

RICHARD WAGNER

**TRISTAN
UND ISOLDE**

Stephen Gould
Nina Stemme
Kwangchul Youn
Michelle Breedt
Johan Reuter

Rundfunkchor Berlin

Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin

Marek Janowski

Live recording
of the concert performance in the Berlin Phil-
harmonie
on March 27, 2012

Richard Wagner (1813-1883) Tristan und Isolde WWV 90

Tristan	Stephen Gould , Tenor
Isolde	Nina Stemme , Soprano
König Marke	Kwangchul Youn , Bass
Kurwenal	Johan Reuter , Baritone
Brangäne	Michelle Breedt , Mezzo-soprano
Melot	Simon Pauly , Tenor
Ein Hirte (<i>A shepherd</i>)	Clemens Bieber , Tenor
Ein Steuermann (<i>A steersman</i>)	Arttu Kataja , Baritone
Ein junger Seemann (<i>A young sailor</i>)	Timothy Fallon , Tenor

Rundfunkchor Berlin (Herren) | Chorus Master: **Eberhard Friedrich**
(Male chorus of the Berlin Radio Choir)

Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin (Radio Symphony Orchestra Berlin)

Wolfgang Hentrich, Concertmaster

Robin Engelen, Assistant conductor

conducted by **Marek Janowski**

Live recording of the concert performance in the Berlin Philharmonie on March 27, 2012

Executive Producers: Stefan Lang, Maria Grätzel, Trygve Nordwall & Job Maarse

Recording Producer: Job Maarse

Balance Engineer: Jean-Marie Geijssen

Recording Team:

Wolfram Nehls, Henri Thaan, Johanna Vollus, Aki Matusch & Clemens Deller

Editing: Ientje Mooij

Design: Netherlands

Disc 1 (5186 425)	
Act 1	<i>playing time</i>
1 Prelude to Act 1	10. 25
2 Scene 1: Westwärts schweift der Blick <i>(Sailor, Isolde, Brangäne)</i>	5. 26
3 Scene 2: Frisch weht der Wind <i>(Sailor, Isolde, Brangäne, Tristan, Kurwenal, Chorus)</i>	9. 40
4 Scene 3: Weh, ach wehe! <i>(Brangäne, Isolde)</i>	18. 31
5 Scene 4: Auf! Auf! Ihr Frauen! <i>(Isolde, Brangäne, Kurwenal)</i>	7. 27
6 Scene 5: Begehrt, Herrin <i>(Tristan, Isolde, Brangäne, Kurwenal, Chorus)</i>	25. 11
Disc 2 (5186 426)	
Act 2	
1 Prelude to Act 2	1. 48
2 Scene 1: Hörst du sie noch? <i>(Isolde, Brangäne)</i>	13. 09
3 Scene 2: Isolde! Geliebte! <i>(Tristan, Isolde)</i>	16. 32
4 O sink hernieder, Nacht der Liebe	21.40
5 Scene 3: Rette dich, Tristan <i>(Tristan, Isolde, Brangäne, Kurwenal, Melot, Marke)</i>	1.32
6 Tatest du's wirklich?	20.54
Disc 3 (5186 427)	
Act 3	
1 Prelude to Act 3	4. 01
2 Scene 1: Kurwenal! He! <i>(Hirt, Kurwenal, Tristan)</i>	29. 00
3 Die alte Weise sagt mir's wieder	16. 49
4 Scene 2: O diese Sonne! <i>(Tristan, Isolde)</i>	3. 06
5 Ha! Ich bin's süssester Freund	5. 23
6 Scene 3: Kurwenal! Hör! Ein zweites Schiff <i>(Tristan, Isolde, Hirt, Kurwenal, Melot, Brangäne, Marke)</i>	8. 03
7 Mild und leise <i>(Isolde)</i>	6. 07
Total playing time disc 1:	76.45
Total playing time disc 2:	75.39
Total playing time disc 3:	72.35
Total playing time:	3.44.59

