

# Leitmotive

## THE WAGNER QUARTERLY



*Richard Wagner*

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# The Editor's Thoughts

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## Wolfgang Wagner 1919–2010

Every reader is doubtlessly aware that Wolfgang Wagner died on March 21st 2010. His contribution to the legacy of Richard Wagner cannot be overestimated.

The Bayreuth Festival, which first took place in 1876, has been held for so many years since then that it might seem to be an indestructible Phenomenon of Nature, almost like the sun coming up every morning. But it never was that, and it remains fragile, although it is not nearly so delicate as it was before Wolfgang.

The first festival, managed by Richard Wagner, was something of a financial disaster (festivals do not need to make a profit, but they must break even or cease to exist). When, in 1876, the final strains of *Götterdämmerung* were over, the accounting was soon done and it became clear that a great deal of money was needed to pay the many debts that had piled up. In time, the money matters were settled, but it was abundantly clear that the much hoped-for 1877 festival was not going to happen. The festival theater

remained empty for six years; finally, in 1882, the second festival was held, but expenses were much less than before in that only a single opera was performed (*Parsifal*).

Happily for us, the iron-willed Cosima became the new manager when Wagner died in 1883. With no prior experience in managing enterprises of this magnitude and type, she nonetheless took charge and organized matters such that many festivals were successfully held. What would have happened had Wagner remained married to Minna and she had outlived him? My guess is that there would be no festivals today.

Siegfried managed the festival for a number of years, and Winifred took the reins when Siegfried and Cosima both died in 1930. She did have some benefit from having watched those who had come before.

Then, in 1951 after World War II, Wieland and Wolfgang took over. Wieland is almost universally praised for his extraordinary aesthetic judg-

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## LEITMOTIVE—THE WAGNER QUARTERLY

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David Dalto, Founding Editor (1985–1989)

Paul Schofield, Editor (1990)

## About the Authors

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Hans Rudolph Vaget ("*Tristan and Ecstasy*") is Professor Emeritus of German Studies and Comparative Literature at Smith College (Northampton, Massachusetts), where he taught from 1967 until 2004. He received his academic training at the universities of Munich and Tübingen, Wales (at Cardiff) and Columbia University, New York. He has published widely in the field of German Studies from the 18th century to the present, focusing primarily on Goethe, Wagner and Thomas Mann. Aside from Smith, he has taught at the University of California, Irvine, at Yale, Columbia, Princeton, the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Middlebury College and Hamburg University.

A recipient in 1994 of the Thomas-Mann-Medaille for his edition of the correspondence of Thomas Mann and Agnes E. Meyer (Frankfurt/Main: S. Fischer, 1992, 1170 pages), he is also one of the chief editors of the new edition of the works, letters and diaries of Thomas Mann.

In 2001, he was awarded the *Forschungspreis* (Research Prize) of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Bonn, Germany.

Agustín Blanco-Bazán ("*The Ring Around Brünnhilde*"), has a most unusual and broad background both in the law as well as a journalist and lecturer, primarily on musical matters. For the past twenty-five years, he has been reviewing concerts and performances of opera for the oldest music magazine of Spain, *RITMO*. He is also a regular contributor to other music publications such as *Mundo Clásico* (Spain), *Operayre* and *Clasica* (Argentina). In addition to reviews, Dr. Blanco-Bazán contributes essays and other commentary for the program magazines of Teatro Real (Madrid) and the Teatro Colón (Buenos Aires).

He was born in Argentina in 1949 and received a Doctor of Laws degree from the University of Buenos Aires. He pursued postgraduate work in Philosophy, Political Science and International Law at the University of Vienna from 1976 until 1979. From 1984 until 2009 he was employed by the UN in London as a lawyer for the International Maritime Organization.

He has reviewed all productions of the Bayreuth Festival since the mid-1980s and has reviewed Wagner productions in London (Royal Opera House and English National Opera), Amsterdam, Berlin (Staatsoper and Deutsche Oper), Hamburg, Glyndebourne, Stuttgart, Cardiff (Welsh National Opera), and Seattle Opera for various publications. He currently lives in London.



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*Kirsten Flagstad was clearly one of the few who could be included in “the very best” category. She sang Isolde at San Francisco Opera in 1936, 1937, 1939, 1949 and 1950. Your editor heard her in 1949 and was greatly impressed first by the sheer and unusual beauty of her voice, but also with her ability to soar effortlessly above Maestro Steinberg’s fortissimos without ever losing even a little of that beauty.*

# *Tristan and Ecstasy:*

## *Perspectives on Isolde's Transfiguration*

Ecstasy has been a familiar topic in discussions of Wagner for the last century and a half. An article was published in this journal not long ago (Summer 2007) by Arthur Colman on the subject of "Tristan's Love," a love he defined as "ecstatic." Colman relied for his reading of Wagner's music drama on psychoanalytic concepts, chiefly of the Jungian variety. I want also to explore ecstasy, though from very different angles. My approach is that of the cultural historian, drawing on biographical, historical, and structural evidence in order to illuminate the dark, ever fascinating secret that lies at the heart of this most powerful of Wagner's operatic works.

Wagnermania is an affliction familiar to almost all of us. One of its common and conspicuous symptoms is the experience of ecstasy, of transport, of being carried away in more than one sense of the word. No work leads to symptoms of Wagnermania more frequently and reliably than *Tristan und Isolde*. There have been other varieties of Wagnermania since the sensational success of *Rienzi* in 1842, but the one caused by *Tristan* is clearly more insidious, and more resistant to cure, than all the rest. The primary cause of this painfully blissful condition is, of course, the music that Wagner imagined for this work—music of an infinite variety of colors and textures, of mystifying harmonic progressions, of overwhelmingly grand architectural design.

The extraordinary impact of *Tristan und Isolde* on Wagner's contemporaries and on the succeeding generation is well documented and a conspicuous event of 19<sup>th</sup> century cultural history. Friedrich Nietzsche and in his wake Thomas Mann have written eloquently and movingly about the epoch-making effect this work had on them; Nietzsche, in the fourth of his "Unfashionable Observations," *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, went so far as to label it "the true *opus*

*metaphysicum* of all art.”<sup>1</sup> As additional testimony let me cite here what Bruno Walter, the eminent conductor and close friend of Thomas Mann, wrote about his first encounter with *Tristan* when he was a student at the Sternsche Konservatorium in Berlin. He had been discouraged both by his parents and his teachers from exposing himself to the music of Wagner, which, of course, had the opposite effect. Young Bruno secretly attended a performance at the Staatsooper conducted by the eminent Wagnerian Franz Sucher. Here is what Bruno Walter wrote about it in his autobiography, *Theme and Variation*:

Never before had my soul been so deluged with floods of sound and passion, never had my heart been consumed by such yearning and sublime bliss, never had I been transported from reality by such heavenly glory. I was no longer in this world. After the performance, I roamed the streets aimlessly. When I got home I didn’t say anything and begged not to be questioned. My ecstasy kept singing within me through half the night, and when I awoke on the following morning I knew that my life was changed. A new epoch had begun: Wagner was my god, and I wanted to become his prophet.<sup>2</sup>

To a greater extent than is usually realized ecstasy in reaction to *Tristan und Isolde* is triggered by ecstasy as it is enacted before us, on the stage and in the orchestra, as we are inexorably drawn into the drama of a spiritual journey which, from the outset, points to an ultimate bliss, an ultimate rapture, an ultimate ecstasy. This is the result of Wagner’s explicit decision, as a composer and artist, to indulge himself, on the stage and in the orchestra, in a bold ecstasy that would top everything he had undertaken theretofore.

Before turning to a close reading of that ultimate ecstasy, enacted in the so-called “Liebestod” — which Wagner preferred to call “Isolde’s transfiguration” (“Verklärung”) — I should like to retrace the steps both in the music drama itself and in its genesis that will eventually lead us to a fuller appreciation of that most extraordinary moment not only in all of Wagner but in all of opera. The evidence we have regarding the genesis of *Tristan und Isolde* is so copious that it lends itself to a variety of reconstructive models, among which one might wish to distinguish the purely biographical, the purely economic, and the purely aesthetic. In the final analysis, however, these three views of

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1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unfashionable Observations*, tr. with an afterword by Richard T. Gray (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 303. The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, ed. by Ernst Behler, vol 2. Cf. also *Im Schatten Wagners. Thomas Mann über Richard Wagner. Texte und Zeugnisse 1895–1955*, selected, annotated with an essay by Hans Rudolf Vaegt (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2nd ed. 2005).

2. Bruno Walter, *Theme and Variations: An Autobiography*, tr. James A. Galston (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), 42.

how *Tristan* came into existence may well become inseparable. But for the purpose of clarity, I shall here consider them separately.

