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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Lohengrin ? Transcendent Love Reimagined

Bayreuther Festspiele, 08.08.2025 [ENA]

The 2025 staging of Lohengrin at the Festspielhaus, under conductor Christian Thielemann and director Yuval Sharon, delivers a mesmerising, deeply human revival of Wagner’s knightly Grail opera. For aficionados of Wagner and opera alike, this production blends musical excellence with daring visual storytelling—anchored in vocal mastery, orchestral profundity, and evocative conceptual drama.

Bayreuth’s Festspielhaus continues to serve as Wagner’s acoustic temple. The iconic covered pit and double proscenium create an enveloping soundscape exceptional even among world-class opera houses. Listeners frequently remark on the clarity of leitmotifs, orchestral color, and vocal projection—enhancing every emotional nuance. The venue’s iconic atmosphere elevates even its simplest dramatic gestures into ritual significance.

The 2025 cast, led by:

Piotr Beczala (Lohengrin)
Elza van den Heever (Elsa)
Ólafur Sigurdarson (Telramund)
Miina-Liisa Värelä (Ortrud)
Mika Kares (King Heinrich)
Michael Kupfer-Radecky (Herald)

represents a vocally commanding ensemble.

Beczala anchors the title role with heroic lyricism and consummate artistry. His high lines shimmer, his phrasing flows brightly, and his final farewell aria (“In fernem Land”) unfurls with aching beauty—emotional, grand, yet intimately personal. His diction is precise, and his long lines sustain noble clarity.

Van den Heever brings a luminous tone to Elsa—both fragile and emotionally strong. Her “Einsam in trüben Tagen” float in shimmering clarity; she captures Elsa’s faith and longing with unfaltering sincerity.

Sigurdarson’s Telramund emerges as a richly layered antagonist. His voice combines smooth legato with

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darker dramatic weight, his gestures calculated, and his confrontations with Elsa crackle with tension.

Värelä's Ortrud, newly cast this year, astonishes with relentless presence. Her mezzo tone is formidable—from searing high accents to brooding low depths—rendering Ortrud not just vengeful, but psychologically unsettling.

Kares as Heinrich commands authority with a resonant bass that balances paternal restraint with sovereign gravitas. Kupfer-Radecky adds incisive clarity to the Herald, guiding narrative flow.

Even where staging polarised opinions, the vocal delivery earned consistent praise—affirming Bayreuth's artistic baseline remains uncompromised.

Christian Thielemann, conducting Lohengrin at Bayreuth again, proves why his name remains inseparable from Wagnerian interpretation. His tempi dwell in reflective mood for Act I, suspending time to evoke Elsa's quiet devotion and the opera's growing tension. The orchestra delivers shimmering prelude textures—blown-out winds, transparent strings—evoking both sorrow and hope.

In Act II, Thielemann heightens conflict through orchestral contrast: darkness in Telramund's motives, warmth in Elsa's scenes, angular brass in Ortrud's machinations. The rhythmic momentum during the Liebesduett pulses with emotional sophistication.

Act III receives a heroic, sustained arc of triumph and tragedy. Thielemann balances inner lyricism and cosmic grandeur—especially striking in the Swansong Prelude and the final resolution. Critics note that while some may find certain tempi conservative, the emotional clarity compensates—revealing Wagner's score anew.

Director Yuval Sharon presents Lohengrin as a poetic blend of early cinema aesthetics and mythic archetype. Though controversial in abstraction, his visual language proves astonishingly effective:

Stage design evokes a sleek blue-lit power station, recalling Fritz Lang's Metropolis. Lohengrin enters not by swan but via electrical cables—teleporting through architecture rather than myth.

The color palette shifts—from Elsa's blue innocence to bold oranges and greens—culminating in Telramund clad in astroturf, Elsa in bright orange, as they walk toward the audience as curtain falls—creating a haunting final image.

Ortrud's insect-wing touches and surreal tableaux suggest myth bent through modern alienation.

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This visual strategy polarizes: some critics call it baffling or reductive, while others celebrate its daring rewrite of Wagnerian symbolism. It evokes metaphors of technological transformation, ecological decay, and identity rupture—translating medieval legend into contemporary psychological allegory.

Dramatic Arc: Moments of Musical Magic
Act I – Prelude & Elsa’s Devotion

The opening prelude shimmers with serene tension. Elsa’s prayerful scene flows with vocal purity. Telramund enters, injecting distrust and social upheaval. Sharon’s abstraction amplifies this contrast through shifting hues and stylized minimalism, focusing attention on character more than scenery.

Act II – Conflict & Illusion

The confrontation scene pulsates with rhetorical drama. Ortrud’s magical manipulations unfold through lighting and costume transformation, while Telramund’s accusation spirals. Elsa’s doubling between hope and doubt is haunted by vocal fragility; Lohengrin arrives with supernatural calm.

The swan motif emerges in orchestral form more than visual—one discerns the myth through musical suggestion rather than literal representation.

Act III – Triumph & Departure

The Swansong Prelude rises to heroic grandeur. Beczala’s orchestral embodiment of farewell soars. Elsa’s belief is rewarded briefly; Telramund’s guilt looms; the final departure is delivered in quiet sacrifice. Sharon’s staging eschews ritualistic fire—Lohengrin exits through abstraction—but Thielemann’s orchestral farewell ensures emotional closure.

Bayreuth audiences responded with respectful intensity. Though some murmured discomfort over Sharon’s modernist abstraction, vocal and orchestral devotion drew out standing ovations. Thielemann and the leads received bravos that underscore why Bayreuth—whether staging is traditional or radical—remains the mecca of Wagner. As one critic observed: despite staging controversies, “No boo, nowhere” in recent seasons—reaffirming the public’s esteem for musical craft at the core of the festival.

This production doesn’t merely retell Wagner—it recontextualizes him. By rewriting the arrival myth through techno-poetic abstraction, and amplifying orchestral and vocal power as narrative anchors, this Lohengrin operates as much in psychological mode as mythic. It asks: what if the Grail myth is displaced

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by modern alienation, yet remains redeemable through steadfast human fidelity?

Bayreuth's 2025 festival underscores its dual destiny: custodian of tradition and experimental crucible. This Lohengrin may not be universally beloved—but vocal artistry and musical integrity affirm that even in radical reimaginings, the heart of Wagner beats vividly.

Bayreuth 2025's Lohengrin is not a conventional fairytale. It is modern myth filtered through cinematic abstraction, underscored by heroic singing and timeless orchestral tradition. Thielemann and his ensemble reaffirm why Wagner at Bayreuth remains essential; Sharon challenges us to see myth anew.

For the Wagnerian pilgrim ready to surrender to sound and question spectacle; for the adventurous listener seeking reinterpretation without loss of musical depth—this Lohengrin delivers unforgettable immersion. It shows that even when outward myth falters, the Grail endures in voice, motif, and the gravitational pull of Wagner's artistry.

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