



TRISTAN UND ISOLDE
(TRISTAN AND ISOLDE)
RICHARD WAGNER

Opera Guides



Heinrich Döll's sketch for the second act in the first production (Munich, 1865)

Preface

This series, published under the auspices of English National Opera, aims to prepare audiences to enjoy and evaluate opera performances. Each book contains the complete text, set out in the original language together with a current performing translation. The accompanying essays have been commissioned as general introductions to aspects of interest in each work. As many illustrations and musical examples as possible have been included because the sound and spectacle of opera are clearly central to any sympathetic appreciation of it. We hope that, as companions to the opera should be, they are well-informed, witty and attractive.

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Nicholas John
Series Editor

Tristan und Isolde
(*Tristan and Isolde*)

Richard Wagner

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Series Editor
Nicholas John



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Contents

List of Illustrations	vi
Synopsis <i>Timothy McFarland</i>	7
'Tristan and Isolde': A Landmark in Musical History <i>John Luke Rose</i>	9
A Musical Commentary <i>Anthony Negus</i>	17
The staging of 'Tristan and Isolde': Landmarks along the Appian Way <i>Patrick Carnegy</i>	29
An Introduction to the German Text <i>Martin Swales</i> <i>and Timothy McFarland</i>	36
Thematic Guide	38
'Tristan and Isolde' <i>Poem by Richard Wagner</i> <i>English Translation by Andrew Porter</i>	45
Act One	47
Act Two	64
Act Three	79
Discography	94
Bibliography	96

List of Illustrations

- Cover: Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, Tristan in the first production. (Munich, 1865)
- Frontispiece: Heinrich Döll's sketch for the second act in the first production. (Munich, 1865)
- p. 8 Milka Ternina. (Stuart-Liff Collection)
- p. 8 Kirsten Flagstad. (Royal Opera House Archives)
- p. 13 Olive Fremstad.
- p. 13 Lauritz Melchior. (Royal Opera House Archives)
- p. 17 The drink of atonement, at Bayreuth in 1938, designed by Preetorius (Bildarchiv-Bayreuther Festspiele)
- p. 28 Richard Wagner in 1863, photographed by Mebius in Moscow.
- p. 28 The Wesendoncks' villa at Zurich, with 'Asyl', the cottage built for Wagner.
- p. 30 Sketch by Max and Gotthold Brückner for Act I when the opera was first performed at Bayreuth in 1886.
- p. 30 Photograph of the setting itself.
- p. 30 Adolphe Appia's design for Kareol in the 1923 La Scala production.
- p. 33 Act I at Bayreuth in 1952.
- p. 33 Act III in Wolfgang Wagner's 1957 production.
- p. 33 Act III of Wieland Wagner's 1952 staging.
- p. 35 Wieland's 1958 Stuttgart production (Act I, above left) pointed forward to Wieland's last and greatest production (above right), first seen at Bayreuth in 1962.
- p. 45 Ludwig Schnorr and his wife Malvina, the first singers to perform Tristan and Isolde.
- p. 46 The first page of the original draft of Wagner's poem with an outline of the Young Sailor's Song. August/September 1857. (Bildarchiv-Bayreuther Festspiele)
- p. 93 Act III at Bayreuth, 1962.

Synopsis

Timothy McFarland

The opera is set in the legendary Celtic world of the early Middle Ages. Many significant events have taken place before it begins, and are recounted at various points in the work, particularly by Isolde in her long account to Brangäne in the first act. These events make up about half the story in Wagner's main source, the courtly romance *Tristan* by Gottfried von Strassburg (c. 1210), and the composer simplified the complex narrative, telescoping episodes and reducing the number of persons, when preparing his text.

Tristan, a Breton nobleman, has left his ancestral home Kareol to serve his uncle, King Mark of Cornwall. He established his position at court and was adopted by Mark as his heir after defeating and slaying Morold, an Irish knight who had forced Cornwall to pay tribute. Morold's severed head had been mockingly sent back to Ireland as 'tribute', but it contained a splinter from the victor's sword, and Tristan himself has received a wound from Morold's poisoned weapon. The only person who could heal this wound was the Irish princess Isolde, who had sworn to avenge Morold, her betrothed. Tristan therefore assumed the anagrammatical name of 'Tantris' and sailed to Ireland; but Isolde, while tending him, discovered that the splinter from Morold's head matched a notch in Tristan's sword and thus guessed his identity. She immediately resolved to take revenge with the sword that had slain Morold. But when she was about to do so, Tristan opened his eyes and gazed at her—'not at the sword, not at my hand, he gazed in my eyes', and she was unable to do the deed. This episode is of central importance for the opera.

