

COWS, SWANS, AND BRICKS: SEEKING THE ESSENCE OF **LOHENGRIN**

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Fans of the radio shows **My Word** and **My Music** will no doubt remember with affection the hilarious stories of Frank Muir. In the course of one of these meandering tales, the protagonist of the story had reached a certain creative climax in his life, and Muir, with his characteristic slight lisp, continued: "It was at this point that he composed **Low-and-Grin**, an opera about a cow." That story came to mind as I watched two recent productions of **Lohengrin**, one at Savonlinna, the other in Munich.

The Savonlinna Opera Festival has an idyllic setting in the lake district of eastern Finland: performances take place in the covered courtyard of a medieval castle set on a tiny island in Lake Pihlajavesi. I made my way to the performance via the bank of the lake, observing with envy the crowds escaping the summer heat by swimming in the water or lying on the beach, then crossed the causeway to the island and the castle, regretting my decision to wear a suit. Inside the castle an equally well-dressed audience fanned themselves furiously and peeled off jackets as they waited for the performance to begin. (Two nights later, as the temperature dropped from 30 to 11 degrees, the same audience at **Tosca** were buying knee blankets from the opera shop to keep warm).

These days, we are used to stage business during an opera prelude or overture, but in this **Lohengrin**, staged by Roman Hovenbitzer, the action began even before the Prelude. Elsa's young brother, Gottfried, whom Telramund accused Elsa of murdering, was seen walking across the raised rear platform, then downstage, dragging a small, artificial swan, rather like a "rubber ducky" which a child might play with in the bath. He deposited the swan in the pond down stage right and lay beside it.

As the Prelude began, a wire swan covered with paper was brought in and placed stage right. Later, after Lohengrin's entry and his expression of love for Elsa, this provided the source of the action

during the ensuing impressive choral ensemble: Elsa and Lohengrin approached the wire-and-paper swan and from it withdrew two bags of large badges which they distributed to all. These carried a stylized image of a swan in the shape of an "L". All now donned their badges and became members of the Lohengrin cult. During the course of this first act, an American lady in front of me declared in a loud stage whisper "It's about a swan." She certainly had ample evidence of her claim in the second act. After the sombre scene of Ortrud and Telramund's scheming, swans in various guises dominated the stage. The women's chorus entered on the high rear platform dressed in swan-styled costumes, then a more specific "Swan Lake" reference followed as a small group of appropriately-dressed "cygnets" entered with winged arm movements. Ortrud's dramatic moment where she confronts Lohengrin, and Telramund's subsequent accusation did not faze Lohengrin in the slightest. He simply drew a paper swan from his bosom and swanned about the stage; nor did he flinch when Telramund snatched the paper swan and tore it up. The canny Lohengrin had another paper swan up his sleeve!

Act three had more flocks of swans. During the Bridal Chorus, six swan dancers accompanied Elsa and Lohengrin to their bedroom, here represented by a draped bed beneath a cross. The "L" cult had clearly strengthened, for Lohengrin was now dressed in the high priest's costume awarded him at the end of the previous act. Despite the Bridal Chorus's romantic words telling of "the fragrant room, bedecked for love/ where the blessing of love shall enfold you", Lohengrin here demonstrated little interest in Elsa and more in his painting. He stripped the cover from the bed, placed a plastic drip sheet in its place, and after removing Elsa's top layer of clothing, proceeded to paint the "L" symbol in black upon her white shift. Thus having branded Elsa into the Lohengrin cult, he proceeded to add some colour to the black, took up his camera and filmed the result. Not surprisingly, Elsa began to have her doubts, not least about the interdiction against asking his name. Eventually in frustration she tore up one of Lohengrin's portraits, and asked the fatal question. Nevertheless, Lohengrin devoted more of his attention to taping together the fragments of the torn portrait, then to fighting the conspirators led by Telramund. In the final scene, the disgraced Elsa

covered to one side, draped in a blanket. Meanwhile Lohengrin approached the wire-and-paper swan and drew out two swan wings, taking them to the upper part of the stage. It was from here that he sang 'In Fernem Land', describing his home, Montsalvat, and the power of the grail. As he revealed his name, he donned the two wings and later disappeared in a cloud of smoke. The missing heir of Brabant, Gottfried, now appeared behind the wire swan, refused the offer of the departed Lohengrin's priestly cloak, and rushed over to the pond on stage right to play with the "rubber ducky" swan we saw at the beginning. Of course, a swan did not appear to draw the boat carrying Lohengrin in act one as the libretto hopefully suggests, nor at the end of the opera. But with so many other swans in the action, could one complain?

The production aside, there were good things about this **Lohengrin**. Richard Crawley sang well as Lohengrin as did Jordanka Milkova as Ortrud, even if her acting seemed drawn from that of silent film vamps. Finest among the singers was the appropriately named Amber Wagner as Elsa. Given her lovely singing, it was a pity, then, that the array of "swan-wing" flounces which made up the skirt of her costume emphasised the bulk of her figure. Most impressive, too, was the chorus whose singing, while not subtle, sounded thrilling in the excellent acoustic of the castle; so too did the orchestra conducted by Philippe Auguin, particularly in the transition music from the first scene of act two.

