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## Lohengrin

A New Take on Wagner  
at the Metropolitan Opera

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# STRANGER WALKS Among Us

The Metropolitan Opera's new production of *Lohengrin* is a hit, having survived an international incident

By: David Barbour





Left: *Lohengrin* was conceived by director François Girard as a kind of sequel to his revival of Wagner's *Parsifal*, first seen at the Met in 2013. (Among other things, each features a title character who appears in contemporary-looking black pants and an untucked white shirt.) Above: Finn's lighting is almost fanatically precise, focusing on illuminating the oculus with saturated color and carving out the branches on the upstage wall.

**L**ohengrin, like all of Richard Wagner's operas, is a challenge to stage, and not just because it requires singers with the vocal heft to carry the demanding score. It also requires that its designers be world-builders, inventing a suitable environment for this fantastical tale of sorcery, romance, and revenge. The Metropolitan Opera's new production, which opened in February, has been extremely well-received, with special praise reserved for Piotr Beczala, best-known for his command of the Italian repertory, in the daunting title role. But much attention was directed at the physical production, which gives the opera an otherworldly aura.

This new *Lohengrin* was conceived by director François Girard as a sequel to his revival of Wagner's *Parsifal*, first seen at the Met in 2013. (Providing a visual link, each features a title character who appears in contemporary-looking black pants and an untucked white shirt.) Working with

production designer Tim Yip (best-known for his Oscar-winning work on Ang Lee's film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*), lighting designer David Finn, and projection designer Peter Flaherty, Girard came up with a vision that has been termed "futuristic" and "cosmic," although one might say that it exists in a universe of its own. Added to the creative challenges was a bizarre plot twist: This co-production with the Bolshoi Opera opened first in Moscow on February 24, 2022, thirteen hours after Russia invaded Ukraine.

This awful turn of events was especially ironic because the plot of *Lohengrin* turns, in part, on the threat of military invasion. Set in Antwerp in the tenth century, it focuses on the conflict-ridden Duchy of Brabant. Gottfried, the royal heir, has apparently been murdered and his sister Elsa is named as the killer. Arriving to defend her from this false accusation—leveled by Telramund, a count of Brabant—is





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an unnamed knight. Subduing Telramund, the stranger is named protector to Brabant and is affianced to Elsa, under the condition that she never ask his name. But Telramund and Ortrud, his wife and henchwoman, scheme to destroy the happiness of Elsa and her savior. The knight eventually kills Telramund, setting the stage for the return of Gottfried and the deaths of Elsa and Ortrud. The knight, we ultimately learn, is Lohengrin, son of Parsifal, and he must return to his home at the temple of the Holy Grail.

This production traffics in elements both ancient and modern, celestial and earthbound, perhaps in keeping with an opera that, *New York Times* music critic Joshua Barone says, "alternates between the harmonic language of its title hero and the more earthbound music of the other characters." Yip's scenic design places the first and third acts, set on the banks of the Scheldt River, in a kind of cavern defined by an overarching stone wall with an oculus through which Lohengrin enters and exits. During the opera's middle portion, the wall lowers to become a solid backdrop. It is covered with gnarled tree roots, adding a

note of wild, untamed nature to the design. Visible through the oculus are Flaherty's stunning images: a night sky as red as molten lava; a looming red planet; a blinding white supernova; and a giant, ghostly bird's wing (standing in for the swan boat that transports Lohengrin in conventional productions). Indeed, this tale, with its heavily religious overtones, often seems to exist outside time itself. Girard has called it "a diffused future."

Speaking to *Women's Wear Daily* about the time frame Yip says, "Before, I had an even more abstract set and later we talked about needing some narrative. So, the director suggested we move it into the near future. Everything is destroyed and then there are people living in the bunker. You settle into that time and start the story." (In addition to his celebrated film work, Yip has considerable experience designing for the stage.) He adds, "The Wagner philosophy of mythology is quite abstract. They [the characters] don't have a [clearly defined sense of] what is right, what is wrong. We want to share this idea of uncertainty, to make people think about the human situa-



tion.” The set design also has a practical value, providing a solid acoustic sounding board onstage, which helps the voices be heard more powerfully.

In some ways, the most complicated part of Yip’s task was that the set had to be built twice. Once the war in Ukraine began, Peter Gelb, the Met’s general manager, told the Associated Press, “I immediately made the decision to sever ties with any official Russian institution or artist associated with [Vladimir] Putin.” That meant, however, that he now had a *Lohengrin* without scenery or costumes, since there was no question of them being transported from Moscow. Therefore, everything had to be rebuilt. The new set was constructed by Bay Productions, based in Cardiff, Wales, the same firm that built the Met’s new production of *Fedora*. The new costumes were constructed in New York and Hong Kong. The delays caused by the need to reconstruct these elements meant that the production couldn’t be part of the Met’s annual summer tech process.