"The world is poor for anyone, who has never been sick enough for this 'hellish sensuality'." With this provocative insinuation, Friedrich Nietzsche sought in his *Ecce Homo* to share with his readers his own love-hate relationship with the "gruesome and sweet infinity" of Richard Wagner's opera, *Tristan and Isolde*. In 1933, in his essay *The Sufferings and Greatness of Richard Wagner*, Thomas Mann confessed to having suffered through time and again "hours of shuddering and blissful, nervous and intellectual ecstasy" upon hearing *Tristan*. The astute analyst Theodor W. Adorno succumbed in equal measure to the charms of the *Tristan* score: "Few things have attracted people so to Wagner's music as the relishing of agony." As late as 1896, Mathilde Wesendonck still spread a cloak of silence over her personal share in the "profound art of silence", which Wagner himself believed permeated his music: "It is from this period that his work *Tristan and Isolde* dates! It remains for us to be silent and bow our heads in awe!"

How can one talk about this work without damaging the unspeakable? Should one draw the veil of night deeper yet than had done Wagner already? Or should one rather drag *Tristan and Isolde* into the light, like two dangerous vampires? Attempts have not been lacking in this respect. Yet all the more they have missed their "objective", whose charm lies in the self-withdrawal from that which is clear-cut, clearly defined, and free from analytical questioning.

Introduction to the game of love

Already, the first bars of the prelude completely seduce the receptive listener. The same occurs in the *Flying Dutchman*, and likewise in *Lohengrin* and the *Valkyries*. However, in *Tristan and Isolde*, two mysteriously contrasting, chromatic lines immediately result in a chord as yet literally unheard-of: the famous "*Tristan*" chord. Until then, the world of music had not come across anything like it: two fourths – one augmented and one pure – placed above one another, separated by a third interval, without any hint of where this might lead harmonically. In other words, it can lead anywhere – and does so constantly over the next four hours. The harmonic tension turns out to be so painful on the one hand, and so almost boundlessly open on the other, that all previous rules of tonal harmony no longer lead to a single goal, but to many. And it is precisely this, which appears to be Wagner's intention: to avoid, on principal, anything leading to the goal, to the resolution, to the unambiguous – in all musical parameters. The "*Tristan*" chord, which is always simultaneously the conclusion and the nucleus of a gentle melodic movement, in fact portrays the emotional atmosphere of the entire work: the uninhibited

expression of erotic desire.

Although Wagner is said to have opened the door to modern music by liberating the dissonance from its functional harmonic constraints, this applies only in so far as modern music continues to treat the dissonance as such. For even though the significance of the harmonic condition is reversed, and the tension, the dragged-out agony has become an (almost) permanent condition, whereas relaxation, resolution, and redemption (if any) takes place within a short and sweet space of time, it has to be emphasized that Wagner does not employ the dissonance without a set purpose; rather, he charges it with meaning. This is the fundamental difference with the non-semantic music of the modern day. And therein lies the secret of why Wagner is acclaimed to this very day, unlike countless subsequent "smithies of the dissonant".

An ardent "Yes" to the negation

What led poet-composer Richard Wagner to make such a controversial choice of materials, and to "translate" them in such a love-drunk manner? In 1834, a *Tristan* poem was published by August von Platen: and although Wagner never mentioned it, he probably knew of it, due to the similarity of the theme. In 1840 in Paris, he became acquainted with Novalis' *Hymns to the Night* (although, likewise, he never mentioned this source); and in Dresden in 1842, he probably conducted performances of Donizetti's opera *L'elisir d'amore* (= The elixir of love). Presumably, he was also aware of an opera planned by Robert Schumann, who in 1846 had asked the poet Robert Reinick to collaborate with him on a five-act opera inspired by *Tristan and Isolde*. In fact, Schumann's pupil Karl Ritter later brushed up the draft libretto to create a drama full of "high-spirited" situations (Wagner). This, in turn, together with the "awakening" he had recently experienced after reading Arthur Schopenhauer's major work *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (= The world as will and representation), led Wagner in 1854 to come up with a transformation of the "profound tragedy" of the "*Tristan*" material. In view of the specific, euphoric "love-anguish," which had dominated Wagner's emotions since 1852 – this will be dealt with more extensively below – and his vision of the art work of the future, his "condensing" of the material developed into a completely new dimension in terms of moral criticism, the form of a music-theatre work, text, harmony, and of the genre itself. It even led him to attempt to square the circle of Schopenhauer's philosophy of the negation of the will. Where the philosopher blamed man's sexual instinct for all the suffering in the world, and thus completely rejected this "will to

live" as pure selfishness, which at the instant of satisfaction could anyway weaken all other desires and higher driving forces, Wagner was full of enthusiasm for his idea, namely that the objective of self-knowledge was not to be gained through the suppression of physical love, but rather through the sexual act itself. However, he never sent Schopenhauer the letter he had drafted on this matter.

