

Richard Wagner
TRISTAN UND ISOLDE Whose Love Story?
A Talk for the Wagner Society of New Wales
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Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* is encrusted in myths, and as with all myths there's a grain of truth in each of them. To an extent *Tristan* did change the direction of Western art music, accelerating the collapse of traditional tonality; the opera does have roots in the composer's own biography; and while the first performances in Munich in 1865 didn't exactly kill Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, the first Tristan, this is a work that makes enormous demands on its principal singers, psychologically as well as musically.

(When asked what the essential thing was that you needed to sing Wagner's heroines, one great Wagnerian soprano is supposed to have replied 'a pair of sensible shoes'. You need physical stamina as well as a voice that is in peak condition to sing Isolde and Tristan!)

Anyone who has ever opened their programme before a performance of this music drama is likely to have read *one of* the most quoted passages from any letter that Richard Wagner penned. It was sent in 1854 to the man who in time would become his father-in-law, the composer Franz Liszt, already an enthusiastic Wagnerian who would oversee the first performance of *Lohengrin* in Weimar in 1851

Let me read the whole passage. "...since I have never in my life enjoyed the true happiness of love, I intend to erect a monument to this most beautiful of dreams, a monument in which this love will be properly sated from beginning to end: I have planned in my head a Tristan und Isolde, the simplest but most full-blooded musical conception."

We might question the opening statement as Wagner appears to have been happy with Minna Planer when he married her in November 1836, though there are reports that they quarrelled in front of the minister who married them.

However the key phrase is surely "*I intend to erect a ... monument to this most beautiful of dreams.*" The word monument hints at death so already love and death, eros and thanatos are jostling for the composer's attention

Then there's the use of the verb sated "... *a monument in which this love will be properly sated from beginning to end* with hints of all consuming passion. As for the final phrase, Tristan is indeed "*a full blooded musical conception*, but it is scarcely "*the simplest*."

But then it is an aspect of Richard Wagner's genius that nothing is ever as simple as it seems.

This letter to Liszt does set the composer off on a journey that continues to reverberate through Western culture

What I hope to do in this short talk is to explore the biographical background to the writing of *Tristan und Isolde* and to suggest ways in which we might think about the relationship between Wagner's inner and outer lives as revealed in his dramatic and musical treatment of the legend, or myth if you will, of *Tristan und Isolde*.

When Richard Wagner began compose *the work* in April 1857 he was a failure – in the world's eyes at least. The one-time Court Kapellmeister in Dresden was an exile in Switzerland living off charity and the modest fees he could earn from conducting engagements. But nine years earlier he had appeared to himself, and to many of his contemporaries, the coming man, the voice of a new kind of German opera.

Back in 1848 in Dresden as Wagner put the finishing touches to *Lohengrin* his reputation seemed assured. 'The most tragic of all poems' as he once described his version of the medieval story of Elsa rescued from evildoers by the knight Lohengrin. On their wedding night she demands to know her champion's name and when he tells her she loses him. Knowledge is often a two edged sword in Wagner's work Musically here was the grandest of his operas to date. And Romantic in every sense of that term.

However, all that Dresden ever heard of *Lohengrin* was the finale to Act I given in a concert performance in February 1847 to mark the three hundredth anniversary of the founding of the court orchestra. By the time the opera was finished Kapellmeister Wagner was pre-occupied with extra musical matters. He had thrown his lot in with the intellectuals and students who took to the streets of Dresden in 1849.

Across Europe people protested against the power of the hereditary princes, demanding political reform and an end to autocracy. The unfinished business of the French Revolution

Wagner, the Court Kapellmeister, undoubtedly served on the barricades and acted as a look-out, while also observing street fighting from the tower of the

Kreuzkirche and, as one historian puts it, engaging in animated politico-philosophical discussions with his fellow revolutionaries.

The Dresden revolution failed. It was put down in three bloody days by Prussian and Saxon troops and cost the lives of over 30 soldiers and at least 200 revolutionaries. And while Wagner – economical with the truth as always – claimed that he had had little to do with the uprising the authorities decided otherwise. Refusing to believe that the Kapellmeister had attended political meetings out of intellectual simple curiosity they issued a warrant for his arrest. Wagner fled to Switzerland his career in Germany in tatters.

