

PROGRAM

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-SECOND SEASON

Chicago Symphony Orchestra

Riccardo Muti Music Director

Pierre Boulez Helen Regenstein Conductor Emeritus

Yo-Yo Ma Judson and Joyce Green Creative Consultant

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Thursday, February 21, 2013, at 8:00

Saturday, February 23, 2013, at 8:00

Tristan and Isolde

Music and Words by Richard Wagner

Prelude to Act 1

Act 2

Esa-Pekka Salonen Conductor

Isolde..... **Linda Watson** Soprano
Brangäne..... **Michelle DeYoung** Mezzo-soprano
Tristan **Stefan Vinke** Tenor
Melot **Sean Panikkar** Tenor
King Mark..... **John Relyea** Bass-baritone
Kurwenal..... **Daniel Eifert** Bass

There will be no intermission.

Performed in honor of the bicentennial of Richard Wagner's birth.

Supertitles by Sonya Friedman

These concerts are endowed in part by the Kirkland & Ellis LLP Concert Fund.

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Richard Wagner

Born May 22, 1813, Leipzig, Germany.

Died February 13, 1883, Venice, Italy.

Music from *Tristan and Isolde* Prelude to Act 1 Act 2

T*ristan and Isolde* towers over the history of music—more than 150 years after it was written, it's still a work of unsettling power and influence. With this one composition, Wagner revealed the scope of his vision and guaranteed that music would never be the same. Reaching back to the Middle

Ages for its subject, *Tristan* cast its long shadow far into the future—stretching across the twentieth century's first modernist masters, from Debussy to Berg, all the way to Radiohead, the radical rock band that quoted the opera's plush harmonies in its blockbuster *Kid A*. At once mythical and modern,

COMPOSED

1857–1859

FIRST PERFORMANCE

Prelude: March 12, 1859, Prague

Opera: June 10, 1865; Munich, Germany

FIRST CSO SUBSCRIPTION CONCERT PERFORMANCES

Prelude: December 18, 1891, Auditorium Theatre. Theodore Thomas conducting

Opera: November 21, 1935, Orchestra Hall. With Lauritz Melchior (Tristan), Dorothee Manski (Isolde), Kathryn Meisle (Brangäne), Fred Patton (Kurwenal), Chase Baromeo (King Mark), Howard Preston (Melot). Frederick Stock conducting

MOST RECENT CSO SUBSCRIPTION CONCERT PERFORMANCES

Prelude: April 29, 2008, Orchestra Hall. Kent Nagano conducting

Opera: October 16, 2001, Orchestra Hall. With Christian Franz (Tristan), Waltraud Meier (Isolde), Nadja Michael (Brangäne), Andreas Schmidt (Kurwenal), John Tomlinson (King Mark), Brian Davis (Melot). Daniel Barenboim conducting

INSTRUMENTATION

three flutes and piccolo, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, harp, strings, six offstage horns

APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME

Prelude: 12 minutes

Act 2: 72 minutes

CSO RECORDINGS OF PRELUDE

1947. Artur Rodzinski conducting. RCA

1976. Sir Georg Solti conducting. London (video)

1977. Sir Georg Solti conducting. London

1994. Daniel Barenboim conducting. Teldec

A 1958 performance conducted by Fritz Reiner is included in *From the Archives*, vol. 3. A 1966 performance conducted by Rafael Kubelík is included in *From the Archives*, vol. 16.

symphonic and operatic, immense and intimate, *Tristan and Isolde* is the kind of masterpiece that wipes out all the familiar distinctions as it maps out its own new territory.

It began, innocently, in December 1854, when Wagner wrote to Franz Liszt, “Since I have never in my life enjoyed the true happiness of love, I intend to raise a monument to this most beautiful of dreams.” More than a decade would pass before Wagner presented *Tristan and Isolde*, and, in the meantime, he used those nearest him to work out his artistic fantasies, straining his relationship with Liszt to the breaking point. Wagner became so intimately involved with the creation of *Tristan and Isolde*—and with the idea of love as a natural force so uncontrollable that it could upset social conventions and ruin lives—that it’s difficult for us today, as it was for Wagner, to distinguish between art and everyday life in this music.

