

Lohengrin

a “grand romantic opera” in 3 acts
by
Richard Wagner

Chronology:

Prose draft of the text completed 3 August 1845; poem completed 27 November 1845

First musical draft completed 30 July 1846; second complete draft finished 29 August 1847; full score prepared 1 January – 28 April 1848

First performance: Grossherzogliches Hof-Theater, Weimar, 28 August 1850

Characters:

Heinrich, king of Germany [bass]

Lohengrin [tenor]

Elsa of Brabant, daughter of the late duke of Brabant [soprano]

Friedrich of Telramund, a count of Brabant [baritone]

Ortrud, Friedrich’s wife [mezzo-soprano]

The king’s herald [baritone]

Four noblemen of Brabant [2 tenors, 2 basses]

Four pages [2 sopranos, 2 altos]

Gottfried of Brabant, Elsa’s brother [mute role]

Noblemen and noblewomen of Brabant, Saxony, and Thuringia, attendants at Heinrich’s court, soldiers, pages, servants, serfs

Setting:

Brabant on the banks of the Scheldt river, including Antwerp, during the Middle Ages (the events portrayed are a conflation of incidents and personalities from the 10th and 12th centuries AD)

Literary Sources:

Most importantly, the medieval romance *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eschenbach, believed to date from the early thirteenth century; he also had access to an anonymous German epic poem *Lohengrin* from later in the thirteenth century and a German version of the medieval “Swan-Knight” legend written by Konrad von Würzburg in 1257

Synopsis

Act I: a plain on the banks of the Scheldt river near Antwerp

Heinrich, King of Germany, has traveled to Brabant to call up soldiers to help fight Hungarian invaders in the east. He is disturbed to find Brabant in a state of discord, because there is no leader of the country in place. The late duke of Brabant left two children, Elsa and Gottfried. They were assigned to the care of Count Friedrich of Telramund. Gottfried, who should have become the new duke of Brabant, has been missing for quite some time after Elsa took him for a walk in the woods and returned without him. Friedrich accuses Elsa of murdering him and seeking to become the ruler of Brabant herself. He says that he suspects she has a secret lover who will rule with her. Friedrich was given the right to marry Elsa by her father, but she rejected him. Instead, he married Ortrud, the last of a family of Frisian princes who had never converted to Christianity. Friedrich tells King Heinrich that he should be the ruler of Brabant.

King Heinrich summons Elsa to answer the charges against her, but she refuses to do so directly. Instead, she only speaks of a mysterious knight who will fight for her and prove her innocence. A trial by ordeal is ordered by King Heinrich. Friedrich will engage in a fight to the death with any champion willing to defend Elsa. It is acknowledged that the winner will be determined by divine intervention, and Elsa's guilt or innocence will be evident simply by the identity of the fighter who prevails.

At first, no champion for Elsa appears; none of the men present step forward. Elsa is expecting a knight to appear to help, but nobody arrives for a long time. At last, a boat drawn by a swan appears on the river. A knight in magnificent silver armor is riding in the boat. He comes ashore and declares that he will fight to prove Elsa's innocence if she agrees to marry him with the condition that she never ask him what his name is or where he came from. Elsa readily agrees to the terms laid down by the mysterious knight. The knight easily defeats Friedrich and has the opportunity to kill him. Nonetheless, he refuses to do so. He shows mercy instead. It is enough for him that Elsa's innocence is now proclaimed by all. Elsa and the knight are escorted to the fortress of Antwerp amidst general rejoicing.

Act II: the fortress of Antwerp

At night, Friedrich and Ortrud are lurking around entrance of the cathedral within the grounds of the fortress in a state of deep despondency while Elsa's vindication is being celebrated inside the knights' quarters. Friedrich blames Ortrud for the catastrophe they have suffered. She says that it was she who came up with the false accusation of fratricide when she lied about actually seeing Elsa kill her brother. She stands by her words nonetheless, and she says that the mysterious knight used magic to win the trial by ordeal. She says that if he is ever to reveal his name or has a part of his body cut off (no matter how small), the magic spell will be broken, and he will be rendered impotent. She vows to seek a means to make one of these things happen, and Friedrich agrees to help her.

