

Richard Wagner's

Tristan und Isolde



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Tristan und Isolde

During the nineteenth century, an era most commonly known as Romanticism, a trend developed among artists, writers and composers to express themselves in such a way that conventional forms could no longer provide. Music allowed composers to communicate more freely those emotions that are not easily defined by words, and music was considered by many the ideal form of Romantic art (Grout 543). This was no more obvious in any composer of the time as it was in Richard Wagner, whose vast imagination and emotional expression pushed music form to a near complete break from traditional tonality. Though Wagner wrote many pieces for several different forms of classical music, both instrumental and vocal, his main contributions are recognized in the forms of opera and the music drama, a style which he would create, with such well known pieces as *Lohengrin*, *Tannhauser*, *Der Fliegende Hollander* (*The Flying Dutchman*), *Tristan und Isolde*, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, and *Parsifal*.

Wagner was born in Leipzig, Germany in 1813 as the youngest of nine children of a police actuary and his wife (von Westernhagen 104). Wagner recognized Carl Maria von Weber as his “true begetter, arousing in me a passion for music,” and this was further entrenched in him as he became completely devoted to music after listening to Beethoven’s symphonies (104). He largely taught himself composition with J. B. Logier’s *Thorough-bass* and harmony lessons from musical director Christian Gottlieb Muller before enrolling at Leipzig University to study music (104). Wagner didn’t produce much in the early years of his life, but he did compose his first three operas; *Die Hochzeit* (1832, most of which was burned at the behest of his sister, Rosalie),

Die Feen (1834, his first fully-surviving opera), and *Das Liebesverbot* (105).

It was in his middle years that his music and poetic ingenuity began to hit full-stride. He moved to Riga (modern-day Latvia) where he spent most of his time as a conductor and producer. He also began on his first major project, *Rienzi*, based on a book by Edward Bulwer Lytton, but he was only able to finish two acts before having to flee secretly to Paris to avoid his creditors (von Westernhagen 105). He finished *Rienzi* in 1840 in Paris, and in 1841 finished the full score for *Der fliegende Holländer* (106). He then moved to Dresden in 1842 because *Rienzi* had been accepted for production at the local opera theatre (106). In Dresden, he completed perhaps his two biggest operas in *Tannhauser* (1845) and *Lohengrin* (1846). *Tannhauser* is a myth based out of the ancient medieval Teutonic religion and is about a great minstrel (Tannhauser) who hears of a sort of underground, mountain paradise inhabited by the Northern mythological version of Venus, Holda (Guerber 39). He enters the mountain and spends a year there entangled with the goddess and her company of nymphs, but eventually longs to return to earth (40). Upon seeing the opera, fellow contemporary Robert Schumann foreshadows Wagner's impending impact on the form when he wrote "On the whole, Wagner may become of great importance and significance to the stage" (39). *Lohengrin* is also based on a medieval legend where a maiden, Elsa, is being accused of killing her brother, she has a vision of being championed by a knight from Heaven, the Swan Knight, Lohengrin, who comes to rescue her (40).

In May 1849, Wagner was forced to flee Dresden for safety after a warrant was issued for his arrest for his part in the Dresden uprising, and he got help from Liszt in getting to Switzerland, where he would spend several productive years that would also signal his complete break with traditional opera theatre (von Westernhagen 107). In 1852, he would finish the

poetry for his *Ring* cycle - *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walkure*, *Der junge Siegfried*, and *Siegfrieds Tod* (the latter two whose names he would later change to *Siegfried* and *Gotterdammerung*, respectively - which he first began conceiving 4 years earlier when he first began working on *Siegfrieds Tod* (107). In 1854, he completed the full score for *Das Rheingold*, and in 1856, he completed *Die Walkure*, completing the first half of the cycle (107). After working on *Siegfried* for awhile, he took a break from the cycle and devoted himself to *Tristan und Isolde*, which he said he “felt the need to ‘drive himself to the brink’ musically” (109). He would finish the full score in 1859 (109). After sometime in Munich at the request of King Ludwig II of Bavaria, and much needed financial assistance for completion of compositions, especially the *Ring*, Ludwig asked him to leave because of fear of an uprising (110). He then moved back to Switzerland, where he finished *Die Meistersinger von Nurnburg* (110).

In 1871, Wagner once again began to focus on the *Ring*, but this time with idea of launching it in a theater of his own and made permanent residence in Bayreuth in 1872 (Westernhagen 110). He spent the next several years building his theater and working on the rest of the *Ring* cycle, completing *Siegfried* in 1871 and *Gotterdammerung* in 1874 (110). In 1882, he completed his final drama *Parsifal* (111). Wagner had planned to produce all of his dramas and some of the operas, especially *Der fliegende Hollander* and *Tannhauser* in the theatre in the way he felt they should really be done (111). Later that year, he moved with his family to 1882 to Venice where he said that he wanted to conduct some one movement symphonies, “in which a melodic thread would be followed through without the use of contrasting subjects,” but this vision would not live to fruition as Wagner suffered a fatal heart attack at his desk in 1883 (111). His body was returned to his home in Wahnfried and buried in the garden (111).

