

Lohengrin

Opera in German in three acts

**Music
by
Richard Wagner**

Libretto by Richard Wagner

Premiere: *Lohengrin* was first performed at Weimar, August 1850, under the direction of Franz Liszt. At the time, Wagner was in political exile in Switzerland; he saw *Lohengrin* for the first time in an 1862 Vienna production.

**Adapted from the
Opera Journeys Lecture Series
by
Burton D. Fisher**

<i>Story Synopsis</i>	<i>Page 2</i>
<i>Principal Characters in the Opera</i>	<i>Page 2</i>
<i>Story Narrative with Music Highlights</i>	<i>Page 3</i>
<i>Wagner and Lohengrin</i>	<i>Page 15</i>

Opera Journeys™ Mini Guide Series

Published © Copyrighted by Opera Journeys

www.operajourneys.com

Story Synopsis

Friedrich Telramund, and his wife, Ortrud, accuse Elsa, the late Duke of Brabant's heir, of murdering her brother, Gottfried, who has recently disappeared. Their accusation represents a political intrigue: if Elsa surrenders the crown of Brabant, it would fall to Telramund.

King Henry orders Telramund's allegations settled in a trial by combat. To serve her cause, Elsa summons a knight whom she had envisioned in her dreams: it is Lohengrin, a knight of the Grail who arrives in a boat drawn by a swan.

Lohengrin proposes to defend Elsa if she vows never to ask his name or his origins: she agrees, and they fall in love and plan to wed. Lohengrin rescues Elsa by defeating Telramund in a duel, but he spares his life. Ortrud and Friedrich vow revenge: Ortrud plants seeds of doubt about the anonymous knight in Elsa's mind, and Telramund attempts to sever a part of his body, the presumed source of his mystical power.

After Lohengrin and Elsa wed, Elsa, overcome by doubt placed in her mind by Ortrud, breaks her vow and pleads to know the unknown knight's name: he reveals that he is Lohengrin, a Grail knight. However, because Elsa has broken her vow and asked the forbidden question, he is duty-bound to return to the Grail brotherhood.

Ortrud reveals that through sorcery she had transformed Elsa's brother Gottfried into a swan. As Lohengrin prepares to depart, he loosens the chain from the swan and rescues Gottfried. As Lohengrin vanishes in the distance, Elsa falls lifeless to the ground.

Principal Characters in the Opera

Lohengrin	Tenor
Elsa of Brabant	Soprano
Friedrich of Telramund	Baritone
Ortrud, his wife	Soprano
King Henry the Fowler, King of Saxony	Bass
The King's Herald	Baritone

Knights and noblemen of Brabant and Saxony

Time: 10th century

Place: Brabant: a territory between present day Belgium and the Netherlands.

Story Narrative with Music Highlights

Lohengrin's Prelude frames the exalted spirituality associated with Lohengrin, a knight of the Grail brotherhood. The Prelude is mono-thematic, conceived as a single unity: the sole subject of the Prelude is a vision of the Holy Grail.

Th Prelude envisions the Grail's mystic nature and holiness: it descends to the mundane world, reveals its spiritual glory, and then returns to its origins. Symbolically, Lohengrin is the human incarnation of the Holy Grail's lofty ideals: he represent justice, virtue, loyalty, and love.

Prelude:*ACT I: The banks of the Scheldt river.*

Henry the Fowler, the King of Saxony, arrives in Brabant to enlist support for an imminent war against the Hungarians. Henry senses tension among the Brabantines, noting that they are disorganized, leaderless, and feuding with each other. He asks Count Friedrich of Telramund, the highest-ranking noble, to explain the reasons for the discord in the province.

Friedrich explodes into a passionate explanation of recent events: he denounces Elsa, accusing her of fratricide and usurping his rights to the throne of Brabant:

“I thank you, O King for having come to pass judgement! I speak the truth, being incapable of deception. The Duke of Brabant lay upon his deathbed when he assigned his children to my care: Elsa, the girl, and Gottfried, the boy. Faithfully I tended his great youth, his life was the jewel of my honor.”

“Imagine, O King, my grim sorrow when I was robbed of this, my honor's jewel! One day Elsa took the boy to the woods for a walk. But she returned without him; feigning concern, she asked after her brother, for having strayed a little from his side, she could not, so she said, find him again.”

“All attempts to find the lost youth proved futile. When I pressed Elsa with threats, her pale trembling and apprehension proved to us her terrible crime. I was seized with horror for it was this maiden whose hand was granted to me by her father. I willingly renounced her there and then, and took instead a wife who pleased me: Ortrud, scion of Radbod and the Prince of Fresia.”

“Now I bring a charge against Elsa of Brabant: I accuse her of fratricide and I rightly claim this land for myself, since I am next in line to the duke, and my wife is of the house that once gave its princes to these lands. You hear the charge, O King! Pass rightful judgement.”

Friedrich of Telramund, and his wife, Ortrud, are *Lohengrin*’s villains, the evil and destructive engines whose craving for land and power fuel the drama: with Elsa extricated from Brabant, they would claim the crown and its lands. Friedrich condemns Elsa as a “moonstruck visionary” who is always lost in dreams; that she disposed of her brother Gottfried so that she could become Mistress of Brabant and be free to marry a secret lover.

Ortrud is the agitator provoking the actions behind Friedrich’s public persona: he is her dispensable surrogate whom she seduced for her own objectives. Her husband is her agent and public spokesman: he speaks but she is silent; he represents the outer evil; she the inner evil. Ortrud is tenacious and resolute, seen throughout Act 1 but silent, only expressing her villainous thoughts in the ensembles.

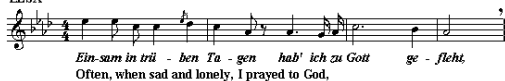
Scene II:

King Henry stands in judgement as Elsa is summoned to defend herself against Friedrich’s charges. Elsa arrives in a semi-trance, almost transfigured. At first, she is silent, but then she explains a vision: Elsa’s *Dream Narration*; *Einsam in trüben Tagen*, “I was lonely amid my sorrows...and prayed to the Lord.”

Elsa’s expression transforms from bewilderment to rapturous exaltation as she relates her dream: in her loneliness and sorrow she prayed in earnest, and suddenly, envisioned a God-sent knight in shining armor descending from Heaven. The knight rescued her, afterwhich she promised to reward him with her love, the crown, and the lands of Brabant: “I shall consider myself happy if he takes my possessions – if he wishes to call me spouse, I shall give him all that I am!”

Elsa’s Dream Narration: *Einsam in trüben Tagen*

Lento
ELSA



King Henry commands that the dispute between Elsa and Friedrich will be decided in combat: God will determine the victor. Trumpets blare three times to

summon a champion who will defend Elsa. Suddenly, a knight in armor appears, drawn in a boat by a swan: all marvel at the seemingly supernatural apparition. Elsa becomes ecstatic: just as she had dreamed, her rescuer has been sent to her from Heaven.

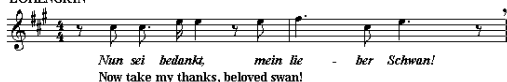
Lohengrin's spectacular arrival is wondrous and transcendent, a divine miracle that prompts the Brabantines to embrace him with unquestioning faith. His music is at first heroic, and then it becomes exalted; the lofty Grail music from the Prelude associating him with justice, goodness, purity, and virtue. The knight of the Grail has arrived in Brabant on a mission to emancipate society from its struggles with evil. Friedrich becomes speechless, and Ortrud, seeing the swan, becomes gripped with terror.

Lohengrin bids farewell to his faithful swan: *Nun sei bedankt, mein lieber Schwan!* "I thank you, my dear swan!"

Nun sei bedankt, mein lieber Schwan

Lento

LOHENGRIN



Lohengrin announces that he has come to protect an innocent maiden who has been falsely accused of a crime. Intuitively, he turns to Elsa, asking her if she will accept him as her defender.

Elsa replies: *Mein Held, mein Retter! Nimm mich hin; der geb'ich alles, was ich bin!* "My knight, my saviour! Take me to you; I give you all that I am!"

