

The Impact of Wagner's Musical Drama:

Tristan und Isolde

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November 7, 2002

Lone I watch here

in the night;

ye there, lost

in love's delight,

to my warning

give good heed:

o'er the sleepers

evil broods;

wake, I warn you,

waken now!

Have a care!

Have a care!

Soon the night will pass.

(The Wagner Operas, Ernest Newman, p 257)

These words foreshadow the tragic resolution of one of the most revered musical dramas ever composed, Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Uttered by the maid, Brangane, in Act II of the production, this narrative passage alerts the audience of future hardship in the developing story, but nothing could prepare the Nineteenth Century German audience, or the future musical world, for the score accompanying this libretto. The score for *Tristan und Isolde*, witness to Wagner's true musical genius, shattered the fundamentals of conventional harmony and ushered in a new era of thought in musical development and theory. Apart from the grandiose score and the waves it made in the musical currents, Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, along with his other operatic works, had a profound effect on the philosophical, psychological, and social trends which

dominated Germany around the turn of the Twentieth Century.

Wilhelm Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig, Germany in 1813 into the family of Karl Friedrich Wagner and his wife, Johana.* Richard, the ninth child in a theatrical family, began composing music in 1829, at the age of sixteen. By 1836, at 22 years old, Wagner had written the music for three operas, and had one of his operas staged under his direction. He already had many notable works published and performed prior to 1857, when he wrote the libretto for *Tristan und Isolde*. He embarked on composing the music in the same year, but did not finish the piece until 1859.

Unlike most opera of the time, which incorporated well known stories as their basis, and in direct opposition of the Caecilian movement going on at the time, Wagner chose a quite rare story to present. *Tristan und Isolde* was based upon a hardly known and poorly preserved Celtic story most likely originating in Wales. No true record of the story survived the years between its inception to the time of Wagner. The oldest transcribed version of the tragedy was penned by the French poet Beroul early in the Twelfth Century. There were two other surviving versions written in the same century. The poet Thomas is credited with a version written shortly after Beroul's, and, towards the end of the century, another version surfaced. This final Twelfth Century version was put down in German by a Saxon vassal to the Duke of Brunswick, Eilhart d'Oberge. Early in the Thirteenth Century, Gottfried von Straussburg took Eilhart's version, which was much like Beroul's, and, weeding through authorial inconsistencies, combined it with Thomas'. The resulting synthesized tale was most likely Wagner's source for his own *Tristan*.

The story of *Tristan und Isolde* in Wagner's opera begins with the action well under way. In Act I, Wagner used extensive narration of the story, through the voice of Isolde, to keep the audience informed as to exactly what had transpired previously to the point at which we find

ourselves, which is quite a way from the beginning of the complicated account. Isolde, the princess of Ireland, informs the audience of her former love, Morold, who was slain by Tristan in a battle to free Cornwall from Irish control. During the battle, however, Tristan had received a blow from Morold's sword. This prompts Tristan to seek out Isolde, who is known as a magical healer. While he is in Ireland, under the assumed name Tantris, Isolde matches the dent in Tristan's sword to the hole in her beloved fiancé's skull, and thereby deduces his true identity. Knowing what Tristan has done, Isolde goes to his bed to avenge her deceased lover. When her eyes meet Tristan's, however, the weapon falls from her hand. They say nothing. This gaze between the two, the *augenblick*, is a major point of insight and development of the story.

Tristan heals and returns to Cornwall, where he is seized by guilt over Isolde. He volunteers to woo Isolde for his uncle, King Marke of Cornwall, and it is agreed upon. Tristan goes to Ireland and begins the journey back to Cornwall with Isolde. The narrative aspect ends and the dialogue begins with Isolde, upset in the ship's chamber, sending for Tristan. After initial defiance of Isolde's demands to see him, Tristan is persuaded to come to her chambers to drink 'atonement' with her. After each have had a cup of what they believe to be poison, and thinking that they are on the verge of death, they profess their love to each other. Tristan nor Isolde realize that the poison has been replaced, by Brangane, with a love potion. They arrive at Cornwall out of sorts and confused.