One piece that stood out as testament to his mastery of the musical theatre was *Tristan und Isolde*. This piece would mark his complete break from traditional opera and the creation of an entirely new form called the music drama. The story of Tristan seems to have Celtic origins from around Wales or southwest England from the early medieval era, though there are no actual written manuscripts available until the twelfth century from Beroul and Thomas, and a little later Eilhart (Newman 170). However, the source that Wagner used most of his material came from Gottfried von Strassburg, who died before completing it (171). Tristan, who is King Marke's nephew by virtue of his mother being Marke's sister, has been marked by the fates as a victim to a life of more suffering and sorrow than any other person (173). His father was slain when he was young, and he was then entrusted to a faithful marshal Rohalt, who passes him off as his own son for the boy's safety (174). Seven years later, he leaves him in the charge of his faithful squire, Gorvenal, who raises him to be the best knight in the land (174). He becomes trapped by some Norwegian merchants, but a storm causes fear of angry gods, and they set him adrift in a small boat by himself where he eventually lands on the Cornwall, King Marke's land (174). One day Rohalt reveals to Marke that Tristan is his nephew, and summons him back to Loonnois (Rohalt's home), but he soon returns to Cornwall to be with his uncle (174).

He returns to find the kingdom in despair as Morholt, an Irish knight of gigantic stature and prowess in battle, there to collect a tribute owed to the King of Ireland (Newman 174). Tristan challenges Morholt to a battle, and succeeds in slaying him, but only after he was wounded with Morholt's poisoned blade (175). The wound was grave and they sent him on his own to Ireland to seek the help of the Queen of Ireland, who's magic potions only could heal

him, but her daughter, Isolde, would like nothing more than to kill Tristan for killing her betrothed (175). After being healed and returning to his senses, he realizes his eminent situation, and offers a tale to protect his identity that he is a minstrel traveling to Spain when his ship was attacked by pirates (175). He then flees Ireland and returns to Cornwall, but he faces more problems now as four barons are against him taking the throne when his uncle passes away, and demand that Marke get married and leave an heir (176). Marke then says he will only marry the woman who's gold hair strand had been brought by a dove, and Tristan alone knows to whom it belongs, and goes to Ireland to retrieve Isolde (176).

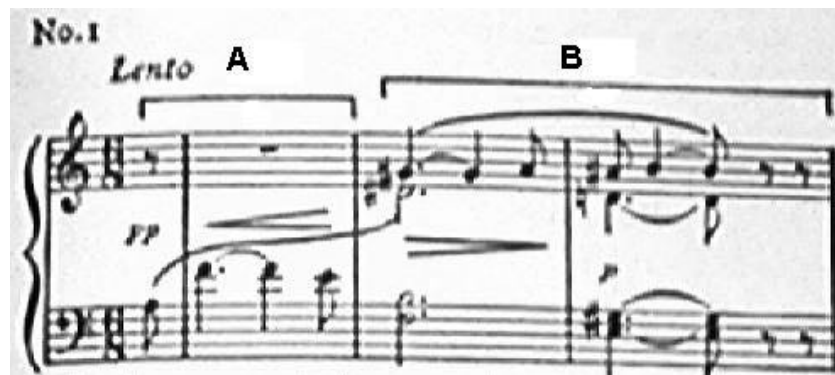
Once again, knowing that his life would be in danger if his identity was revealed, he disguised himself as a merchant and traveled with a hundred wealthy Cornish men (177). After landing, he hears of a dragon that has been terrorizing the countryside, and arms himself to slay it (177). He succeeds in killing the beast and cuts off its tongue and places it in his tunic, but he was once again poisoned (177). The prize for slaying the dragon was the princess Isolde's hand in marriage, and so a cowardly steward in the King's court went out to see if he could get lucky, and lucky he did get as he found the slain dragon and a shattered shield nearby but no sign of the hero (177). So, he assumes he too had died and cuts the head off the dragon and returns as the hero (177). Isolde, suspecting foul-play, goes out to search for the real champion, and she finds him unconscious near a pool (178). She finds the dragon's tongue in his tunic and revives him with one of her mother's herbs (178). She takes him back to the castle to recover his strength and reveal the treachery of the steward, but while he his bathing, she notices a splinter missing from his blade and matches it with the piece left in Morhold's head (178). In a rage, she turns with the blade to kill Tristan, but he out wits her by telling her that he twice deserves since he

was also the minstrel that she had healed previously and that it was for her that he had returned (178). She drops the blade and kisses him on the lips in a sign of peace (179). After the treachery is revealed, Tristan reveals that he had actually come to take Isolde back to King Marke to be his wife and that it would make the two kingdoms a brotherhood (179). The King agrees to the terms, but Isolde feels betrayed (179). They then sail to Cornwall, and this is where Wagner's drama comes in.

