Synopsis

Act I

Isolde has been captured in Ireland and is now being escorted by Tristan to Cornwall, whose ruler (and Tristan's foster-father), Marke, she is to marry. Mortified to be a captive, Isolde does not want the ship to reach its destination. She is unable to understand why Tristan is delivering her to Marke instead of marrying her himself. She calls his heroism and nobility into question and accuses him of cowardice. She then sends Brangäne to arrange a meeting with Tristan. Intent on performing his duties as an officer, Tristan declines, and his aide, Kurwenal, brusquely dismisses Brangäne and alludes to the death of Morold. In confidence, Isolde tells Brangäne how she had saved Tristan's life and treated his wounds when he washed up on the shores of Ireland after having killed her betrothed, Morold. Assuming the name of Tantris, Tristan surrendered himself to Isolde's care, and she fell in love with him, even though she eventually realized that he had slain Morold. Humiliated at being rebuffed, Isolde now craves revenge. She asks Brangäne to prepare poison that she intends to give Tristan in a drink of vengeance. The ship approaches its destination. Isolde finally manages to speak to Tristan, and they have a bitter conversation in which she brings up all his misdeeds. Tristan remains impassive and keeps his emotions in check. As the ship approaches the shore where Marke awaits his bride-to-be, Tristan drinks the potion Isolde offers him, fully aware that it is poisoned. Isolde does likewise. But the flasks have been switched: Brangäne has given them a love potion instead. As the ship sails into the harbor, Tristan and Isolde fall under its spell and confess their love for each other. Isolde's last words before being brought before Marke are, "Must I live?"

Act II

Marke is away. Isolde is eagerly looking forward to a secret rendezvous with Tristan, who is to appear when the lights go out. Brangäne is apprehensive and tries to dissuade Isolde from seeing her lover, but Isolde disregards her warnings. At the appointed signal, Tristan arrives. After the initial rapture of their reunion, they begin a long conversation. Tristan expresses his belief that love cannot find true fulfillment in the daylight—this can only happen at night: "We have dedicated ourselves to the night!" Brangäne, standing on the lookout, warns them that day is about to break. Faced with the inevitability of their parting, the lovers resolve to die: "Let day give way before death!" They are discovered by Melot, who has brought Marke along in order to expose Isolde's infidelity. Devastated by Tristan's disloyalty, Marke accuses him of having

sullied his honor. Tristan pays no heed to Marke's reproaches and implores Isolde to set off into the night with him. She agrees. After a struggle with Marke's men, Tristan is wounded and collapses.

Act III

Tristan lies in a coma with Kurwenal watching over him. The sound of a familiar old tune brings him out of his slumber. Bewildered by his return to the waking world, Tristan speaks of his experiences while unconscious: "I was where I had been before I was, and where I am destined to go, in the wide realm of night." As his life gradually slips away, Tristan embarks upon an inward journey. He recalls traumatic events—including the death of his parents, whom he never knew—which have caused him to lose faith in the rituals of day and in the possibility of fulfillment in the light of day. Kurwenal tells Tristan that he has summoned Isolde to look after him once more. Delirious, Tristan sees Isolde running toward him with a promise of love and redemption. When Isolde's ship appears on the horizon, he tears off his bandages and rushes toward her. He dies in her arms, and she is left alone in the care of Marke and Brangäne. Racked with guilt, Marke tries, along with Brangäne, to draw Isolde back to the realm of day and life, but she expires in a rapture of ecstatic love.

—Piotr Gruszczyński

(Reprinted courtesy of Festival Hall Baden-Baden)

Richard Wagner

Tristan und Isolde

Premiere: Court Theater, Munich, 1865

Wagner's breathtaking meditation on love and death holds a unique place in the opera world. It is based on an ancient myth, extremely popular in various forms throughout medieval Europe, about the illicit love of a knight and the wife of his king. A love potion triggers a passion too great to be bound by the rules of conventional society and ultimately stronger than death itself. To explore this well-trod territory, Wagner created a drama in which daily reality is dismissed as an illusion, while truths about life, love, and death are revealed as if in a fever dream. The music for this journey has astounded, amazed, infuriated, and inspired audiences since it was first heard, and the title roles are acknowledged as among the most extraordinarily demanding in opera. The vocal challenges, the sumptuous symphonic scale of the orchestral writing, and the mystical nature of the story, with its opportunities for creative visual design, make this awe-inspiring work a phenomenon of the repertory.

