Tristan and Isolde

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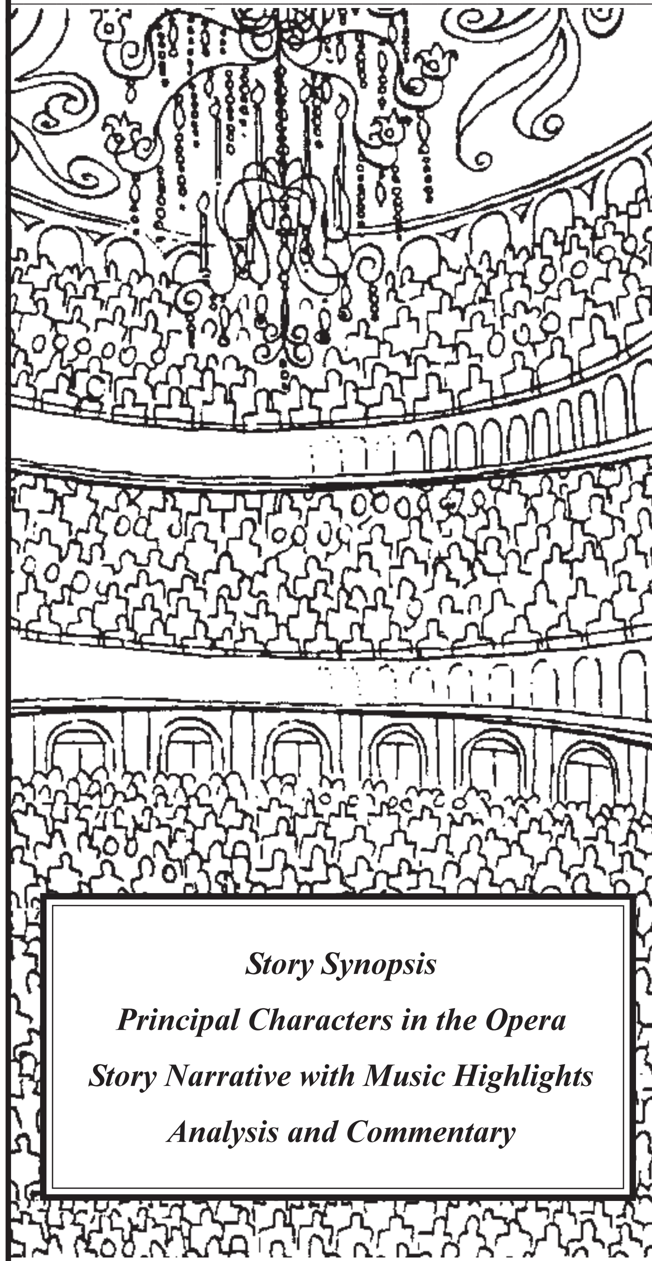

Story Synopsis

Principal Characters in the Opera

Story Narrative with Music Highlights

Analysis and Commentary

Burton D. Fisher, editor,
Opera Journeys Mini Guide Series

Burton D. Fisher is a former opera conductor, author-editor-publisher of the *Opera Classics Library Series,* the *Opera Journeys Mini Guide Series*, and the *Opera Journeys Libretto Series*, principal lecturer for the *Opera Journeys Lecture Series* at Florida International University, a commissioned author for Season Opera guides and Program Notes for regional opera companies, and a frequent opera commentator on National Public Radio.

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Tristan and Isolde

("Tristan und Isolde")

Music drama in German in three acts

Music by Richard Wagner

Libretto by Richard Wagner

Premiere: National Theater,
(Hoftheater), June 1865

Adapted from the
Opera Journeys Lecture Series
by
Burton D. Fisher

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Opera Journeys Mini Guide Series

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Principal Characters in Tristan and Isolde

Tristan, a knight from Cornwall	tenor
Isolde, an Irish princess	soprano
King Marke, King of Cornwall	bass
Kurvenal, Tristan's squire	baritone
Melot, a courtier	tenor
Brangäne, Isolde's maid	soprano
A Shepherd	tenor
A Steersman	baritone
A young sailor	tenor

Sailors, knights and squires.

TIME: During the Middle Ages
PLACE: At sea, King Marke's castle in Cornwall, and at Tristan's castle in Brittany

Brief Story Synopsis

Cornwall has conquered Ireland. Isolde, an Irish Princess, is being forced to marry the elderly King Marke of Cornwall. Tristan, a Cornish knight, escorts Isolde to Cornwall.

In a battle between Cornwall and Ireland, Tristan killed Morold, Isolde's betrothed. Tristan was wounded and sought Isolde's magical healing powers. He disguised himself as a seaman named Tantris and was cured by Isolde. Isolde discovered that he killed Morold. She was about to kill him to avenge Morold's murder, but his doleful glance stirred her emotions and she was unable to fulfill the deed. Tristan — as Tantris — and Isolde fell in love, but he departed after declaring his profound gratitude. However, Tantris returned to Ireland, but in his true identity as Tristan; he came to fetch Isolde, whom he promised as a bride for his old uncle, King Marke, the marriage intended to end the strife between Cornwall and Ireland. Tristan, the man Isolde loved, became Tristan the bridebearer for King Marke.

Betrayed and vengeful, Isolde vows death by poison for both of them. As the ship nears the coast of Cornwall, Isolde confronts Tristan; she curses him for betraying her and seeks his death. Tristan offers Isolde his sword to fulfill the act, but she suggests that they share a draught to reconcile their enmity. Tristan knows that the draught contains poison.

Tristan and Isolde drink the draught; it is not poison, but a love potion substituted by Brangäne,

Isolde's maid. Tristan and Isolde unite in impassioned love as the ship reaches the shores of Cornwall, where she is to become the bride of Tristan's uncle.

At King Marke's castle, Isolde awaits Tristan: Brangäne will extinguish a torch, a signal that Tristan can approach safely. But Brangäne suspects that Melot, King Marke's knight, plots against Tristan. Isolde extinguishes the torch. At that signal, Tristan arrives. The lovers rapturously embrace, praising the Night, when their love can be consummated. At a nearby tower, Brangäne maintains a watch; she warns them that dawn approaches, but the lovers are overcome by ecstasy and ignore her warning.

Kurvenal, Tristan's aide, warns them that the King approaches with a hunting party. King Marke, Melot, and courtiers discover the lovers; Tristan is shamed and dishonored. Melot and Tristan fight, and Tristan is fatally wounded.

In Tristan's castle in Brittany, Kurvenal guards the wounded Tristan; they await Isolde, whom Kurvenal has summoned to heal Tristan's wounds. Tristan is pained, delirious, and longs for death. A shepherd's pipe announces that Isolde's ship has finally arrived. Tristan rips off the bandages of his wound and rushes to meet Isolde. While in Isolde's embrace, Tristan dies.

Another ship brings King Marke and Melot. Kurvenal kills Melot, but is fatally wounded in the struggle; he dies alongside Tristan. King Marke learned about Brangäne's deception and forgives Tristan. Isolde grieves over Tristan's death, and then dies on his corpse.

Story Narrative with Music Examples

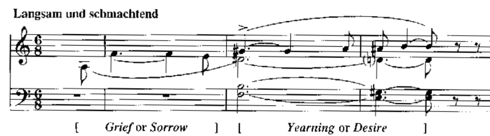
Editor's note: Many descriptive labels have been attached to certain musical motives, many of which have been determined by commentators and analysts from hints given by the words or situations as they appear in the opera. Nevertheless, these designations should not be taken literally. Many of the motives undergo many transformations and metamorphoses during the course of the drama, suggesting that other shades of meaning can readily apply.

The Prelude:

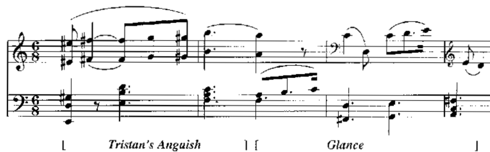
The Prelude provides the spiritual essence of the drama. It begins with a rising phrase of just over three bars.

