SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

Antwerp, first half of the 10th century

ACT I: The king's court of judgment, on the banks of the Scheldt

ACT II, Scene 1: Outside Elsa's castle
Scene 2: The courtyard of the cathedral

ACT III, Scene 1: The bridal chamber
Scene 2: The banks of the Scheldt

ACT I

In Antwerp, on the banks of the Scheldt, a herald announces King Henry, who asks Count Telramund to explain why the Duchy of Brabant is torn by strife and disorder. Telramund accuses his young ward, Elsa, of having murdered her brother, Gottfried, heir to Brabant's Christian dynasty. (Gottfried was actually enchanted by the evil Ortrud, whom Telramund has wed.) When Elsa is called to defend herself, she relates a dream of a knight in shining armor who will come to save her. The herald calls for the defender, but only when Elsa prays does the knight appear, arriving in a boat magically drawn by a swan. He pledges his troth to her on condition that she never ask his name or origin. Defeating Telramund in combat, the newcomer establishes the innocence of his bride.

ACT II

Before dawn in the castle courtyard, Ortrud and the lamenting Telramund swear vengeance. When Elsa appears in a window, Ortrud attempts to sow distrust in the girl's mind, preying on her curiosity, but Elsa innocently offers the scheming Ortrud friendship. Inside, while the victorious knight is proclaimed guardian of Brabant, the banned Telramund furtively enlists four noblemen to side with him against his newfound rival. At the cathedral entrance, Ortrud and Telramund attempt to stop the wedding—she by suggesting that the unknown knight is in fact an impostor, he by accusing Elsa's bridegroom of sorcery. The crowd stirs uneasily. Though troubled by doubt, Elsa reiterates her faith in the knight before they enter the church, accompanied by King Henry.

ACT III

Alone in the bridal chamber, Elsa and her husband express their love until anxiety and uncertainty at last compel the bride to ask the groom who he is and

whence he has come. Before he can reply, Telramund and his henchmen burst in. With a cry, Elsa hands the knight his sword, with which he kills Telramund. Ordering the nobles to bear the body to the king, he sadly tells Elsa he will meet her later to answer her questions. Escorting Elsa and the bier to the Scheldt, the knight tells the king he cannot now lead the army against the Hungarian invaders. He explains that his home is the temple of the Holy Grail at distant Monsalvat, to which he must return; Parsifal is his father, and Lohengrin is his name. He bids farewell and turns to his magic swan. Ortrud rushes in, jubilant over Elsa's betrayal of the man who could have broken the spell that transformed her brother into a swan. But Lohengrin's prayers bring forth Gottfried in place of his vanished swan, and after naming the boy ruler of Brabant, Lohengrin disappears, led by the dove of the Grail. Ortrud perishes, and Elsa, calling for her lost husband, falls lifeless to the ground.

—Courtesy of OPERA NEWS

NOTES ON LOHENGRIN

"How strange that I must feel as Beethoven did; he could not hear his own music because he was deaf," Wagner wrote to a friend in 1852. "I cannot hear mine because I am more than deaf…." The cause of the composer's anguish was *Lohengrin*. Ever since its completion in March 1848, he had craved to hear it, but no opera company would put it on. When Liszt finally arranged to produce the work in Weimar in August 1850, Wagner could not attend since he was banned from Germany because of his sympathy for the revolutionary movement of 1848–49. So frustrated was he that he toyed with the notion of attending the premiere in disguise. In the end, he did the next best thing; he attended vicariously. On the evening of the performance he sat—appropriately enough—at the Swan Inn in Lucerne and tried to imagine, as he watched the clock, how the work was progressing act by act. Ten years later, still not having seen his opera, he complained to Berlioz that he was probably the only German not to have done so. It was only in 1861 in Vienna that he finally heard it. Moved to tears, he told his first wife, Minna, "For the first time in this artist's life of mine, I felt a total sense of enjoyment which reconciled me to everything that had gone before."

Affected though he was on that occasion, Wagner had long despaired of having his works performed to the standard he wished. Reports about the Weimar premiere had left him dispirited. In spite of his copious written instructions and Liszt's best efforts, the performance had been an overall failure. Neither the directing, the singing, nor the orchestra—with only 11 violins and a total complement of 38—were up to the demands of the score. It was because of this that in 1850 the idea occurred to him that the only way of ever ensuring polished performances of his novel and oft-difficult works would be to build his own theater and personally control its productions. Thus was planted the

Bayreuth seed that came to fruition a quarter century later.