The first musical sketch for *Tristan and Isolde* is dated December 19, 1856. Wagner was then at work on *Siegfried*, the third installment in his enormous *Ring* cycle, and he was at something of a crossroads in his life. His marriage meant nothing to him; his work, too, seemed to have reached a dead end. In April 1857, Wagner and his long-suffering wife Minna rented a small house in the Zurich suburb of Enge from Otto and Mathilde Wesendonck, who lived in the new villa next door. Wagner had already tested the Wesendoncks’

generosity—Otto’s money paid for three concerts of Wagner’s music in 1853—and he would soon test their marriage as well, for Wagner now had his eye on Mathilde. That August, after nearly a decade of work, Wagner put aside the *Ring* at the end of *Siegfried*, act 2, to devote himself to a tale of unquenchable passion and longing. On August 20 he began a prose draft of his new music drama, *Tristan and Isolde*.

On September 5, 1857, two newlyweds entered this picture of domestic unrest: the distinguished conductor Hans von Bülow and his young bride, Cosima Liszt, daughter of the great composer. Wagner had met Cosima before, and remembered her only as a shy fifteen-year-old, tagging alongside her famous father. She



Minna Wagner, Richard's first wife, with her lapdog, 1853



Mathilde Wesendonck by Karl Ferdinand Sohn, 1850

made a scarcely better impression this time, yet she would eventually become the most important person in Wagner's life. Certainly Hans von Bülow never suspected that music students would one day find his wife in all the standard music texts under Wagner (née Liszt).

The cast was now assembled for Wagner's private drama, and the participants all had roles in the creation of *Tristan and Isolde*. For three weeks the scene was remarkably cozy; this astonishing world of art and intellectualism created in a soap-opera setting still strains credibility. Each morning dur-

Wagner read aloud the finished poem of *Tristan*. There, gathered at his feet, were Minna, his wife; Mathilde, his muse and perhaps his lover; Cosima, who would one day become his second wife; and the two husbands—Hans von Bülow, who was destined to conduct the premiere of *Tristan and Isolde*; and Otto Wesendonk, whose money never did run out.

The Bülows—a “most happily matched” young couple, in Wagner's words—left the Wagners to the Wesendonks on September 28. Within days, Wagner began writing the music

for *Tristan*, Mathilde becoming Isolde to Wagner's *Tristan* as they themselves conducted—but evidently never consummated—a love affair of extraordinary passion.



A musical evening at Bayreuth: Liszt is at the piano; Wagner follows the score

ing the Bülows' visit, silence was demanded so that Wagner could finish the text for *Tristan and Isolde*. Later in the day there was music making—Hans, a fine pianist, played through the first two acts of *Siegfried*, with Wagner taking all the vocal parts—and seemingly innocent entertainment. One night

Mathilde made frequent visits to Wagner's workroom to hear the latest sketches for “their” new opera, or to show Wagner the modest poems she was writing. Wagner set five of them to music that winter, giving lasting stature to mediocre poetry. Two of the songs were subtitled studies for *Tristan*

and *Isolde*, and in one, “Traume” (Dreams), Wagner discovered the famous, slowly shifting colors he needed for the great act 2 love duet. On April 7, 1858, Minna Wagner intercepted a letter headed “Morning confession” from her husband to Mathilde; it was rolled inside a sketch for the *Tristan* prelude. Minna was so inflamed that she didn’t care—or notice—that the confession dealt with an interpretation of Goethe’s *Faust*, which Wagner had denounced the night before. Minna confronted her husband first, then Mathilde. Wagner insisted on the purity of the relationship; Mathilde said Otto had long known about it and accepted it for what it was. The proof, as such, was there in Minna’s hands, for the music of *Tristan and Isolde* is an ironclad testament of unfulfilled love.