### Biographical Evidence

Let us first look at the biographical evidence and turn to the alluring but enigmatic figure of Mathilde Wesendonck—enigmatic, chiefly, because almost all her letters to Wagner have disappeared.<sup>3</sup> The fourteen letters that have survived date from a later period of their relationship and are of little interest.<sup>4</sup> We can only guess at how many written communications they actually exchanged. Nor do we know how many communications the correspondents themselves destroyed, or who destroyed Mathilde's letters from the crucial years of the relationship. (We do know that they were preserved and intended for publication.) Was it Cosima, motivated by jealousy, or rather by fidelity to Wagner's own wishes? Was it Mathilde herself, as Cosima at one point suggested?<sup>5</sup> As John Deathridge has recently observed, "the history of this correspondence is shrouded in mystery, lending it an air of perceived erotic tension that for the most part disguises its essential formal qualities." From what we can tell on the basis of the surviving documents, "the correspondence has many of the hallmarks of an exchange of letters between late 18<sup>th</sup> century figures"; it appears to have been a "serious formal engagement, a pact even, with responsibilities on each side."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the serious and formal nature of their engagement can be glimpsed from Wagner's letters alone; they contain more, and more revealing, comments about aesthetic matters and about his work than any other correspondence of his from those years.

The story of Richard Wagner and Mathilde Wesendonck is dear to the hearts of many Wagnerians. But how far does their romantic involvement really go in illuminating the origins of *Tristan und Isolde*? Consider, to begin with, the biographical and physical setting of their romance. At the end of April 1857, Wagner and his wife, Minna, accepted the offer from Otto Wesendonck to live in the comfortable little cottage next to the Wesendonck's own newly built villa on their spacious property in Zürich. Otto Wesendonck, who

3. See Martha Schad/Horst Schad, "Meine erste und einzige Liebe." *Richard Wagner und Mathilde Wesendonck* (München: Langen/Müller, 2002). Cf. also the recent documentary novel by Jörg Aufenanger, *Richard Wagner und Mathilde Wesendonck* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 2007).

4. These were published as an appendix to the edition of Wagner's letters to Mathilde; cf. *Richard Wagner an Mathilde Wesendonck* [k: Tagebuchblätter und Briefe 1853–1871, ed. with an introduction by Wolfgang Gölther (Berlin: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1904), 341–362.

5. See John Deathridge, *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 130–131, 263–264. Deathridge (p. 264) cites an unpublished letter of 28 December 1903 from Cosima to Fritz von Bissing, Mathilde's grandson: "Die Briefe Ihrer theuren Grossmutter wurden ihr Alle zurückgestattet u. sie hat sie zerstört."

6. See Deathridge (note 5), 131.

hailed from Wuppertal, an industrial town near Düsseldorf, had been a partner in a New York silk trading company and, at thirty-six, had made enough money to be able to retire and to devote himself to the pleasant and rewarding task of supporting the arts. Together with Mathilde, his attractive and talented German wife, Otto's junior by thirteen years, Wesendonck decided to settle in Zürich, where he and Mathilde soon made the acquaintance of Wagner.

Mathilde first met the composer at a concert, in 1852, when she was twenty-four, he thirty-nine. Some five years later their friendship, according to Barry Millington, "developed into a sexual relationship which may or may not have been consummated."<sup>7</sup> This is puzzling and leads you to wonder what precisely is meant here by "sexual relationship." In fact, indications are that, contrary to what is often assumed or insinuated, Wagner did not have sexual relations with that woman. John Deathridge is undoubtedly right to say that "The supposed sexual shenanigans between Wagner and Mathilde Wesendonck have been so grossly exaggerated that it has become all the harder to trace the underlying seriousness of their relationship."<sup>8</sup> Both seem to have understood that, if not for Otto's sake, then for the sake of the new work struggling to be born, they ought not to go that far. Once the decision to write an opera on the subject of Tristan and Isolde was taken, Wagner needed a muse—and only a muse—to get his creative juices flowing. In the event they gushed—thanks to Mathilde, who very clearly understood her role as an unattainable object of intense desire. For his part, and true to form, Wagner instinctively knew that he needed to be in love in order to make the new work a "monument to love," as he described his project to Franz Liszt, and that the object of his love should in fact be unattainable.<sup>9</sup>

One year after the Wagners moved into the cottage, which they dubbed "Asyl" (refuge), Minna Wagner intercepted one of the countless messages that went back and forth between the "Asyl" and the Wesendonck house. This happened to be a lengthy and weighty epistle, which Wagner described as a "Morgenbeichte"—an early morning confession. What precisely was he confessing? And what led to his confession. This needs to be reconstructed in some detail.

The previous evening had not gone well for Wagner. He was having din-

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7. *The Wagner Compendium. A Guide to Wagner's Life and Music*, ed. Barry Millington (London: Thames & Hudson), 33; cf. also 120.

8. See Deathridge (note 5), 128.

9. See the letter to Franz Liszt, 16 December 1854 in *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, tr. and ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1988), 323; Richard Wagner, *Sämtliche Briefe*, vol. VI, ed. Hans Joachim Bauer and Johannes Forner (Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1986), 299. Henceforth: SB.

ner with Mathilde while Otto was away on business—with operatic opportuneness, as George Bernard Shaw would have said. However, present at the dinner was another guest, Francesco De Sanctis, a professor of Aesthetics and Italian literature at the Technical University of Zürich. De Sanctis was a brilliant and good-looking man, whom Mathilde had hired as her private tutor in Italian. Like Wagner, he was a political radical; years later he served as the Italian Minister of Education and became an eminent literary historian.<sup>10</sup> Wagner did not like what he witnessed at that dinner. The Italian academic, his junior by four years, was openly acting like a serious contender for Mathilde's affections. What made things even more uncomfortable was the fact that Francesco was holding forth on Schopenhauer and on Goethe's *Faust*—two subjects in which Wagner, too, could claim some expertise. The discussion must have been lively, but apparently Wagner felt that he had not gotten his points across with the customary forcefulness. Hence his urge to write a long letter first thing next morning—"just out of bed." This, then, was his "Morgenbeichte."

In large part, this letter is an incisive critique of Goethe's figure of Faust, who, in Wagner's eyes, does not deserve redemption because his love of Gretchen lacks compassion. But the letter also contains—perhaps to fend off his Italian competition—an unambiguous declaration of love for Mathilde, who is referred to as "the well-spring of my redemption."<sup>11</sup> The letter concludes with an urgent request for an assignation later that day. Minna is not known to have had an interest in the question of Faust's redemption, but she was no fool either. Minna had concluded that the two of them were having an affair and that she could no longer ignore what was going on. Even though her marriage to Richard had for all intents and purposes been dead for some time, Minna thought that now was the time to break up the idyll. In the aftermath of the storm, the continuation of the near-cohabitation of the Wesendoncks and the Wagners became impossible. Wagner thus took off for Venice, where he completed the score of Act II of *Tristan und Isolde*—a score in which messy personal relationships are transformed, miraculously, into exquisite musical symbolism.

10. For a comprehensive study of Wagner's Zürich period, see Chris Walton, *Richard Wagner's Zürich. The Muse of Place* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007). Walton's comments, pp. 221–231, represent the most detailed treatment we have of the frequently overlooked Mathilde–De Sanctis relationship.

11. See letter to Mathilde Wesendonck, 7 April 1858, *Selected Letters* (note 9), 381: "[...] In the morning I regained my senses, and was able to pray to my angel from the very depths of my heart; and this prayer is love! Love! My soul rejoices in this love, which is the well-spring of my redemption."

### Economic Circumstances

Those who like biographical and romantic notions about the origin of works of art will want to cling to the story just summarized, and will want to view *Tristan und Isolde* as the dramatization of Wagner's personal situation—with King Marke as a portrait of Otto Wesendonck. There is, however, enough evidence to support quite a different and decidedly more ordinary and prosaic narrative about the origin of this extraordinary work.<sup>12</sup> This narrative is grounded in a set of pressing economic circumstances. In 1856, the music publishers Breitkopf & Härtel declined to give Wagner a contract for *The Ring of the Nibelung*, which at that time was, of course, far from completion. This meant that for the foreseeable future Wagner could expect no royalties and no advances. He thus had to think of a work that theaters would be able to produce expeditiously. What he had in mind was a potboiler that would quickly generate a lot of royalties. With a considerable measure of self-delusion that we may now find touching, if not incomprehensible, Wagner assured his publishers that his new opera would make no great demands in terms of sets and choral forces; that all that was needed was a pair of good singers.<sup>13</sup> This, of course, did not quite work out as expected, as no Wagnerian need be reminded. Several theaters, among them the Vienna Court Opera, sampled *Tristan* and gave up on it. (In Vienna, the work had gone through no less than seventy-seven rehearsals before the effort was aborted.) Even after the very successful Munich premiere of the work in 1865, it took a while before other theaters would even touch it. It is a sign of Wagner's desperate financial situation that he asked Breitkopf & Härtel to pay him for *Tristan* in three installments, one after the completion of Act I, one after the completion of Act II, and one after the completion of Act III. This arrangement was advantageous to the publishers because they could begin setting the score in print even before Wagner had completed the work in its entirety. It also meant that composing the later parts coincided with the proofreading of the earlier ones. This made for a compositional procedure that is unique in all of Wagner and leads one to wonder to what extent such exceptional circumstances were a contributing factor to the exceptional character of the work.

