

The Pescadero Opera Society presents

Lohengrin



Music and libretto by Richard Wagner

A romantic opera in Three Acts

**Location: Antwerp, on the Scheldt River
Time: 10th century**

Characters

Lohengrin (tenor) Peter Hofmann
Elsa von Brabant (soprano).....Karan Armstrong
Friedrich von Telramund, a count of Brabant (baritone)..... Leif Roar
Ortrud, his wife (mezzo-soprano)..... Elizabeth Connell
Heinrich der Vogler, king of the Germans (bass)..... Siegfried Vogel
The King's Herald (baritone)..... Bernd Weikl
Four Noblemen of Brabant (tenors, basses)..... Toni Krämer, Helmut Pampuch,
..... Martin Egel, Heinz-Kaus Ecker
Four Pages (sopranos, altos)Natsue von Stegmann, Irene Hammann
..... Patricia Lampert-Bucher, Elke Burkert

Conducted by Woldemar Nelsson
Bayreuth Orchestra and Chorus

Première performance on August 28, 1850 at the Staatskapelle Weimar in Weimar, Germany

Synopsis

Act I

On the banks of the Scheldt River

A Herald announces the arrival of King Heinrich of Brabant. He has assembled the German tribes in order to expel the Hungarians from his dominions. The Duke's guardian, Count Telramund, needs to settle a dispute involving the disappearance of the child-Duke, Gottfried of Brabant. Telramund has accused his ward, Elsa, of having murdered her brother, Gottfried, heir to Brabant's Christian dynasty. He calls upon the King to punish Elsa and to make him, Telramund, the new Duke of Brabant.

The King calls for Elsa to answer Telramund's accusation. She enters, surrounded by her attendants. Knowing herself to be innocent, she declares that she will submit to God's judgment through ordeal by combat. Telramund, a strong and seasoned warrior, agrees enthusiastically. When the King asks who shall be her champion, Elsa describes a knight in shining armor that she has beheld in her dreams ("Alone in dark days") and sinks to her knees, praying for God to send her relief. He is the one who will save her.



Twice the Herald sounds the horn in summons, without response. Then Elsa prays for her knight to appear. A boat drawn by a swan appears on the river, and in it stands a knight in shining armor. He disembarks, dismisses the swan, respectfully greets the king, and asks Elsa if she will have him as her champion. Elsa kneels in front of him and places her honor in his keeping. The knight asks but one thing in return for his service — that Elsa is never to ask him his name or where he has come from. Elsa agrees to his wishes.

Telramund's people advise him to withdraw because he cannot prevail against magic, but he proudly refuses and the combat area is prepared. The company prays to the one "Herr und Gott" for victory, for the one whose cause is just. Telramund's wife, Ortrud, a pagan woman, does not join the prayer of the monotheists, but privately expresses confidence that Telramund will win.

The combat begins. The unknown knight defeats Telramund, but spares his life. Taking Elsa by the hand, the knight declares her innocent and asks for her hand in marriage. The crowd exits, cheering and celebrating. Ortrud and Telramund are left to lament their defeat.

Act II

Night in the courtyard outside the cathedral

It is just before dawn in the castle courtyard. Elsa appears serenely on the balcony. She overhears Ortrud and the lamenting Telramund swear vengeance. Ortrud prays to her pagan gods, Wodan and Freia, for malice, guile, and cunning, in order to deceive Elsa and restore pagan rule to the region.

Elsa appears serenely in a window. Ortrud, attempting to sow distrust in the girl's mind, warns her that she knows nothing about the knight. He could leave her at any time, almost as quickly as he appeared. But Elsa innocently only offers the scheming Ortrud friendship.

The sun rises and the people assemble. The Herald announces that the king has offered to make the unnamed knight the Duke of Brabant. The Knight, however, declines the title, preferring to be known only as "Leader of Brabant." The Herald further announces that the Knight will lead the people to glorious new conquests. Four knights quietly express misgivings to each other. Telramund



Ortrud

appears, and, concealing himself from the crowd, draws these four knights aside and assures them that he will regain his position and stop the Knight, by accusing him of witchcraft.

As Elsa and her attendants are about to enter the church, Ortrud appears, clad in magnificent attire. She challenges Elsa to tell who her husband is, and to explain why anyone should follow him. Telramund also enters. He pleads to the king that his defeat in combat was invalid because the Knight did not give his name — trial by combat is traditionally open only to established citizens.