But he did expound on his vision in his *Tristan*. Wagner studied the historical "*Tristan*" material provided by Gottfried von Straßburg (around 1210), in order to translate it to the emotional world of the 19th century by drastically gearing this mediaeval dynamite to the belief that love should be experienced as a fateful disaster, whose fulfilment comes about only in death. In order to indulge this myth, Wagner designed a four-hour stage work, of which the 'external' plot could be narrated within just a few minutes. However, in order to understand the constellation of characters, it is especially important to know what has gone on previously. The work itself could be reduced to a succinct formula: *Tristan*, the hero, makes various suicide attempts, none of which are successful. Why he does this, what it is that torments him, whom he drags with him into his agony – all this is the theme of the 'internal' plot. Mysterious words and a "knowing orchestra" transport the listener into the fascinating obscurity of the human psyche.

Background history

Tristan, son of king Rivalin and princess Blanche fleur, the sister of King Marke of Cornwall, lost his parents early on and grew up in his uncle's court. There, he was brought up by Rivalin's squire Kurwenal to serve his king loyally. Thus, Cornwall's dependence on Ireland fills him with anger. When the Irish delegate Morold – the betrothed of Isolde, daughter of the local king – demands tribute from Cornwall to Ireland, *Tristan* kills him and returns the head of the dead man to Isolde, in lieu of payment. Shortly afterwards, the 'murderer' also arrives on Isolde's doorstep, as he has been poisoned in the fight by Morold's sword, which had been specially prepared by Isolde. Isolde the healer does not recognize Tantris, as he calls himself, and nurses him back to health. While Tantris/*Tristan* knows nothing of Isolde's former relationship with Morold, the young Irishwoman recognizes her fiancé's murderer by his weapon, which she compares to the fatal wound received by Morold. She approaches the wounded *Tristan* with the intention of avenging Morold. "From his bed, he looked up – not at the sword, not at my hand – he gazed into my eyes." Isolde's desire for revenge is transformed into love at first sight. After she restores him

to health, Tristan is able to return to Cornwall. Diplomacy dictates a linking of the royal houses of Ireland and Cornwall. Tristan travels again to Ireland to win Isolde for King Marke. Snubbed for the second time by Tristan, Isolde follows him to Cornwall. She loves him above all else, against her better judgment.

Act I

Now the internal drama can begin. Despite everything, Isolde yearns for the notorious destroyer of her peace of mind, who is gradually becoming aware of his guilt. But at first, he still avoids her. Isolde's maid Brangaene comes up with the practical idea of stimulating the impending match between Isolde and King Marke by means of a love potion based on Irish herb lore. But Isolde has a different plan: she has decided to use a death potion also contained in her trunks, in order to die together with Tristan. A discussion on board ends with Tristan suggesting that Isolde stab him with his own sword: perhaps that would solve his own problem. But she would then have to live on alone; what is more, as consort to the foreign king Marke. Thus both swallow the cup of reconciliation – which, in the meantime, the good Brangaene has secretly swapped for the love potion. Confident that they are moments from death, Tristan and Isolde confess to one another their mutual love. However, they do not die; rather, as soon as they arrive in the presence of King Marke in Cornwall, the love potion begins to take effect.

Act Two

Isolde waits for Tristan, who wants to visit her secretly at night, and ignores all of Brangaene's warnings. United at last, the two lovers resist the magnificent glow of bright day and praise night and death as the only shelter for the most fervent of love. Thus, the emotional nucleus of the entire work takes place without any progressive external action. Brangaene's warning that Marke is appearing in the light of dawn does not trouble them in their death-desiring love. Marke's worldly grief at Tristan's betrayal has as little influence on the miracle of this love as would have had a fit of rage, or a similar highly understandable action. On the contrary, Tristan and Isolde turn again to one another. Infuriated, the faithful servant Melot intervenes on behalf of the king. Tristan takes up a fighting stance, but only in order subsequently to fall on Melot's sword. Admittedly, he survives once again: however, had this "accident" succeeded in killing him, Isolde would also have been left behind, alone.