And now begins the great silence in Richard Wagner's middle age with no new opera of his to be heard for fifteen years. The composer was taking stock, politically and artistically. Indeed, you could say that his art now became his politics and that it was through art that he hoped to change the world. He began by writing; not music but polemical pamphlets, a torrent of them.

In *Art and Revolution* he admired the drama of ancient Greece and demanded a political revolution in Germany that would banish materialism and so create a society capable of producing works of art to match those of classical Greece.

In *The Art-Work* of the future he argued that when the glory of Greece declined into the grandeur of Rome and thereafter, each of the arts that had once been combined in performances of tragedy in ancient Athens had been allowed to go their separate ways. Opera, or Music Drama to use Wagner's preferred description, was destined to be the new total art work that reunited all the arts in one form, music, painting, poetry and dance. The *Gesamtkunstwerk*. And who was going to create this total artistic experience. Stand up Richard Wagner.

Judaism in Music, another polemic from this period is a hateful and vicious attack on the Jews, evidence of the composer's deep dyed anti-Semitism. A sick piece of writing that Wagner did not even have the courage to publish under his own name. A pamphlet that might have been no more than a footnote to the awful history of European anti-Semitism were it not for the horror that engulfed Germany after 1933.

The longest of these essays is perhaps the most important. *Opera and Drama* is a kind of manifesto for the new kind opera that he intends to write now that he has completed *Lohengrin*.

The music of *Lohengrin* is built around a series of motifs or themes, like the one associated with the Swan that at the beginning of the opera brings the knight Lohengrin from the ethereal kingdom of the Holy Grail to Brabant as Elsa's champion. Musical calling cards was how one unkind critic once described

these *leitmotifs*, leading motifs. Of course they are much more than calling cards. They allow the orchestra to comment on the action, to remind the audience of what has happened and to hint at things to come. Music and memory are joined at the hip, or perhaps on the staff!

In *Opera and Drama* Wagner announced that he's going to use these orchestral motifs in a new way. Woven together symphonically they will permeate the entire score. The libretto or the poem as Wagner called it will convey the drama on a conscious level on stage. While in the pit below the orchestra will take us deep down into the unconscious parts of the story. And tales of medieval knights and abandoned maidens are to be banished. Myths and legends are the proper subjects for this new kind of opera, or music drama. Ancient tales handed down through the generations containing deep truths about human existence.

The myth that Wagner had his eye on was the old Nordic myth of the Niebelungen, and in particular the end of the story as it had been retold in German in the thirteenth century. How the hero Siegfried who having acquired the Niebelung treasure is betrayed by a wife who thinks he has dishonoured her and is then slain by her retainer Hagen. And Wagner had had his eye on Siegfried while he was still finishing *Lohengrin*. More than a year before he started publishing his new artistic manifesto in that stream of pamphlets that poured out of him when he went into political exile.

In fact he'd published a scenario *The Niebelungen Myth as Sketch for a Drama*. This will become the fourth and final opera *The Ring of the Nibelung* in the fullness of time in its very fullest sense, for this opera, *Götterdämmerung*, *The Twilight of the Gods* won't receive its first performance until 1876, nearly thirty years after Wagner published his initial ideas for the libretto.

Back in the Spring of 1851, an exile without a paying job in the musical world, Wagner persuaded Franz Liszt to pay for a commission. Liszt offered 1500 marks for the opera that would eventually become *Götterdämmerung*, which at this stage it was called *Siegfried's Death*.

You have to stand amazed at Wagner's reply. With minimal means of support for himself and his wife Minne he suggests that rather than compose *Siegfried's Death* he needs to write a prequel *Young Siegfried*, which would relate his hero's early life. So in June that year he wrote the libretto for *Young Siegfried* and began to plan the music. Then he stopped. He needed to go back further still to make sense of Siegfried, to tell the story of the hero's parents, Siegmund and Sieglinde. So he wrote the libretto for *Die Walküre*.

But why had Siegmund been deserted by his father Wotan? Still one more opera was needed to tell the whole story, that was *Rheingold* and Alberich's theft of the gold from the River Rhine and his forging of the all-powerful Ring.

Wagner was planning over fourteen hours of music drama, without a penny to his name and a political exile from his native Germany. He was about to begin composing a sequence of music dramas for the kind of opera house which didn't yet exist. Ambition and single minded artistic vision, arrogance and supreme egotism all combined to drive this extraordinary project.