The Creator

Richard Wagner (1813–1883) was the complex, controversial creator of music-drama masterpieces that stand at the center of today's operatic repertory. Born in Leipzig, Germany, he started out in the tradition of German Romantic opera and became an artistic revolutionary who reimagined every supposition about music and theater. Wagner wrote his own libretti and insisted that words and music were equals in his works. This approach led to the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk, or "total work of art," combining music, poetry, architecture, painting, and other disciplines, a notion that has had an impact on creative fields far beyond opera.

The Setting

The three acts of the opera are originally set, respectively, aboard ship on the Irish Sea, in Cornwall (southwestern Britain), and in Brittany (northwestern France). The many versions of this story, from various corners of Europe, all pay homage to the Celtic ambience and probable origin of the tale, and the drama utilizes several key themes associated with ancient Celtic culture: mysticism, knowledge of the magic arts, an evolved warrior code, and a distinctly non-Christian vision of the possibilities of the afterlife. The Met's new production places the action in a contemporary wartime setting.

The Music

Volumes have been written about the influential score of *Tristan*. The music is built on the idea of a great yearning, irresistible and self-perpetuating, that cannot be fulfilled in this life. This is first expressed in the orchestra by a single chord in the third measure and conveyed using chromatic modulations, which build without resolving. The famed "Tristan chord" tells us that many of the opera's ideas will be presented by the orchestra, which plays a unique role in this work. (It is not only the lead vocal roles that are challenging: some of the finest orchestral musicians in the world once dismissed this work as unplayable.) The prelude sweeps the listener into an ecstatic yet tortuous world of longing. The vocal parts are of unique stature. The soprano immediately establishes her presence in a grueling Act I narrative, full of pride, anger, and repressed love. The second act is dominated by the extended encounter of the two leads. Starting off in a frenzy (including two high Cs for the soprano), it transforms into an otherworldly atmosphere that seems suspended in time. The pace builds in growing waves of distinctly erotic music, only to be stopped short by the arrival of Isolde's husband. In Act III, the tenor and soprano each have huge solo moments. The tenor's punishing narratives at the beginning of the act require exceptional musicianship and sheer stamina. Isolde's is the last voice we hear: her famous Liebestod ("Love death") ends with a final octave leap that concludes this unique musical-dramatic journey.

Met History

The Met presented the American premiere of *Tristan* in 1886, with Anton Seidl conducting Albert Niemann and Lilli Lehmann in the leading roles. Seidl also led a new production in 1895 featuring the foremost Wagnerian stars of the day: the brothers Edouard and Jean de Reszke and the American sensation Lillian Nordica. In the early years of the 20th century, Gustav Mahler and Arturo Toscanini each conducted new productions, with Mahler making his Met debut on New Year's Day, 1909. Joseph Urban designed a 1920 production, which lasted until 1959 and was the setting for many memorable Met performances: the dream team of Lauritz Melchior (128 performances as Tristan from 1929 to 1950) and Kirsten Flagstad (73 Isoldes from 1935 to 1951) dominated this opera in their time. Helen Traubel made 44 appearances as Isolde from 1942 to 1953. The 1959 production, conducted by Karl Böhm, featured the Met debut of Birgit Nilsson, the preeminent Isolde of her time. Erich Leinsdorf led Nilsson and Jess Thomas in the next new production in 1971. The following staging by Dieter Dorn was unveiled in 1999, with James Levine conducting Ben Heppner and Jane Eaglen as the leads. Mariusz Treliński's new production opens the Met's 2016–17 season, with Nina Stemme and Stuart Skelton in the title roles and Sir Simon Rattle on the podium.