Act Three

Now the external story basically repeats itself. The badly wounded Tristan is languishing at castle Kareol, his ancestral home in Brittany. Kurwenal has taken him there and is doing his best to look after his master. However, the damage inflicted is far more of an internal than an external nature. So Tristan has sent for Isolde to heal him again. A shepherd shortens the agonizing wait by singing an old melody that prompts Tristan to carry out an extensive review of his entire life. When Isolde arrives, he is feverish: she sees this as the mutual ardour they once shared, but is not able to restore him to health, or even follow him immediately in the Liebestod (= love-death). King Marke now arrives and, in favour of the love shared by Tristan and Isolde, is prepared to forgive his former faithful servant and to give up his plans to wed Isolde (although, in fact, he had never truly coveted her). But Isolde decides to dwell no longer in this world. She follows Tristan into the night of death.

External and internal plot

Murder, betrayal and shame as a result of activity, convention and customs reduce any specific action by Tristan and Isolde to a minimum. They flee into the "Gegenwelt" (= inner/counter world) of night and death. Consequently, all worldly recommendations, warnings, reassurances, declarations go unheard, no matter by whom they are uttered: Marke, Brangaene, Kurwenal, a shepherd, or a sailor. In this way, dialogues turn into monologues, whose authors are basically as interchangeable as the two interlocutors in the inner dialogues. It does not matter who is the first to praise to the other the bliss of love in death. What is more: "His earlier insistence that every word must be audible was now relaxed, and in the big Act 2 love duet, for example, there are frequent passages where long-held notes, together with the overlapping and simultaneous declamation of the lovers – not to mention the overwhelming impact of the orchestra – prevent the words being heard clearly, if at all. The musical depiction of the lovers' illicit passion is so graphic, building intensity in waves of ecstasy from the initial idyll on the flowery bank to the moment of coitus interruptus when King Mark and his followers burst in, that most listeners are happy to sacrifice the occasional line of text." (Barry Millington)

As the visible action dwindles, thus the possibilities previously supplied by opera dramaturgy also diminish. By contrast, "still images" intervene in the time structure of the stage work far more

significantly than ever before. Action and contemplation – in musical terms: recitative and aria – no longer alternate, but literally blend into one other. Moments turn into eternity; and by contrast, significant action takes place within a few seconds. Whereas practically the entire first act is dedicated to Isolde's struggle for Tristan's attention, in the second act the lovers basically do not permit any distraction from their mutual absorption, not even when drama threatens to invade their private world. Tristan's major fever monologue fills the third act to a large extent, even Kurwenal participates in this "inner action" as a source of inspiration. The arrivals of Isolde and, later, of Marke are treated as casual occurrences. Only at the moment of her transfiguration (this was Wagner's own term for the conclusion, he did not choose the term "Liebestod"), does Isolde also once again take up the central theme of the inner action.

Wagner gave the work the simple yet odd title of "Handlung" (= action, plot), as it is not a drama in which conflicts are resolved by means of dialogue, but neither is it an opera in the traditional sense. "The fact that Wagner chose, in a subtitle, to define precisely Tristan and Isolde, which is the work containing the least external plot, as an action – and the term 'action', conspicuous through its stressed inconspicuousness, is nothing other than a translation of [the Greek word] 'drama' – demonstrates unequivocally that his concept of drama was aimed primarily at the inner action (basically, the only action in Tristan and Isolde)." (Carl Dahlhaus).