In reality, there are two motives present. The first phrase begins with the opening note A in the bass clef and rises to the D sharp in the second full bar, a particularly poignant theme played by the cellos in the upper register that has been associated with Grief or Sorrow, and at various times associated with longing, pain, and hopelessness.

The second motive, G sharp through B natural in the second and third full bars, is dominated by penetrating oboes over woodwind harmony, a motive suggesting Yearning, or Desire, but also Isolde's Magic, the latter description because it is first heard in the opera when Isolde speaks of her mother's craft in brewing magic potions. (For Wagner, this motive primarily represented Tristan and Isolde's yearning and desire to realize their love, a love that was their predestined fate, but hopelessly unattainable.)



Two new motives make their appearance: that of Tristan's Anguish, and the Glance motive.



As the Prelude swells to its climax, the motives of Grief and Yearning combine with motives suggesting deliverance through Death and Tristan's Longing.

The Prelude is a miraculous tone-poem, a musical portrait of passion, pain, and unsatisfied longing, the agonies that torment Tristan and Isolde and represent the essence of the entire music drama.

Act 1: At sea, on the deck of Tristan's ship, during the crossing from Ireland to Cornwall

The drama begins with the voice of a young sailor, heard from atop a mast of the ship, his unaccompanied song about the longing he feels for his Irish sweetheart .

"Westwarts schweift der Blick"

In a tent on the deck of Tristan's ship, Isolde reclines on a couch, her face buried in the cushions. Brangäne, Isolde's maid and confidante, holds a side curtain back as she looks at the ship's deck.

Isolde rises, as if rudely awakened from a dream, the sailor's song referring to an Irish maid provoking her irritation and anger. She has been brooding over her fate, an Irish princess forced into a loveless marriage with the elderly King Marke.

Brangäne advises Isolde that they will soon land in Cornwall. Isolde erupts into a furious outburst of defiance, declaring that she will never set foot on Cornwall's shore. She condemns her Irish countrymen with fury: cowards who allowed themselves to become easy prey for the armies of Cornwall; and she deplores the impotency of her mother's sorcery over the elements, invoking the seas to destroy the ship and all of its occupants.

Brangäne grieves over Isolde's suffering and sorrow, but her attempts at consolation are futile. In a wild outburst, Isolde calls for air; Brangäne draws aside the curtains, revealing the ship's stern. Near the mast, sailors are busy with ropes; on the deck above stand knights and squires, among them Tristan, who stands arms folded, looking thoughtfully out over the sea. Beside him is his trusty squire, Kurvenal. From the mast above, the young sailor begins his song again.

Isolde's eyes remain transfixed on Tristan, her enigmatic words "Mir erkoren, mir verloren" ("I mistaken! I forsaken!"), followed by her outburst: "Todgeweihtes Haupt! Todgeweihtes Herz!" ("Death-devoted head! Death-devoted heart!"), variously interpreted as Isolde's curse of death against Tristan.

"Todgeweihtes Haupt!"

Isolde speaks scornfully to Brangäne about Tristan, the man who brings her as a bride to his old uncle, King Marke, and who persistently refuses to see her. Indignantly, Isolde orders Brangäne to summon Tristan so that she may speak with him. As Brangäne leaves, Isolde seats herself on the couch, all the while staring fixedly at the stern of the ship.

Brangäne hesitatingly approaches Tristan, timidly announcing Isolde's request to see him. Tristan refuses, claiming that he cannot desert the helm until the ship is brought safely into harbor. As Brangäne becomes more insistent, Kurvenal becomes incensed by her tone and reinforces Tristan's refusal, mockingly reminding Brangäne that it was the hero Tristan who liberated Cornwall from Ireland: that Tristan defeated and slew Morold; and that sending Morold's decapitated head to Ireland was their ironic way to pay Ireland the tribute they demanded from Cornwall. Kurvenal concludes his tirade, shouting at Brangäne with contemptuous defiance. Tristan gestures that Kurvenal be silent. Offended, Brangäne leaves to return to Isolde.

Defeated, Brangäne falls before Isolde in despair. She relates the details of her bitter humiliation by Tristan, restraining herself from erupting into a furious rage.

Isolde narrates the incidents causing her present predicament and dilemma. She relates how the wounded Tristan, near death after his battle with Morold that freed Cornwall from tribute to Ireland, came to Ireland in the disguise of Tantris to be healed by Isolde's magic art; how she recognized him as Morold's murderer from the notch on his sword blade that corresponded to a piece of metal in Morold's skull; how she had Tantris at her mercy and was about to exact revenge against him for killing Morold, but after he looked deep into her eyes, his profound Glance stirred her emotions and compassion; she could not kill him and let her sword fall. Her heart no longer bore hate and revenge against Tantris, but an overwhelming love for him.

She tended and cured his wound, hoping that he would return home and no longer disquiet her with his Glance; he swore a thousand oaths of eternal gratitude and faith to Isolde. Isolde released Tantris, but he has returned, revealing himself as the hero Tristan.

When Tristan returned to Cornwall, he praised Isolde's beauty and her magic secrets, offering her as a bride to his old uncle, King Marke: a tribute from vanquished Ireland. Isolde erupts into impassioned scorn against the man whose life she saved; he has humiliated her by boldly returning to force her into a loveless marriage, an act, Isolde suggests, he would never had dared if Morold still lived.

Isolde is in desperation, injured in personal and national pride; she considers herself the pawn of Tristan's ambition by bringing her as Ireland's tribute to Cornwall, and she detests the thought that she has been exploited, forced to marry Cornwall's aged king.

With increasing anger, Isolde curses the perfidious Tristan, vowing revenge and ending her sorrows through death: death for both Tristan and Isolde. Brangäne attempts to console Isolde by portraying the happy life that awaits her with the powerful King Marke, reminding her that her mother compounded magic potions that will ensure her marital love. Brangäne opens a casket to show Isolde the potion, but Isolde is more concerned with another potion in the casket: a Draught of Death.

Kurvenal boisterously interrupts Isolde and Brangäne, relating a message from Tristan that they are prepared to land, and that Isolde should be ready to be presented to King Marke. Isolde, with quiet dignity, orders Kurvenal to deliver a message to Tristan: that she will not leave the ship, or be present at his side when he presents her to King Marke, unless she forgives him for his offences against her.

After Kurvenal leaves, Isolde orders Brangäne to give her "the cup of Peace": the poisonous Draught of Death. Brangäne becomes horrified, but her protests are in vain.

Tristan appears before Isolde.

Isolde, controlling her agitation, gazes at Tristan intently. Tristan justifies his conduct with dignity, explaining that he has avoided her call during the voyage because of his moral duty to his king; by custom, a bridebearer must remain away from the bride. Isolde reminds Tristan of another custom: that he slew her betrothed and that she has the right of vengeance, even though she had once renounced it.

She further reminds Tristan of the feud between Ireland and Cornwall, but claims that their enmity ended with the defeat of Morold. Isolde tells him that she saw through his disguise as Tantris, had him in her power, but pledged herself to silence and spared Tantris' life. But now she is incapable of vengeance, for everywhere Tristan is triumphant and honored. Who will strike him down and fulfill her vengeance?

Gloomily, Tristan yields to Isolde's right; he offers her his sword, urging her to strike the fatal blow herself. But Isolde rejects the weapon, telling him that she cannot appear before King Marke as the slayer of his most estimable knight.

Isolde proclaims that their differences cannot be settled by the sword, but rather, they must celebrate a truce between them by drinking a cup of reconciliation. Tristan intuitively knows that the drink is poison, but chivalrously agrees to share the "draught of peace" with Isolde.

Isolde signals the agitated Brangäne to bring the draught. To the cries of sailors taking in sails, Tristan takes the cup from Isolde. Before he drinks the draught, he speaks of his honor and anguish; he lifts the cup and drinks, the cure for the endless grief in his heart. Fearing further betrayal, Isolde wrests the cup from Tristan and drinks it.