A poor production of **Tosca** and gloomy days of rain did not improve my opinion of Savonlinna. However next year's festival is a landmark celebration for the company which will revive its most famous productions including the celebrated **Die Zauberflöte** and the fine **Der Fliegende Holländer** which readers may know from DVD. Visitors in 2012 will probably fare better than I did.

My next **Lohengrin** was a few days later at the Munich Opera Festival. In Richard Jones's production for the Bavarian State Opera, there was, I was relieved to discover, only a single swan and that appeared with Lohengrin where the libretto suggests. The surprise here was the inclusion in the set of a construction site and a pile of

building bricks. During the Prelude, we saw Elsa at an architect's drawing board, designing a house, the concrete embodiment of her vision of the future life with her champion and defender of her reputation. The construction of this house took place brick by brick in the course of the action of the opera, reaching its completion at the beginning of the third act. In the first scene, King Henry's Saxon followers and the Brabantines, whom the king had come to enlist in the future struggle with the Hungarians, were clearly distinguished in costume, the Saxons wearing blue with an embroidered "S", while the Brabantines' mustard-coloured costumes carried the letter "B". The Elsa of this staging was somewhat different from the rather fragile, dreamy character suggested by the libretto: she strode in determined fashion during King Henry's speech from one side of the stage, carrying a brick, and entered a door into the construction area behind the partition. I had looked forward to hearing Adrienne Pieczonka in the role of Elsa but she was replaced by Emily Magee. The latter is an excellent singer but her forthright tonal quality is not ideally suited to the part of Elsa, or so I thought at first. But it increasingly dawned on me that, in this production at least, her ample vocal style and forthright delivery were entirely suited to a brick-carrying Elsa. Similarly, Peter Seiffert, burly of figure and robust of voice, seemed an improbable emissary from the kingdom of the grail; yet following his entrance carrying a very realistic-looking swan, his enthusiastic embrace of brick-laying and painting duties confirmed the appropriateness of the casting. The lengthy choral passages which are the glory of this opera give rise, in many productions, to long stretches of static staging. In this case, Richard Jones avoided the problem by having frenzied action on the construction site, now fully revealed by the raising of the partition. As the curtain fell, Lohengrin and Elsa joined the construction activities with enthusiasm.

The building continued in the second act, though much of the conspiratorial scene between Ortrud and Telramund took place in the more intimate space produced by lowering the partition, concealing the construction activity. During this scene, the erotic bond between the two was made very clear by Waltraud Meier's intense performance as Ortrud, sinister and compelling, despite her not being

in best voice. By the final scene of this act, the house was nearing completion and a kind of double *coup de theatre* took place: the roof was finally lifted into place and the very moment at which it settled on the building coincided with Ortrud's dramatic interruption of the bridal procession of Elsa and Lohengrin.

During the joyous prelude to the third act, the final preparations to the happy couple's house were made: workers positioned a picture, prepared the bridal bed, and Lohengrin brought in a baby's crib. In front of the house, workers completed a huge floral panel, the letters of which ironically spelled out the wish that the house be free of strife. The floral panel was a nice touch, motivating Lohengrin's later comment about the "sweet scents" which "intoxicate the senses". The beginning of the act proper saw Lohengrin and Elsa greeting the singers of the Bridal Chorus from their new balcony. Yet the happiness of the couple proved short lived, despite the prediction of the floral tribute, and Elsa, increasingly anxious, asked the forbidden question concerning her husband's name and origin. The moment coincided with the entry of the conspirators led by Telramund, whom Lohengrin killed with a gesture. Their happiness destroyed by Elsa's question, Lohengrin placed the crib on the bridal bed and set fire to both. In the final scene, all appeared wearing blue T shirts similar to that which Lohengrin had worn on his arrival in Brabant. This gesture of solidarity with their future leader in battle was soon rendered pointless as Lohengrin revealed his name and origin and the necessity of his return to Montsalvat. The return of the swan took place off-stage until Ortrud's final dramatic moment: as she revealed that the swan was actually the disguised heir of Brabant, Lohengrin crossed the stage with the swan, then reappeared carrying the heir, Gottfried.

One might well have reservations about the device of showing the gradual construction of Lohengrin and Elsa's house throughout the opera, and claim that it has little to do with the setting of the libretto. It was, you might say, a rather imposed way of enlivening the occasionally static narrative of the opera. Yet the idea in practice worked well enough, more especially in the final act. But the real virtue of Richard Jones's production lay in the precision and intensity

of the stage direction. This was particularly evident in the detailed direction of the chorus actions and our empathy with the principal characters of the drama induced by the direction of the singers. It was certainly a relief after Savonlinna where a single, obvious idea was repeated *ad nauseam* and limp direction did nothing to convince one of its relevance. Munich's bricks certainly won out over Savonlinna's swans. Now, please, a production using Frank Muir's suggestion.