Death and Love Potion

Wagner devotes considerable attention to the key moment of the cup of reconciliation. Whereas he often rather dismisses the external action sequences, he motivates the dual nature of the potion with great care. First, Brangaene proposes the love potion: however, her plan is to administer it to Marke as she does not understand what Isolde has told her, truly believing that the young princess fears that Marke will not love her. Isolde, however, brings the death potion into play, in order revenge herself on Tristan for his betrayal, and yet to be close to him in death. Dietmar Holland sums it up as follows: "However, the surmised death potion finally enables Tristan and Isolde to give in to the forbidden and, as yet, repressed love they feel for one another..." Essentially, the deception with regard to the true nature of the potion during the cup of reconciliation ritual was imperative in order for Tristan and Isolde to dare, in the face of death, to be honest with one another. This is the key element of the entire plot: "If it is truly a death wish, which changes into love thanks to the potion" – and not because

it is the 'love potion', but rather the supposed 'death potion' – "then love would have existed previously, and the death wish would have evolved from this. Death was the only escape for Tristan and Isolde from their doomed love." (Carl Dahlhaus). In this respect, Thomas Mann was absolutely right when he claimed in his essay *Leiden und Größe Richard Wagners* (= The Suffering and Greatness of Richard Wagner), in a controversial undertone, that the two lovers might just as well have drunk an innocent glass of water: that would not have changed the fact that they would have been willing to admit the truth only when they believed death to be near.

Amazing symmetry

By continuously depriving the senses of any relaxation or breathing space, Wagner confuses the listener. In addition, his opera lacks any audible form structure or motivic reminders such as in *Der Ring*; yet the work still follows a surprisingly clear structure. Throughout the drama there is a well-planned symmetry: while in the second act the pseudo-dialogue between the two protagonists referring to their fatal love forms the emotional and thematic climax, the scene is framed by two major analogous monologues. In one monologue, Isolde explains to Brangaene and the audience her external actions in the third scene of the first act, in the other Tristan portrays his entire past life in the first scene of the third act. The Introduction (Prelude) to the first act returns, at a higher level of consciousness, at the end of the third act: thus, at the end of the entire work. Both passages fit together so well that they are occasionally performed in sequence in concert, without the audience noticing any transition from one to the other. In general, in his *Tristan and Isolde*, for the first time Wagner avoids with absolute consistency any break, any interruption of the musical flow. He achieves this by elaborating and extending the composition (= *Auskomponieren*, literally "composing out") through the various transitions, as well as by circumventing any harmonic conclusions. The open harmony is a direct indication of his principle of the "endless melody", just as inversely the endless melody is not permitted to come to a rest in a harmonic sense.

Language and Music

"If one compares Wagner's prose draft for *Tristan and Isolde* with his final libretto, then one notices a tendency to separate the language from its function as a voice of reason and rational, insightful motivations for series of actions, and to replace it with verses of a distinctively enigmatic

character, which are not intended as a direct communication to either the audience or the singer, but rather as a monologue to pronounce that which cannot be said..."

Clearly, Wagner considers rhetoric to be the appropriate language to illustrate the blind prevailing of fate. Furthermore, it has the advantage of emphasizing the musical aspect of the language and serves to prefabricate the musical structures. In the prose draft, Marke's lament regarding Tristan's betrayal begins as follows: 'This, Tristan, to me? Where now is loyalty, honour, fame, and every major virtue – for Tristan has betrayed me?' In the final libretto, Wagner repeats the form of address, accomplishing this through the rhetorical device of reshuffling the words as if they were musical motifs (he uses a similar technique in the arrangement of the musical motifs in the prelude; thus, one can speak of rhetorical music there): 'This, to me? / This, Tristan, to me?' ... At the same time, the verbal rhetoric shapes the musical form. This is possible only because Wagner conceives of the tool of rhetoric in a musical manner, and vice versa, uses the tool of music rhetorically. It is obvious that such a compositional process, no matter how well-differentiated, is not a setting of music to a libretto, neither is it a genuine musical structure. Both are subordinate to the will of the rhetoric." (Dietmar Holland)

In this sense, one perceives in a new light the mutual supplementation of language and music that is so frequently invoked by Wagner. If language is not sufficient to convey the last messages, which are reserved for the music alone, then according to Carl Dahlhaus the music requires the momentum of language, be it only as a stammering, atmospheric, and abstract aside, in order to be sufficiently motivated. Thus, the musical leitmotifs also play an important role in *Tristan and Isolde*, although employed in a different manner than in the *Ring des Nibelungen*.