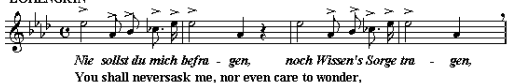
As the Grail music throbs, Lohengrin asks Elsa that if he wins the fight on her behalf, does she wish him to be her husband. Elsa replies ecstatically: *Geb' ich dir Leib und Seele frei*, "I will freely give you my body and soul."

Elsa vows that she will be faithful to Lohengrin, a trust and fidelity that will be unquestioned and unshakable. Lohengrin demands that Elsa solemnly promise never to ask his name or origins: *Nie sollst du mich befragen*, "Never shall you ask me, nor trouble yourself to know from where I have come, my name or my origin!"

Nie sollst du mich befragen

Adagio

LOHENGRIN



The Grail's emissaries descend to the mundane world for noble purposes. The spiritual brotherhood forbids questioning by the outside world of the motives and functions of those consecrated to serve the Grail: their anonymity must remain secure, the name becoming an integral part of the man. To learn that name surrenders power over the man: the knights must be accepted with unquestioning faith.

Elsa vows her unwavering faith in Lohengrin. Lohengrin, seeking reassurance from Elsa, repeats the solemn "Promise": if Elsa should break her vow and ask Lohengrin the forbidden question, his duty to the Grail brotherhood would force him to end his noble mission and depart. With still greater urgency, and this time with rapturous fervor, Elsa assures Lohengrin that the trust he places in her will never be betrayed: *Nie, Herr, soll mir die Frage Kommen!*, "Never my Lord, shall the question come to me." Lohengrin embraces Elsa and cries out ecstatically: *Ich liebe dich*, "Elsa, I love you!"

Friedrich agrees to fight the mysterious stranger. The ground is measured off and King Henry prays that truth shall prevail: God will judge the rightful victor.

Lohengrin and Friedrich pray before their battle: *Gott richte mich nach Recht und Fug, so trau'ich ihm, nicht meiner Kraft!*, "God will pass rightful judgement on me, I shall trust in Him, not in my own strength."

Gott richte mich nach Recht und Fug,

LOHENGRIN

FRIEDRICH

Gott richte mich nach Recht und Fug! So trau'ich ihm, nicht meiner Kraft!
 God judge me after right and law! I trust His strength, and not my own!

The King calls upon God: *Des Reinen Arm gieb Heldenkraft, des Falschen Stärke sei erschlafft!*, "May he who is innocent fight with the strength of a hero, and may he who is false be sapped of strength!"

Des Reinen Arm gieb Heldenkraft

Moderato

KING HENRY

Des Rei - nen Arm gieb Hel - den Kraft,
 To the pure knight give strength and might,

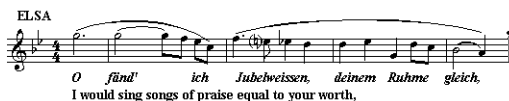
In a brief encounter, Lohengrin fells Friedrich, but the knight of the Grail, the man of justice and honor, spares his life so that his victim may repent for his sins.

The defeated Friedrich despairs: he laments his defeat and the shame at what he perceives was the hand of God; Ortrud, questions the will of her pagan gods, confounded by the appearance of this unknown hero who vanquished her husband and brought her dreams of power crashing to the ground; nevertheless, she remains undaunted in purpose, unable and unwilling to accept defeat.

Elsa jubilantly expresses her appreciation to Lohengrin, surrendering her whole being to the anonymous knight who has rescued her and proved her innocence.

Lohengrin's proud and heroic music is recalled as the Brabantines erupt into jubilation, praising and blessing the triumphant arrival of Lohengrin, an exalted wonder-worker sent to them by God: *O fänd' ich Jubelweissen deinem Ruhme gleich*, "I'd sing a song of praise equal to thy worth."

Elsa and Chorus: O fänd' ich.



The Brabantines enthusiastically agree to join King Henry's call to arms to fight the Hungarian foe.

Act II: Exterior of the King's Castle

Ortrud and Telramund are complex and multi-dimensional characters: they are sinister and villainous instruments of darkness and evil.

Ortrud, a sorceress, instinctively knows that she cannot harm Lohengrin directly, however, she will assault Elsa's vulnerability, using cunning and character assassination as her weapon to achieve her objectives. Ortrud will plant seeds of doubt in Elsa's mind about her rescuer, using guile to provoke Elsa to betray her "Promise," the forbidden question: then Lohengrin will be driven away, and she will bring Elsa to ruin.

It is dawn. Ortrud and Friedrich confront each other outside the King's castle. Friedrich is dejected, despairing, and disgraced by his defeat. He blames Ortrud for his humiliation and denounces her: "Unholy woman! Because of you my honor is gone. You swore that Elsa murdered her brother, but God has proclaimed your words a lie." Friedrich condemns Ortrud for deceiving him with her prophecy that the House of Radbod would

again rule Brabant.

Ortrud, equally enraged, attributes Friedrich's defeat to his cowardice: "Was it not your own cowardice that lost the fight with the anonymous knight? A brave man would have found the stranger weak as a child, for he owes all his strength to a magic spell!"

Ortrud unveils her insidious plan of vengeance: if the mysterious knight is compelled to reveal his name, or if a part of his body were to be severed, he would lose his mystical powers. Ortrud will lure Elsa to question the anonymous knight and betray her solemn promise; Friedrich will assault the knight to sever a portion of his body.

The conspirators, Friedrich and Ortrud, invoke their ancestral gods, Wodan and Freia, and savagely swear vengeance.

Der Rache Werk

ORTRUD

TELDRAMUND

Der Ra - che Werk sei nun be - schwö - ren
Let us swear vengeance

Elsa appears on the balcony, luxuriating in her present happiness. *Euch Lüften, die mein Klagen so traurig oft erfüllt*, "Oh breezes who often heard tales of my distress"

Euch Lüften, die mein Klagen so traurig oft erfüllt,

Andante
ELSA

Euch Lüf-ten, die mein Kla - gen so trau - rig oft er - füllt,
Oh breezes who have often heard tales of my distress,

Below the balcony, Ortrud calls out to Elsa, pretending grief and begging for her compassion: "Elsa, what have I done that you should spurn me? It is easy for you, who are so happy, to forget my misery."

Ortrud pours out her despairing soul to Elsa, mourning her vanished ancestral glory, begging pity for the wife of a disgraced man, and explaining her remorse: she feigns contrition and reveals that evil powers misled her to falsely accuse Elsa of fratricide.

Elsa becomes seized with sympathy for Ortrud, thanking God for the opportunity to bestow kindness on this distressed woman: she leaves the balcony and goes below to fetch Ortrud and unwittingly embrace her

enemy.

Ortrud explodes into a frenzied triumph, calling upon her dishonored pagan gods, Wodan the strong, and Freia the gracious, to bless her and secure a victorious revenge: *Ent weihte Götter*, “O forsaken gods!”

Ent weihte Götter!

Molto allegro
ORTRUD



Elsa expresses her compassion for Ortrud and promises her that she will plead with her rescuer to pardon Friedrich: Elsa has fallen into Ortrud’s trap, the naïve victim of her evil. Ortrud proceeds to distill her poison by slowly driving Elsa into a frenzy of doubt. She warns Elsa that her present happiness is vulnerable to misfortune and evil, suggesting that perhaps her anonymous rescuer has come to her through sorcery: would he therefore some day leave her by magic? Cunningly, Ortrud opens Elsa’s soul to doubt, but promises to defend her against misfortune and betrayal: “Let my power protect you from the magic of the strange knight.”

Elsa defends her love for the anonymous knight, expressing sorrow that Ortrud is less fortunate: “You poor one, you cannot ever know love so trustful as mine, a love born of perfect faith.” To herself, Ortrud disdains Elsa’s pride and faith in her love, vowing that she will transform her arrogance into a weapon that will destroy her.

Nevertheless, Elsa is sympathetic and compassionate toward Ortrud, and accepts her friendship: Ortrud has succeeded in planting the seeds of doubt that will begin to gnaw away at Elsa; her faith in her redeeming knight will transform into doubt, and ultimately, into a breach of trust.

