

Prelude

“Inside Masterworks”



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FEBRUARY 2016

Masterworks #5:

What piece of music can claim to have “induced fits of sobbing, fainting and even orgasms” in the theatre?

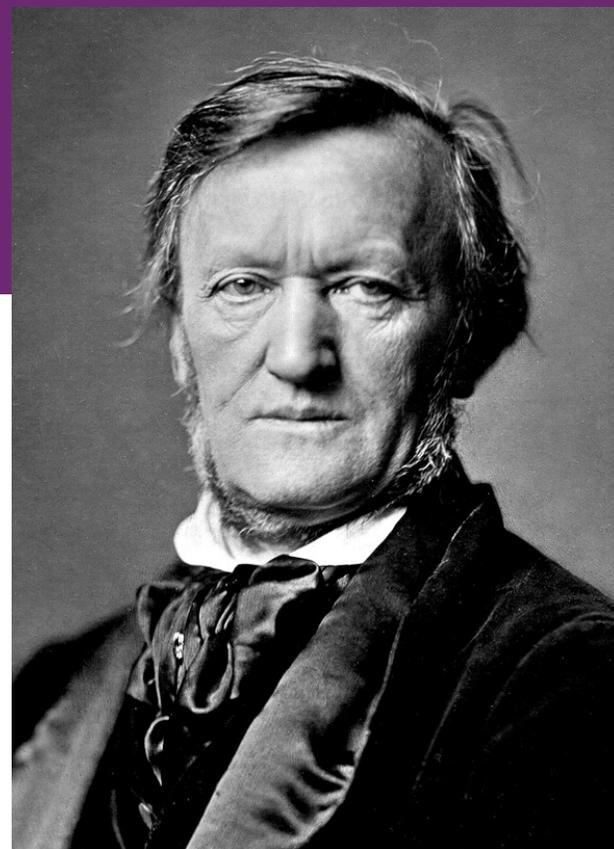
***Tristan und Isolde*, music that inspired emotions, legends and folklore.**



Did you ever wonder about curses and superstitions in theater or music? Speaking the name “Macbeth” inside a theater is considered bad luck, hence the term “The Scottish Play” when referencing Shakespeare’s work. We say, “break a leg” to an actor or “in bocca al lupo” to an opera singer to wish the artist a good performance. What few know, however, are the stories and folklore that circulated around Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*, or that Wagner himself worried about the power of his music to induce madness.

To be sure, the mythology is partially based on the unusual power of the story: *Tristan und Isolde* is a tale of “adulterous passion inspired by a love potion in the first act, which turns night into day in the nocturnal world of the second act with a powerful love duet.”ⁱ When Tristan dies, their great love transcends their bodies and “their souls are supposed to entwine in an ethereal union in the final notes of the piece.”ⁱⁱ Complicating the overtly sexualized and seductive story is the music itself, which “changed every composer who heard it.... and opened a Pandora’s box of technical and expressive possibilities....”ⁱⁱⁱ

Wagner had completed all acts of the opera in August of

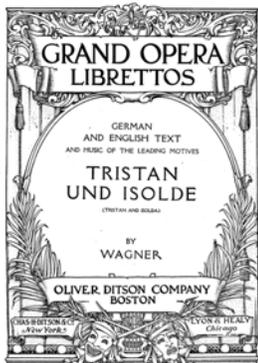


1859, but it took six years of struggle before *Tristan* was finally performed in 1865. What began as a short popular work to “make a quick buck” soon proved to be the most difficult work in any dramatic genre then known.^{iv}

Wagner, working on his score in 1858, already felt he was unleashing “something fearful” on the world, and hysterically wrote: “Only mediocre performances can save me! Completely good ones are bound to drive people mad!”^v Even as he worked on the piece, Wagner believed his music was potentially lethal. When work finally began on the world premiere in Munich, after several opera houses had rejected or abandoned it as “an abortion of idealistic extravagances,”^{vi} a series of mysterious obstacles arose that added to the enduring folklore surrounding the work.^{vii} The premiere, originally scheduled for May 15, 1865, had to be postponed because Malvina Schnorr, the first *Isolde*, experienced severe hoarseness.^{viii} It was speculated that her vocal problems were caused by the extreme difficulty of the score, and set the production

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back nearly a month. Rumors quickly circulated around the curious postponement.^{ix} The most tragic and damning blow to the reputation of the work came when Malvina's husband, Ludwig Schnorr, the first Tristan, died unexpectedly of an illness that many attributed to the difficulty of the role.^x These major obstacles of illness and death resulted in the opera house

declaring *Tristan und Isolde* "unperformable" after more than 70 rehearsals.^{xi}