Thus, Tristan and Isolde believe that they are meeting their doom, which is not death and the end of their grief, but life: a life that will now be filled with misery and sorrow; Brangäne had disobeyed Isolde and substituted a Love Potion for the Death Potion, an expression of her love for her mistress, whose death she was trying to avert.

After Tristan and Isolde drink the potion, they are seized with a succession of conflicting emotions, all portrayed in rapturous music that expresses a breathless frenzy. Finally, their death-defiant expression radiates into intense passion for each other. They are confused, bewildered and trembling, gazing at each other with extreme longing and passion.

Tristan and Isolde are overcome by love for each other. But it is not the physical effect of the Love Potion that has transformed them: they were predestined for each other and have always secretly loved each other, but honor prevented Tristan from acknowledging that love. They are now awakened to their love, their sense of imminent death removing restraint; they no longer disguise their feelings and pour out their souls and rapturously express their passion.

The shore is seen, a castle crowning its heights. The lovers remain embraced and in a trance. Brangäne looks at them in horror; she interrupts them and throws the royal robe over Isolde. Kurvenal tries to rouse the enraptured Tristan to reality; King Marke is coming aboard to greet his bride. Brangäne admits to Isolde that the draught she drunk was a Love Potion.

In their moment of ecstasy, Tristan and Isolde struggle to comprehend what has happened to them. They longed for Eternal Night and the oblivion of death, but now they must live in the cruel light of Day. The act closes with exhilarating, vigorous and impassioned rising chromatic motifs, versions of the Sea motive that seems to mock the lovers' pain.

Act 2: King Marke's castle in Cornwall

Tristan and Isolde long to escape into the Eternal Night where they can share their forbidden love.

The orchestral introduction to the second act introduces several principal motives:

The motive of the Insolent Day, in the mystical rather than material sense: the inner consciousness of "night" as opposed to the material world, or "day.

Insolent Day:

Isolde's Impatience:

Isolde's Ardor:

Spiritual Ecstasy:

It is a summer night in a garden before Isolde's chamber in the castle. On one side of an open door of the castle a torch is burning. The sounds of hunting horns are heard, signifying the departure of King Marke and his courtiers. The horns gradually fade in the distance.

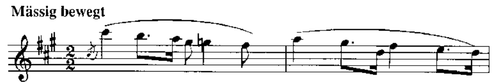
Isolde appears before Brangäne in great agitation. Brangäne tells her that she has become deceived by desire: to Isolde, the horns are barely audible, only the murmuring fountain that suggests to her that Tristan awaits her in the silence of the night.

Brangäne further warns Isolde that in her impatience to see Tristan she should not be oblivious to the devious Melot, Tristan's supposed friend, who is really an enemy who sows evil seeds in the mind of King Marke. She alleges that Melot has arranged the hunt as a ruse, hoping that the noble Tristan will be indiscriminate and become his real prey. But Isolde is heedless to Brangäne and fearless of Melot, whom she regards as Tristan's most faithful friend. Isolde orders Brangäne to extinguish the torch: the signal for Tristan to approach; the symbol of the Night that is to embrace the lovers.

Brangäne reproaches herself for fatefully switching of the Love Potion for the Draught of Death. Isolde reassures her that the transformation of the lovers was not Brangäne's work, but the fulfillment of the wishes of the all-powerful Frau Minne, the Goddess of Love.

Isolde has woven grief into joy by transforming hate into love. She praises the Goddess of Love.

Love: Frau Minne



Isolde's mystical ecstasy intensifies. She removes the torch, the symbol of the hateful Day, and extinguishes it herself. She sends Brangäne up into the watchtower.

Isolde impatiently awaits Tristan; she is agitated and expectant, waving her veil profusely as a signal to Tristan. Tristan bursts in and the music builds to a frenzied climax, the lovers greeting each other ecstatically and embracing wildly. In a breathless exchange, both alternate impetuous and rapturous expressions of their eternal love for each other: Isolde says, "Bist du mein?" ("Are you mine?"), followed by Tristan, "Hab' ich dich wieder?" ("Do I possess you?")

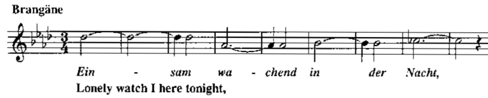
Tristan draws Isolde to a flowery bank. Both invoke the holiness of Night.

They have escaped from the cruel, blinding, Insolent Day; they aspire to Night when their souls can unite as they celebrate their love; Day is illusion and error, but Night is truth, an illumination beyond all the wisdom of earth. It is the Night that delays the dawn of Day: the Day brings separation and sorrow.

Both recollect the past. Tristan, who lived in the world of Day and Illusion, had been a traitor to Isolde; Isolde wanted to save him from the consequences of treachery and error by seeking to unite herself with him in death. But the gates of death had opened only to let love in. The yearning of Day surrendered to the truth of Night: "Descend upon us, oh Night of passion."

"*O sink hernieder, Nacht der Liebe*"

And joining their ecstasy, Brangäne is heard from the watchtower, her voice floating above in the Night as she warns the lovers that Day awaits them.



Tristan and Isolde invoke Death, freedom from life's yearning.

Death may seize their bodies, but their love will endure in a mystic world beyond life: Death is the ultimate consummation of their love.

But the lovers remain heedless to Brangäne's warning, as their ecstasy reaches its climactic explosion of the fulfillment of their yearning and desire. The lovers speak of a mystical darkness in which there will be no more need for them to hide from each other, the music a union of Tristan's Hero motive and Isolde's Magic motive.

In their final rapture, the lovers praise the Night, lost in the ecstasy of their love.

"So sturben wir"

A savage discord in the orchestra is accompanied by a piercing scream from Brangäne. Kurvenal rushes in with drawn sword, warning Tristan of danger. Hunting horns announce the arrival King Marke, Melot, and courtiers; Brangäne runs from the tower and rushes to Isolde.

All pause in astonishment as they witness Tristan and Isolde embraced rapturously. Isolde is overcome with shame, and Tristan tries to hide her, covering her with his cloak. With sadness, Tristan comments: "The barren Day, for the last time!"

The triumphant Melot gloats as he reminds King Marke that his suspicions were well-founded. The King expresses his profound sorrow that Tristan has

surrendered honor and duty and betrayed him. Tristan cannot speak, finding it impossible to explain to King Marke the lofty mystical world into which love has elevated his soul. King Marke gently reproaches Tristan; his nephew was a paragon of honor, but he has now brought shame upon himself. With a heavy heart, he asks who can explain to him the deep, mysterious cause of all this misfortune and treachery.

Tristan turns to Isolde and invites her to follow him into "the dark realm of Night," that mystical world from which he awoke when his mother brought him in sorrow into this world. Isolde replies that as she once followed him "to a foreign land, so now will she go with him to his own real land, his heritage." Tristan kisses her gently on the forehead.

Tristan exposes Melot's deception and treachery, claiming that it was Melot who urged him to bring Isolde to Cornwall; and that Melot is in love with Isolde, his jealousy the reason he has betrayed Tristan.

Inflamed, Melot draws his sword and attacks Tristan. Tristan and Melot fight. Tristan seeks death, now assured that Isolde has promised to follow him into the Night. He allows Melot to wound him, and then sinks into Kurvenal's arms.

Melot, eager to thrust the fatal blow at Tristan, is restrained by King Marke.

Act 3: Tristan's castle in Karéol, Brittany

In the garden of the castle, the wounded Tristan sleeps beneath a tree. Kurvenal bends over him, grief-stricken by his master's suffering and agony. In the distance, the sea can be seen. Kurvenal has sent to Cornwall for Isolde, the only one who can heal the wound Tristan received in his battle with Melot. Kurvenal has placed a shepherd on a watchtower to signal when Isolde's ship arrives. The shepherd sings a melancholy song, but Kurvenal tells him that when Isolde's ship comes into view, he should signal by playing a merry melody. But now, the sea is desolate, and the shepherd continues his plaintive tune.