Having written the story backwards Wagner intended to compose the four parts of the Ring in their right chronological order. It would take him at least three years he thought once the four libretti were completed by the end of 1852.

Wagner was now living in Zurich where he made a little money conducting three concerts and supervising a production of his earlier opera *The Flying Dutchman*. It wasn't until the following year on a visit to Italy that he began to compose the music for *Das Rheingold*. The full score was completed in September 1853 and at last Wotan and his fellow gods could enter their fortress Valhalla.

The Wagners were living in altogether less exalted circumstances as Wagner told Franz Liszt, *Dearest Franz, I shall perish, and shall be quite incapable of further work, unless I find a habitation such as I require, viz a small house to myself and a garden, both removed from all noise, for four years I have tried in vain to realise this wish, which I can accomplish only by buying a piece of ground and building a house on it. Over this possibility I have brooded like a madman.*"

It was not Liszt but a quite new friend who turned that 'possibility' into bricks and mortar. Otto Wesendonk, a wealthy silk merchant was building his family a grandiose villa outside Zurich at a place called the Green Hill. In its grounds there was a more modest house. Would his esteemed friend Wagner allow him to buy it and rent it to the composer and his wife for a nominal sum?

Best friend, would you like to know how I today received the news? A deep peace invaded me; down to the foundations of my being I was seized by a grateful warmth. O you dear good creatures! What shall I say to you? All hesitation is at an end: I know where I belong now. A Thousand greetings.

For her part Mathilde Wesendonk did the right social thing and wrote to Frau Wagner. "*May this little house become a true refuge of peace and friendship. A sanctified place in the midst of a world of envy and hatred and jealousy; a safe*

retreat from all worries and distress on this earth. ... Goodbye, a thousand greetings to you and Wagner and the assurance of my warmest friendship. Yours Mathilde Wesendonk.

The Wagners had first met Otto Wesendonk, and his pretty younger wife Mathilde in 1852 after a performance of the overture to the composer's opera *Tannhauser*. Otto's reactions to the 'music of the future' are unrecorded, but his wife seems to have been overwhelmed. By the overture certainly; by the composer too.

The two couples began to meet socially. The Wesendonks dined with the Wagners and the Wesendonks were pleased to receive the Wagners. True to form Wagner began to borrow money from Otto and he was about to borrow his wife. Mathilde was just 28, Wagner was 44.

In April 1857 Richard and Minna moved into their new home at the bottom of the Wesendonck's garden and the relationship between the composer and the silk merchant's wife blossomed. As far as Wagner's own marriage was concerned that was already on its last legs. Minna Wagner was four years older than her husband, her health was weakened by a chronic heart condition and she could neither understand nor sympathise with her husband's huge artistic ambitions. How were they going to pay the bills? To have joined the Dresden uprising on a whim and so to have forfeited his position of Royal Kapellmeister seemed utterly irresponsible to her. She yearned for respectability. But here she was an exile in a foreign land and without a roof of her own over her head.

As the composer started writing the music for *Die Walküre*, the second of the operas that make up *The Ring of the Niebelung* his thoughts kept wandering. By the summer of 1856 simple social calls to Mathilde had become close friendship and close friendship ripened into love. Indeed Wagner pencilled love notes into the draft score of *Die Walküre*. 'Blest be Mathilde' and 'I love you Infinitely.'

By 1856 the first two operas of the ring were completed. But there was still *Siegfried* and the massive *Götterdämmerung* to be started. As usual money had run out and until the Ring was completely forged and available for the stage there was little prospect of filling Wagner's empty pockets.

But you also wonder if the composer perhaps reached an artistic impasse. Had Wagner really refined his new musical language sufficiently to explore the deepening conflict between worldly power and human love that was becoming the dominant theme of *The Ring of the Niebelung*. And what about the pair of lovers, Siegfried and Brünnhilde waiting to sing the longest love duet in the

cycle in the last act of *Siegfried*. Would the orchestra be able to express the depth of their feelings for each other?

It's perhaps not insignificant both psychologically and creatively that Wagner puts the score of *Siegfried* aside two thirds of the way through Act II before his hero's plot changing encounter with his grandfather Wotan, with his aunt Brünnhilde still wrapped in sleep on her fiery rock.

