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**PAPER**

# Hybridised Performance: Disruption and Deferment in Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*

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The following focusses on aspects of hybridised multi-layered performance as seen in Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, recently in a new production at the English National Opera (ENO). The notion of Wagner's, '*Gesamtkunstwerk*' (his own spelling) is particularly relevant, as are the influences of Schopenhauer's 'Philosophy of Pessimism' and to a lesser extent Nietzsche's apologias. There are nuances within music and libretto which invoke all of these in the work's treatment of *Liebestod*, self-immolating romantic passion. This production was conducted by Edward Gardner, directed by Daniel Kramer, and designed by Anish Kapoor with digital assistance from Frieder Weiss.

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**Keywords:** *Tristan and Isolde*; Hybridity; multi-layeredness; heterogeneity; Richard Wagner; *Gesamtkunstwerk*; 'Total Art-Work'; Schopenhauer; Nietzsche; Music-Drama; Synaesthesia; *Liebestod*; '*Tristan Chord*'

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## Introduction

In July 2016, I attended a production of Richard Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* at the Coliseum in London. Wagner referred to the work as '*eine Handlung*' (a drama, action or plot (translating the term used by the 17th century Spanish playwright Calderón)<sup>1</sup> rather than as an opera. It is based on a fragmented and amended 13th

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Coleman argues that Wagner fundamentally misunderstood Calderón's writings, and grossly distorted his character Segismundo in *La Vida es sueño* (*Life is a Dream*) in so much as he read the 'playwright ... with the aid of Schopenhauer's misreading and misinterpretation in *The World as Will and Representation*'. According to Coleman, 'no matter how one twists the play, there is no Romantic Will at work here, no Schopenhauerian illusion or disillusion' (1983: 22–28).

century version by Gottfried von Strassburg of a far older Celtic narrative, spread over 40 episodes. From these Wagner selected only three, each comprising an entire act.

The work, completed in Lucerne in 1859, in a long digression from composition of the third part of the *Ring* cycle, was premiered in Munich in 1865, conducted by Hans von Bülow, the first husband of Wagner's second wife, Cosima. The first UK premiere was given at Drury Lane in 1882. It has become regarded as probably the most characteristic of Wagner's individual music-dramas (as opposed to the *Ring* tetralogy), presented in much-lauded productions over the years, notably at the Bayreuth *Festspielhaus*, built by Wagner to host performances of his own works. Amongst a diverse range of directors and conductors have been Daniel Barenboim (on several occasions), Jean-Pierre Ponnelle (1983), Heiner Müller (1993) and Katharina Wagner (2015) the new director of the Bayreuth Festival and great-grand-daughter of Richard.

## **Innovation in Music and Performance**

### ***A Rebalancing of Music and Text: A New Hybridity***

*Tristan and Isolde* is a story of a socially impossible love and yearning which cannot be legitimately realised until it is too late. Put like that it could be the basis of any number of *opere serie* composed in the Italian tradition by which a pre-written dramatic text, the libretto, is set to music which observes a constant functional distinction between recitative, where dialogue is clearly sung and sparsely accompanied, and arias, which amplify the affective situations of the characters. From its first manifestation in the late 16th century *intermedi* of the Florentine Medici court, opera can be said to have been an innately hybrid genre, at times not always easily straddling the competing demands of musical integrity and dramatic force. It is significant that the composer of its first great works, Claudio Monteverdi, himself argued for a new priority for textual content, and following the elaborateness of baroque composition, Christoph Willibald Gluck, a later, self-conscious 'reformer' of the tradition, reiterated a need for fidelity to the words. In opera, the successful blend of both elements has always been a difficult attainment.

Wagner's approach to this matter involved a radical departure from established practice: consonant with his early ambitions to write plays, he generally wrote his own

libretti. This overcame the persistent problem of divergence of creative intent between composer and poet, even if doubts were expressed as to the literary worth of his texts. Hybridity, as it were, was now taken 'in house', within the composer's own sensibility. Moreover he argued publicly that the text was of equal importance, although privately he appears to have thought otherwise (Guttman, 1990: 13). And, whilst not its inventor, he followed the abandonment of the stereotypes of recitative and aria in pursuit of the 'through composed' score, where all dramatic action was incorporated into a continuous musical flow. And again, whilst not the first to associate individual characters with musical phrases Wagner developed to its full the notion of *leitmotif*, one of a lexicon of repeated musical phrases each associated with a particular person, place or idea as suggested by the libretto. In this way the music, rather than merely amplifying the textual content being sung at a particular time, becomes another layer of commentary on it, essentially a hypertext in itself, pointing backwards and forwards to other points in the drama. The *Ring* offers the most extensive paradigm of this new multilayeredness.