Tristan, healed of his wound, swore 'a thousand oaths of eternal gratitude and loyalty' and returned to Cornwall. There the jealous courtiers urge the widower Mark to remarry, but he refuses to do so until Tristan himself threatens to leave the court forever unless Mark permits him to go and woo Isolde on his behalf, thereby probably disinheriting himself. Mark gives his reluctant consent, and Tristan sails to Ireland once again. The feud between the two countries is solemnly ended and a marriage alliance concluded.

Act One is set on the ship bringing Tristan and Isolde to Cornwall. She tells her maid Brangäne what had happened earlier, expresses her humiliation and rage at Tristan's behaviour, curses him and resolves that they both shall die. She demands of Tristan that they drink 'atonement' and he accepts, comprehending her real intention and tortured by the passion he cannot admit. But Brangäne has substituted a love-potion for the poison, and so, as the ship arrives at Cornwall, Isolde and Tristan find that their love for each other has been released by the potion and that, instead of death together, they are condemned to life with an irresistible and inadmissible love.

In Act Two, Tristan's best friend, Melot, has arranged a hunt at night, ostensibly to give the lovers an opportunity to meet. Brangäne warns Isolde in vain that Melot is treacherous, and the lovers celebrate the night that enables them to reject life itself in a state of mystical union. Brangäne's warnings are disregarded and the lovers are discovered by King Mark and the hunting party. Mark reproaches Tristan for having broken his oaths of loyalty, and once again Tristan seeks death — by throwing himself on Melot's sword.

Act Three takes place at Kareol, Tristan's neglected home in Brittany. The faithful Kurwenal has brought him here, mortally wounded, and has sent for Isolde to heal him once again. When the delirious Tristan regains consciousness, he yearns for Isolde and for release from the torment of life; as her arrival is announced, he tears the bandages from his wound and dies in her arms. Mark and Brangäne arrive, bringing understanding and forgiveness too late. Isolde's lament for Tristan is a triumphant apotheosis as she sinks lifeless on to Tristan's body.



Milka Ternina, the Croatian soprano whose 1895 London debut as Isolde opposite Jean de Reszke's Tristan was acclaimed. (Stuart-Liff Collection)



Kirsten Flagstad, the Norwegian soprano, as Isolde at Covent Garden (1936). (Covent Garden Archives)

A Landmark in Musical History

John Luke Rose

As I have never in my life felt the real bliss of love, I must erect a monument to the most beautiful of all my dreams, in which, from beginning to end, that love shall be thoroughly satiated. I have in my head a *Tristan und Isolde*, the simplest, but most full-blooded, musical conception.

Wagner wrote this in a letter to Liszt, of December 16, 1854, but the music drama which eventually emerged was more than 'a monument to ideal love'. It became one of the landmarks of cultural history. The legend on which it is based had been famous far back into the Gothic period; Dante refers to Tristan in *The Divine Comedy* (*Inferno, Canto V*). Whereas Shakespeare, in an equally famous love drama, explores the poetic aspects of tragic adolescent love in *Romeo and Juliet*, Wagner explores all the conscious and unconscious aspects of mature adult love. By excluding all incidental episodes from the legend, he concentrates on the souls of the lovers, illuminating metaphysical as well as erotic aspects of love. This illumination comes, not so much from his poem, as from the unique style of the orchestral music, which evokes, powerfully as well as sensitively, every shade of emotion in all the characters, ranging from mockery, pride and despair, to sublime ecstasy. Wagner's musical inspiration here reached its supreme peak, which he may have equalled in parts of later works, but never surpassed.

Certain biographical incidents need to be considered. As a young man, Richard Wagner fell in love with a pretty actress, Minna Planer, who already had a daughter from one of her earlier affairs. Their marriage was based on shaky foundations; within a few months she had deserted him for another man, but soon returned to her husband. Although for most of their married life she remained physically attractive to him—in his eyes, the Venus to his Tannhäuser—she rarely had faith in his more ambitious creative projects, often scolding him for wasting time in creating unperformable works, when there were plenty of other composers, and when he was already recognised as an outstanding conductor. His theatrical background had made him an incurable spendthrift, and their married life proceeded from one crisis to another: trying to escape from unpaid bills and threatening creditors; near-starvation and imprisonment for debt in Paris in 1840; the Dresden crisis, the 1848–9 Revolution, their flight, abandoning one of Germany's best conducting posts; and so many vital creative years spent in exile, unable to return to Germany, where he was wanted by the police on a charge of treason for his part in the Dresden Revolution. Minna would have had to be a wife of superhuman patience and faith to have endured all this without periodic recriminations—and so she became for him the Fricka to his Wotan, the doubting Elsa to his Lohengrin. Intellectually and spiritually, Richard and Minna were incompatible. He yearned for a being who would share his ideals, and encourage him to higher achievement with womanly compassion. He yearned for something more than physical love, for a woman who would,