Heralds and trumpeters proclaim the King’s decree: Friedrich of Telramund has been banished from Brabant; the Heaven-appointed stranger, consort of Elsa, will become the new “Protector” of Brabant. The wedding feast will be celebrated today, and tomorrow, the anonymous knight will lead the Brabantines into battle as allies of the Saxon king.

Friedrich appears with his followers, all expressing discontent with the new turn of events: the anonymous knight has become their new ruler and is to lead them against a foe that they believe is not threatening. Consequently, Friedrich stands before the Brabantines

and accuses their anonymous new leader of sorcery.

As an entourage escorts Elsa to the church where the marriage ceremony will take place, Ortrud follows behind the procession, her expression sullen, vicious, and angry.

Ortrud erupts into a sudden fury and confronts Elsa: “Stand back, Elsa, I was not born to be your menial serving-maid. Precedence is mine. Here and everywhere, before me, all should bow in due humility! What is mine is mine, by claim of right; for what I have suffered, I will have revenge.”

Elsa becomes shocked at Ortrud’s change in temperament, the supplicating woman from the night before transformed into anger and rage. Elsa and Ortrud clash in a bitter exchange. Elsa becomes appalled by Ortrud’s audacity, the wife of a man condemned by God who now flaunts her arrogance before her. Ortrud expresses her outrage: “Though my husband has been condemned by a false judgement, his name is honored in this land, his virtues praised, his sword feared. But your man – who here can know him, since his bride herself cannot call him by name?”

Ortrud challenges Elsa: “Can Elsa assure all that her hero is of noble race? Explain how the river brought him to her? When will he leave her?” Ortrud berates Elsa, alleging that the anonymous stranger used sorcery to prevent her from asking these questions.

But Elsa responds proudly, affirming that her lover is so noble that no one dare doubt his lofty mission. Their anger remains unresolved, but Ortrud’s questions seize Elsa with doubt about the anonymous man she is about to wed.

King Henry and Lohengrin arrive. Elsa is distressed and reveals to Lohengrin that out of compassion, she took Ortrud into her confidence, but now, she taunts her and questions her faith in him. Despairingly, she begs Lohengrin’s protection from Ortrud. Lohengrin senses Ortrud’s villainy and contemptuously motions her to leave. He turns to Elsa and embraces her tenderly, reminding her that if she must weep, she should shed tears of joy. Nevertheless, Lohengrin becomes dismayed, sensing that Ortrud has poisoned Elsa’s mind, and that her faith in him has now become undermined with doubt.

Friedrich launches the second part of his assault on Lohengrin, accusing him of sorcery and magic, and challenging the Brabantines to demand the stranger’s name and origins. Lohengrin proudly refuses, proclaiming that he need not defend himself because they witnessed his worth and noble deeds. As he warns the

Brabantines not to doubt him, he turns to the trembling Elsa: "There is only one to whom I must give answer." King Henry and the courtiers offer their allegiance to Lohengrin, confirming their full faith in him even though his identity remains anonymous.

Friedrich approaches Elsa and further assaults her vulnerability. He whispers to her: "Give me your trust. I can show you a means by which you may learn the truth. Let me but wound his fingertip, and I swear to you, all will be clear what he is now concealing. Then he will be faithful and bound to you forever. Tonight I shall be near. Call me and it will be done." Friedrich's scheme is to break Lohengrin's spell and power by severing a portion of his finger.

The bridal couple and the procession prepare to enter the church as organ music recalls the haunting motive of the "Promise." Elsa struggles with her ambivalent, inner doubts, but builds her self-assurance and declares to Lohengrin, "my redeemer, above the power of doubt, love reigns supreme." Nevertheless, Elsa is agitated and anxious. She looks back at Ortrud standing below, her arms raised in scornful triumph. Horrified, Elsa turns away and presses close to Lohengrin as they enter the church to be wed.

ACT III: The Bridal Chamber

Bridal Music:

Con motto moderato



Elsa and Lohengrin exchange their vows, and the bridal procession leads them into their bridal chamber.

Ortrud's assault on Elsa has succeeded. Elsa has become disconcerted and overwhelmed by doubt because she does not know her husband's name and origins. She becomes possessed, realizing that she must break her vow and ask her new husband the "forbidden question." Within her soul, she is compelled because her desire to know him expresses not curiosity, but her profound love for him: however fateful, by revealing his name and origins, Lohengrin will be expressing the essence of love itself. Simultaneously, Elsa will prove that Ortrud was wrong, that Lohengrin did not arrive by sorcery or magic.

Lohengrin and Elsa tenderly and intimately express their love for each other: *Fühl ich zu dir so süß mein*

Herz entbrennen, “As I feel my heart go out to you”

Duet: *Fühl ich zu dir so süß mein Herz entbrennen*

Un poco piu lento

LOHENGRIN



Fühl'ich zu dir so süß mein Herz entbrennen, athme ich Wonne, dir nur Gott verleiht.

I feel so sweetly, how my heart glows, raptures I breathe that are bestowed by God,

The love of Elsa and Lohengrin has become their victorious destiny. Alone with Elsa for the first time, Lohengrin expresses his joy that he has become the recipient of her loving faith and confidence: *Das süsse Lied verhallt*, “The sweet song fades as we are alone.”

Nevertheless, their wedding night transforms into an increasingly urgent series of pleas from Elsa: she loves Lohengrin, but because of that earnest love, she must know who he is. As Elsa revels in the fulfillment of her dreams, she notes the sweetness of her name as it echoes from Lohengrin’s lips: she suggests that perhaps one day she will be able to speak his name, a day when they are alone together and the world cannot hear.

Elsa promises Lohengrin that if she were allowed to share his secret with him, no power on earth could tear it from her. As she begs his confidence, her agitation mounts and she finally builds her courage and confronts Lohengrin: “Reveal to me your noble being. Tell me from where you have come, and you will be assured of my silence.”

Lohengrin protests, explaining that he made sacrifices to rescue her: in return, he asks her to bury any doubts and only shower him with her love, trust, and faith. Nevertheless, Lohengrin reveals but one secret to Elsa: “I come from splendor and delight. I come not from night and sadness, but from a home of light and bliss.”

Lohengrin’s revelation haunts Elsa and increases her anxiety: she has become the victim of Ortrud’s poison and believes that he arrived by magic and sorcery, and will likewise suddenly disappear: *Das Loos, dem du entronnen, es was dein höchstes Glück*, “If you have come from a land where all was joyous, will you not always want to return?” She continues: “Must Elsa count the days until the one dawn arrives when she must lose him? What power has she to hold him?” Vainly, Lohengrin tries to assure her that if she remains free from doubt, faith will keep them united in love.

Elsa becomes impassioned and frenetic. Her imagination overcomes her as she envisions the swan drawing his boat and taking him away: he must reveal his secret to her so that she can rid herself of that fearful vision. Again, in desperation, Elsa asks Lohengrin the forbidden question: “What is your name, and from where

do you come?"

Suddenly Friedrich and his men appear in their bridal chamber. With sword drawn, Friedrich attacks Lohengrin, attempting to mutilate him by cutting off a portion of his finger; what he believes will end his magical power. With one mighty blow, Lohengrin kills Friedrich.

Lohengrin, distressed by having to kill Friedrich, and saddened that Elsa has broken her promise, poignantly comments: "Alas, now our happiness is forever ended." He announces that they must appear before King Henry where he will finally disclose his identity.

Scene 2: Banks of the Scheldt.

All the nobles gather to greet King Henry who expresses his gratitude to the Brabantines and their new leader for their allegiance to him.

Friedrich's body is brought forward and Lohengrin explains that he killed him in self-defense. Lohengrin appeals to their sense of justice, explaining that Friedrich assaulted him during the night in his bridal chamber: "Tell me if I did right in slaying him?" King Henry and the Brabantines absolve him of guilt.

Lohengrin turns to Elsa, accusing her of betraying him by allowing herself to heed evil counsel. All of Brabant had witnessed her sacred promise never to ask his name or origins, but she broke her vow. Lohengrin will reveal his secret, and she will learn what she desired to know.