The effect of these formal integrations is not merely confined to technical process. Wagner's overarching theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the 'total/communal art work', conjectured future work in which art and the social were indivisible, supported by belief that great drama resulted from the 'organic synthesis' of the Athenian state, which had been replaced by a modern fragmentation of industrialisation and mechanisation. According to David Roberts:

Wagner's concept of total redemption entails a cyclical philosophy of history, stretching from the natural Greek polity to the completion of history in the communist society of the future.

(2011: 74)

The main ingredients of Wagner's total art work were 'dance, music and poetry', of which existing traditions made scant use:

The language of the body ... of the heart and ... of the spirit. Opera, by contrast, is dismissed ... as nothing but the occasion for displaying egoistic rivalry of the three sister arts.

(Wagner quoted by Roberts, 2011: 75)

Other forms of plastic arts were also drawn into the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to provide a further intermingling of art forms. Again, according to Wagner: 'Not a single richly developed capacity of the individual arts will remain unused in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the future' (Roberts, 2011: 75). Thus a fundamental reconsideration of the elements of pre-existing opera gave an indication as to the scale and combination of future manifestations of hybridity.

### ***Musical Structure: Coitus Very Interruptus***

The opening passage of *Tristan*, containing the celebrated chord, left music in a condition 'after which nothing could ever be the same again' (Tom Service (2016)). According to Gardner, conductor of the ENO production, the 'chord gives you, this lack of resolution and the colour of it, it gives you this unbelievable sense of yearning – it's poetic in the most extraordinary way' (Macleod, 2016). For Richard Strauss: 'with Tristan, Wagner opened the door to new sounds' (Strauss quoted in Osborne, 1997). But beginning with a dissonance was not of itself unprecedented, Mozart (Quartet K. 428), Spohr, and Liszt, in his song *Die Lorelei*, had all exploited its unsettling quality (Osborne, 1997). Indeed the '*Tristan Chord*' can be seen as a variation of a similar chord in the latter, first version published in 1843. Barry Millington comments that there it 'is presaged (though never in its precise form)' (2006: 74). According to John Snelson:

There isn't even agreement on the chord's technical name. It can be called a half-diminished 7th chord (F, G sharp, B, D sharp). It's also the superimposition of a perfect 4th (D sharp, G sharp) on a tritone (F, B); or a French 6th (F, A B, D sharp) with an appoggiatura (G sharp leading to A).  
(2014)

Had it been an arresting device which then settled down into orthodox tonality, perhaps the Chord would not have had such an effect on musical history. But of course it enunciated a vastly extended dissonance and harmonic suspension across

four hours of performance, in which the music frequently progresses towards new keys yet repeatedly postpones a key-strengthening cadence, in other words creating repeated 'harmonic suspensions' and although this device was commonly used to create musical tension, in *Tristan* it is the main developmental principle. For Bryan Magee:

What is certain is that the chord contains not one dissonance but two. And when this first chord moves to the second, one of the dissonances is resolved but not the other; indeed a dissonance is created. When the second moves to the third the same thing happens ... Our perpetual longing for the resolution of discord is ... partially satisfied but partially frustrated. Only at the very end ... does the stretched-out unsatisfied longing come permanently to a close ... the two main characters are now both dead and the opera is finished. (2007: 343)

The cadences, introduced in the Prelude, are not resolved until the final Scene of Act 3 in the *Liebestod* sung by Isolde, despite almost doing so in Act 2, only to be deferred by the interruption by Tristan's manservant, Kurwenal, and Isolde's maidservant Bragäne, who both rush in to warn the lovers of the approach of King Marke's entourage. The Chord and its vastly deferred resolution provides an 'exquisite pain' with its unending state of 'dissolution where we desire a resolution ending but never want it to come because we want to be suspended in this place where longing begets more longing' (Service, 2016). As Barry Millington succinctly puts it: 'the cadence, like the coitus, is *interrruptus*' (1992: 819).

This erotic power was evident from the first; *Tristan* was considered so scandalous that young women were not allowed to see it when it premiered in Munich. For Clara Schumann, writing soon after, it was 'the most repugnant thing I have ever seen or heard in all my life' (Ashmore, 2012). It was as if the equilibrium of mid-romanticism, with its bourgeois domestication of romantic passion (something her late husband Robert constantly evinced in his songs) had been irreversibly upset, indicating what

Dionysian licence music could be capable of arousing. And of course, the notions of stable tonality upon which such an equilibrium depended, were from this point under increasing threat, as Theodor Adorno puts it:

All the tones and their combinations, even at their most daring, for example in *Tristan* and *Parsifal*, can be explained in accordance with the traditional teachings of harmony. At issue is a tendency, a potential – not what one finds literally in the notes, but what they tend toward – and this, indeed, has decisively to do with atonality.