Program Note

In December 1854, Richard Wagner wrote to his friend Franz Liszt: "But since I've never in my life enjoyed the true happiness of love, I intend to erect a further monument to this most beautiful of dreams, a monument in which this love will be properly sated from beginning to end; I have planned in my head a *Tristan and Isolde*, the simplest, but most full-blooded musical conception." It was also in this letter than Wagner announced his discovery of Arthur Schopenhauer and his philosophy of the denial of the will. "[He] has entered my lonely life like a gift from heaven. … I have found a sedative which has finally helped me to sleep at night; it is the sincere and heartfelt yearning for death: total unconsciousness, complete annihilation, the end of all dreams—the only ultimate redemption," he explained to Liszt.

It was no accident that *Tristan* and Schopenhauer should seem to suddenly appear in Wagner's life at the same time. When Wagner wrote that letter, he was in desperate straits. He was exiled from Germany for his part in a middle-class uprising in Dresden in 1848–49, and that such insurrections had been crushed throughout Europe was a bitter blow. For neither the first nor the last time, he was also in a precarious financial situation, able to live in Switzerland only with the help of wealthy friends. His marriage was deteriorating. Since the premiere of *Lohengrin* four years earlier, the musical world had heard nothing new from him. He had written the libretto of all four parts of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, as well as the music for its opening work, *Das Rheingold*, but as he worked his way through composing *Die Walküre*, he began to understand just what a lengthy process it would be to finish just that installment of the tetralogy. Getting the entire *Ring* on stage, given the enormous forces involved, must have begun to seem like an improbable folly.

As he finished *Walküre* and started on *Siegfried*, music for the new *Tristan* continued to bubble to the surface. In December 1856 he wrote to a friend: "For the moment, music without words … in the shape of a melodic thread which, though I fain would have quitted it, kept on spinning itself, so that I could have spent the whole day developing it." It was not until April 1857 that he actually drafted the prose scenario for *Tristan* that he would later refine and then use as a libretto, which he finished that September.

Wagner had always seen drama in terms of music. Throughout his life, he often told friends who questioned some unclear—or even contradictory—plot element in his libretti, "When you hear the music, you will understand." But with *Tristan*, he went even further. In this case, it was not the story's words that first encapsulated the drama and then inspired the music, but the opposite: the emotions and drama of *Tristan und Isolde* first came to Wagner as *music*. It was only after some of the key musical elements had appeared, and been worked out to some degree, that he then produced the libretto and set to work in earnest composing the opera, leaving aside *Siegfried* to be finished at a later date.

Wagner's main source for the libretto was Gottfried von Strassburg's poetic version of the ancient Celtic myth, which appeared about 1210. The poem—which was left unfinished, at 19,548 lines in length, at Strassburg's death—has an enormous cast of characters, and the sprawling story includes numerous digressions depicting medieval courtly life with all its intrigues and pageantry. But Wagner was not interested in a musical setting of the colorful medieval story. He is not concerned with the outer situations of the lovers, but with the story's deep psychological aspects. As Wagner explained it, "I have rejected the exhaustive detail which a historical poet is obliged to employ so as to clarify the outward development of his plot, to the detriment of a lucid exposition of its inner motives, and I trusted myself to the latter alone. Life and death, the whole meaning of the outer world, here hang on nothing but the inner movements of the soul."

The English poet W. H. Auden summed up the crux of the story: "The love [Tristan and Isolde] feel for each other is religiously absolute, i.e., each is the other's ultimate good so that not only is sexual infidelity inconceivable, but all other relations to other people and the world cease to have any significance. Yet, though their relation is the only value that exists for them, it is a torment, because their sexual desire is only the symbolic expression of their real passion, which is the yearning of two souls to merge and become one, a consummation which is impossible so long as they have bodies, so that their ultimate goal is to die in each other's arms."

In the opera, Wagner provides just enough plot detail to explain how Tristan and Isolde found themselves in their situation, while primarily concentrating on their inner world. The composer is quite capable of writing essentially a cappella parts for the singers, with only orchestral punctuation, when he wants the specific words to be clearly understood by the audience. But there are also times—after the lovers drink the potion in Act I or in much of the duet in Act II—when the individual words are lost in a torrent of sound and become simply another element in the music's emotional outpouring. When Brangäne sings her warning to the lovers from high in the tower, the individual syllables of her words are sometimes stretched out to such a degree that they become unintelligible, but the overall effect is magical.