Act II begins with a rendezvous between the two defiant lovers in the forest of Cornwall. After they have vowed their love for one another, Tristan's friend, Melot, betrays him and arrives in the forest with Tristan's uncle, King Marke, to whom Isolde is to be wed. Betrayed by Melot, Tristan challenges his friend to a duel, and then allows Melot to strike a mortal blow.

The final act begins with Tristan being brought home by his servant, Kurnewal.

Kurwenal calls for Isolde to come and heal Tristan. While they wait, Tristan hallucinates Isolde's arrival two times. Tristan then delivers a speech on how vexed he is by the turn of events and his present situation. Upon the announcement of Isolde's ship, Tristan rips off his bandages and goes to Isolde, dying in her arms as they meet. While Isolde weeps over the loss of her love, King Marke arrives with Melot in his company. Kurwenal kills Melot for the betrayal of his friend, and then kills himself in grief over Tristan's death. It is not until it is too late when Isolde learns that Brangane had told the King of the potion, and he had come to give his blessing to the two lovers. The opera ends with Isolde's visualization of the dead Tristan coming back to life in her arms.

See ye not

how he beameth

bright and brighter,

lapped in star-shine

high he soars?

See ye not

how his heart

is pulsing brave,

strong and calm

within his breast?

(Newman, p 277)

“Life and death, the whole import and existence of the outer world, here hangs on nothing but the inner movements of the soul”. This statement from Jarka Burian's book Svoboda:Wagner was made by the composer himself. (p 40) Wagner tries to neatly tie up the

focus of *Tristan und Isolde*; however, it cannot be that neatly tied. The entire opera is a convoluted amalgam of love, death, and eroticism.

Critics of Wagner have put forth the idea that the will to compose the story, and the production itself, sprung from the subconscious manifestation of Wagner's overactive libido. This was noted in a review of the opening performance, published in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, Leipzig, 5 July 1865. "...paraded openly in the new musical drama *Tristan und Isolde*: not to mince words, it is the glorification of sensual pleasure, tricked out with every titillating device, it is unremitting materialism, according to which human beings have no higher destiny than, after living the life of turtle doves, 'to vanish in sweet odours like a breath'! In the service of this end, music has been enslaved to the word; the most ideal of the Muses has been made to grind the colours for indecent paintings!....he makes sensuality itself the true subject of his drama."

(Wagner, Barth, Mack, Voss, p 208)

Due to the circumstances surrounding Wagner's personal life, during the time he worked on *Tristan und Isolde*, many of the critiques linking this opera to his sexual psyche have been merited adequate credit.

Wagner had initially suspended the composition of *Tristan und Isolde*, and begun work on "the Ring"; however, in 1852, he began to work diligently on *Tristan* after his introduction to the young Mathilde Wesendonk, the wife of a wealthy silk merchant, Otto Wesendonk. Wagner and Frau Wesendonk became quick friends. She has been recounted multiple times as having been under the spell of his music. It would be hard to find a resource on the composer that does not mention her influence on *Tristan und Isolde*. Otto Wesendonk moved Wagner and his wife, Minna, out into the country into a home near his own, in keeping with his wife's wishes to

maintain a friendship with the composer. The friendship quickly turned to something else, which inspired Wagner in his labor on *Tristan*. Not only did the romantic aspects of *Tristan* mirror Wagner's own forbidden love, the guilt over his infidelities and multiple betrayals was also reflected. After the affair came to light, the Wesendonk's went on a visit to Italy, but not before Minna wrote a letter to Mathilde. "I must tell you with a bleeding heart that you have succeeded in separating my husband from me after nearly twenty-two years of marriage. May this noble deed contribute to your peace of mind, and your happiness." (Wagner and His World, Osborne, p 58)

He [Wagner] wrote to Liszt (letter of 19 Oct.1858) about the ending of his impassioned love-affair with Mathilde Wesendonk and her creative influence on *Tristan*: "The pains and pangs of birth have their victorious issue now in all this wealth of beauty. The love of a tender woman has made me happy; she dared to throw herself into a sea of suffering and agony so that she should be able to say to me "I love you!" No one who does not know all her tenderness can judge how much she had to suffer. We were spared nothing-but as a consequence I am redeemed and she is blessedly happy because she is aware of it.'

