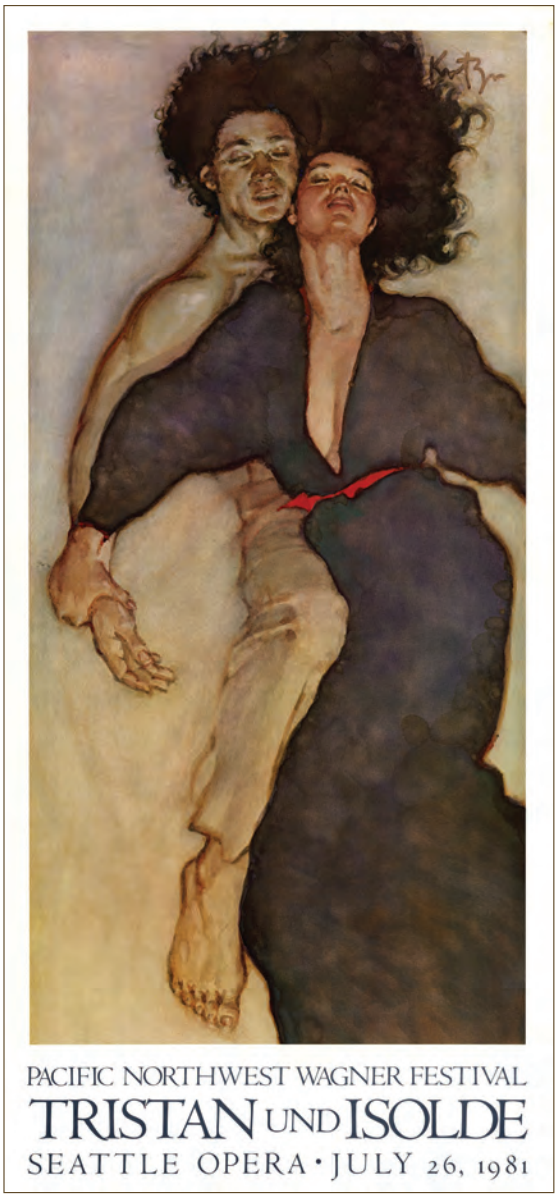
LEITMOTIVE

Journal of The Wagner Society of Northern California — Fall 2024



ON THE COVER

Tristan und Isolde

David Martin Kreitzer (b. 1942)
Watercolor on paper (1981)
Private Collection

David Kreitzer was commissioned by Seattle Opera to produce several posters for its 1981–82 productions, which included a season poster and individual ones for *Manon Lescaut, Tristan und Isolde,* and *The Ring of the Nibelung.*

This painting for *Tristan* captures the climax of the opera, after Tristan has died in Isolde's arms. She sings the haunting "Liebestod" and then reunites with him in death. The original painting is now in a private collection, and several thousand reprints of the poster have sold worldwide.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, an informal group of die-hard Wagnerians from the San Francisco Bay Area traveled to Seattle to attend the summer *Ring* cycle performances, which ran annually from 1975 through 1984. This group formed the first iteration of The Wagner Society of Northern California in 1981. (The Society was formally incorporated in 1985.)

Kreitzer lived on California's Central Coast for more than 40 years; he now resides in Oregon and continues to paint thematic, operatic, landscape, figure, and floral images. Part of the vanguard reviving New Realism in the West Coast art scene, he started his career in the 1960s, painting and exhibiting in San Francisco, including sold-out shows at Maxwell Galleries.

He met his first wife, dramatic soprano Jean Cook, while she was singing the role of Gutrune in the 1980 Seattle production of *Götterdämmerung.* (Cook died in 1986.) Kreitzer also met his second wife, mezzo-soprano Jacalyn Kreitzer, backstage at a Seattle *Ring* performance. She has sung Wagner roles in Seattle, San Francisco, Chicago, Barcelona, and Geneva, and at the Metropolitan Opera.

Kreitzer recently completed a series of paintings depicting monumental scenes from the *Ring* cycle.

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LEITMOTIVE

Fall 2024

Leitmotive is the official journal of The Wagner Society of Northern California and serves as a platform for inquiry and discovery of the works, life, and influence of Richard Wagner (1813–1883). We welcome submissions from scholars affiliated with academic institutions, performing artists, Society members, and anyone with a keen interest in Wagner studies.

The opinions expressed in this publication are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of The Wagner Society of Northern California.

Leitmotive is available as a benefit of membership. To join, visit the Society's website: wagnersf.org. Contact the editors at leitmotivejournal@gmail.com or at The Wagner Society of Northern California, PO Box 590990, San Francisco, CA 94159.

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Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers:

Welcome to the fall issue of *Leitmotive* in its new format. The essays and reviews largely focus on *Tristan und Isolde*, which will be performed in October and November by San Francisco Opera after an 18-year absence from the repertoire.

These insightful scholarly articles provide a historical, philosophical, and personal background that influenced Wagner in the creation of this monumental opera. We hope they will further the reader's understanding of the plot complexities and deepen the emotional impact of the score.

We are thrilled that heldentenor Simon O'Neill will return to the company in the title role. Readers may remember his riveting performance in San Francisco Opera's production of *Lohengrin* in 2023. O'Neill was a recipient of a William O. Cord Memorial Grant from the Society early in his career. International stars Anja Kampe (Isolde), Wolfgang Koch (Kurwenal), Annika Schlicht (Brangäne), and Kwangchul Youn (King Marke) lead the cast.

This issue features research and essays from noted Wagner scholars, including Simon Williams, Richard Masters, and Hans Rudolf Vaget. It also includes performance and recording reviews, and an article detailing the Wagner-Wesendonck connection from the author and presenter Desirée Mays.

As always, the Society would appreciate your feedback on this issue and ideas for future subjects to cover in *Leitmotive*.

—The Editorial Board

Our Contributors

PATRICK BURNSON is a widely published writer based in San Francisco. His current musings can be found in *The American Magazine* (Rome).

LISA HIRSCH is a freelance writer. She has published in San Francisco Classical Voice, the *San Francisco Chronicle, Opera News,* and *Opera Magazine*. She blogs about classical music and opera at Iron Tongue of Midnight.

RICHARD MASTERS is an associate professor of piano and collaborative piano at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. Before his appointment at VT, he was the principal opera coach of the Butler Opera Center at the University of Texas at Austin. He has also served as associate head coach at the Pittsburgh Festival Opera. Masters is a Yamaha Artist. He holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Colorado at Boulder, a master's degree from The Juilliard School, and a doctorate from the Eastman School of Music.

DESIRÉE MAYS was the nightly preview lecturer for the Santa Fe Opera for more than 20 years during the summer Festivals in Santa Fe. The author of 18 books in the Opera Unveiled series, she lectures to opera companies and Wagner societies around the world and produces podcasts that are broadcast nationally for the Metropolitan Opera Guild.

CHUNG-WAI SOONG, bass-baritone, performs regularly with companies such as San Francisco Opera, San Francisco Symphony, Hawaii Opera Theatre, Opera Parallèle, West Edge Opera, Pocket Opera, and West Bay Opera.

HANS RUDOLF VAGET is professor emeritus of German Studies who taught at Smith College from 1967 to 2004. He is co-founder and former president of the Goethe Society of North America and former co-editor of *wagnerspectrum,* a journal of Wagner studies. Vaget has published widely in the field of German Studies focusing on the eighteenth century to the present.

SIMON WILLIAMS recently retired after more than 30 years as a professor in the Department of Theater and Dance at the University of California Santa Barbara. He has published extensively in the fields of European continental theatre, the history of acting, Shakespearean performance, and operatic history. Williams is an active director and reviewer of opera. His current projects include co-editing *A History of the German Theatre* for Cambridge University Press. Williams also served as host of the annual, four-day "Opera at Oakhurst" retreat in the Sierra Nevada foothills.

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ESSAY

Changing Modes in Wagner's Theater: from *Lohengrin* to *Tristan und Isolde*

— *Simon Williams*

Among the notable anomalies in Wagner's career were his ambitions regarding *Tristan und Isolde*. Written in part as a means of making money while the *Ring* was in an unexpectedly long process of composition, it was intended to be performed in smaller opera houses, with roles that would be within the grasp of the average professional singer and an orchestral score that could be played by a competent provincial pit band. Of course, it turned out to be exactly the opposite. *Tristan* was Wagner's most challenging opera musically, and was also his most experimental work theatrically and far from being a cash cow, it was, of all his music dramas, the one that took the longest to find its place in the regular repertoire.

Composition was completed in 1859, but it was not until 1865 that it found a patron, Ludwig II, and an opera house, the Bavarian Court Opera in Munich, willing to perform it. It was revived in Munich in 1869 but had to wait until 1874 to receive a second production, in Weimar. It was then staged in Berlin in 1876.

Its first performance outside Germany was in London in 1882, and it eventually found its way onto the Bayreuth Festspiele stage in 1886. In comparison to most of his music dramas, especially *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* before and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* after, the positive reception of *Tristan* and its acceptance into the repertoire was unduly prolonged.

This delay has been much discussed and largely attributed to the difficulty of the music for both singers and orchestral players. But there may be other reasons for its slow acceptance. *Tristan und Isolde* was so unlike anything audiences had heard or seen in the theater before that the entire work flew in the face of their expectations. We should bear in mind that audiences who came to see *Tristan* for the first time in Munich in 1865 did not have the same advantages in coming to terms with it as Wagnerians have today.

Due to the vagaries of Wagner's career, audiences were not prepared for Wagner's unconventional dramaturgy. Today's Wagnerian comes to *Tristan* in full knowledge of the works that immediately proceeded it in composition—*Lohengrin* (1848), *Das Rheingold* (1854), *Die Walküre* (1856), and *Siegfried*, Acts I and II (1857). In 1865, the only one of these music dramas German audiences were familiar with was *Lohengrin*, as none of the *Ring* music dramas were performed until after *Tristan*. Some audience members, primarily Wagner enthusiasts, may have heard extracts from these works in concert, notably extracts from *Die Walküre* Acts I and III at a concert in Vienna in 1862 and the prelude to *Tristan* at three concerts in Paris in 1860. Many in the audience for the first run of *Tristan* in 1865 would no doubt have come with expectations created by *Lohengrin*, one of the two Wagner music dramas that had received widespread performances and, due to its successful incorporation of several of the features of grand opera, was enjoying growing popularity. *Tristan,* however, rudely shattered these expectations. Few critics displayed the balance and objectivity of the reviewer for Munich's *Neueste Nachrichten* who recognized that this was largely a work without precedent. "Not without embarrassment," he wrote, "do we embark on the judgment of a work that in its purpose and artistic means is entirely different from what has come before and will tolerate no other standard than what it has created itself."

While some reviewers found the music to be a fount of unending beauty, just as many considered it an incomprehensible mass of dissonance with no melody or sense of unfolding drama. The characterization was rawer, less polished, more disturbing and direct than in any of Wagner's previous music dramas. Critics had problems with music being used to explore the meaning of the word rather than to provide a melodic context for the word, while the vocal line was not tied unbrokenly to the orchestral accompaniment, something they may have been able to accommodate themselves to had they, for example, been able to hear *Das Rheingold*. Above all, many found it utterly repellent. Perhaps both the musical and moral revulsion Tristan could arouse was best summarized in Clara Schumann's prim anathematization

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of the work: "The most disgusting thing I have ever seen or heard in my life … To be forced to see and hear such crazy lovemaking the whole evening, in which every feeling of decency is violated and by which not only the public but even musicians seem to be enchanted—that is the saddest thing I have ever experienced in my artistic

Set design by Italian designer and architect Angelo Il Quaglio (1784–1815) for the world premiere of Tristan und Isolde *at the Bavarnian State Opera in 1865.* Lebrecht Music & Arts / Alamy

life ... During the second act, the two of them sleep and sing; through the whole last act—for a full 40 minutes—Tristan dies. And that they call dramatic!!!" However, dramatically as well as musically, *Tristan* turned out to be a pivotal opera.

Despite frequent complaints from Wagner that grand opera dominated the operatic repertoire of his time, *Lohengrin* was his masterpiece in the genre he claimed to despise; it can even be argued with justice to be the masterpiece of grand opera *in toto*. It employs all the characteristic features of the immensely popular genre—colorful historical settings, massive choruses, public rituals of prayer, and calls to arms, and the conflict between forces that bring about historic change and the individuals that fall prey to them. But *Tristan* veered from this model. To give an example, in *Lohengrin*, as in most grand opera, whenever a critical event occurs, it is marked by an extended number that involves most of the major characters, the assembled mass of the people, and those who rule over them.

Despite frequent complaints from Wagner that grand opera dominated the operatic repertoire of his time, Lohengrin *was his masterpiece in the genre he claimed to despise …*

For example, as Telramund's accusations against Elsa intensify in Act I, King Henry determines that Elsa's innocence will be determined by a duel between Lohengrin and Telramund. Prior to the duel, the entire court, people and army, plus all principals on stage, launch into a *preghiera*—the prayer that was frequently a formal number in grand opera—where they plead that God's revelation of Elsa's innocence will result from the duel. It is a magnificent piece. Constructed on a strong, noble melody, fully expressive of the sterling virtues grand opera prided itself on embodying, the ensemble builds to an immense climax, followed by a short but exciting duel and the defeat of Telramund. The act is capped off by a tumultuous chorus of rejoicing, a mightily impressive conclusion. From this we realize that the

conflict has immense, public significance, implicating not only the personal happiness or desolation of individual characters but the welfare of the Brabantian and, more broadly, the German state.

Equally important crises develop in *Tristan und Isolde*. At the end of Act I, the ship carrying the lovers arrives in Cornwall, and Marke's court swamps the stage. Convention would have required an extended climactic ensemble similar to that in *Lohengrin*, but instead there is a perfunctory chorus, and the act ends with the lovers separated in despair, a "downer" of an ending if ever there was one. The same can be said of the equally telling ending of Act II. Tristan and Isolde have been discovered in their tryst, Marke has been betrayed by his most loyal knight and closest friend, and the whole feudal structure of knighthood and political loyalty is hanging in the balance. By the aesthetics of grand opera, this should call for an explosion of public fear and indignation, and in the world of *Lohengrin* that would have happened. But in *Tristan* the discovery is followed by two long, mournful, deeply moving monologues by Marke and Tristan, followed by Melot's challenge to Tristan and the duel in which Tristan is fatally wounded. But there is no mighty chorus nor expression of public dismay. Rather Melot's challenge and the inconspicuous duel that follows takes barely half a minute to perform, and the curtain falls on a bleak scene of desolation. Another anticlimax.

The aura of *Lohengrin* is mostly elevated and heroic. The center of attention is mainly on the political situation and, to some degree, its religious context; the duel that ends Act I will have a major impact on community and nation. The figures of Lohengrin and Telramund have some degree of individuality, but mainly, they are symbolic of contrasting political and religious values. The aura of *Tristan,* however, is subdued after the events following the discovery of the lovers; attention is exclusively on the personal, while political and dynastic issues have been shunted out of the way as they are not what the drama is about.

Contrasting auras are created by differences in the structure of the two music dramas. *Lohengrin* is the most impeccably arranged of all Wagner's stage works, in a way that was perfectly tailored to nineteenth-century audiences' tastes. Not only was it congenial to aficionados of grand opera, but it is also Wagner's supreme achievement in that most nineteenth century of all dramatic forms: the well-made play. These plays, ubiquitous in the nineteenth-century theater, both spoken and operatic, were plotted around a secret that was known to the audience but not to most characters; in this instance the secret is Lohengrin's name, which even first-time audiences knew before entering the theater.

The action of the well-made play is the discovery of that secret. The first acts of well-made plays were devoted primarily to exposition, telling us of past events and how they impact the present; these acts ended with the arrival of the central figure whose advent on stage promises to resolve the torturous dilemmas created by the events that have been spoken about. Act I of *Lohengrin* follows this pattern precisely. The remaining two acts of the well-made play—most of these plays tended to be in three acts— are devoted to scenes of rising tension, leading to a crisis, usually in the middle of Act III, followed by the denouement in which the secret is revealed to all and loose ends are tied up. In *Lohengrin*, the crisis is Elsa asking Lohengrin his name and the death of Telramund, followed by the denouement of Lohengrin's revelation of his name, the return of Gottfried, and the death of Elsa.

Tristan, *like other of Wagner's late music dramas, can mean all things to all people, but a significant aspect of the piece remains clear: it is the first psychological drama in operatic history.*

Clarity of action is of the essence in *Lohengrin*. Each scene is so placed that the unfolding action is clear. Wagner, as always, the most economical and precise of dramatists, ensures not a word is out of place nor a single moment irrelevant. By the end of *Lohengrin* there is no mystery for the audience—we have understood all. The action that has brought this about is a perfect machine. Even the scenes are arranged in an order in a centuries-old tradition, from the Baroque period forward. Most plays and operas, until well into the nineteenth century, were presented on perspective stages with several pairs of wings. To assure continuity of action, it was common practice to alternate "long" scenes, which reached to the back of the stage, with "short" scenes that only used the front half of the stage, the wings at the back being hidden by a backdrop, usually between the third pair of wings. This set up a spatial rhythm between personal ("short") and public ("long") scenes, which is precisely the rhythm Wagner establishes.

Act I is public, with panoramic dimensions; all characters are introduced as key figures in the political world of Brabant. Act II, Scene 1 takes place in virtual darkness in the courtyard outside Elsa's chamber; it is intimate, involving Ortrud successfully insinuating herself into Elsa's confidence. As daylight breaks, to an impressive interlude depicting sunrise, the scene expands to the space before the cathedral, leading to the wedding

procession to the Minster, another public scene with a panoramic perspective. Act III, Scene 1 in the bridal chamber is appropriately intimate, while the final scene on the banks of the River Scheldt in which the troops are mustering for war, brings the private intrigue into the harsh stare of the public eye. This switch between public and private assures continuity in the running of the performance, a rhythm familiar to audiences of the time. Its overall effect would have been to create the sense of an orderly world, in which goodness can be trusted to overcome evil.