In the summer of 1856 with *Siegfried* resting in the shade of a lime tree, Wagner's thoughts turned to the Medieval Romance of *Tristan and Isolde*. The story of a hero who woos an Irish princess for his elderly uncle, and then falls in love with her himself might make a modest opera. Something quickly written that would restore the composer's fortunes and permit him to complete *The Ring* at his leisure. There need only be five principal characters: the two lovers, Tristan and Isolde, their faithful friends Kurwenal and Brangäne, and the cuckolded King Mark. There was no need for big choruses and dramatic effects could be kept to a minimum.

And it would be a love story written by a man in love with another man's wife. How far Mathilde Wesendonk is the 'onlie begetter' of *Tristan and Isolde* and how far she was a necessary emotional precondition of Wagner's writing his masterpiece is impossible to determine. What is certain is that in an almost uncanny way the writing of this opera shadows Wagner's relationship with the Wesendonks. And thanks to letters and diaries we can trace in detail how Wagner composed his 'monument to this most beautiful of dreams.'

The Wesendonks moved into their brand new villa on the Green Hill in August 1857, soon followed by the Wagners. At Mathilde's suggestion Wagner had named his small house on the estate Asyl, or Refuge. Years later when he was dictating his memoirs to his second wife Cosima, the composer remembered that, "*at this point a new phase began in my relations with this family, which was not really important, but nevertheless exercised considerable influence on the outward conduct of my life. We had become so intimate, through being such near neighbours in a country place, that it was impossible to avoid a marked increase in our intimacy if only through meeting one another daily. Curiously enough, this closer association with my neighbours coincided with the time when I began to work out my libretto, Tristan und Isolde.*"

Masterly understatement from The Master. Coincidence? Of course Wagner might have written *Tristan* if he'd never met Mathilde Wesendonk. But if he hadn't met her it might have been a very different opera. As it was, Wagner seems to have identified himself with Tristan and Mathilde with Isolde from the very moment he began to work on the libretto. And if that makes Otto King

Mark then what about the fourth person in this Swiss quartet, Minna Wagner. What is her role in the drama? As that great Wagnerian Ernest Newman observed. “Her business was mainly to attend to the costumes and sweep out the dressing room of the principal comedian, and generally keep the stage clear for him and the leading lady.”

Is Wagner’s love affair with another man’s wife part of what the poet T S Eliot meant when he used the phrase ‘objective correlative’ about a successful drama being rooted in a known world with recognisable motives and emotions?

The prose sketch *Tristan and Isolde* was quickly written in August 1857. Wagner had first become interested in the story back in Dresden in the 1840s when he read a modern verse translation of the classic Middle High German poem by Gottfried von Strassburg written in the thirteenth century. Gottfried’s version of the story was unfinished so his modern translator had borrowed an ending from another medieval source. This bulky source material would have to be heavily compressed for the stage. So, as Wagner explained to Mathilde Wesendonk, he chose just ‘three main situations of dramatic intent’. The voyage from Ireland as Tristan brings Isolde to Cornwall as a bride for his uncle King Marke. A meeting of the lovers under cover of night at Marke’s court which leads to them being betrayed to the King. And Tristan’s voluntary exile to Brittany, his illness, death and final mystical reunion with Isolde. We’ll return to the other sources for the work, more philosophical and intellectual than narrative, in a while.

As soon as he had finished the prose sketch Wagner set to work on the libretto.”*I read it over act by act to my two friends. As Frau Wesendonk appeared to be particularly moved by the last act, I said consolingly that one ought not to grieve over it as, under any circumstances, in a matter so grave things generally turned out this way.*”

This passage from Wagner’s *Memoirs, Mein Leben*, is a later edited version what happened in the autumn of 1857. But the composer also kept a diary for Mathilde.”*I finished the poem of Tristan and brought you the last act. You led me to the chair before the sift, placed your arm around me and said, “I no more have a wish.” On this day, at this hour, was I born anew. A gracious woman, shy and diffident, had taken heart to cast herself into a sea of griefs and sorrows, to shape for me that precious moment when she said: ‘I love you!’ Thus did I receive your life, from then on to forsake the world with you, to suffer with you, die with you. Thanks to you, gracious, loving angel.*”

It's difficult to be certain whether Mathilde Wesdendonk was smitten or simply flattered by the attentions of an older man, an artist too, not a merchant; and almost Byronically mad, bad and dangerous to boot. And was Wagner, instinctively theatrical, acting out his libretto in his daily life, cosplaying to use a contemporary term. In the autumn of 1857 Mathilde, who also fancied herself as an artist, wrote five poems, including *Dreams*

Shall I say what wondrous dreams
Hold my mind in thrall?
Dreams, that in every hour,
Every day, grow fairer.
Dreams that, like the sun of spring,
Draw flowers from the snow with a kiss.
They are born to unsuspected joy
And greet the new day,
And they grow and they bloom,
And dreaming give forth their scent.
Gently they cool upon your breast
And then sink into the grave.

