

ELSA'S DREAM: INSPIRATION AND MUSICAL
DEVELOPMENT IN RICHARD WAGNER'S *LOHENGRIN*

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Richard Wagner's epic *Lohengrin* bridges the gap of musical style between his operas and music dramas. *Lohengrin* combines characteristics of French Grand Opera, Italian bel canto style, German Romantic opera, as well as the plots of a historical drama to create a unique style that stands apart from the rest of Wagner's works. The story of the Swan Knight follows the tale of Elsa of Brabant, who stands accused of murdering her brother Gottfried, heir to the dukedom of Brabant. Friedrich von Telramund asserts his right to the throne, and Elsa recalls her dream in which a knight appears who rescues her and takes her as his bride. Elsa's remembrance of the dream in her aria "Einsam in trüben Tagen" brings the Swan Knight Lohengrin into being. This scene is one of the most important in the opera because it is a "story within a story," which chronicles the tale of Elsa and the Swan Knight. The original myth of Lohengrin and the Grail revolves around the Swan Knight, but Wagner's opera centers around Elsa and her impossible decision of whether to ask her champion his name. As we will see, the act of asking the "forbidden question" is inevitable, but Elsa goes through tremendous emotional anguish trying to decide what to do. Eventually her inquisitiveness and the influence of the witch Ortrud overcome her will, and she asks Lohengrin his name, only to die as Lohengrin returns to the spirit world.

Wagner's original Prose Sketch for *Lohengrin* was nearly thirty pages in length, but did not necessarily provide enough opportunities for emotional moments in the opera. If Wagner had not altered his original sketch greatly, "Einsam in trüben Tagen" would not have existed. Elsa's recollection of her dream was hardly mentioned in his first stage plan. Originally, after Telramund accuses Elsa of Gottfried's murder, he also states that she will make herself the mistress of Brabant through marriage to an undisclosed lover.

Elsa then would have claimed her innocence and hope that some brave and unknown man would step forward to defend her. The Swan Knight would have then just appeared without her invoking him into being, making for a far less dramatic and emotional scene. The trance-like state that Elsa attains in her aria helps set up her character as a dreamer and a visionary; without this scene her character would not be established properly, and the audience would have no reason to sympathize with her and become emotionally invested in the plot. The appearance of Lohengrin coming down the river on the swan would have also been less effective in Wagner's original sketch, seeing that in the second interlude of Elsa's aria she swears that her knight will appear and fight for her. Without her aria, there is no anticipation of Lohengrin's arrival; there would be less at stake because Elsa would not have sworn to her King that her unnamed savior will arrive. Lohengrin's entrance would have been more of a surprise and not dramatically successful.¹

The story of *Lohengrin* takes notes from both Greek myth and Christianity, with the juxtaposition of light and dark, good and evil, conveying a pivotal role in the plot. The Christian aspect involved is, of course, the Holy Grail, which acts as a catalyst through which Lohengrin may be allowed to enter the world of humans. It is because Lohengrin is a "servant of the Grail" that he is given invincible power, as well as the option to live as a human, but only if his true nature remains unknown. Comparisons can also be drawn between Elsa and Eve of Christian mythology, as both, unquestionably pure in the beginning of their stories, eventually fall prey to curiosity brought on by a representative of evil. Elsa can no longer stand up to the questions which Ortrud has

¹ Ernest Newman, *The Wagner Operas*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 107-108.

planted in her head, just as Eve is enticed by the serpent to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Both women discover knowledge that destroys their charmed lives, but Elsa pays for this disloyalty with her life.