Orchestral melody

Whereas the motifs in *Der Ring* appear so to speak on cue – at times resulting in an unintentionally odd effect, although the leitmotiv-like network of links in the increasing complexity is seemingly impenetrable – the themes in *Tristan and Isolde* are limited exclusively to the dimension of the forbidden love shared by the dastardly couple. Here, the motifs themselves are subject to constant change, interwoven into the structure more like central themes, here emerging, there returning underground, literally not wanting to be grasped definitely, and certainly not by means of any conceptual labels (as proven by an extensive argument among the musicologists). This may stem

from the fact that the music in *Tristan* "flowed forth from the subject matter" (Wagner in a letter to Cosima on April 29, 1878). And the "subject matter" was nothing more than "a couple caught up in the passion of their transgression, they refuse to admit it to themselves, but they sense that there is only one way out; namely, death" (Wagner to Cosima on December 11, 1878).

More than ten years after composing *Tristan and Isolde*, Richard Wagner was still amazed at himself. "He feels as if he has dived into the entire colour spectrum, and has now emerged dripping wet. As if he has had to resort to the greatest wealth of musical tools, due to the plot being so simple," thus wrote Cosima Wagner in her diary on June 21, 1869. What sounds like a frenzy of colour here was originally nothing less than the frenzy of (his own) blood, set to music. In 1857, Wagner interrupted his work on *Siegfried* (in other words, his life's work, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*) in order to plunge into his *Tristan* adventure – without calculating any previous theory – and to give himself a free symphonic hand for once. So to speak inadvertently, here Wagner the musician left us his most sustainable business card, he surpassed himself as an imaginative composer. It remains to be seen whether it was the biographically motivated *Mut zur Verzweiflung* (= courage born of despair) that drove him so far – as was also the case with Beethoven, Schubert and Schoenberg.

The orchestra is the sea in which all Wagner's characters and their mutual relationships swim. Better than any other medium, music is capable of absorbing and depicting the inner action, when all other "commentary" fails. Wagner's orchestral melody is not "subordinate" to the text as in a conventional opera, it does not simply provide the music to the libretto in a manner that strengthens the aesthetics or even contradicts what is being sung: no, it "acts" independently, at its own level. Wagner reserves the right to specifically control the perception of the audience with the help of the orchestra. Where necessary, he implements the memory or premonition themes. Wagner was well aware of the difficulties involved with this new way of listening to and orienting oneself in a music-theatre work, as he described to Cosima on December 27, 1878: "Most people did not hear a melody – if only they could grasp the melody intellectually," they would easily follow the meaning. So despite the major demands made on the feelings, the intellect is also put to work! Or to quote Carl Dahlhaus: "By means of the musical language of the leitmotifs, of the 'orchestral melody', Wagner himself talks and communicates with his audience over the heads of the cast, provided that they are able to understand his musical metaphors."

Resounding silence

In the particular case of Tristan and Isolde, a dimension is added, precisely in the orchestra, that is not present in any other opera by Wagner (not even in Parsifal): the “art of the resounding silence,” as Wagner himself describes it in a letter to Mathilde Wesendonck. “The orchestra is given a particular, ‘eloquent’ role, exactly when the spoken word (on stage) ceases, as it has nothing more to say.” At the beginning of the fifth scene of Act I, Isolde is waiting for “Lord Tristan”. From a musical point of view, the moment is extremely urgent, as the orchestra expresses the tension dominating the encounter (the so-called fate motif can be heard...).

Even after Tristan has already entered the cabin, the motif is heard again, while Isolde “becomes dreadfully agitated at the sight of him”. All the more blatant does Tristan’s conventional (and unaccompanied) form of address sound (“Demand, my lady, what you wish”). ... When the deceived King Marke asks, during the third scene of Act II, for the “unfathomably deep and mysterious reason” of the love between Tristan and Isolde, then only the “knowing” orchestra is able to provide the answer: Tristan remains helpless (“compassionately directing his gaze at Marke” is the stage direction provided by Wagner). The wordless answer is – the beginning of the Prelude to Act I; in other words, as previously mentioned, the quintessence of the entire opera. (Then Tristan turns to Isolde as if nothing had happened, to talk to her in code about their death wish, while the orchestra resumes the night music, which had been interrupted by the appearance of Marke.)