Lohengrin's *Narration* tells of his father, Parzival, and the brotherhood of the Grail, good and virtuous men who guard the divinely blessed holy chalice. Once each year a dove descends from Heaven to renew the mystic virtues residing in the Grail, endowing the knights dedicated to its service with a supernatural power whereby evil becomes powerless before them. A Grail knight possesses divine, mystical powers, against which no one can prevail as long as his origin remains unrevealed: if he discloses those secrets to the mundane world, he must return to Monsalvat and the brotherhood of the Grail.

Lohengrin reveals his identity: "My father is Parzival. My name is Lohengrin."

Lohengrin's Narration: In fernem Land

Lento
LOHENGRIN



In fernem land, un-nahbar euren Schritten, liegt eine Burg, die Monsalvat genannt
In a distant land, there lies the fortress of Monsalvat

The love of Elsa and Lohengrin would have reconciled the fatal clash between good and evil in the world. However, despite his profound love for Elsa, he is bound by his solemn duty and must abandon Elsa and return to the spiritual world of the Grail.

In vain, Elsa pleads desperately to be forgiven, and King Henry and the Brabantines implore him to remain and lead them into battle. However, Lohengrin explains that if he disobeys the Grail brotherhood it would bring disaster upon them; nevertheless, although he cannot go into battle with them, he predicts success for their cause.

The swan appears with an empty boat, a signal that the Grail brotherhood has called for Lohengrin. Remorsefully, Lohengrin kneels before the swan: *Mein lieber Schwan! Ach, diese letzte traur'ge Fahrt*, "My beloved swan, now for our last sad journey."

Ortrud suddenly emerges, screaming triumphantly to the departing Lohengrin: "Go home with all of your pride. I will tell you who draws the boat. I know the chain around its neck; it is the chain with which I transformed him from a child into a swan: he is the heir of Brabant." Ortrud turns to Elsa: "My thanks that you drove your hero away. Now the swan takes him home again. Had the knight stayed longer, he would have freed your brother. See how my gods avenge themselves on you for having turned away from them."

Lohengrin sinks to his knees in prayer: "Give me a sign, eternal God, that shameless evil shall not mock at Thee! Let me have a sign of redemption from Thee so that I may lay it as balsam upon the wound dealt to the purest of beings by the sin of doubt. O Lord my God, hear my humility."

As the exalted Grail music pulsates, a white dove descends and hovers above the boat. Lohengrin loosens the swan's golden chain: the swan immediately sinks, and in its place, a youth stands garbed in gleaming silver; it is Gottfried, freed by Lohengrin from Ortrud's spell. Lohengrin lifts him to the bank and present him to King Henry and the Brabantines: "Behold the Duke of Brabant, he shall be your leader."

Lohengrin leaps into the boat as the dove seizes the chain and draws him down the river. Ortrud collapses at the sight of Gottfried who bows before King Henry, and then embraces Elsa. For a moment, Elsa explodes into joy upon seeing Gottfried. Then, she turns her eyes toward the river where Lohengrin has vanished and cries out in despair: "My husband, my husband."

Lohengrin is seen once more in the distance. He stands on the boat with head bent, sorrowfully leaning on his shield: at the sight of him, all lament.

Suddenly, Elsa falls lifeless to the ground. As Lohengrin's boat fades in the distance, the pulsating Grail

music echoes.

Wagner..... and Lohengrin

Lohengrin was Wagner's sixth opera, written and composed between 1846 and 1848, chronologically following *Tannhäuser* (1845). Wagner's later operas were the *Ring* operas comprising *Das Rheingold* (1854), *Die Walküre* (1856), *Siegfried* (1876), *Die Götterdämmerung* (1876); *Tristan und Isolde* (1865), *Die Meistersinger* (1868), and *Parsifal* (1882).

The story of *Lohengrin* is related in many Medieval stories that dealt with the Holy Grail: Wolfram von Eschenbach's 13th century poem, *Parzival*; the anonymous epic, *Le Chevalier au Cygne*; the Chrétien de Troyes epic, *Li Conte di Graal*; and in Albert von Schaffenburg's *Der Jungere Titurel*. Also, there are legends of King Arthur's Court that link Parzival with Perceval, whose deeds of valor were performed with the brave knight Gawain. In Eschenbach, Parzival's second son bears the name of Loherangrin, a name identified with Garin le Loherain, or Garin of Lorraine.

Eschenbach's *Parzival* brought Wagner under its spell. Wagner's *Lohengrin*, and his later *Parsifal*, share many elements: both operas are dominated by the Grail atmosphere; both contain the father-son relationship of Parsifal and Lohengrin; both contain a swan that is shot in flight by Parsifal, and guides Lohengrin down the river Scheldt; both divulge the hero's name at a later point in the story, the guileless fool Parsifal in the second act, and the Swan Knight Lohengrin shortly before the final curtain falls; both villains are initially almost totally silent, the volcanic Ortrud in the first act of *Lohengrin*, and Kundry in the last portion of *Parsifal*; and underlying all else, both operas share an urgency in the struggle between good and evil.

In *Lohengrin*, the swan-knight arrives almost magically in a boat that is drawn by a swan. In medieval legend and literature, swans and knights were symbols representing rescue and faith. In Greek mythology, the swan symbolized transformation, the swan drawing the sun under the earth at night and appearing providentially in the morning to ease a troubled world. Many legends and myths depicted gods, knights, or heroes, who drift to some land in a boat drawn by a swan, rescuing virtuous maidens in distress, or children who had been transformed by magic into swans.

Episodes from all of these legends and myths gradually coalesced, and sometime in the 12th century, the figure of the swan-knight was incorporated into the

legends surrounding the Holy Grail, first expressed in Eschenbach's *Parzival*. In his epic, Parzival appoints his son, Kardeiss, to rule over the territory of Brobarz while he himself retires to rule Monsalvat with his other son, Loherangrin. Loherangrin serves the austere brotherhood of the Grail, but when news arrives that the virtuous princess of Brabant is in distress, he is assigned to go to her aid.

Wagner, as always, was his own librettist for *Lohengrin*, writing his own dramatic poetry and prose. His medieval sources for *Lohengrin* provided him with nothing more than general raw material for a dramatic subject: he had to select, condense, and adapt these shapeless masses into their prose form. He would face a similar challenge with his later epic, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, in which he combined various Norse Eddas with the Nibelungen Sagas.

Wagner composed *Lohengrin*'s music in a reverse order. He realized that the second act, with its heavily dramatic conflict of the forces of good against evil would give him the most difficulty, so he began with the lyricism of Act III, then proceeded to Act I, the Prelude, and finally, to the inherent difficulty of Act II.

Up until 1849, Wagner was *kappellmeister* at the Dresden Opera, but after his revolutionary activities, he was forced into exile and became *persona non grata*; therefore, the Dresden opera refused to produce *Lohengrin*. After expectations for premieres failed to materialize in Paris and London, Wagner sent the score to Liszt, then *kappellmeister* in Weimar, desperately pleading that *Lohengrin* had gone unheard for 2 years since its completion, and begging him to produce it at Weimar. Liszt was a genius in various musical genres: he was not only a virtuoso pianist and original composer of symphonic works, but he was also an impresario of enormous idealism, introducing at the court theater at Weimar many symphonic and operatic works by gifted composers of his time. Courageously, Liszt mounted *Lohengrin* in August 1850.

Within the next few years, *Lohengrin* began to achieve ever-increasing acceptance and success, performed so often that Wagner, living in exile in Switzerland, complained that he was the only German alive who had not seen a production of *Lohengrin*. Since its premiere *Lohengrin* has remained one of the world's most popular operas. Nietzsche suggested that its obvious popularity was attributed to its portrayal of an alluring metaphysical matinee idol who easily became a darling for ladies who delighted in the fairy-tale portrayal of a Swan-knight magically coming to the aid of a lady in distress. Nevertheless, musically and textually,

Lohengrin was one of the finest Romantic opera's of its generation, a work written by Wagner before he abandoned old paths and began his crusade to reform and transform operatic traditions.