### The Aesthetic Factor

Beyond these biographical and economic considerations, however, the

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12. For the following comments on the economic angle of the genesis of *Tristan und Isolde* I draw, chiefly, on Deathridge (note 5), 119–122.

13. See letter to Breitkopf & Härtel, 30 September 1857. SB, IX, ed. by Klaus Burmeister and Johannes Forner, 46f.

truly decisive factor in the genesis of *Tristan und Isolde*, as one might expect with an artist such as Wagner, has to be an aesthetic one. In a sense, this work demanded to be written, which is another way of saying that the dynamics of Wagner's development as a composer compelled him to set down this score at this time. In the famous letter to Franz Liszt to which I earlier alluded, Wagner declared that he wished to erect a monument to "the most beautiful dream of all," the dream of love, not, as one might think, because he was overflowing with happiness and joy but because he himself had never really tasted them. Psychologically more plausible than any biographical explanation, the letter to Liszt would in fact preclude the experience of sexual fulfillment with Mathilde as central to the creative impulse. The idea of love to which Wagner wanted to erect a monument was the fruit not of an experience but of a dream—a dream that would take him above and beyond the realm of ordinary human experience.

When Wagner finally turned to the subject of Tristan, Mathilde had already been on his mind for some time. After their initial encounter in 1852, she began to become a factor in the volatile economy of Wagner's creativity. In June of 1853 he wrote a little "Sonata for Mathilde Wesendonck." As an epigraph he used a rather suggestive, even ominous, line from *Götterdämmerung*: "Wißt Ihr wie das wird?"—"Do you know what will become of this?" A year later, in the compositional sketch for Act I of *Die Walküre* he wrote "G. S. M.," meaning: Gott segne Mathilde—Blessed be Mathilde. Whatever was brewing here, it came into focus only after Wagner's dramatic discovery of the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer—in which the composer found clarification and confirmation of much of what he had been thinking about life and the world except on one crucial point: the question of sexual love. To Schopenhauer, sex was the ultimate cause for the ceaseless perpetuation of life's suffering. To Wagner, sex was and remained a "Heilsweg"—a road to salvation. Wagner's reservations about Schopenhauer's metaphysics of sexual love arose, inconveniently, when he was at work on *Die Walküre*, where the die, so to speak, had already been cast. To engage with Schopenhauer required the clean slate of a separate work.

Reading Schopenhauer, he writes in *Mein Leben*, had put him in a serious frame of mind and in a philosophically contentious "mood" that became so intense that it sought "rapturous," i.e. ecstatic, "expression."<sup>14</sup> Much later, in

14. See Richard Wagner, *My Life*, tr. Andrew Gray, ed. Mary Whittal (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 510. Cf. *Mein Leben*, complete, annotated text, ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin (München: List, 1976), 523f: "Es war wohl zum Teil die ernste Stimmung, in welche mich Schopenhauer versetzt hatte und die nach einem ekstatischen Ausdrucke ihrer Grundzüge drängte, was mir die Konzeption eines 'Tristan und Isolde' eingab."

conversations with Cosima, he admitted that composing *Tristan* had in fact been an ecstatic experience. He had felt an irrepressible desire, “sich auszurufen” —to give it his all and, for once, completely to let himself go, symphonically speaking.”<sup>15</sup> When Wagner decided to take leave of his Siegfried, he did so as someone who had exhausted all the possibilities of the essentially diatonic style that dominates the first two parts of the *Ring*, as someone who in Act II of *Siegfried* had tasted the artistic possibilities of overwhelming chromaticism, and who now wanted to give this new road his full attention, thereby to move beyond the boundaries of what was then thought possible and acceptable in music for the theater. Tellingly, Wagner became aware of the ground-breaking nature of *Tristan und Isolde* when he had to divide his attention between the second and third acts. As he wrote in *Mein Leben*: “The process of correcting the proofs of the second act, while I was simultaneously in the throes of composing the ecstasies of the third act, had the strangest, even uncanny, effect on me; for it was in just those first scenes of this act that I realized with complete clarity that I had written the most audacious and original work of my life.”<sup>16</sup> Just how audacious he felt he had been emerges from a letter to Mathilde written just as he was composing those “ecstasies” in Act III: “This *Tristan* is turning into something *terrible!* This last act!!! —I fear the opera will be banned—unless the whole thing is parodied by bad performances—: only mediocre performances can save me. Perfectly *good* ones are bound to drive people mad [...] That’s just how far I’ve had to go.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus, what had originally been conceived as a potboiler was turning under Wagner’s own eyes into a music drama that would stretch to the breaking point the capacities of the leading opera houses. And what had been intended as a monument to “the most beautiful dream of all” —the common dream of love—was leading him to probe the outer limits of human experience, where love is distilled into ecstasy or into madness.

It is here that we find the true significance of Mathilde for the genesis of *Tristan und Isolde*—she played the role of Wagner’s partner, at once using her powers to awaken his sexual desire and, by withholding gratification, to lead him to transform that desire into music—music that revels in the excess of pain. Unique among the women in his life, Mathilde became part of an aesthetic project; she was instrumental to his achieving that quantum leap from the largely diatonic loveliness of the “Forest Murmurs” in *Siegfried* to the

15. See *Cosima Wagner’s Diaries*, tr. Geoffrey Skelton (New Haven: Yale UP, 1997), 1 October, 11 December 1878.

16. See *My Life* (note 14), 588.

17. See Letter to Mathilde Wesendonck, undated (April 1859), SB XI, 58.

chromatic hell of desire and suffering in the Prelude to *Tristan*.

A perfect illustration of Mathilde's role as muse, or rather, partner, may be found in the set of five songs "for female voice and piano" known as the "Wesendonck Lieder." From what we know of her, Mathilde was a good listener, this, of course, being a paramount requirement of a muse to a man such as Wagner with his irrepressible urge to talk about his work. Mathilde also had literary ambitions of her own, which Wagner apparently encouraged. In fact, after the Wagner affair, Mathilde Wesendonck made a name for herself as a writer. She published poetry and wrote plays, including one on the subject of Siegfried. As Chris Walton has observed, all of her writings, in one way or other, echo Wagner.<sup>18</sup> It was her talent, then, more than her feminine wiles, that qualified her to become Wagner's partner not only in love but also in the creative process. She thus must be regarded as the great enabler of the ecstasy of Richard Wagner, the composer.

As we have seen, Wagner began drawing Mathilde towards him and into the still shadowy world of *Tristan* by dedicating the piano sonata to her. He made a more explicit move when, on 18 September 1857, he went over to the Wesendonck house and presented her with the autograph manuscript of Act III of the libretto of *Tristan und Isolde*. Mathilde led him to a chair in front of the sofa, embraced him, and said: "Now I can wish for nothing more."<sup>19</sup> A few days later he began the compositional sketch for Act I. When this sketch was completed, he presented it, too, to Mathilde, complete with an ecstatic dedicatory poem. Now it was Mathilde's turn. Having read the libretto she responded by writing a number of poems that reflect her reaction to *Tristan*. Wagner set some of these to music as soon as they came off Mathilde's desk—an extraordinary and in fact unique occurrence in his creative life. Two of these settings—"Träume" and "Im Treibhaus"—he later designated as "studies for *Tristan und Isolde*."<sup>20</sup> "Träume," the best-known song of the group, clearly foreshadows the incipient ecstasy of the love duet in Act II: "O sink hernieder, Nacht der Liebe." Although there is a certain opaqueness to Mathilde's poem, it is easy to see that Wagner read it as a veiled declaration of love, which in turn inspired his loving gesture of setting five of her poems to music. Of "Träume" Wagner later wrote to Mathilde: "God knows, I liked this Lied better than the proud scene [the love scene of Act II]. Heaven, this is more beautiful than anything I have done. When I listen to it, my innermost nerves are

18. See Walton (note 10), 231–238.

19. See Diary of Mathilde Wesendonck, 18 September 1858, in *Richard Wagner and Mathilde Wesendonck* (note 4), 44f.

20. See John Deathridge and Carl Dahlhaus, *The New Grove Wagner* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co 1984), 184.

stirring.”<sup>21</sup> He was stirred to the point of arranging “Träume” for violin and a small wind ensemble and having it performed as a serenade on the morning of Mathilde’s birthday, December 23<sup>rd</sup> 1857.<sup>22</sup> Thirteen years later in Tribschen, in a strikingly similar fashion, Wagner composed a symphonic summary of the love-music in *Siegfried* and surprised Cosima with a performance of it on the morning of her birthday, December 25 1870.

