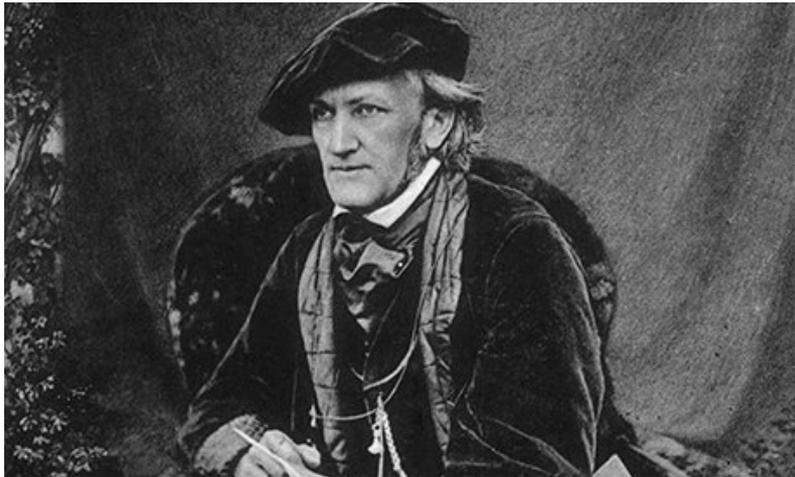


# Happy 150<sup>th</sup> Birthday: Wagner's "Tristan Und Isolde"

by Andy Glover-Whitley



*Richard Wagner in mid and late life*

150 years ago this year one of the greatest operas ever written was premiered in Bayreuth, Bavaria. It was also the one greatest trigger of artistic revolution ever to be struck by a revolutionary creative artists striving for a new perfection and freedom of expression. A work that was so immense in scale, structure, vision, imagination, beauty, colour, orchestration, compositional techniques and wonderment that we are still to this day in awe of it. It stands like a giant black monolith (*2001: A Space Odyssey*) that we are afraid to approach, or reproach, for fear of being totally overwhelmed and burnt by its genius of musical and artistic vision. The work is "*Tristan und Isolde*" by Richard Wagner.

It is hard for those who see this work from this vantage point in time to imagine the shockwaves that this gloriously succulent work sent through the musical and artistic world of its day. Even today the ripples can still be felt keenly in all aspects of the musical and dramatic arts. Whether from the standpoint of the use of the engorged over domineering orchestra in its rich original colours, or whether from the interconnected ideas of 'music drama' (the combined importance of text, music and acting as one item) as a whole art form where everything was treated with equality and importance of intensity of emotional direction in one ultimate goal.

It is a work that at some time in your life you must finally face and try to come to terms with. Not on your own terms but on those of Wagner's, there is no compromise, there never can be. There is no getting around or away from it. It is like Beethoven, you have to face it directly or suffer the consequences for the rest of your life. As with Beethoven's Symphonies you either accept, or you don't. Take your own choice. Whether you come out of the experience of this opera without being permanently changed by that experience is almost unimaginable. It is one of the life changing epiphonic works in the canon of Western Art music. Without it there would have been no late Romanticism as we know it, and no breakdown of tonality leading to the musical revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

These a few of the things to contemplate, take on board, assimilate, and although this epithet of "World Changing" is, and has been overused, for many art works over the years this is one work that alone genuinely can carry it justly and without fear of any disagreement from anyone.

<https://youtu.be/J-qoaiog2UA>

*Tristan und Isolde Prelude to Act 1*

"Tristan und Isolde" was conceived as a work of musical drama that was through composed, in other words started at the beginning and followed through to the end just as the audience would hear it. It is a work without overture etc just a short prelude that introduces the scene set of the stage. Gone are the arias, the duets, the big show off solos and in their place is more realism in its content that works through strong emotional and psychological interplay of characters. This is described in musical terms through the use of "leitmotifs", the musical portrayal in shortish themes of an idea, item or person. In this work more characters and ideas than in his other operas.

<https://youtu.be/Pwk3BKipjtQ>

*An on line harmonic analysis of the prelude to act 1*

Although leitmotifs were nothing new it was the way in which Wagner created whole stretches and expanses of music using, developing and mutating these leitmotifs that was new. Before, the leitmotiv would have been stated above the rest of the music and left as such just as in the music of Berlioz, as a form of *idée fixe*. Through this new way of integrating the motifs an idea such as jealousy, or love, could be portrayed in sound and suggested to the audience without the character who is jealous or in love actually stating it in the text of the sung part. Thus creating the possibility of many layers of emotion, history, psychology etc all being able to be experienced in the same point in time.

As “Tristan und Isolde” was written during the composition of “Siegfried”; the third of the four Ring cycle operas, one would expect to be bombarded with similar material and motifs but in Tristan Wagner tried to loosen the grip that leitmotifs were having on the Ring cycle composition and by doing so this allowed him more freedom of expression in the music he was able to create. The motifs are referential rather than directionally controlled to state emotional ideas or states of mind. Having said this certain phrases and elements of the main motifs are used to express otherwise inexpressible concepts. As if Wagner is trying to find a way out of, or see beyond, the Ring’s use of these dogmatically self-controlling leitmotifs.

