

Richard Wagner 1813- 1883
F.A.M.E.
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“The Wedding March” from Lohengrin
Wagner’s opera compared to “traditional” operas

Richard Wagner, (“Vahg-ner”) who was born in Leipzig Germany in 1813, was one of the most important operatic composers of the 19th century. His operas were unlike the traditional operas. (*show the opera visual to remind students the different parts of an opera*). In fact, Wagner did not allow anyone to use the word opera in his presence. Instead, Wagner called his works music dramas, and required his supporters to use this word to describe his works. Wagner believed music dramas were a synthesis of music, drama, verse and staging, they were total works of art. Traditionally, operas were written in Italian or French. Mozart, another famous German composer, wrote his operas in Italian. Traditional operas contained separate songs; the arias and choruses were woven into a story. They contained a beginning, middle and end. This was not the case with Wagner’s music dramas. His music dramas were written in German and based on German or Northern European legends. His music dramas had no definite songs; instead they contained an open ended melody. He also felt that all areas of the opera should have equal importance and to this extent, the symphony played a more important role in his operas than in the traditional opera. The music in his works was loud and the orchestras were very large. In addition, his stories were very long; many of his music dramas are in excess of four hours long. His stories contained larger than life characters, and were based upon concepts of good versus evil or the main character being saved through a woman’s love, concepts familiar in traditional operas. Wagner also demanded changes in his audience as well. In the past, the audience would clap in the middle of the acts, applauding a song or a particular scene, and talking during the opera was common. Wagner did not allow these practices. He insisted on silence throughout his music dramas, with applause at the end.

A very interesting aspect of Wagner’s music dramas was his use of musical phrases that were associated with characters in his production, or concepts like “good versus evil”. These musical phrases were called leading motives or leifmotifs. This concept has continued through to modern music today, especially in movie scores. In the opera we will be hearing from today, Lohengrin, the main character Lohengrin is associated with the A major, Elsa is associated with A flat or E flat, and evil is associated with the F sharp minor.

Wagner was very egotistical, and perhaps this is a reason that he also took an active role in all aspects of the opera from the composition, orchestration, score and scenery. Towards the end of his career, he took this one step further and constructed a theater, built to his vision, to perform his works.

The Bridal Chorus from *Lohengrin*

Track 2 –either CD, there is one short version (white case) that begins with the familiar melody and one longer version (green case) where the familiar part of this song can be heard at about 3:17). Track 4 of the white CD case contains Prelude to Act III, which can be played in the background while the play is being performed or when you present the synopsis version).

Costumes for the characters are in bags, and labeled with the character's name:

Gottfried: Swan hat, white garment

Elsa: White cape, veil

King of Germany: crown, purple/eggplant robe

Lohengrin: green robe (can wear Telramund's crown when he is ruler)

Telramund: black garment – crown to wear until he is no longer ruler

Two versions of the play are in the cart – a “marriage version” and the “no-marriage” version. So that everyone understands what is happening, you can first read the following synopsis, however, if your students do not have long attention spans, I would suggest bypassing the synopsis.

Synopsis of *Lohengrin* – FAME Version

Lovely Elsa was the daughter of a ruler of Belgium, which was under German authority at that time. The ruler dies and, at the same time, his son, Elsa's brother, Gottfried suddenly disappears. A power-hungry tyrant, Telramund, wants to be the new ruler of their country and accuses Elsa of murdering her brother. The King of Germany is sent to Belgium to be Elsa's judge. While he feels she is innocent, Telramund insists there should be a duel to decide the verdict.

A trumpet is sounded to herald a request for a defender for Elsa. No one steps forward! Elsa kneels to pray for help and suddenly, on the nearby river, a boat appears drawn by a lovely white swan. The boat bears a knight who gallantly offers to defend Elsa.

She agrees to give this hero her love in marriage and in turn, the knight obtains her promise that she will never ask his name or origin. (We know, though it's Lohengrin!). The knight triumphs in battle of her honor, but spares the jealous Telramund his life (A big mistake!).

The King of Germany chooses the knight (Lohengrin) as the new ruler, much to Telramund's displeasure. Hoping to gain the power he thirsts for, Telramund spreads the story that the knight has strength only because of a magic spell. The spell can be broken if one discovers the knight's identity. Telramund accuses the knight of sorcery and demands the forbidden secret – the knight's name! The knight refuses to answer.

Elsa and the knight (Lohengrin) marry, but Elsa begins to be uncertain of her husband-knight, all due to the seed of doubt sown by the wicked Telramund! Telramund then strikes again. He and his cohorts attack the knight. Our knight is triumphant!