Parallels can also be drawn between Elsa and the Greek legends Semele and Psyche. All three women fall in love with Gods, or God-like men, whose true identities either cannot be known, or are called into question. Semele is seduced and falls in love with the God Zeus, but begins to question whether her lover is truly Zeus when his wife Hera discovers the affair and plants seeds of doubt in Semele's mind. Psyche is visited every night by Amor (Cupid), whose identity as a God must be kept a secret from Psyche in order for them to be together, just as Lohengrin cannot allow Elsa to know his true nature. Each of the three characters begins with faith in their love, but falls prey to a malicious woman who instills uncertainty into their minds about their relationships. Psyche's sisters cause her to doubt her blind trust in her nameless lover, Hera causes Semele to question her faith in Zeus, and Elsa eventually surrenders to the fear and uncertainty Ortrud has imparted on her. However, unlike the Greek myths, the story of Elsa and Lohengrin does not have a happy ending. Semele and Psyche are both pardoned for their weakness and reunited with their loves (Psyche with Amor and Semele with her son Dionysus), but Elsa dies at the end of *Lohengrin*, with no chance for redemption. *Lohengrin* is one of Wagner's only operas or music dramas to end with no chance of salvation or at least some hope.

The story of Lohengrin, the Swan Knight, was first depicted in Wolfram von Eschenbach's epic poem *Parzival*. Eschenbach's basis for *Parzival* was *Perceval, le Conte du Graal*, a 12th century poem left unfinished by Chrétien de Troyes, which

recounts the legend of Percheval (Parsifal). While Wagner utilized the foundation of the Lohengrin story provided by Eschenbach, he also added elements of magic and Paganism to the plot. Wagner wanted to minimize the historical aspects of the plot by adding more “fairy tale” elements, most notably with the addition of Ortrud, Friedrich von Telramund’s wife. The historical features of the plot revolve around Henry the Fowler, or Henry I of Saxony, who reigned from 919 to 936. King Henry was a defender of German rights and defended his country against the Hungarians in 933.² In the original folk story, Elsa betrays her vow to Lohengrin simply because curiosity overcomes her, and she feels she must know her love’s name. By adding the witch Ortrud to the plot, Wagner created a catalyst through which the evil of the world can reach Elsa and slowly destroy her purity and faithfulness, so it is not Elsa’s weakness alone that causes her downfall, but also the influence of black magic. In Wagner’s tale it is also Ortrud who turns Elsa’s brother Gottfried into a swan, and Ortrud who provokes Telramund to accuse Elsa of her brother’s murder in the beginning of the opera.³ Ortrud also acts as the counterpart Lohengrin; she is a Pagan witch, while he is a knight of the Holy Grail; her actions are only motivated by greed and power, while Lohengrin’s actions are completely selfless and noble.

As mentioned earlier, the motives in *Lohengrin* play a smaller structural role in the music, and there are fewer motives than found in *The Ring* or *Tristan und Isolde*. Wagner also maintains a regular four-bar structure throughout *Lohengrin*, and states the initial motives completely with consequent clauses. In his music dramas, Wagner does

² Newman, *The Wagner Operas*, 115.

³ Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner’s Music Dramas*, translated by Mary Whittall (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 35-36.

away with regular phrasing, and entwines the leitmotifs to make them part of the thematic structure, something not yet seen in his earlier operas. The motives in *Lohengrin*, once stated fully, always sound as a break in the regular phrasing when they are repeated later in the score. These motives provide a powerful addition to the action and drama, but do not necessarily act as a framework for the musical configuration of the opera as whole.⁴ This does not mean that the motives in *Lohengrin* are in any way fragmentary or arbitrary though, since Wagner implements the return of the motives in sections which help link characters and emotions. The motives in *Lohengrin*, while not as highly developed as the leitmotifs seen in *Tristan* and *The Ring*, still provide cohesiveness to the opera that is reminiscent of the motives of Weber.