Act I begins on the ship with Isolde lamenting her fate to her trusted maid, Brangaene (179). She asks Brangaene to summon Tristan to her, and she does so, but as she pleads with Tristan to talk to Isolde, Kurvenal gets irritated and makes a retort to which Isolde hears in her tent (Guerber 77). Isolde finds out about the medicine chest that Brangaene has brought with her and devises a plan for her and Tristan to drink a poison and die together (78). As they preparing to land and meet the king, Isolde once again requests Tristan to come to her, and this time he obliges in order to avoid a scene (78). Isolde asks Brangaene to prepare the draught of poison, but she instead uses the love potion that the Queen had prepared for Isolde to drink with King Marke (78). Instead of dying as expected, the two gaze at each other in passion (80). Isolde then faints as Marke enters her tent and curtains close, ending the act (81). Act II starts out with with Tristan and Isolde trying to meet secretly in her room, but suspecting foul-play, Marke returns from his hunting party early and find the two together (83). Melot, a supposed friend of Tristan who betrays him, is enraged at the site of the two and lunges at Tristan, badly wounding him, and ending Act II (84). Act III begins in Brittany at Tristan's ancestral home after he has sent for Isolde to come to his side and with Kurvenal attending to him and watching for the returning vessel (84). Eventually, after a scene where he embraces Kurvenal for his devotion and a

hallucination of an approaching ship, they hear the shepherd's joyful tune of the vessel arriving (85). Kurvenal runs to bring forth Isolde, but Tristan's haste to see his love overcomes him (85). He gets up from his couch, and as he approaches her, he collapses in her arms and Isolde faints (85). Shortly thereafter, a ship approaches carrying Marke, Melot, and Brangaene (85). They have come to forgive Tristan, but Kurvenal's emotions get the best of him and he slays Melot, but is mortally wounded and falls at Tristan's feet (85). Brangaene revives Isolde and Marke tells why he had come, but Isolde pays no heed and then sings the final piece of the play, popularly known as the *Liebestod* (86).

The Prelude portrays the mood of the entire drama as melancholy, like the unquenchable love that will only be fulfilled in death, and contains many of the important motives heard throughout the piece. It opens with two separate motives that are generally implemented together.



The first, played by the cellos in their upper register, which has a natural edginess, and usually called the Grief or Sorrow motive (207). The second is played by the oboes commonly known as Desire or Magic (Newman 208). The chord that ties the two motives together is often called the "Tristan Chord." The motives in the piece get their names from the first words heard sung against it, such as the Magic motive being called such because it is first heard when Isolde

speaks of her mother's knowledge of magic; an idea known as the leitmotif (208). It should be noted that these are merely labels to which to recognize individual motives and should not necessarily be taken literally as expressing a specific idea, object or feeling.(208). Ernest Newman expresses this point when referring to the Magic motive, which he prefers to call Desire.

“Wagner never intends to imply that the love of Tristan and Isolde is the *physical consequence* of the [love potion], but only that the pair, having drunk what they imagine to be the draught of Death and believing that they have looked upon earth and sea and sky for the last time, feel themselves free to confess, when the potion begins its work within them, the love they have so long felt but have concealed from each other and almost themselves” (208).

These two motives are repeated a few times with minor alterations in pitch and guise until a sforzando at m. 16, which marks the beginning of the next pair of motives (No. 2) (208).



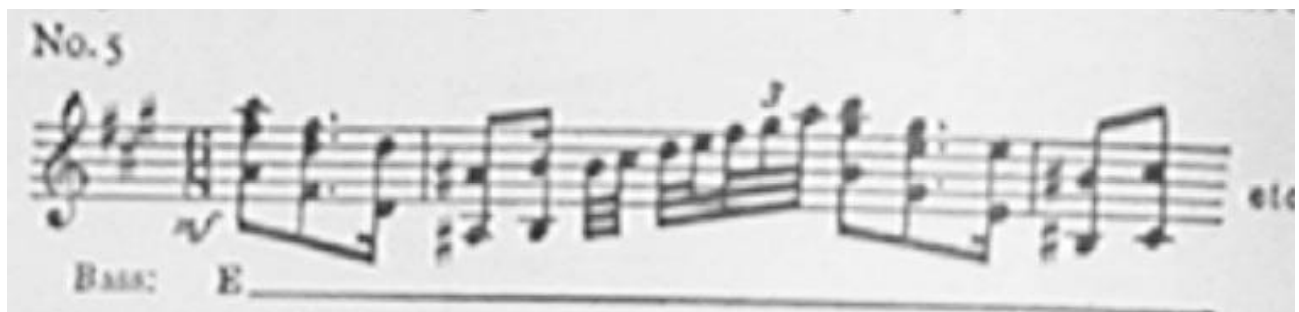
These two motives are commonly referred to as (A) the Anguish of Tristan and (B) the Look, since it first appears in text as Isolde is relating to Brangaene the look that took her heart (209). After one brief statement of the motives, a short transition leads into the third motive, which is most commonly associated with the love potion at m. 25 (209).