Träume

Sag’, welch wunderbare Träume  
halten meinen Sinn umfassen,  
daß sie nicht wie leere Schäume  
sind in ödes Nichts vergangen?

Träume, die in jeder Stunde,  
jedem Tage schöner blüh’n,  
und mit ihrer Himmelskunde  
selig durch’s Gemüte ziehn!  
Träume, die wie hehre Strahlen  
in die Seele sich versenken,  
dort ein ewig Bild zu malen:  
Allvergessen, Eingedenken!  
Träume, wie wenn Frühlingssonne  
aus dem Schnee die Blüten küßt,  
daß zu nie geahnter Wonne  
sie der neue Tag begrüßt,  
dass sie wachsen, dass sie blühen,  
träumend spenden ihren Duft,  
sanft an deiner Brust verglühen,  
und dann sinken in die Gruft.<sup>23</sup>

Mathilde’s poem speaks of dreams which, like the sun in spring, lovingly melt and with a kiss draw flowers from the ice. To summarize the miraculous effect of that dream of love she cites two characteristically Tristanesque words

21. See Egon Voss, “‘Besseres, als diese Lieder, hab ich nie gemacht...’ Zu den Wesendonck-Liedern,” in Voss, *Wagner und kein Ende. Betrachtungen und Studien* (Zürich, Mainz: Atlantis Musikbuch-Verlag, 1996), 105–109.

22. Cf. Walton (note 10), 76.

23. Here is the translation by William Mann: “Dreams. Say, what wondrous dreams/hold my mind in thrall,/so that they have not like empty bubbles/passed into oblivion?/Dreams, that in every hour,/every day grow fairer,/and with their heavenly message/pass through my soul with blessings!/Dreams, that, like celestial rays,/penetrate my very soul/and paint an unfading picture there/of forgetting and remembering!/ Dreams that, like the sun of spring,/draw flowers from snow with a kiss;/they are born to unsuspected joy/ and greet the new day;/then they grow, and they bloom,/and dreaming give forth their scent;/gently they cool upon your breast/and then sink into the grave.” Booklet accompanying the EMI Classics CD 7243 5 56165 2 4; Wolfgang Sawallisch, The Philadelphia Orchestra, *Wesendonck-Lieder, and other works*.

from Wagner's text: "Allvergessen, Eingedenken!" —total oblivion, [total] remembering. Mathilde's poem concludes with the wish that her dreams might grow and bloom and impart their scent upon "your," that is, Wagner's breast. By setting to music her response to the text of *Tristan und Isolde*, Wagner allowed Mathilde's poem to feed back into the love music of Act II. In other words—extraordinary for him, and for any composer, really—he gave his muse a voice in the creation of *Tristan*.

Strangely, Mathilde's authorship of these five poems was for a long time obscured. The *Wesendonck Lieder* appeared in 1862 as "Five Poems for Woman's Voice Set to Music by Richard Wagner." Mathilde's name appeared nowhere in the publication, and it was thus assumed that Wagner himself had penned the poems, especially since they contain many verbal echoes of *Tristan und Isolde* and they capture much of the opera's unmistakable mood of passion and gloom. In fact, Wagner had wanted to indicate that the poems were by another hand when he proposed that Schott add to the title page the subtitle "Fünf Dilettanten-Gedichte," meaning five poems by a dilettante, that is, by a true lover of poetry.<sup>24</sup> But the publishers rejected Wagner's subtitle and condemned Mathilde Wesendonck to an unjust if temporary obscurity.

### The Opera

Having reviewed the genesis of *Tristan und Isolde* let us now take a fresh look at the work itself. The three acts of *Tristan*, although written in the same new musical idiom, display a variety of moods. In the literature, Act I has perhaps been less appreciated than the others, which is a great pity, because there is no finer example in all of Wagner of the composer's prowess as a dramatist. More importantly in our context, Act I leads up to the first manifestation of ecstasy in the work itself. We are on board a ship sailing from Ireland to Cornwall. After the prelude, the action begins in complete silence, soon broken by the unaccompanied voice of a young sailor singing his haunting and taunting song to his Irish love. When the orchestra finally enters, we begin a tremendous voyage on an ocean of sound that carries us, gradually and with increasing forward momentum, to Cornwall, where the tumultuous arrival of the ship is marked by a blinding blast of solid C-Major that washes away the harmonic uncertainties to which we have been treated since the beginning and drowns, though not for long, the distinctly troubled and conflicted sentiments of the two ill-fated passengers. They have agreed to die together and have finally confessed their love, which instantly makes them forget where they are.

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24. See Voss (note 21), 108.

They are lost to the world. They are literally “beside themselves”—which is precisely the meaning of ecstasy.

Act I is above all a model of dramatic economy. Wagner had to condense vast stretches of narrative from his primary source, Gottfried von Strassburg’s courtly epic, *Tristan*, into one dramatic situation, and he had to present from the lovers’ lives the key moments that would make plausible the turn of events while at sea—the irruption of hatred and despair into open passion. Furthermore, he had to define the nature of their love. Consider how much we learn during the claustrophobic action on board ship that leads to their common desire for mutual death. The lovers’ history, embedded as it is in the political history of English-Irish relations, is long, complicated, and fraught with deception and betrayal. In earlier times, England had been obligated to pay taxes to Ireland until young Tristan, King Marke’s nephew, killed in battle the Irish emissary, Morold, betrothed to the Irish princess Isolde, thereby putting an end to England’s subservience to Ireland. In a nasty gesture of *schadenfreude*, the English sent Morold’s severed head back to Ireland. However, Tristan’s triumph was severely diminished when it became apparent that the wound inflicted upon him by Morold was incurable. Aware of the medical wizardry of princess Isolde, and of that of her mother, Tristan sails to Ireland and appears before Isolde under the false name of Tantris. Isolde heals Tantris and allows him to return to England, but at a terrible emotional price—for as she performs her healing rites she discovers that the splinter she had earlier found in Morold’s skull is in fact missing from Tantris’ sword. However, as she is about to do what honor and loyalty demand—namely, kill the killer of her betrothed—she looks into the eyes of the wounded Tantris, who lies prostrate before her. She is unable to proceed and drops the sword.

Since England wishes to seal the peace with Ireland, Tristan, denying his love for Isolde out of loyalty to his uncle, is again sent back to Ireland, this time under his real name, not in order to woo Isolde for himself but rather to woo her for his uncle, King Marke, whom she is now, as they approach Cornwall, about to meet for the first time. The prospect of being given in marriage to an aging king—Marke is said to be a “tired” man—while the most desirable man in the kingdom is going to be ever present is simply too much for her to contemplate. In despair, she decides to demand penance of Tristan for his “betrayal” of their as yet unannounced love. He agrees to die with her. Having drunk what they believed is a death potion and thus firmly expecting to die before they reach shore, Tristan and Isolde feel released from the bonds of custom and morality and openly acknowledge their feelings. In the symbolic language of Act II, they have left behind the world of the “day” and entered

the realm of the “night.” The musical gestures Wagner invented to signify the lovers’ emotional turmoil and its magical transformation into desire, with reminiscences of the motifs from the prelude punctuated by silences of extraordinary expressivity, are gripping and justly celebrated.

Of even greater importance for the understanding of the inner action is that moment in Isolde’s great retrospective narration when she recalls the fatal glance—the meeting of her eyes with Tristan’s—which signifies the birth of love from compassion. This is a scene nearly identical to that seminal scene in the first act of *Die Walküre*, where Sieglinde’s and Siegmund’s eyes likewise meet in similar embrace. In *Tristan*, instead of a solo cello, it is a solo viola that intones the melody of desire. Wagner even marks the dropping of the sword with a pluck of the strings. And while in *Die Walküre* the birth of love from compassion, embodied in the glance, is acted out before our eyes, in *Tristan* it occurs as a recollection from the distant past.

Acts I and II end with the expression of the lovers’ desire forever to thwart the forces of the “day” in order to enter forever the realm of the “night.” When Tristan and Isolde finally die—separately, not together—they do indeed enter the realm of “eternal night” through a mystical experience, which in the case of Isolde is commonly referred to as “Liebestod,” literally “love-death,” but more appropriately transfiguration. While many have analyzed the music of the concluding “Liebestod,” few have attempted to understand and to interpret the words. And yet if we really wish to comprehend this mystical experience we must understand what the words of the “Liebestod” mean, what they signify, and how in poetic terms this culminating point of the opera is designed.