Because *Lohengrin* marks the transition between Wagner's operas and music dramas, there is a melding of styles found throughout the music that is unique compared to his other works. Wagner blends two seemingly opposite themes in *Lohengrin*; historical drama and mythology, to create a unique kind of drama that defies classification. There are certainly multiple traditional Romantic themes that permeate *Lohengrin*, including the use of magic, supernatural subjects, a plot set in the past, and especially faith. The catalyst for the entire action of the opera begins because of Elsa's faith in her dream champion. In her darkest hour, when Telramund has accused her of the murder of her brother Gottfried, Elsa blindly believes that the knight she saw in her dreams will come to her rescue. Her recollection of her dream, told in "Einsam in trüben Tagen," brings her savior, Lohengrin, into being. In a way, "Einsam," or "Elsa's Dream," as it is known, is a story within a story. Elsa narrates the story of Lohengrin, all

⁴ John Deathridge and Carl Dahlhaus, *The New Grove Wagner* (New York: Norton, 1984), 140-142.

the way from his journey from the spirit world into the world of humans, to her fantasy outcome of him becoming her husband and living happily ever after, so to speak. The course of the action in the actual opera, however, does not take this blissful route. Elsa's fantasy, of course, does not include the interference of Ortrud and Telramund in the relationship between Elsa and Lohengrin, and so the course of the action is altered to end with a tragic conclusion.

Despite her faith in the Swan Knight and her dream as reality, Elsa's happy ending is impossible to achieve from the outset of the opera. The existence of the forbidden question – Lohengrin's name and origins – makes a good outcome impossible for Elsa. Ortrud and Telramund's meddling with Elsa's mind certainly facilitates the inevitable tragic ending, but the forbidden question would eventually have to be asked by Elsa at some point. Lohengrin forbids Elsa to ask his name because he does not want to be worshipped for being a knight of the Grail, but by having such a mammoth secret, it casts an untouchable light over him, making him even more of a figure to be worshipped and not just loved as a person.

Wagner himself described the character of Lohengrin as “the tragedy of the absolute artist.” In an 1851 letter, Wagner wrote:

Lohengrin sought a woman who would believe in him: who would not ask who he was or whence he came, but would love him as he was and because he was what he appeared to her to be. He sought a woman to whom he would not have to explain or justify himself, but who would love him unconditionally. For this reason he had to conceal his higher nature, for it was precisely the non-discovery, the non-revelation of this higher nature...that was his sole guarantee that he was not admired or marveled at or humbly – and uncomprehendingly – adored simply because of that

quality.... But he is unable to shake off the telltale aura of his higher nature; he cannot help but appear an object of wonder; the amazement of the commonalty, the venom of envy throw their shadow even into the heart of the loving woman; doubt and jealousy prove to him that he is not understood but only adored, and tear from him that confession of his divinity, with which he returns into his solitude, destroyed.⁵

At the time Wagner wrote this, he had been in exile in Switzerland since May of 1849, so his perception of the story may have been colored by his feelings towards his own situation.⁶ The tragic ending in *Lohengrin* is a rarity for a Wagner opera. Tragic endings for operas were becoming more common at the time, but were not yet commonplace as they would become in the later operas of Verdi and Puccini. Operas of the French Grand Opera style regularly employed sad endings, which could have influenced Wagner's libretto for *Lohengrin*. There are other examples of the influence of French Grand Opera in *Lohengrin* as well. There are six leading characters in the cast, including Gottfried, as there typically are in Grand Opera. While Gottfried only has a few moments of stage time, he is mentioned so frequently, and his role is so important in the opera, that he should be regarded as a central figure. He essentially takes the place of both Elsa and Lohengrin at the end of the opera, as both the principal characters are eliminated from the action. The heroic subject of the opera is also certainly typical of Grand Opera, as are the crowd scenes which involve a large number of chorus members and extras. Spectacle also plays a large role in the plot, especially in the beginning and end of the opera when Lohengrin first appears on the swan, and when he exits back to the world whence he came.

⁵ Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, 40.

⁶ Arnold Whittall, "Wagner's Great Transition? From 'Lohengrin' to 'Das Rheingold,'" *Music Analysis*, no. 3 (October 1983): 270.

