

Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

Tristan und Isolde: Prelude and Liebestod

It is ironic that *Tristan und Isolde* was written while Wagner took a break from what would become his epic 15-hour masterpiece, *The Ring of the Nibelung*. *Tristan*, first staged in 1865, is itself a pinnacle of music history. In it – and it is discernible even in this customary extract – Wagner stretched European music beyond its previous expressive capabilities.

In many respects *Tristan* was simpler than the *Ring*. Based on Arthurian legend as set down by the 13th century poet Gottfried von Strassburg, the plot can be summarised quickly: Tristan is taking Isolde back to Cornwall to wed his uncle, King Marke, but they fall into a world-defying love when Isolde's servant substitutes a love potion for the poison Isolde intended for Tristan; when they are caught, Tristan flees mortally wounded; he dies as Isolde comes to him in Brittany, and she expires in expectation of joining him beyond earthly life. This all takes place with a minimum of action. The settings are aboard ship from Ireland, in Cornwall, and in Brittany, but could be anywhere. Dramatic incident is stripped down basically to entrances and exits. Act II is essentially one long love duet.

But *Tristan und Isolde* is not simple in philosophical or psychological terms. It may be opera's 'greatest love story ever told' (the real life inspiration was Wagner's white hot passion for Mathilde Wesendonck, the wife of a Zurich silk merchant) but in *Tristan und Isolde*, Wagner was wrestling with something beyond earthly passion. Influenced by Ludwig Schopenhauer whose writings were a German gloss on Buddhist detachment, Wagner was trying to express a transcendence of earthly passion in death.

In trying to convey all this, Wagner almost exhausted Western harmony's unique ability to express desire. The Prelude begins with four notes of cello in a yearning arc which culminates in the famous 'Tristan' chord, a tensely knotted harmony, which unfurls to a merely less dissonant chord. This is the pattern of tension and not-quite release for the next few hours (and certainly the Prelude) - dissonance, a passing colouristic effect in classical era tonality, milked for all its expressive worth.

In concert, the Prelude is usually paired with the opera's very end, Isolde's final monologue, the *Liebestod*. Such is the richness of Wagner's orchestration by this stage that these pages are performed as written, minus singer. The *Liebestod* is more diatonic (comprised of common chords) than the Prelude though constantly modulating, and thus still unsettled. Its melody derives from Act II where Tristan sang: 'Thus might we die, undivided...' In Act II, the buildup culminated in an ugly interrupted cadence. Here there is complete release as Isolde sings of tasting Tristan's respiration in 'sweet perfume, in the surging swell, in the ringing sound of the world's breath' – a flood of sensation suggesting transcendence beyond surfeit.

The effect is overwhelming in the opera house. It is still palpable in the concert hall, which Wagner must have known when he established the convention of making a concert item out of what he called *Love-death and Isolde's Transfiguration*.