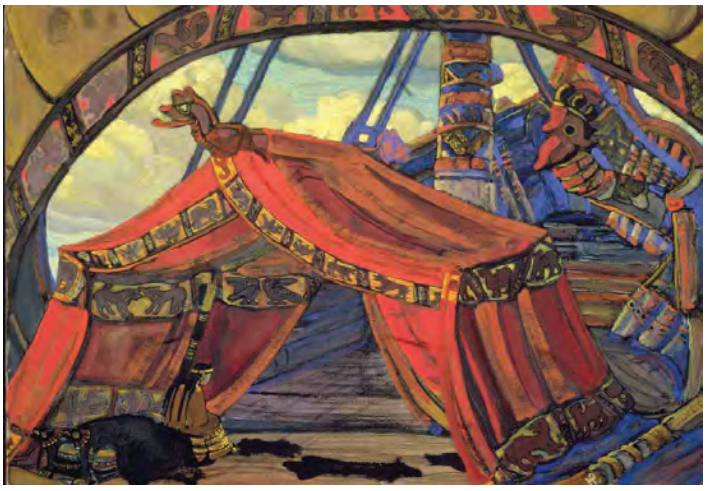
Tristan is totally different. It is as painstakingly structured as *Lohengrin* is but differently so. As Francis Fergusson argued in *The Idea of a Theater* (1949), Wagner's model for *Tristan* was Racinian tragedy, which had its roots in Greek tragedy. In this classical tradition, while the dramatic action was often driven by violent and deeply passionate impulses, violence and passion were rarely, if ever, physically represented on stage, for artistic reasons, as well as, at times, because of political or religious sanctions. In such drama, a tension arises between the quasi-ritualistic stasis of the bodily action and the shattering emotional turmoil of the characters' inner world.

Formal exchanges of monologue were closer to the norm than the rapid dialogue of conversation. Central characters have their confidantes, to whom they entrust their deepest and often most indefinable feelings, but an intimate exchange of emotions between characters who are equal in standing is rare. In the case of *Tristan* this leads to an extraordinary tensity, in that Wagner's music drama, widely acknowledged as Western culture's most powerful expression of romantic, erotic love, is clad in the seemingly most hidebound of dramatic forms. Vigorous, tangible conflict and elaborate spectacle, which is an important aspect of *Lohengrin*'s stage world and of countless plays and operas of the time, are avoided in *Tristan* by focusing exclusively on a world that cannot be seen, the psychic and especially the sexual experience of the characters. It is a rigorous psychological drama, in which corporeal representation would be inadequate to express the torturous emotions of the characters, so the conflict takes place within the minds of characters and, in effective performances, of the audience as well.

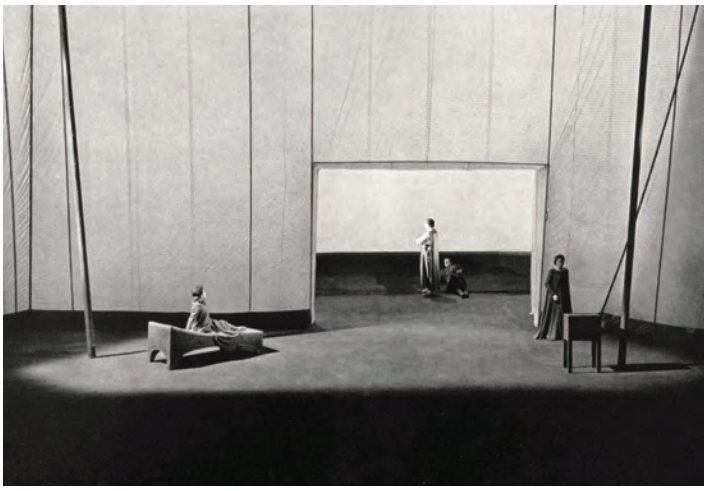
To achieve this relatively unusual dynamic, *Tristan,* unlike *Lohengrin*, does not have a well-made plot, in which each incident is carefully tied to other incidents. Rather each act is constructed around a single event culled from Gottfried von Strassburg's twelfth-century romance, *Tristan,* an immense poem of close to 20,000 lines. The poem is full of incident, conflict, and sexual intrigue, with a leavening of comedy that is a necessary ingredient in the rambunctious world of epic. Wagner's drama, however, takes place within the perplexing mysteries of the mind.

The aura of Tristan *is subdued after the events following the discovery of the lovers, attention is exclusively on the personal, while political and dynastic issues have been shunted out of the way as they are not what the drama is about.*

Act I, set on the voyage between Ireland and Cornwall, centers exclusively on Tristan and Isolde falling in love. Act II is focused on the consummation of that love and the disastrous aftermath. Act III, which is mainly from Wagner's imagination and not Strassburg's poem, is about death, and, perhaps arguably, more than any other opera of the nineteenth century, it speaks with a disturbing directness that anticipates the modernist theater of the fin-de-siècle. In *Lohengrin* all actions are



Set design for Tristan und Isolde *by Nikolai K. Roerich, 1912*



Stage design by Wolfgang Wagner, 1957

connected in a rigorously logical sequence. In *Tristan* connection can be understood only through recognizing the symbolic nature of each action; a meaning that, by and large, the audience must provide for itself.

Given the radically different natures of the two music dramas, the characters themselves are as different. *Lohengrin* is not only the supreme culmination of German Romantic opera but of grand opera itself. As one of the basic principles of grand opera was to demonstrate the inevitable subjugation of the individual to the forces of historical necessity, characterization tended not to emphasize individual traits of character. One of the great achievements of Wagner—and of his Italian contemporary Verdi—was to resist that tendency, suggesting that individual volition could overcome the historical powers that threaten to destroy it. If Wagner's conception of character did not fit the ethos of grand opera, neither did it suit the well-made play, a genre in which characters tended to be social ciphers, with limited lives that were, by necessity, shallow and not especially disruptive of the social and political status quo. In fact, Wagner of all nineteenth-century composers and dramatists, along with Ibsen, had the soundest and most subtle grasp of the disorderly power of the working of unconscious forces in personal life, and as his career advanced, he devoted much of his energy to exploring it.

Regarding characterization, *Lohengrin* is a transitional work. Wagner admitted he had problems in bringing his eponymous hero to life. He felt he had the woodenness of the wayside statues of saints, and as he could not solve this problem, he found himself losing sympathy for Lohengrin as he composed the work. It was Elsa who increasingly drew on his sympathies. For much of the action, until well into Act II, Elsa maintains the emblematic stature appropriate to a grand opera. Her voice has lightness and elevation, suiting a character who embodies the virtues of faith and trust, but as Elsa listens to Ortrud's plea for forgiveness and pity, she fatally gives way to her empathetic impulses and readmits Ortrud into her company. What is most striking about this transition, as her pity for Ortrud grows, at Elsa's line "*Kehr bei mir ein! Lass mich dich lehren" (*Enter here with me! Let me teach you); the duet between the two women culminates in Elsa singing one of Wagner's serenest melodies, which is undercut by Ortrud's grim joy at her weakness. Elsa's stature as an emblematic character in a political intrigue breaks down as her fascination with, and fear of, Lohengrin's insistence that she does not know his name, possesses her, at which point, serenity is dissolved into dramatic anxiety and deep distrust of Lohengrin. She is transformed into a tragic character.

But perhaps the most striking characters in *Lohengrin* are Ortrud and Telramund, who anticipate figures in the *Ring*. Their vocal lines are not structured on melody, as those of Lohengrin, Elsa, and the King. Rather they engage in conversation, in which music is devoted to exploring the dramatic needs of the situation rather than by displaying melody. This, of course, was not entirely new in Wagner. The Dutchman's entrance monologue in *Der Fliegende Holländer* and Tannhäuser's Rome narration are early essays in this music-dramatic style; in

Clarity of action is of the essence in Lohengrin. *Each scene is so placed that the unfolding action is clear.*

Lohengrin it is a technique that grows in prominence. The music articulates the fluidity of the dramatic situation, providing insight into character and motives, especially unconscious ones. There is only one scene in which this style predominates, the opening of Act II when Telramund assails Ortrud for deceiving him, deceiving him, which led him to accuse Elsa of murdering Gottfried. It culminates in one of the most chilling confrontations in Wagner as Ortrud derides Telramund for making God out of his own cowardice. Here the action enters a realm that has no anchor, no order, one that cannot be expressed through the reassurance underlying the uncommonly rich and frequently opulent melody that comprised much of the rest of the score of *Lohengrin*.

In the critical furor that greeted *Tristan,* the greatest outrage was reserved for the licentious implications of the action. Although mid-nineteenth-century society was far from innocent with regard to sex outside of marriage, this was an age in which public discussion of such matters was strictly taboo. In the theater, both spoken and lyric, the assumption reigned that any member of the nuclear family who sought unsanctioned sexual gratification outside the family was de facto guilty of destroying the institute of the family, which would lead to the decay of the social fabric. In particular, the theme of the "fallen woman"—an unfaithful wife or rebellious daughter—was an obsession in the theater for most of the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth; these plays often ended in the death of the offending woman.

Wagner was intensely aware of this iconic figure and employed it—indeed Elsa's death is the most prominent example of it in his drama—but in most of his work he tended to reverse the moral opprobrium that was commonly associated with the fallen woman's death. Senta dies to "save" the Dutchman; Elizabeth dies while

saving Tannhäuser, through prayer; Kundry succumbs from the exhaustion of a life lived in desolation. But the two most flagrant examples of inverting the figure of the "fallen woman" are Sieglinde and Isolde. In Act II of *Die Walküre*, as Sieglinde violently rebounds from her encounter with Siegmund and reacts to Hunding's pursuit of them, she specifically anathemizes marriage, seeing her ties to Hunding as a violation and pollution of herself, which the audience can read as marriage being a bond that destroys rather than upholds an integral society.

Tristan und Isolde goes further than *Die Walküre*. The primacy of erotic and romantic love is assumed; marriage, and particularly its dynastic and political uses, is a secondary, even an irrelevant concern, and as the action progresses it increasingly centers in the inner life of the characters. Most of Act I exposes Isolde's emotional crisis, as she recalls her violently conflicted feelings for Tristan in a volcanic outburst in which love and hate are unnervingly blended until the couple suddenly unite in their passion for each other. Isolde's ecstatic hymn to Frau Holde at the start of Act II plunges the action into the spiritual landscape of romantic love, in which all difference is annulled and the presence of conflict erased.

The serene transcendence achieved by the lovers is not dissolved by Marke's monologue bewailing Isolde's infidelity and does nothing to dispel the serene ambiance of the act as he still loves both Tristan and Isolde, and, despite his deep pain, he ends his long solo with a question: "warum mir diese Schmach?/Den unerforschlich tief/geheimnisvollen Grund,/wer macht der Welt ihn kund?" (why this disgrace?/The uncharted depths/of its mysterious causes,/who will make them known to the world?).

Tristan, *unlike* Lohengrin, *does not have a well-made plot, in which each incident is carefully tied to other incidents. Rather, each act is constructed around a single event culled from … an immense poem of close to 20,000 lines.*

As if in answer to this question, the focus of Act III shifts to Tristan's internal state of being. In his immense monologue he describes the dreary void without Isolde beyond the bounds of physical life, his return to the circumstances of his birth, and his inability to escape them. Is it this, a condition common perhaps to men as distinct from women, that identifies the root cause of tragedy? Wagner realized, in the most shattering passage in *Tristan,* the fatal incapacity of men to embrace and find fulfillment in romantic love. As the drama progresses it penetrates the cheerless depths of the isolated male psyche. In what is perhaps the only flaw in *Tristan,* his death is followed by fighting and speech tying up the few loose endings of the plot. They are unnecessary. Only Isolde's transfiguration is needed to end the drama.

The universal aspects of Tristan and Isolde's love and the total inwardness of the action can be gauged by contrasting the love duets at the center of each work. Each duet is pivotal to the action and each end, in their different ways, catastrophically. The love duet in *Lohengrin* is personal, the lyrical heart of the opera, but it is a somewhat staid, even passionless, affair. Centered on one of Wagner's most extended, poised, and overtly lyrical melodies, saturated with the imagery of Romantic Germany, it is one of his rare excursions into the sentimental. Sex, if it is involved at all, is kept at a distance. Indeed, from a post-Tristan viewpoint, the absence of any overriding physical passion in either Lohengrin or Elsa, seems to be the most fundamental cause of their sudden separation. In contrast, Tristan and Isolde go through the throes of unbridled physical passion, rendered so literally in both the orchestra and the vocal line that we experience their bodies as not only personal to themselves but as extensions or expressions of the world itself. It is the most extraordinary glorification of physical love, whose very intensity is founded in its universality. Tristan and Isolde's love lies within and beyond the world. The key issue for performance is that the center of the drama's action is a locus that cannot be seen.

Wagner spoke, scholars often tell us in jest, of inventing the invisible theater in *Parsifal,* but he had already achieved it in *Tristan. Tristan,* like Wagner's other late music dramas, can mean all things to all people, but a significant aspect of the piece remains clear: it is the first psychological drama in operatic history. *Lohengrin* deals with things that can be seen, with ideas, values, and principles. Even though Lohengrin hails from the mystic realm of Montserrat and the Grail, through the Prelude to Lohengrin's narration in Act III, we gain a graphic sense of the quasi-religious values he stands for. But *Tristan* deals essentially with things that cannot be seen or fully understood.

In the mid-nineteenth century, however, their settings were similar in style and in being so they puzzled the audience for *Tristan.* No music drama by Wagner better fits the scenic model of grand opera than *Lohengrin*. It provided opportunities for sumptuous sets, often allowing for the most minute historicist detail or even fully summoning up an idealized view of the medieval period to which audiences were so attached.

Stage design by Wolfgang Wagner, 1957

Sets by Heinrich Döll and Antonio Il Quaglio (aka Angelo Quaglio the Younger) for performances at the Munich Court Theatre in February 1858 and for a new production directed by Wagner himself, in 1867, provide model examples of grand operatic settings. Döll's airy, romantic setting for Act I in 1858 was, in 1867, compressed and boxier, with heavy trees framing and enclosing the action. The sets, costumes, and staging for the wedding procession to the cathedral in Act II were pure grand opera as well. Although *Lohengrin* is set in the tenth century, the designs for 1867 production were based on the architecture and costumes of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, providing a more conventional and picturesque setting, in contrast to the less attractive military and ecclesiastical buildings of the tenth century.

Michael Echter's famous picture of Quaglio's setting and Wagner's staging for the wedding procession to the cathedral (1868) also attests to the attention paid to the detail in costume and sets. What is notable is how crowded the scene is. *Lohengrin* attends primarily to public affairs; it is not a genre to represent loneliness or inwardness. Even Quaglio's design for the bedroom scene in Act III displays an obsession for decorative detail that must have drawn attention away from the newly married couple who are dwarfed by the scenery.

Critics at the first performance of *Tristan* were not insensible to the inappropriate nature of the settings; some acknowledging that historicist detail and grandiose staging were less important than atmosphere. In much of *Tristan und Isolde* there is a spatial tension within the action, between the claustrophobia of Isolde's cabin and a sense of movement, fullness of light, and freshness, but these can be felt more strongly if there is also a fullness of light, freshness, and a sense of change in the ocean through which the ship is sailing. But Angelo Quaglio's design for the first production seemed to deny that entirely, the ship largely hidden by massive draperies and the cluttered space of Isolde's quarters. The difference between Isolde's cabin and Tristan with his sailors in the stern is approximately observed, but there is no scenic response to the marine environment. Act II begins to move away from the obsession with historicist detail toward more atmospheric concerns. The woodland scene is framed by Heinrich Döll's set in which a corner of the castle is balanced by the great double trunk of a tree, spreading its branches like a roof over the top of the stage. The forest is romantic, but like the first act it is enclosed, with no visual hint of the universal spaces toward which the lovers yearn. The dimensions are still those of grand opera. This is less so in the final act. There was a general opinion that while Angelo Quaglio's set sustained the primarily realistic style of the rest of the production, historicist detail was of minor significance, as the dilapidated condition of Kareol expressed the sickness of Tristan rather than "authentic" historical architecture. Also, a view out to sea from the battlements at the back of the stage provides, for the first time, an abstract space that serves as a potential visual parallel for the numinous world that lies beyond our bodies.

It was, of course, *Tristan und Isolde* which, along with *Parsifal*, initiated the move toward minimalist and eventually abstract designs that revolutionized operatic stagecraft. Once Wagner's difficult musical language in *Tristan* came to be accepted, understood, and enjoyed, and the static nature of much of the action understood, the inadequacy of contemporary production techniques was accordingly recognized. The great Mahler/Roller production of *Tristan* in Vienna in 1903 was perhaps the first production to find solutions to the challenges offered by the unprecedented nature of Wagner's drama.

Tristan und Isolde, Act III Liebestod

(1859, premiere 1865)

Language: German

Text: Richard Wagner

This entire passage is sung by Isolde.

Libretto:	**English Libretto:**
Mild und leise	Mildly and gently,
wie er lächelt,	how he smiles,
wie das Auge	how the eye
hold er öffnet ---	he opens sweetly ---
Seht ihr's, Freunde?	Do you see it, friends?
Seht ihr's nicht?	Don't you see it?
Immer lichter	Brighter and brighter
wie er leuchtet,	how he shines,
stern-umstrahlet	illuminated by stars
hoch sich hebt?	rises high?
Seht ihr's nicht?	Don't you see it?
Wie das Herz ihm	How his heart
mutig schwillt,	boldly swells,
voll und hehr	fully and nobly
im Busen ihm quillt?	wells in his breast?
Wie den Lippen,	How from his lips
wonnig mild,	delightfully, mildly,
süßer Atem	sweet breath
sanft entweht ---	softly wafts ---
Freunde! Seht!	Friends! Look!
Fühlt und seht ihr's nicht?	Don't you feel and see it?
Hör ich nur diese Weise,	Do I alone hear this melody,
die so wundervoll und leise,	which wonderfully and softly,
Wonne klagend,	lamenting delight,
alles sagend,	telling it all,
mild versöhnend	mildly reconciling
aus ihm tönend,	sounds out of him,
in mich dringet,	invades me,
auf sich schwinget,	swings upwards,
hold erhallend	sweetly resonating
um mich klinget?	rings around me?
Heller schallend,	Sounding more clearly,
mich umwallend ---	wafting around me ---
Sind es Wellen	Are these waves
sanfter Lüfte?	of soft airs?
Sind es Wogen	Are these billows
wonniger Düfte?	of delightful fragrances?
Wie sie schwellen,	How they swell,
mich umrauschen,	how they sough around me,
soll ich atmen,	shall I breathe,
soll ich lauschen?	Shall I listen?
Soll ich schlürfen,	Shall I drink,
untertauchen?	immerse?
Süß in Düften	Sweetly in fragrances
mich verhauchen?	melt away?
In dem wogenden Schwall,	In the billowing torrent,
in dem tönenden Schall,	in the resonating sound,
in des Welt-Atems	in the wafting Universe of the
wehendem All —	World-Breath ---
ertrinken,	drown,
versinken ---	be engulfed ---
unbewußt ---	unconscious ---
höchste Lust!	supreme delight!