The moments when Lohengrin enters the world of humans and when he leaves are the most supernatural, but because Lohengrin is a servant of the Grail; his otherworldly spirit is defined more by his connections to Christian mythology than to Pagan or magical folklore. After the premiere of *Lohengrin*, Wagner later expressed a certain disdain for Christianity, which may also help explain his additions of magic and the Pagan witch Ortrud into the plot. Wagner may have wanted to take away the emphasis on Christianity within the Swan Knight myth, and add other Romantic elements to create a more ethereal feeling in the opera.

While Wagner is most known for his demanding vocal parts that must be very large and dramatic to compete with his massive orchestras just to be heard, the orchestra in *Lohengrin* is not yet so sizable as to require singers with super-human voices. In fact, *Lohengrin*, in terms of the interaction of voice and orchestra, has more in common with Italian bel canto style than with the later style of Wagner's music dramas. The greatest difficulty in singing later Wagner is that it takes an incredible amount of stamina to maintain smooth legato lines while singing with a great amount of force. There are not many "Wagnerian" sopranos in the world, and even less that can get through a performance of Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre* or Isolde in *Tristan* without damaging their voices. Elsa does not require such an enormous voice like the female characters in Wagner's subsequent operas do, which allows the singer to focus more on the nuances of the role than just trying to get through the performance without extreme vocal fatigue. In the score of *Lohengrin*, the orchestra still accompanies the singer. The vocalists are the prominent element in the music, and not just another member of the orchestra. There are also still a couple examples of arias that can be extracted from the score and performed as

separate pieces. “Elsa’s Dream” is often performed out of context of the opera, with just one alteration made to the music so the interlude before the third verse is not so long. “Elsa’s Dream” provides a perfect fragment of the opera to be extracted and performed separately because it summarizes the story of the Swan Knight and has a dramatic arch, which peaks with Elsa’s statement that she will give herself completely to the Knight if he will take her as his wife. The emphasis in “Elsa’s Dream” is on her soaring melody and emotive text, also characteristics of bel canto opera. The vocal range in the aria is relatively small for a dramatic soprano, from E-flat above middle C to A-flat five, but the low tessitura makes her leaps up to the high A-flat even more dramatic.⁷

The motives in *Lohengrin*, though not as numerous as in Wagner’s music dramas, still play an integral part in the score. There are only six pervasive motives in *Lohengrin*, as compared to the over thirty leitmotifs utilized in *The Ring*; however these motives recur at important places in the music and interweave the characters in an elaborate scheme of jealousy, love and passion. The first, and possibly the most important motive in the opera, is the Grail or Lohengrin motive. This is the first motive heard at the beginning of the opera, and is one of the last developed in the finale as Lohengrin sees a white dove and restores Gottfried from a swan to his original state. This motive not only represents Lohengrin the man, but also the Grail and the good that it symbolizes. Lohengrin is represented by the key of A-major throughout the opera, which is also the key of his motive. Wagner uses “associative” tonality to link Lohengrin and Elsa’s motives. Elsa’s motive, which is first sounded at her entrance in the opera in Act I, scene

⁷ Paul Thomason, “Lohengrin’s Line: Is Wagner’s Opera a Bel Canto Work in Disguise?,” *Opera News*, (March 1998): 15-16.

two, is in A-flat major, just one half-step below Lohengrin. Wagner would go on to use associative tonalities in *The Ring* cycle as well; the Valkyries are associated with B-minor and the Nibelungs with B-flat minor.⁸ The close relationship of tonalities between Elsa and Lohengrin is in no way a coincidence; the fact that Elsa's motive is a semitone below Lohengrin's is symbolic of her never being able to attain the same plane of existence as him. No matter how strong their love is, Elsa can never attain the same God-like divinity that Lohengrin possesses. Lohengrin will forever be of a higher nature than Elsa, and therefore their relationship cannot last because they can never be equals.