Elsa appears on a balcony and thanks heaven for delivering her. Friedrich hides while Ortrud tries to elicit pity from Elsa. After all, her circumstances have become desperate since her husband lost the trial by ordeal. Elsa is so moved that she leaves the balcony to bring Ortrud to the ladies' chambers and pledges mercy for Friedrich from her new husband after they are married. While Elsa is hidden from view as she walks down to fetch Ortrud, she invokes the Norse gods Odin and Freya to help her take revenge on the Christians who oppose her ambitions. Pretending to be thankful for Elsa's kindness, she also begins the process of undermining her belief in the powers and virtue of the knight. She tells her that he might use magic to disappear just as suddenly as he arrived.

At daybreak, a large crowd assembles at the fortress for Elsa's wedding. It is announced that Friedrich has been outlawed, Elsa will marry the knight, and he will rule Brabant as Protector of Brabant (not duke of Brabant). Friedrich nonetheless continues to lurk on the grounds of the fortress and has

actually persuaded some of this former liegemen to try to challenge the new regime now set to take over the country. They intend to accuse the mysterious knight publicly of sorcery. Elsa proceeds to the cathedral for her wedding ceremony and the king arrives with his knights to witness it. Friedrich suddenly appears and accuses the knight of sorcery. Even though she is now a part of Elsa's retinue, Ortrud comes forward to renounce her and support Friedrich's accusation. Friedrich demands to know the name and origins of the knight, who tells him that he will reveal that information only to Elsa, if she asks. He refuses to answer any question about his name or origins publicly even after King Heinrich demands it. Elsa is shaken by the accusation of sorcery, but she affirms her faith in the knight and is escorted to the cathedral by the king for her wedding ceremony with him.

Act III, scene 1: a bridal chamber in the fortress of Antwerp

In the evening, a procession leads Elsa and the knight to the bridal chamber, where they have a chance to speak to each other alone for the first time. The knight declares his love, but he avoids Elsa's questions. She swore an oath never to ask him his name or his origins, but she does anyway. As soon as Friedrich, who has been hiding outside the bridal chamber, overhears Elsa pose her questions, he enters the room with his liegemen. Convinced that answering Elsa's questions will cause the knight to lose his magical powers, he tries to attack with his sword, but the knight kills him instantly. The liegemen carry Friedrich's body out, and the knight instructs Elsa's ladies-in-waiting to prepare her to be brought before the king. In his presence, the knight will reveal his name and origins to all.

Act III, scene 2: a plain on the banks of the Scheldt river near Antwerp

The next morning, the king greets the Brabantian nobles and their soldiers, who are ready to leave for battle under his command. The knight appears, uncovers Friedrich's body, and describes how he was killed after attacking him the night before. He tells the king that Elsa has broken her promise not to ask his name. He answers in front of everyone assembled before the king that he is Lohengrin, son of the Grail king Parzival. He comes from the castle of Monsalvat (in Spain), where the Holy Grail is protected, and belongs to a brotherhood of knights who are sent out by the Grail to fight evil and defend virtue. The knights are protected by divine power, but they lose this protection if they reveal their names. Lohengrin will not stay, even though he is begged to do so, since he has now lost his magical powers. He had originally planned to stay with Elsa in wedded bliss for a year (his term of service with her mandated by God), after which he would have been freed from the power of the Grail, and she would have appeared to him in a different form. But now, as punishment for breaking her oath, he must leave immediately.