For the first and only time as a mature musician Wagner set another person's words to music. Did he think the texts were deserving of his musical attention? Did he see them as part of the love affair that was driving his new music drama? Is this Tristan to Isolde?

In later years Wagner will describe two of the songs as 'sketches' for Tristan, So "*Träume*, will find its way into the Act II duet for the lovers while *Im Treibhaus* is present in Prelude to Act III. *Der Engel*, on the other hand, looks back to a moment in *Das Rheingold*, a work that in part is about forswearing love in return for power.

As for Mathilde, she would write in her memoirs that Wagner took each of her poems upon their completion and gave to them a "supreme transfiguration and consecration" with his music.

Meanwhile the composer arranged a modest little surprise for Mathilde's 29th birthday. He hired an orchestra of local musicians and conducted them in *Träume* outside his muse's window. While Otto Wesendonck was away from home Wagner had the run of his villa. And on the morning of his wife's birthday Otto was in New York on business. It transpired that Wagner had paid for the chamber ensemble with Otto's money and when his patron returned he was understandably upset. Wagner arranged for another concert performance in the villa to placate his patron with movements from

Beethoven's symphonies this time – but things were curdling between the two men

One can only speculate on Otto's thoughts when in September of 1857 the conductor Hans von Bülow came to visit with his new wife Cosima (who was Franz Liszt's illegitimate daughter). Wagner read his *Tristan* libretto, to an audience that included his wife Minna, his current romantic interest Mathilde, and Cosima, with whom he would later have two children while she was still married to von Bülow. An example of art and life not so much separate as sharing a bed!

Wagner was now composing the music for Act I of the opera in the morning. During the afternoon he and his muse would meet and talk or read together. On days when meetings were impossible there would be more poems and notes from the composer "*Here is another winter flower for the Christmas Tree*", he writes "*full of sweet honey, without the smallest bane.*

*Thrice happy,
Out of reach of pain,
Free and purely ever thine,
Tristan and Isolde,
What they bewailed.
What they forwent, their tears and kisses
In music's chaste gold I lay at thy feet.
May they praise the angel who has lift me so high"*

The music may have been chaste, but only those who turned a blind eye remained unaware of what was happening between the composer and his muse. In his unreliable memoirs Wagner implies that Otto Wesendonk was becoming something of a gooseberry "*With the beginning of the New Year, 1858, neither my home nor the company of my friends afforded me any relaxation. It was really intolerable to me to devote all my evenings to conversation and entertainments in which my kind friend Otto Wesendonk felt obliged to take as much part as myself and the rest of us. His apprehension that everything in his house would very soon follow my lead instead of his, gave him that peculiar aggressiveness with which a man who believes himself neglected interpolates himself like and extinguisher into every conversation carried on in his presence*"

It looks as if Otto was getting in the way. King Marke was becoming restless, as Tristan and Isolde were scarcely bothering to wait until nightfall to meet. The relationship between composer and his muse was being conducted in the full glare of daylight.

Early in January Wagner sent a call for help to Franz Liszt. He was, he said, at the end of a conflict in which everything that can be holy to man was involved. He had to decide and every choice before him was terrible. But Liszt stayed at home and Wagner fled to Paris. Two months later he was back in Switzerland in his 'refuge'. There was a lull before the inevitable storm broke. The lovers were discovered – just like Tristan and Isolde.