### Isolde’s Transfiguration

Analysis of the text requires us, first and foremost, to throw overboard most of the familiar and apparently ineradicable notions about the poetic force or frailty of Wagner’s librettos. While few now contest his excellence as a composer, many continue to dispute or to deny his talent as a poet. Jacques Barzun was surely speaking for many when in his 1941 book on Marx, Darwin, and Wagner he opined: “Whether in translation or in the original, the lines [of Wagner’s librettos] fail to strike us as remarkable for anything but dullness.” For good measure Barzun added that there are only a few “living Wagnerians who could face a performance or a reading of the librettos as plays.”<sup>25</sup> This

25. Jacques Barzun, *Darwin, Marx, Wagner: Critique of a Heritage* (New York: Little, Brown & Co. 1958), 261. Cf. John D. Heyl, “Der Fall Barzun: Wagner and the 19<sup>th</sup> Century,” *Wagner in Retrospect: A Centennial Reappraisal*, ed. Leroy R. Shaw et al. (Amsterdam: 1987), 224–234.

oft-repeated perception was put to the test in January 2005 when the eminent Wagnerian Dieter Borchmeyer organized a non-musical and purely “literary” reading of *The Ring*—an event carried out by professional actors and singers—that filled Munich’s Residenztheater on two consecutive evenings and proved to be a surprising success.

In marked contrast to Barzun, Patrick Smith, to whom we owe the most authoritative history of the libretto, *The Tenth Muse*, flatly asserts that Wagner’s achievement as a librettist was “the greatest the form has produced.”<sup>26</sup> To substantiate this claim, Smith underlines three outstanding characteristics of the Wagnerian libretto. First, “for the first time in its history the libretto itself served as reflection of the range of a man’s mind and his deepest thoughts.” In other words, Wagner appropriated and applied to the text of the opera the modern, Romantic concept of authorship as the medium for the most authentic realization of the self. Second, Wagner’s “organizational genius,” as evidenced in *The Ring of the Nibelung*, is “by far the greatest structural achievement ever carried to fruition by a librettist.” Third, Wagner’s “command of the stage, from both the point of view of technical knowledge and that of intuitive sense of the dramatic,” is said to have been “greater” than that of “any other librettist.”<sup>27</sup>

The issue on which Patrick Smith is hesitant and tentative is the poetic dimension of Wagner’s operatic texts. Considering the experimental character of much of Wagner’s poetic language, especially in *The Ring* and in *Tristan*, such hesitation is understandable. Wagner deliberately strove for a new poetic language that would maximize the effect of the new music he was devising—a music that dissolved the set numbers and the traditional periodic structures of the classical style and transformed them into a seamless symphonic web. He found such a poetic idiom suited to his new musical language when he turned to the famous medieval “Stabreim”—a short-line alliterative verse of irregular length. The Wagnerian “Stabreim” is explicitly designed to sound archaic. But on close inspection it turns out to be, at least in the art of the libretto, a decidedly avant-garde idiom and a highly effective vehicle that is ideally suited to Wagner’s purposes in *The Ring*. Practical-minded and undogmatic as he was in all artistic matters, Wagner, in *Tristan*, modified and augmented the alliterative verse technique he had invented for another purpose.

Thomas Mann was thus right on target—as he usually was with respect to Wagner—when he remarked: “It has always seemed to me absurd to ques-

26. See Patrick J. Smith, *The Tenth Muse: A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1970), 287.

27. *Ibid.*, 229, 260, 279, 289.

tion Wagner's poetic gifts."<sup>28</sup> From the Dutchman's great monologue in Act I of *The Flying Dutchman* to the monologues of Amfortas in *Parsifal*, Wagner finds a particularly rich voice in the expression of pain and suffering, especially suffering that is related to sexual desire, as it is in *Tristan* and in *Parsifal*. Wagner is at his most innovative and subtle when he explores his characters' interiority, when he brings into focus their hidden motivation. In these cases—think of Siegfried and Brünnhilde, or of Parsifal and Kundry—Wagner proceeds very much in the manner of a psychoanalyst, using musical motifs to lay bare hidden connections. It was precisely as an explorer of interiority that Wagner served as a model and inspiration for countless later poets and writers who wished to refine the literary means of rendering subconscious thoughts and feelings. It was not for nothing that some of the pioneers and leading practitioners of literary modernism were Wagnerians, among them Edouard Dujardin, Arthur Schnitzler, Thomas Mann, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust.

This brings us back to *Tristan und Isolde* and to the remarkable musical and poetical manner in which Wagner brings his drama of desire to the devastating conclusion of Isolde's "Liebestod." Given the popularity of this music today and the often cliché-ridden program notes that usually accompany it, the temptation to deflate the metaphysical hype of the commentators and to remind readers of the sexual foundation of it all is almost irresistible. One recent commentator, for instance, has described the climactic conclusion of *Tristan und Isolde* as "Isolde's musical orgasm" and "a thoroughly masculine cliché." This music, he explains, "is essentially a voyeuristic male depiction of a woman's onanistic fantasy: it is Wagner imagining how his lover [Mathilde] fantasizes about him while he watches from afar."<sup>29</sup> Such wild iconoclasm, imaginative though it may be, fails to do justice to the undeniably spiritual dimension of this supreme moment.

In order to grasp that spiritual dimension, a commentator must make a close reading of Wagner's poetry. For just as the music of the "Liebestod" can be performed as a separate concert item, or as a sequel to the prelude to Act I, as it often is, so, too, can the end of *Tristan* be read as a poem in its own right. It was the great philologist, Leo Spitzer, who, in a comparative study of John Donne, St. John of the Cross, and Wagner, established the conclusion of *Tristan und Isolde* as harking back to the tradition of "ecstatic" religious poetry. The proper subject of such poetry, wrote Spitzer, is "the ecstatic union

28. See "Richard Wagner and 'Der Ring des Nibelungen,'" Thomas Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner*, tr. Allan Blunden, with an introduction by Erich Heller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 190.

29. See Walton (note 10), 210.

of a human ego with a non-ego.”<sup>30</sup> In pre-romantic religious poetry that non-ego is god. In Wagner the non-ego is clearly something non-Christian—it is the “Welt-Atem,” the World Spirit. In the universe of *Tristan und Isolde*, there is no personal god. So it is illogical, despite the claims of so perceptive a commentator as Joseph Kerman, to speak of *Tristan und Isolde* as a “religious drama” and to posit a “conversion” on the part of Tristan.<sup>31</sup> As a follower of Ludwig Feuerbach, Wagner had discarded all notions of a personal god long before he conceived this music drama. A more appropriate characterization of the peculiar spirituality of Isolde’s transfiguration has been proposed by John Deathridge, who points to the “inverted religious codes” woven into the “Liebestod,” by which he means, chiefly, the “inversion of the Christian doctrine of the resurrection and the life everlasting.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Wagner deviates from the tradition of ecstatic poetry in this crucial regard: in traditional religious poetry the ecstatic union with god is a temporary trance, while in Wagner music drama, Isolde’s transfiguration, which is to say, her union with the World Spirit, is terminal.

Generally, an ecstatic union can be achieved only by exceptional individuals such as saints and mystics. Ecstatic union is a spiritual occurrence on the outer edges of human experience. Ecstasy, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is, as we have seen, “the state of being ‘beside oneself.’” In late Greek antiquity the word denoted “the withdrawal of the soul from the body.” All of this is very much to the point as concerns Wagner’s “Liebestod.” As soon as one disentangles the seemingly convoluted and woolly design of the text, it is plain to see that we have here a sophisticated and perfectly controlled poetic utterance. It will be seen that the words of the “Liebestod” are organized according to a clearly recognizable poetic principle—that of ecstatic religious poetry—and that the text reveals a four-part structure: the first three sections are made up of several series of questions relating consecutively to the sense of seeing, of hearing, and of smell; the concluding fourth section, hovering between an expression of desire and a statement of fact, signals the extinguishing of all sensory perception and sense of individual identity. In performance, of course, we are unable to perceive the poetic structure of the “Liebestod” because Wagner, as he had to, made the all-enveloping, seamless web of music the dominant medium for the articulation of ecstasy.

Isolde’s ecstasy is preceded by the ecstasy of the ailing and dying

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30. See Leo Spitzer, “Three Poems on Ecstasy (John Donne, St. John of the Cross, Richard Wagner),” in Spitzer, *A Method of Interpreting Literature* (Northampton, Mass.: Smith College, 1945), 5.

31. Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (New York: Vintage, 1956), 194–197.