(1993: 43).

### ***A 'Filmic' Temporality***

By letting the harmonic ramifications of one chord pervade such a large musical structure Wagner had clearly changed the possible modes of audience response. In place of the busy alternation of speeds implicit in traditional operatic procedure, with their discrete numbers juxtaposing keys and moods, he had let one musical, and therefore dramatic, moment wash through the entire performance. So to speak, the music *is* the drama, over which the sung characters float, buoyed along by it, as they are, dramatically, driven on by their passions. There is not much of a sense that they can do anything to arrest such a flow.

As with the *Ring*, the kind of response that *Tristan* determines is of a new order of temporalisation: put simply, it is epically slow-moving, but for those who are up to it, this durational vastness is not empty, rather, it immerses the audience in a soundworld analogous to the parallel universe of infatuation in which Tristan and Isolde are trapped from Act 1 onwards. Considering this is four hours of performance, very little 'happens' on stage: a failed poisoning attempt induces the passion; the lovers are surprised at their nocturnal tryst; they are later reunited where both die. Narrative is minimal and episodic, though retrospective narration does serve, particularly in Act 1, to create the preconditions for the passion itself. A pit orchestra musician once described, in informal conversation, that Act 2 was 'an hour of bloody rambling crap'; perhaps he preferred to play Verdi, but he correctly identifies most of this Act as a huge, ecstatic duet with no forward movement whatever.

Such a daring reliance on minimal action taken so slowly can be seen as prescient with regard to a medium Wagner never knew: cinema, particularly as its technical resources have increased since the thirties. As transmitted through Gustav Mahler, Richard Strauss, early Arnold Schoenberg and Erich Korngold, it is impossible to imagine the temporality of film music as it interacts with images without recognising Wagner as the precedent. It is apparent how much the intrinsic pace of his musical developments lends itself to the conventions of big screen camerawork and visual editing, so much so that it could be argued that the former actually helped create the latter. The sense of how images and sparse words can be given atmospheric resonance by music of this monumental slowness, is itself so engrained in our visual culture that it is difficult to appreciate it freshly. The use of leitmotif also presages film music's exploitation of character-identifying phrases which act as anaphoric devices, subliminally reminding the audience of other moments or events in the narrative. According to Caryl Flinn:

The leitmotif for Wagner produced meaning in two ways, first by anticipating them and second by retrospectively constructing them. The assumption is that when the leitmotiv is first heard, the auditor experiences a vague emotional response that is only more fully understood later when the leitmotiv is repeated and readily associated with an object or theme.

(1992: 26)

There are closer and purely musical debts too: an interpretation of the *Liebestod* ('Love-Death') is recognisable in both Luis Buñuel's *L'Age d'Or* (1930) and in Bernard Herrmann's score for Alfred Hitchcock's film *Vertigo* (1958).

## **The Inner Landscape: Influences**

### ***Mathilde Wesendonck: The 'Affair' and The Lieder***

Ever in need of funding, Wagner met Otto Wesendonck, a Swiss businessman, in 1853, who became a benefactor. In 1857, fleeing creditors and still a marked man after his participation in the 1848 European uprisings, Wagner and his first wife, Minna, were invited to live at the '*Asyl*' (Asylum, Sanctuary), a cottage on the Wesendonck's estate. The ensuing 'affair' with Otto's wife Mathilde is now thought



unlikely to have been consummated, remaining largely epistolary. Wagner wrote to Liszt at the time:

Since I have never in my life tasted the actual happiness of love, I must raise a monument to the fairest of all dreams, in which from beginning to end that love shall be thoroughly satiated. I have in my head, *Tristan and Isolde*, the simplest but yet most full-blooded conception; with the 'black flag' that waves at the end of it. I shall shroud myself to die.

(Guttman, 1990: 163)

The 'black flag' relates to a variation of the Tristan tale which Wagner did not use. The affair appears to have collapsed around 1858 following his wife Minna's interception of a note between Wagner and Mathilde, consequently accusing both, and reporting it to Otto. Despite both protesting innocence, the situation deteriorated, causing Wagner to move to Venice where he wrote the Second Act of *Tristan*. Minna left for Dresden for health treatment but before leaving she wrote acerbically to Mathilde:

Before my departure I must tell you with a bleeding heart that you have succeeded in separating my husband from me after nearly twenty-two years of marriage. May this noble deed contribute to your piece of mind.