Despite the claims of innocence, Wagner broke off relations with the Wesendonks—although Otto’s fortune remained in favor for years. In August, the Wagners gave up the house on the Wesendonks’ grounds—the house he had always called his “Asyl,” or “refuge,” for it clearly was that no longer. Wagner moved on to Venice, and there, in the large, silent rooms of the Palazzo Giustinian on the Grand Canal, he wrote act 2 of *Tristan and Isolde*. Often he found that he couldn’t bear to compose for more than a few hours each day.

Wagner finished the full score of act 2 of *Tristan and Isolde* on March 18, 1859. He continued writing to Mathilde, and when she returned his letters unopened,

he began writing in a journal which she saw only years later. He visited the Wesendonks in September 1859, just after finishing the full score of *Tristan and Isolde*, and concluded another financial arrangement with Otto, this time for the *Ring*, but his affair with Mathilde was over. By now Wagner had separated from Minna, and in November 1862 he saw her for the last time. She died four years later.

Now Wagner’s personal drama moved into high gear. To her husband’s surprise and her father’s disgust, Cosima Liszt von Bülow entered the scene. In *Mein Leben* (My life), Wagner’s preferred version of his life, he says that he



Richard and Cosima Wagner, 1872

and Cosima swore eternal fidelity in November 1863. It's more likely that their relationship began in June or July of 1864, when Cosima visited Wagner at Lake Starnberg. Hans von Bülow arrived there on July 7, just in time to realize that his devotion to Wagner now required forfeiting his own wife to the cause. Plans for the premiere of *Tristan and Isolde*, which Bülow was to conduct, went forward, undeterred even by the news that Cosima was pregnant. On the morning of April 10, 1865, Cosima gave birth to Wagner's child while her husband conducted the first orchestral rehearsal of *Tristan*. In a gesture of almost unfathomable taste, the girl was named Isolde; she was registered as the daughter of Hans and Cosima von Bülow, and Wagner participated in the public deception by officially serving as godfather at his own daughter's christening. Even in later years, Cosima referred to Isolde as Bülow's daughter, although by then it was apparent that the child was the first of Wagner's offspring to carry his great, beaked silhouette into the future.

The premiere of *Tristan and Isolde* was scheduled for May 15; that afternoon, Malvina Schnorr, the Isolde, lost her voice, so it was postponed until June 10. There were four performances, the last on July 1. Within three weeks, Ludwig Schnorr, who sang Tristan to his wife's Isolde, died of indeterminate causes, fanning speculation that the demands of his last and most famous role had done him in. In July, Wagner began to dictate

Mein Leben, ensuring that a life larger than fiction would itself be polished into a work of art for eternal contemplation.

Although it opened the door to the future of music, *Tristan and Isolde* is a work grounded in tradition. Wagner's literary source is the ancient legend of Tristan, first written down in the twelfth century, but originating centuries earlier in Celtic lore. Wagner preferred the early-thirteenth-century version by the German poet Gottfried von Strassburg, although he further telescoped the action and combined characters. Still, unlike all Wagner's other mature works, *Tristan* began as music, not poetry. In November 1856, Wagner could write of its "music without words for the present," the reverse of his usual working method. And the finished product, more than any other in his output, is dominated by its music, despite the subtlety of the musical and dramatic synthesis.

Tristan and Isolde is much more than a love story—and it's not simply Wagner's own love story, despite the biographical evidence. Wagner thought it "quite ridiculous" when the German emperor commented on "how deeply Wagner must have been in love at that time." It has long been argued that Mathilde Wesendonk didn't inspire this music, but, rather, it was Wagner's fixation with the subject and its ultimate need to be experienced that fired his infatuation for her. Wagner later wrote, "In *Tristan* I had to portray the all-consuming anguish

of love's longing, inconceivably intensified to a pitch of the most painful desire for death." It's no coincidence that, as the opera was taking shape, Wagner regularly read Schopenhauer's words on suffering and the struggle to attain nirvana, the cessation of individual existence. Not for the last time, Wagner's music rose above his muddled (and sometimes suspect) ideals and transfigured the mundane mess of his own existence.