This is Wagner's account of the debacle *"My wife Minna had for some time been anxious as to relations with our neighbour. She complained with increasing bitterness that she was not treated by her with the attention due to the wife of a man who Frau Wesendonk was so pleased to welcome in her house. And that when we did meet, it was rather by reason of that lady's visits to me than to her."*

For her part Minna had no illusions about what was really happening up at the house on the Green Hill *"I let it all go on calmly. Men often have an affair, why should I not tolerate it in the case of my husband? I did not know jealousy. Only the meanesses, these humiliations might have been spared me, had not my ludicrously vain husband tried to conceal it from me."*

Wagner again: *On the 3rd of April I sent the manuscript of the score of the first act of Tristan und Isolde to Leipzig to be engraved. I had already promised to give Frau Wesendonk the pencil sketch for the instrumentation of the Prelude and I sent this to her accompanied with a note in which I explained to her seriously and calmly the feelings that animated me at the time. As Minna happened to be in the garden that morning. she met the servant carrying the packet for Frau Wesendonk.*

"I asked him for the packet. I undid it, and took out the thick letter that was enclosed in it. I opened it, and read this love letter, from which I will give you a passage. After a wild night of love that he had had, he writes to her. 'Thus it went on the whole night through. In the morning I was rational again, and from the depth of my heart could pray to my angel, and this prayer is love! Love! Deepest soul's joy on this love. The source of my redemption.'"

There was more – and despite the heightened language adopted by the lover, it was equally damning. *"I look into your eyes, then I simply cannot speak any more. How blind the one who would not recognise your glance and find his soul here. Only inside, within, only deep down does salvation dwell. Be good to me and forgive my childishness of yesterday; you were right in calling it so! Today I shall come to the garden as soon as I see you. I hope I may be with you undisturbed for a moment. Take my whole soul as a morning greeting!"*

Minna was understandably outraged. *“What do you say to that? At midday I told my husband that I had opened and read his fine letter. He was rather alarmed, but I said that I would not suffer this deception to poor Herr Wesendonk. I would go away, but he must call this woman his own for ever. Richard wanted to justify himself with his wonderful gift of the gab, but I would not have it. He tried to force me to be silent, and to persuade me of the purity of his relations. How ridiculous!”*

Wagner rationalises. *“This letter, if she had been at all able to understand it, would have really been able to give her all the pacification she could have desired, for the theme of it was our resignation. However, she fastened simply onto the intimate expressions in it and lost her head. She came to me in a fury and I was compelled to explain to her calmly and explicitly how things stood, that she had brought misfortune on herself by opening such a letter, and that if she did not know how to contain herself we must part.”*

Wagner’s justifications may strike us as implausible and indeed cruel to the wife who had stood by him for nearly a quarter of a century. But turn the situation through 180 degrees. What if Wagner instinctively understood that his adulterous love affair with Mathilde was necessary to the creation of *Tristan und Isolde*? A sublime egotist who felt he was entitled to take what he wanted and what he needed in the service of his work which was supremely important to him and he believed to the world, Is it possible to understand the composer while condemning the man?

“Next day, however, I was sorry for her,” He would write later. *“I said ‘Minna, you are very ill.’ And we arranged the plan for a cure for her and she seemed to become composed again. Then she absolutely insisted on speaking to Frau Wesendonk. I firmly forbade her to do so. However, she could not keep quiet. She went over to the Green Hill behind my back, and, no doubt without realising it herself, wounded the gentle lady most grossly. Minna told her ‘If I were an ordinary woman I should go to your husband with this letter’, and after that there was nothing for Frau Wesendonk, who was conscious of never having had a secret from her husband (which a woman like Minna cannot understand), but to inform him of the scene and its cause.”*

If we’re to believe Minna Wagner Mathilde too knew how to shape the facts to suit her preferred case. *“She told her husband that I had insulted her frightfully, but without telling him the real truth as to their relations. She cried out to Richard how deeply and horribly I had offended her in spite of the fact that I had been delicate enough not to show her the fateful letter, which I had in my pocket. But this is the way with common little natures. They can do nothing but tittle-tattle and stir up mischief.”*

No prizes for guessing who has the last word about this emotional debacle. *“I told Minna that she had better go as soon as possible to the health resort she had been recommended at Brestenberg on the Hallwyler Lake A few days later I took her and her parrot to this pleasantly situated and well-appointed watering place. I could say very little to comfort her except that I would try, in the interests of our future life together to mitigate the dreaded consequence of her having broken her word.”*

Otto Wesendonck's feelings about these comings and goings, the interviews and the mutual recrimination at the Green Hill are unrecorded. Was he really as uncomprehending as King Marke when he finds the lovers in flagrante in Act II of Wagner's opera. He certainly appears to have been as dignified.