The swan appears again in the river, this time drawing an empty boat to take Lohengrin away. Before he steps into the boat, he tells Elsa that her long-lost brother Gottfried will return. Ortrud suddenly appears, and it is revealed that the swan is actually Gottfried. He had been turned into a swan by means of a spell cast by Ortrud on the day he went walking in the woods with Elsa. Lohengrin falls to his knees and prays. At that moment, a dove descends from the heavens and hovers over the boat. The swan sinks beneath the waves and Lohengrin lifts out Gottfried, who is now freed from Ortrud's spell. Lohengrin proclaims him the new ruler of Brabant before disappearing in the boat, which is now drawn by the dove. Ortrud collapses with a shriek at the sight of Gottfried. For her part, Elsa embraces her brother, then falls lifeless to the ground.

Notes on the historical background of Wagner's libretto for *Lohengrin*:

Wagner's version of the Lohengrin story is a conflation of personalities and historical events of both the tenth and twelfth centuries AD. The only firm chronological clue provided by Wagner himself is his identification of King Heinrich in his libretto with King Henry the Fowler (ca. 876-936), who became the duke of Saxony in 912 and king of East Francia in 919. Although the character of King Heinrich is hailed as "king of Germany" in Wagner's *Lohengrin*, he never held or claimed that title. The first ruler to assert the title king of Germany was Heinrich's son Otto the Great (912-973). Nonetheless, references to Henry the Fowler's Saxon followers and wars with the Hungarians would be compatible with a setting during his reign in the early tenth century AD. In terms of European cultural trends, the presence of a heathen princess such as Ortrud also points to a time frame in the tenth century, when there were still many non-Christian political figures in northern, central, and eastern Europe. Already by the eleventh century, there were not (with some notable holdouts). The depiction of a trial by ordeal and contemporary belief in a place where the Holy Grail was located and protected would not be compatible with a setting in later centuries up to the appearance of the Lohengrin tale in thirteenth-century German literature.

There are also historical references in the libretto that would be much more compatible with events during the reign of Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI, who held the title king of Germany between 1169 and 1197. In particular, this has to do with references to territories ruled by a duke of Brabant. No duchy of Brabant existed before 1183. The title duke of Brabant was first held by Henry I (r. 1183-1235), who had no child named Elsa and did not die with minor children put into the care of a Brabantian nobleman. He did have a son named Gottfried (Godfrey), however, who lived from 1209 to 1254, but he was the last child of his marriage to Mathilde of Boulogne, so he never became the ruler of Brabant. In the reign of Henry the Fowler, what later came to be designated the territories of Brabant were ruled from afar by a duke of Lorraine, Gilbert (d. 939), who had no ethnic identification with the residents of the area and did not frequently visit the territories that later made up the duchy of Brabant.

Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI also claimed the loyalty of knights and nobles in Saxony, and in addition, knights and nobles from Thuringia, who are mentioned in Wagner's libretto. In fact, he intended to lead these forces in a Crusade that was planned to begin in 1197 but was cut short by his death the same year. No Thuringian state existed during the reign of Henry the Fowler, but a well-established landgraviate of Thuringia did exist throughout the reign of Henry VI. It is also known that Henry VI had dealings with the first duke of Brabant, Henry I.

The pronounced sense of German nationalism expressed in Wagner's libretto is quite remarkable, and it was appealing to many nineteenth-century Germans who wanted to see the unification of the German lands (a monumental political goal finally realized in 1871). No such feelings of German nationalism are documented among the residents of what was known as the kingdom of Germany either in the tenth or twelfth centuries. The states ruled by Henry the Fowler and Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI as kings of Germany were far-flung and not governed by a powerful centralized government. They were populated by a wide variety of ethnic groups, and many residents, including those who lived in what is now known as Brabant, did not even speak German. It is quite arresting to find a chorus in *Lohengrin* in which the singers proclaim "Sieg, Heil" ("hail victory") in the manner of supporters of the Nazi regime in Germany during the years 1933-1945. The victory hoped for in Wagner's opera was against invaders from Hungary.