending. For a while he hesitated, and even said at one point that he agreed. Then he realised that no other ending could possibly be considered if the drama was to remain true to itself, and so he left it intact. Undoubtedly, this was the right decision.

I mentioned at the outset that *Lohengrin* is, fundamentally, about the separateness of the worlds of the spirit and the flesh. A permanent relationship between Elsa and Lohengrin was doomed from the outset, not because of Elsa's frailty (her curiosity was entirely justifiable) but because the basis of the relationship was an impossible one. It could not be, because it was never meant to be.

Perhaps Elsa should have noted more carefully Lohengrin's remark to the swan when he first arrived on the banks of the Scheldt: "Glide back over the wide water to the place from which you brought me; return to where alone our happiness lies!" Then she wouldn't have been surprised by his departing words: "Farewell, my sweetest wife! I shall antagonize the Grail if I remain longer. Farewell, farewell!"

Peter Bassett

-----oooOOOooo-----