32. Deathridge (note 5), 149–150.

Tristan—the kind of ecstasy which, properly performed, Wagner feared would drive listeners insane. As Tristan predicted in Act II, he has preceded her to the land from which there is no return. The first twenty-one lines of the “Liebestod,” all notably short, are composed of a series of three questions addressed to King Marke and Brangäne, Isolde’s “friends,” who are called upon to witness the miraculous transfiguration of Tristan’s body. Isolde poses three pairs of rhetorical questions, the second challenging the negative answer implied in the first, as in “Can you see it, friends?—How can you not see it?” Here then is a free but faithful rendering of the first 21 lines, starting from “Mild und leise.”<sup>33</sup>

How gently and softly he smiles; how sweetly his eyes open: do you  
not see this,  
friends? How could you not see it?  
How he glows, ever brighter, how he raises himself, stars sparkling  
around him?  
Do you not see it?  
How his heart is bravely swelling; how, full and noble, it fills his breast;  
and how sweet breath drifts softly from his gentle, blissful lips? See,  
friends—  
do you not feel and see it?

It is clear from these rhetorical questions that only Isolde perceives Tristan’s transfiguration—a transfiguration, like her incipient ecstasy, that is confined to her own sensibility and consciousness. The phenomena that her “friends” are unable to perceive—that the deceased Tristan is actually smiling; that he is opening his eyes; that his heart is swelling; that a sweet fragrance flows from his lips—are all familiar items of ecstatic religious poetry.

The next several questions Isolde directs to herself. The first, running from lines 22 to 33, is extraordinarily involved. It is a question—beginning with “Höre ich nur diese Weise?”—raised by an aural sensation. Isolde—and only she—hears a melody issuing from Tristan’s transfigured body, as though his

33. Mild und leise/wie er lächelt,/wie das Auge/hold er öffnet:/seht ihr’s, Freunde,/Säht ihr’s nicht?/Immer lichter/wie er leuchtet,/Stern-umstrahlet/hoch sich hebt:/Seht ihr’s nicht?/Wie das Herz ihm/mutig schwillt,/voll und hehr/im Busen quillt?/Wie den Lippen,/wonnig mild,/süßer Atem/sanft entweht:—/Freunde! Seht—/fühlt und seht ihr’s nicht?—/Höre ich nur/diese Weise,/die so wunder—/voll und leise,/Wonne klagend/alles sagend,/mild versöhnend/aus ihm tönend,/auf sich schwingt,/in mich dringt,/hold erhallend/um mich klingt?/Heller schallend,/mich umwallend,/sind es Wellen/sanfter Lüfte?/Sind es Wolken/wonniger Düfte?/Wie sie schwellen,/mich umrauschen,/soll ich atmen,/soll ich lauschen?/Soll ich schürfen (rendered “schlürfen” in some versions),/untertauchen,/süß in Düften/mich verhauchen?/In des Wonnemeeres/wogenden Schwall,/in der Duftwellen/tönendem Schall,/in des Welt-Atems/wehendem All —/ertrinken—/versinken—/unbewußt—/höchste Lust!” Richard Wagner, *Dichtungen und Schriften*. Jubiläumsausgabe in zehn Bänden, ed. Dieter Borchmeyer (Frankfurt/Main: Insel Verlag, 1983), vol. IV, 80–82.—For my translation of the “Liebestod”—poem I gratefully acknowledge the expert help I have received from Peter Bloom.

essence had been distilled from him and transubstantiated into music. It is the same “Weise” that has dominated Tristan’s entire life, except that now, in Isolde’s inner ear, it is transformed from a tune of sadness and pain into a melody of bliss. A cluster of three verbs and seven adverbs is marshaled to describe the mystical music emanating from Tristan’s body. This inaudible “Weise,” then, is the catalyst of the traditional mystical climax, as Isolde is literally and figuratively penetrated by the musical embodiment of Tristan.

Am I the only one to hear this melody, which, so wondrous and tender in its blissful lament, revealing everything and gently soothing, emanates from him, penetrates me, sweetly echoing about me?

There follow, with increasing urgency, seven more questions, which Isolde again addresses to herself. The text now shifts from the realm of hearing to the realm of touch and smell, as Isolde rapidly loses her sense of identity. Unable to make out whether she is feeling waves of gentle breezes, or clouds of otherworldly fragrances, she is unsure of her response.

Are these waves of gentle breezes? Are these clouds of otherworldly fragrances?

As they swell and roar around me? Shall I breathe them; shall I listen to them?

Shall I sip them, dive into them and expire in these perfumes?”

Sliding from one sense perception to another she is moved to breathe her last and become one with the enveloping clouds of perfume that she experiences as a mighty, heaving sea of pleasure.

In the remaining eight lines leading up to the climax, all syntactical order is abandoned. Three participial phrases—the surging flood, the ringing sound, the World Spirit’s wafting breath—are followed by two infinitives—“ertrinken, versinken”; to drown, to sink. The last two elements are an adjective—“unbewusst”; unconscious—and a distantly audible exclamation—“höchste Lust”; bliss supreme! The last two lines are ambiguous as to what precisely is happening to Isolde. To “drown” and to “sink” denote downward movements, as though she were falling below the ocean of sound that is a manifestation of the World Spirit. “Bliss,” on the other hand, —the exquisite word “Lust,” with its mellifluous L and whispering S—points upward, as does the vocal line at this climactic point of ecstasy with its extraordinary upward leap of an octave.

In this heaving sea of pleasure, in this scented sound, in the world-

spirit's all-encompassing breath—to drown—to sink—unconscious—bliss supreme!

It is supremely fitting, then, that a poem of ecstasy—the so-called “Liebestod”—should provide the capstone to a musical architecture that addresses ecstasy in various forms and that has given the composer the much-desired opportunity for an ecstatic experience in a emphatically musical and artistic sense.

The purely poetic excellence of Wagner's “Liebestod” may now be perceived more clearly. It rests on the sophistication with which the structure of the poem is made to reflect the mystical experience of ecstasy. All of the elements are of a piece. In concert, they admirably fulfill the chief function that Wagner's theory assigns to the word: it makes distinct and visible the “deeds of the music.”<sup>34</sup> The poetic text proceeds from alliterative verse to alternate rhymes and to pairs of rhymes enhanced by assonance. In the process a kind of synthesis of different sensations is achieved, the one blending with the other and leading up to the most spiritual—“verhauchen,” expire. Most tellingly, the convoluted syntax of the first set of questions gives way, gradually, via simpler but more agitated questions, to a complete dissolution of syntax—mirroring exactly Isolde's loss of self and loss, ultimately, of individual identity.

Wagner makes it quite clear that the goal of Isolde's ecstasy is a mystical union not with Tristan but with the “Welt-Atem”—the World Spirit. Tristan is her partner in this transition. Penetrated by the musical essence of her lover, Isolde experiences the sensual ecstasy that carries her away to a different sphere altogether. This then can no longer be called ecstasy in the traditional religious sense. Isolde's ecstasy is terminal, as we have said, and associated not with a personal god but with the essence of a pantheistic universe. Thus does the “Liebestod” bring to stunning fruition Wagner's project of creating a monument to his dream of love. He makes the point with what is, at last, irrefutable certainty, by having the seemingly endless harmonic tension, deception, and ambiguity that we have experienced throughout this miraculous music drama finally climax in an overwhelming, blissfully ecstatic B major chord that leaves no room for further argument and no room for doubt as to the supreme logic and inevitability of this moment.

—Hans Rudolph Veget

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34. See “Über die Benennung ‘Musikdrama,’” Richard Wagner, *Dichtungen und Schriften* (note 33), IX, 276.

## The Ring Around Brünnhilde: II

### A Disturbing Awakening

Many opera-goers, while confessing their anticipated joy at the prospect of seeing *Die Walküre*, also acknowledge a certain disillusion when they arrive at the theatre for a performance of *Siegfried*. The reason is that while in *Die Walküre* the awe-inspiring scent of love is brought to the fore from the very beginning, while most of *Siegfried* is devoted to the machinations of men in pursuit of power. One needs to have a different attitude than in *Die Walküre* to enjoy the supreme beauty of *Siegfried's* score. It is an opera full of remembrance of things past and premonitions of the future. It is also an opera about fear and how to overcome it because, we should not forget, heroes are supposed to be *fearless*. When Mime tries to explain to Siegfried what fear is all about, the orchestra insistently plays Brünnhilde's sleep motif. In doing so the orchestra is anticipating that Siegfried will only experience fear at his first encounter with the woman who awaits him.

Siegfried performs without fear three of his most important tasks, namely, he kills Fafner, he breaks Wotan's spear, and he crosses the fire shielding Brünnhilde. Then and only then does he learn fear, to the point that he calls his mother for help when he discovers that Brünnhilde is not a man. As in the case of most types of fear, he overcomes this one when he accepts the possibility of death: "I must suck the life from those lips. Even if I should die doing so." Nothung is of little use here. It only helps Siegfried to pull out the strings of Brünnhilde's breastplate. No weapon can help Siegfried to overcome the fear. As with any human being, he can only overcome fear by learning to love unconditionally even at the cost of dying for the sake of love.

