

Richard WAGNER (1813-1883)

Tristan und Isolde: Prelude and Liebestod [1863]

Tristan und Isolde: Prelude and Liebestod [1863] In 1854 Wagner wrote to Franz Liszt of his idea for an opera based on an idealisation of love: 'As I have never in life tasted the true joy of love, I will raise a monument to this loveliest of dreams, in which from first to last this love shall for once be satisfied utterly'. The final product, *Tristan und Isolde*, manifests an exploration of desire, suffering, self-denial and the forbidden, all associated with love. Over several hours, Tristan the Cornish knight and Isolde the Irish princess move from mutual hatred to an intoxicated liaison and subsequently to release in death.

Since its first performance, *Tristan und Isolde* has been recognised as the embodiment of the departure from traditional harmony and as a catalyst for harmonic developments in subsequent decades. This is primarily due to Wagner's increased use of dissonance to express heightened emotion. From the opening bars of the Prelude, delayed resolutions and complex harmonies draw the listener into a world of seemingly inexhaustible passion from which the lovers can only be released after rejecting their phenomenal (bodily) forms. This relates directly to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, who espoused: 'so long as we are given up to the throng of desires…we never obtain lasting happiness or peace.'

Wagner had been introduced to Schopenhauer's work in 1854. His source for the opera was a 13th-century text by Gottfried von Strassburg that was based on various versions of the *Tristan and Isolde* legend. In order to give prominence to the emotional journey of the lovers, Wagner stripped the story to its barest essentials. The result was an opera in which the unfolding drama derives from the changing dynamic of the lovers' relationship rather than from the actual plot.

The subject of the opera was perhaps inevitable in view of Wagner's evolving relationship with Mathilde, the wife of his patron Otto Wesendonck. Wagner and Mathilde became intimately involved, to the point that Wagner composed a series of songs for Mathilde, two of which have strong musical ties to the opera. However, only Act I of *Tristan und Isolde* was composed during their time together. Following the interception of one of Wagner's letters to Mathilde by Wagner's wife, Wagner was forced to move alone to Venice where the second Act, including the famous love duet, was composed. The third Act was completed in Lucerne in 1859.

Wagner had put aside the Ring Cycle to compose *Tristan und Isolde* as the former was taking so long to compose and he needed something more immediately performable. But *Tristan* itself grew to such length that he had difficulty staging it - indeed it was only premiered in 1865. In the interim, in order to promote the opera, Wagner had included the Prelude on numerous programs he conducted. As early as 1863 he had coupled the Prelude with the music from Isolde's final aria (he named this *Transfiguration*, but it is now known as *Liebestod*, 'love-death') which, in a shimmering wash of harp arpeggios and string tremolos, describes her vision of Tristan risen after death. The final cadence provides the first real resolution to the dissonances that are set up in the Prelude and sustained for the four-hour duration of the opera. Even in concert the musical evocation of the departure of Isolde's soul is electrifying; a moment Wagner describes as 'the bliss of renouncing life, of being no more.'

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