(Guttman, 1990: 182)

As mentioned above, Wagner in 'his mature years' did not use any libretti other than his own. But during his passion for Mathilde, he, exceptionally, set five of Mathilde's poems in his *Wesendonck Lieder* (Service, 2016). Wagner subtitled two of the songs 'studies' for *Tristan*, in effect trying out musical ideas which he later developed. In 'Träume' ('Dreams') can be heard the musical origins of the love duet in Act 2, while the verses address the power of infatuated fantasies. *Im Treibhaus* ('In the Hothouse'), the last of the five to be composed, rehearses the music of Tristan's exile in the Prelude to Act 3, whilst identifying with the vulnerable sadness of a trapped exotic plant. Since he was scoring Act 1 at this time, it is easy to ascribe to this romance Wagner's self-identification with Tristan, Mathilde with Isolde, Otto with King Marke,

and, perhaps, Minna with the traitorous Melot, Tristan's erstwhile friend. But these songs, more importantly, permitted him to develop more transparent sonorities than he had used during composition so far of the *Ring*.

### ***Schopenhauer: Pessimism and Release***

Georg Herwegh introduced Wagner to Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea* in 1854: 'the study of which was to assume a vast importance' (Wagner, 1988: 508). He wrote:

I was instantly captivated and by the great clarity and manly precision with which the most abstruse metaphysical problems were treated from the beginning ... Everyone who has been roused to great passions by life will do as I did, and hunt for the final conclusions of the Schopenhauerian system; whereas his treatment of aesthetics pleases me immensely, particularly his surprising and significant conception of music.

(Wagner 1988: 509)

Another reason for Wagner's interest was his disappointment over the failure of the Dresden uprising in 1849. According to Margrit Frölich: 'Wagner saw the chance for social change deteriorate beyond recall. The frustration of his revolutionary hopes ... resulted in his subsequent turn to Schopenhauer's pessimist philosophy' (1999: 157). As Magee argues: 'to some of the most beautiful music ever composed, Tristan and Isolde are singing metaphysics. The whole work is a fusion of metaphysics and music drama' (2007: 345).

For Schopenhauer, the known world is the Idea or 'Representation' (*Vorsellung*), in short, the 'phenomenal world'. And this is driven by the inner world or the 'noumenon' behind this phenomenon, which Schopenhauer termed the 'Will'. According to Martin Walsh: 'the world is the appearance of one eternal Will to be' (1987: 355). These are concepts derived from original positings by Kant. Schopenhauer's use of the term 'Will' must be regarded 'as having no necessary connection with purpose or personality or consciousness, or indeed with life at all' (Magee, 2007: 342).

As regards life, 'desire begets desire since we always want more and more' and thus we remain 'unsatisfied' (Kenneth Hamilton interviewed by Service 2016). We are continually driven by our unachievable desires, 'in common with the Buddhists, he [Schopenhauer] sees human life, as we consciously experience it as consisting of ultimately unsatisfiable wanting and wishing, grasping, longing yearning and craving' (Magee, 2007: 342). Schopenhauer believed there were only two ways we can escape 'from the slavery of tormented Will': the first is through the medium of Art, 'will-less perception' which provides temporary relief (Walsh, 1987: 355). This intersects with Kant's notion of aesthetic pleasure as 'disinterested delight' and in his conception of form in art as 'purposiveness without purpose' (1978 42–69). In respect of this way Schopenhauer provides two theories of Art – one for music and one for the rest (Magee, 2007: 342). Music for Schopenhauer was the highest of the Arts, which resonated hugely with Wagner's own ideas:

Because music does not, like all the other arts, exhibit the *Ideas* or grades of the will's objectification, but directly the *will itself*, we can also explain that it acts directly on the will, i.e., the feelings, passions and emotions of the hearer, so that it quickly raises these or even alters them.

(Schopenhauer, 1966: 448)

According to Linda and Michael Hutcheon, Schopenhauer directly influenced Wagner's 'sense of musical structure and function'. They continue with the suggestion that: 'two motifs of desire and suffering are famously conjoined in bar 2 in the '*Tristan* chord' – the symbolic musical bridge between suffering and yearning that will not be resolved until its transformation at the end ... in full accord with Schopenhauer's theory of music' (1999: 273–74). As he writes:

Slow melodies that strike painful discords and wind back to the keynote only through many bars, are sad, on the analogy of delayed and hard-won satisfaction. Delay in the new excitement of the will, namely languor, could have no other expression than the sustained keynote ... the transition from

one key into quite a different one ... is like death inasmuch the individual ends in it.

(Schopenhauer, 1969: 260)

Magee reiterates this argument when he writes that '*Tristan and Isolde* is, at a musical level, an instantiation of Schopenhauer's doctrine that existence is an inherently unsatisfiable web of longings, willings and strivings from which the only permanent liberation is the cessation of being' (2007: 343).