The Knight refuses to reveal his identity and claims that only one person in the world has the right to know his origin — Elsa and Elsa alone. Elsa, though visibly shaken and uncertain, assures him of her confidence. The King supports him too, and the Knight and Elsa enter the church together.

Telramund and Ortrud, now banished, listen unhappily to the distant party music. Ortrud, a pagan witch (daughter of Radbod Duke of Frisia), tries to revive Telramund's courage, assuring him that her people (and he) are destined to rule the kingdom again. She plots to induce Elsa to violate the mysterious knight's only condition.

Act III

Scene 1: The bridal chamber

Elsa and her new husband are ushered in with the famous bridal chorus. Alone in the bridal chamber, Elsa and her husband express their love for each other. Ortrud's words, however, are impressed upon Elsa and, despite his warning, she asks her new husband the fateful question — who he is and where is comes from.

Before the Knight can reply, Telramund and his four henchmen burst into the room to attack him. With a cry, Elsa hands the knight his sword. The knight defends himself and kills Telramund. Ordering the nobles to bear the body to the king, the knight turns to Elsa and asks her to follow him to the king, to whom he will now reveal the mystery.



Scene 2: On the banks of the Scheldt River



The troops arrive equipped for war. Telramund's body is brought in and the knight defends his slaying of Telramund. One thing remains — he must now disclose his identity to the king and Elsa. He tells the story of the Holy Grail, and reveals himself as Lohengrin, Knight of the Holy Grail and son of King Parsifal. The time for his return has arrived and he has only stayed long enough to prove Elsa's innocence.

Escorting Elsa and the king to the Scheldt River, the knight tells him that he cannot now lead the army against the Hungarian invaders. He explains that his home is the temple of the Holy Grail at distant Monsalvat, to which he must return.

Lohengrin sadly bids farewell to his beloved bride. The swan reappears. Lohengrin prays that Elsa may recover her lost brother. The swan dives into the river and appears again in the form of Gottfried, Elsa's young brother, who had been turned into the swan by Ortrud's witchcraft. A dove descends from Heaven, taking the place of the swan at the head of the boat.

After naming Gottfried ruler of Brabant, the dove leads Lohengrin to the castle of the Holy Grail. Ortrud perishes, and Elsa, stricken with grief, calls for her lost husband and falls lifeless to the ground.

Richard Wagner

Born: May 22, 1813 in Leipzig, Germany; died February 13, 1883 in Venice, Italy



Wilhelm Richard Wagner was the ninth child of Carl Friedrich and Johanna Rosine Wagner. His father died when he was six months old and Ludwig Geyer, who his mother was now living with, was rumored to have been the boy's biological father. In August 1814 Johanna married Geyer and moved with her family to his residence in Dresden.

Young Richard entertained ambitions of becoming a playwright and only first became interested in music as a means of enhancing the dramas that he wanted to write and stage. He enrolled at the University of Leipzig in 1831. One of his early musical influences was Ludwig van Beethoven.

In 1833, at the age of 20, Wagner finished composing his first complete opera, *Die Feen (The Fairies)*. In 1836, Wagner married actress, Minna Planer, and moved to the city of Riga in Russia, where he became music director at the local opera house. By 1839, the couple had amassed such a large amount of debt that they were forced to flee Riga to escape their creditors. During their flight, they took a stormy sea passage to London where Wagner got the inspiration for *Der Fliegende Holländer (The Flying Dutchman)*. The Wagners then lived in Paris for several years; Wagner made a living writing articles and arrangements of operas by other composers.

Wagner completed writing his third opera, *Rienzi*, in 1840, which was a considerable success. The Wagners lived in Dresden for the next six years, where he was eventually appointed the Royal Saxon Court Conductor. During this period, Wagner wrote and staged *Der Fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser*.

During the 1848 revolution sweeping Europe, widespread discontent against the Saxon king came to a boil in April 1849, when King Frederick Augustus II of Saxony dissolved his Parliament and rejected a new constitution pressed upon him by the people. In May, an uprising broke out, in which Wagner played a minor supporting role. The incipient revolution was quickly crushed by an allied force of Saxon and Prussian troops, and warrants were issued for the arrest of the revolutionaries. Wagner escaped, first to Paris, and then to Zürich. His compatriots Röckel and Bakunin were forced to endure long years of imprisonment.

Wagner spent the next twelve years in exile from both Saxony and Prussia. He had completed *Lohengrin* before the Dresden uprising, and he now wrote desperately to his friend, Franz Liszt, to have it staged in his absence. Liszt, proving to be a friend in need, eventually conducted the premiere in Weimar, Germany, in August 1850.