Tristan revives from his delirium and asks where he is. Kurvenal replies that he is in his ancestral castle in Karéol. Slowly and painfully, Tristan's

consciousness returns. But he has difficulty seizing the reality surrounding him, his soul still preoccupied with thoughts of endless Night, his plunge into eternal oblivion with Isolde.

Tristan becomes possessed by the thought that Isolde still lives in the bright light of Day; he must seek and find her, that they may end their yearning in the realm of Night: Death. In his confusion, he sees the light in the castle and believes that he hears Isolde calling him; he becomes delirious.

Kurvenal reveals that he has sent for Isolde: that she once healed his wound from Morold, and she can surely heal the wound from Melot. Tristan, in the frenzied confusion of his delirium, imagines that he sees Isolde's ship approaching. Frantically, he calls for Kurvenal to look for the ship, but it is a delusion, the shepherd's song remaining mournful. In his mounting despair, Tristan remembers how he heard that sad shepherd's song in his childhood, when his mother and father died. Tristan yearns to die. He curses the Love Potion that has brought him so much anguish.

Tristan faints and sinks back. Kurvenal despairs, thinking that Tristan has died. Tristan revives and recovers consciousness, and again imagines Isolde's ship approaching. While Kurvenal tries to calm him once more, the shepherd blows a merry tune, the signal that a ship has been sighted.

Kurvenal rushes to the watchtower and reports on the ship's progress: its conquest of the breakers, the skill of the steersman, and its safe passage to the rocks. At last, he announces that he sees Isolde coming ashore. All rush to the shore, leaving Tristan alone. Frenzy and feverish excitement seize Tristan as he anticipates Isolde's arrival. He tears the bandages from his wounds.

Isolde's voice is heard calling: "Tristan! Beloved!" Tristan replies in wild anticipation: "What do I hear? The light? To her! To her!" Isolde arrives and Tristan rushes to meet her, half fainting. The lovers embrace, and then Tristan sinks slowly to the ground. His last word, "Isolde!'", underscored by the Glance motive. Tristan has died.

Isolde becomes distraught, unable to accept the death of her beloved Tristan. She sinks unconscious on his corpse, just as the shepherd tells Kurvenal that a second ship has been sighted. Kurvenal

believes that it is King Marke coming to exact revenge against Tristan. He orders the gate barricaded.

Brangäne appears, and then Melot. Immediately, Kurvenal strikes Melot dead. King Marke and his retainers appear and try to bring Kurvenal to reason, but Kurvenal attacks them and is fatally wounded. As Kurvenal's strength wanes, he drags himself toward Tristan, dieing heroically and pathetically at his master's feet.

King Marke, grieving deeply, explains that he learned of Brangäne's Love Potion and that Tristan was not dishonorable; the King has come to unite Tristan with Isolde, but sadly, Tristan is dead.

Brangäne tries to arouse Isolde, whose only consciousness of reality is the body of Tristan; Tristan has preceded Isolde into the realm of Night, and she must follow him.

In the Liebestod (Love-Death, or Isolde's Transfiguration), Isolde proclaims the mystical future of the lovers: "Mild und leise" ("Gently and softly.")

Isolde recalls the glory of their passion and love, and then dies, falling on Tristan's body. It a transcendent moment in which death has finally united the souls of Tristan and Isolde.

The final music of the opera, a resolution on a B major chord, musically ends the tragedy of *Tristan and Isolde.*

Wagner and Tristan and Isolde

During the second half of the 19th century, Richard Wagner (1813-1883)revolutionized opera with his conceptions of music drama: he created a seamless continuity between opera's internal architectural elements by virtually eliminating the formal structures of recitative and aria (or set piece); the result became a seamless continuity of music and text in the evolving drama. Through leading motives, or leitmotifs, the orchestra exposed the thoughts and ideas of the characters, but the orchestra was now transformed from accompanist into a symphonic unit; it became an integral protagonist of the drama that provided "endliche melodie," or an endless chain of music.

Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* is vast in its concept and design, bold in its execution, revolutionary in its operatic structure, and exacting in its demands on singers and the orchestra. In this opera, Wagner's music-drama esthetics were first materialized: the extensive use of leitmotifs, the integration of the orchestra into the drama, and the dramatic unity of all its artistic elements.

The leitmotif of the entire music drama is the exaltation of love: as Wagner commented, "a monument to this loveliest of all dreams." In this opera, Wagner spiritualized love: an ideal beyond experienced emotions or the material world that is consummated metaphysically, or as a transcendent experience.

Musically, *Tristan and Isolde* represents a milestone — if not a revolution — in the history of music: its music emancipated dissonance from tonality and set the stage for future harmonic adventurism; the music score of *Tristan and Isolde* has been deemed the beginning of modern music, Wagner's harmonic innovations continuing into modern times. The score is dominated by discords, an innovation that broke all the existing rules of tonality: for hundreds of years before *Tristan and Isolde*, the essence of music was tonality; all music was composed in keys, chords could be identified with keys, or identified as transitional chords between keys.

The "Tristan Chord" — f, b, d sharp, g sharp, appearing initially in the second full measure of the Prelude and associated with Grief or Sorrow — is perhaps the most famous chord in the history of music, its essence challenging conventional analysis. The Tristan Chord is a discord; it partially resolves and it is partially suspended, creating a sense of both resolution and dissonance. As the music progresses new discords are created: the result is that the ear becomes partially satisfied by the resolution, but dissatisfied by the suspension; a lack of resolution that creates a sense of tension as the listener consciously and unconsciously craves for resolution. Wagner built the harmonics of the entire opera on discord and lack of

resolution, except the final chord, its resolution suggesting a finality: the culmination of insatiable yearning.

Tristan and Isolde's premiere was scheduled for Vienna in 1859. However, the premiere was abandoned after some fifty-seven rehearsals, the musicians finding Wagner's score virtually impossible to learn and play, and the singers finding it unsingable. Its music was so revolutionary that Wagner was considered seriously insane, a musical anarchist and iconoclast intent on destroying Western music traditions. But the opera did have its premiere six years later and Wagner's ingenious harmonic innovations began to overtake the music world. After Wagner, many composers began to abandon tonality; it began a transformation in music's harmonic structure, such as the introduction of the atonal, 12-tone, or serial music, an avant-garde technique that virtually considered conventional melody, rhythm and traditional harmony evil elements of the musical language.

Wagner's early operas, from *Die Feen* (1834) ("The Fairies"), after Carlo Gozzi's *La Donna Serpente* ("The Serpent Woman"), through *Lohengrin* (1850), derived from Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzifal,* reflect strong musical and aesthetic influences from the German Romantic as well as the Italian bel canto schools: those operas contain many parallels to the mysticism and spiritualism of Weber's *Oberon* (1826) and Marschner's *Der Vampyr (*1828), as well as the Italian bel canto masters, Rossini and Belllini. Wagner's other operas from that period include *Das Liebesverbot* (1836) ("The Censure of Love"), after Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*; *Rienzi, der Letzte der Tribunen* (1840) ("Rienzi, the Last of the Tribunes") after Edward Bulwer-Lytton, that was typical of the five-act French grand opera style in the tradition of Auber and Scribe; *Der Fliegende Holländer* (1841) ("The Flying Dutchman") after Heine; and *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg* (1845) ("Tannhäuser and the Contest of Singers on the Wartburg.")

Wagner vehemently opposed the abuses of the Italian bel canto school: their hackneyed librettos, obsession with spectacle, and showcases for singers: to Wagner, much of opera that preceded him was "causes without effects." Wagner shared Berlioz's description of the genre: "Music of the Italians is a sensual pleasure and nothing more. For this noble expression of the mind, they (the Italians) have hardly more respect than for the art of cooking. They want a score that, like a plate of macaroni, can be assimilated immediately without having to think about it, or even pay attention to it."

