

LOHENGRIN: THE LOVE THAT DARE NOT SPEAK ITS NAME

Professor H Teufelsdröck (from the Universität Weissenhof) reflects on a recent performance of *Lohengrin* in Barcelona. (Translated from the original German by Professor Richard Rose.)

Peter Konwitschky's controversial new production of *Lohengrin* for Hamburg and Barcelona, in which the opera is set in a school room and all but one member of the cast is an adolescent, is an excellent example of post-modern German operatic interpretation. It would be better still if the producer had developed the adolescent theme further.

The producer was mistaken in presenting Lohengrin as an adult, when he, like the star-crossed lovers in *Romeo and Juliet*, should be the same age as Elsa, that is, an age of awakening uncertainty about his/her sexual orientation. To make Lohengrin adolescent thus avoids the disturbing appearance of hierarchy, patriarchy or even incest that might be read into the existing portrayal. In a complementary fashion, all the other characters should be treated as adults broken down by the ravages of war and the corruption of court life. In this way, Lohengrin and Elsa become symbols of purity and innocence in a tired and decaying world.

The Swan motif also requires emphasis; in Barcelona Lohengrin's entrance was by a lift through a trap door at stage centre. The swan is a symbol of purity and innocence, while its soft, tactile feathers have erotic overtones appropriate to the bonds of desire between Lohengrin and Elsa. For Lohengrin, the symbolism of the white down on the swan that he rides has the same symbolism as the hawthorn flowers in Proust's *Les jeunes Filles en Fleur*.

Most of all, Konwitschky should reject the out of date convention that Lohengrin is a young knight and recognise that she is a transvestite dressed as a knight in order to declare her love for Elsa while hiding its Sapphic motivation. The recognition of Lohengrin's lesbian attraction to Elsa makes clear why Lohengrin cannot reveal her true identity to Elsa. Telling Elsa not to ask Lohengrin's name is Wagner's way of signing to the audience that there is something 'not quite right' with this young stranger. The producer's introduction of a bedside floor lamp in the climactic scene of the opera implies that Lohengrin had a plan to forestall a physical confrontation with her bride by reading in bed on their wedding night, albeit many might consider a television set more appropriate to the contemporary age. The fundamental point is that Elsa should not only be innocently unaware of Lohengrin's origins but also of Lohengrin's gender.

The revelation of Lohengrin's real sexual orientation also explains Lohengrin welcoming Ortrud's readiness to force Elsa to ask who (s)he is. In this way, Lohengrin can avoid being forced to reveal herself on their wedding night. Ortrud consents to do this because she too has a crush on Elsa, and is bitter that Elsa plans to marry someone who appears to be of the opposite sex.

Whilst Wagner was prepared to shock the public with his own heterosexual exploits, he was not prepared to risk his musical career by placing transvestite lesbianism at the centre of the opera. It would have been entirely appropriate to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the première of the opera by making the subplot explicit. In a post-modern era it is completely unacceptable for a German producer to omit such a scene because of the absence of a manuscript statement showing this to be the composer's intent. If Wagner had committed the source of Lohengrin's love for Elsa to paper, he would surely have destroyed it. In other words, the absence of documentation actually validates the foregoing interpretation.

PROFESSOR H TEUFELSDROCK