Hearing news of these early performances of the opera, one London music critic declared it was "too revolting" to ever be produced in England.^{xii} It took nearly twenty years before *Tristan und Isolde* reached the English-speaking world, and by that time, documented audience reactions had cemented the swirling controversy that surrounded the work:

"Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* has induced sobbing fits, made people pass out and even fear for their lives. Then there were reports of seven simultaneous orgasms in act two..."^{xiii}

"I have heard of many who could not sleep after it, but cried the night away," wrote Mark Twain, having just seen one of the performances. "I feel like the one sane person in the community of the mad."^{xiv}



(French composer) "Emmanuel Chabrier heard it in Munich in 1880 and broke down during the prelude, sobbing uncontrollably."^{xv}

(Another composer) Guillaume Lekeu "passed out during a performance at Bayreuth" in 1886.^{xvi}

(Novelist) Catulle Mendès issued a health warning: "One has to keep one's distance from this work or ... suffer with it as much as he who wrote it."^{xvii}



***Tristan und Isolde* remains a magnificent work of art that has inspired a wide array of emotional responses: love, torment, sexual curiosity, death, illness, suspicion and folklore. Come join the HSO for our Valentine's Day program, February 11 - 14, 2016, as we present **Love Notes**, featuring the overture from Wagner's great work – and experience, firsthand, the enduring power of this great music.**

Love what you hear and want a closer connection with the HSO? Remember that as a donor you are entitled to special benefits and unparalleled access to insider events. For a full list of donor benefits and giving levels, please visit our website at <http://www.hartfordsymphony.org/individual-support/giving-levels/>

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The return of Casey's Classics

Recommended recordings
for your listening pleasure!

Curious about what you will be hearing on the concert program, or want to hear more? **Coleman Casey**, HSO's dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers the following recommendations for recordings of selections featured on our upcoming Masterworks Concert:

Wagner's *Prelude and Love Death* from *Tristan and Isolde* receives a performance of great intensity and perfection of ensemble from George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra in excellent sound from the 1960's. (SONY)

Prokofiev's magnificent ballet *Romeo and Juliet* is performed with unforgettable commitment and magnificent sonority by Lorin Maazel and the Cleveland Orchestra. (DECCA)

For Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, choose Wilhelm Kempff, one of the greatest Beethoven performers, whose recordings (DG) have been at the forefront of recommended recordings for more than fifty years.

A wonderfully clear, soothing and sensuous recording of *Claire de Lune* by Debussy is by pianist Pascal Roge. (DECCA)

The Bacchanale from *Samson et Dalila* by Saint Saens receives an over-the-top performance (as is required for such music of sensuality and display) from Daniel Barenboim and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. (DG)

Tchaikovsky's *Francesca da Rimini* is performed with total commitment by Leopold Stokowski and the Stadium Symphony of New York (a/k/a the New York Philharmonic) on a classic recording from EVEREST.

The Nutcracker ballet by Tchaikovsky is touchingly and sensitively performed by Vladimir Ashkenazy with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in outstanding sound (DECCA).

- i. Service, Tom. "Tristan Und Isolde - Wagner's Love Supreme." *The Guardian*. The Guardian, 20 Dec. 2012. Web. 29 June 2015.
- ii. Ibid
- iii. Ibid
- iv. H Williamson, Andrew M., Prof. "Richard Wagner's "Tristan Und Isolde": A Critical Study-01: Historical Background." *Linkedin*. LinkedIn, n.d. Web. 29 July 2014.
- v. "Is This the Most Powerful Music Ever Written?" *The Guardian*. The Guardian, 13 Oct. 2000. Web. 29 July 2015.
- vi. Ibid
- vii. Rizzuto, Thomas. "The Critical Reception of Richard Wagner's Tristan Und Isolde in the English-Speaking World." *Digital Archives CCNY*. City University of New York, May 2010. Web. 29 July 2015.
- viii. Ibid
- ix. Ibid
- x. Ibid
- xi. Service, Tom. "Tristan Und Isolde - Wagner's Love Supreme." *The Guardian*. The Guardian, 20 Dec. 2012. Web. 29 June 2015.
- xii. Rizzuto, Thomas. "The Critical Reception of Richard Wagner's Tristan Und Isolde in the English-Speaking World." *Digital Archives CCNY*. City University of New York, May 2010. Web. 29 July 2015.
- xiii. "Is This the Most Powerful Music Ever Written?" *The Guardian*. The Guardian, 13 Oct. 2000. Web. 29 July 2015.
- xiv. Ibid
- xv. Ibid
- xvi. Ibid
- xvii. Ibid