The other four recurring motives in the opera are the "forbidden question" motive, and the motives of Ortrud, Telramund, and Heinrich der Vogler (King Henry the Fowler), who is symbolized by the key of C-major. Wagner called his use of motives in *Lohengrin* a "symphonic web," which was inspired by the symphonies of Beethoven. Carl Dahlhaus best describes Wagner's use of structural units in the opera:

The thematic periods are divided up into smaller motivic and structural units, to be restored complete only at the end: a method reminiscent of, and historically dependent on, the symphonic process of development and reprise. Antecedent and consequent clauses are separated from each other and the motives eventually shrink to short quotations, which are then always ready to be inserted into the musical fabric without strain or technical difficulty, whenever the inner or external action requires it...The thematic periods should be understood as the outcome of elaboration of the motives and not vice versa; the motives are not the

⁸ Grove Music Online "Lohengrin (i)" (by Barry Millington), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com> (accessed February 17, 2009).

result of subdividing the thematic periods. The periodic structure is secondary.⁹

The end of the use of quadratic periods for Wagner would not come until he began work on *The Ring*, but there are moments in *Lohengrin* when Wagner abandons two and four-bar phrases in favor of more progressive and irregular rhythms. The Act II scene between the villains Ortrud and Telramund defies rhythmic regularity, and uses a combination of both Ortrud's motive and the forbidden question motive to build the formal structure of the scene. Ortrud and Telramund are lamenting their defeats, and Ortrud crafts the plan to incite Elsa to ask the question which she has promised never to ask to Lohengrin in order to bring about Elsa's downfall and her own victory. Two-bar or four-bar phrases are juxtaposed with one-and-a-half bar phrases in this scene, which are unique to the rest of the score of *Lohengrin*, and offer a glimpse into what would become Wagner's compositional style for his music dramas.¹⁰ The fact that this deviation from his usual quadratic style is used in a scene involving the two antagonists may have been another way Wagner utilized the music to depict his characters.

"Einsam in trüben Tagen" begins with Elsa entering on an E-flat at the top of the staff, which moves in a downward motion, helping to depict the text which translates as "Lonely in sorrow filled days." Her melody in the opening of the aria is accompanied only by flute and oboe, which are soon joined by other woodwinds, giving the aria an otherworldly sound. Elsa is depicted with woodwinds throughout the opera, which juxtapose the use of bassoons to represent Ortrud and Telramund. The melody descends chromatically, indicating Elsa's grief over the loss of her brother and her desperation as

⁹ Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, 46.

¹⁰ Newman, *The Wagner Operas*, 141-142.

she prays to God for help. This melody is simple, but allows the soprano the chance to experiment with dynamics, especially *pianos* and *pianissimos*, which are a rare occurrence in Wagner operas. The orchestra suddenly doubles in size with the addition of more woodwinds and strings playing tremolo as Elsa sings, “Da drang aus meinem Stöhnen ein Laut so klagevoll” (Then arose out of my wailing a cry so filled with grief). Her melody, which has so far been very smooth and tranquil, abruptly becomes choppy with the use of dotted and double-dotted quarter notes. This rhythm, combined with the tremolo on the strings, makes for a very ominous sound. Elsa’s melody at this point is also studded with grace notes while hovering over an E-flat and gradually building in dynamics and tempo, all of which serve to add tension to the phrase. The dramatic swelling of the music finally peaks on a high *fortissimo* A-flat as Elsa sings “...der zu gewalt’gem Tönen weit in die Lüfte schwoll” (which with mighty ringing far into the air swelled). At this point the music breaks and rapidly diminuendos and ritards as Elsa once again returns to the ethereal melody like that which she sang at the outset of the aria, beginning with an octave portamento leap up from E-flat. She moves down stepwise along with the orchestra, until ending on an E-flat above middle C, her lowest note in the piece. This descending melody reflects the text and her mood as she sinks “into sweet slumber.”