Perhaps the most important point in the “inner” action – at least in the orchestra – is the moment of the longed-for arrival of Isolde in the second scene of Act III: like in a burning glass, as a “final arrival of a longed-for moment”, the essential themes relating to the doomed love of Tristan and Isolde can be heard simultaneously, as Tristan lies dying in Isolde’s arms. ...

Arguably, the most startling effect of Wagner’s “art of resounding silence” – one of the few “actual” places (thus, deep and simple – no noisy theatricals) where Wagner implemented this effect in his work – was accomplished in a highly subtle, almost inconspicuous manner, at the end of the third act. ... This refers to the three separate, hesitant, yet determined initiations of the so-called “death song”, which had already been heard in the middle of the second act as an undeniable yearning for death (“Thus would we die, that together...”). ... Here, Isolde is basically enacting a “hero-transfiguration”, for the final union in death sinks into the resound-

ing surge of the last orchestral bars, which – finally – provide the resolution of the “Tristan” chord. However, this is, in fact, a “false” resolution: the quote from the “yearning” motif superimposed on the “Tristan” chord will henceforth be seen in relation to the key of B major instead of the ‘imaginary’ key of the Prelude to Act I (A minor).” (Dietmar Holland)

Purgatory of the feelings

What is true and what is false with regard to the unfortunate biographical structure of relationships, which contributed considerably to the creation of Tristan and Isolde? More than any other renowned musician of the 19th century, Wagner embodied the inevitably organic interaction between life and art. Instinctual desire and philosophically sublimated eroticism have always been the main fuel for his life and creative work. And in order to remain here as authentic as possible, he needed the fascination of immortality, he was forced to indulge the ethos of the reprehensible, to give full expression to an unrestrained selfishness, and to despair of the incompatibility between the mind of a genius and the body of a normal man. As far as expressing itself in a sustainable manner in major art is concerned, Wagner’s unbridled megalomania beat hands-down Beethoven’s conflict with his nephew, Schubert’s syphilis, Schumann’s mental illness, and even Tchaikovsky’s homosexuality. His life consisted of an unbroken sequence of excess, debt evasion, manic work ethic, and self-pity. The excess extended to financial and interpersonal issues. The flight from constant new debt had him running all over Europe. His self-pity led him to continually tap new sources of money and other types of personal funding. And finally, his manic work ethic – which probably kept him grounded and gave him a sense of purpose – together with uncompromising self-confidence enabled him to become one of the truly great composers in the history of music.

A merry-go-round of people

There is no doubt about the importance of Mathilde Wesendonck in Wagner’s life, and especially in the creation of Tristan and Isolde. The young woman was born in Elberfeld in 1828 as Agnes Luckemeyer. In 1848, she married Otto Wesendonck, a wealthy textile merchant 13 years her senior who came from her home town. He named her after his late wife, whose (third!) Christian name in turn had been Mathilde, the name of Otto’s beloved sister who had died young. Family ties being close, the newly married couple travelled to the United

States, to which country Otto’s brother had fled. (Like Wagner, Hugo Wesendonck was a revolutionary with a warrant out for his arrest, and a German court had condemned the former member of parliament to death for his participation in the 1848 revolution.) Otto took care of his brother, but above all he took care of his own flourishing textile business. However, Mathilde wanted to return to Europe. They avoided a possible political confrontation (because of his brother) in Germany by settling in Switzerland, in the German-speaking town of Zurich.

