

## The Debut of Wagner's *Lohengrin* in London

Peter Dundas

Did you know that *Lohengrin* is, and always has been, Wagner's most popular opera? This is reported in the databases of Bayreuth, Covent Garden, and the MET. First performed in 1850, it was the last of his works that Wagner called an 'Opera.' Ten years later he started composing the Ring Cycle and calling each part a 'Music Drama.'

The music of *Lohengrin* was begun at Gross-Graupe, near Dresden, in the summer of 1846; the third act was sketched first, followed by the first and, finally, by the second, the full score being finished by April 28, 1848. The directors of the Dresden Opera did not care to risk an experiment by producing *Lohengrin*, but the finale to the first act was performed at a concert celebrating the three-hundredth anniversary of the Court Orchestra on September 22, 1848. Undaunted by this setback, Wagner busied himself with his prose writings, when not conducting at the theatre.

He began to realize that under the prevailing conditions at Dresden, he could not hope to see his work and ideas fulfilled. His unfortunate association and sympathy with the unsuccessful May Revolution in 1849 caused him to flee the city to escape arrest. Wagner took shelter with Liszt; with his assistance, he moved on to Paris and finally, in July 1849, settled in Zurich, Switzerland, a political exile until 1861.

The unproduced *Lohengrin* was sent to Liszt from Paris, who produced it at Weimar on August 28, 1850. Wagner did not see it.

The first performance in London of *Lohengrin* took place on May 8, 1875 at the Royal Italian Opera, Covent Garden, sung in Italian. It was justly regarded as one of the most interesting musical events of the season.

From a contemporary review:

"Only once before have we been permitted to judge the compositions of the "musician of the future." At Her Majesty's Opera, *The Flying Dutchman* was given on a single occasion, but the real Wagner is far more discernible in *Lohengrin* than in the former work. New as Wagner's

music will undoubtedly be to most English amateurs, in Germany it is becoming well known, and at Dresden, Munich, Berlin, Vienna, Frankfort, and elsewhere, *Lohengrin* has become a standard work in the repertoire. Wagner owes much to the enthusiasm of King Ludwig the Second for this opera, and some amusing stories are told how the young king, in the days before Wagner became a musical prophet in his own country, used frequently to have the opera performed for his sole gratification....*Lohengrin* has found a circle of admirers who would have us believe that no such dramatic or original music was ever heard in opera before, and even in Italy it was received with rapture when performed at Bologna in the winter of 1871...

German critics tell us that in Wagner's operas, it is not possible to judge the composer fairly without making ourselves first fully acquainted with the story. Wagner is, they say, as much a poet as a composer, and one of his greatest merits is that the character of his music clearly indicates the character of the story. In order to increase the dramatic significance of the music Wagner will not permit the action to be interrupted by separate melodies. All flows on in a continuous stream of sound, principals, chorus, and band all aiming at combined rather than isolated expression. There are instances, however, where the situations of the story compel the composer to treat them with individuality, and it is in some of these that Wagner's genius as a musician is most strikingly displayed. In the prelude, Lohengrin's song to Elsa, the music of the bridal procession, and the introduction to the third act, we find no extravagant departure from accepted models. The prelude has always awakened enthusiasm amongst Musicians. It stands almost alone as an example of the power of music to express a mystical sentiment. The strange opening upon the high notes of the violins afterward blended with the softer wind instruments, then the repetition of the theme with the full power of the orchestra, and the gradual diminishing of the tone until it dies away in ethereal echoes, makes a powerful impression on an imaginative mind.

It was within five minutes of one o'clock when the curtain fell, and we are therefore necessarily prevented from giving full details, but we may say at once that Wagner was, for the first time, thoroughly appreciated in England by an operatic audience. The house was crowded as we never remember to have seen it before. The Princess of Wales, with a host of aristocratic visitors and all the musical celebrities in London, remained until the close of the opera, late as it was, and the enthusiasm manifested, especially by the German audiences, we have rarely seen equal. They insisted upon having the famous prelude repeated, also the chorus where Lohengrin first appears, a magnificent movement, and although it was nearly midnight when the third act commenced, the remarkable orchestral introduction was encored, and at last, when the curtains fell, a prolonged and deafening shout from the Wagnerites absolutely shook the house.... Whatever may be the ultimate fate of "The Music of the Future," Wagner was positively triumphant at Covent-Garden last night."

Based on reviews published in old British newspapers from 1845 to 1880, especially one called "ERA Newspaper" May 9, 1875.