

WAGNER'S LOHENGRIN

A SYNOPSIS



The time is the 10th century, CE. King Henry the Fowler has come to Brabant to determine why there is so much discord in the kingdom. Frederick of Telramund accuses his ward, Elsa, of having murdered her younger brother Gottfried, the heir to the throne. When Elsa is called to defend herself, she sings of a mysterious dream in which a knight in shining armor came to her aid. The King orders his herald to summon such a knight, if indeed he exists. On the third summons, Lohengrin appears, in a boat drawn by a swan. He tells Elsa that he will fight for her, on condition that she marry him, but never ask his name or place of origin. Elsa rapturously agrees, the King prays for God to grant guidance, and Lohengrin defeats Telramund, but spares his life.

The second act is set on the eve, day, and night of Elsa's marriage to Lohengrin. Ortrud, Telramund's wife and the real force in the marriage, plots to undo Elsa. When the girl comes out on her balcony to sing of her love, Ortrud humbles herself before her, but only so that she can plant seeds of doubt in her ear—concerns that, for now, Elsa brushes off. Later, though, when Elsa arrives at the cathedral for the ceremony, Ortrud blocks her path, saying that no longer will she cede precedence. She accuses Lohengrin of having defeated her husband by witchcraft, further fomenting Elsa's doubts about the man whom she does not really know.

Nevertheless, the wedding takes place, and the start of the third act (after the famous Wedding March), finds the couple alone for the first time. Despite Lohengrin's endearments, Elsa is increasingly uneasy, and at last asks the forbidden question. At that moment, Telramund attacks with some dissident knights. Lohengrin kills him, then says that he will reveal his identity before all the next morning. As indeed he does, revealing that he is the son of Parsifal, the Keeper of the Holy Grail, one of a number of Grail Knights who can do good only on condition of secrecy. The swan appears again, and Lohengrin thanks it for its faithful service. Ortrud springs forward in triumph: the swan is none other than the missing Duke Gottfried, whom she had changed into a swan through her magic. Before departing, Lohengrin falls to his knees in prayer; the swan changes into a young man, Elsa collapses, and Ortrud falls down dead.