### Digression: Brünnhilde's (and the Audience's ) Long Wait

In no other opera as in *Siegfried* do we have to wait for so long to be carried away by the protestations of love between male and female—and please spare

a thought for the soprano in waiting! Just listen to what Eva Marton has to say: "In San Francisco the curtain went up at seven in the evening, and I was still at home at nine, waiting, and so nervous I couldn't do anything except watch baseball on TV. Eventually, I would drive to the theatre and leave my car a few blocks away so I could steady my nerves by walking. Once inside the theatre, there was more waiting until Brünnhilde wakes up, at the end of Act III. You cannot imagine how daunting it is to wake up in the morning knowing the climax of the day won't happen until eleven o'clock at night, when you have to get dressed, put on your make-up, and go on stage and sing for twenty-seven minutes. This interminable waiting is the only problem in *Siegfried*." <sup>7</sup> Jane Eaglen had a very different experience: "I remember that when I sang it at La Scala I had dinner with the understudies at seven o'clock, usually some pasta, went home, had a shower, warmed up and turned up again at the theatre at ten, full of beans and ready to go! Actually the worst thing about it is having to lay there on your rock for a good ten minutes before you have to sing." <sup>8</sup> Nor that this lying about made her nervous. On the contrary, she apparently once relaxed too much at this crucial moment: "I remember I actually fell asleep! It was such a comfortable set that I really nodded off and then suddenly heard the tenor singing 'But this is not a man' (*Dass ist kein Mann!*) and thought 'My God' and woke up with a start!" <sup>9</sup>

### From Dutiful Wife to Vengeful Lover

Brünnhilde pays a heavy price as a result of her rapturous submission to her new-found hero. She submits to the point of becoming a besotted housewife. In the English National Opera production of *Götterdämmerung* stage director Phyllida Lloyd shows Brünnhilde laying the table with a red-and-white chequered tablecloth and cups and saucers in order to serve her darling the breakfast of champions he needs to recover his energy and abandon her. Because, no doubt about it, he leaves her *forever*. Like many soldiers going to war, Siegfried tells Brünnhilde that she is his arm, namely the inspiration for his heroic deeds. Brünnhilde tellingly replies: *O wäre Brünnhilde deine Seele* ("Oh, if only Brünnhilde were your soul!").

If Brünnhilde had been his soul he would have stayed with her. Instead, he embarks on his fatal cruise along the Rhine, in fact traveling from the

7. "Diva," by Helena Matheopoulos. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992); previously published in Great Britain; London: Victor Gollancz, 1991. "Diva, The New Generation," by Helena Matheopoulos, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998). PLEASE NOTE: the quotation of Jane Eaglen in Part I of this article (which was published in the previous issue, Winter 2009-10), on page 22, paragraph 2, is also to be found in Helena Matheopoulos, "Diva." We regret the omission.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

mythical eternity symbolized by the rock of the Valkyrie to a time and space of everyday life. This passage is marvelously commented on in the interlude, "Siegfried's Rhine Journey." A better title perhaps would have been "Siegfried's Journey from Paradise to Earth." Or should we call it "A Journey from Paradise to Hell?" After reaching its paroxysm, the magic fire music is abruptly replaced by the Twilight of the Gods motif. How dark and full of premonition the music now sounds! In her production for the English National Opera Phyllida Lloyd shows, after the fire, the murky waters of the Hudson River with the silhouetted background of skyscrapers at night. Wieland Wagner comments sarcastically that with his sexual initiation Siegfried loses his instinct: "He enters the second Dragon's cave, the palace of the Gibichungs, without being able to listen to the voice of nature, as he did when he managed to understand the bird's singing."<sup>10</sup> After killing the first Dragon, the second Dragon, the son of Alberich, will easily swallow him whole.

As for Ms. Brünnhilde, we can say that she has lost her instinct too. Otherwise she would not have accepted Alberich's ring as her wedding ring. Then, it happens! She becomes what Wotan predicted, a defenceless wife, *dem feigsten Manne zur leichten Beute*, the feeblest man's easy acquisition. There is only a small step from dutiful wife to vengeful lover. As everyone knows, dutiful wives are not necessarily keen to understand the infidelities of their husbands. Brünnhilde has become so human that she even lets Hagen know where exactly his spear should strike in order to kill Siegfried. It is only after this murder has taken place that Siegfried's funeral music brings us back from the soap opera of marital deception that characterizes everyday life to the eternal myths of the *Ring*. In this mythical world everything has a different, transcendental meaning. Brünnhilde is now alone, with only the company of her horse. There is no alternative. She must ride again, just one more time.

### Brünnhilde Rides Again

Nowadays most stage directors opt for the easy solution of not having Grane appear to accompany Brünnhilde's last ride. Not so in the case of Seattle Opera's current production, in which Grane is invited to enjoy his five minutes of glory on stage. A word of warning: history teaches us that such an appearance is not without its risks. To ensure Grane's proper behaviour, the legendary soprano Birgit Nilsson decided to bribe her stallion by stuffing him with sugar cubes during rehearsals for a *Götterdämmerung* in Sweden. Alas, she forgot the sugar for the premiere and here is what she tells us in her autobiography:

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10. Walter Panofsky, *ibid.* page 46.

“When the horse and I made our entrance and Grane realized I had no sugar cubes for him, he began to bite me. I held him fast by the halter, whereupon he tried with his rear end to push me toward the orchestra pit. To distract Grane from his fixation about the sugar, I jumped around the stage with him during which antics I was singing the most difficult passages in the scene!”<sup>11</sup>

Nilsson was lucky. In the 1925 Bayreuth Festival Grane went mad. He injured Siegfried and broke a couple of bones of one of the Gibichungs. Then he headed towards the fire before Brünnhilde entreated him to do so. During a 1939 performance in Bayreuth, Grane fell dead in the first Act. A member of the audience (who had witnessed Grane’s madness in 1925) was so upset that he ordered not to have a new untrained horse for the last Act. Believe me, he could give orders. He was the most important member of the audience, so much so that days before he had been described by Bayreuth’s daily newspaper as the hero “who had newly forged the broken sword, and had also restored to his people their honor and belief in their own strength and values.”<sup>12</sup> This hero finally accepted Grane’s replacement and, one month later, went to war against Poland.

It was only too fitting for the Nazis to consider *Götterdämmerung* as an allegory of death. For them, to die heroically in battle brought a meaning to their lives. No wonder, then, that with the Soviet Army at the doors of Berlin, the Berlin Philharmonic ended its last concert before disbanding with a rather predictable piece, the end of *Götterdämmerung*. The perverse association of *Götterdämmerung* with the *Heldentod* promoted by the Third Reich reached its climax when, after the concert, the audience was met by members of the Hitler Youth distributing cyanide capsules for those who wanted to join the Nazi Gods in Valhalla. Now: if this was the meaning of the end of *Götterdämmerung*, if this was the artistic message of Wagner’s *Ring* to the world, then, I would feel similar apprehensions as those of the Los Angeles County supervisor who would prefer not to have the *Ring* performed there. *However*, the work does not close with Siegfried’s death but with Brünnhilde’s proclamation of something entirely different. In the words of Carl Dahlhaus, *Götterdämmerung* has a happy ending. How can this be? We know the answer if we carefully listen to what Brünnhilde has to say. But it is very difficult to heed Brünnhilde’s words in the opera house because the eye tends to ignore the supertitles while becoming mesmerised with the magnificent sight of the pyre.

Jane Eaglen gives us a hint on how to proceed when she tells us how the

11. “La Nilsson: My Life in Opera,” by Birgit Nilsson, Translated by Doris Jung Popper. (Lebanon, New Hampshire: Northeastern University Press, 2007), 84, 85.

12. “Bayreuther Tageblatt,” 30.7.1939. Quoted by Brigitte Hamann in “Winifred Wagner oder Hitler’s Bayreuth,” (Munich and Zürich: Piper, 2002).



*In an exercise in introspection amidst the grand spectacle of fire and water of the Immolation Scene, Jane Eaglen portrays Brünnhilde in the Lyric Opera of Chicago 2005 production (with John Treleaven as Siegfried).*

soprano should perform a difficult exercise in introspection amidst the grand spectacle of fire and water: “What *is* challenging is to communicate the essence of what’s going on in Brünnhilde’s mind during the Immolation Scene. The first half is very introspective. She is going over everything that’s happened in the past, realising her own part in it and what she has to do. And this is how I play it up to this point, very quietly and introspectively. This is something about which I have thought long and hard, and have concluded that you have to put across every thought racing through Brünnhilde’s mind. But in order to express them vocally, you have to be very clear about them in your own mind. I am not consciously trying to make the audience understand them, but to make *myself*, as Brünnhilde, understand them.”<sup>13</sup>

The audience should understand Brünnhilde’s words too, if they want to realise up to which point the *Ring* has a happy ending: Brünnhilde accepts Siegfried’s death as part of the process needed to abolish the power represented by the ring. She finally asks Grane and all of us to look inside her, so that we can understand that the pyre is a mere reflection of something much more real, namely her heart burning with supreme love. Wieland Wagner follows Carl Dahlhaus when he refers to Brünnhilde as dying “in the fire of her own love.” It happens here as it always happens with Wagner and with any myth: the external landscape is only a reflection of what it really matters, namely the reality of the soul.