Elsa then asks the knight the two questions she promised not to ask. Our knight sorrows at the unfortunate turn of events, but reluctantly agrees to reveal his identity to Elsa and the King of Germany. He tells them that he is the knight of the Great Treasure and his name is Lohengrin. He tells the story of a selected few men so pure that they have power against evil. They have been given the task of guarding this Great Treasure in a castle high on the mountain, but they can also do good deeds in the world of men if their identity is kept unknown. If Lohengrin had remained unnamed for just one year, he could have restored Elsa's brother, Gottfried, who had been turned into the boat-pulling swan. Now due to everyone's curiosity, Lohengrin must leave forever and go back to the castle. Lohengrin performs one last act. He prays for a miracle, and lo and behold, the swan once again becomes Elsa's brother, Gottfried. Lohengrin must leave forever and steps into the boat to leave. Alas, poor Elsa dies of a broken heart.

Biography

Wagner wrote 13 operas, the most famous being *The Ring*. He was born in Leipzig, Germany in 1813. His family was musically and dramatically inclined; two sisters were actresses and one brother was a tenor. Richard did not show an early interest in music, but rather took an interest in literature. He wrote his first play as a young teenager. His interest in music began when a family friend introduced Wagner to the music of Beethoven. Richard studied the symphonies of Beethoven. In his studies of Beethoven, Wagner changed the speed of Beethoven's 9th *Symphony* to make it more dramatic. This practice became standard and it wasn't until recently that the work was performed as Beethoven originally composed the piece.

Wagner was mainly self-taught in the field of music, having only about six-months formal training. At the age of 20, Richard decided to dedicate himself to opera.

Wagner did not live within his means; throughout his life he would have financial problems. When he was in his early 20s, he and his wife Minna had to slip out of the country to avoid going to jail, as the authorities had seized their passports. They traveled by sea to England. It was while at sea that Richard came up with the idea of one of his operas, *The Flying Dutchman* (Track 6 green case) This opera, along with *Rienzi* (track 9 white case), are operas in the more traditional sense.

Wagner and his wife moved to Paris where he wrote operas, including *The Flying Dutchman*. His success enabled him and Minna to return to Germany several years later. He was appointed kapellmeister in the city of Dresden, but didn't want to work at this occupation. He wanted to compose and it is at this time where he refined his version of music dramas. As his operas were different, they were not always initially well received. The opera *Tannhauser* was withdrawn after three performances in Paris, although eventually enjoyed much success.

While he was in Dresden, he became involved in a revolution, writing flyers. The revolution failed and he was banished from Germany in 1849, not returning for the next 11 years. Partly due to the reaction of *Tannhauser*, the Dresden opera rejected Wagner's next opera, *Lohengrin*. Franz Liszt, the Hungarian composer became a proponent of

Wagner and it was Liszt who saw to the production of *Lohengrin* in Weimar in 1850. *Lohengrin* was a popular opera in Germany, and it is ironic, that one of the few Germans who hadn't seen the opera in Germany by 1860 was Wagner himself. While in Switzerland, Wagner began work on *The Ring*. He actually composed the piece in reverse order. Wagner did not intend for the piece to be so massive. He began composing *The Twilight of the Gods*, but felt when it was done, it needed more information to make it understandable, so he composed *Siegfried*, then *Die Walkure*, and finally *Das Rheingold*. He scored it in the normal order, then orchestrated the work. From the time he began the opera, to the time he ultimately finished the opera, it spanned a time period of almost 25 years and spanning over 14 hours in length (*there is a slide which shows the length of each piece*).

By the early 1860s, Wagner had again run into financial problems, he was in debt, had tapped out his friends, and apparently sold the rights to his completed works. King Ludwig II came to Wagner's rescue. He paid off most of his debts and set Wagner up in a villa on the palace grounds. Throughout his life, Wagner had his strong supporters, but had many people who disliked him. Wagner thought very highly of himself, was opinionated, lived extravagantly and thought nothing of taking advantage of others, including family and friends in order to achieve his goal. The dislike was so strong in King Ludwig II's court that Wagner had to leave, and returned to Switzerland, although King Ludwig continued to support him.

Wagner returned to Germany in the 1870s with his second wife Cosima (daughter of Franz Liszt). At this time, Wagner set off to build his own opera house, designed to give perfect acoustics for the audience, musicians and singers. In 1876, he held a festival at his theater in Bayreuth to perform *The Ring*. Due to the length of *The Ring*, the festival took place over a four-day period. In 1883, Wagner's health began to fail, and he left for Venice, but died shortly after arriving. His body was returned to Bayreuth. His wife Cosima continued his legacy at Bayreuth.

People either really loved or despised Wagner's works. Here are some quotes found from BBCi regarding Richard Wagner.

"One cannot judge Tannhauser from a first hearing and I certainly do not intend to hear it for a second time" ----- Rossini.

"Richard Wagner was a musician who wrote music which is better than it sounds" ---- Mark Twain.

"I like Wagner's music better than any other music. It is so loud that one can talk the whole time without people hearing what one says. That is a great advantage" --- Oscar Wilde.