Musically, *Lohengrin* marked a critical stage in the composer's development. With each step along the way from *Rienzi* to *Der Fliegende Holländer* to *Tannhäuser*, Wagner had broken new ground. *Lohengrin* was the culmination in this series of "Romantic operas" and at the same time a landmark in harmonic innovation. The old operatic format was still in place but now took a different shape. Aria, duet, and ensemble were forged into a unity, and the chorus, with its more complex harmonies, assumed greater importance. The instrumentation created richer orchestral color and more subtle descriptions of mood, and Richard Strauss considered the prelude to be the first step toward a new tonality. Music was beginning to say more than the text, with the leitmotif emerging in primitive form by associating characters with certain keys (Lohengrin with A major) and situations (the forbidden question) with specific musical themes. "With *Lohengrin* the old world of opera has come to an end," Liszt grandly prophesied, "the spirit moves upon the face of the waters, and there will be light." The "light" took shape in the new musical world of *Tristan und Isolde*, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, and *Parsifal*.

Lohengrin was also a vital turning point in Wagner's life in an entirely different way. On hearing the work in 1860, the 15-year-old Bavarian crown prince was so enthralled that as soon as he came to the throne as Ludwig II in the spring of 1864, he had no greater wish than to promote the composer's musical career. Wagner was so down and out at the time that without Ludwig's support it is difficult to think that any of the creations that followed their meeting—*Die Meistersinger*, the *Ring*, and *Parsifal*, not to mention the Bayreuth Festival and its Festival Theater—could ever have come into existence. Although slow to catch on, *Lohengrin* eventually replaced *Tannhäuser* as the popular favorite among Wagner's works. In Germany it was accompanied by a wave of kitsch that was never matched by any other opera. No one fell in with the mood or epitomized it better than Kaiser Wilhelm II, who loved to be photographed dressed as the swan–knight in a gleaming white uniform and silver winged helmet and who, thus clad, once had himself transported into Hamburg aboard a motorized swan boat. At the same time, the work was also transformed into a veritable anthem of chauvinism. The operatic King Henry was historically the 10th century Henry, king of Saxony, who had in fact fostered the unity of the German nation and defended it against invaders from the East. While the nationalistic theme was marginal to the essence of the opera's plot, which was the conflict between Christianity and paganism, it is not difficult to see why, in a nation seeking historic roots and unifying itself for the first time, the work provoked such a strong political resonance.

With its splendid choruses and melting lyricism, *Lohengrin* holds a special place in the Wagnerian canon and in the hearts of many Wagnerites. Despite his disillusionment with Wagner in later life, Thomas Mann never lost his

love of the "silvery-blue beauty" of the work that he termed "the epitome of Romanticism." On hearing it in 1889, Vasily Kandinsky also saw color in the music and said that it taught him that "painting could develop the very same forces which music already possesses." Ernest Newman spoke for many in saying he felt that "as one watches that diaphanous and finely spun melodic web unfold itself, one is almost tempted for the moment to regret that the daemon within him [Wagner] drove him on so relentlessly to another style."

Lohengrin was first performed in New York in 1871 at the old Stadt Theater and was one of the operas in the Metropolitan's inaugural season in 1883. Since then it has been performed by the Met more than 600 times in 71 seasons. The casts have comprised all the notable singers of the roles at the time, including Leo Slezak, who today is probably less remembered for his voice—famous as it was in this role—than his quip, after the swan had by mishap left ahead of schedule, "Wann geht der nächste Schwan?" ("When does the next swan leave?") With 78 members, the orchestra is a shade more than twice the size of the band at the Weimar premiere that Wagner could not attend.

The Met's current production had its debut on March 9, 1998, with Deborah Voigt as Elsa, Deborah Polaski as Ortrud, Ben Heppner as Lohengrin, Hans-Joachim Ketelsen as Telramund, Eric Halfvarson as King Henry, and Eike Wilm Schulte as the Herald. James Levine conducted.

—Frederic Spotts