In the ensuing interlude, the chorus sings abrupt phrases expressing their confusion about Elsa’s strange behavior and King Henry urges her to confess to the murder of her brother over a flute solo which ascends by half-steps. The juxtaposition of the declamatory vocal parts and the ascending flute line echo the mood of respective characters. The chorus and the King are both agitated and confused, while Elsa is

slipping back into the memory of her happy dream. The chromatic motion ends delicately with an arpeggiated tonic chord played on harp. Strings take over and play Lohengrin's motive, foreshadowing his story which is about to be told by Elsa. Elsa begins recalling the story of the knight she saw in her dream while in a trance-like state, again using dotted and double-dotted quarter notes to express her excitement. The consequent of Lohengrin's opening motive is played in the woodwinds as Elsa recalls the first moment she saw the knight in her dream. The tempo slowly picks up speed and trumpet, playing a variation of Lohengrin's theme, is added to the orchestra to indicate Lohengrin's horn, which Elsa sings of when describing her knight. The orchestra pulls back in dynamics and the key deviates momentarily as Elsa sings, "Mit züchtigem Gebahren gab Tröstung er mir ein: des Ritters will ich wahren, er soll mein Streiter sein" (With modest manners gave comfort to me: for the knight will I care, he shall my champion be!). The size of the orchestra is cut in half as the dynamics decrease and Elsa sinks even farther into her dream, declaring once again she knows this unnamed knight will be her savior.

The music breaks once again as men of the chorus enter singing over a full orchestra to the melody of Elsa's motive, once more declaring their belief in Elsa's guilt in regular four-bar phrases. The King begins to change his mind about Elsa's guilt, and tells Telramund to think carefully about who he accuses of murder. The King's melody brings about a more declamatory, recitative-like section, which continues with Telramund's response sung over menacing strings and bassoon. Bassoons will come to represent Telramund and his wife Ortrud later in the opera, which makes their use notable in this scene because it is a considerable deviation from the light strings and flute which

have been used so far to represent Elsa. Telramund upholds his position and his disbelief in Elsa, and asks “who here will dare contend against the honor of my word?,” to which the chorus replies defensively, “none of us here” as the orchestra grows in size. The conversation between Telramund and King Henry continues as Telramund reminds the King that he has been loyal to him, and the King agrees that Telramund deserves to rule the country, but decides that only God can bring judgment and decide who will become ruler. A melody played on bass clarinet and trombone signifies the judgment of God, as King Henry asks Telramund if he will agree to combat to fight for rule of the kingdom and let the result be in God’s hands. The King then asks the same question to Elsa, if she will agree to have her hero fight for her, and both she and Telramund agree.

This interlude of the aria ends as Lohengrin’s motive is played once more on woodwinds, indicating a return to Elsa’s dream. Her melody is once again marked by dotted rhythms, and becomes more declamatory as her conclusion that the knight in her dream will be her savior becomes more secure. The orchestra continues to increase in size and dynamic level until Elsa says, “mich glücklich soll ich preisen, nimmt er mein Gut dahin” (happy shall I consider myself, if he takes my possessions for himself), when the orchestra softens and condenses to only strings, flute, and bassoon. The mood changes once more as the strings and Elsa’s melody ascend and crescendo to the final peak of the aria: “will er Gemahl mich heissen, geb’ ich ihm, was ich bin!” (if he will take me for his wife, I will give him all that I am), as Elsa reaches A-flat five for only the second time in the aria, effectively and dramatically ending the scene and setting the stage for Lohengrin’s entrance.

Elsa's role in *Lohengrin* is arguably the most complex and the most integral to the plot. Her dream and love for her unnamed knight bring him to life and motivate the action of the opera. Her aria "Einsam in trüben Tagen" introduces the audience not only to the Swan Knight, but her character as well, showing her vulnerability and desire for love. Wagner's use of multiple musical styles gives the opera a unique sound which provides a link between his operas and music dramas, and continues to be one of his greatest works.

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