The way Wagner used these techniques was revolutionary and from his use of this in “Tristan und Isolde” it allowed him to develop this freer concept further in his ongoing masterpiece, “The Ring of the Nibelungen” operatic cycle. This masterstroke allowed Wagner to create subtleties in emotions that was unheard of before this and instead of the audience feeling one emotion towards a character it allowed them to be swayed in their opinions via a whole gamut of ideas that put together would create changing emotions and perceptions of the characters. This is very much the case in Tristan where you are appalled by the fact that Tristan and Isolde lust after each other although she is betrothed to King Mark. She wantonly gives herself to Tristan and not Mark much to the antithesis of the moral codes of the day. Right has been wronged. This is a theme that has been extended from the Ring cycle with the siblings Siegmund and Sieglinde who have an incestuous affair and beget Siegfried in a lustful socially and morally wrong position. This would as it would today repel and shock the social sensibilities of the audience. Yet through subtle manipulations of the main leitmotifs in both operas you end up siding with and feeling for the anti-socially unacceptable couple and wish them to become the heroes of the works even though you know they are in the wrong and must and will pay the price for their wrongdoing.

The sheer immensity and duration of the work shocked many people causing some critics to complain and pour vitriol against this work, but in particular against Wagner, without recourse to the actual reasons for the extreme length of the work. The subject was complicated, not one that could or would have been tackled by the likes of Mozart, Rossini, Donizetti or even Wagner’s arch rival Meyerbeer. No-one had tackled such subjects in such a pseudo-psychologically realistic manner before and thus to implement all the nuances of the characterizations and plots it needed to unfold rather than be revealed suddenly. This was no light operatic farce. This concept automatically leads to greater lengths of time being required to gain insight and to open out the dramatic concepts.

<https://youtu.be/OAEkTK6aKUM>

*The end of Tristan and Isolde*

The musical language was one of extremes. Extreme melodies that never ever ended; Wagner's "never-ending-melody", and extremes of harmony with unusual keys and chords. This opera is famous for a particular chord, called the "Tristan Chord" that cannot be resolved in the usual way using the harmonic rules of the day and lent no support or root to a particular key. It is sometimes cited as the "crisis" point in romantic harmony. It pushed harmony outside of the rules of the time and can be seen as the actual beginning of the breakdown of tonal harmony.



*The opening of the opera with the Tristan chord in the second full bar*

Through this one rich and nearly unfathomable chord the whole of Western Art Music's searching's and stirring's for the next 130 years were set in motion. The exploration of extreme unrelated harmonies created according only to the rules of their composers was released. It set in motion all manner of experiments in 20<sup>th</sup> century music. At the time its significance was impossible to be seen and Wagner was criticised for the un-harmonic sound it created. Today we understand its gesture in a way that would have been unfathomable 150 years ago.

Wagner with one work, one chord, changed the way music would wander through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A parallel to be drawn with Wotan's own wanderings in the Ring cycle. Each composer making their own way through it.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed more adventurous composers such as Bruckner, Mahler, Zemlinsky, Busoni, Schoenberg became aware of the importance of this opera and the music it contained and studied its technicalities and musical language. It allowed them to structure Symphonic music in a more developed and technical way than before, it also allowed for a harmonic language that was extended and stretched. Cadence points were pushed back further and further back while more and more tension built up, with developed harmony only making this possible. Until finally something had to give, and give it must, and give it did. With Schoenberg's experiments up to his masterpiece "Gurrelieder" owing so much to Wagner's work and technique that it reached its final points of possible development in this strange work. The only real alternative was to break harmonic language by breaking the exacting rules and from that 'shattering' an a-tonal language emerged.

<https://youtu.be/75MqAyETxno>

*First part of Schoenberg's Gurrelieder*

For a better understanding of the impact of Wagner's language on the music and harmony of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and very early 20<sup>th</sup> century a look and a brief study of Schoenberg's massive book on late Romantic music harmony incongruously entitled "Theory of Harmony" is the best place to start. That is if you can get past the high-brow language that Schoenberg uses (even in its translation it is daunting).

For myself this work has never been easy or comfortable to accept unlike his Ring cycle or the exquisitely painful "Parsifal". Its unusual colours and rich 19<sup>th</sup> century textures are almost overbearing for my tastes. Its strong emotionally ridden pages do not make for an easy journey and even though I accept it now for its technicalities and importance it is not a work I can watch or listen to in one sitting unlike "Parsifal". It is a rollercoaster ride in every way that still makes me uncomfortable, unsettled and that from a confirmed Wagnerian. Having said this still I return to the opera like I do his other works as each time I find something new, and each time I get side-tracked with 'how' or 'why'. Maybe one day this will cease and I will come to terms with this important work in a way that I can his other operas or with the music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Until then the fascination will keep drawing me back to its sonorities and emotions.