(Wagners' Ring, Donington, p 265)

Wagner completed *Tristan* in the year following the end of his relationship with Frau Wesendonk. Due to the parallels between *Tristan*'s subject matter and Wagner's own personal life, a clearer path is laid for interpretation of the piece as a whole.

Though the history of Wagner's life interlinked with the creation of *Tristan und Isolde* is inseparable from discussion of the piece, and is very interesting, it is not the libretto, written by Wagner himself, or the opera's conception that has captivated listeners for almost 150 years; it is

the score. The first point of interest in the score is the very beginning of the piece, which Wagner opens with a very dissonant chromatic mixture chord. This chord, referred to historically as the ‘Tristan’ chord, has been the source of many different interpretations. The most accepted analysis of the chord describes it as a Fr +6. However, in terms of modern tonality, it is most easily referred to as a half-diminished seventh chord. The ‘Tristan’ chord was only part of the wonder with which Wagner captured the ears of Germany in 1865. Wagner’s blending of tonality and blurring of keys, through the use of repetitive leitmotifs, was the cornerstone of *Tristan und Isolde*’s genius.

Wagner’s leitmotifs were short, melodic themes connected to a character, place, or a feeling in the musical drama. The use of such motives was not groundbreaking, but the way in which Wagner employed these motives was. The leitmotifs in *Tristan* constantly shift in register, relative to the importance of the particular motive’s association with the action of the drama at that point. The intertwining of these leitmotifs, and the tonal ambiguity that resulted from this design, put *Tristan und Isolde* in a theoretical realm where the notion of functional harmony, with its clarity and conciseness, is more a hindrance than a help when trying to put together a synopsis of the piece.

From the very onset of *Tristan und Isolde*, no sort of tonal ground is established, immediately separating the piece from almost all music since the invention of equal temperament. Wagner cleverly begins the opera with the dissonance of the ‘Tristan’ chord, giving no indication to where the beginning of the story is, or where it is going. The entire opera consists of a swaying between constant suspensions of leading tones, and no dominant resolutions, much like the story itself. Even the most advanced composers and theorists have a hard time describing the exact mechanics of the progression. Arnold Schoenberg referred to

Wagner's chordal progressions in *Tristan* as: 'phenomena of incredible adaptability and non-independence roaming, homeless, among the spheres of keys; spies reconnoitering weaknesses, to exploit them in order to create confusion, deserters for whom surrender of their own personality is an end in itself'.

(The Wagners, Wagner, p 81)

Wagner expanded the harmonic vocabulary, and executed his chromatic vagueness so fluently, that it paved the way for public's appreciation of the tonal abandonment which rose in his wake. Wagner laid the groundwork for many of the musical movements which quickly followed his example. "This departure from the Classic Conception of tonality in such a conspicuous and musically successful work can today be viewed historically as the first step toward the breakdown of tonality and the establishment of new systems of harmony that marked the development of music after 1890. (Concise History of Western Music 5th ed., Grout & Palisca, p 429)

Though many composers in the Post-Wagner era did not embrace Wagner's idea of harmony, his fluid transitions from one section to another had a strong influence on the majority of composers to come along after him. The contiguous nature of Wagner's form gave a greater sense of cohesion to the story. This approach to transitions was favorably recognized. The shorter links between sections removed some of the choppiness found in the formulaic resolution and closure of sections in music hitherto. The lack of a cadential phrase at the conclusion of each section helped the story seem more like reality, where remnants from the previously introduced material linger on without any definite resolve.