Nevertheless, Wagner's operas prior to 1850, particularly *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin,* possess intense lyricism and represent perhaps the pinnacle of the bel canto school: Wagner, at times the principal antagonist of Italian

bel canto, ironically became its foremost and finest practitioner. But Wagner was seeking an antidote for the existing conventions of recitative, set-pieces, or numbers, that he considered elements that impeded the flow of the drama. In his next compositional period, beginning in the 1850s, he would develop theories of music drama that would completely transform opera traditions.

Wagner's challenge was to let drama run an unbroken course without restraining the action with purely musical forms. As such, he envisioned a complete fusion of drama and music, in which the drama would be conceived in terms of music, and the music would freely work according to its own inner laws, a balance in which the drama assisted but did not constrain the music. The words had to share equally with the music in realizing the drama, their inflections sounding ideally in alliterative clusters with the vocal line springing directly out of the natural rise and fall of the words. As such, the voices were to give the impression of heightened speech, and the ultimate opera would become a "sung drama." However, where words failed, the orchestra would convey the drama through recurring musical themes, what Wagner called "motifs of memory," that were later termed leitmotifs.

In 1849, Wagner's participation in the Dresden political uprisings caused him to become exiled from Germany. He found safe haven in Zurich, where he began to pen his theories about opera: *Die Kunst und die Revolution* ("Art and Revolution"); *Die Kunst der Zukunft* ("The Artwork of the Future"); and *Oper und Drama* ("Opera and Drama"). Essentially, these were theories that envisioned the opera art form as a "Gesamtkuntswerk," a complete work of art that incorporated all artistic and creative elements: acting and gesture, poetry, music, and scenery; opera was idealistically a total artistic unity that was the sum of its various parts. As such, Wagner conceived opera as music drama: the full integration of text, music, and other artistic elements that contribute to realizing the drama.

Wagner's first attempt to put his theories and conceptions into practice began in 1848: he began his monumental trilogy, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* ("The Ring of the Nibelung.") In 1864, Wagner was rescued from financial disaster by Ludwig II, an impassioned admirer who had just acceded to the throne of Bavaria. With the King's support, Wagner produced *Tristan and Isolde* (1865), *Die Meistersinger* (1868), premiered the two *Ring* operas *Das Rheingold* (1869) and *Die Walküre* (1870), opened the Bayreuth Festspielhaus in 1876 with the full production of *The Ring of the Nibelung,* and completed his final opera, *Parsifal* (1882).

Wagner's first inspiration to convert the *Tristan and Isolde* legend into a music drama came to him in 1854 while he was living in exile in Zurich. He had been

preoccupied with the *Ring* for some 15 years, but he realized that even if he completed the *Ring*, he could not envision immediate publication or performances. His immediate problem was his chaotic personal finances; he had mounting debts and even doubted his ability to survive. For practical purposes, he decided to interrupt his work on the *Ring* and compose what he envisioned as a simple opera that could be staged immediately: *Tristan and Isolde.*

In May 1857 Wagner received an invitation from Dom Pedro, Emperor of Brazil, to compose an opera for Rio de Janeiro and conduct its world premiere in the Brazilian capital. In desperation, Wagner considered a version of *Tristan and Isolde* that would be translated into Italian: *Tristano ed Isotta*. In retrospect, there is much skepticism as to whether Wagner was serious or not about the project, but nevertheless, it may have provided the jolt he needed to devote himself to composing an opera that he had announced to Liszt two and half years earlier, but had since remained dormant.

In 1857, Wagner had written himself to a standstill in the composition of the *Ring* and needed stimulation from a totally different project: he began to compose *Tristan and Isolde*. Halfway through the second act of *Siegfried,* the third music drama of the *Ring,* Wagner laid down his pen for nine years, writing to Franz Liszt, his ardent supporter: "I have led my Siegfried into the beautiful forest solitude. There I have left him under a linden tree and, with tears from the depths of my heart said farewell to him: he is better there than anywhere else."

At the time, the exiled Wagner was living at an idyllic home on the shores of Lake Lucerne, a gift from his benefactor, the Swiss silk merchant, Otto Wesendonck. It is generally supposed that the inspiration for *Tristan and Isolde* — both libretto and music score — was Mathilde Wesendonck, the wife of his patron. Frau Wesendonck, a young and beautiful woman, was also a poet, the author of "Fünf Gedichte" ("Wesendonck Lieder"), for which Wagner composed music. Two of the songs, "Im Treibaus" and "Träume," were later published by Wagner as "Studies for Tristan and Isolde": "Träume" was underscored with the love music that materialized into the second act of *Tristan and Isolde*, and "Im Treibhaus" appears in the music of the third act prelude.

The relationship between Wagner and Mathilde has stirred conjecture and speculation: Was their love consummated? Or was their love a forbidden and unattainable love as intense and impassioned as that of *Tristan and Isolde*? Wagner was never shy about justifying affairs with the wives of friends, and in his mind, an affair with the wife of his patron would certainly have been an acceptable relationship. But the real question is: Would Wagner have composed *Tristan and Isolde* had he never met Mathilde Wesendonck? It is an unanswerable question, as unresolved as the Tristan Chord itself, but it is indeed

probable that Wagner was in love with Mathilde because he was writing *Tristan and Isolde*, not because he was in love with Mathilde.

Wagner completed the prose scenario for the opera in August 1857, the pencil sketches of the music completed in August 1859. In 1861, the Court Opera in Vienna agreed to premiere the opera, but between November 1862 and March 1863, after some 54 rehearsals, musicians and singers rebelled and the opera premiere was abandoned.

Some wonderful opera trivia is attached to the failed *Tristan and Isolde* premiere. Wagner detested and hated the master of operetta, Jacques Offenbach, bombastically designating Offenbach's *Orphée aux Enfers* (1858) ("Orpheus in the Underworld"), "a dunghill in which all the swine of Europe wallow." It must have been a great satisfaction for Offenbach when the Vienna Court Opera asked him to compose a "romantic grand opera for its patrons" to replace the failed world premiere of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde.*

Ironically, Offenbach's opera was named *Rheinnixen*, not Rhinemaidens, but a title descriptive of nixies, or watersprites, from German Romantic literature. Offenbach's opera was a complete failure, but one number survived, singled out by the well-known critic, Eduard Hanslick, Wagner's severest critic, with praises such as "lovely, luring, sensuousness." The passage was the *Goblin Song* from *Rheinnixen*, the music Offenbach later transplanted into *The Tales of Hoffmann,* and titled the *Barcarolle,* a song that is specifically attached to Offenbach's fame.

Nevertheless, after King Ludwig of Bavaria became Wagner's patron and rescuer, *Tristan and Isolde* had its long-delayed premiere at the Royal Court Theatre in Munich in 1865, under the baton of Hans von Bülow.

The critical reception to the opera was controversial, some critics expressing their vehement hostility to the work, while others praised it with unbridled enthusiasm. Nevertheless, Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* was launched on the music world, its harmonic innovations and heightened music drama a milestone in the history of opera. The opera would exert an extraordinary influence in music for future generations: it was the dawn of modern music drama, and more particularly, of modern music.

The story of *Tristan and Isolde* is attributable to ancient Celtic legend that originated in Brittany: stories of desperate and tragic romance and frustrated passion fraught with guilt and unrequited love that held great appeal. By Medieval times, the story had already gone through many syntheses, particularly after it was adopted into many Arthurian legends.

But the basic Celtic legend is the following: Rivalin, the King of Parmenia, arrives at the court of King Mark in Cornwall and marries Blanchefleur, Rivalin's sister. While

in the overseas fortress of Kanoël, Blanchefleur, pregnant with child, learns that her brother Rivalin was killed in battle; her sorrow is so great that she dies giving birth to her son, Tristan, a name descriptive of the unhappy circumstances of his birth. Tristan is brought up by his tutor Kurvenal.

