

Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*

In his engaging little book called *Wagner*, Michael Tanner has this to say: 'It is widely known that Wagner wrote a religious drama, but not so widely realised which of his works that is. *Tristan und Isolde*, often described as a paean to sensuality, a hymn to romantic love, even an exposé of its impossibility, is the work in question.' He goes on: 'Along with Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, it is one of the two greatest religious works of our culture. Bach had the easier task, for he was writing in the midst of a culture which accepted the religion to which he gave unsurpassable expression.'

Those who regard *Tristan und Isolde* as an exercise in 'orgiastic ecstasy' (to quote one commentator) will be surprised to see it described in such terms, but Tanner's point is that there is more to the eroticism of *Tristan und Isolde* than meets the ear. Of course, one needs to be cautious when applying the notion of 'religion' to Wagner. He was not 'religious' in a conventional way, and *Tristan* represents but one phase in the evolution of his beliefs. For the composer's final thoughts on the subject we must look to *Parsifal*. Carl Dahlhaus put it succinctly when he wrote that, ultimately, 'Wagner's faith was philosophical, not religious, a metaphysics of compassion and renunciation, deriving its essential elements from Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* and – via Schopenhauer – from Buddhism.'

Central to Wagner's intellectual evolution was his response to the writings of the contemporary German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. These writings made a huge impression on Wagner when he encountered them in 1854, and they continued to influence his thinking for the rest of his life. Schopenhauer, following in the footsteps of Kant, wrote of the illusory nature of the world as we perceive it, with its inevitable frustration and pain - equated in *Tristan und Isolde* with the all-deceiving 'day'. In our culture and everyday speech, 'truth' is usually associated with 'light', but in *Tristan* this idea is stood on its head. Here, the world of daylight belongs not the realm of actuality but to the realm of illusion, phantoms and dreams. This is because, as human beings, we can only have an incomplete *perception* of reality, brought to us via our senses and mental faculties. Beyond that *perception* of reality is the reality itself ('the thing-in-itself'), which we do not and cannot know directly. 'Night' in *Tristan und Isolde* is not the realm of ignorance but that of timeless reality. It symbolizes the true but inaccessible being of what we perceive as the world of phenomena, and is therefore a desirable refuge from the unsatisfiable longing of this life. 'O come down night of love' sing the lovers, 'make me forget I live.'

Of particular relevance to *Tristan* was Schopenhauer's treatise *On Death and its relationship to the Indestructibility of Our Inner Nature*, which expresses the view that dying is a moment of liberation from one-sided 'individuality' – an individuality that can never constitute the innermost kernel of our true being.

In *Tristan und Isolde*, the text (which, for long passages, is nothing more than poeticized Schopenhauer) and its vehicle, the human voice, are merely parts of a great symphonic texture, in which the lovers submerge themselves and then transcend. For them, this is perfect love: the extinction of selfishness, the disappearance of self, total identification with each other. As Tristan tells his beloved:

'Thus we die, undivided, one forever, without end, never waking, never fearing, embraced namelessly in love, given entirely to each other, living only in our love!'

And above them floats the warning voice of Brangäne, Isolde's maid, telling them to beware, for night is already giving way to day. In this world, their dreams cannot last.

In the second act, we encounter some of the most erotic music ever composed, rising repeatedly to orgasmic climaxes. Schopenhauer wrote that the most intimate knowledge of the *will to live* is to be found in the ecstasy of sexual love. However, the will to live is essentially selfish. So how can sexual love be an impulse towards a timeless reality in which there is no 'self'? Wagner parted company with Schopenhauer here, maintaining that sexual love was no longer just an impulse to maintain life but a manifestation of a longing for the transcendence of individual boundaries, and union with the universe. '*Then I myself am the world*' sing the lovers at the height of their passion.

Thus, in *Tristan und Isolde* we have the story of a sexual love so intense that even the physical bodies of the lovers are a barrier to its fulfilment. Its driving force is a yearning for union beyond the constraints of time, the fluctuations of physical passion and even separate existences. This great opportunity to be 'one forever' rather than 'you' and 'I', 'Tristan' and 'Isolde', is accomplished through death and love – by death through love and through love in death.

The only unresolved problem, which Wagner recognized, is that after death, the lovers would be united not just with each other ('each other' implies separate identity which is, of course, a concept belonging only to the world of 'day') but with everything and everyone, including all the other characters in the opera! For his solution to this problem we must look not to *Tristan* but to *Parsifal*.

Schopenhauer called the essential, metaphysical nature of each thing, its 'will'. In the case of human beings, this 'will' manifests itself in our perpetual wanting, striving, and yearning - a process leading inevitably to disappointment because the things that we strive for belong to the world of phenomena and are ephemeral. The only possible remedy for our unhappiness is to cease wanting, to stop desiring – in other words, to renounce the world of phenomena. In *Parsifal*, erotic love (as mere sensual gratification) is seen as an expression of the 'will' and therefore a cause of pain and suffering. In that work, Wagner's solution (consistent with Schopenhauer's) lies in the recognition that all individuals are, at some deep level, one and undifferentiated. This is the source of our feelings of compassion – our ability to identify with the plight of others and to share the sufferings of all creatures. If we hurt one another we are, in a fundamental way, hurting ourselves. The key to *Parsifal* therefore is '*Mitleid*' (compassion), as the key to *Tristan und Isolde* is '*Sehnsucht*' (longing). Both dramas focus on the ultimate unity of being, but the paths they take could hardly be more different.