The next years Wagner found himself in grim personal straits — he was isolated from the German musical world, and without any income to speak of. The musical sketches he was writing, which would eventually grow into *Der Ring des Nibelung*, seemed to have no prospects of ever being performed. His wife, Minna, who had disliked the operas he had written after *Rienzi*, was falling into a deepening depression. Wagner also fell victim to erysipelas — a superficial bacterial skin infection that causes high fevers, shaking, chills, fatigue, headaches and vomiting — which made it difficult for him to continue writing.

During his first years in Zürich, Wagner wrote a set of notable essays he called, *The Art-Work of the Future* (1849), describing a vision of opera as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or “total artwork,” in which the various arts such as music, song, dance, poetry, visual arts, and stagecraft were unified. He also wrote *Judaism in Music* (1850), an anti-Semitic tract directed against Jewish composers, and *Opera and Drama* (1851), in which described ideas in aesthetics that he was putting to use on the *Ring* operas.

Schopenhauer's influence. In 1854 Wagner's poet and friend, Georg Herwegh, introduced him to the works of philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, which Wagner would later call the most important event of his life. His personal circumstances certainly made him an easy convert to Schopenhauer's philosophy, which was centered on a deeply pessimistic view of the human condition. He would remain an adherent of Schopenhauer for the rest of

his life, even after his fortunes had improved. One of Schopenhauer's doctrines was that music held a supreme role among the arts, since it was the only one unconcerned with the material world.

Mathilde Wesendonck. Another source of inspiration for Wagner was the poet-writer, Mathilde Wesendonck. Though Mathilde seems to have returned some of his affections, she had no intention of jeopardizing her marriage, and kept her husband informed of her relationship with Wagner. Nevertheless, the affair inspired Wagner to put aside his work on the *Ring* cycle (which would not be resumed for twelve years) and begin work on *Tristan und Isolde*. The uneasy affair collapsed in 1858, when Minna intercepted a letter from Wagner to Mathilde. After the resulting confrontation, Wagner left Zürich alone, and headed for Venice. The following year, in 1861, he once again moved to Paris to oversee production of a new revision of *Tannhäuser*, which was an utter fiasco, due to disturbances caused by aristocrats from the Jockey Club. Further performances were cancelled and Wagner hurriedly left the city.

In 1861, the Saxony-Prussian political ban against Wagner was lifted, and he settled in Biebrich, Prussia, and began working on *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. In 1862, Wagner finally parted with Minna, though he (or at least his creditors) continued to support her financially until her death in 1866.

King Ludwig II of Bavaria. Wagner's fortunes dramatically improved in 1864, when King Ludwig II assumed the throne of Bavaria at the age of 18. The young king, an ardent admirer of Wagner's operas since childhood, had the composer brought to Munich. He settled Wagner's considerable debts, and made plans to have his latest opera, *Tristan und Isolde*, produced. After grave difficulties in rehearsal, the opera premiered to enormous success at the Munich Court Theatre on June 10, 1865.

Cosima von Bülow. In the meantime, Wagner became embroiled in another love affair, this time with Cosima von Bülow, wife of conductor Hans von Bülow, one of Wagner's most ardent supporters, and première conductor of *Tristan und Isolde*. Cosima was the illegitimate daughter of Franz Liszt and 24 years younger than Wagner. In April 1865, Cosima gave birth to Wagner's illegitimate daughter, who was named Isolde. Their indiscreet affair scandalized Munich and, to make matters worse, Wagner fell into disfavor among members of the Bavarian court, who were suspicious of his influence on the king. In December 1865, King Ludwig was finally forced to ask the composer to leave Munich. He apparently also toyed with the idea of abdicating the throne in order to follow his hero into exile, but Wagner quickly dissuaded him.

Ludwig set Wagner up at the villa Tribschen, beside Switzerland's Lake Lucerne. Wagner completed *Die Meistersinger* at Tribschen in 1867, and it premiered in Munich on June 21st the following year. In October, Cosima finally convinced Hans von Bülow to grant her a divorce. Richard and Cosima were married on August 25, 1870. On Christmas Day of that year, Wagner presented to Cosima the chamber music, *Siegfried Idyll*, for her 33rd birthday. The marriage to Cosima lasted to the end of Wagner's life. They had another daughter, named Eva, and a son named Siegfried.