Wagner's musical achievement was so radical that even he was stunned by what he had written. "I had the prelude to *Tristan* played to me for the first time," he wrote to Mathilde in January 1860, only months after he had finished the opera,

and it was as though the scales had fallen from my eyes, allowing me to see how immeasurably far I have traveled from the world during the last eight years. This short prelude was so incomprehensibly *new* to the musicians that I had to guide my people through the piece note by note, as if to discover precious stones in a mine.

And the following August he wrote to Mathilde again:

Tristan is and remains a miracle to me! I find it more and more difficult to understand how I could have done such a thing: when I read through it again, my eyes and ears fell open with amazement! . . . I have far overstepped the limits of what

we are capable of achieving in this field.

The rhetoric is classic Wagner, but one can't take issue with his verdict. Wagner wasn't alone in seeing the brilliance and daring of the work. Nietzsche spoke of the music's "dangerous fascination." Brahms, though regularly cast as Wagner's archenemy, studied the score with enormous admiration. And Giuseppe Verdi, whose own popular operas grew from a radically different tradition, said that he stood "in wonder and terror" before *Tristan*.

The music has always been controversial. When the prelude to act 1 was played in concert in Paris, five years before the opera was staged, it left many listeners bewildered, including Hector Berlioz, whose understanding of modern music was unsurpassed. But the poet Charles Baudelaire, who attended the same performance, was so excited that he wrote to Wagner "of being engulfed, overcome—a really voluptuous sensual pleasure, like rising into the air or being rocked on the sea."

The musical advances of this score can't be overstated. It's surely no coincidence that Wagner first used the famous term "infinite melody" while at work on *Tristan and Isolde*, for many passages, including the great span of the act 2 love duet, define that term to perfection. Wagner's use of harmony looks far into the future—the music is saturated with chromaticism, the use of dissonant and unresolved chords is bold and unprecedented,

and harmonic tensions are stretched to unimagined lengths. In Wagner's hands, unresolved dissonance becomes a powerful metaphor for unrequited love. The famous "Tristan chord," the first harmony in the score, contains just four tones (F, B, D-sharp, and G-sharp), yet their unsettling combination casts a cloud of instability and anxiety over the music that pervades the entire drama. Eventually, *Tristan* was understood as the seminal work in freeing harmony from the traditional tonal system. It has been described—without exaggeration—as the first piece of modern music; in fact, music written at the beginning of the twentieth century is inconceivable without its example, whether as a model, a point of departure, or as an invitation to open rebellion.

Each act of *Tristan and Isolde* revolves around one central dramatic incident—the drinking of the love potion in act 1, the king's interruption of the lovers

in the second act, and the arrival of Isolde in act 3. The high point occurs in act 2, and this climax, with which the whole arch begins to crumble, is the most wrenching moment in the opera. The passage that builds to that point, from the low hush at the beginning of the lovers' duet, through the stillness of Brangäne's distant warnings, to the full ecstatic cries of love, is one of the most magnificent canvases in all music. The entire score of *Tristan* is characterized by music of ceaseless motion and transition—a completely new understanding of musical continuity over long stretches of time. If Wagner had deliberately set out to change the course of music, he couldn't have succeeded more brilliantly. ■

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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Synopsis of *Tristan and Isolde*

ACT 1

At sea, on the deck of Tristan's ship, during the crossing from Ireland to Cornwall

A young sailor sings about the Irish lover he has left behind. Isolde, who is being brought from Ireland to Cornwall by Tristan as a bride for his uncle, King Mark, jumps up, assuming that the reference to an Irish maid is an insult to her. When her maid and confidante Brangäne tells her that they are soon to land in Cornwall, Isolde launches into a furious outburst against her own “degenerate race,” which has succumbed so easily to the enemy. Brangäne attempts in vain to calm her.

Isolde now tells Brangäne to instruct Tristan to attend her. Brangäne's timid request to Tristan is courteously turned aside, but when she repeats Isolde's command, Tristan's retainer, Kurwenal, makes his own bluntly negative reply. He goes on to revel in the slaying by Tristan of Morold, Isolde's betrothed, who came from Ireland to exact tribute from Cornwall.