Schopenhauer's second way of escape was release through the means of 'asceticism, holiness, mortification and self-denial'. 'In death', we achieve 'the final goal of total denial of the "Will to live"' (Walsh, 1987: 356). According to Schopenhauer:

As a rule, the death of every good person is peaceful and gentle; but to die willingly, to die gladly, to die cheerfully is the prerogative of the resigned ... and denies the will to live and denies the will to live ... For he alone wishes to die ... he willingly gives up the existence that we know ... The Buddhist faith calls that existence *Nirvana*, that is to say extinction.

(1966: 508)

Schopenhauer's influence on Wagner's thoughts extended to sexuality; the former held that 'sexual love' shows itself as the 'strongest and most active of all motives' and it has an 'unfavourable influence on the most important affairs' and 'it does not hesitate to intrude with its trash'. It continually 'brews and hatches the worst and most perplexing quarrels and disputes and destroys the most valuable relationships'. He continues: 'that which makes itself known to the individual consciousness as sexual impulse ... is in itself ... simply the will-to-live' (1966: 533–35).

But here Wagner deviated from such an attitude of uniformly suspicious pessimism; although he believed that *Tristan and Isolde* was the 'greatest monument to the greatest of all illusions, romantic love' (Zeki, 2001: 52), he also believed that sexual love 'came to share with death an ability to transcend individuation, to lose the self in a unity with a larger force – passion' (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 1999: 281).

In response to Schopenhauer's declaration of how he found it 'inexplicable' that lovers could commit 'common suicide' (1966: 532), Wagner took issue to the point of writing to him, though apparently, he never sent the letter, to explain the connection between death and sexual love. For Wagner, 'both sexual love and death are both solutions to the suffering and pain of individuation' and 'the link between love and death is not one of obstacle but one of fulfilment' (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 1999: 282). It could be said that death in *Tristan and Isolde* is 'a metaphor for a world of the highest of all possible loves, both profound and spiritual' (Service, 2016), but at the same time taking an explicitly sexual form.

### ***Nietzsche: a reciprocal influence?***

It could be questioned whether Nietzsche could be called an influence on Wagner, since Wagner was obviously a pre-eminent influence on him. *Tristan* was complete by 1865, but inasmuch as the younger Nietzsche was very much a disciple of, and propagandist for, Wagner during the early 1870s, theorising on his behalf and hailing his position in cultural history before this was widely settled, one could argue that Wagner, in using the other's gifts, was partially conditioned by them. It is even more apparent that we are bound retrospectively to see Wagner's achievement through Nietzsche's hermeneutic lenses.

Nietzsche questions whether 'genuine musicians ... can imagine a human being who would be able to perceive the third act of *Tristan and Isolde's* without expiring in a spasmodic unharnessing of all wings of the soul' (Nietzsche, 1967: 126–27). In his first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy* (published in 1872), dedicated to Wagner, he proposed his music as the Dionysian 'rebirth' of European culture in contrast to Apollonian rationalist 'decadence', writing in 1876:

Tristan and Isolde, the real opus metaphysicum of all art, a work upon which rests the broken look of a dying man with his insatiable and sweet craving for the secrets of night and death, far away from life ... overpowering in its simple grandeur and in harmony with the secret of which it treats – lying dead in the midst of life, being one in two.

(Nietzsche, 2008: 44)

*The Birth of Tragedy* is essentially a discussion of the relationship between Apollonian and Dionysian influences on art and culture. These, for Nietzsche, were symbols rather than concepts and his theorisation of the aesthetic was based on their opposition. Despite their apparent radical opposition they have in common a shared rejection of any mediated understanding provided by concepts or analysis. Apollo is associated with form and structure, whilst by contrast Dionysus is associated with energy, sexuality, fertility and nature; the pure Dionysian art is music. While the Apollonian experience is found in the 'dream' which has form (image), the Dionysian experience is characteristically that of 'intoxication' which is by definition formless. Nietzsche describes the Dionysian as: 'The tremendous awe which seizes man when he suddenly begins to doubt the cognitive modes of experience ... whose closest analogy is furnished by physical intoxication'. Apollo, in contrast, is 'the god of illusion wrapping man in 'the veil of maya' and protecting him from the harsh realities of his existence. Dionysus 'annihilates' the veil of maya and opens the way for a direct and unmediated participation in reality. Nietzsche argues that Dionysian art 'does not ... represent appearance, but the will directly' (1956: 97).

