

# British Theatre Guide

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## Lohengrin

Richard Wagner  
Opus Arte (3 DVDs)  
(2007)

I suspect that very few hardcore Wagner fans would nominate *Lohengrin* as their favourite opera. Compared to the psychological depth of *Tristan*, the *Ring Cycle* and *Parsifal*, the earlier work often come across as shallow and rather anaemic - or perhaps modern audiences simply find it harder to relate to Wagner's saintly knight, distressed damsel and enchanted swan. But Nikolaus Lehnhoff's bold production for the Baden-Baden Festspielhaus, conducted by Kent Nagano, throws fairytale prettiness out of the window in favour of a harder approach. This *Lohengrin* is a dark, Strindbergian psychodrama in which the clash of male and female, good and evil is played out against a disconcertingly modern backdrop.

As the first notes of the overture are heard the lonely figure of Elsa von Brabant (Solveig Kringelborn), illuminated only by a thin shaft of light, advances slowly towards the front of the stage. The young noblewoman has been falsely accused by Friederich von Telramud (Tom Fox) and his sorceress wife Ortrud (Waltraud Meier) of killing her brother Gottfried. Stephan Braunfels' huge architectural set literally swings into action to form a semi-circular amphitheatre in which Elsa is brought to trial before the nobles of Brabant and Telramund's followers. Elsa begs King Heinrich of Germany (Hans-Peter König) to summon the knight she saw in a vision - a man who will save her life and honour. Lohengrin (Klaus Florian Vogt) makes a dramatic (but swanless) entrance, defeats Telramund in single combat and vows to marry Elsa - on the condition that she never asks him to divulge the secret of his name and origin.

In his leaflet notes Lehnhoff plays down the Nazi connection with Wagner, but Bettina Walter's first act costumes feature black or brown military uniforms for the men and 1930s suits for the women. When Lohengrin is mobbed by a bevy of adoring ladies it's hard not to be reminded of female enthusiasm for another supposedly heaven-sent redeemer...

The second act is set firmly in the present day. Casually dressed spectators, newspapers in hand, jostle one another at the top of a monumental staircase for a good view of the wedding procession. Meanwhile Ortrud and Telramund, officially banished from the court, lurk in disguise outside the cathedral. Ortrud reveals her identity to Elsa and even manages to regain her trust, but not without sowing a seed of doubt in her mind that Lohengrin's powers may be due to magic rather than divine protection. Elsa, not the brightest of Wagner's heroines, resists the temptation to ask the forbidden question and the marriage goes ahead to general rejoicing.

Lehnhoff's most audacious touch is reserved for the final act, in which Lohengrin - curiously indifferent to the charms of his new bride and his role as leader of an army against foreign invaders - is spending his wedding night composing at the piano. A scene which in less certain hands could have been a risible piece of "director's theatre" works perfectly. Lohengrin's otherworldly origin is so clearly signalled by his silver clothing and the slightly metallic sheen on his skin and hair he could hardly be expected to behave like an ordinary mortal. But when Elsa can no longer contain her

curiosity and begs to know his secret, her dreams of happiness comes to a brutally abrupt end; almost simultaneously Telramund bursts in and makes an attempt on Lohengrin's life only to be killed himself, and the blue backdrop at the rear of the stage falls to reveal the grim courtroom set of Act One. Lohengrin reveals that he is a knight of Montsalvat, the earthly resting place of the Holy Grail, and his identify having become known he must return there. He bids a sad goodbye to Elsa - the swan-drawn boat again being left to the audience's imagination - and young Gottfried is miraculously restored to his rightful place as heir of Brabant.

The first-rate cast give their all in this fine production. Solveig Kringelborn is a most touching Elsa and Klaus Florian Vogt, who sounds as if he would be equally at home as Tamino, has no difficulty making himself heard above the mighty Deutsches Symphonie Orchester. The wonderful Waltraud Meier, who has played Ortrud so often she could probably sing the role in her sleep, gives a sensational performance both vocally and dramatically (totally unfazed by the fact that in two scenes she is in danger of being upstaged by her OTT hat). The combined forces of the EuropaChor Akademie Mainz and the Chorus of the Opera National de Lyon also do sterling work. Lehnhoff's clever and insightful *Lohengrin* will no doubt make many converts of those inclined to consign the opera to the second-rate Wagner category.

**Reviewer:** [J. D. Atkinson](#)