The bass line in the fourth and fifth measures of example 3 (B, C, D#) were used to signify Death (210). At m. 32 there is a restatement of motive 2B that leads into the statement of a fourth motive at measure 36. In a letter to Frau Wesendonk in December of 1859, he mentions this little theme when Wagner tells her that she will “recognise the ivy and vine in the music, especially when you hear it in the orchestra where strings and wind alternate with each other” (210).



This call and response is repeated several times until, at m. 45, a modified restatement of the third “Love Philtre” motive, which is then followed, at m. 55, by another restatement of theme 2B, which is modified and builds towards climax, which is built upon the statement of motive 5 at m. 63 (210).



This motive is repeated as the energy builds up into a fortissimo and another repetition of motive 2B at m. 73, but this time it undertakes increasingly complex transformations and harmonic forms (211). The climax continues to build until finally it is reached at m. 82, whereupon the melody descends and diminishes to piano (211). From measures 84 until 106, the orchestra solemnly dwells upon motives 1, 2, and 4 before fading away, leaving only cellos and basses quietly preparing for Act I with figure 6 (211).

fig. 6



Tristan und Isolde would prove to be a highly influential work and would come to define a new form of theatrical drama. In 1851, Wagner wrote an essay, *Oper und Drama*, where he expressed his belief in what he called the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total artwork (Grout 625). It was opinion that drama and music were connected in a single dramatic idea (625). Though *Tristan* was not his first idea for his new form of the music drama - he had already finished the entire *Ring* poem, and 2 of the 4 cycles' scores - it was his first finished music drama since the *Ring* cycle would not be completed for another fifteen years (von Westernhagen 107). It apparently was not Wagner's plan originally to make *Tristan* a piece that would transform the musical theatre (Millington 228). He told Liszt that it was to be a simple piece that would be practical, require modest staging, and be attractive to the public, and he told his publisher it would take only a year to write (228). However, it took him two years to complete, and the complexity of the staging required another six years before it was first performed (228). Another part of the separation from traditional opera, besides the massive dramatic staging, was it's continuity (Grout 625). Whereas traditional operas are formally divided into aria, recitatives, and set numbers, Wagner's music dramas are continuous throughout (625). The culmination of his music drama came with the *Ring* cycle, which is a massive drama of four separate poems and takes over 15 hours to perform. The sheer size and complexity of his music dramas were so much that opera houses and theaters could not handle them, so Wagner set out to create his own theater in Bayreuth, and from that the Bayreuth Festival was created and still continues (von Westernhagen).

Perhaps just as important as the creation of the music drama was his affect on the traditional system of tonality. Tonality had already bent remarkably by many of the Romantic composers, especially by his friend Liszt, but the creation of *Tristan und Isolde* helped lead the way for early 20th century composers to make a complete break with the tonal system. *Tristan* is a highly chromatic piece that, for much of the piece, approaches tonal ambiguity. Despite this, the piece is, as a whole, still diatonic (Millington 237). The first chord heard in the piece is the famous “Tristan Chord” on the first beat of measure two, and is one of the most discussed chords in music (240). The chord is simply a perfect fourth and an augmented fourth, representing the two polar opposites of the traditional tonal system (241). The perfect fourth, along with the perfect fifth, were traditionally used as the backbone of tonality, and the augmented fourth, or the tritone was considered in the medieval era as the devil in music and came to signify anarchy or evil (241). The Tristan chord makes its appearance several times throughout the entire work, always maintaining the original pitch (242).

As a person, many have questioned his morals; as a composer, no one can question his importance on that of a new generation of composers and in the history of music itself. He created three highly celebrated operas, created a new form of music in the music drama, and his use of chromaticism paved the way for future composers, such as Arnold Schoenberg, to break away from tonality. Barry Millington said it perfectly when he said of *Tristan und Isolde*,

“For all Wagner’s avoidance of sharp contrasts, *Tristan* was a shocking experience for his contemporaries, even for the most avant garde of them. And that is only to be expected, for *Tristan* largely deserves its reputation as the seminal work in the emancipation of harmony from the Classical tonal system. It was to be another half a century before the

twelve notes of the chromatic scale were treated as co-equals, but *Tristan*, perhaps more than any other piece of music, symbolized the end of one era and looked forward to the birth of another.” (243).

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