Tristan und Isolde solidified Wagner as the chief forerunner of German opera, replacing Weber at the helm of German music. Wagner's constant use of Norse legends and mythology

are quintessential elements of what has become known today as German Romantic Opera. The use of these folk stories awakened a sense of nationalism in a Germany badly weakened by the hardships of the Nineteenth Century. Wagner was revered as a national icon and, therefore, had an enormous impact on the shaping of a German national consciousness and philosophical/political trends in German thought.

Wagner, a great admirer of the philosopher Schopenhauer incorporated many Schopenhauerian themes into the story lines of his musical dramas. Though the effect on the overall German spirit can be viewed as a positive one, the effect on German philosophical and political thought can only be analyzed as detrimental to the progression of humanity. Wagner is credited with furthering the notion of German racial purity through the extermination of contaminants, namely the Jewish inhabitants of Germany.

Judaism is the obstacle to true social and moral revolution. Such is the most fundamental anti-Jewish message that underlies the apparently 'non-social' and 'non-realistic' opera composed in Wagner's Schopenhauerian phase, *Tristan*. In *Jesus of Nazareth* in 1849 Wagner had set down his first insights into how love and death were the supreme redeeming acts of self-annihilation from egoism - the first, still crude, expression of what was to become the more sophisticated Schopenhauerian love-death in *Tristan*. But where *Jesus* had set the love-death in the context of the metaphor of Judaism as the very stuff of egoism, *Tristan* suppressed the original Jewish context while subliminally retaining the anti-Jewish meaning of 'self-annihilation'.

(Wagner: Race and Revolution, Rose, pp 97-98)

The reports of Wagner's own anti-Semitism is far from being hypothetical conjecture, in

light of his own published works. Wagner published several highly anti-Semitic texts under a short-lived pseudonym, and was, henceforth, branded as a contributor to Nazism whose impact cannot be underestimated. Adolf Hitler enthusiastically engaged both Wagner's political writings and his music. "“With the exception of Richard Wagner”, Hitler wrote, ‘I have no forerunner....’”. (Adolf Hitler, Zalampas, p 60) “Whoever wants to understand National Socialist Germany must first know Wagner.” (The Psychopathic God: Adolf Hitler, Waite, p 113) It has even been suggested that Hitler used Wagner's treatment of the leitmotif as a springboard to write his speeches.

Though there is a widespread assimilation of Nazism with Wagner's work and ideals, Wagner is still looked upon as an ingenious composer, and his influence is easily recognizable, especially in the works of the early Twentieth Century. The musical era categorized as Serialism owes its most fundamental grounds to the work of Wagner, particularly in *Tristan*. “The music of the first period [referring to Schoenberg] is tonal and, as we have noted, originated in late German Romanticism. Schoenberg's earliest important work, the string sextet *Verklarte Nacht* (Transfigured Night, 1899), is in a chromatic idiom growing out of *Tristan...*” (Palisca & Grout, p 493). Hindemith even worked the story of Tristan into a parody with the puppet opera, *Das Nusch Nuschi*. And after all, imitation is the greatest form of flattery.

It would be impossible to adequately capture the influence that Wagner had on Nineteenth Century thought and political development in any synopsis of shorter length than Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. And, possibly, as more is discovered about Wagner's controversial ideology, appreciation of his musical grandeur may dissipate. Regardless of the impact Richard Wagner had outside of the musical realm, *Tristan und Isolde* remains one of the most talked about pieces of music ever written. It exhibits a true mastery and rejection of the previous tonal

system, and pulls this revolution off beautifully.

* There is dispute on the validity of Wagner's lineage. His documented father, Karl Friedrich Wagner was most likely not Wagner's birth parent. It is most likely that his father was his mother's second husband, meaning Wagner was conceived in infidelity. Ironically, in light of Wagner's anti-Semitic proposals, he is of Jewish lineage.

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