Many of Schopenhauer's ideas also happen to be central to the philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism. Wagner had a high regard for Buddhism during the last three decades of his life. The Buddha taught that the cause of suffering is desire, but that release from suffering is possible through the achievement of *Nirvana* - literally the 'blowing out' of the flame of desire. It is no coincidence that Tristan's dying cry is: '*The torch is put out*'. Wagner the musician likened *Nirvana* to untroubled, pure harmony. The imagery of *Tristan und Isolde* is dominated by the great dualities of death and life, night and day, concord and discord. The lovers long for the unity of night whose music is harmonically 'untroubled', and recoil from the separateness of day whose music is full of discordant glare. '*The day! The day! The envious day...the hard-hearted foe, I hate and loathe it!*' says Tristan.

The first four bars of the prelude to *Tristan und Isolde* contain the kernel of all that transpires over the next four hours. In the first two bars there is a descending, sighing chromatic phrase that suggests suffering. In the next two bars there is an inversion of this; a rising four-note phrase that suggests yearning. Where these two phrases overlap, there is a chord – the so-called ‘*Tristan* chord’ – which expresses, with profound economy, the indivisibility of suffering and yearning or, to put it in Buddhist terms, the inter-relationship of suffering and desire.

Interestingly, the composer himself referred to the prelude as the *Liebestod* (love-death) and what we now call the *Liebestod* he called *Verklärung* – ‘transfiguration’.

The legend of Tristram and Yseult was an ancient one, originating in the British Isles. Celtic and French versions preceded the 13th century romance *Tristan* by Gottfried von Strassburg, Wagner’s principal source for the narrative. In the old tales, the lovers, joined at last in death, were buried on either side of a chapel. From the tomb of one grew up a vine and from the other an ivy, which climbed up an arch and reached across and intertwined. No matter how often they were cut down, they grew up again and intertwined and were finally left in perpetual embrace.

Wagner simplified the story for dramatic reasons, explaining his approach in this way:

‘I have rejected the exhaustive detail which an historical poet is obliged to employ to clarify the outward development of the plot to the detriment of a lucid exposition of its inner motives, and I trusted myself to the latter alone. Life and death, the whole meaning and existence of the outer world, here hang on nothing but the inner movements of the soul. The whole decisive action materialises when the innermost soul demands it.’

If *Tristan und Isolde* had been Richard Wagner’s sole creative achievement, his place in western art would still be assured. With it, music was affected irreversibly, and the emancipation of harmony from the classical tonal system began in earnest. However, Wagner’s concern was not with modernism for its own sake but with the most expressive depiction of the drama.

Tristan was at least fifty years ahead of its time, and yet, ironically, we can find within it echoes and anticipations of his other works – from the nineteen-year old composer’s unfinished opera *Die Hochzeit* (The Wedding) to *Parsifal* half a century later. The link with *Die Hochzeit* is a narrative rather than musical one, but there are some undeniable musical connections to Wagner’s other works.

One such association is with *Der fliegende Holländer*. Act I is set on the deck of Tristan’s ship, bringing the Irish princess Isolde to Cornwall to be the bride of Tristan’s uncle, King Marke. The tang of salt is in the breeze that fills the sails and blows the ship eastwards, and we recall the nautical atmosphere of the earlier opera.

The Wagner of *Tannhäuser* can be recognised in the eroticism of the lovers’ nocturnal tryst in the garden in Act 2. It is not difficult to imagine the shocked audiences of 1865, hearing this music for the first time. By comparison, *The Rite of Spring* sounds positively tame! Significantly, Wagner went back to the score of *Tannhäuser* and used the *Tristan* idiom to reinforce the music of the Venusberg scene.

In the prelude to Act 2, we find reminiscences of *Lohengrin*. Remember the fanfares that call to one another from the towers of the citadel at Antwerp? In *Tristan*, we hear

the wonderfully evocative sound of distant hunting horns as the King and his courtiers hunt during the twilight of a summer's evening.

And what about Wagner of *The Ring*? We can find many traces of him too, but perhaps nowhere more powerfully than in the prelude to Act 3, where the wounded and dying Tristan lies in the courtyard of his neglected castle, Kareol in Brittany. The merciless sun beats down, heat rises from the flagstones, and the music describes not only his physical suffering but the agony in his soul. A shepherd's mournful pipe articulates his despair. Here nature is put to work in the service of psychology, just as it is in *The Ring*. In a way, this music also foreshadows the opening to Act 3 of *Parsifal*.