Here, Schopenhauer's influence on Nietzsche can be seen clearly as indeed can Nietzsche's increasing attraction to Wagner. However, according to Hutcheon and Hutcheon:

Greek tragedy – and its revival in Wagner's music dramas – did not involve Schopenhauer's Will-negating resignation. Instead it was a life-affirming interweaving of two forces: the energising Dionysian powers (destructiveness [of individuality], cruelty, sexuality) and the controlling Apollonian ones (rationality, form, *principium individuationis*).  
(1999: 290)

Tristan's death does not bring about any 'Aristotelian catharsis of pity' instead it 'creates joy' (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 1999: 290). In contrast to Schopenhauer, 'tragedy' for Nietzsche was life affirming in a similar way that 'sexual love' was for Wagner. After seeing his first performance of *Tristan and Isolde*, Nietzsche noted:

'This drama of death does not sadden me at all, on the contrary, I feel happy and redeemed' (Fischer-Dieskau, 1976: 92).

The first Bayreuth Festival was an enormous disappointment for Nietzsche, he believed that Wagner was demonstrating an increasing and exclusive Germanic nationalism, together with a rampant anti-Semitism. He also despised Wagner's apparent lean towards Christianity, exemplified in the mythico-religious *Parsifal*. This rupture led to Nietzsche articulating his distaste for Wagner and his work in his later publications, including: *The Case of Wagner* (1888), subtitled 'A Musician's Problem' and *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (1895), where he again attacks Wagner's views and life choices. But Nietzsche continued to be uniquely enthralled by *Tristan*: 'Even now I am still in search of a work which exercises such a dangerous fascination, such a spine-tingling and blissful infinity as Tristan – I have sought in vain, in every art' (1979: 61).

### **ENO's *Tristan and Isolde***

This rendering of *Tristan and Isolde* was met with very mixed reviews, for instance: 'a lethally perverse production' (Tanner, 2016), 'a fascinating, vexing riot of ideas' (Maddocks, 2016) and 'musically fine but a confused and illogical staging' (Clements, 2016).

The ENO's tradition of both singing in English and now surtitling the libretto makes it far easier to associate music and text. The sets, three for each act, were spectacular and on a grand scale (See performance images at BBC Radio Galleries <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04967nc/p04966f6>). According to Kapoor, this was in order 'to hold the human figure at a certain scale' (Macleod, 2016), though he was 'not interested in illustrating either the music or text' (Macleod, 2016). The use of light was extraordinary: 'colour gives a quantity to an object which is illusionistic, that's why I am loving working with light here' (Kapoor quoted by Christiansen, 2016).

Act 1 of this production took place in a massive partitioned wooden sculpture with three separate spaces coming to a point upstage, presenting a pyramidal shape, reminiscent of a ship's sails. Kapoor adds 'I was not bothered about referencing the ship; rather, I wanted his world and her world. A space where worlds collide'

(Macleod, 2016). Isolde's space was on the left and Tristan's on the right, with the centre space used for both subsequently coming together, and also for the chorus. The visual array was completed by some eccentric choices of costumes designed by Christina Cunningham. Isolde, sung by soprano Heidi Melton, was in a baroque wide panniered skirt in Act 1 which appeared to inhibit movement. Tristan, the Australian Heldentenor Stuart Skelton, was progressively dressed onstage as a samurai warrior. Their two respective servants were in 'classic servant fops in the mode of a Cruikshank cartoon: frock coats and high, Brillo-pad-with-glamour wigs, all pout and mouth' (Maddocks, 2016). King Marke's soldiers (who were also the chorus) were *Star Wars* troopers.

The libretto of Act 1 is the longest of the three, straightforwardly written to lay out the complex pre-existing layerings of the principals' mutual feelings. They are hardly innocent victims of a substitution; each is presented to us as a 'hybrid' of violently ambivalent emotions. Isolde, daughter of royalty, is being taken by sea from Ireland to her familiarly ordained wedding to King Marke in Cornwall, cementing a peace treaty between them. She is ostensibly furious. In the preceding war Tristan had killed her fiancé, but, wounded himself, had travelled incognito to seek her healing skills. She had discovered his identity, but, intending to exact revenge, was checked by the moment their glances met. Now, as part of the peace deal, Tristan returned again to collect her; the libretto vaguely implies that in this, also, she was lured by her involuntary love for him. Tristan too has overruled his affections by offering Isolde to Marke solely to ingratiate himself at court. The musical settings of their speeches alternate between her torrential denunciations and his, almost Elgarian, bluff complacency. Though etiquette supposedly dictates he must keep distant, Isolde eventually forces Tristan to meet her; she wants 'atonement' for her fiancé's death. Tristan is honour-bound to drink with her what he is convinced is poison. But Bragäne, her maid servant, has substituted a love potion instead. It is a mark of the layering of affect in this Act, that the potion's effects are, dramatically, not magical but more of a truth drug; it has simply exposed repressed yearnings to the point that their bearers cannot resist them. By the time King Marke arrives they are both stripped of their previous false consciousness, even though they know its cause; as Tristan declares, in an almost Nietzschean paradox: 'Our bliss now lives from lying! Joy, guile-inspired, I bless you!' (Porter, 1993: 63).