Lohengrin is saturated with profound lyricism and melodiousness, a work that propels the flow of adrenalin with its marvelous outpouring of sumptuous and majestic music, surely deserving its sobriquet, "the grand opera of all grand operas."

Wagner composed *Lohengrin* within the *bel canto* musical traditions and conventions of the time, an almost Bellini-Donizetti-Verdi-Meyerbeer musical language in which the voice dominated: there are many set-pieces such as arias, duets, and large choral ensembles, as well as pomp and spectacle. Glimpses of the future Wagner are evident in the virtuoso orchestration, the opera's singleness of mood and conception, and in the use of leitmotifs, the latter, mostly repetitions of "musical blocks" that are not as symphonically woven as in Wagner's later works.

Lohengrin's vocal lines are elegant, heartfelt, and intimate; at times, even coloratura. Wagner's music likewise supports every dramatic point with bravura, dynamism, and sheer power: its lyricism pulsates with extravagant emotion, and its rich and lavish vocal music possesses an arch-romantic quality, a reminder that once upon a time, the Germans expressed themselves as romanticists.

Lohengrin's singing roles make their greatest effect not through sheer lung power, but through achieving vocal artistry: like the *bel canto* tradition, drama is created by the singer infusing the vocal lines with nuance, inflection, and character. Wagner's orchestra dutifully supports and frames the vocal lines, but never competes with them.

Lohengrin became an incredibly popular sensation in Italy, the Italians eventually adopting the opera as their very own, even though "germanism" in opera was furiously opposed and even deemed a blasphemous affront to their cultural treasure; nevertheless, it was always sung in Italian. *Lohengrin* is rarely performed in the contemporary repertory because it requires voices with incredible singing force and power. Singers capable of the title tenor role have become rare, the role containing a crippling *tessitura* in which most of the music is sustained in the very high ranges. It is no surprise that great tenors of the past adopted the role as their favorite: Caruso, de Rezke, del Monaco, Vickers, and

presently, Plácido Domingo.

Lohengrin and *Tannhäuser* were Wagner's last "romantic operas." Afterwards, he took a respite from composition and conceived new directions for opera: *The Art Work of the Future*, and *Opera and Drama*. Thereafter, Wagner labeled his works *Buhnenfestspiele*, "Stage festival plays," in effect, his transformation of opera into the ideal of "music drama." After *Lohengrin*, Wagner severed his ties to past operatic traditions and embarked into those new directions, theorizing in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the "Total Artwork," music dramas that would achieve an uninterrupted flow of music, *endliche melodie*, and his new symphonic style: the ultimate results became the *Ring* operas, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger*, and finally, *Parsifal*.

There are many operaphiles who wish that Wagner had allowed himself the luxury of one more work like *Lohengrin* before converting himself into a world-historical phenomenon, masterfully transforming conceptions and perceptions of the art form. Liszt would later confirm the magnificence of *Lohengrin*, Wagner's last Romantic opera: "With *Lohengrin*, the old world of opera comes to an end."

Lohengrin contains a relatively simple and uncomplicated story, almost an exaggerated melodrama that is clothed in a Medieval historical background. Externally, two dramatic threads weave through its story: good and evil confront each other; and true love succeeds only when trust and faith are not undermined by doubt.

Nevertheless, *Lohengrin's* underlying story is much more intense than an illuminated medieval manuscript. It contains disguised subtexts that are presented in the form of allegory and metaphor such as Wagner's romantic dream for German unification, and Wagner himself as an alienated, isolated, and misunderstood artist.

The French and American Revolutions, byproducts of the 18th century Enlightenment, battled for human dignity, freedom, and progress. Napoleon arose from the ashes of the French Revolution, determined to consolidate the Revolution's egalitarian principles and spread them across Europe. To accomplish his mission, he had to destroy the oppression and tyranny of the Holy Roman Empire and the Austrian Hapsburgs: it would be one-hundred years later, after the conclusion of World War I in 1918, that Napoleon's goal to eliminate the autocratic monarchies would finally be achieved.

Napoleon's defeat, and the peace imposed by the Congress of Vienna in 1815, returned Europe to the status quo preceding the French Revolution: the Quadruple Alliance of the victorious coalitions - Austria, Prussia, Great Britain, and Russia - remained the unwanted guardians over most of the European states. Nevertheless, the French Revolution left two immediate ideological legacies: the first was modern nationalism and self-determination; and the second was democratic liberalism and its call for individual freedom and social reform.

During the post-Napoleonic period - from 1815 to 1848 - the ruling European aristocracies failed to provide promised social and democratic reforms, resulting in frustration and anxiety that exploded into social unrest and revolutionary riots in virtually every major city in Europe. Those riots were outcries for national identity, self-determination, and liberation of countries under alien rule: Greece, Czechoslovakia, Holland, Belgium, Poland, Hungary, Italy - and particularly, the German Confederation of States.

German nationalist fever exploded in 1848. Dresden, the capital of the Kingdom of Saxony, was ruled by the obstinate, indignant, and uncaring King of Prussia, Freidrich Wilhelm IV: the city became a hotbed of revolt clamoring for democracy, social reform, and freedom from the harsh, oppressive, tyrannical, and hypocritical Prussian rule. Politically, the Prussians, the most powerful of the German States, had appeased the Russian Czar with a peace treaty: nationalist Germans had traditionally been paranoid about historic threats from the east, and they interpreted the Prussian *détente* with Russia as a betrayal.

In 1848, the thirty-five year old Richard Wagner, then an opera conductor at the Dresden Court Opera, became a hotheaded and impetuous nationalist and revolutionary, disgusted and frustrated with the worthlessness of contemporary political and social conditions. Wagner envisioned the unification of a divided Germany as one possible solution to existing political and social problems. Likewise, he shared the same nationalist fervor as his contemporary south of the Alps, Giuseppe Verdi, who also dreamed of his beloved Italy liberated from Austrian and French oppression: all of Verdi's early operas contained themes condemning oppression, his name becoming the symbol of Italy's freedom and unification.

The early 19th century witnessed the advance of the Industrial Revolution: capitalism had transformed society through its rapid changes in methods and mechanization,

the focus changing from land to machine. New wealth and new classes emerged, and the bourgeoisie and middle classes became the new claimants to the old legitimacy.

Wagner was an idealist and cultural pessimist, disillusioned by contemporary values that he envisioned were being corrupted by *neuveau riche* materialism. Nevertheless, he was also embittered by his personal failures: he was broke, debt-ridden, and in despair, frequently fleeing to other cities to escape creditors.

Wagner found a solution and panacea to his personal problems in socialist ideology, joining his liberal contemporaries in seeking utopian changes. (Marx, born five years after Wagner in 1818, published his Manifesto in 1848.) Wagner's disappointment and disillusionment prompted him to become an active revolutionary: he became both a socialist and a German nationalist, joining left wing groups like the Hegelians who protested religious and intellectual values, and befriending the notorious Russian anarchist, Mikhail Bakunnin.

Consequently, Wagner became a violent anti-capitalist possessed by a rabid and audacious ideology: he was an early communist who advocated the abolition of capital, and vented his frustrations by writing and distributing inflammatory political tracts endorsing armed insurrection and revolt. Wagner even became somewhat of a terrorist, manufacturing and distributing hand grenades.

At the Dresden State Opera where he was *kappellmesiter*, he was further embittered by the pettiness of the politically appointed opera management who refused to produce and perform his newest opera, *Lohengrin*. His fanatic nationalist idealism, together with his financial and career problems, provided him with abundant frustrations and anxieties to drive him into revolutionary ideology.

In 1848, the Dresden uprising led to bloodshed as Prussian troops quelled the rebellion. Wagner participated in the riots and was forced to flee to Zurich where he started twelve long years of exile and banishment from Germany. Wagner's nationalism and anti-Prussianism are reflected in *Lohengrin* through the character of King Henry the Fowler, the king of Saxony.

The historical background of *Lohengrin* is precise. During the first half of the 10th century, specifically, the years 919 to 936, King Henry I of Saxony was an energetic champion for the cause of German unity and independence. In particular, he fought the Roman Catholic Church's interference in German politics, a feature that later endeared him to the affections of 19th century German nationalists.

