

Christopher James

LOHENGRIN FOLLIES

Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Richard Wagner

(1985)

New Music Orchestral Project
National Orchestral Association
Jorge Mester, Conductor

First Performance: Carnegie Hall, April 18, 1989

Duration: 16 minutes

“James’ *Lohengrin Follies* is Wagner’s vaudeville debut; a revisionist’s account of the exploits of the famous Knight of the Grail in 16 variations and a colossal double fugue.” - NOA press release

“Mr. James uses the orchestra with exceptional skill and a concern for clarity even in the densest textures.” - Donal Henahan, New York Times

Introduction and Notes

The title *Lohengrin Follies* is a play on words. Is it not folly to subject one of the most famous phrases in Western music (Wagner’s “Grail Theme”) to irreverent and parodistic treatment? The work “follies” is meant in its theatrical sense, as in “Ziegfeld Follies” (a musical revue with loosely connected or even wildly disparate acts), and in its historical sense, as in “Folies d’Espagne,” equating to ground-bass variations.

The piece falls into three sections of approximately equal duration. The theme proper is Wagner’s bass line; the “Grail Theme” itself appears in only a few variations. The Wagnerian harmonies and motives are referred to and manipulated more or less continually.

Throughout the four variations of Section I, four solo violins and woodwind solos play leading roles. The theme is first heard in an extremely high register: support is gradually added in middle and lower registers until the greatest debts of the orchestra are reached; in impasse is reached with the saturation of the musical space, and a radical break becomes necessary.

Section II presents a series of brief character variations. You will encounter Beethovenian brusqueness and energy; horn writing of Straussian élan; demonstrations of invertible counterpoint; a lyrical intermezzo in the winds; a severe (though quiet) Schoenbergian fugato; a scherzo with trumpet and tambourine; a flowing pastorella with woodwind solos; conventionalized Gypsy music à la Liszt, with piccolo and triangle; a vague, impressionistic prelude to a pocket sized adagio in the heaviest and most overwrought manner of Bruckner.

The first subject of the double fugue in Section III is a paraphrase of the “Grail Theme”; the second subject snakes along chromatically in a syncopated rhythm. This is an academic fugue, freighted with as much learned paraphernalia as I could manage to pack in (a dubious distinction), and is a parody, a folly, a piece of lunacy. The trump card is, as one might expect, the return of the “Grail Theme” in the heavy brass and high woodwinds elaborately figured, and the composition draws to a hollow and bombastic conclusion.

Lohengrin Follies arose out of a musical doodle and was written in six weeks in 1985. I would ask the listener to always keep in mind the *double entendres* implied by its title.