Act 2 sees the stage dominated by a massive textured hemisphere excavated out with a cave-like interior: 'a kind of garden of delight', which raises the singers up so they are above the stage. According to Kapoor, it suggests 'falling in love, a state apart, where all reality disappears', almost 'a world removed where love happens' (Macleod, 2016). It is lit by a deep blue nocturnal light. And it does not permit the singers much room for manoeuvre.

This is where the lovers come together. King Marke is leading a hunting party nearby, and despite Brangane's fears that they will be discovered, the two sing their protracted ecstatic love duet, whose analogical core is *Liebesnacht* ('Love of the Night'). At the risk of stretching the term, this can be regarded as a hybridised feature in itself, resembling more a 'symphonic poem', that characteristic late-romantic form, than an integral part of the plot. And it is here that the re-use and development of material from one of the *Wesendonck Lieder* is most apparent. Following occasional practice, which reflects the sense some have that the duet is too digressive, in this production a 'heinous 12-minute cut' was made in it, prompting the outburst: 'in what other opera is there a comparable act of barbarism?' (Tanner, 2016).

The text offers declarations of mutual infatuation which have now acquired Schopenhauerean connotations of *fuga mundi* (flight from the world), figuratively filling out a sensory inversion: daylight is the arid 'empty and false' world of action, reason and ambition, the darkness of night is love's true reality. Tristan sings: 'since we are by night enfolded, the envious day, so keen and spiteful, still may keep us apart yet not deceive our heart ... all that remains is yearning ... for holy night, where endless and always true, Love brings laughing delight.' Isolde responds with: 'So let us die and never part!'. Both sing: 'no more Tristan, no more Isolde! Ever nameless, never parting ... endless ever joined in joy, ever-glowing love, highest holy love' (Porter, 1993: 71–76). In a passion that assumes a metaphysically monistic and transcendental idealist disposition, they sing: 'I myself am the world: supreme bliss of being ... never more to awaken dreamless' (Porter, 1993: 72). And again: 'endless ever, joined in joy' (Porter, 1993: 75).

But found out they are; Tristan's erstwhile friend Melot has indeed betrayed them to the king. Marke confronts Tristan, who is unable to explain, only asking

Isolde to follow him into death. He challenges Melot to fight but offers no defence and instead, in a Schopenhauerian renunciation, impales himself on Melot's knife.

The Act ends in this production with both Tristan and Isolde being strapped to hospital beds by paramedics in modern surgical dress, a staging innovation that was probably the most unpopular of all. In discussing this, Kramer relates 'I spent about two years listening to the score to find original ideas'. His deepest 'understanding of how sick they were, was at the climax of the opera ... it was from the sick image of "so let us die and never part" that I realised Tristan and Isolde were committing suicide' (Macleod, 2016).

In Act 3, the hemisphere of the previous act is now hidden behind a scrim with a huge tear in it giving the resemblance of 'a cave', 'a vagina' or 'an abyss', for now Tristan is 'locked out of the garden of love'. Movement is accordingly confined to the front of stage. As it progresses a blood red image is projected onto the scrim, giving the impression of 'an open wound' (Kramer interviewed by Macleod, 2016). The stunning video projections, as elsewhere, are by Weiss, for whom they 'all represent bleeding and suffering which eventually transforms all perception of space and leads to a blackout of all light and hope' (Weiss, 2016).

A filthy and dishevelled Tristan lies unconscious, having been exiled to his ancestral castle in Brittany, brought by his servant Kurwenal, now dressed as a down-at-heel clown in a fashion that Kramer attributes to the influence of Beckett's *Endgame* (Macleod, 2016). A sorrowful shepherd's pipe (a *cor anglais*) can be heard in the distance. Tristan begins slowly to regain consciousness, obsessed with being reunited with Isolde. Kurwenal tells him that she has been sent for. The text here hints at an increasing ambivalence, in which Tristan has a longing for a Buddhistic, absolute obliteration as the only release from the torment of unrequited *Liebe*:

No healing cure, not death itself  
 can set me free  
 from the yearning pain  
 ...  
 cast back by night to burning day.  
 (Porter, 1993: 84)

Isolde's ship eventually approaches, but Tristan expires on their meeting. A second party arrives with King Marke. Kurwenal, believing they are pursuing Isolde, challenges them, kills Melot before being killed himself. But Marke, having learnt about the potion from Brangane, is here to release the lovers from their ties. Isolde sings her final incandescent aria *Mild und leise* before succumbing to her own *Liebestod*. In a controversial departure from the score's stage directions, whilst singing, Isolde leads a revived Tristan into the now unveiled aperture, at the centre of a blood red stain of light, resembling an open wound, where they 'transfigure' together in the 'garden' of the previous Act.