Stage direction: Isolde, aware of nothing round about her, fixes her gaze with mounting ecstasy upon Tristan's body.

Stage direction: Isolde sinks gently, as if transfigured, in Brangaene's arms, on to Tristan's body. Those standing around are awed and deeply moved. Mark blesses the bodies. –The curtain falls slowly.

Tristan and Isolt, *1910, oil on canvas, Rogelio de Egusquiza (1845–1915)*
Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=21988240

INTERVIEW

David Trippett on Editing His New Work of Scholarship: *Wagner in Context*

— *Interviewed by Patrick Burnson*

Wagner in Context (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, March 2024) was released this past spring. Musicologist David Trippett is the editor who brought this remarkable book to fruition.

Containing 42 essays by music scholars, writers, and other classical figures (including conductor Leon Botstein), the essays probe the life and legacy of Richard Wagner. Divided into six sections, including geography, politics, people, performance, and reception, the book offers comprehensive dives on well-known topics (e.g., the *Ring* and its stagings through time), practicalities (money), realities (criticism), as well as pointed socio-cultural examinations (performing his work in Israel; Buddhism, video game music).

It is the twelfth in a series of "Composers in Context" compilations published by Cambridge, which includes Mahler, Mozart, Liszt, and The Beatles.

Trippett is Professor of Music at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Christ's College. He is the author of *Wagner's Melodies: Aesthetics and Materialism in German Musical Identity* (2013) and the recipient of the Lockwood and Einstein awards from the American Musicological Society. He has also edited collected volumes on music in digital culture. and music and science.

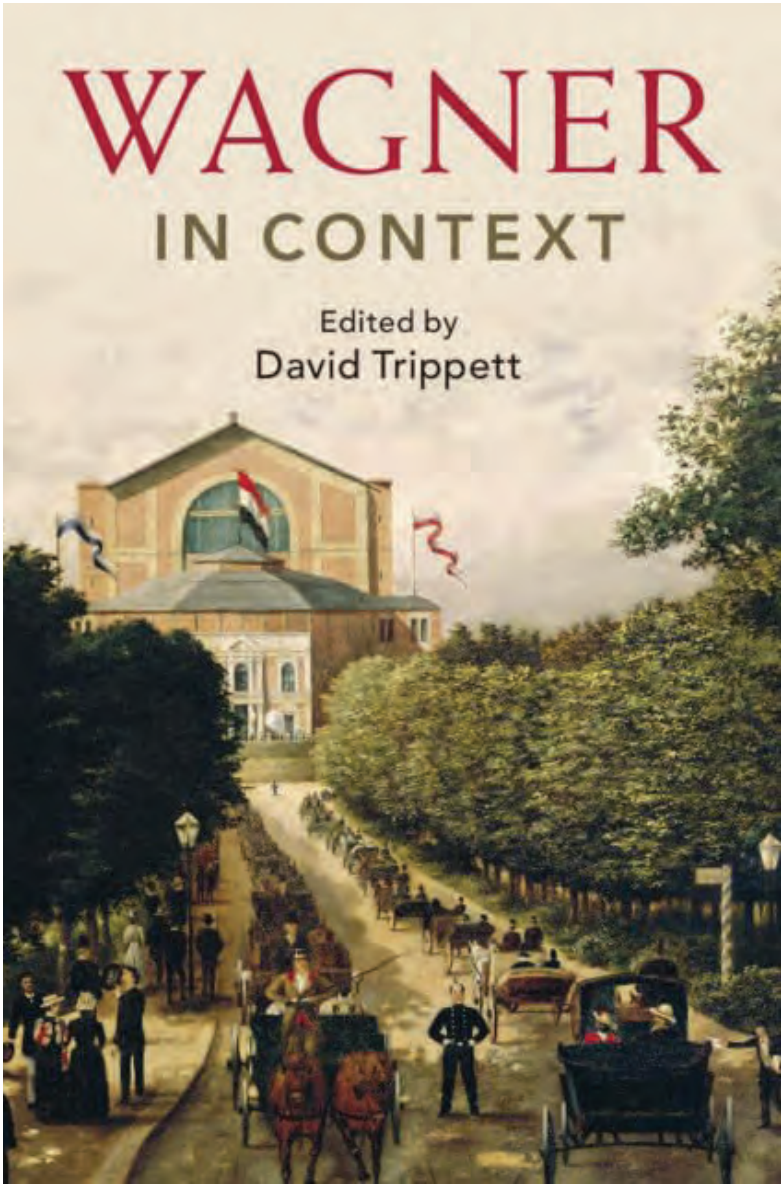
In this exclusive interview with *Leitmotive*, he shares insights on how such an ambitious project as *Wagner in Context* comes together.

What was the inspiration behind* Wagner in Context? *Any particular event or encounter driving this ahead?

Usually, writers on music begin with artworks. In Wagner's case, his opera and music dramas, where the sounding music and its history remains in focus. This work-centered approach is not what interested me for *Wagner in Context*. The purpose of the *X in Context* series is specifically to look beyond individual biography and works to the rich contexts that lie behind them: the macro-political scene, social mores, ideals of femininity, shifting philosophical ideas, attitudes towards bodily health, royalty practice in different countries vs cost of living. These include both local contexts of the nineteenth century (i.e., during Wagner's lifetime) and those that come thereafter, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

It begins by weaving Wagner's whole approach to life and art into the woof (fabric) of nineteenth-century Europe, and it zooms out, placing this in wider contexts with which his music resonates.

As I say in the introduction, it's like looking at a



beautiful garden through a windowpane. Your eye can focus on the greenery, or on the frame and glass but not both at once. This book invites readers to switch between both, focusing back and forth, thereby placing Wagner into a more dynamic history.

How did you determine which authors would make the most compelling contributions?

One of the enjoyable aspects of this project was the chance to rethink what it means to study Wagner in the 2020s. After charting the range of topics that were essential and those more variable and less developed that were desirable, I set about approaching scholars whose work I admire.

People enjoy writing about Wagner—such is the incredible breath and reach of his artistic interests, reading habits, and personal affiliation, not to mention the sheer quality of his music. I was very fortunate that almost everyone I approached to write a chapter agreed.

What began as a commission for internet memes became "Wagner and the Schopenhauerian erotics of video game music," and a commission initially directed at German literary history eventually became "Wagner and Spain," which discusses the remarkable influence of Calderón and Cervantes.

The project offered a chance for world experts, as well as some new voices, to focus on intellectual contexts. Therefore, I was very grateful to all the writers in the volume for agreeing to take up the challenge of condensing everything into such short chapters of about 3,000 words each.

What major surprises did you discover during the editing process?

It is perhaps a cliché, but Wagner is ever new. I have studied his music and writings for decades, but the new vistas emerging—concerning warfare, physical health, Israel, personal finance, Spanish literature, etc.—were genuinely surprising. It was less a case of Solomon's edict of "nothing new under the sun," and more a case of each new age reinventing, refashioning, and, frankly, reproblematizing the information we have, forcing us to rethink assumptions and break apart old narratives afresh.

This remaking process of Wagner studies for the twenty-first century was undoubtedly one of the more rewarding aspects of this project.

Is there a common thread that runs through this collection?

Perhaps not a common thread but a consistent attitude—to explore the context inhabited by Wagner and bring these to the fore. The book is divided into six sections:

—Place
—People
—Politics, Ideas, and Bodies
—Life, Language, and the Ancient World
—Music and Performance
—Reception

Each contains a set of short chapters, offering what amounts to a Michelin-starred taster menu of Wagner studies.

What new discoveries may readers expect?

Did you know that had royalties been paid in the German states as they were in Paris, Wagner's annual income would have been £28,598 during his lifetime? Readers can explore more in Sven Friedrich's excellent analysis of "Wagner's Finances."

The role of "noise" in language (as the Rheinmaidens' utterance—"Weia! Waga! Woge, du Welle"—emerges from noise into language) is borrowed from the hissing of a snake in E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Serpentina* and was ultimately linked to the idea of *Rauschen/rauschen* (noise/to rustle) in Wotan's ravens by Friedrich Kittler, an eclectic German post-structuralist philosopher and media theorist.

Geoffrey Winthrop Young, a poet and educator, has written a thought-provoking discussion of Kittler's profound influence on Wagner's reception.

Wagner "took the waters" often, notably at Albisbrun, in order to improve his constitution, circulation, and strength. This included ice baths, cold towel wraps, a carefully controlled diet, and exercise schedule. Holly Watkins has explored the deeper contexts for this in an exciting chapter about physical health.

And readers may not have known previously that one of the chief architects of Zionism, Theodor Herzl, adored listening to Wagner and attended the opera almost daily in Vienna. His diary records a confession that "it is only those days that I do not hear *Tannhäuser* that I begin to doubt the possibility of Israel." This inverts the association more commonly attended upon Wagner and Israel, and Victor Nefkens offers an important discussion about the differences between influence, association, and appropriation of Wagner's music.

These are tiny examples from within the book's 42 chapters, and, of course, I would recommend readers explore the full set at leisure.

This is an election year in America. What does conductor Leon Botstein have to say about Wagner's fascination with this country?

Leon has contributed a characteristically erudite and original discussion. It concerns both the role America played in Wagner's imagination (including imagery—Siegfried as frontiersman) and the early performance history of Wagner in America (including a production of *Parsifal* in Yiddish in New York in 1903).

One of the most valuable lines of argument that readers might wish to explore more is the idea that Wagner's realization of drama and imagination in sound formed an important template for early cinema in America, particularly in demonstrating the emotional power of this combination of drama/narrative, Wagnerian music, and entrancing spectacle. I dare say, the lessons of this genre are not lost on politics today, even if their origins are rarely traced back so far.

San Francisco Opera is staging* Tristan und Isolde *this fall season. How might your book enrich this experience for our audience?

I would encourage readers to begin by exploring three chapters: on Schopenhauer; on Wagner's orchestration; and on Wagner's ideal femininity. All bear on the narrative, philosophy, and expressivity of *Tristan und Isolde*.

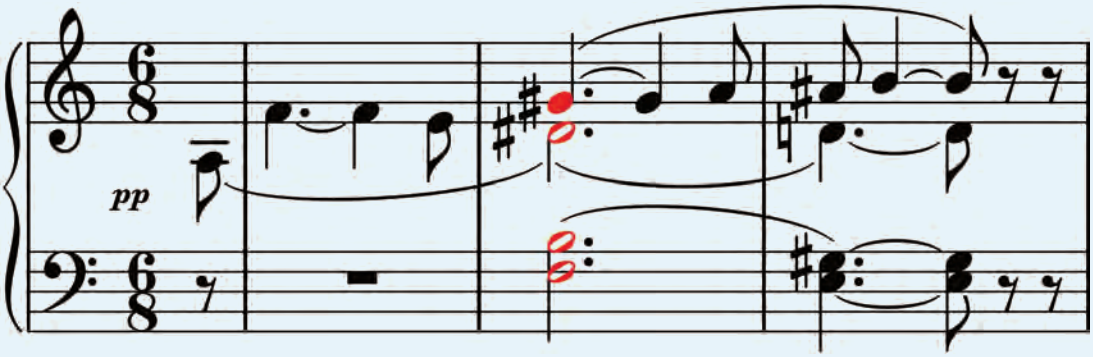
Beyond these, I encourage readers to grasp onto any chapters that capture the imagination. Listening to Wagner is ultimately a very personal experience, and reading, too, has an inwardly directed goal—of greater understanding, of expanding our horizon, of expanding our world.

David Trippett

We need this form of enlightenment constantly, and I hope the production of *Tristan,* with the wonderful artists of San Francisco Opera, can help to bring it about for all readers and listeners, Wagnerians and non-Wagnerians alike.

The Tristan Chord

— *Peter Felleman*



The infamous Tristan Chord appears in the first bars of the Prelude to Act I of *Tristan und Isolde*. Musically, it is made up of the notes F, B, D♯, and G♯. This is not original, and examples of the use of chords with the same intervals stretch back deep into music history. However, it is Wagner's use of the chord that is so important.

Musicologists can explain how it moves away from traditional harmony leading eventually to atonality. More important for those attending performances and listening to *Tristan* is the profoundly mysterious and unsettling sound world it creates within the opera. As part of a leitmotif, it appears again and again, creating tension in the listener until the very end of Isolde's "Liebestod" when the chord finally resolves, releasing Isolde and the audience.

ESSAY

Disembodied Masterworks: *Tristan und Isolde* and the 1936 *Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia of Recorded Music*

— *Richard Masters*

"It is an astonishing book, this encyclopedia."[1]

Introduction

In the enthusiastic forward to R.D. Darrell's *The Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia of Recorded Music,* critic Lawrence Gilman evoked a call to arms by the French writer Émile Vuillermoz at an International Congress of Music Critics in the late 1920s. The Frenchman said that it was "madness … for critics to neglect performances which were heard by millions, while giving prominent attention to those heard by hundreds, or at the most, a few thousands."[2] As a result of his heartfelt plea, a resolution was passed. "Resolved: That this Congress call the most earnest attention of the Associations of Critics in all countries to the great and growing importance of the mechanical and electrical means of reproducing and conveying music …"[3]

The critical realization of the significance of recordings was doubtless related to the advent of electrical recording technology, first introduced in 1925. Prior to the electric-powered microphone, recordings were made using "acoustic" technology, with sound traveling from a large horn through a diaphragm to the tip of a needle, which captured the music directly onto the soft wax of a special cylinder or disc.[4] Although singers recorded quite well, orchestras did not. To be close enough to hear the recording horn, there could only be roughly thirty musicians in a room, and certain instruments were substituted for others that did not record well. (For example, there is always an "oompah-pah" quality to operatic records from the first quarter of the twentieth century, because the double bass was invariably replaced by a tuba.)[5] Only four and a half minutes of music could be captured on a twelve-inch

side, necessitating side breaks for longer pieces. Few large-scale works were recorded in their entirety. As Robert Philip points out: "Gramophone records were very expensive, and it was rare for a record company to take the commercial risk of issuing a major work complete."[6] By the 1920s, critics had begun to attack record companies for offering bowdlerized versions of classical masterworks.[7]

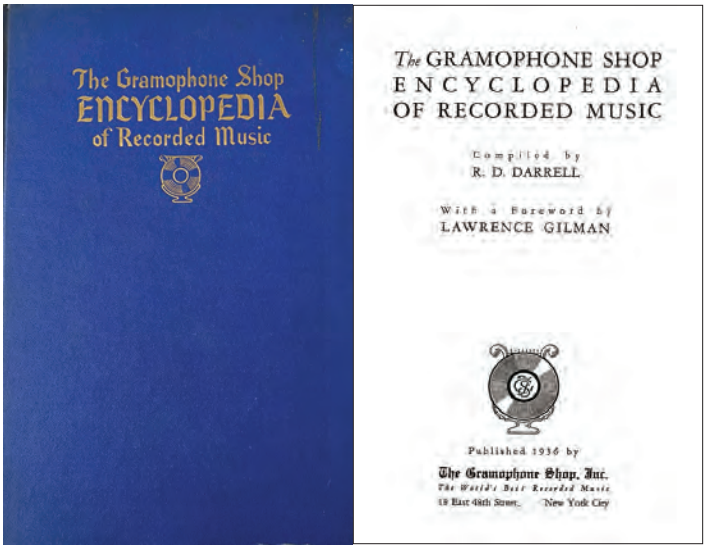
In 1925, the microphone was introduced, and, as a result, a full symphony orchestra could be captured with ease, making the experience of listening to a symphonic recording much more akin to a real concert than the previous acoustic records. Double basses could be heard on a recording; no more circus bands! The problem of limited recording time remained, but the greatly improved sonics encouraged classical music lovers to purchase sets of records rather than singles, meaning that an entire symphony or even a full opera could be recorded and sold—a worthwhile investment for both the public and the companies responsible for producing the records.

For classical music lovers who wished to build their collections, there were few options for investigating existing recordings from the comfort of their homes. More intrepid collectors may have amassed the individual catalogues of the disparate record companies. Still, there was no central compilation of recording data like the *Schwann* catalog of the later twentieth century. The American critic R.D. Darrell (1903–1988) was the first to realize the existence of a need, and he responded to it by compiling *The Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia of Recorded Music*.