### Lighting and video

In many ways, Yip’s costumes set the tone for the production. The members of the chorus are dressed in capes with linings that change color at a moment’s notice. The colors indicate the singers’ shifting allegiances: red for Telmarund; green for King Heinrich, who presides over the action; and white for Lohengrin. Both Finn and Flaherty incorporate these colors prominently into the lighting and video. (The designers worked on the 2013 *Parsifal* with Girard and are

solidly in tune with his aesthetic.)

Flaherty’s design creates lushly colored imagery of the cosmos that often moves at the slowest of paces, insinuating itself into one’s consciousness rather than overwhelming the stage picture. Interestingly, he says, “François began talking to me about *Lohengrin* while we were working on *The Flying Dutchman* [at the Met in 2020]. He was interested in exploring it as a kind of loose sequel to *Parsifal*. I agreed that the connection was interesting, but wanted to make sure that we advanced the visual approach and the imagery itself for *Lohengrin*, rather than repeat ourselves. He agreed and I began to develop a vision for the video. I would send him original imagery, first in rough format and then in its final form, which is how we have worked since we first began 20 years ago. It’s a very open and exploratory process and he gives me a lot of latitude to create the imagery on my own, based on our creative discussions. It’s quite a generous process with such an accomplished director and filmmaker himself!”

The imagery was developed using an array of software programs, Flaherty adds. “We worked primarily with Unity, DaVinci Resolve, After Effects, Cinema 4D, and disguise.” Many hands were involved in this ambitious undertaking. “The video team was incredible, both in my studio in Los Angeles, which included Jesse Garrison and Trey Gilmore from Nightlight Labs, Hsuan-Kuang Hsieh, and a few MFA students from CalArts [where he is a faculty member] during the high-speed shooting process.”



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The bulk of the rear-projected imagery is delivered via double-stacked Panasonic PT-RQ35K projectors, located upstage of the oculus wall, driven by disguise vx 4+ media servers. However, the opera's prelude, to which the designer has added a display of full moons that initially strikes the production's cosmic tone, required a different approach. Flaherty says, "To make the images bright enough and to fit within the fly space, LED panels were the best solution. We needed very high-resolution panels to look crisp enough, given the high-contrast and detailed images of the lunar surface and time-lapse digital shadow. Therefore, we used 2.5mm Absen PL2.5 Pro panels with a Brompton Technology SX40 4K processor and XD Distribution unit, the latter of which is designed to work with the SX40 to facilitate large-scale displays."

Finn's lighting is fanatically precise, focusing on illuminating the oculus' edges with saturated color and carving out the branches on the upstage wall. He also silhouettes the members of the chorus, adding a strong sense of dimensionality to their groupings. He is especially good at highlighting the principals downstage while keeping the chorus in evocative, colorful, semi-shadows. At the same time, he preserves a strong sense of darkness, which is appropriate for Girard's post-apocalyptic vision as well as Wagner's concept of a conflict-ridden duchy threatened with barbarian invaders. This chiaroscuro style is not often seen at the Met, where the use of followspots on the stars is strongly encouraged.

While working with the Met's house rig, Finn relied heavily on side units to get many of his effects. "As Acts I and III are mostly under the canted ceiling, it was important to have towers at left and right to sculpt not only the massive chorus but also the texture of the ceiling plane," he says. "In Act II, it is important for me that I have sidelight in a very specific position to edge-light the root wall that fronts the oculus. Any lighting units aimed from the front made this wall look flat; ultimately, it would look like a painting."

He adds, "When the wall turns vertical in Act II, there is no flexibility in where the sidelight needs to be located. At the Bolshoi, we could move the side lighting towers from act to act; at the Met, that isn't possible but [resident lighting designer] John Froelich and his team found a way to make the necessary positions work for all three acts."

"The placement of the set was driven by the size of the chorus in Act II," he adds. "It was all a matter of getting that many people downstage of the oculus wall. The lighting bridges at the Met were the next driving force, as we need to maintain usable positions both upstage and downstage of the oculus. At the Bolshoi, you can also move the bridges, which means that I could replicate the Met in Moscow and really prep the show for the Met at the same time."

Finn was aided by the Met's equipment inventory, which prominently features Vari-Lite VL4000s and VL3500s, as well as Elation Professional Artiste Monets. "I think this is

the most successful rep rig in the world," he says. "The Monets are powerful, can mimic HMIs, and have great color control, which can get you close to tungsten. They can also be used as washes or profiles. They are the only lights in the bridges and are spaced approximately 3' apart, left to right." This arrangement is especially important, he adds: "Time continues to be the biggest factor in creating the lighting in a rep opera. In this rig, when one position doesn't work for you, there is the same unit 3' to the right and left that can be an option. Of course, a designer still needs to be prepared, but I would contend that problems are easier to solve with a rig that offers such flexibility. And, from the maintenance point of view, you have one fixture type overhead to worry about, which is extremely efficient."