In the course of Tristan's adventures, he arrives at King Mark's court at Tintagel, where he is recognized as the King's nephew and is treated with great honor. After he returns from a war in Parmenia, he finds his native Cornwall conquered by the Irish King Gurmun, whose brother-in-law, Morold, comes to collect a tribute from Cornwall. Tristan is determined to put an end to the practice by challenging Morold to combat; he slays Morold, and sends his decapitated head to Ireland, a scornful and defiant gesture of tribute to Ireland.

But in the combat, Morold's sword deals Tristan a poisoned wound. Before Morold dies, he advises Tristan that only Queen Isot of Ireland can cure his wound. In the disguise of a trader named Tantris, Tristan seeks Isot and is treated by her magic arts. After he is healed, he is made tutor of the Queen's daughter, Isot the Fair, with whom he falls in love.

After a while, Tristan returns to Cornwall where he faces political turmoil: nobles are intent on deposing the childless old King Mark, Tristan's uncle. The King wants to make Tristan his successor, but the nobles object. A swallow flies overhead and drops a lock of golden hair. Tristan recognizes the hair as belonging to the beautiful Isot the Fair. He persuades the king to marry Isot, and offers to go to Ireland on his behalf and return with his bride.

Once more, Tristan goes off to Ireland, where he finds the land terrorized and ravaged by an enormous dragon. Tristan wins the country's gratitude by slaying the monster. During the battle he is weakened by the dragon's poisonous breath. Again he seeks Isot's healing powers, but in disguise. Both Isots — mother and daughter — notice a notch in his sword that corresponds to a splinter in the head of the dead Morold; they recognize him as Tristan and condemn him as Morold's slayer. In revenge, Isot the Fair attempts to kill Tristan in his bath with his own sword, but she finds that she can not wield the sword against him. After Tristan recovers, he asks for Isot on behalf of King Mark. Isot's father, the king, readily agrees to the marriage as a means of restoring good relations between Ireland and Cornwall.

But Isot becomes deeply grieved because she is being forced to marry old King Mark. Before sailing for Cornwall, the Queen prepares a love-potion which she gives to Isot's maid Brangaene; it is to be secretly given to King Mark and Isot on their wedding day, a potion that will insure their love for ever. During the voyage Isot does not conceal her hatred of Tristan, a man she loved, but a man who is now a bridebearer for King Mark. One day,

when the pair are thirsty, they drink the love potion and fall passionately in love with each other. When they reach Cornwall, Isot marries King Mark, but on the wedding night, in the cover of darkness, Brangaene takes Isot's place in the royal bed.

For a time, the lovers manage to rendezvous in secret, but like Lancelot and Guinevere, they are eventually discovered by King Mark while asleep, Tristan's sword lying between them. King Mark decides not to slay them; instead, he exchanges Tristan's sword for his own and leaves them sleeping. After Tristan discovers the King's sword, he becomes shamed by the mercy shown by his uncle; he persuades Isot to return to her husband, and leaves Cornwall for Brittany.

In Brittany, Tristan marries the reigning Duke's daughter, Isot of the White Hand, but he is extremely unhappy. On several occasions he would return to Cornwall to secretly meet with Isot. After various adventures, Tristan is again wounded in battle, and he sends for Isot, the only person who can heal him. It is arranged that when her ship arrives, it is to hoist a white flag: black if the plan has failed.

Jealous of the reunion of the lovers, Tristan's wife announces that the sail is black. In despair, Tristan loses his will to live and throws himself upon his own sword before Isot the Fair reaches land. After she arrives, Isot dies while embracing Tristan's corpse.

Tristan's wife contemptuously buries Tristan and Isot on opposite side of the church, so that even in death they should not be united. But a mighty oak springs from each grave, and the branches meet over the roof of the church, a symbol of the lovers' eternal union.

The love story of Tristan and Isolde has maintained a singular charm in both English and German literature, a hymn representing universal passions that has been celebrated " as the High Song of Love, the Canticle of all Canticles."

There are many prototypes of elements of the story that appear in earlier classics: the meeting of Tristan and Isolde bears similarities to the young lover's first encounter in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*; the fateful extinguishing of the torch appears in the legend of Hero and Leander; and although not appearing in Wagner's version of the story, the incident of the sails appears in the Greek legend of Aegeus and Theseus.

The story has captivated many writers, among them, Sir Thomas Mallory, Lord Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, and Algernon Swinburne, each of whom placed the stamp of his special genius upon it. And in the Middle Ages, when chivalry and romance were awakened, the tale was sung by the French trouvères, and after them the German Minnesingers.

A famous version of the story was the 12th-century German epic by Gottfried von Strassburg, first translated

into modern German in 1844. It could be safely assumed that the translation by Strassburg fell under Wagner's eye while he was developing his reinventions of German legendary lore during his Dresden period of the 1840s. Nevertheless, it was Strassburg's version of the story that provided Wagner with the basic libretto for his music drama.

Wagner had to spiritualize the story in order for it to stimulate his muse, but he also had to reinvent certain elements in order to appropriately adapt the legend to music. Wagner quite logically reduced the two Isots of the legend to one. The slain Morold, originally an Irish hero and Isolde's uncle, became Isolde's betrothed, the man slain by Tristan: Tristan's killing of Morold became the justification for Isolde's hatred and obsession for revenge against him, as well as his return as the bridebearer for King Mark. Isolde's love-hate obsession makes the lovers' ultimate reconciliation and admission of their love even more poignant.

The motive of forbidden love is the catalyst for all the action of *Tristan and Isolde.* Traditionally, Wagner's heroes defy society's conventions: Tristan and Isolde were in love before they drink the love potion, but their sense of conscious guilt has kept them apart. However, Wagner does not allow the love potion itself to be the sole instrument to remove those shackles of society that have impeded their love; in Wagner the pair are reunited in love because of Fate, not because of the physical consequences of the love potion.

So Tristan and Isolde drink what they imagine is the "Draught of Death," each believing beforehand that they have looked upon earth and sea and sky for the last time. But as the potion overcomes them, they feel free to confess their love for each other, a love that has been stirring within them for a very long time. Tristan and Isolde were predestined for each other, and they yearned for each other; the love potion merely served to quash their scruples.

Greek tragedy expressed profound moral ideas. Usually, the hero bore a taint of guilt for his conduct, his suffering evoking a sense of pity. But he must be punished so that the ideals of justice and morality are preserved. Likewise, Tristan represented lofty ideals of duty and honor, qualities that became superseded by his passion for Isolde, that passion becoming his ultimate tragic fault..

But just like the dramas of the ancient Greek tragedians, Fate intervenes, the catalyst for the ultimate horror and catastrophe of both Tristan and Isolde. The lovers drink the love potion, an act of Fate or accident that is outside of their responsibility or control, and suddenly their passions for each other are unleashed; they immediately surrender duty, honor, and the moral codes and scruples of society.

The entire pathos and tragedy of the story is that a union between Tristan and Isolde was impossible: a forbidden love impeded by Tristan's sense of duty and honor to the laws of society. And it is his effort to preserve that honor that eventually contributes to his death.

In Wagner's retelling of the legend, it is unclear whether Isolde actually marries King Marke at all; the indications are that she does not. The very essence of the drama is an incident that is not portrayed but mentioned: in Ireland, Isolde recognized Tristan's disguise and raised her sword to slay the murderer of Morold, but the sick and helpless Tristan looked at her so profoundly — the Glance — that she paused, stirred by incomprehensible emotions of pity and love: then the sword fell from her hands. The Glance has been variously interpreted: that Isolde read in Tristan's eyes an unconfessed love for her, or that she subconsciously loved him but was unaware of it herself.

Nevertheless, it would be a gross misunderstanding to suppose that Wagner meant his story to be a glorification of illicit love.

Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* cannot be fully appreciated without a thorough knowledge of the events that took place before the curtain rises. Wagner relished the dramatic technique of the ancient Greek tragedians, in which significant elements of the story occurred before the curtain rose: thus, narrations of previous events and flashbacks are important elements of all Wagner's music dramas, and particularly *Tristan and Isolde.*

In Wagner's reinvention of the story, the Irish Princess Isolde was betrothed to the nobleman and warrior Morold, told by Isolde at the end of Act I. In Act I, Tristan's squire Kurvenal relates that Morold had set out with his army to collect Cornwall's annual tribute, which King Marke of Cornwall scornfully refused to pay. Morold was defeated in battle by Tristan, who then symbolically paid Cornwall's tribute with defiance and scorn; he sent Morold's severed head back to Ireland.

In Act I, Isolde relates that Tristan did not escape unharmed; he received a wound which refused to heal. He learned of Isolde's prowess with curative herbs and medicinal potions and embarked to Ireland, disguised as a lonely seaman named Tantris. Isolde recognized him as the slayer of Morold because a fragment lodged in Morold's head matched exactly a notch in Tristan's sword. She stood over her helpless enemy, but he looked up, their eyes met, and she was unable to act. When Isolde narrates these events, they are underscored by Wagner's Glance motive, a musical symbol of the mysterious power that overcame their souls. But at that moment when Isolde failed to wield the death blow to Tristan, no words are exchanged between them, just incomprehensible feelings and passions expressing a love buried deep within their subconscious.

Cured, Tristan returned to Cornwall, but the remembrances of Isolde haunted his mind. In Cornwall, his enemies accused him of being overambitious, aiming to succeed his uncle, King Marke. Tristan considered it an act of honor to urge his uncle to marry, and he praised the Irish Princess Isolde as the only maiden worthy to be his queen. Tristan even threatened to leave Marke's court forever unless the King consented to take Isolde as his bride. Finally, the King sends Tristan to Ireland as "bridebearer." These events are explained during the Act II duet between Tristan and Isolde, as well as by King Marke in his monologue near the end of the act.

In Isolde's Act I Narration, she reveals that she became humiliated, a political pawn delivered "like a corpse to her country's victorious enemies." But in addition, while aboard ship she is humiliated by Tristan, who refuses to see her. In desperation, she calls upon the storms to arise and destroy the ship and everything on it. And Isolde vehemently curses Tristan, a man whose mind and heart are consecrated to death, proclaiming revenge for Tristan's betrayal of her: "Revenge! Death for us both!"

Tristan is likewise distraught, realizing that his agony has been caused by his sense of honor. In Act I, when they finally meet at Isolde's insistence, he is stung anew by her violent reproaches; he hands her his sword, ready to let her kill him then and there.

Isolde is in this frantic state when the two lovers drink the love potion; both believe they are concluding a suicide pact by drinking poison, indicated musically by the motives of Death and the Magic Potion: "For the deepest agony, for the greatest suffering, there is only one remedy: the Drink of Death." Their drink will deliver them to oblivion, and both are quite ready to leave the agony caused by their unbearable yearning for each other: their forbidden love.

When the two lovers believe that they are on the brink of death, as Wagner noted, "when the gates of death open before them," they confess their love to each other, the potion liberating them from scruples and all worldly considerations of honor, propriety and convention. The drinking of the potion represents their moment of mutual avowal. The potion was to have brought instant death, but it set them on a different path: an impassioned love that merely delays their death.

The philosophy of the arch-pessimist philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, speaks throughout Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*: a continuous recurrence of the idealization of death.From the moment of their declaration of love, Tristan and Isolde live in the realm of Death, of Night, as Wagner called it. Death becomes their obsession, their escape from the realities of Day. The second act love duet —" Liebesnacht" ("Night of Love") — is saturated with repeated references to the dreaded, treacherous world

of Day, as opposed to the welcome oblivion of Night, the realm in which they can consummate their love, unseen by the world. Day is what keeps the lovers apart, while Night and darkness unite them; it is in the realm of Night that their love achieves transcendence.

Wagner turned to Schopenhauer's division of total reality: the realm of Day is the phenomenal, the world experienced through the senses rather than through thought or intuition, as opposed by the noumenal, a posited object or event as it appears in itself independent of perception of the senses. Light is the phenomenal, or perceived world, so when the lovers are condemning the awfulness of Day and daylight, they are ranting against the world and its false values: the world that separates them metaphysically as well as physically. So long as they are alive in this world they will be separated, kept apart not only by social forces but by the deeper level of the metaphysics of phenomenal existence.

So Day brings sorrow, the Night rapture. Only Death can release them from this phenomenal realm, liberating them from the realm of Day into the realm of Night, where there will be no more Tristan or Isolde: in the noumenal sense, the idea of spiritually being united. And Tristan and Isolde sing about this transcendence, underscored by some of the most radiant music ever composed, that explains their union in the most literal sense: undifferentiated, nameless, and eternal. The souls of man and woman become united in Death, released by their love from the need for any further life in this world. As such, Tristan and Isolde's dream of a supreme bliss does not end with Death: it begins, but in the metaphysical world.

Those images of the dichotomy of Day and Night pervade the libretto — and certainly the music. But a musical dramatist brings words to realization through his music; when Wagner's music characterizes the deception and vanity of Day, it is bright and glaring; for Night, it is dark and shadowy.

In Wagner's new musico-dramatic architecture, the musical leitmotif became the essential means to convey elements of the story; Wagner himself called them "Hauptmotiv," or principal motive, a technique which he did not invent, but certainly brought to its fullest flowering in his music dramas. The leitmotifs of *Tristan and Isolde* are woven together in symphonic splendor, and no composer before Wagner gave such prominence to the orchestra.

Leitmotifs are translated in most musical guidebooks as "leading motives"; they are short musical phrases that describe or identify certain ideas, characters, or objects, whether seen, mentioned, or thought about. Leitmotifs act as musical symbols that become engraved in the listener's memory and serve to explain, narrate, or provide psychological insight. Most significantly, when a firm

relation between the leitmotif and its meaning have been established in the listener's mind it becomes a symbol that is recognized quickly and almost unconsciously through the power of association; thus, leitmotifs provide important information which can be conveyed even more effectively through the musical language.

Counterpoint, or polyphony, defines one or more independent melodies, or a combination of independent melodies that are integrated or juxtaposed into a single harmonic texture. The essential ideal of the leitmotif technique was to join the themes contrapuntally, and in Wagner's particular case, present them with symphonic grandeur. Nineteenth-century Romantic period composers, such as Wagner, Liszt, Mendelsohnn, and Brahms, revered the earlier counterpoint techniques of Palestrina and Bach. But their true inclination was toward combinations of leitmotifs; Franz Schubert's lieder songs, and those of Hugo Wolf, were highly innovative because their accompaniments contained motives that interacted contrapuntally with the vocal parts. In Wagner's new music drama style he was striving toward an ideal of "sung drama," or the imitation of speech through music; in its perfect manifestation it was "speech-song," or "Sprechgesang," which he contrapuntally balanced with motives in the orchestral accompaniment.

The great virtue of leitmotifs is that they work on multiple levels: they not only foreshadow the future, but by evoking the past they can provide the present with an infinitely greater immediacy. As an example, in *Tristan and Isolde,* past associations are provided by the Glance and Magic Potion motives, musical motives that recall and provide emphasis to important elements of the drama.

The contrapuntal fusion and skillful harmonic interweaving and variation of leitmotifs convey powerful emotions: it ultimately becomes the orchestra that develops these reminiscences in accordance with the expressive need of the dramatic and psychological action, and Wagner, the quintessential symphonist, ingeniously achieves the full embodiment of the leitmotif technique in *Tristan and Isolde* through his orchestra.

The listener can virtually follow the dramatic narrative by interpreting the meaning of its musical leitmotif symbols without the benefit of visual or verbal clarification. As such, Wagner's orchestra functions like a massive Greek chorus that narrates and comments on the action. In *Tristan and Isolde*, Wagner proved his genius as both music dramatist and symphonist, composing elements in the music drama that have become indelible for the listener.