Darrell was a Harvard and New England Conservatory-trained musician who began reviewing records in the 1920s. He was interested not only in

1 George Currie, "Passed in Review," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle,* July 16, 1936, 16.
2 R.D. Darrell, compiler, *The Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia of Recorded Music* (Wisconsin Cuneo Press, Milwaukee, WI, 1936), i.
3 Ibid., i.
4 Robert Philip, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 27.
5 Ibid., 27-28.
6 Ibid., 29.
7 Ibid., 30.

classical music but also in jazz, being one of the first critics to recognize the merit of Duke Ellington's compositions.[8] *The Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia* was his first major contribution to the music world, to be followed by the *Music Lovers' Guide* and later, *Good Listening: A Guide to the World's Best Music*. The Gramophone Shop was a Midtown Manhattan record store in business from 1929 until 1954. In addition to selling records, the shop had its own record label, releasing "esoteric fare" not offered by the bigger established record companies.[9] In 1936, it published the encyclopedia, the first volume of its kind. In the acknowledgments to the encyclopedia, Darrell thanks the "officials and staff" of the shop for their help in



the compilation of the volume, as well as numerous librarians, musicians, and musicologists.[10] The most familiar name in the list of contributors is one Bernard Herrmann, at the time a staff conductor for the CBS Radio Network but better known for his later film scores created for Alfred Hitchcock. Darrell also acknowledges the previous contributions of various record magazines (*Gramophone, Disques, Phonograph Monthly Review*) as well as a complete catalogue of all discs issued in France (*Répertoire Phonographique*).[11]

The hefty encyclopedia comprises not only music but also spoken word, offering listings of language courses as well as poetry and literature in recorded performance. The bulk of the book, however, is music: it is organized alphabetically by composer, then by composition type, and finally, alphabetically by title. Operas are first noted in whole or part, reflecting the pre-LP era difficulty of capturing a truly complete opera. Once "complete" recordings or significant excerpts ("bleeding chunks") are dealt with, there is a scene-by-scene breakdown of individual recordings focusing on arias or small ensembles. Complete record information is given, with

In 1925, the microphone was introduced, and, as a result, a full symphony orchestra could be captured with ease, making the experience of listening to a symphonic recording much more akin to a real concert than the previous acoustic records.

single pieces or arias cross-referenced with information about the music on the flip side of the record, as well as record company and catalogue data. Also present is information on versions of arias and scenes performed in languages other than the original, with the titles specified in the respective novel tongue. "In fernem Land" from *Lohengrin* thus becomes "It. Racconto: Da voi lontan" or "Fr. Récit du Graal: Aux bords lointains."[12] Selected out-of-print recordings are noted with the word "withdrawn."

The modern music lover might believe an antiquated compilation of this nature to be a curiosity rather than a useful tool. Conventional wisdom posits that the internet is a mighty search engine that allows for the finding of all useful existing information; in the case of historical recordings, this is not necessarily the case. An eager Wagnerite who utilizes Google to find a historical recording of the previously mentioned "In fernem Land" will be presented with more than 120,000 hits searching for the aria title alone. "'In fernem Land' + historical recording" will still provide more than 52,500 hits, and there is no organizing principle at work: a 1911 recording of Jacques Urlus pops up alongside a 1960s-era Nicolai Gedda record. Using an encyclopedia like Darrell's provides a much more targeted method for exploration. The book and a site like YouTube can work in tandem; YouTube can provide examples of many recordings found in the book, but it must be searched in a targeted manner. In this article, I will use the encyclopedia and YouTube to explore lesser-known recordings of Wagner, records that provide a historical perspective of his music that often differs greatly from the "classic" performances that gained currency in the LP era.

In discussing the recordings, I will only refer to performances that can be easily found on YouTube.

8 R.D. Darrell, "Ellington in an encyclopedia," in *The Duke Ellington Reader*, ed. Mark Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 33.

9 Bryan, "Seventeenth Century Organ Music (Finn Viderø)," *Shellackophile Blog*, December 15, 2016, http://shellackophile.blogspot.com/2016/12/seventeenth-century-organ-music-finn.html

10 Darrell, *Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia*, viii

11 Ibid., viii.

12 Ibid., 512.

Most of the recordings mentioned in the encyclopedia have made their way onto compact disc at one time or another, but it is difficult to find them without a great deal of trouble and expense. I will also focus entirely on recordings that capture Wagner's "original intent," setting aside mentions of all-orchestral versions created by Leopold Stokowski and Max von Schillings.

Wagner in the Encyclopedia

We find Wagner between Wagenaar and Waldteufel, occupying a hearty 27 pages of tiny type. (By comparison, Verdi receives only 20 pages, and Beethoven eleven.) Though curiosities like the August Wilhelmj arrangement of an Albumblatt for violin and piano or the overture to *Die Feen* are present, most entries are found in recordings of the canonical operas, from *Der Fliegende Holländer* to *Tristan und Isolde*. By 1936, only four operas existed in near-complete (versions: *Tristan und Isolde*, *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Die Walküre*.) Other operas could be found in the form of assorted large-scale excerpts (*Siegfried, Götterdämmerung*), single acts (*Parsifal*), or only as scattershot collections (*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*). *Der Fliegende Holländer* and *Das Rheingold* were only available as brief excerpts published by different companies. The unavailability of a complete *Rheingold* or even significant excerpts from the opera is decried by Darrell in an editorial note: "The lack of a complete or nearly complete 'Rheingold' is the most serious gap in the recorded 'Ring' repertory."[13]

For the Wagnerite interested in delving into historical recordings, the encyclopedia is a gold mine of information. Included here are not only well-known Wagnerian singers, like Frida Leider, Lauritz Melchior, and Kirsten Flagstad, but a host of others who never gained popular renown, interpreters who sang Wagner's works with great passion and beauty: Emmy Bettendorf, Delia Reinhardt, Florence Austral, Rudolf Laubenthal, and many others.

To discuss Wagner's place in the *Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia,* I have chosen to survey Darrell's entries on *Tristan und Isolde*. This is in part because it's an opera with which most Wagnerians are familiar but also because it was recorded by a wide variety of artists. There is a single large-scale set that focuses on Act III and then numerous recordings of excerpts.

The "Complete" *Tristan und Isolde*

In the era of 78 rpm records—records that could only handle at most four and a half minutes of music on each twelve-inch side—there was no such thing as a complete Wagner opera on disc. This was due mostly to the financial realities of a record company releasing a large set of discs. To give an example, an abridged composite *Götterdämmerung* featuring one Brünnhilde, two Siegfrieds, three Hagens, and two Gunthers (with two orchestras conducted by three conductors) was recorded by HMV[14] in London and Berlin from 1926 to 1929. Released on 16 records (32 sides, roughly 144 minutes of music), the set cost $24 in 1936 or $1.50 per record. In 2024, $24 is the equivalent of $543, adjusted for inflation.[15] If the complete opera with its usual running time of four hours was recorded, it would add another $16.50 to the total cost: $40.50, or $917 in modern dollars. Even the most dedicated Wagnerian would think twice before paying out that amount, particularly for easily breakable discs that require changing every four and a half minutes. The record companies' solution then was to omit whatever could be cut while preserving the major musical numbers and hoping the critics didn't quibble with the results.

Record companies tried to discover how to record Wagner in a cost-effective manner and hit upon the solution of recording at Bayreuth. Fred Gaisberg, chief of the HMV Artists Department, attempted to sign Siegfried Wagner to a Bayreuth recording contract during his visit to London in 1927, only to be undercut by Gaisberg's own company, which did not want to agree to record operas at Bayreuth without being assured that the singers would be sufficiently well known to attract buyers.[16] Wagner instead signed a contract with Columbia, and recording engineers descended upon that year's festival to record excerpts from *Parsifal*.

Record companies tried to discover how to record Wagner in a cost-effective manner and hit upon the solution of recording at Bayreuth.

Though these were recording sessions rather than attempts to capture live performances, recording during the Bayreuth Festival proved problematic. Charles Gregory of Columbia Records observed:

> The artists and instrumentalists were difficult to assemble. They had come to look upon the Festival as a holiday and resented the extra rehearsals and

13 Darrell, *Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia,* 519.

14 Darrell refers to HMV ("His Master's Voice") as "G" for "Gramophone" throughout the encyclopedia. HMV is the name by which most of its employees and the record-buying public refer to the company, so I will use that acronym throughout.

15 https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/, accessed October 19, 2020.

16 Jerrold Moore, *A Matter of Records* (New York: Taplinger Publishing, 1977), 180.

> performances that robbed them of their spare time, even though Columbia was paying good fees. The orchestral players were particularly difficult and were always going on strike . . . These [*Parsifal* recording] sessions started at any time when they could be fitted in but usually in the evenings when the theatre was free.[17]

There was only one microphone used with "no tone controls of any kind."[18] Although the results were astonishing considering the circumstances (the recordings documented conductor Karl Muck's magisterial interpretations of the Transformation music, Act I Grail scene, and Flower Maidens Scene), Columbia learned its lesson and decided to tackle *Tristan* the following year in August, when the Festival was not in session.

The first cast of *Tristan* in 1928 featured Lauritz Melchior and Frida Leider as the star-crossed lovers, but both of those individuals were under contract to HMV rather than Columbia. As a result, pride of place fell to Gunnar Graarud and Nanny Larsén-Todsen. Rudolf Bockelmann was the Kurwenal, and Anny Helm was the rare soprano Brangäne. King Marke was sung by the Norwegian bass Ivar Andrésen, and the performance was overseen by Karl Elmendorff.

Elmendorff (1891–1962) has been largely forgotten by Wagnerites, no doubt, because his work was always competent but never on the exalted level of a Furtwängler or Toscanini. Elmendorff was the type of dependable musician one can always find on the conducting staff of any opera house. The impression given by his conducting of the Columbia *Tristan* is one of tidiness. His tempi are on the fast side but never distractingly so. Elmendorff does not often whip the orchestra into a frenzy like Albert Coates or Victor de Sabata, but he also does not stop to smell the roses like Knappertsbusch or Furtwängler. Modern listeners who have suffered through "sensitive" interpretations of the opera (conductors working out their emotional issues on the podium, in the process adding a half hour or more to the running time) may find this recording to be a balm. The orchestra knows the score backward and forward, and there is never a sense of strain, even in the knottier moments of the score.

The same cannot be said of the Tristan, Gunnar Graarud (1886–1960), a Bayreuth favorite who often yelps to reach his high notes (the "Isolde! Geliebte! Tristan! Geliebter!" portion of Act II is particularly egregious). Graarud's voice comes across as small and

is of the throaty tenor variety that many *Leitmotive* readers will recall from their least-favorite Wagner recordings. The Norwegian tenor does better with softer moments; when he is not trying to muscle the music into submission, Graarud produces a lovely color and reveals himself to be a sensitive musician. "O sink hernieder" is perfectly balanced with the soprano, and his ashamed reply to King Marke later in the act is touching. The Act III "Wie sie selig" showcases more of the tenor's vocal control and potent tonal hues. The listener is luckily spared more of Graarud's effortful singing, because this particular *Tristan* raves and dies offstage due to significant Act III cuts.

Nanny Larsén-Todsen (1884–1982) is a genial Irish princess. Her voice has a smiling tone that would make for a perfect Eva, but it is problematic for Isolde, who is made of sterner stuff than the maid of Nuremberg. Larsén-Todsen's narrative and curse is energetic, but it lacks the bite of the vicious and thrilling Frida Leider.

17 Ibid., 180.

18 Jonathan Brown, Great Wagner Conductors: A Listener's Companion (Canberra: Parrot Press, 2012), 188.

The love music of Act II is more suited to the Swedish soprano's talents, her warm timbre providing a pleasant contrast to the leather-lunged Graarud. The "Liebestod" is a lovely bit of singing from a technical standpoint but offers little dramatic involvement from the soprano.

Rudolf Bockelmann is a lightweight, dull Kurwenal who does manage to find a consoling tone for the dying Tristan in Act III. His colleague Anny Helm offers a tremulous, schoolmarmish Brangäne, perhaps the ideal companion for Larsén-Todsen's well-behaved Isolde. The surprising hero of this recording is King Marke, sung by Ivar Andrésen (1896–1940). His heartbroken Act II monologue is an excellent piece of vocal acting. Within the twelve minutes or so of the aria, Andrésen leads us through each of Marke's feelings: disbelief, sadness, anger, grief, resignation. The aria is unfortunately cut near the ending, but this is a lovely interpretation that fully justifies the inclusion of the monologue, which should have been protected from the producer's shears.

For the Wagnerite interested in delving into historical recordings, the encyclopedia is a gold mine of information.

It should be noted that this *Tristan* is incomplete. Both Act I and Act II have some nips and tucks, what you might expect from a historical recording, but Act III is missing about half of its music. Columbia's executives may have been aware of the existence of a recording of a "complete" Act III by rival HMV (one that still sports some significant cuts) and decided to cede the battleground to HMV by focusing on Acts I and II, saving some money in the process.

His Master's Voice Recording, Act III

In the spirit of its "Potted" *Ring* cycle (a large collection of excerpts from the *Ring* recorded with a variety of singers, conductors, and orchestras), HMV cobbled together the roughly 40-minute recording of Act III from a variety of sources from 1927 to 1929. There are still significant cuts, around 35 pages worth, but it is less of an evisceration of the score than on the Columbia set. HMV's recording boasts three conductors (Albert Coates, Leo Blech, Lawrance Collingwood), three orchestras (the London Symphony Orchestra, Berlin Staatsoper, and a 'Symphony Orchestra,' presumably an HMV pickup group), and three Kurwenals (Howard Fry, Charles Victor[19], and Eduard Habich). The title roles are sung by Walter Widdop and Göta Ljungberg, singers who were paired in several Wagner discs in the 1920s.

Widdop (1892–1949) will be something of an acquired taste for modern Wagnerians. His adenoidal tone—a common sound amongst English tenors of this era—takes some getting used to, and his German is mostly incomprehensible. That said, Tristan's death is affecting; his vision of Isolde has a desperate tenderness, and his ravings possess a heroic but still lyrical quality that is superior to the barking we hear on many modern recordings. For her part, Ljungberg (1893–1955) gives us a more dramatically involved Isolde than Larsén-Todsen. Her voice has point and is bright, giving her a more youthful sound than some Isoldes. She is careful to sing Wagner's printed dynamics; for once, we hear a truly *pianissimo* start to the Liebestod. There are occasional struggles with intonation, but for the most part, this is a solid, if not spectacular, Isolde.

Two of the three Kurwenals are negligible. Fry and Victor, singing in the first half of the act, share that unique English timbre with Widdop; in the second scene, Victor is nearly indistinguishable from the tenor. Both baritones sound as if their voices are several sizes too small for the role. Habich, later a stalwart Alberich at the Metropolitan Opera, is more convincing in the final scene as he challenges Melot. Again, we hear Andrésen as the King, and again, he is the highlight of the recording. How moving he is as he mourns Tristan, and how responsive he is to Wagner's intense chromaticism. Genia Guszalewicz's Brangäne is excellent; if only she had been utilized by Columbia on its recording!

Having audited the two large-scale "bleeding chunks" of *Tristan* mentioned by Darrell, we should turn our attention to the individual excerpts.

Act I: Prelude

There are eight recordings of the prelude mentioned in the encyclopedia.[20] The three highlighted by Darrell are Furtwängler with the Berlin Philharmonic (1930, Brunswick), Karl Muck leading the Berlin Staatsoper Orchestra (HMV), and Adrian Boult conducting the BBC Symphony (HMV). Other important recordings listed as "duplications" include Alfred Hertz's recording with the San Francisco Symphony (Victor), Siegfried Wagner's disc with the Berlin Staatsoper Orchestra (Parlophone), and Ignace Jan Paderewski's piano rendition of a transcription by his student Ernest Schelling (Victor).

Many readers will be familiar with Furtwängler's classic 1952 EMI recording of the complete opera; for many, that set is still the touchstone recording of the

19 Victor is not mentioned in Darrell's note on the set.

20 Darrell, *Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia*, 532.

opera. It is interesting, then, to compare this 1930 recording to the 1952 performance. The sonics afforded Furtwängler in 1930 are inferior to the 1952 version, with a claustrophobic, closeted sound, but the overall effect is somehow more "orchestral." We hear a large group only as a large group, with no sense of solo instruments being layered atop a separate band. The 1952 recording allows us to hear instruments as individual voices, providing a sensation of chamber music, but there is less heft to the sound. In the later recording, we can hear Furtwängler's famed inability to clearly indicate downbeats; important arrivals are ragged, usually in the cellos and double basses. The murkier engineering in 1930 helped to obscure this particular trait. The 1930 Prelude has more give-and-take; it is faster than its counterpart by 30 seconds, yet it seems this is due to a willingness to push forward and then relax at ideal moments. The most notable aspect of the earlier Prelude is its overwhelming ecstasy at the climax; the later recording cannot match it.

Karl Muck, famous as an orchestral trainer who insisted on laser-like precision, was asleep at the switch for his 1928 recording of the Prelude. The ensemble is looser than Furtwängler at his worst, and it often drags. The low brass is incapable of playing in tune; it is unfortunate that the engineering somehow emphasizes louder moments in the score. Muck is not able to find the same ethereal soft sounds as his younger counterpart, and his climaxes lack power. Wagner's concert ending is used for this recording.

In the era of 78 rpm records—records that could only handle at most four and a half minutes of music on each twelve-inch side—there was no such thing as a complete Wagner opera on disc.

Unfortunately, several of the recordings mentioned by Darrell are not easily found; the recording of Boult and the BBC is available on an out-of-print CD from Dutton but is not on YouTube. Max von Schillings, a composer and conductor barely remembered for his opera (*Mona Lisa*), recorded the Prelude for Polydor, but it is also missing from YouTube.

Otto Klemperer's recording with the Berlin Staatsoper Orchestra is out of print in an Archiphon multi-CD compilation, but the entirety of the set has been transferred to YouTube. Klemperer's pre-war activities are often glossed over in favor of his work later in life as the venerable, granitic conductor of the Philharmonia Orchestra. In his post-war manifestation, he recorded colossal (some would say bloated) renditions of the Beethoven symphonies, the Bach B Minor Mass, Bruckner, Brahms, and all of the other Teutonic masterworks. His recording of the *Tristan Prelude* is neither swift nor slow and does not scale any emotional heights. It is most notable for its careful working out of details; there is no sloppiness to be found, clarity is omnipresent, and dynamics have been calibrated to the nth degree. Arnold Schoenberg viewed Klemperer's conducting as clinical in nature: "Klemperer is taken as a great expert in Berlin because he makes music in a way that is less laden with feeling (*gefühlsbetont*) than is usual here. In reality, he is only continuing where Mahler began, but he exaggerates." [21]

Alfred Hertz's account with the San Francisco Symphony is a powerful document of a conductor who has been mostly forgotten. Felix Mottl, himself a famous conductor of Wagner, reported that Hertz conducted Wagner "as if in a rage, all rough-and-ready. In doing so, he does develop a zeal and seriousness which is touching enough …"[22] Massive volume was a priority for Hertz, who would shout "Mehr! Mehr!" at his orchestras to get them to boost their Wagnerian dynamics to an exciting level.[23] Of the available recordings of the Prelude mentioned in the *Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia*, this is perhaps the most moving. Some sharping in the brass aside, the execution and ensemble are excellent. Hertz's string section, particularly the low strings, is never afraid to dig in, meaning that the all-important bass line is always audible and always supportive. Hertz's tempi are flowing without rushing, increasing in intensity and momentum as the Prelude progresses.

