

Richard Wagner (1813 –1883)

Lohengrin -

If one ever wonders where the music of Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms and Liszt is supposed to culminate – consider the iconoclastic triumph of German Romanticism that is Richard Wagner.

There is much to process when considering the music of Wagner and we must try not to see it as an artistic abstraction but as part of a whole lifestyle and philosophy that was the man. Primarily an opera composer, it seems the scope of Wagner would have been trivialized had he written primarily symphonic works. As it happens, this constant artist always had a story to tell; and had to tell it in his own way; with his own directives; and his own music; in his own house; with his own cast; with his own musicians; with an absolute Germanic authority over every aspect. There is a word that has been coined for exactly this Wagnerian premise – it is *Gesamtkunstwerk* – which literally means, the ‘whole artistic undertaking’.

Wagner built an operatic performance from the ground up. He was the composer, the librettist, the stage director, the set designer, as well as being the house manager, the architect, the community officer and the politician. No one man can be a master in all these areas, though it is the perfectionist in him that may drive him to try. The libretti have a tendency to be long and overworked. Wagner was a great poet in his compositions, but not in the written word.

At the height of German Romanticism, the storyline, more often than not, concerns itself with mythical figures, greater gods, lesser gods, heroes, mortals, woodland nymphs, fairies and witches. The vast expanses of the Bavarian countryside that evoke this story line are also the inspiration for Weber’s *Freischütz*, and Humperdinck’s *Hänsel und Gretel* along with all those other marvelous Fairy Tales set down by the brothers Grimm in 1812. . Come to that, a similar countryside, not too far to the east is also the inspiration for Mahler’s symphonies and their combination with the lore of the *Wunderhorn*. It is not a passing fancy, - it is deep in the psychology of the German experience. Equally, prevalent at the time, is the storyline that contains Christian mysticism – and the prevalence of good over evil embedded in the Christian story of salvation through purity in Christ. Indeed, both these story lines provide such good meat that they are often mixed up, with witchery appearing in religious contexts and religious Christian ideals appearing in mythical heroism.

Lohengrin is set as part of a medieval epic which whilst favouring the ideal of Christian knighthood, is set in a mythical pre-Christian era. Once again, just as with *Parsifal*, and even *Tannhäuser*, stories rife with mysticism and myth appear mixed up in an overtly Christian context.

The fact that everything could be given a *Christian* context, and that everything from whatever era in history was directly relatable to *Christian* morality, no matter how spurious or untenable, - has a dark and terrible side. It is no wonder that the geography of Europe most susceptible to these myths and legends, with the Bavarian Black Forest to the west, Southern Poland to the north, Northern Hungary to the East, Austria to the south and the Moravian Czech region right in the middle was the continuous font of wave after wave of anti-Semitism - from the mediaeval pogroms of the 1200's to more recent events (1933-1945) well known to all.

The actual scoring of *Lohengrin* has a personalized context for Richard Wagner himself. Lohengrin loses his magical power the moment he is forced to reveal his name. We are led to expect that a love interest must love and adore with a pure motivation. Just as Elsa is forbidden to ask the right questions, she is also expected to be pure and virtuous and not succumb to human love, which would undoubtedly initiate the wrong questions. Wagner is no doubt autobiographical in this artistic investment. What he wants for Lohengrin, he yearns for himself. As garbled a prospect as this may be, Wagner gives us his own insight into the subject, writing in 1851 in *Mitteilung an meine Freunde*:

“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 as 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 and marvelled at, or humbly – and uncomprehendingly -- adored, simply because of that quality.”

Musically, *Lohengrin* is transitional, between ‘Romantic Opera’ and ‘music drama’. In accordance with Wagner’s ambition to establish a symphonic foundation for tragic drama, he writes as follows:

“Nevertheless the new form of dramatic music must have a musical shape and to do that it must display the unity of a symphonic movement, and it does so if it spreads itself over the whole drama... not merely over isolated... smaller sections of it.”

The prelude to *Lohengrin* is instantly a realization of this ambition!

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