Festspielhaus. Wagner, now happily settled into his newfound domesticity, turned his energies toward completing the last two operas of the *Ring* cycle, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*. He wanted the complete *Ring* cycle to be performed in a new, specially-designed opera house. In 1871, Wagner decided on the small town of Bayreuth as the location of his new opera house. The Wagners moved there the following year, and the foundation stone for the Festspielhaus (Festival House) was laid. Later that year, the Wagners moved into their permanent home in Bayreuth, a villa that they named "Wahnfried" ("Freedom from Illusion").

In 1877 Wagner began work on *Parsifal*, his final opera. The composition took four years, during which he also wrote a series of increasingly reactionary essays on religion and art. Wagner completed *Parsifal* in January 1882, and a second Bayreuth Festival was held for the new opera. Wagner was, by this time, extremely ill, having suffered through a series of increasingly severe angina attacks. During the sixteenth and final performance of *Parsifal* on August 29th, Wagner secretly entered the pit during Act III, took the baton from conductor Hermann Levi, and led the performance to its conclusion.

After the Festival, the Wagner family journeyed to Venice for the winter. On February 13, 1883, at the age of 70, Wagner died of a heart attack in the Palazzo Vendramin on the Grand Canal. Franz Liszt's memorable piece for pianoforte solo, *La Lugubre gondola*, evokes the passing of a black-shrouded funerary gondola bearing Wagner's mortal remains over the Grand Canal. His body was returned to Bayreuth and buried in the garden of the Villa Wahnfried. (Cosima would later be buried there in 1930, forty-seven years later.)

Lohengrin

Lohengrin was the work which first made the young and enthusiastic King of Bavaria a warm and devoted admirer of the so-called Music of the Future. Of this remarkable friendship Wagner himself wrote: “In the year of the first performance of *Tannhäuser*, a Queen bore me the good genius of my life, who raised me from the direct necessity to the highest joy. When but fifteen years of age, he witnessed a performance of *Lohengrin*, and since then he has belonged to me. He calls me his teacher, the dearest for him on earth. He was sent to me from Heaven. Through him I am, and understand myself.”

Wagner started to work on the poem of *Lohengrin* while staying at Marienbad (Mariánské Lázně) during the summer of 1845. By November, the libretto was completed, and Wagner would read it to some of his friends. In 1846 he began writing the music at Gross-Graupe, and finished it by April 1848. Wagner dedicated the monumental work to Franz Liszt, his “rarest friend” (his own words). Liszt had helped Richard to take refuge in Switzerland because of his support for a revolution in Dresden against the royal patron. Later, thanks to Liszt’s generosity, he was joined by his wife Minna, a dog and a parrot.

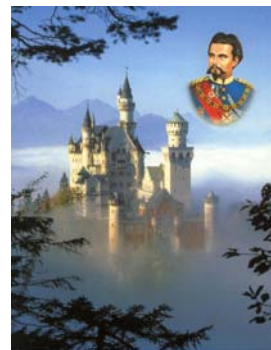
On September 22, 1848, the first act finale of *Lohengrin* was performed at a concert in the Dresden’s Opera Theatre, celebrating the three hundredth anniversary of the Court Orchestra. However, the Dresden Opera Theatre was not interested in the opera. Besides, due to Wagner’s sympathy and association with the unsuccessful May Revolution, he had to flee the city in order to avoid arrest. It was a setback for Wagner, realizing that for as long as the situation at Dresden persisted, he could not hope to see his work and ideas fulfilled there.

The first production of *Lohengrin* was in Weimar, Germany on August 28, 1850 at the Staatskapelle Weimar under the direction of Franz Liszt, a close friend and early supporter of Wagner. Liszt chose the date in honor of Weimar’s most famous citizen, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who was born on August 28, 1749. It was an immediate popular success.

In 1871 *Lohengrin* was performed for the first time in Italy, the home of opera, at Bologna. It was then taken to New York, and although it had been heard there before in the original German, it was given at the Academy of Music in Italian. Then it went to London.

Lohengrin firmly established Wagner as an international figure of importance in the world of opera. The ultimate verdict on *Lohengrin* was, “An unbelievable music with a continuous stream of sound, where the principals, chorus and orchestra aim at a combined rather than an isolated expression. It clearly shows Wagner’s genius as a musician and is strikingly displayed.” The most popular and recognizable part of the opera is the “Bridal Chorus” known better as “Here Comes the Bride,” played at weddings in the West.