Act I: Isolde's Narrative and Curse

Only two recordings of this scene are mentioned in the 1936 *Encyclopedia:* Frida Leider as Isolde accompanied by the Brangäne of Elfriede Marherr-Wagner on HMV, and Margarete Bäumer (solo, with no accompanying Brangäne) for Parlophone. The latter excerpt begins at "Von einem Kahn" and continues to the end with no cuts, while the Leider recording begins earlier at "Doch nun von Tristan" but cuts thirteen bars.

Bäumer (1898–1969) is the less familiar of the two Isoldes. After a 1920 debut in Wuppertal, Bäumer eventually became ensconced in Leipzig, where she performed regularly until her appointment to the

21 Peter Heyworth, *Otto Klemperer: his life and times,* 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1:290.

22 Felix Mottl, diary entry of December 16, 1903, quoted in Brown, *Great Wagner Conductors*, 170.

23 Brown, *Great Wagner Conductors*, 349.

faculty of the Leipzig Music High School in 1954.[24] She specialized in all Wagnerian soprano roles, as well as those of Richard Strauss. Her 1929 recording of the "narrative and curse" in Act I is unfortunately a weak performance. Bäumer's singing is enervated, lacking forward momentum. There are tuning issues sprinkled throughout, with Wagner's insistent chromaticism throwing up a number of hurdles that Bäumer does not quite surmount. Bäumer may have made a different impression in an opera house than she does here, but the microphones capture a singer who lacks intensity and musical decisiveness.

The most exciting discovery found in the Encyclopedia *is the Liebestod of Elsa Alsen. She came to the United States in 1923, toured with several opera companies, and was the first Isolde at San Francisco Opera, performing the role under the baton of Alfred Hertz in 1927.*

After Bäumer's relaxed rendition, the swashbuckling singing of the great Frida Leider (1888–1975) comes as a shock. Her 1928 record with the Berlin State Orchestra under Leo Blech gives full vent to Isolde's rage, with Leider and Blech taking Wagner at his word when he writes "immer belebter" ("always more lively") or "schneller" ("faster"). Her cries of "Rache! Tod! Tod uns beiden!" are chilling, sung with power and assurance. Leider's imitation of Tristan's mocking words as he points out the beautiful princess for his uncle are not just angry; they drip with wounded dignity, making the curse all the more understandable. The timbre of Leider's voice is warm yet always laser-focused. Her diction is crisp, with every consonant clearly enunciated alongside pure vowels from which one could take dictation. Blech whips the orchestra into a frenzy and is with Leider every moment. This is a recording to treasure; a master class in healthy Wagnerian singing.

Act II: O sink hernieder (Love Duet)

Only two versions of the great love duet are mentioned in the *Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia*, both featuring the same Isoldes as in the Narrative and Curse. Bäumer is paired with Walter Kirchhoff (Parlophon), while Leider sings with Lauritz Melchior (HMV). The former set is conducted again by Frieder Weissmann, leading an unidentified "large opera orchestra" 1931.[25] Leider and Melchior are accompanied by the great English conductor Albert Coates; their set was made in Berlin and in London, with the first half performed by the Berlin Staatsoper Orchestra and second by the London Symphony Orchestra in 1929. Both recordings require savage cuts in order to fit the duet on two records. Darrell notes that the Leider/Melchior recording (the longer of the two) cuts some 29 pages of the duet, the total timing of the duet being c. 17 minutes. The Bäumer/Kirchhoff recording is only c. 11 minutes in length, thus more of a "greatest hits" than a true representation of the duet.

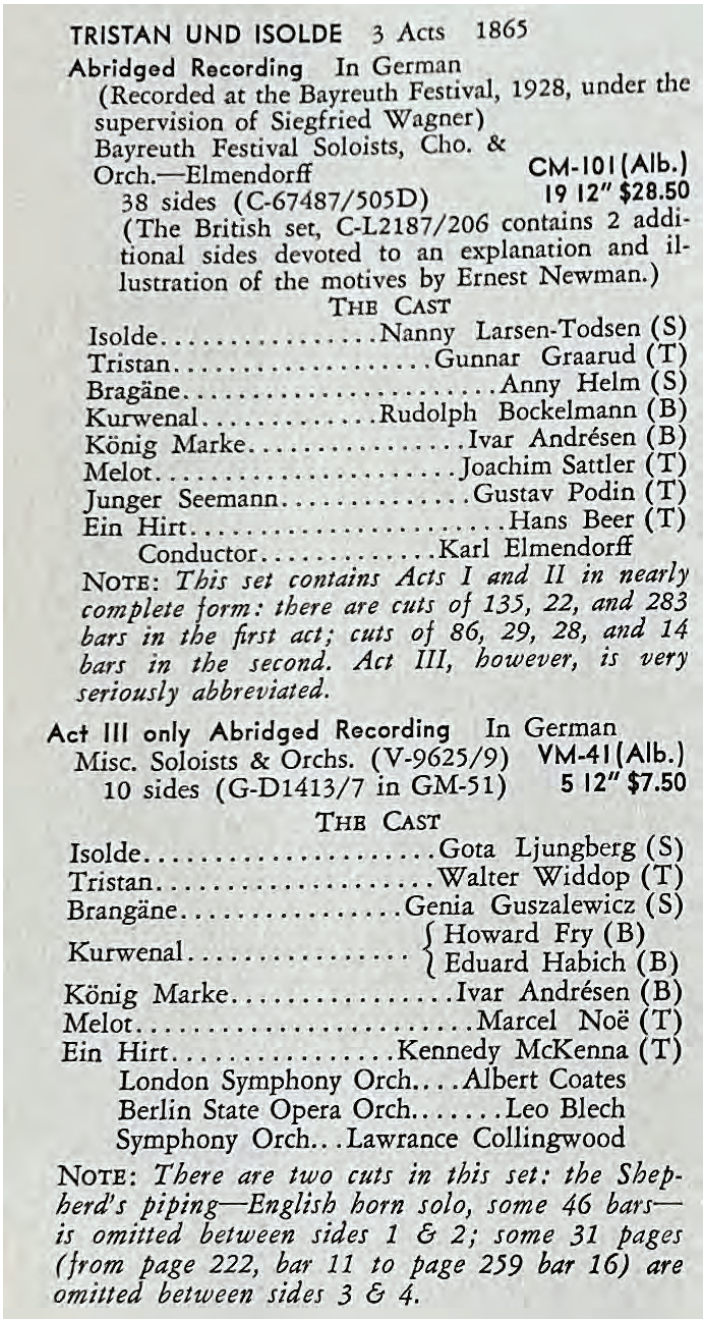
Although now considered a minor figure, Kirchhoff was immortalized in the 2005 film *Joyeux Noël* as tenor Nikolaus Sprink. Like Sprink, Kirchhoff sang in No Man's Land during the Christmas Truce of 1914. Kirchhoff begins the duet by showing off his lovely, Leo Slezak-like soft tone. Throughout the duet, he leans heavily on that light timbre, even occasionally marshalling a pleasant falsetto. The soft singing unfortunately impacts his intonation. As the duet increases in intensity and volume, Kirchhoff's voice turns hard, and he struggles with the higher tessitura, resorting to falsetto to reach the higher pitches and dropping out entirely at the final climax. For her part, Bäumer turns in a respectable performance, offering much more verve here than in her Narrative and Curse. Her voice is better suited to the love music of the duet; Bäumer's tenderness is genuine, the timbre attractive as she sings "Barg im Busen uns sich die Sonne, leuchten lachend Sterne der Wonne."

If one had access to no other recording of the duet, the Bäumer/Kirchhoff records would make do, but fortunately for music lovers of the 1930s, the Leider/Melchior recording was available. Most Wagnerites with any awareness of historical recordings know Lauritz Melchior (1890–1973) as the tenor forever in harness with the Norwegian soprano Kirsten Flagstad, but they might not be aware of this recording of the duet, which is one of the greatest operatic recordings ever made.

From the first note to the last, the orchestra burns with intensity. This ecstatic, urgent interpretation is led by Albert Coates (1882–1953). Born in St. Petersburg to English parents, Coates was identified throughout his life with the great Russian symphonic and operatic literature. His hallmark as a conductor was an impetuous vitality that set him apart from other conductors of the era. Coates was never afraid of "majestic" tempi in moments of dramatic calm. Still, his tempi in faster music always

24 K.J. Kutsch and Leo Riemans, *A Concise Biographical Dictionary of Singers,* trans. Harry Earl Jones (Philadelphia, PA: Chilton Book Company), 32.

25 "Parlophon: Tristan und Isolde," Archive.org (website), accessed November 21, 2020, https://ia800707.us.archive.org/5/items/01BumerKirchhoff/01%20B%C3%A4umer%20Kirchhoff.jpg



TRISTAN UND ISOLDE 3 Acts 1865

Abridged Recording In German
(Recorded at the Bayreuth Festival, 1928, under the supervision of Siegfried Wagner)
Bayreuth Festival Soloists, Cho. & Orch.—Elmendorff
38 sides (C-67487/505D)
CM-101 (Alb.) 19 12" $28.50
(The British set, C-L2187/206 contains 2 additional sides devoted to an explanation and illustration of the motives by Ernest Newman.)

THE CAST

Isolde.....Nanny Larsen-Todsen (S)
Tristan.....Gunnar Graarud (T)
Bragäne.....Anny Helm (S)
Kurwenal.....Rudolph Bockelmann (B)
König Marke.....Ivar Andrésen (B)
Melot.....Joachim Sattler (T)
Junger Seemann.....Gustav Podin (T)
Ein Hirt.....Hans Beer (T)
Conductor.....Karl Elmendorff

NOTE: *This set contains Acts I and II in nearly complete form: there are cuts of 135, 22, and 283 bars in the first act; cuts of 86, 29, 28, and 14 bars in the second. Act III, however, is very seriously abbreviated.*

Act III only Abridged Recording In German
Misc. Soloists & Orchs. (V-9625/9)
10 sides (G-D1413/7 in GM-51)
VM-41 (Alb.) 5 12" $7.50

THE CAST

Isolde.....Gota Ljungberg (S)
Tristan.....Walter Widdop (T)
Brangäne.....Genia Guszalewicz (S)
Kurwenal.....{ Howard Fry (B) / Eduard Habich (B)
König Marke.....Ivar Andrésen (B)
Melot.....Marcel Noë (T)
Ein Hirt.....Kennedy McKenna (T)
London Symphony Orch....Albert Coates
Berlin State Opera Orch.....Leo Blech
Symphony Orch...Lawrance Collingwood

NOTE: *There are two cuts in this set: the Shepherd's piping—English horn solo, some 46 bars—is omitted between sides 1 & 2; some 31 pages (from page 222, bar 11 to page 259 bar 16) are omitted between sides 3 & 4.*

Tristan und Isolde *listed in The Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia of Recorded Music*

seem to surge forward, always faster, with an exhilarating breathlessness that somehow never can be identified as "rushing." Coates invariably pins listeners to the back of their seats, expressing every passion with infectious enthusiasm.

The Coates/Leider/Melchior recording of the Act II duet is no exception. Beginning with the orchestral interlude immediately before scene 2, we are hurled into the action as Isolde throws her torch onto the ground. From that moment to the moment at which Isolde and Tristan embrace, Coates sets the orchestra afire. The violins, in particular, are hard-pressed to keep up with the conductor, but the payoff is evident when the voices join at "Geliebte/Geliebter!" Throughout the almost 17-minute recording, Coates paces the duet perfectly; repose is never allowed to disintegrate into sloth, and the conductor knows precisely when to usher the singers and orchestra forward.

For their part, Leider and Melchior manage to keep up with Coates with little audible effort, though often at the cost of the notated rhythms. Their breathless embrace is thrilling, making it believable for once that an external magical potion is responsible for their intense attraction. "O sink hernieder" is magical like no other recording of the scene; the orchestra floats like the stars in the eternal night, while Melchior summons an intimate color that he never again summoned in subsequent recordings and performances. Both Melchior and Leider nail the difficult-to-sing intervals in this portion of the duet; there are few recordings of the score featuring such musical security. The buildup to the final moments of the scene is performed at such a fever pitch that, at times, it becomes difficult to listen to, as if the listener is eavesdropping on two real lovers embracing. The recording ends abruptly on the blaring diminished chord that announces the entrance of Kurwenal. If readers only seek out one recording mentioned in the *Encyclopedia's* Wagner entry, it should probably be this one.

Act II: Einsam wachend in der Nacht (Brangäne's Warning)

There are, unfortunately, no satisfactory recordings of Brangäne's Warning mentioned in the 1936 *Encyclopedia*. Emmi Leisner's 1928 recording of "Einsam wachend" is disappointing. The German contralto (1885–1958) possessed a sumptuous, velvety timbre, the sort which is rarely encountered in the modern opera world. Unfortunately, her rich timbre was all she had if one judges her solely on the basis of this recording. Her text is incomprehensible, and there is little dynamic shaping, though Wagner provides many specific instructions for swells and increased intensity. There is no character, just a wall of beautiful sound. The German mezzo Eva Liebenberg recorded the Warning in 1932; she possesses a quavering, painfully out-of-tune voice, and the disc lacks any significant musical interest.

Act II: Tatest du's wirklich (King Marke's Monologue)

For many operagoers, King Marke's Act II monologue is the perfect moment to catch a brief nap before heading out for intermission drinks. In the wrong hands, the monologue can be deadly, a state of affairs that early

twentieth-century conductors dealt with by cutting it entirely. Ivar Andrésen, the bass heard on the initial *Tristan* recording, recorded it separately with Frieder Weissmann and the Berlin Staatsoper Orchestra for Parlophone in 1927. Given the excellence of his abbreviated contribution in the Bayreuth set, I'm sad to report that this recording is unavailable on YouTube or archive.org. However, it was featured in a CD set, *Tristan und Isolde*: *Great Operas at the Met*.

Act II: O König … Wohin nun Tristan scheidet
Act III: Und drauf Isolde … wie sie winkt

Melchior made the only recordings of these scenes mentioned in the *Encyclopedia*. Accompanied by Robert Heger conducting the London Symphony Orchestra in 1930, Melchior is appropriately downcast at the outset of the Act II excerpt, his voice full of genuine remorse. As the record continues, Melchior becomes more matter-of-fact, possibly a result of the uninspired conducting of Heger. The Act III excerpt is lovely, though less visionary than his live performances from the 1930s at the Met and in London.

Act III: Liebestod—Mild und leise

The Liebestod is the best-represented item from the opera, with no fewer than eleven recordings of the vocal version mentioned in the *Encyclopedia*.

Frida Leider's 1931 recording of the Liebestod conducted by John Barbirolli is a great disappointment. Given the superlative nature of Leider's other recordings discussed here, it is surprising to hear intonation issues throughout the disc, as well as a vocal timbre that tends in places toward the matronly. The soprano's superlative diction is still in evidence, but dramatically she seems to be going through the motions. This may be the fault of the young Barbirolli, who pushes Leider mercilessly through the aria, squeezing it onto a single record side in a cool 4'54".

For this writer, Lotte Lehmann's 1930 recording of the Liebestod stands above all others. Lehmann (1888–1976) is most remembered for her status as a brilliant pedagogue and Lieder singer of distinction. Indeed, she brings a Lieder singer's sensibility to her interpretation; every word speaks clearly, and, more importantly, each word is shaded with layered meanings. Listen to her first phrase: "seht ihr, Freunde! Seht ihr's nicht?" This Isolde is desperate to share her otherworldly knowledge with the sorrowful bystanders, whom she seeks to convince of an ultimate reunion with Tristan. Lehmann's voice is feminine, seductive, poignant, searching, powerful. Her voice is fraught with emotion at all times. The excitement in her voice in the buildup at "Wie sie schwellen" is irresistible, the climax overwhelming. Notably, the Lehmann recording is only ten seconds slower than Leider's (it was placed across two sides of a single disc, sharing one of the sides with "Du bist der Lenz" from *Walküre*), yet it feels much more spacious. Lehmann never sang Isolde on the stage, so this recording is the only document we have of what might have been.

Unlike Lehmann's transcendent performance, a number of the Liebestod recordings in the *Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia* are routine affairs that don't show the singers in a positive light. The Dutch soprano Elisabeth Ohms (1888–1974) offers an out-of-tune and hooty rendition of the aria from 1929; the record gives little indication of why Arturo Toscanini admired Ohms enough to bring the soprano to La Scala the previous year to showcase her Isolde. Gertrud Bindernagel (1894–1932) is forgotten today, having left only eleven recordings before her premature death at the hand of her second husband. Her Liebestod is good without being excellent. The first few phrases are sung under pitch, and although she eventually gets into the swing of things from a technical standpoint, the voice itself lacks the individual quality of a Flagstad, Leider, or Lehmann. She musters a beautiful tone, but it is not enough to set this record apart from many others.

In her 1927 recording, Meta Seinemeyer (1895–1929) is emotional in a forward manner that would be more appropriate for a character in an opera by Puccini or Leoncavallo. Her vibrato is fast, and her use of portamento more noticeable (and more irksome) than that of Frida Leider, herself a liberal portamentist. The warmth of the voice is a positive quality, but she often shies away from high notes; bear in mind that the highest pitch in the Liebestod is an A flat, significantly lower than the high Cs of Act II. The Liebestod of Czech soprano Maria Jeritza (1887–1982) is intriguing in that the soprano possessed a completely different timbre than the other singers under discussion. Although Jeritza successfully sang Turandot in Europe and the United States, the color of her voice is significantly brighter than that of a typical Isolde; her 1928 record sounds like Mozart's Susanna in *Le Nozze di Figaro* traded places with Isolde and is trying her hand at Teutonic drama. The role of Isolde does not appear to have been in Jeritza's repertoire, so this record may have been a one-off. Although Germaine Lubin was ostensibly Adolf Hitler's favorite Isolde, her French-language recording of the Liebestod ("Doux et calme") suggests that the dictator's ear for singing was not quite up to snuff. Lubin can't sing a single note without scooping up to it. Although

Lubin may have been trying to achieve the seamless legato demanded by Wagner, the French soprano's dogged slithering comes across as a technical crutch rather than a musical choice. Lubin's lovely voice is well suited to the role, and she is quite involved dramatically, but the overall effect is compromised by her delivery.

