

***Lohengrin* Seminar By Dr Antony Ernst, 13 August 2017**

1.00pm: Seminar by Dr Antony Ernst

Once again, Antony Ernst captivated Society members and guests with an extended presentation of original and insightful material. He was, as ever, articulate and consistently entertaining (despite apparently having no need to rely on notes) and he made very effective use of projected images. He also played short excerpts from the opera, though, since his focus was chiefly on the text rather than the music, he did not highlight and comment on key passages such as 'In fernem Land' and 'Mein lieber Schwan'.

In this relatively short summary, I can do no more than outline a few of the points that he made.

He referred back to his seminar last year focusing on the many links between Bach's Passions (which he described as substitutes for operas in Protestant church music) and the operas of Wagner. He pointed out that to an extent not found in Wagner's earlier compositions, the music of *Lohengrin*, like that of Bach, is mostly comprised of a number of lines of orchestral sound underpinning the vocal lines. This rich contrapuntal texture is indeed apparent from the outset, in the remarkable Prelude to Act 1. As soon as its shimmering sounds from the string section commence, the listener feels that Wagner's music has acquired a new dimension.

Antony also argued that Lohengrin's insistence that Elsa should have complete faith in him and, being reassured by this faith, should not seek to know his name or his origins had parallels in Protestant doctrine. It resembled the Protestant principle that believers, relying on their faith in God and their direct relationship to Him, must be prepared to live with continuing doubt and uncertainty as to whether or not they will be saved. Antony drew attention to the many occasions in operatic texts and other forms of literature where doubters who try to acquire knowledge on matters forbidden to them are severely punished for their disobedience.

Another aspect of *Lohengrin* that constituted a point of departure for Wagner was, according to Antony, its depiction of all the key events of the story on stage in 'real time'. There is, he said, no significant reduction of the time that any particular event would be expected to occupy.

Equally, the action is never interrupted merely to permit the singing of an aria. This is well exemplified in Act 1 by the Herald's three ceremonial calls for a knight to fight as Elsa's champion. Lohengrin's swan is required to wait for quite a while in the wings (sorry – couldn't resist!) while all the traditional rituals for summoning a champion are performed at an appropriately stately pace.

Towards the end of his seminar, Antony suggested that the crucial point of conflict in *Lohengrin* is between the demands of honour, on the one hand, and opposing human needs and desires, on the other. It is important, he said, that Elsa's promise not to ask Lohengrin what his name was or where he came from is made not just to Lohengrin but to the community of Brabant at large. In yielding to her own essentially human and utterly understandable yearning for information on these aspects of the man with whom she has just walked out of the church to the strains of a justly celebrated wedding march, she both breaks her promise to him and exposes herself to public shame and condemnation for violating the principles of honour. Antony suggested that a similar conflict between honour and human desires is perceivable in later Wagner operas, notably *Tristan und Isolde*. But while in *Tristan* a form of redemption – this being a constant motif in Wagner's works – of the lovers' breach of the principles governing their honour occurs through their deaths, in *Lohengrin* no such redemption – only despair in the hearts of both Lohengrin and Elsa – is portrayed.

In preparing this brief and manifestly incomplete summary of Dr Ernst's presentation, I have been greatly assisted by separate notes kindly made available to me by June Donsworth and Marie Leech.

By Michael Chesterman