Wagner still hoped that it might be possible to stay on at Asyl and begin work on the second act of *Tristan und Isolde*. He was still writing to Mathilde but his tune had somewhat changed. Now he was preaching resignation in the face of the world's hollow pleasures. Ideas that he'd found in the writings of the philosopher Schopenhauer were being worked into the opera and it seems into his life too. Further evidence if it were needed that when he was writing *Tristan* Wagner needed life to imitate art. *“My Child, these last months have perceptibly blanched the hair on my temples. There is a voice in me that cries with yearning after rest – that rest which long, long years ago I made my Flying Dutchman yearn for. It was the yearnings after ‘home’, not after the seductive joys of love and only a grandly faithful woman could gain for him that homeland. Let us vow ourselves to this fair death, which stills and buries all our hankerings and cravings. Let us fade away, with peacefully transfigured gaze, and the holy smile of beautiful self victory! No one shall lose. We are all the victors.”*

Minna Wagner returned from her cure on 15th July 1858. And there was yet another scene. A servant had erected a floral arch to welcome his mistress home. It was clearly visible from the Wesendonck's Villa across the garden. And Minna made sure that her triumphal arch stayed up for several days. Mathilde was furious. At last Wagner realised that it was impossible to continue living near the Wesendoncks any longer. Within the month it was decided that he and Minna would go their separate ways. She to friends in Germany and he to Venice - and without his muse. *“Farewell! Farewell dear love! I'm leaving tranquilly. Where'er I am, I shall be wholly yours now. Try to keep the Asyl for me, my refuge. Auf widersehen! Auf widersehen. Dear soul of my life, farewell!”*

Tristan goes into exile to Kareol after being wounded by Melot, so Wagner packs his bags and prepares to leave Zurich. *“The last night in the Asyl I went to bed at 11 o'clock. For long I tossed in bed, till at last I rose. Completely dressed myself, shut the last trunk and, now pacing up and down, now stretched full length on the divan, uneasily waited for daylight. I went downstairs and there was my wife*

waiting for me. She offered me tea. It was an awful lamentable hour. We paced down the garden and at the last farewell my wife broke out in tears and lamentations but weep I could not. So I set forth.”

Wagner left Zurich on August 8th 1858. Minna stayed on for a few days longer to close up the house.. Their Refuge for life that had lasted for just fifteen months. Minna wrote a final note to Mathilde. *“Honoured Lady, 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 peace of mind, to your happiness. Now Wagner will go back to his work from which, to my great sorrow, he has long been shamefully kept. This is the sole wish of an unhappy woman. M Wagner.”*

Poor unhappy Minna! She had entirely missed the point. It was the very relationship with Mathilde Wesendonk that had probably kept the composer at his work, that had generated the psychological situation that allowed him to create *Tristan und Isolde*.

Minna went to Dresden and Wagner to Venice. As he began work on Act II of the opera he still needed Mathilde. And he kept a diary for her. They also had news of each other through a mutual friend Frau Wille. *“September 7th 1858 – Today I had a note from Frau Wille: your mind is made up she says, calmly and resolutely to go through with the renunciation. I have written to you, and sincerely hope not to be rejected with that letter.”*

September 10th – Yesterday I was downright ill with fever. In the evening I received another letter from Frau Wille. Enclosed was my note to you – sent back unopened. No, that shouldn’t have happened! Not that!

September 13th – Your letter came today – that you love me I know full well. All will turn out well. Our love stands high above all obstacles, and every hindrance makes us richer, more spiritual, nobler.

Dearest, dearest child, we shall meet again as in a dream at first, like two departed spirits that meet on the scene of their sufferings. If perhaps a green old age is granted me, perhaps it’s yet reserved for me to return for good to be near you, some day when every pang of jealousy is overcome. Then Asyl, our refuge, might become a truth at last. I shall now return to Tristan, to let the deep art of sounding silence there speak for me to you.

In the seven months that he was in Venice Wagner completed Act II of *Tristan*. Then it was time to come home. He arrived in Switzerland on the 29th March 1859. At last he was to see Mathilde again, though this time he was careful to

share his plans with his wife, who he still hoped might keep house for him as he composed the final act of *Tristan und Isolde*. *'Dearest Minna, Listen! Wesendonk invited me a few days back. I was to put up at his house. He would send his carriage to the station and gave me to understand that he wished to put an end to all exaggerations and perversions through so open a nact of friendly intercourse. So I accepted, went to Zurich last Saturday, slept the night in his house and travelled back to Lucerne on Sunday afternoon. This was a very salutary demonstration. All the world will naturally infer my footing with the family, which has, of course, made a great impression on the servants.'*

That weekend the realist seems to have triumphed over the romantic. Or to put it another way Otto and Mathilde Wesendonck achieved a balance between their friendship with the Wangers and their evident admiration for the artist. As well as resuming social relations Otto also seemed willing to offer financial help. And while Wagner and Mathilde continued to write to each other all passion was spent. 'Du' the familiar form of address became the formal 'Sie'. And their letters were about work not love.