The most exciting discovery found in the *Encyclopedia* is the Liebestod of Elsa Alsen. Alsen (1880–1975) was born in Prussian-controlled Poland and began her career as a contralto in Germany in 1902 before making the switch to the dramatic soprano *fach*.[26] She came to the United States in 1923, toured with several opera companies, and was the first Isolde at San Francisco Opera, performing the role under the baton of Alfred Hertz in 1927. Period newspapers were ecstatic about her singing: "Her voice is of the most agreeable quality, with large range, ample power, and evenness in all registers."[27] Alsen's 1929 Columbia record of the Liebestod has a feminine warmth which is much more human than the recordings of Leider or Flagstad. This is no stalwart Brünnhilde disguised in Celtic robes but rather a heartbroken-yet-transfigured mortal with a vision of ultimate reunion. Her diction is not as clear as Leider or Lehmann, but Alsen provides sensitive musical shaping and carefully observes Wagner's dynamics, including the occasional high-register piano. She has long-term plans for the eventual climax, though the payoff is not as great as one would hope. Alsen keeps her powder dry in the commercial recording; a state of affairs confirmed by a live recording from 1932 with the New York Philharmonic conducted by Arturo Toscanini. In that recording (an aircheck with horrible sonics), we hear a singer who easily swamps an orchestra with her voice. The climax is unfortunately lost, but the buildup present on the recording is impressive, and the final moments must have been overwhelming.

Any discussion of pre-1936 Liebestod recordings must culminate with the discs of a singer who has not yet been discussed here: Kirsten Flagstad (1895–1962). Flagstad came in just under the gun, recording the aria in New York on October 9, 1935. The Norwegian soprano made her Metropolitan Opera debut as Sieglinde in February of 1935 and was an instant sensation. Hearing this recording, one understands the reason for her success, though the disc also raises questions. This is a large, pure voice; the intonation always rings true, every note and rhythm speaks clearly, the words can be heard without struggle. There is no difficulty for Flagstad in this music; it just flowed from her like rivulets of tonal gold. Her ease of delivery was both a blessing and a curse, in this writer's opinion. Dramatically, Flagstad is uninvolved. There are no wide-eyed appeals, no ecstasy, no sure and certain hope of a spiritual reunion. Instead, there is just the huge, attractive tone intoning the music at a sluggish tempo (partially the fault of the conductor, the enervated Hans Lange).

Conclusion

In the previously mentioned foreword of Lawrence Gilman, the critic muses on the futuristic world that recordings can offer the listener of 1936 and fixes upon *Tristan und Isolde* as an example:

> Reflecting upon these marvels of our time, looking through these new gateways to music, we may dream of a day when we can hear, let us say, *Tristan und Isolde*, in a performance which we may be tempted to think of as very nearly ideal. For we shall be relieved of disillusionment and distraction. We shall be free to summon before us that ideal *Tristan*, that ideal Isolde, who live imprisoned in the pages of Wagner's opera. We shall be able to disenchant them, as we listen unimpeded to the music and the words. Knowing the course of the drama (we shall have studied it many times with the score and text before us), we may allow our imaginations to set the stage for us, conduct the action, release the great figures of the tragedy to do the bidding of the poet-composer. We shall be actors and stage directors in our own right, untroubled by corporeal limitations.
>
> After all, there will be no audience save ourselves and such elect companions as we may invite—no barbarians slamming seats during the whispered intensities of the Prelude's opening, no ill-bred neighbors talking through the Acts. There will be only the disembodied masterwork of Wagner, imprinting its ideal patterns of drama and of tone upon our quickened minds.[28]

The modern Wagnerian may bristle at this dismissal of the live, in-house experience of opera, but Gilman's rapturous vision of an "ideal" *Tristan und Isolde* invites contemplation of the current world of recordings.

We live in an era of plenty; today's opera lover has literally hundreds of thousands of recordings at their fingertips via YouTube, The Met: Live in HD, Amazon.com, etc. For even the most esoteric opera, there are competing electronic versions waiting to be streamed or

26 "Else Alsen, 94, Wagnerian Opera Singer," *Washington Post*, February 3, 1975, B10.

27 S.L.L., "Elsa Alsen Sings in Philadelphia Concert," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 30, 1924, 4.

28 Darrell, *Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia*, iv.

downloaded. What is lacking in this operatic cornucopia is curation. As discussed before, if one types "Wagner Tristan" into the YouTube search bar, thousands of results appear, with no specificity of outcome and no true organizational principle. A newcomer to Wagner might get lucky and stumble upon a Furtwängler or Leider recording, but it is just as likely that they will be offered the lackluster equivalent of the Laserlight CDs once sold at the supermarket checkouts. A main attraction of the Darrell *Encyclopedia* to the modern listener will thus be its expertise; the book provides a guided framework to the music. Although many different recordings for each aria or orchestral excerpt are listed in the *Encyclopedia*, Darrell offers an unspoken comment on quality of each disc by including his preferred records in an initial section before listing "duplications." He notes in his "Modus Operandi":

> The more popular instrumental pieces, operatic arias, and songs are oftentimes recorded by scores of artists, many of whom are of slight artistic stature or little known outside their native country. Obviously, it would be impracticable and of little general value to give complete, detailed listings of the minor versions; on the other hand, no catalogue with pretensions to completeness can afford to ignore them entirely. Our solution is to give detailed listing only to the more important recordings, selected with preference for versions in the original language (or medium), by the better-known artists, and in the most recent recordings.[29]

29 Darrell, *Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia*, xi.

Though this is an encyclopedia listing all available records, an attempt has then been made to indicate which recordings are of value to the general listener. Although one can disagree with Darrell's selections—and bemoan the excellent recordings banished to the "duplications" section—the breadth of his knowledge (and the knowledge of the small army of experts who helped to compile the *Encyclopedia*) bestows a degree of trust that goes beyond what a modern listener might give to a random connoisseur posting on an internet message board.

Darrell's preface quotes from Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain,* evoking the feelings of the protagonist Hans Castorp as he listens to his new gramophone, an apparatus that was previously unknown to him. "… [H]ere was a world to conquer, large enough that even to survey it was a difficult task at first, and bewildering; yet a world full of beautiful possibilities …"[30] The attempt by Darrell to perform this survey of a new and exciting world of recordings helped listeners in 1936 begin the process of learning about music via their record players. The modern listener, with unprecedented access to recordings both old and new, can use R.D. Darrell's *Encyclopedia* to step back in time, gaining access to performances whose luster may have been obscured by their age but still shine brightly for those who can find them.

30 Ibid., v.

First Performances of Wagner's Operatic Works

Premiere Date	Title	Location	Libretto Completed	Music Completed
29 March, 1836	*Das Leibesverbot*	Magdeburg	1834	1836
20 October, 1842	*Rienzi, der Letzte der Tribunen*	Dresden	1838	1840
02 January, 1843	*Der Fliegende Holländer*	Dresden	1841	1841
19 October, 1845	*Tannhäuser*	Dresden	1843	1845
18 August, 1850	*Lohengrin*	Weimar	1845	1847
10 June, 1865	*Tristan und Isolde*	Munich	1857	1859
22 September, 1869	*Das Rheingold*	Munich	1852	1854
26 June, 1870	*Die Walküre*	Munich	1852	1856
21 June, 1868	*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*	Munich	1862	1867
16 August, 1876	*Siegfried*	Bayreuth	1851	1857
17 August, 1876	*Götterdämmerung*	Bayreuth	1848	1874
26 July, 1882	*Parsifal*	Bayreuth	1877	1882
29 June, 1888	*Die Feen* (Posthumous)	Munich	1833	1834

HISTORICAL PERFORMANCES

San Francisco Opera's Productions of *Tristan und Isolde*

— *Jahan Byrne and Teresa Concepcion*

San Francisco Opera has performed *Tristan und Isolde* in 17* out of 101 seasons, starting in 1927 as its first-ever German-language production led by San Francisco Symphony Music Director Alfred Hertz. The most recent performances were in 2006. After an absence of 18 years, *Tristan und Isolde* returns to the War Memorial Opera House stage with five performances in October and November 2024.

Here is a pictorial history of some of the most significant singers and productions in the last century. *All photos courtesy San Francisco Opera Archives.*

1936
Kirsten Flagstad as Isolde and Lauritz Melchior as Tristan. Photo: Morton

1939
Kirsten Flagstad as Isolde and Lauritz Melchior as Tristan. Photo: Morton

1953
Paul Schoeffler as Kurnewal. Photo: Skelton Studios

1967
I*rene Dalis in her debut as Isolde.* Photo: Margaret Norton

1970
Janis Martin as Brangäne, Birgit Nilsson as Isolde, and Wolfgang Windgassen as Tristan. Photo: Margaret Norton

1974

Jess Thomas as Tristan. Photo: Ron Scherl

1980

Gwyneth Jones in her role debut as Isolde, Spas Wenkoff as Tristan, and Simon Estes as King Marke. Photo: Ron Scherl

* 1927, 1933, 1936, 1937, 1939, 1945, 1947, 1949, 1950, 1953, 1967, 1970, 1974, 1980, 1991, 1998, 2006.

1998

Scene from Act II featuring Elizabeth Connell as Isolde and Wolfgang Schmidt as Tristan. Photo: Marty Sohl

2006

Thomas Moser as Tristan and Kristinn Sigmundsson as King Marke. Photo: Terence McCarthy

2006

Scene from Act I featuring Christine Brewer as Isolde, Thomas Moser as Tristan, and Jane Irwin as Brangäne. Initial set by David Hockney. Photo: Terence McCarthy

ESSAY

Tristan and Ecstasy: Perspectives on Isolde's Transfiguration

— *Hans Rudolf Vaget*

Ecstasy has been a familiar topic in discussions of Wagner for the last century and a half. Some of you may remember a Wagner Society lecture 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 also want to speak about ecstasy, though from quite 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 many 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, mystifying harmonic progressions, and 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 nineteenth-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* essays, "Richard Wagner in Bayreuth," went so far as to label it "the true opus metaphysicum of all art."[1] 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 Stern'sche 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 Staatsoper conducted by the eminent Wagnerian Franz Sucher. Here is what Bruno Walter wrote in *Theme and Variations: An Autobiography*:

> "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."[2]

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.

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?

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 would 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

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 I*m Schatten Wagners. Thomas Mann über Richard Wagner.* Texte und Zeugnisse 1895–1955, selected, annotated with an essay by Hans Rudolf Vaget (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.

distinguish the purely biographical, the purely economic, and the purely aesthetic. In the final analysis, however, these three views of how *Tristan* came into existence may well become inseparable. But for the purpose of clarity, I shall consider them separately here.

* * *

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.[3] The fourteen letters that have survived date from a later period of their relationship and are of little interest.[4] We can only guess at how many written communications they had 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 [Wagner's widow], motivated by jealousy or rather by fidelity to Wagner's own wishes? Was it Mathilde herself, as Cosima at one point suggested?[5] 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 eighteenth-century figures"; it appears to have been a "serious formal engagement, a pact even, with responsibilities on each side."[6] Indeed, the serious and formal nature of their engagement can be glimpsed from Wagner's letters alone; they contain 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*? To begin with, consider 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 Wesendonck's own newly built villa on their spacious property in Zürich. Otto Wesendonck, who hailed from Wuppertal, an industrial town near Düsseldorf, had been a partner in a New York silk trading company and, at the age of 36, had made enough money to be able to retire and 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 13 years, Wesendonck decided to settle in Zurich, where he and Mathilde soon made the acquaintance of Wagner.

Mathilde first met the composer at a concert in 1852 when she was 24 and he 39. Some five years later their friendship, according to Barry Millington, "developed into a sexual relationship which may or may not have been consummated."[7] 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 her. 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."[8] 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. Mathilde 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.[9]

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 homes. This happened to be a lengthy and weighty epistle, which Wagner described as a "Morgenbeichte" or an early morning confession. What precisely was he confessing?

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 Wesendon[c]k: Tagebuchblätter und Briefe 1853–1871*, ed. with an introduction by Wolfgang Golther (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.

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.

And what led to his confession? This calls for a reconstruction in some detail.

The previous evening had not gone well for Wagner. He was having dinner 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 Zurich. 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.[10]

The Kiss *by Paul Behrens (1898).* Credit: Heritage Image Partnership

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 was 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 contained—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."[11] The letter concluded with an urgent request for an assignation later that day. Minna had not been known to have been interested 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 it. Even though her marriage to Richard had been, for all intents and purposes, dead for some time, Minna thought that now was the time to break up the idyll. In the aftermath of the storm, the neighborly cohabitation of the Wesendoncks and the Wagners became impossible. Wagner thus took off for Venice, where he completed Act II of *Tristan und Isolde*—a score in which messy personal relationships had been miraculously transformed into exquisite musical symbolism.

Those who like biographical and romantic notions about the origin of works of art will want to cling to the story summarized here 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.[12] 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 near future, Wagner could not expect any royalties and advances. Thus, he had to think of a work that theaters could produce expeditiously. What he had in mind was a potboiler that would quickly

10 For a comprehensive study of Wagner's Zurich period, see Chris Walton, *Richard Wagner's Zurich. 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."

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.

Isolde *by Aubrey Beardsley (1905).* Beardsley Lordprice Collection

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 and that all that was needed was a pair of good singers.[13] This, of course, did not quite work out as expected. Several theaters, including the Vienna Court Opera, sampled *Tristan* and gave up on it. (In Vienna, the work had gone through no fewer than 77 rehearsals before the effort was aborted.) Even after the highly successful Munich premiere of the work in 1865, it took a while before other theaters would even touch it. It was a sign of Wagner's desperate financial situation that he asked Breitkopf & Härtel to pay him for *Tristan* in three installments: the first after the completion of Act I, the second after the completion of Act II, and the third 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 was unique in all of Wagner's work and leads one to wonder to what extent such exceptional circumstances were a contributing factor to the exceptional character of the work.

Beyond these biographical and economic considerations, however, the truly decisive factor in the genesis of *Tristan und Isolde*—as one might expect with an artist such as Wagnerhas 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 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 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 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

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

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, Wagner wrote in his autobiography *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."[14] Much later, in conversations with Cosima, he admitted that composing *Tristan* had, in fact, been an ecstatic experience. He had felt an irrepressible desire, "sich auszurasen," to give it his all and, for once, completely to let himself go, symphonically speaking.[15]

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."[16]

Just how audacious he felt he had been emerges from a letter to Mathilde written 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."[17]

Thus, what originally had 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 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, lead him to transform that desire into 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 him achieving that quantum leap from the diatonic loveliness of the "Forest Murmurs" in *Siegfried* to the chromatic hell of desire and suffering in the Prelude to *Tristan*.

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.

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, which is 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 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 about Siegfried. As Chris Walton has observed, all of her writings, in one way or another, echoed Wagner.[18] It was her talent—rather than her feminine wiles—that qualified her to become Wagner's partner not only in love but also in the creative process. Therefore, she must be regarded as the great enabler of the ecstasy of Richard Wagner the composer.

As we have seen, Wagner began drawing Mathilde toward him and into the still shadowy world of *Tristan* by dedicating the piano sonata to her. He made a more explicit move when on September 18, 1857, he went over to the Wesendonck house and presented her with the autograph manuscript of the Act III 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

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.

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.

18 See Walton (note 10), 231 - 238.

more."[19] A few days later, he began the compositional sketch for Act I. When this sketch had been completed, he presented it to Mathilde together with an ecstatic dedicatory poem. Now it was Mathilde's turn. Having read the libretto, she responded by writing several 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*."[20] "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 stirring."[21] He was stirred to the point of arranging

Having drunk what they believed was 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.

"Träume" for violin and a small wind ensemble and having it performed as a serenade on the morning of Mathilde's birthday, December 23, 1857.[22] 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 24, 1870.

Mathilde's poem speaks of dreams that, like the sun in spring, lovingly melt and draw flowers from the ice with a kiss. To summarize the miraculous effect of that dream of love, she cites two characteristically Tristanesque words 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 in fact, for any composer—he gave his muse a voice in the creation of *Tristan*.

Strangely, Mathilde's authorship of these five poems was obscured for a long time. 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. Therefore, it was assumed that Wagner himself had penned the poems, especially since they contained many verbal echoes of *Tristan und Isolde* and captured 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, a true lover of poetry.[23] But the publishers rejected Wagner's subtitle and condemned Mathilde Wesendonck to an unjust, if temporary obscurity.

* * *

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. Act I has perhaps been less appreciated than the others by some musicologists, which is a great pity because there is no finer example in all of Wagner of the composer's prowess as a dramatist. More important, in our context, Act I leads up to the first manifestation of ecstasy in the work itself. We are on 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 gradually carries us to Cornwall with increasing forward momentum. 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. They are lost to the world. They are literally "beside themselves"—which is precisely the meaning of ecstasy.

19 See Diary for Mathilde Wesendonck, 18 September 1858, in *Richard Wagner an Mathilde Wesendon[c]k* (note 4), 44f.

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

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 See Voss (note 21), 108.

Above all, Act I is 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 eruption 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 the ship that leads to their shared 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 rituals, 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—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 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 demands Tristan's penance for his "betrayal" of their unannounced love. He agrees to die with her. Having drunk what they believed was 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

The Love Potion (Tristan and Isolde) *by Koloman Moser (1914).* Credit: Peter Horree

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 a 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 enacted 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" 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 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.

First, we must throw overboard most of the familiar and somewhat 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 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."[24] This 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 J. Smith to whom we owe the most authoritative history of the opera libretto, *The Tenth Muse*, flatly asserts that Wagner's achievement as a librettist was "the greatest the form has produced."[25] 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 the modern Romantic concept of authorship to the text of the opera 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."[26]

Tristan and Isolde *by Edmund Blair Leighton (1902).* Credit: ARTGEN

The issue on which Patrick J. Smith is hesitant and tentative is the poetic dimension of Wagner's operatic texts. Considering the experimental character of most of Wagner's poetic language, especially in the *Ring* and in *Tristan*, such hesitation is understandable. Wagner deliberately strove for a new poetic language to 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. Wagner designed his *Stabreim* 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 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 question Wagner's poetic

24 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 19th Century," *Wagner in Retrospect: A Centennial Reappraisal*, ed. Leroy R. Shaw et al. (Amsterdam: 1987), 224–234.