*Fühl´meine Brust auch,  
Wie sie entbrennt:  
Helles Feuer  
Das Herz mir erfasst,  
Ihn zu umschlingen,  
Umschlossen von ihm,  
In mächtigster Minne  
Vermählt ihm zu sein!*

[Feel my breast too,  
How it burns.  
Bright fire  
Has seized my heart,  
Longing to enfold him,  
And be embraced by him,  
In supreme love  
To be united with him.]

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13. Helena Matheopoulos, “Diva, the New Generation,” p20.

Brünnhilde chooses to sing her last words using the same melody as in Sieglinde's farewell. This leitmotif is sometimes called "Sieglinde's Love" or "Redemption through Love." Whatever the name, it becomes Brünnhilde's final signature music. While Sieglinde sang it only once, Brünnhilde repeats it again and again, in ascending scales, as if trying to make us understand that only unconditional love can successfully oppose power and greed. Once Brünnhilde has leapt onto the pyre, the orchestra indulges in some additional pyrotechnics to put Valhalla to the torch. Then, the strings take the lead to bring the work to a close while once again echoing Sieglinde's and Brünnhilde's song of love. Thomas Mann puts it well with his usual perception when he tells us that "Brünnhilde's sublime melody rises above the flames, which are destroying the bastion of power." A very, very happy ending, indeed.

Brünnhilde's final ride into the fire means exactly what she tells us, not what the concertgoers in Berlin in 1945 were asked to believe. To see the *Ring* as Hitler saw it is wrong and self-demeaning, both ethically and intellectually. It is also wrong to accept Hitler's views of the *Ring* in order to ban the work, in Los Angeles or anywhere else. It is not about the end of the world but about the word's unlimited capacity for redemption and regeneration through love. Like no other *Ring*, Seattle Opera's current production strongly suggests the complete restoration of nature at the end of *Götterdämmerung*.

Certainly, Siegmund and Siegfried are heroes, but of a very different kind than those suggested in the male oriented interpretations of the work abhorred by Bekker and Mann. Siegmund breaks the law and dies for the sake of love; and it is for the sake of love that Siegfried successfully challenges Wotan's supreme authority to the point of breaking Wotan's spear. Both of them are heroes, *but only to the women they love*, because they choose love instead of power. Otherwise, they are outcasts, doomed to be marginalised by any establishment. Not for them, thus, the mores of political absolutism, Nazi or otherwise. It is very easy for Hagen to destroy Siegfried. However, in the final confrontation between male power and female love, Hagen loses to Brünnhilde. Therefore the *Ring* is not about enhancing power, race, dictatorship, or death; to paraphrase James Carville "it's about love, stupid."

### Epilogue

Thomas Mann suggests that we consider this love as feminine. Like others,<sup>14</sup> he notes that Brünnhilde's last music chimes with the mystical chorus

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14. See for instance Willi Tschiedert in an essay published in the *Götterdämmerung* programme of the Bayreuth Festival, 1985: "I too believe that the *Ring of the Nibelungs* is the greatest work after *Faust*, which is why the closing words of the latter may be valid for this work too."

ending the second part of Goethe's *Faust* with a contemplation of the eternal feminine existing in all of us:

*Alles Vergängliche  
Ist nur ein Gleichnis  
Das Unzulängliche,  
Hier wird's Ereignis,  
Das Unbeschreibliche  
Hier ist's getan  
Das Ewig-Weibliche  
Zieht uns hinan*

[All that is transient,  
Is but a likeness:  
The insufficient,  
Here, grows to reality:  
The indescribable,  
Here, is done:  
Woman, eternal,  
Beckons us on.]

I am not going to digress here on Goethe's eternal feminine, but I would like to close with some advice regarding the interpretation of all of Wagner's works: do not get too carried away with male heroism. Heroic deeds may be mesmerising but they are also misleading. Instead, look always for the apparently passive, but finally overwhelming strength of suffering, acceptance, and compassion. Think of Antigone, think of mother Russia after the battle in Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky* and, nowadays, think of the Mothers Against the War. Both male and female exist in all of us but we can discover this when we allow the wisdom of the heart to unblock our heads. Wotan's famous "will" ends in flames in Valhalla. Brünnhilde's wisdom remains as eternal as life itself. Wagner and Goethe are here at one.

—Agustín Blanco-Bazán

## Letters to the Editor

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Editor,

Although we have numerous occasions during the year to exchange views on opera performances, it is Wagner's operas which generate the greatest interest for both of us. Within that narrower topic it is the 'Ring' performances which represent the pinnacle. As you will surely know, the two articles on the Seattle 'Ring' in the latest *Leitmotive* were avidly read and gave me great satisfaction. Lisa Burkett will forgive me if I focus on your contribution since I see yours as a continuation of the dialog which we have sustained over the years. Having read through it twice I realized that there is not a word or a judgment about the Seattle 'Ring' with which I would disagree, but wholeheartedly support.

Two memories that I have I will mention—during the last interval in *Götterdämmerung* Speight also asked me for my opinion, just as he asked you for yours. My response echoed yours, 'Magnificent, Speight, absolutely magnificent!' My second memory was curious. Like you I was struck by how human so much of the Seattle performances had become, as distinct from so many of the other 'Rings' I have attended (I use the word human in the sense of the feelings conveyed by Wotan and Brünnhilde especially: Gods with human emotional characteristics). One small quick action illustrated this humanity further—when Wotan and Loge descend to Nibelheim and confront Alberich, the capture of the toad was followed by a quick wiping of hands to remove the slime! Small gestures like this have

been introduced by Wadsworth in the developed iteration during the four years of preparation and, like you and countless Wagner lovers world-wide, we wait for what may be the final performances in 2013.

This brings me to several questions: Is anything being done to encourage the retention and not destruction of the Seattle sets? Can we as a group urge Speight and the Seattle Opera Board of Directors to bring in a successor who will build further on the existing 'Ring' interpretations and commit to avoidance of the appalling Regie theater performances (keeping Wadsworth involved for at least one more cycle after 2013 could be a first step). Most importantly, can the WSNC take a lead in stimulating a nationwide or perhaps a worldwide award (something very substantial such as the highest U.S. Presidential Award for the Arts and/or the French and German equivalents) in recognition of Speight Jenkins' unforgettable contribution to the preservation of Wagner opera performances as Wagner himself envisaged? At the Seattle performances one meets so many people from all over the USA, Europe and elsewhere. The WSNC Board might wish to hold a discussion to pursue this idea.

—Alexander Cross

Editor,

I agree with your assessment of the Seattle Ring...and have been hammering at this for a long time: 2013 is the last time this unforgettable pro-

*(Continued on page 35)*

## Letters to the Editor

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*(Continued from page 35)*

duction will be seen and Seattle Opera simply **MUST** convince the corporate world (Microsoft, Boeing, etc.) that a DVD of this must be made. I have mentioned this to Speight every time I see him and he cheerfully says that they would love to do it... if they could get a sponsor. Might this be something the world's Wagner Societies might tackle... after all, they did help fledgling Bayreuth at the inception. Something to dream about.

—David Marsten

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*We received but one other written communication, that was on an entirely different subject, which included an off hand remark that was not entirely clear, but probably indicated the writer's preference for regie productions. It is clear, however, that some Wagnerians seem to prefer the regie productions and do not find the authenticity (in the sense of being very close to Wagner's own conception) of the Seattle production to be compelling. Certainly everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion. —Ed.*

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## The Editor's Thoughts

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*(Continued from page 4)*

ment, doubtless justifiably so. But most of the Wolfgang obituaries that I have read seem to slight Wolfgang's productions, some of which I have seen and which struck me as being excellent. Further, I have the impression that many of these same obituaries failed to give him his just due for all that he bestowed on the fundamental organization of the festival: this achievement was not trivial.

But perhaps the key matter here is that from 1951 until 2005 (much longer than anyone else), Wolfgang successfully managed Bayreuth each year even while simultaneously taking on the responsibility for many of the productions. It was a huge undertaking and I wonder if many of us do

not underestimate what he has left to posterity? The time, effort and skill that he expended in managing the festival for so very long was crucial to its continued success. Our focus is understandably, as members of the audience, mostly on the productions, but Wolfgang left the *organization* of the festival greatly improved in many ways, including both Bavarian state as well as Federal participation.

This is the legacy of Wolfgang Wagner, to the important benefit of all Wagnerians. Excepting only for his grandfather, he just may have given us more than anyone else. We are deeply grateful.

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