In 1852, the couple met the exile Richard Wagner in the hotel “Baur au Lac”. Looking deeply into each other’s eyes (!), Richard and Mathilde felt an immediate mutual fascination. Even before the Wesendonck family – by now, Mathilde had given birth to her second child – took up residence in their newly constructed villa in Rieterpark above Lake Zurich, Otto Wesendonck ensured that Richard Wagner and his wife Minna had moved into the neighbouring property, on which he had renovated the existing house at his own expense. Wagner was overjoyed at the generous gift, which granted him residency for life. Instead of addressing him as “Geehrter Herr” (= Dear Sir), any letter he wrote to Wesendonck henceforth began with “Liebster” (= My dearest Sir). Later on, Otto Wesendonck was displaced only by King Ludwig II of Bavaria, whom Wagner addressed in his letters as “Mein Geliebter” (= My Beloved). Nevertheless, it was due to Mathilde that he felt so incomparably well in Zurich. She inspired him to unprecedented artistic heights, and the situation was tolerated initially by Minna Wagner and Otto Wesendonck. The daily exchanging of messages and small gifts, afternoons spent reading, and evenings attending concerts were the rule. Whether Mathilde and Richard ever actually cheated on their respective partners is rather doubtful: nevertheless, they exceeded by far the limits that bourgeois society was prepared to tolerate in the middle of the 19th century. The case is similar and yet different to that of Johannes Brahms and Clara Schumann. From today’s perspective, it is clear that, here too, love was involved. But Brahms – who in later years also regularly visited Mathilde Wesendonck – would certainly never have behaved in such a shameless manner as Richard Wagner. Clara Schumann, however, loudly and angrily denounced Mathilde Wesendonck!

On April 7, 1858, Minna Wagner intercepted a letter written by her husband to his beloved Mathilde in a fit of petty jealousy involving an Italian teacher. For her, the protestations of love formulated in the so-called morning confession were sufficient proof of his infidelity. Upon returning from his travels, Otto Wesendonck learned of the intentions of the Wagners to leave the “asylum”. Zurich was granted its scandal – or more or less, as Otto Wesendonck did everything he

could to feign normalcy. However, despite the emotional attachment his wife felt for Richard Wagner, Wesendonck knew he could rely on her common sense, and thus on the survival of his marriage. Moreover, in his own way, he appears to have loved her unwaveringly. Wagner left his wife, who went to Dresden, and fled via Geneva to Venice, where he promptly moved into a huge palace – the rent of which Otto Wesendonck agreed to pay – in order to continue work on *Tristan and Isolde*. Whereas the prose sketches and the libretto came into being while he was, as it were, still directly and emotionally connected with Matilda, the elaboration of the composition was now marked by his loss and renunciation. Rather an important detail to take into consideration if one wishes to carry out an in-depth examination of the work!

Wagner still hoped to be able to return to Zurich. Restless, he left Venice for Paris, then travelled on to Vienna and finally Lucerne, after it was made clear to him that he was no longer welcome to take up residence at the “asylum” previously provided by the Wesendoncks.

However, they did continue to visit one another, and exchange letters and gifts. And Otto continued to pay and to pay... On August 6, 1859, Wagner completed work on *Tristan and Isolde*. Several attempts to stage a première failed, due to the extreme difficulty of the opera score. But on May 4, 1864, Ludwig II made his appearance in Wagner’s life, and the following year, on June 10, 1865, saw the world première in Munich. Mathilde Wesendonck left unanswered Richard Wagner’s request: “Friend! Tristan will be wonderful. Will you come?”.

There is no point in trying to discover to which degree *Isolde* is meant to represent Mathilde, or whether Richard considers himself to be Tristan, and Otto Wesendonck bears the traits of King Marke. All female characters in Wagner’s operas reveal his questionable image of womankind; and anyway, the intellectual and emotional world of the 19th century differed to that of the current day. Personal traits of Wagner can be found in Wotan, and likewise in the Dutchman, Tannhäuser and Siegfried. The relationship between Mathilde and Richard is also reflected in that of the siblings Siegmund and Sieg-

linde, whereas Hunding is identified with Otto Wesendonck. In 1854, the first act of the *Valkyries* immediately supplied the background music to the budding love between Richard and Mathilde! And in 1861, the renunciation of Hans Sachs – Wagner’s “alter ego,” with whom he believed Mathilde would inevitably fall in love, after having served again as muse for this opera – does this correspond to Pagner, also known as Otto Wesendonck, or perhaps even Mathilde as Eva?

On April 10, 1865, Cosima von Bülow gave birth to the first child she conceived with Richard Wagner: *Isolde*! With Cosima, Wagner went further than ever before. Would Mathilde have followed him to such extremes?

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