Numerous books have been written about how Wagner used the "melodic thread" of his leitmotifs to weave one of the greatest scores in music history—how an opera that begins with a musical phrase depicting aching desire evolves symphonically, through endless melody and the use of unresolved chromatic harmony and dissonance that was unprecedented at the time, to the transfiguration of the soul and the achieving of highest bliss, all conveyed by some of the most ravishingly beautiful music ever written.

The oft-repeated tale that Wagner composed *Tristan* to forever memorialize his love affair with Mathilde Wesendonck—the wife of the composer's wealthy

patron, who provided the Wagner family with financial assistance and housing at his Zurich estate for about a year beginning in April 1857—is not true. Instead, the composer's immersion in the opera predisposed him to recreate its emotions in his outer life, and thus the affair with Wesendonck. It is unknown whether the affair was ever consummated, but in any case, it put an enormous strain on the marriages of both participants.

When Wagner started working on *Tristan* in earnest, he thought the project would be a quick moneymaker. He imagined in another letter to Liszt in June 1857 that "[*Tristan*'s] modest dimensions will facilitate a performance of it, and I shall produce it in Strasbourg a year from today. … I may safely assume that a thoroughly practicable work such as *Tristan and Isolde* will soon bring in decent revenues and keep my head above water." In fact, the score was not finished for more than two years, and early attempts to give the opera—first in Karlsruhe and then in Vienna—came to nothing. Wagner's detractors declared the piece unperformable.

It was only when Bavaria's King Ludwig II summoned Wagner to Munich in 1864, discharging his debts and awarding him a generous annual salary, that the composer was given the necessary resources to get *Tristan* on stage. But its bad luck continued; the announced premiere had to be postponed because the Isolde had become hoarse. Finally, on June 10, 1865, *Tristan* was given for the first time. After a few more performances, the husband and wife team who had sung Tristan and Isolde, Malvina and Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, returned to their home theater in Dresden, where Ludwig suddenly died, age 29—more evidence of a "*Tristan* curse," according to Wagner's enemies.

Tristan broke so much new ground, both musically and dramatically, that few people who saw it remained indifferent to its lure. For decades, it was as reviled as it was adored. Clara Schumann, by this time a widow, saw it in September 1875. "It was the most disgusting thing I have ever seen or heard in my life," she wrote in her diary. "To be forced to see and hear such crazy lovemaking the whole evening, in which every feeling of decency is violated and by which not just the public but even musicians seem to be enchanted—it is the saddest thing I have experienced in my entire artistic life."

Whether one likes *Tristan* or not, its influence reaches far beyond the opera house. Poetry, literature, painting, and theater have all been impacted by it. For many composers after Wagner, it was the one work whose shadow they most struggled to escape. In performance, *Tristan und Isolde* can easily seem to be the pinnacle of sweeping Romanticism, its endless melody a great duet between the singers on stage and the surging orchestra, everything driving inexorably to the final resolution at the climax of what is now known as Isolde's Liebestod. But that overarching power is achieved only because Wagner was so meticulous in constructing every nuance of his score.

The prelude to Act III, for example, with its haunted sense of desolation, is built on the last four notes of the opening phrase of the prelude to Act I, the essence of desire, subliminally suggesting the relationship between desire and despair and musically tying together the two acts. And the orchestral music that accompanies the entrance of King Marke and his men in Act II, trapping the lovers, is a grotesque parody of the music that accompanied Tristan's headlong dash into Isolde's arms earlier in the act.

In his autobiography, conductor Sir Georg Solti tells of visiting Richard Strauss, who wanted to talk about *Tristan*. The elderly composer pointed out that the very last chord of the opera is played by every instrument in the orchestra *except* the English horn. Wagner uses the English horn to represent desire, and with the death of both Tristan and Isolde, desire has ended. One tiny touch, unnoticed in performance, but it is indicative of the way Wagner spun his initial "melodic threads" into an exquisite musical tapestry that stands among the supreme masterpieces of Western civilization.

—Paul Thomason

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