By wise rule, he made Saxony internally strong,

while externally, he fought to save the many disunited German states from being overrun by the Hungarians, at that time, a formidable, aggressive, and threatening military power. Henry negotiated a nine year truce with the Hungarians in order to delay their advance, during which time he fortified Saxon towns, built up his national defenses, and trained his men in the latest developments in the art of war. When the truce expired in 933, he was ready and able to face the Hungarians on equal terms and defeat them.

King Henry in *Lohengrin* embodies the dream of 19th century German unification: he is presented as a ruler who travels the length and breadth of German-speaking lands promoting national unity, and resists and confronts the threatening Hungarians in the east. The characterization of King Henry in *Lohengrin* is allegorical: he represents 19th century nationalist dreams for German unification, as well as liberation from Prussian tyranny and oppression.

The young Gottfried likewise allegorically represents German nationalist ideals. Lohengrin arrives in a boat drawn by a swan: the swan is actually Gottfried transformed, the victim of Ortrud's enchantment. Ultimately, Lohengrin restores Gottfried to human form, his transformation a symbol providing renewed hope in a future hero who will become the savior of the German lands. In mythology, swans generally symbolize transformation: Gottfried's transformation represents a signal to the German nations that they can now move forward toward their own transformation; toward national unity and integration.

Wagner reasoned that his failure to achieve success was because his artistic genius was misunderstood. In an allegorical sense, Wagner identified with his *Lohengrin* hero: Wagner was Lohengrin, considering himself a messianic savior of art whose mysteries of creativity were not to be questioned but accepted on faith.

Jean Jacques Rousseau, an icon and spiritual force of the 19th century Age of Enlightenment, reminded man that reason was not a substitute for emotion, his focus on "freedom and feeling" nurturing the Romantic movement: it became an awakening of man to individuality, democracy, and a world without social injustices.

To the 19th century Romantics, man was the reservoir of all creative genius, and an artist was considered an extraordinary being, divinely inspired, and regarded with enormous spiritual importance. Man's

genius was considered a force of revelation, a divine gift of individuality and perfectionism.

The “absolute artist” is possessed with the essences of a god, the creator of works whose significance and validity must be accepted unconditionally on faith. Nevertheless, the sublime mystery of an artist’s creative gifts is frequently misunderstood by his contemporary society, the creative artist operating according to his own idealized principles that are difficult to understand. However, the artist is divinely endowed, and the truth and beauty of his creations must be accepted without question: if any apparent faults exist in his works, the fault lies not in the work, but in society’s failure to appreciate and understand its grand design.

Wagner, the artist, was not quite a *wunderkind* in the Mozartian sense, but nevertheless, he was a genius, if not proclaimed by his contemporaries, certainly self-proclaimed. Yet at the time of *Lohengrin*, Wagner considered himself a failure: with the exception of *Rienzi*, his previous operas received lukewarm receptions. Wagner defended himself by invoking Romanticist ideals: he was misunderstood, and certainly, unappreciated.

Ultimately, Wagner envisioned himself as the artistic incarnation of Lohengrin, a man whose greatness was to be acknowledged without question, a man whose artistic genius was to be felt and sensed immediately. The hero of *Lohengrin* – Wagner – arrives majestically and magically, immediately glorified as a man of noble ideals, virtue, justice, and accepted by the Brabantines without question. The underlying theme of *Lohengrin* is faith, obedience, and acceptance without question. As Lohengrin’s alter ego, Wagner was pleading for blind faith in his artistic talents. In this allegorical context, Wagner is saying: “I am the savior of art, my art is great, and my art is redeeming. Accept me! Accept me as the emissary of a greater and supreme will!”

Wagner confirmed his artistic ideology:

“Now I come to the essence of the tragedy in the situation of the true artist living in the present age – a situation to which I gave artistic shape in my opera *Lohengrin*. The most urgent, most natural demand of such an artist is to be accepted and understood unconditionally through feeling; but the modern artistic world makes it impossible for him to find the sort of directness and undoubting constancy of feeling that he needs in order to be understood – thus he is compelled to address himself almost exclusively to critical understanding rather than feeling.”

Wagner, like Lohengrin, commands his critical

world: *Nie sollst du mich befragen*, “Don’t ask my name or from where I come from.” As such, Wagner demands, like Elsa’s heroic rescuer, unquestioning and unconditional acceptance of his divine creative gifts.

At the heart of the *Lohengrin* story, the hero suffers from a tragic loneliness and isolation while he fulfills his service as a knight of the mystical Grail brotherhood.

In 1839, at the age of 26, Wagner was an opera conductor at a small, provincial opera company in Riga, Latvia. In a very short time, he was summarily dismissed, his rambunctious conducting style provoking disfavor, and his heavy debts becoming scandalous: to avoid creditors and debtors’ prison, Wagner fled to Paris, the center of the European opera world. Wagner arrived in Paris with the lofty ambition to become its brightest star, imagining fame and wealth: he appeared with letters of introduction to the “king” of opera, Giacomo Meyerbeer, and his yet uncompleted opera, *Rienzi*.

During Wagner’s three years in Paris, from 1839 to 1842, he experienced agonizing hardships, living in penury and misery, and surviving mostly by editing, writing, and performing musical “slave work” by transcribing operas for Jacques Halévy. The leading lights of French opera were Meyerbeer and Halévy, but Wagner was unsuccessful in securing their help and influence in having *Rienzi* produced at the Paris Opéra. He became lonely and alienated, frustrated by his failures, and bitter, suspicious, and despondent. Ultimately, with his dreams shattered, his Paris years became a hopeless adventure, the non-French speaking Wagner considering himself an outsider and a failure.

Wagner, a prolific reader of German Romantic literature, was well familiar with Heinrich Heine’s haunting story of *The Flying Dutchman*: *Aus den Memoiren des Herren von Schnabelewopski*, “The Memoirs of Herr Von Schnabelewopski,” (from *Der Salon*, 1834–40), a retelling of the nautical legend about the doomed seaman. Heine, 1797–1856, was one of the foremost German Romantic lyric poets and writers during the early decades of the 19th century. Wagner was not only inspired to *The Flying Dutchman* from Heine’s works, but his opera *Tannhäuser* owes much of its provenance to Heine’s poem, *Der Tannhäuser* (1836): Heine’s lively evocations of the young Siegfried in *Deutschland ist noch ein kleines Kind* (1840), certainly influenced aspects of the *Ring*.

Heine filled the shoes of two different writers. On the one hand, he was a brilliant love poet whose works

were set to music by such famous composers as Franz Schubert and Robert Schumann. On the other hand, he was a gifted satirist and political writer whose fierce attacks on repression and prejudices made him a highly controversial figure. Heine was a German who made Paris his permanent home, and while he witnessed the establishment of limited democracy in France, he became increasingly critical of political and social situations in Germany. Eventually, he enraged and angered the German government, prompting them to ban all of his works, and making it clear that he was no longer welcome to return to his homeland.

Throughout his life, Heine considered himself an outsider. He was brought up as a Jew in a nation plagued by anti-Semitism, and as a result, developed an inescapable sense of alienation, isolation, and loneliness. Heine considered himself, “a Jew among Germans, a German among Frenchman, a Helene among Jews, a rebel among the bourgeois, and a conservative among revolutionaries.”

Heine’s story that became Wagner’s underlying basis for *The Flying Dutchman*, is virtually autobiographical. In an allegorical sense, the alienated, isolated, and lonely Dutchman, was Heine himself: similarly, the alienated and lonely Richard Wagner, who was suffering agonizing frustration and defeat during his Paris years, wholeheartedly identified with the tormented hero of the story.

As always, Wagner’s muse, consciously and unconsciously, was inspired by a personal identification with his protagonists. At the time of *Dutchman*, Wagner was exceedingly unhappy, bankrupt, unemployed, and a failed composer: the melancholy Dutchman symbolized his own wretched condition, a man persecuted, uprooted, and unfulfilled. Tannhäuser, like the Dutchman and Lohengrin, was a tormented soul, an isolated and alienated man seeking salvation and redemption. During this period, each of Wagner’s operatic heroes was in effect the composer’s alter ego: likewise, Richard Wagner was isolated, alienated, and seeking redemption through love and acceptance.