Lohengrin has proved inspirational towards other works of art. Among those deeply moved by the fairy-tale opera was the young King Ludwig II of Bavaria. “Der Märchenkönig” (“The Fairy-tale King”), as he was dubbed later, built his ideal fairy-tale castle and named it “New Swan Stone,” or “Neuschwanstein,” after the Swan Knight. King Ludwig was said to stand on the balcony of his favorite residence, the mountain castle Hohenschwangau, and gaze at the clear moonlit lake below him while a courtier sang the Swan Song; and it is the same Hohenschwangau that is one of the legendary homes of the Swan Knight — an alpine paradise, and almost as inaccessible as the fabled Monsalvat. It was also King Ludwig’s patronage that later gave Wagner the means and opportunity to build the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth for his epic cycle, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.



The Legend of Lohengrin. *Lohengrin* is taken from medieval German romance, notably the *Parzival* of Wolfram von Eschenbach and its sequel, *Lohengrin*, written by a different author, itself inspired by the epic of *Garin le Loherain*. It is part of the Knight of the Swan tradition.

The legend embodied by Wagner has its roots in the Anglo-Saxon, Danish, and Longobardian legend of Scaef. An Anglo-Saxon story says: “A ship once arrived on the coast of Scandia without rudder or sail. In it lay a boy asleep upon his arms. The natives took and educated him, calling him Scild, the son of Scaef (the skiff). In course of time he became their king.” In *Beowulf* it is added that Scild reigned long, and when he saw that he was

about to die, he bade his men lay him, fully armed, in a boat, and commit him to the sea. Other legends say that the boat which bore him away was drawn by swans. He forbade questions to be asked about his home, but his wife heeded not his request. The legend is related of many places and noble families in Germany. Says one chronicler about this time: "Otto, Emperor of Germany, held court at Neumagen, there to decide between Clarrissa, Duchess of Bouillon, and the Count of Frankfort, who claimed her duchy. It was decided that their right should be established by single combat, provided some doughty warrior would do battle for the lady. But none would meddle with the affair. In answer to her prayer, however, the Swan Knight appeared. Lords and ladies were scattered along the banks of the Meuse. The knight is Helias, who overcomes the Count of Frankfort, and becomes the Duke of Bouillon."

Swan problems: Probably the most famous line ever spoken by a Wagnerian hero on or off the stage was inspired by the swan boat in *Lohengrin*. This craft, which is drawn by a large stuffed swan, delivers the hero on stage and, hours later, takes him away. Since it has to be propelled by a hidden cable operated from a distance by stagehands, it is subject to many quirks. (Once it was hooked up backward and arrived tail-first.) One night at the Met when Leo Slezak, as Lohengrin, was about to get aboard for his stage entrance, the contraption suddenly lurched off without him. Before sprinting after it, the urbane Slezak turned to the nearest stagehand and inquired, "When does the next swan leave?" The line is sometimes attributed to Melchior, who is supposed to have sung it in full voice as the swan departed while he was on the stage, and sometimes to others.

***Lohengrin*: The Video (1982)**

Starring Peter Hofmann, Karan Armstrong, Bernd Weikl; Woldemar Nelsson, Bayreuth Opera orchestra



This is the best *Lohengrin* available. As with most Bayreuth performances the orchestra and chorus are first rate. The Bayreuth orchestra, under the direction of Woldemar Nelsson, are excellent. The orchestra plays superbly except, perhaps, in the Prelude of Act I, which sounds less opulent than other performances because of the fast tempo adopted by Nelsson. The Bayreuth chorus is splendid throughout, and *Lohengrin* is an opera where the chorus performance is vital.

Peter Hofmann certainly looks perfect for the role of Lohengrin, and was also in excellent voice. Karan Armstrong is a believable and well-acted Elsa. Leif Roar is a very good Telramund, and so is Siegfried Vogel as the King. Bernd Weikl is also excellent in the small role of the Herald. Elizabeth Connell is excellent as Ortrud, both as a singer and as an actress, adding evil and malevolence inherent to the character.

This production is very conservative. It is not set on the river bank as in most other production and there is no swan, just a faintly glowing white disc in the background. Although it adds drama to Lohengrin's entrance I would have preferred to see a swan pulling a boat. The sets are very basic, and the costumes are appropriate for time. Lohengrin makes a dashing entrance in his shiny silver armor. There is no audience. Excellent image quality and superb sound. This, indeed, is the preferred *Lohengrin*.