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

26 Ibid., 229, 260, 279, 289.

gifts."[27] 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 *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 like 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 cliché-ridden program notes that usually accompany it, the temptation to deflate the metaphysical hype of the commentators and remind readers of the sexual foundation of it all is almost irresistible. One 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."[28] Such wild iconoclasm, imaginative though it may be, fails to do justice to the undeniably spiritual dimension of this supreme moment.

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 of a human ego with a non-ego."[29] 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. Therefore, 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.[30] 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."[31] 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, her union with the World Spirit, is terminal.

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. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* ecstasy is "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 complicated design of the text, it becomes obvious 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 senses of seeing, hearing, and

What had been intended as a monument to "the most beautiful dream of all"—the common dream of love—was leading Wagner to probe the outer limits of human experience, where love is distilled into ecstasy or madness.

27 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.

28 See Walton (note 10), 210.

29 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.

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

31 Deathridge (note 5), 149 – 150.

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 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?]

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 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 is extraordinarily involved. It is a question beginning with "Am I the only one to hear this melody?"

> 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?

Isolde—and only she—hears a melody, "Weise," issuing from Tristan's transfigured body, as though his 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," is the catalyst of the traditional mystical climax as Isolde is literally and figuratively penetrated by the musical embodiment of Tristan.

Seven more questions follow, with increasing urgency, 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.

> 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!

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"—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.

It is supremely fitting that a poem of ecstasy—the "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 an 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. In concert, it admirably fulfills the chief function that Wagner's theory assigns to the word: it makes distinct and visible the "deeds of the music."[32] The poetic text proceeds from alliterative verse to alternate rhymes and 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 can no longer be called ecstasy in the traditional religious sense. Isolde's ecstasy is terminal 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. With irrefutable certainty, he makes the point that by having the seemingly endless harmonic tension, deception, and ambiguity that we have experienced throughout this miraculous music drama, there is finally a climax. A 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.

32 See "Über die Benennung 'Musikdrama'," Richard Wagner, *Dichtungen und Schriften* (note 33), IX, 276.

Upcoming Wagner Operas Around the World

2024 Dates	Opera	Performances	Company	City
Oct 19–Nov 5	*Tristan und Isolde*	5	San Francisco Opera	San Francisco
Oct 27–Jul 31	*Das Rheingold*	7	Bayerische Staatsoper	Munich
Nov 15–17	*Die Walküre* (concert)	2	Sydney Symphony Orchestra	Sydney
Nov 17–30	*Der Fliegende Holländer*	5	Opera Nacional de Chile	Santiago
Nov 21–Dec 10	*Der Fliegende Holländer*	5	Opernhaus Zurich	Zurich
Nov 26–30	*Tristan und Isolde*	4	Maggio Musicale Fiorentino	Florence
Dec 1–22	*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*	4	Staatsoper Unter den Linden	Berlin
2025 Dates				
Jan 8–19	*Der Fliegende Holländer*	4	Staatsoper Hamburg	Hamburg
Jan 11–Mar 30	*Siegfried*	3	Oper Leipzig	Leipzig
Jan 19–Feb 1	*Der Fliegende Holländer*	5	New National Theater	Tokyo
Jan 28–Feb 8	*Tristan und Isolde*	5	Royal Opera of Wallonie	Liege
Jan 29–Feb 19	*Das Rheingold*	7	Opera National de Paris	Paris
Feb 1–Mar 28	*Der Fliegende Holländer*	9	Opera North	Leeds
Feb 4–Mar 2	*Götterdämmerung*	8	Die Munt/La Monnaie	Brussels
Feb 5–23	*Die Walküre*	6	Teatro alla Scala	Milan
Feb 7–Mar 29	*Das Rheingold*	2	Oper Leipzig	Leipzig
Feb 9–Mar 2	*Ring Cycle*	2	Regents Opera	London
Feb 16–Apr 26	*Der Fliegende Holländer*	5	Deutsche Oper Berlin	Berlin
Feb 21–23	*Parsifal* (concert)	2	Baltic Sea Festival	Stockholm
Mar 2–14	*Der Fliegende Holländer*	5	Palau de les Arts Reina Sofia	Valencia

2025 Dates	Opera	Performances	Company	City
Mar 9–15	*Tristan und Isolde* (concert)	2	Dresdner Philharmonie	Dresden
Mar 16–Apr 27	*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*	8	Royal Danish Opera	Copenhagen
Mar 17–30	*Lohengrin*	6	Gran Teatre del Liceu	Barcelona
Mar 23–29	*Der Fliegende Holländer*	4	Irish National Opera	Dublin
Mar 25–31	*Der Fliegende Holländer*	3	Bayerische Staatsoper	Munich
Mar 30–Apr 6	*Lohengrin*	3	Semperoper	Dresden
Apr 4	*Siegfried* (concert)	1	Cite de la Musique/Philharmonie	Paris
Apr 5–13	*Tannhäuser*	4	Deutsche Oper Berlin	Berlin
Apr 6–20	*Lohengrin*	3	Deutsche Oper Berlin	Berlin
Apr 6–11	*Parsifal*	6	Stuttgart Opera	Stuttgart
Apr 12–20	*Parsifal*	4	Staatsoper Unter den Linden	Berlin
Apr 12–27	*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*	3	Deutsche Oper Berlin	Berlin
Apr 13–May 4	*Lohengrin*	5	Opernhaus Zurich	Zurich
Apr 17–23	*Parsifal*	3	Wiener Staatsoper	Vienna
Apr 18–20	*Parsifal*	2	Hungarian State Opera	Budapest
Apr 18–May 4	*Parsifal*	4	Staatsoper Hamburg	Hamburg
Apr 25–May 11	*Tannhäuser*	5	Houston Grand Opera	Houston
Apr 26–May 4	*Siegfried*	4	Atlanta Opera	Atlanta
May 1–17	*Die Walküre*	6	Royal Opera	London
May 2–June 9	*Ring* cycle	2	Theater Basel	Basel
Apr 27– May 4	*Lohengrin*	3	Wiener Staatsoper	Vienna
May 4–16	*Der Fliegende Holländer*	4	Staatsoper Unter den Linden	Berlin
May 16–27	*Der Fliegende Holländer*	6	Opera National du Capitole	Toulouse
May 18	*Der Fliegende Holländer*	1	National Theater of Prague	Prague
May 22–Jun 4	*Tannhäuser*	5	Wiener Staatsoper	Vienna
May 25	*Siegfried* (concert)	1	Opera Royal de Versailles	Versailles
May 26–29	*Tannhäuser*	2	Mupa Budapest	Budapest
May 28–Jun 28	*Ring* cycle	2	Wiener Staatsoper	Vienna
May 29–Jun 15	*Tristan und Isolde*	3	Staatsoper Hamburg	Hamburg
Jun 1–8	*Tristan und Isolde* (concert)	2	Philadelphia Orchestra	Philadelphia
Jun 5–13	*Die Walküre*	5	Edmonton Opera	Edmonton
Jun 6–21	*Siegfried*	5	Teatro alla Scala	Milan
Jun 13–15	*Siegfried*	2	Teatro Communale di Bologna	Bologna
Jun 26–28	*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*	2	Mupa Budapest	Budapest
Jul 25–Aug 22	*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*	7	Bayreuther Festspeile	Bayreuth
Jul 26–Aug 21	*Die Walküre*	5	Santa Fe Opera	Santa Fe
Jul 27–30	*Lohengrin*	2	Bayerische Staatsoper	Munich
Jul 26–Aug 20	*Ring* cycle	2	Bayreuther Festspeile	Bayreuth
Jul 28–Aug 26	*Parsifal*	5	Bayreuther Festspeile	Bayreuth
Aug 1–9	*Lohengrin*	4	Bayreuther Festspeile	Bayreuth
Aug 3–25	*Tristan und Isolde*	5	Bayreuther Festspeile	Bayreuth
Oct 24–26	*Götterdämmerung*	2	Teatro Communale di Bologna	Bologna
Nov 13–16	*Siegfried* (concert)	2	Sydney Symphony Orchestra	Sydney

CD AND DVD REVIEW

Favorite *Tristan* Recording[s]

I asked a critic, a scholar, and a singer to tell our readers about their favorite Tristan und Isolde *recordings. There was most definitely a favorite! — Jahan Byrne*

LISA HIRSCH: Everyone who loves this opera needs to have a performance with Lauritz Melchior and Kirsten Flagstad, the pre-eminent Wagner tenor and soprano of their era, and perhaps of any. I like the 1936 Covent Garden performance under Fritz Reiner, which is decently recorded and impetuously conducted, though the Nacht und Tag section is missing from Act II.

A special treat: listen carefully to the prelude with headphones, and around 10:30–40, you can hear a singer, probably Flagstad, warming up offstage. The performance is available on Naxos. Theoretically, this isn't available in the United States, but Presto Music makes it available as a download and on CD and will probably ship it to the U.S. **Naxos 8110068-70**

For a complete recording in modern sound, I'm fond of Karl Böhm's electrifying 1966 live recording from Bayreuth. Made over three nights in front of a live audience, Birgit Nilsson, Christa Ludwig, Wolfgang Windgassen, Eberhard Waechter, and Martti Talvela are all at or near their vocal peaks. This might be the fastest performance of *Tristan* on record, and it will knock you over. **Deutsche Grammophon 4497722**

SIMON WILLIAMS: I always turn to the DG recording of the Bayreuth 1966 performance as my first choice. Although it has been long celebrated as one of the swiftest *Tristan*s ever, Böhm's conducting is never rushed and he explores with great intensity the emotional depths of the work. Nilsson expresses well the strengths of Isolde in contrast to the vulnerability of Windgassen's Tristan. But perhaps the greatest moment comes from Christa Ludwig whose singing of Brangäne's warning is the most moving rendition I have yet heard of Wagner's most moving music.

Barenboim is the go-to conductor for contemporary recordings. His performances of *Tristan* vary, from those in which Wagner's lyricism prevails to those that are marked by tempestuousness and agony. His finest performances are primarily available on DVD; two are especially remarkable.

First, the 1995 Bayreuth production features Waltraud Meier as a sympathetic and evocative Isolde, while Siegfried Jerusalem's Tristan grows into a deeply disturbing figure on the brink of insanity. Heiner Müller's minimalist production may not be to everyone's taste, but it captures Wagner's fundamental themes impressively. **DG 00044007344392**

Twelve years later, in 2007, La Scala opened its season with a production of *Tristan* by Patrice Chéreau. Meier's Isolde is a mature, determined woman who celebrates the feelings Tristan has aroused in her; while Ian Storey's Tristan is notable for the unusual tonal richness and security of his voice.

While some may question the coherence of the setting that mixes modern industrial with medieval elements, Chéreau's personenregie is precise and impeccable, making this one of the most dramatically thrilling versions of *Tristan* available today. **VIRGIN CLASSICS 51931599**

CHUNG-WAI SOONG: Fritz Reiner's thrilling live performance from Covent Garden (1936) not only has one of the most important titular pairings in Melchior

and Flagstad, both in resplendent voice, it also benefits from Ward Marston's peerless restoration. For roles that require superhuman vocalism, Melchior sounds as though he could sing a whole other performance, and you only need to listen to the ease and subtlety of Flagstad's "Liebestod" at the end of a long night. **Naxos 8110068-70**

A recording I always turn to is DG's classic version from Bayreuth (1966), with a cast for the ages. Nilsson is vocally magnificent and would reign as the Isolde of her generation; Windgassen is a heartbreaking Tristan. Along with Christa Ludwig, Eberhard Waechter, and Marti Talvela, many of you will recognize the name Claude Heater as Melot. Karl Böhm's conducting is occasionally hurried, but I appreciate the urgency, and he knows when the music needs the space. **DG 4497722**

I cannot talk about this opera without mentioning Martha Mödl, who is in prime voice in Bayreuth (1952), with the mahogany tenor of Ramon Vinay. Hans Hotter is a luxurious-voiced Kurwenal. Karajan fully supports Mödl's intense characterization with vivid and incisive control of the score. **Orfeo C603 033 D**

The pickings in video form are slim and uneven, and their availability even more so. There is a live capture from Osaka with Nilsson and Windgassen, but the picture is grainy. Rene Pape steals the show as King Marke in the Metropolitan Opera's 1999 video. Then there is a 1968 film by Belgian TV featuring once again Claude Heater as Tristan if you can find it.

ESSAY

The Wesendonck Connection

— *Desirée Mays*

"Herr and Frau Wagner would give great pleasure to the family Wesendonck by spending the evening tonight quite alone with them."

(The Burrell Collection: Zurich, January 19, 1855) [1]

Thus, it began. Two couples, Otto and Mathilde Wesendonck and Richard and Minna Wagner, met and became friends through a shared love of music. Otto, a retired silk merchant, art collector, and patron of the arts, undertook to pay Wagner's debts and support him financially in return for the rights of Wagner's yet-to-be-composed operas. He was impressed with the potential he saw in Wagner, who, in 1852, was 39 years old. Otto's wife, Mathilde, at age 24, fell under the spell of the Master from the time she first heard his music.

When Wagner first met the Wesendoncks, he was living in Zurich. He had been exiled from Germany because of his role in the Revolution of 1849. He struggled for work and had little money. He was trying

Mathilde Wesendonck, *Karl Ferdinand Sohn, 1850*

Villa Wesendonk und „Asyl"
auf dem grünen Hügel in Enge bei Zürich.

Villa Wesendonck and Asyl On the Green Hill at Enge near Zurich, Photograph, 1865

to compose *Siegfried* while negotiating with opera houses to take his operas. Minna spent much of her time in Germany, having despaired of Wagner ever providing a livable life—their marriage was in trouble.

Mathilde Wesendonck, the wife of Wagner's benefactor Otto Wesendonck, appeared in the composer's life when he was seriously considering composing an opera based on the medieval romance of Tristan and Isolde. Wagner wrote to Otto, "I am paying an old debt today: please give your wife the accompanying sonata."[2] The two wives became friends: Mathilde wrote chattily in July 1853 about the sonata Wagner had written for her, how she was playing it and awaiting his advice.

In April 1857, the Wesendoncks moved into their newly built mansion at the Green Hill in Enge, a suburb of Zurich. They invited the Wagners to live in a small house on their estate for minimal rent. Wagner persuaded Minna to come to Zurich to live with him in a home where, at last, Wagner could compose in peace and

He then turned to Tristan und Isolde *with Mathilde as his muse—or was it the other way around? Wagner wrote, "The taste of life, of love, is simply a matter of the imagination, not of experience."*

comfort, free from financial woes, thanks to Otto. The added advantage of this new development for Wagner was his new proximity to Mathilde, to whom he had become deeply attached.

Mathilde wrote to Minna: "We have long cherished the desire to find a pleasant and friendly retreat for our friend. The peace which came over him when he suddenly realized that he had found his home communicated itself to us and did us unspeakable good!

May this little house become a true refuge of peace and friendship, a sanctified place in the midst of a world of envy and jealousy, a safe retreat from all worries and distress! I want to bestow on the house such words of blessing that only beauty, goodness, and love may dwell in it, so that the rest and peace of those who dwell there may never be disturbed."[1] This refuge of peace and friendship was to be named Asyl, meaning Refuge. The Wagners had found their salvation.

Richard Wagner, the man, is no longer with us, but we still have his extraordinary music, which goes beyond words to describe human passions. This was how he communicated. Women were drawn to him. Often, the women in his life—the special women whose destinies intersected with his—arrived fully formed as his muses, providing the conduit through which his musical inspiration took flight, manifesting the flesh and blood,

In one day, Wagner lost his benefactor Otto, his muse Mathilde, and his domestic partner Minna and, ultimately, the home he had come to love.

even metaphysical characteristics of the women in his operas. Wagner wholeheartedly believed in the power of the feminine and wrote to a friend: "Women, indeed, are the music of life; they absorb everything more openly and unconditionally, in order to embellish it by means of their sympathy."[2]

That Wagner himself yearned all his life for a perfect love experience is explicit in his music; he wanted more perhaps than any one woman could give him—Cosima came closest. Maybe he did ultimately find his ideal in his music. Wagner stated: "Music is a woman … She must be loved by the poet, must surrender herself to him, in order that the new artwork of the future may be born … the begetter must be the artist."[3]

Wagner even spoke of "marriage of myself to myself," the marrying of the masculine and feminine sides of his personality, aware, on some level, that a normal relationship could not fulfill his dreams, yearnings, or aspirations—but maybe music could. "As I have never in life felt the real bliss of love, I must erect a monument to the most beautiful of all my dreams, in which, from beginning to end, that love shall be thoroughly satiated. I have in my head Tristan and Isolde, the simplest but most full-blooded musical conception."[2]

Now began an extraordinary period in the lives of the Wagners and the Wesendoncks, starting in the spring of 1857. The idyll did not last long; heartbreak occurred for all of them in the coming months and Asyl was empty by August 1858, 16 months after the Wagners' arrival.

Wagner was in the middle of creating *Siegfried* when his fascination with Mathilde took hold. He put *Siegfried* aside in 1857 and only returned to it 12 years later under the influence of Cosima. He wrote at the time: "I have finally decided to abandon my obstinate attempts to complete my Nibelungs. I have led my young *Siegfried* into the beautiful forest of solitude; there I have left him beneath a linden tree and have said farewell to him with tears of heartfelt sorrow: he is better there than anywhere else."[1]

He then turned to *Tristan und Isolde* with Mathilde as his muse—or was it the other way around? Wagner wrote, "The taste of life, of love, is simply a matter of the imagination, not of experience."[2] Was it because Wagner was writing this opera of love and yearning that his love, yearning, and unfulfilled passion for Mathilde manifested

Act II: King Marke confronts Tristan and Isolde, *Ferdinand Leeke, 1889*

itself? Or was she truly his muse? The two spent much time together, much to the chagrin of Minna, his neglected wife. Early in the relationship, while composing *Siegfried*, Wagner wrote to Mathilde: "The Muse is beginning to visit me, does it betoken the certainly of your visit? The first thing I found was a melody which I didn't know what to do with, till of a sudden the words for the last scene of *Siegfried* came into my head. But you shall hear all about it, if the swallow comes to inspect her edifice tomorrow."[2]

Mathilde came alone most days to Asyl, to Wagner in his music room. He told her: "I need total inner equilibrium to complete my great work."[1] He found that equilibrium for a few months at Asyl with Mathilde who was always there, ready to listen, encourage, and applaud.