In *Lohengrin*, the hero’s human needs are profound: he is a lonely man desperately seeking the experience of human warmth, affection, and love. Wagner commented that Lohengrin wanted “to become and to remain nothing other than a full and complete human being who would feel warm emotion, and inspire that emotion in another.”

Lohengrin arrives in Brabant to rescue Elsa. At the very first sight of Elsa, he is filled with love for her: if she will love him with unquestioned faith and trust, her noble love will compensate for the surrender of his

heritage and duty to the Grail brotherhood. Nevertheless, Lohengrin's demands are dichotomous: he yearns to be understood through love and be accepted as an individual in his own right, but his terms are bizarre: they are unconditional, like the misunderstood artist, without having to reveal his higher nature, identity, and origins.

The German Romantics of the early 19th century were preoccupied with the nature of spiritual truth. The philosopher, Kant, scrutinized the relationship between man and God, concluding that man, not God, was the center of the universe; David Friedrich Strauss's very popular *Life of Christ* deconstructed the Gospel; and finally, Nietzsche pronounced the death of God.

In seeking a spiritual renaissance, rebirth, and reawakening, the Romanticists concluded that the Christian path to redemption and salvation had failed; it was unsatisfactory and deficient. Theologically and philosophically, they turned not to Christianity for higher spiritual understanding, but to their ancient myths, legends, and epics, their powerful mythology and legends possessing universal truths that were waiting to be reborn, and waiting to reveal themselves to any mortal who would seek them out and believe in them. Schiller posed the question in his nostalgic invocation of the past: *Schöne Welt, wo bist du?*, "Beautiful world, where are you?", later set to music by Schubert. The underlying meanings within ancient German mythology were believed to contain the ultimate truths of German cultural identity, as well as the essential values of their collective unconscious.

The nature of love possessed the Romantics: it was reflected in the "Young Germany" movement, a glorification of the ideal human spirit that was manifested in free sensuality, the emancipation of the flesh, and the idea that sensuality and worldly joys were no longer tied to bourgeois conventions. For the Romantics, mundane love and spiritual love were dramatically disassociated. Wagner, a quintessential German Romantic, expressed those ideals in his operas: *Das Liebesverbot*, adopted from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*; the entire dramatic conflict of *Tannhäuser*; and certainly in his later *Tristan und Isolde*.

Most of Wagner's operas are thematically unified: they are concerned with man's redemption through woman's love, faith, and compassion; an alternate path to redemption that precluded theology. In *The Flying Dutchman*, the condemned, egocentric, almost Byronesque Dutchman is redeemed through Senta's love, compassion, and ultimately, her sacrifice. Likewise, in

Tannhäuser, the errant and tormented minstrel, is redeemed not through his Pope, but through the love and sacrifice of Elisabeth. In Wagner's operas, including *Parsifal*, Christianity does not redeem its suffering heroes: those heroes are redeemed by the ennobled "woman-soul," the treasured feminine ideal of the German Romantics. To the Romantics, redemption of the soul was achieved through the intercession of the sacrificing woman known as the *ewige weibliche* or *la femme éternelle*: the eternal female, or "woman of the future." Therefore, man may strive through art or reason toward a synthesis of human experience, but it is woman's love and sacrifice that leads him to achieving life's ultimate fulfillment.

Wagner, paying tribute to Goethe, Schiller, and Beethoven (*Fidelio*), ennobled German Romanticism's "holy-woman" in his operas. He explained that man's most profound desire is to desperately seek human warmth, affection, love, and to be understood through love. Through that pure, idealized, unconditional love – Wagner's eternal female – man is redeemed and healed from his narcissism, ego, loneliness, isolation, desires, needs, and yearnings. The *ewige weibliche*, that intuitive, saving woman who is both understanding and sacrificing, provides the path to man's ultimate redemption. The eternal female became Wagner's "woman of the future": Wagner's idealized heroines, like Beethoven's Leonora in *Fidelio*, became Senta, Elisabeth, Brünnhilde, and Isolde.

In *Lohengrin*, the "Promise," or "Prohibition," becomes Elsa's solemn and sacred vow to Lohengrin: *Nie sollst du mich befragen*, "Don't ask who I am or from where I come." If Elsa fulfills her vow, she becomes the idealized Wagnerian eternal female, a sacrificing woman who redeems Lohengrin from his loneliness through her love, total trust, and enduring faith.

The idealization of man redeemed through love became, in effect, Wagner's personal obsession. His marriage to the former actress, Minna Planer, was a complete failure: it was explosive, tempestuous, and eventually became both loveless and sexless. As a result, Wagner became tortured in life by his need for a woman's love, as well as love in the form of acceptance and appreciation of his artistic talents. Redeeming love is autobiographical Wagner, the theme that is solidly at the core of all of his operas.

Elsa's vow to accept Lohengrin's proscription, *Nie sollst du mich befragen*, "Don't ask me who I am and where I come from," is a forbidden question that

appears repeatedly in myths and legends, often a test of absolute trust and faith by some god-like power. The sacred and inviolable vow always seems to be strained by outside forces, as well as by curiosity, but truly acts as a test of individual faith, loyalty, and perseverance.

In the legends, when the forbidden question is breached, there is not just punishment, but a transformation. The transgression breaches the vow causing immediate catastrophe, sorrow, and tragedy, but ultimately, there is a transformation representing a triumph for mankind. In the myths, it is always “she,” the more intuitive woman, who takes the evolutionary first steps to a misdeed that must ultimately be punished: she will encounter and provoke an immediate loss, but in the end, her actions will foster progress and a transformation for the good.

Myths recognized that developing humanity passed from a blissful state of innocence and unconsciousness in which man survived through instinct, to a more sophisticated state in which reason emerged and man developed the capacity to know good from evil: consciousness separates the human race from the rest of creation.

In *Lohengrin*, Elsa’s sacred vow transforms into doubt, and consequently, her loss of faith: ultimately, she is compelled to ask the forbidden question, her breach leading to a fatal punishment, a transformation for the greater good of the Brabantines; Gottfried returns to become their leader against their enemies; and good, in the form of Christianity, triumphs over the pagan evil of Ortrud and Friedrich Telramund.

Wagner envisioned Elsa as a parallel to the mythological tale about Semele. Zeus, the Greek god, left his Olympian life in order to love a mortal woman, Semele. He commanded her never to ask him to reveal himself in the light, but obsessed with curiosity, Semele violates her vow and indeed asks him the forbidden question. In punishment, Zeus reveals himself in “thunder and light,” the full sight of him immediately destroying her. But the triumph for the ultimate good becomes the rescue of Semele’s unborn child who added a new dimension to the god’s power: he became Dionysus, the god associated with fertility and the powers of nature.

Similarly, in the myth of Psyche, the very name meaning “Soul,” Psyche is commanded never to look upon her lover in the light. Nevertheless, curiosity overcomes her and she breaks the proscription: she lights a lamp, is punished, and loses her lover. But the ultimate transformation to the good occurs when Psyche awakens from her sleep and finds her new lover, Eros, the god of sexual passion and love.

And in the Pandora story, Pandora, meaning “all gifts,” was given a box and commanded not to open it, but curiosity overcame her. She opened the box and found it filled with all the evils; the consequence of her breach, the introduction of evil into the world. Nevertheless, the transformation for the good was that one last winged creature survived, Elpis, the spirit of hope.

And finally, Eve was commanded not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Eve defied her commandment, ending a life of pre-natural bliss that would ultimately lead to sorrow and suffering for all mankind. Nevertheless, in Christianity, Eve’s sin is deemed a *felix culpa*, a fortunate fault, since the immediate sorrow transformed into ultimate good; in the Christian plan, it is related to the coming of Christ and the redemption of the sins of mankind.

Myths reflect man’s collective unconscious, and Wagner well understood their underlying meaning. In most fairy tale and myth, the forbidden deed is necessary in order that a situation, however agreeable or disagreeable, can transform into good. Thus, Wagner meant the transformations that occur in *Lohengrin* to symbolize change: sacrifices that ultimately bring good to the world.