What was Wagner doing at the time when the idea of *Tristan* came to him? He was in the middle of writing *The Ring* – that monumental undertaking dominating the best part of his creative life and sweeping up so many complex and often contradictory ideas as it went along. However, in the midst of that enormous task, he felt the need to work through, in more detail than the *Ring* story would allow, some of the creative impulses that overwhelmed him. That is why he broke off at the end of the second act of *Siegfried*, to write *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. There were practical reasons too. *The Ring* was barely half-finished, years had passed, and none of it had been performed. His publisher and would-be patrons were sceptical that it would ever see the light of day. They needed something more manageable to be going on with, and so he produced *Tristan* and *The Mastersingers*, neither of which turned out to be typical operatic fare. Indeed, each, in its own way, is a pinnacle of western art.

Practical considerations aside, there were some other forces at work in Wagner's life in the early 1850s, leading directly to the creation of *Tristan und Isolde*. One was his encounter with the writings of Schopenhauer, already considered. The other related to his conviction that he had never in his life 'felt the real bliss of love' and needed 'to erect a monument to the most beautiful of all my dreams'.

When he was just twenty-one, Wagner had fallen in love with a pretty actress, Minna Planner. The marriage between Richard and Minna was, for the most part, affectionate but, in many respects, they were poles apart. Minna rarely had faith in his more ambitious ventures. She could never understand why he was not content with being a conductor and composer of a more conventional kind. Their married life lurched from one crisis to another and often involved flights from creditors in perilous circumstances. Richard remained convinced of his own destiny; Minna was just exasperated.

Wagner made friends and enemies with equal abandon throughout his life, and he certainly made enemies in Dresden in the 1840s. As Royal Saxon Kapellmeister he was expected to toe the line on artistic matters and refrain from meddling in politics but, typically, he did neither. He upset influential people, some of whom continued to pursue him in later life, even to the Bavarian court of Ludwig II.

By 1848, revolution was in the air. Popular revolts had broken out in Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Frankfurt and Prague, and Wagner sympathised with the revolutionary movement in Dresden. He was actively involved in the violent uprisings of 1849 and a warrant was issued for his arrest. With the help of Franz Liszt he escaped to Zürich, where there was a sizeable community of Saxon refugees.

Exile and a warrant for treason; that was the ultimate humiliation for poor Minna. She nagged and scolded him until her health deteriorated. He was utterly miserable. He

longed for a woman who shared his ideals and would encourage him to higher achievements. He yearned for more than physical love; he wanted someone who was genuinely a soul-mate and believed in him. He found such a person in Mathilde Wesendonck. Mathilde and her wealthy silk-merchant husband Otto were patrons of the arts and were delighted to have such a well-known composer as their protégé. They built a palatial villa on the outskirts of Zürich and installed Richard and Minna in a cottage in the grounds, which Wagner called his Asyl, or 'refuge'. Each day, he would walk across to the beautiful Mathilde to play his composition sketches for her. Other artists also came to the Villa Wesendonck but Wagner was the star. Minna soon felt hopelessly out of her depth. Mathilde, on the other hand, believed totally in Wagner's genius and provided the sympathetic spirit he craved. He fell in love with her and dedicated to her parts of *Die Walküre*. It was while he was under this spell that he abandoned *Siegfried* and threw himself into the subject that had been increasingly dominating his thoughts: *Tristan und Isolde*.

It is highly unlikely that the 'affair', if one can call it that, existed other than in Wagner's mind. Mathilde, to the end of her life, insisted that nothing improper had transpired, and Otto was aware of the connection and tolerated it as serving an artistic purpose. However, a jealous Minna intercepted a letter between Wagner and Mathilde headed 'Morning Confession', drew her own conclusions and made a scene. The letter in question (which survives) was in fact devoted primarily to a lengthy discussion of Goethe's *Faust* but the language was flowery enough to excite Minna's suspicions. In matters Wagnerian, truth rarely stands in the way of a good story, and accounts of the 'torrid affair' between Richard Wagner and Mathilde Wesendonck are still repeated with relish.

There was no way that Mathilde would leave her husband and children for Wagner and he, in turn, felt bound to his sick wife. The situation for all concerned had reached a crisis. Minna left for a health cure and Wagner went to Venice. He and the Wesendoncks remained friends until his death in 1883, and they attended the first performance of the *Ring* in Bayreuth in 1876. Alone in Venice with his inspiration, Wagner composed some of the loveliest music ever written. Perhaps it is his own voice that we are hearing in Brangäne's warning to the lovers:

'Lonely watcher in the night, you who dream in love's delight, hear my warning call aright; my foreboding makes me fear; waken sleepers, danger's near! Ah, beware! Ah, beware! Soon the night will pass!'

'The tale of *Tristan und Isolde*' said Wagner, 'is one of endless yearning, longing, the bliss and wretchedness of love; world, power, fame, honour, chivalry, loyalty and friendship all blown away like an insubstantial dream; one thing left living – longing, longing unquenchable, a yearning, a hunger, a languishing forever renewing itself; one sole redemption – death, finality, a sleep without awakening....'

Thus Isolde at last joins her Tristan in mystical union. The insistent, unresolved motif of 'yearning', heard in the opening bars of the prelude and so often throughout the work, achieves its final resolution. Poignant memories of the shepherd's pipe hover above serene waves of sound that lead to what Richard Strauss called 'the most beautifully orchestrated cadence in all music'.

Peter Bassett