Allegory denotes symbolic representation. Tristan's leitmotifs are specifically symbolic representations, but they are presented in the language of music. It is through the emotive power of the musical language that ideas in the opera are conveyed and responses are evoked; as such, the drama's characters, elements, and events become part

of a complete mythography whose inner allegorical symbolism, in both words and music, provide intensely profound understanding as well as different levels of meaning. The symbolism of Day and Night, evoke intuitive rather than rational responses from the human psyche; Wagner's musical leitmotifs become those same symbolic images, often revealing and evoking profound inner thoughts and emotions.

Ultimately, leitmotifs provided Wagner with the organic structure for his music drama, but more importantly, they provided the wherewithal to add profound impact to the drama through musical symbolism.

Wagner was a man possessing profound intellectual curiosity; he was a voracious reader whose huge library of books, abandoned at the time of his 1849 exile, remains today in Dresden.

The German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, had come under the spell of Orientalism when early in life he stumbled into a French translation of the Indian Upanishads; he became enthralled with Hindu and Buddhist doctrines regarding renunciation of the Will, or the extinguishing of desire. In *The World as Will and Idea* (1818), Schopenhauer pitted Eastern mystical conceptions of wisdom against the Enlightenment's faith in reason, science, and civilization. Although his book remained unread for some 40 years, Europe's disillusionment after the 1848 Revolutions brought him a new and enthusiastic audience.

Schopenhauer directed his radical views about the renunciation of human Will to both Enlightenment and Christian ideology. In his conception, the Enlightenment had created a false optimism through its empty faith in reason and progress. He also condemned Christianity, which he concluded had urged men to strive for salvation in this world through a set of religious and moral preconceptions, which, he argued, posed the illusion of "Will as idea." Schopenhauer reasoned that the ultimate reality was that the exercise of human Will was purposeless, aimless, and neither reasonable nor rational: Will was simply a blindness that urged man to strive for meaningless goals that ultimately cause anguish, such as man's lust for wealth and power.

Schopenhauer proposed that man had to escape from the sickness and curse of the Will, a yearning that imprisoned him in a fatal state of eternal desire; they represented urges that man must extinguish, abandon, and renounce. Schopenhauer envisioned a new way of understanding the world that was immune from the remorseless desires of the ego, what he termed the destructive idea of the "world as Will." His resolution of the dilemma was for man to achieve salvation not through a religious or spiritual path, but through philosophic knowledge, compassion, and sympathy for others. And

more importantly, that man could obtain a momentary release from life's curse of desire through aesthetic experience, such as viewing a painting or listening to a symphony; by experiencing the world in a new way — through moments of pure contemplation of art and music — man would become uncorrupted by contact with the gross materialism that surrounded him.

Schopenhauer's conception that music and art provided a way to transcend the Will's relentless grip — albeit temporarily — coincided with Wagner's belief that his music dramas would provide relief for restless souls. But Schopenhauer added intellectual profundity to Wagner's vision, and armed with his new philosophy, the composer became more convinced than ever that his music dramas would become a consecrated art form, and more importantly, a transcendent musical experience.

In 1854, while Wagner was composing the music to the second act of *The Valkyrie*, he was deeply engrossed in Wotan's torment, an agony that was caused by the frustration of the Godhead's Will. Simultaneously, Wagner became immersed in the spell of Schopenhauer's philosophy, the idea that all human anxiety and conflict derived from self-imposed desires, or Will. Wagner began to realize what he had felt intuitively; that Wotan's inner conflicts derived from the frustration of his Will.

Wagner became mesmerized — and totally indoctrinated — by Schopenhauer's philosophy. He realized that the "renunciation of Will" had been a theme he had subconsciously brought to the surface in his earlier *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser;* the idea that the world of active desire resulted in a suffering from which the soul yearned to be freed, and that freedom could only be achieved when the Will was extinguished.

By applying Schopenhauer's philosophy of the "renunciation of Will," the essential conflicts of the *Ring* saga developed more profound meaning. Wagner had by now concluded that industrialized Europe would never escape or find release from its struggles: "I saw that the world was Nichtigkeit, a nothingness or an illusion." Thus, the *Ring*'s power conflicts were incontrovertible elements in the world's evolution, but he was now convinced more than ever that their cause was specifically humanity's blind exercise of Will.

Armed with Schopenhauer's preaching, Wagner found it necessary to revise his original conception for the conclusion of the *Ring,* and decided that it was necessary to destroy Wotan and the Gods in the final moments of *Twilight of the Gods,* instead of a victorious Siegfried ascending to Valhalla. Wagner commented about the fall of the Gods: "The necessity for the downfall of the Gods springs from our innermost feelings, as it does from the innermost feelings of Wotan. It is important to justify the necessity by feeling, for Wotan who has risen to the tragic height of willing his own downfall."

The Godhead Wotan had evolved into the indisputable tragic character of the *Ring* story, his agony the result of his insatiable Will as master the world. For Wagner, it was now necessary to conclude the *Ring* with the Schopenhauerian "renunciation of Will," a decisive condemnation of Wotan's Will — and all human Will — that he now believed was the cause of the world's evil. And similarly, Brünnhilde's sacrificial suicide and the purification of the Ring's Curse, would represent an acceptance of fate that finally released humanity from its endless cycle of desire, rebirth, and death. Thus, the *Ring*'s power conflicts were incontrovertible elements in the world's evolution, so the ultimate conclusion of the *Ring,* as well as the entire tragedy of *Tristan and Isolde,* became an expression of pure Schopenhauerian philosophy.

Wagner maintained that human beings are in the most literal sense the embodiment of metaphysical will; therefore, victims of unsatisfied craving, yearning and longing. In *Tristan and Isolde,* hardly anything "happens," in the ordinary sense of theatrical action. But the tragedy comes about not because of what happens to the fateful pair, but because of what they are: *Tristan and Isolde* is a drama of spiritual states, not of overt actions; it is about victims of continual yearning and unsatisfied craving.

According to Schopenhaurian philosophy, music represented a manifestation of the metaphysical will, an audible and meaningful voice in the empirical world. Music directly corresponds to man's innermost being, or his alternative life. Music therefore, creates certain wants and desires: simple melody, or a succession of notes, compels an eventual resolution on the tonic, and it provokes dissatisfaction if it resolves — or suspends — on any other note than the tonic (gravity). Without tonic resolution, the listener senses harshness, dissatisfaction, outright rejection, and a desire and longing for musical resolution.

Schopenhauer's ideas of musical resolution and suspension lit a beacon for Wagner, who now fully realized that suspension, discord, and lack of tonal resolution prolonged tension and dissatisfaction. As such Wagner decided to compose an entire opera dominated by harmonic suspension, its music moving from discord to discord in such a way that the listener was continually in a state of tension in the anticipation of resolution; but the resolution would never come. Suspension would become a purely musical equivalent of the unsatisfied longing, craving, and yearning of the protagonists in the *Tristan and Isolde* story. The only resolution would occur in the final chord of the opera: symbolically the ultimate resolution of Tristan and Isolde's love, which takes place in the spiritual world.

In *Tristan and Isolde*, Wagner proved that he was a supreme musical dramatist; it is a drama realized through its music, a symphonic poem about love.

Musically, its dissonances convey yearning and desire, all composed ingeniously by Wagner in a complexity that defies analysis. Its true strength and genius lies in its appeal to emotions; it is an opera whose music possesses agonizing beauty.

The subtitle of *Tristan and Isolde* is the German word "Sehnen" (to long, or to yearn), an inner conflict and tension that is reflected musically through Wagner's suspended and unresolved chords: a discord that becomes an integral and unifying aspect of the entire music drama.

As such, Wagner, through the magnificence of his music drama, made the story of *Tristan and Isolde* a testament to the soul of humanity.