In the early months of the Wagner's sojourn at Asyl, one event stands out. Hans von Bülow and his new bride, Cosima, daughter of Franz Liszt, came to Asyl during their honeymoon. Hans, a renowned conductor who married the 19-year-old Cosima, was a close friend and collaborator of Wagner's but also a difficult man and abusive husband. Now, for the first time, three women so important in Wagner's life were under one roof—Minna, his first wife; Cosima, who would become his second wife; and Mathilde, Otto's wife. "The visit of the young von Bülow couple was my most delightful episode of this summer. They stayed at our cottage for three weeks. Seldom have I felt so agreeably stimulated as by this intimate visit. Of a morning, they had to keep quiet because I was writing my *Tristan*, a fresh act of which I would read them each week. The rest of the day we almost always made music when Frau Wesendonck would come loyally across, and thus we had our most grateful little audience close at hand."

Hans von Bülow, the bridegroom of the moment, even wrote: "I can imagine nothing that can confer on me so great a boon, such spiritual refreshment as being with this glorious unique man whom one must revere as a God. In the presence of this great man, I ascend."

On completion of *Tristan und Isolde* Act I, Wagner wrote to Mathilde: "Thrice happy, out of reach, pain, free, and purely ever thine Tristan und Isolde, their tears and kisses, in music's chaste gold I lay at thy feet, that they may praise the angel who lifted me so high."[2] He tells her: "Our love stands high above all obstacles, and every hindrance makes us richer and ever more intent upon the essence of our love, ever more indifferent toward the inessential. Yes, good pure darling, we shall triumph, we are already in the midst of victory."[2]

Mathilde was an intelligent, beautiful, young woman with a mind of her own. She loved Wagner but was always mindful of her position as a wife to Otto whom she loved—the young children she adored, the new mansion, and the lifestyle Otto provided for her. There was much more to her than the simple beauty shown in portraits. She managed the *ménage à quatre* with extraordinary skill. She kept her husband appraised of her meetings with Wagner at the little house, and Otto, surprisingly, put up with it all. It is not clear what his motivations were in allowing Mathilde to visit Wagner privately when clearly both were attracted to one another. He kept quiet, said nothing, not wanting to lose his wife or children. And he never lost his faith in Wagner's music, regardless of the circumstances under which much of it was composed.

While their physical union may not have happened, Wagner did consummate the union in the music of Tristan und Isolde *into which he poured his yearning and love for his beloved Muse.*

Mathilde was also a fine poet. Hers were some of the few lines Wagner ever set to music that weren't his own. That summer, Mathilde wrote the five poems that were to become the famous *Wesendonck Lieder,* poems on which she and Wagner collaborated closely when he set the poems to music. Later, Wagner wrote from Venice: "Better than these songs I have never done, and very little in my work will bear setting beside them."[2]

One evening, with Act I of *Tristan und Isolde* complete, Wagner gathered a small orchestra to play the poem "Träume" under Mathilde's window for her birthday. A contemporary writer describes it thus: "It's early morning on 23 December 1857, and the bittersweet strains of a chamber ensemble performing a passionate lieder arrangement waft through the villa on Zurich's Green Hill—a beautiful way to waken the lady of the house on the morning of her 29th birthday. The romantic gesture was initiated by Richard Wagner, and the song being performed is his recently composed "Träume." But the lady is the wife of his patron, a muse, and the current object of his affections."[4] Wagner repeated this gesture years later when he had his *Seigfried* "Idyll" played for Cosima on the stairs to their bedroom for her birthday.)

Wagner used two of Mathilde's poems as studies for *Tristan und Isolde*: "Im Treibhaus" in the opening section of the Prelude to Act III and "Träume" in the Act II love duet. Years later, Wagner wrote of how he struggled with the end of the duet until suddenly it came to him. He described that moment in a letter to Mathilde sometime after the breakup: "For three days I had been plodding at

a passage. I could get no further when I saw the face of my gracious Muse and the passage was clear. I sat down at the piano and wrote it off rapidly. "Träume" flit close by. Nay, ne'er repent thy love for me; 'tis heavenly."[2] See the text of "Träume" by Mathilde Wesendonck in the original German with the English translation, below.

The words are different in the love duet, but the sentiment is the same in a mood of melancholy with a deep sense of longing: "O sink hernieder" ("O sink around us, night of loving"). This section comes at the end of the love duet when Tristan (in stage directions from the libretto) "Draws Isolde down onto a flowery bank and sinks on his knees before her" as they sing together, "Love so true and noble, love so pure and holy, long-awaited joy"—the words that softly end the duet as the lovers sing of finding an end to yearning; their love transformed in the dark night of death. Since Wagner's death, the *Wesendonck Lieder* has been performed countless times to enraptured audiences.

But then, one fateful day in the summer of 1858, on completing the Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, Wagner wrapped up the score to send with a messenger to Mathilde in the big house. Into its pages he tucked a letter, now known as the "Morning Confession," with words of love to Mathilde: "When I look into your eyes … Everything I might say becomes meaningless. When everything is so clear to me, then I am sure of myself that when this wonderful, sacred glance rests on me, I submerge myself in it. Then there is no longer any subject or any object, then everything is one, united, deep, infinite harmony! That is peace. And in that peace the highest, perfect life! Today I shall come to the garden. As soon as I see you—I hope I may be with you undisturbed for a moment. Take my whole soul as a morning greeting!"[1]

The crisis hit when Minna intercepted the love note to Mathilde. Furious, she confronted Mathilde and denounced the pair as lovers, and a monumental row ensued, resulting in Minna's returning alone to Germany, leaving behind this note for Mathilde: "I must tell you with a bleeding heart that you have succeeded in separating me from my husband after nearly 22 years of marriage. May this noble deed contribute to your peace of mind."[1] The idyll was over—Otto could not ignore Minna's revelation. In one day, Wagner lost his benefactor Otto, his muse Mathilde, and his domestic partner, Minna, and, ultimately, the home he had come to love.

Shortly after leaving Asyl, Wagner wrote to his sister Clara about his love for Mathilde:

"This love, which still remained unuttered by a word between us, finally cast aside its veil when I penned the poem of my *Tristan* and gave it to her. Then for the first time did she lose her self-control and confessed to me that she must die! We recognized forthwith that any union between us could not be so much as thought of and were accordingly resigned; renouncing every selfish wish, we suffered, endured, but loved each other."[1] Wagner continued: "My wife seemed to understand with shrewd feminine instincts what was proceeding; certainly she showed some jealousy, but she tolerated our companionship which on its side never violated morals but simply aimed at consciousness that we were in each other's presence. Finally, Minna so lost her senses as to intercept a letter from myself to Mathilde and break it open. She went by nothing but the endearing expressions that it contained and lost her head. She came to me raving and I explained if she did not know how to contain herself, we two must part."[1]

Träume	**Dreams** English translation © Richard Stokes
Sag, welch wunderbare Träume Halten meinen Sinn umfangen, Daß sie nicht wie leere Schäume Sind in ödes Nichts vergangen?	Say, what wondrous dreams are these Embracing all my senses, That they have not, like bubbles, Vanished to a barren void?
Träume, die in jeder Stunde, Jedem Tage schöner blühn, Und mit ihrer Himmelskunde Selig durchs Gemüte ziehn!	Dreams, that with every hour Bloom more lovely every day, And with their heavenly tidings Float blissfully through the mind!
Träume, die wie hehre Strahlen In die Seele sich versenken, Dort ein ewig Bild zu malen: Allvergessen, Eingedenken!	Dreams, that with glorious rays Penetrate the soul, There to paint an eternal picture: Forgetting all, remembering one!
Träume, wie wenn Frühlingssonne Aus dem Schnee die Blüten küßt, Daß zu nie geahnter Wonne Sie der neue Tag begrüßt,	Dreams, as when the Spring sun Kisses blossoms from the snow, So the new day might welcome them In unimagined bliss,
Daß sie wachsen, daß sie blühen, Träumend spenden ihren Duft, Sanft an deiner Brust verglühen, Und dann sinken in die Gruft.	So that they grow and flower, Bestow their scent as in a dream, Fade softly away on your breast And sink into their grave.

Mathilde went to her husband at once and explained what had happened. Wagner states: "Herewith the delicacy and purity of our relationship was invaded in a coarse and vulgar manner and many a thing had to alter. The most unheard-of scenes and tortures never ceased for me and I finally had to make up my mind to vacate the fair asylum that had been prepared for me with such tender affection"[2]

The dream shattered: Minna left alone for Germany to take care of her health, Otto took Mathilde and the children on an extended trip to Italy, and Wagner left for Venice where he wrote the final act of *Tristan and Isolde*, seeing himself as the rejected Tristan, identifying now with King Marke, the abandoned husband.

When Wagner left Asyl, he wrote a farewell letter to Mathilde: "My child, there is a voice in me that cries with yearning for rest, the rest which, long, long years ago I made my Flying Dutchman yearn for, the yearning for home, not the seductive joys of love. Only a grand, faithful woman could gain that for him, that homeland. Let us vow ourselves to this fair death, which stills and buries all our hankerings and cravings! Let us fade away, with peacefully transfigured gaze, and the holy smile of beautiful self-victory! And no-one then shall lose, when we are victors! Farewell, my dear hallowed angel!"[2] This letter expresses well the longings and yearning of the Dutchman, Tristan, Isolde, and Wagner himself in his love for Mathilde, his Muse.

Now, for the first time all three women so important in Wagner's life were under one roof—Minna, his first wife; Cosima, who would become his second wife; and Mathilde, Otto's wife.

Wagner wrote passionate letters daily to Mathilde once they were separated as, musically, he poured his pain into the final act of *Tristan*. One year later, he writes to her from Venice: "Here *Tristan* will be completed. And with that, if I may, I shall return to see thee, comfort thee, make thee happy; there looms my fairest, my most sacred wish. So be it. Sir Tristan, Lady Isolde, help me, help my angel! Your wounds will cease bleeding; they will heal and close. From here shall the world once learn of the sublime and noble stress of highest love, the plaints of agonizing joy."[2]

As time passed the letters to Mathilde change from passionate longing and despair to a more distanced yet still intimate tone as he describes his compositions, the concerts of his works, and the birth pangs of *Parsifal*. By 1863, Wagner had come to terms with the loss of Mathilde, though she and Otto always remained friends, reverting to the relationship they had enjoyed in the early years. Wagner was, by now in love with Cosima. By 1865, Wagner had been financially rescued by King Ludwig, and he writes to Mathilde requesting that his portfolio be sent to him: "Best child, it would be best to send the whole portfolio. I pledge myself that it shall return to its lady-owner unimpaired … Simply (my young king) wants everything collected, to take it in his charge, and know that he possesses me entirely."

The *Tristan* sketches, much of the *Ring* and the 1861–1862 manuscript for *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* had been gifts from Wagner to Mathilde. Ultimately, Wagner retrieved the rights to his works from Otto, and they became the property of the King. Despite this, Otto, Mathilde, and Richard remained on friendly terms; they exchanged letters, met socially, and attended concerts and operas. Otto and Mathilde were present at the opening night of Bayreuth in 1876 for *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

Wagner wrote to Mathilde for many years. Long after his death in 1883, she decided to collect his letters to her for publication. She requested that the Wagner family return her letters to Wagner but, as part of Wagner estate, Cosima would not hear of it. Mathilde was in the process of assembling the collection when she died in 1902.

"There are definitely many similarities between "Träume" and the "O sink herneider" part of *Tristan*. The harmony is mostly the same, but the melody is different. The accompaniments are also very different, with the *Tristan* orchestra playing off the beat. This makes it very difficult to get together with the orchestra, as from the stage, you really don't hear anything at all. A prompter is very necessary in an opera house. There is a similar 'feel,' but they are very difficult to sing. The intro to Act III of *Tristan und Isolde* is pretty much the same harmony and melody as "Im Treibhaus" though in "different keys … D-minor for the *Wesendonck* and F-minor in *Tristan*. Also, in *Tristan* the time signature is common time, and it is compound in the *Wesendonck*. But they sound very much the same in their context and create a sad, mysterious feeling to the listener."

— *Jane Eaglen*

Wagnerian soprano and president of the Boston Wagner Society (and honorary life member of The Wagner Society of Northern California).

Desirée Mays' Recommended Recordings of the *Wesendonck Lieder*

Lise Davidsen: Beethoven, Wagner, Verdi, London Philharmonic Orchestra, Sir Mark Elder, conductor, Decca, 2020

Jessye Norman: Wagner: Wesendonck-Lieder and Tristan und Isolde, London Symphony Orchestra, Colin Davis, conductor, Philips, 1975

Translated by William Ashton Ellis, this collection is a treasure trove of information about the relationship between Wagner and his beloved Muse from 1852 through the brief months spent in Zurich at Asyl and beyond. The entire collection provides extraordinary insights into this relationship, into Wagner's creative process, his writing and composition, and into the heartbreak that followed the crisis at Asyl. Mathilde was part of that journey from the time they met during the composition of *Die Walküre* right to the end. While their physical union may not have happened, Wagner did consummate the union in the music of *Tristan und Isolde,* into which he poured his yearning and love for his Muse.

Mathilde wrote in 1902, the year she died: "For years since his death [in 1883] have I lived with these letters. I plunged into my friend's ideas, pondering withal this unique relation and what had thereby ripened in me for all time and eternity. It often seemed to me to be not right that so much truth, such greatness and goodness, should perish wholly with myself. True, for me alone the letters had been written, but the truths expressed so lucidly, the sure paths to inner calm and happiness so gently and so clearly pointed out that a knowledge of them must be salutary for every seeking mind. Should these letters descend into the grave with me, with me be turned to dust?"[2]

We have Mathilde to thank for sharing these letters, which shed so much light on Richard Wagner, where Wagner discussed many topics over and beyond his affection for her.

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1. *Letters of Richard Wagner, The Burrell Collection,* The MacMillan Co., 1950.
2. Ellis, William Ashton, *Richard Wagner to Mathilde Wesendonck,* Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1905.
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4. Danny Riley, January 24, bachtrack.com, 2018.

FROM THE SOCIETY ARCHIVES

The Wagner Society's First Opera Production

— *Patrick Burnson*

While exploring the 1993 summer edition of *Leitmotive*, we came across a particularly engaging story by Lisa Burkett about the Society's staging of *The Flying Dutchman*—a daunting challenge for a group as small as ours, one that is focused on promoting Wagner's works, not producing them.

This complete concert version was co-sponsored by the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and held for one night only at Hellman Hall in San Francisco's Sunset District. Part of the impetus behind launching such a venture may have been the fact that "Wagnerian ambitions" were stifled in 1992 when San Francisco Opera excluded the composer from its regular season.

Ms. Burkett's account of the preparations for this enterprise included finding talented young artists who were enthusiastic about preparing new roles and agreeable to performing for fees the Society could manage.

Yolanda Harden, who won the National Association of Teachers of Singing competition at the age of twenty-one, was making her professional opera debut in the pivotal role of Senta. Daniel Harper would portray Erik, a role he covered for San Francisco Opera in 1988. Daland's role was to be taken by David Tigner, a bass who had by that time sung with every major Bay Area opera company.

Kathryn Garber, who had appeared at Seattle Opera, was chosen for the role of Mary. Completing the cast was tenor Raymond Salazar.

With little debate, Nakabayashi was approved by the Society's board to take over the podium. He was, after all, the distinguished Assistant Conductor of Opera San José and an assistant to Maestro Gabriele Bellini in Italy.

The enormous challenge of creating and preparing a two-piano reductive score was in the hands of accomplished pianists Jerome Lenk and Len McWilliams.

After eight months of planning, Society members and guests attended a preview performance on July, 22, 1992. After some initial nervous moments, the performance continued and delivered a captivating account of Wagner's work from the overture to the closing scene.

Opening night was two days later, July 24, with more than 200 in attendance. The company was welcomed with a standing ovation and brought back for multiple curtain calls.

Music critic Bill Aguiar, Jr. (my colleague at the bygone San Francisco Press Club), noted in his review that the performance faithfully captured the spirit and purpose of the work:

"Sans orchestra and chorus, Jun Nakabayashi conducted in a manner that was always supportive of his singers. Two excellent pianists, Jerome Leak and Les McWilliams, played the score with passion and drama. The opera was presented without interruption in keeping with Wagner's intentions."

Coming off this stage success, the Society produced two performances of *Das Rheingold* the very next year, staged at the Palace of Fine Arts Theatre under the direction of Daniel Helfgot. It was a modern-dress version, with minimal props (e.g., Rheinmaidens in bathing suits and sunglasses and Alberich as a beach bum searching for the gold with a metal detector).

Thirty years later, these remain the Society's only two productions. But who knows what may happen in the next 30 years?

Wagner in the World

Richard Wagner Monument

Liebethaler Grund Valley in Elbe Sandstone Mountains, Saxony, Germany

The largest Wagner monument in the world is near Graupa, where Richard Wagner lived during his work on *Lohengrin*, and is today a place of pilgrimage for Wagnerians.

Created between 1911–12 by sculptor Richard Guhr of the Dresden Academy, the monument was originally designed for placement in the Great Garden in Dresden. However, the outbreak of World War I halted the project, and it was soon forgotten.

The monument depicts Wagner as a grail knight, with five subsidiary figures representing the essential elements of his music dramas: the lyrical, spherical, dramatic, Dionysian, and demonic. It is constructed of bronze over sandstone and stands more than 40 feet high.

In the early 1930s, Wagnerites rediscovered the monument, and the Staude family donated the land in the Leibenthaler Valley near the site of Lochmühle, a famous mill complex dating to the 1600s.

On May 21, 1933—the 50th anniversary of Wagner's death—the monument was unveiled and opened to the public, making it the first Wagner memorial in Saxony.

The Wagner Society
of Northern California

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