Brangäne returns in confusion to Isolde, who is barely able to control her anger. Isolde tells how the wounded Tristan, disguised as Tantris, came to her to be healed and how she recognized him as Morold's killer. Isolde's determination to slay Tristan in revenge dissolved as he looked pitifully into her eyes, but now she bitterly regrets that she let the sword drop. Brangäne reminds Isolde of her

mother's magic potions; Isolde, however, has only vengeance in mind, and she selects the draught of death. Kurwenal calls the ladies to make ready, but Isolde insists on speaking to Tristan before they land, in order to “forgive” him. Tristan approaches. Isolde tells him that she saw through his disguise as Tantris and demands vengeance. Tristan offers her his sword, but Isolde signals to Brangäne for the potion. Isolde hands Tristan the cup. Tristan lifts the cup and drinks. Fearing further betrayal, Isolde wrests the cup from him and drinks in her turn, but Brangäne, in desperation, has substituted the love mixture for the death potion. Tristan and Isolde embrace ecstatically, while Brangäne looks on in horror.

ACT 2

In King Mark's royal castle in Cornwall

A volley of horn calls gradually receding into the distance signifies the departing hunt of King Mark and his courtiers. The cautious Brangäne warns her mistress that the horns are still audible, but all Isolde can hear are the sounds of the balmy summer night. Brangäne further warns Isolde that in her impatience to see Tristan, she should not be oblivious to the devious Melot, Tristan's supposed friend, who, she alleges, has arranged the nocturnal hunt as a trap. Isolde brushes these fears aside and requests Brangäne

to extinguish the torch, which is the signal for Tristan to approach. Brangäne demurs, bewailing her fateful switching of the potions. Isolde throws the torch to the ground and, sending Brangäne to keep watch, she waits impatiently for Tristan. He finally enters and they greet each other ecstatically.

Tristan draws Isolde to a flowery bank for their love duet, which is punctuated by Brangäne's watch song from the tower. At the critical juncture, a scream is heard from Brangäne in the watchtower, as King Mark, Melot, and the courtiers burst in on the scene. King Mark, much moved, addresses Tristan and, receiving no direct answer, embarks on a monologue of questioning reproach. To King Mark's questions there can be no reply, Tristan responds. He feels that he no longer belongs to this world and invites Isolde to follow him into the realm of night; she assents and he kisses her on the forehead. At this, Melot, whose actions, according to Tristan, have been motivated by his jealous love for Isolde, draws his sword. Tristan also draws, but allows himself to be wounded.

ACT 3

Tristan's castle in Brittany

Tristan lies asleep under a lime tree, with Kurwenal bending over him grief-stricken. A shepherd appears; Kurwenal tells him to play a merry melody if Isolde's ship should come into sight. To the joy of Kurwenal, Tristan revives and asks where he

is. Kurwenal replies that he is in his family castle, Kareol. Tristan returns slowly and painfully to consciousness. He is dimly aware that he has been brought back from the distant realm of endless night, where he had glimpsed oblivion. Isolde remains in the bright light of day, but he looks forward to the final extinction of the torch and their union.

Kurwenal tells him that he has sent for Isolde, and Tristan, in his fevered imagination, sees the ship approaching. Tristan sinks back in a faint. Tristan revives and in the final, sublime phase of his delirium, he imagines Isolde coming to him across the water. The shepherd's spirited tune confirms that the ship has indeed been sighted. Kurwenal rushes to the watchtower and reports on its progress. He sees Isolde come ashore and goes to assist her. Tristan, meanwhile, anticipates her arrival in feverish excitement, tearing the bandages from his wounds.

Isolde enters in haste, but Tristan expires in her arms. The shepherd tells Kurwenal that a second ship is arriving; they try to barricade the gate. Brangäne appears and then Melot, whom Kurwenal strikes dead. King Mark and his followers also appear and, oblivious to the king's pleas, Kurwenal sets upon them, sustaining a fatal wound; he dies at Tristan's feet. King Mark, who had come to yield Isolde to Tristan, laments the scene of death and destruction. In her Liebestod, Isolde sinks, as if transfigured, on to Tristan's body, mystically united with him at last.