Some critics were not convinced, instance: 'in one of his most outrageous interventions Kramer had Tristan resurrected while Isolde sang, ignoring the crucial point that the whole pathos, as opposed to the ecstasy, of the last 20 minutes of the drama is that the lovers die apart, and deluded' (Tanner, 2016). For Melton, singing Isolde: 'Daniel has made a bold decision to address the notion of the afterlife and the souls being able to be together. That's brave ... I find it really quite sublime' (Macleod, 2016).

In defence of this departure it can be said that the attachment of the term *Liebestod* to Isolde's final aria was probably the work of Liszt, Wagner's future father-in-law and indefatigable populariser of *Tristan* through his own piano reductions. For Wagner, it was the Prelude that originally bore this label, whilst calling the final aria 'Transfiguration' (*Die Verklärung*). It is certainly a weirdly transcendental expiry by the standards of operatic death, rather closer perhaps to a massive overdose of LSD.

Synaesthesia would appear also to figure very strongly in this final scene. Whilst the scene is replete with the odour of death and blood, Isolde sings of a 'wonderful fragrance'. This is a feature much commented on by writers on this work. Isolde asks 'shall I breathe them? Shall I hear them? Shall I taste them? ... Drown in tide of melting sweetness? ... I'm drowning, unaware, Highest love!' (Porter, 1993: 92). And for Hutcheon and Hutcheon:

Isolde asks if she is the only one to hear the melody that sounds from him, a lamenting, reconciling, vibrating sound that physically penetrates her ...

she asks if she is feeling waves of soft air that sound around her, wondering if they are waves of perfume? While such a mixing of the bodily senses of sound, touch and smell does have its par, Isolde asks if she is the only one to hear the melody that sounds from him, a lamenting, reconciling, vibrating sound that physically penetrates her.

(1999: 286)

This production commanded widespread applause for its musical qualities, Gardner 'conducting a dramatically rich and emotionally sensitive interpretation of the score, superbly played by the orchestra (Christiansen, 2016). Vocally 'there are few tenors who can 'sing the role of Tristan in English ... with anything like the authority, sustained beauty of tone and intensity that Stuart Skelton brings to it' (Clements, 2016). Melton as Isolde was felt by some to be overtaxed later on, but she was praised for her energy and volume in Act 1.

The whole audiovisual array, as said above, was less successful for many. In creating *Tristan*, Wagner took sparse episodes from a medieval romance and invested them with layers of overwhelming oneiric, metaphysical content borne by music of indefeasible impact. Perhaps trying to match this richness with such monumental constructions onstage was not going to work if the very size of them would inhibit blocking and movement, which they appeared to do. Whatever the intriguing visual qualities of Kapoor's designs, they cannot be said to have 'collaborated' with the music or drama; they were powerful exhibits fit for a gallery but not perhaps for amplifying what took place around them. The lighting software was far more adapted to this. Similarly, the heterogeneity of costume sources, including the 'pathologising' of the lovers' plight after capture, surprised, but did not constitute, as it were, a vision of a strange world in itself; they remained simply a diverse collection.

Without doubt, it is difficult to originate successful production designs for this work. Short of a hackneyed reversion to a Celtic twilight with overtones of *Jugendstil*, historical settings do not suggest themselves readily. Perhaps one avenue is to consciously react against the score; for instance, Heiner Müller's 1993 Bayreuth production was experimentally minimalist, 'influenced by the classical Japanese

Bunraku puppet theatre and Robert Wilson's postmodern mythico-theater' (Frölich, 1999: 157), stripping 'the Music-Drama of both passion and eroticism, together with any Wagnerian notion of 'the mystification of death as redemption' (Frölich, 1999: 157), creating an austere, demystifying, defamiliarised performance with no 'cathartic release'. His Tristan is 'ambivalent' in his desire for Isolde and his political disloyalty to the State. In this way the visual quality is one of suffocating bathos, which might make the music even more vividly declarative, rather like maniacally emotional subtitles to a silent film.

Perhaps Wagner's work has a quality that associates it with our inherited cultural notion of the Sublime: it can never be fully or definitively presented, but there must be always be an attempt to do so. In capturing and presenting the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as in the *Gestalt* – the parts can never be greater than the whole, yet the (perhaps unsatisfactory) heterogeneity of means as found in Kramer's production brings a 'negative pleasure' (Kant, 1978: 91) a yearning for a completion that can never be, for a satisfaction of a full presence that due to its disparity of elements can never or could never be realised in the everyday beingness of day, very much as neither Tristan nor Isolde could live happily ever after in the quotidian world.

## Competing Interests

Susan Broadhurst is an editor of BST. This paper was subjected to double-blind peer review and handled by another editor.

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