Finn also says that he worked closely with Flaherty to create a unified color palette. "In Act I and for the second part of Act III, I used Peter's celestial outer world as the motivation for color. Peter and François produced a very detailed color palette plot for the video and this content was, of course, created far ahead of any lighting work in the theatre, especially as we did not have a summer tech. It was an easy and clear choice to bring the celestial world through the oculus with light in the same color palette—often weighting the direction of the color based on whether Peter's moon was fully or half-lit. The oculus edge was also lit to reflect these palettes and direction. We had a few discussions about where the color would shift in the timeline; then I could pick and choose where it was important to reflect the celestial palette and when it was important to push another palette under the oculus. For example, in moments when Ortrud and Telramund vie for power, François and I wanted to push the red; even though Peter's world often reflected these power struggles as well, sometimes I would push into it sooner to create a stronger visual impact."

For his part, Flaherty adds, "David is meticulous about his use of color and takes a particular interest in matching not only color but also the direction of light with the video imagery. I love to watch him work. We have learned over the course of our projects together that getting him a full cut of the video imagery well in advance of tech is incredibly important, because he can dial in an incredible match between the two. Some examples are the fire red of the moon, which corresponds to the Ortrud character; the explosion; and some of the rolling red cloud imagery in Act I and how David's lighting plays on the rim of the oculus. Getting that match between the RGB of the video imagery and the CMYK is not easy, but he was able to get it perfectly. It really connects the screen and physical stage space and ties it all together beautifully!"

It goes without saying that the score, which is marked by long, luxurious melodic lines, influenced Finn's cuing. "In every Wagner opera that I have done—a dozen now,





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with another five on the books—the leitmotifs and scoring are a massive motivator for cuing and cue timing. Unlike many composers, he provides time in his scores for visual changes onstage. Wagner was the master of instilling intensity and movement in the interludes. It is extremely filmic in nature. You have the sense that Wagner would close his eyes and envision the visual passages taking place onstage when composing."

On a similar note, Flaherty says, "The music is always crucial, of course, but the luxury with Wagner is that if you can crack the preludes, you then usually understand the rest. That's what I've observed in the three shows of his that I've designed. François and I went back and forth about the moon section. The concept is, first and foremost, to communicate the passage of 40 years between *Parsifal* and *Lohengrin*, but I also wanted to make it a cosmic dance to set up the imagery that arrives in the third act. François wanted to emphasize the simplicity of the lunar sequence, its meditative evolution, which is evident in the first portion of the overture, and I wanted to add energy to drive us forward, which you can see clearly in

the latter half after the visual explosion on the climax. It worked out well—a good collaboration!"

Speaking about the high-contrast lighting looks onstage, Finn adds, "François and I share a deep love for darkness. There are those who think we go too far. François comes from film and is constantly looking to recreate the dark world of cinema onstage. There is a balance when in a large house like the Met and we push it as far as we can. But we also know that we have to provide clarity. At the beginning of *Lohengrin*, it was important for us to keep the focus on the outer world and to disguise the fact that there is a hundred-plus chorus onstage. François has them cloaked in black with hoods and all their faces and hands are hidden. We spent more time on this opening than any other part of the piece, working with the orchestra to reduce the intensity of their lights."

In any case, Finn concludes, working at the Met remains a pleasure: "John and his team are the best in the business. They continue to struggle with the schedules imposed upon them, but they always manage to find a way to solve the designer's issues—or, at least, offer a rea-





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sonable compromise. There is always someone dedicated to followspots, which allows the designer to focus on the cuing, and there is another assistant who keeps the paperwork clean. Shows are always well documented coming out of the Met, which is becoming more and more important in the world of co-productions."

### Leaving Moscow behind

Then again, the drama that unfolds in Wagner's libretto paled in comparison to real life as the creative team worked on prepping *Lohengrin* for its Moscow debut even as Russia announced its plans to invade Ukraine. (As the Met's production notes mention, in the last century *Lohengrin* was fetishized by the Nazis, who saw it as a kind of statement about the German people menaced by hostile foreign influences. This is not a point typically emphasized in contemporary productions. How strange it must have been to be working on this opera under these dire political circumstances.)

Finn notes that the team was so wrapped up in finalizing the show that they were often unaware of news devel-

opments outside the opera house's doors. He adds that the Bolshoi staff, whom he praises for their skills and kindness, were thoroughly circumspect about what was being represented in the Russian media as a "special military operation." Flaherty says that, on his last night in the city, he went to dinner with some colleagues; passing by Pushkin Square, a traditional haven for political protests, he noted that it was largely empty.

In an interview with the *Times*, Girard, who also had his hands full dealing with an Omicron breakout in the Moscow company, says, "I heard all the signs that [the war] was coming, but there was also a common understanding that it was a bluff." Arriving at the Bolshoi for the opening night, he found many in tears.

Of course, the show went on. However, the director tells the newspaper, "Music and opera is one of those places where human beings meet. It is our modern church, our modern chapel. And, at that moment, our chapel was on fire."

Given its strong reception, *Lohengrin* is certain to return to the Met's repertory in future seasons. 🎭