But by now Wagner was working on Act 3 Tristan's exile. Psychologically his focus had shifted from the lovers to his hero's relentless self-examination in the two great monologues that are at the heart of the Act.

Again, a biographer might ask whether the self-imposed and solitary exile in Venice was a necessary requisite for writing this music. Did the proto-Freudian analysis that Tristan subjects himself to need the composer to put himself in a place removed from the other characters in his drama so that he might begin to make sense of it?

"This Tristan is becoming something terrible", he writes. This last Act!! I fear the opera will be forbidden unless the whole thing is turned into a parody by a bad production. . Nothing but indifferent performances can save me. Completely good ones are bound to send people crazy. Heighho! Adieu. Richard Wagner.

Tristan und Isolde was finished in Lucerne on August 8th 1859. It had taken Wagner two years to wrote and it would be another six before it received its first performance in Munich in June 1865. By then Wagner had long been separated from Minna. Her judgement on *Tristan* was predictable , the lovers were "a much too enamoured and odious couple."

A brief reconciliation in 1862 lasted just seven days. She intercepted a harmless letter and late Christmas presents from Mathilde Wesendonk and left Wagner

never to see him again. She died alone in Dresden four years later. To his credit Wagner continued to support her until her fatal heart attack.

Wagner and Mathilde remained friends until the composer's death in 1886. Long before then she knew that she had been dethroned as Wagner's muse. Tristan was done. She had served his art. Later she would try to persuade Brahms to set to music a dramatic cantata she had written on the subject of cremation.

I have suggested that Wagner in some way tried to arrange his own life so that it fed into the creative process that created *Tristan und Isolde*. And in doing so I have perhaps sidestepped the question of how we should understand this radical work.

The first performance of *Tristan und Isolde* finally took place on 10th June 1865 in Munich, paid for by Wagner's adoring new patron the young King Ludwig of Bavaria. For the most part the audience were respectful if a little confused, but those of Wagner's friends who had made the journey proclaimed the new work a masterpiece. As for Ludwig he was ecstatic quoting the words of Isolde's *Liebtestod* when he wrote to the composer. (It's clear that the king had cast himself as Isolde to Wagner's Tristan!) "Only one! Hallowed One! What rapture! – Perfect. Overwhelmed by delight! ... To drown ... to sink – unconscious – highest bliss – Divine Work! Eternally true, till death and beyond!"

Love and Death, but you can never be entirely sure what *Tristan und Isolde* really means

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century lovers it seems enjoyed it as a justification for the often-illicit nature of their passion. Tristan and Isolde were social rebels. In his autumn days, Wagner the patriarch drew a veil over such youthful radicalism. Married to Cosima, the daughter of his old friend Franz Liszt, and surrounded by acolytes and admirers he craved respectability. So *Tristan* is described as a kind of pilgrimage, how to reach out beyond the world, the flesh and the devilish itch of sexual desire to the pure realm of the spirit.

Then in the twentieth century Freud was enlisted to explain Tristan's agonised self-examination in the third and final act of the opera; while Marxists pronounced on the alienation of the lovers from the social world of King Marke's court in Cornwall. Of course, Isolde is an Irish Princess brought to England, so that perhaps hints at a colonial theme. And what about the politics

of gender, with Isolde being shipped off into a loveless marriage with an older man? A purely political match designed to mend the broken fences between Cornwall and Ireland.

Tristan und Isolde is all of these things. And it's also an extended meditation on how erotic passion challenges the social order. How selfish romantic love is, with lovers blind to any needs other than their own. The very social equilibrium that was upset on the Green Hill outside Zurich in the late 1850s. *Tristan und Isolde* can also be one of the most disturbing of all musical experiences as Wagner's score reaches parts of an audience that other operas rarely touch. And for that I would suggest, we have to thank the Wesendoncks and Minna as well as Richard Wagner