Nevertheless, *Lohengrin* is basically a classic morality play – even a fairy tale – representing the classic struggle of humanity in which the morality of good struggles against the immorality of evil.

In *Tannhäuser*, the tormented hero faces his inner struggle between good and evil: the evil temptations of Venus are pitted against the virtues of Elisabeth; the classic confrontation between sensual lust and spiritual love. But Tannhäuser also faces the paradox of two conflicting values: the humility of the Medieval world against the urge for freedom represented by Renaissance values. Tannhäuser eventually repents for his sins and is ultimately redeemed through the death of Elisabeth: the sacrificing eternal female.

Lohengrin, the servant of the Grail brotherhood, symbolizes virtues of goodness and justice, and Elsa symbolizes purity. But Elsa becomes corrupted by evil, unwittingly surrendering to Ortrud’s intrigue that causes her to lose faith in Lohengrin. In the end, there is tragic sorrow, but a transformation in which good vanquishes evil.

Lohengrin’s Prelude frames the lofty spiritual ideals associated with the opera’s hero. The Prelude is monothematic, conceived as a single, thematic unity. The

sole subject of the Prelude envisions the Grail's mystic nature and holiness: it descends into the mundane world, reveals its spiritual glory, and then returns to its origins. Wagner achieved a marvel of images through his astonishing and magical use of orchestral textures, most of which are in the very open and traditionally bright A major key. The first and second violins are each divided into four parts, each playing in the upper reaches of the register and ascending higher and higher on the scale in order to convey a sense of loftiness and high moral tone. When the Grail appears in its full majesty, the full orchestra brass resounds climactically.

The Prelude music is intended to ennoble the ideals of justice, virtue, and loyalty of the brotherhood that guards the Grail, however, the Prelude music portrays the exalted qualities of the opera's hero, Lohengrin. Writers and poets have suggested that the Prelude's music portrays transcendental beauty, the gleam of gold, perhaps silver, or even the soft, clear, blue expanses of the sky. Thomas Mann commented: "It is silvery blue beauty, supernatural and playing above and beyond all reason." The poet, Baudelaire, noted that it held him suspended in a pre-natural state, "in an ecstasy compounded of joy and insight."

Wagner rejected the idea that the Grail in *Lohengrin* was an exclusively religious symbol, therefore, the chalice used by Jesus at the Last Supper. He specifically stated that the Grail is only to be seen in a secular light: Lohengrin is the human incarnation of the Holy Grail's lofty ideals of justice, virtue, and love.

In Act I, the Swan Knight, fully armored, magically appears in his swan-drawn boat, and is enthusiastically heralded by the Brabantines gathered on the banks of the Scheldt. Lohengrin's arrival is one of the most majestic, incomparable moments in all opera that achieves a sudden adrenalin rush and excitement as the music builds its intensity toward a thundering climax.

In Act II, Ortrud and Telramund are portrayed as complex and multi-dimensional characters, the opera's villains and instruments of evil. Wagner's extended musical passages for them are dramatic, projecting their sinister personalities with impressions of darkness and evil, a foretaste of the grandeur to follow in his next masterpiece: the *Ring*.

Ortrud and Friedrich represent classic incarnations of evil with a tinge of the anti-Christ: they represent the fierce tensions of the old pagan world confronting the new Christian world. In the 10th century, Christianity was yet young and nascent, struggling for its survival against entrenched and implacable paganism, as well as assaults from the Vikings from the north. Ortrud was a

traditionalist who believed that Christianity was heresy, and that her ancestral gods, Wodan and Freia, had been unjustly dispossessed but would eventually triumph. A dramatic highpoint of *Lohengrin* is the conspirator's solemn oath, *Der Rache Werk*, their invocation of their gods to vengeance.

The metamorphosis of the swan into young Gottfried represents a climax in the spiritual struggle that underlies the *Lohengrin* story: the pagan sorceress, Ortrud, had precipitated evil by transforming Gottfried into a swan, however, she is defeated, by inference, a transformation that restored humanity through Christianity's triumph.

But *Lohengrin* also provides a realistic portrait of the world of politics. Friedrich Telramund and Ortrud can plausibly be seen as politicians involved in a dynastic power play, deceitful and unscrupulous in achieving their objectives. Ortrud is a noblewoman whose family ruled Brabant for generations before the upstart Christians overtook them, and is consumed by passions to restore her power. Wagner described Ortrud to Liszt in 1852: "Ortrud is a woman who does not know love. Her nature is politics. A male politician disgusts us, a female politician appalls us."

Ortrud was Wagner's own creation, a character not to be found in the early legends. She is the psychological counterweight and absolute antithesis of all that Elsa represents: Elsa represents love, Wagner's idealization of the woman of the future; Ortrud represents evil, a calculating female who cannot know love, and is incapable of love. Elsa is unequipped to deal with the evil politicians: she is redeemed by the noble and idealistic figure of Lohengrin, the chivalrous rescuer who divinely comes to her aid.

In Act III of *Lohengrin*, Wagner introduces the "Bridal" music, music that has probably accompanied more brides up the aisle than any other piece of music ever written. Its dignified strains represent a perfect prelude to the solemn rite of matrimony, but in the opera, it occurs after Lohengrin and Elsa have exchanged their vows. Then, Elsa and Lohengrin are alone for the first time, and Wagner abandons himself to the luxury of lyricism, an ecstatic and rapturous symphony of beautiful, tender, and intimate melody: *Fühl ich zu dir so süß mein Herz entbrennen*, "As I feel my heart go out to you"

Elsa wants to prove Ortrud wrong: that Lohengrin did not arrive by magic or sorcery. But Elsa has become convinced that it is essential for her to pose the question. Wagner commented: "Love demands full, practical reality, and if Lohengrin really loves her, he should tell her what is only natural what she wants to know. By asking the forbidden question, she is expressing her deep

love for him. Wanting to know his name and origins is in that sense, expressing the nature of love itself, even if it will be fateful.”

As a result, their wedding night becomes an increasingly urgent series of pleas from Elsa, possessed to know her new husband’s name and origins. At the end of the scene, the music that began their duet reappears, acquiring the significance of a leitmotif; a sorrowful echo of a happiness that has now collapsed in ruins.

Lohengrin’s *Narration, In fernem Land*, tells of his father Parzival and the brotherhood of the Grail, good and virtuous men who guard the divinely blessed holy chalice. Once each year a dove descends from Heaven to renew the mystic virtue residing in the Grail, endowing the knights dedicated to its service with a supernatural power whereby evil becomes powerless before them. A knight of the Grail has divine power and no one can prevail against him as long as the secret of his origin and the mystery of his powers remain unrevealed, but if disclosed to the mundane world, the knight must return to Monsalvat and the brotherhood of the Grail. Lohengrin reveals his identity: “his father is Parzival, his knight am I, and Lohengrin my name.” The love of Elsa and Lohengrin would have reconciled the fatal clash between the good and evil powers of the world, but now, despite his profound love for Elsa, he is duty-bound to abandon her and return to the spiritual world of the Grail.

Richard Wagner was a complex genius, simultaneously controversial as well as exalted. Thomas Mann noted that “as a thinker and personality, Wagner seemed suspect; as an artist, irresistible.” In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare noted, “Such welcome and unwelcome things at once, ‘tis hard to reconcile.” Great and charismatic men inspire strong emotions and controversy; in Wagner’s case, the positive and negative passions he generates are as profound as his robust legacy of operas and music dramas.

Lohengrin was Wagner’s last opera in which he composed within conventional traditions before leaping toward his music dramas: the *Ring*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger*, and *Parsifal*. But in spite of *Lohengrin*’s multitude of subtexts, such as good versus evil, the misunderstood artist, loneliness, nationalism, and unquestioned faith and love, the opera score possesses some of the most majestic, sumptuous, and sublime music ever composed: *Lohengrin* is indeed a spiritual musical memoir pouring forth from Wagner’s soul.

Lohengrin has earned the sobriquet, “the grand opera of all grand operas,” but Liszt more aptly confirmed the magnificence of this Romantic masterpiece: “With

