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# WAGNER

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TRISTAN UND ISOLDE

Vorspiel und Isoldes Liebestod

Prelude and Liebestod

WWV 90



Eulenburg

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RICHARD WAGNER

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Edited by/Herausgegeben von  
Egon Voss



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# CONTENTS

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Preface .....	III
Vorwort .....	V
I. Einleitung .....	1
II. Liebestod .....	18

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# PREFACE

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The *Tristan* material was first of topical interest to Wagner in autumn 1854, though the work – as far as can be gathered from Wagner’s few statements of that time – at first looked entirely different from what would later be executed.<sup>1</sup> Wagner wanted ‘to leave a memorial’ to love as the ‘most beautiful of all dreams’, as he wrote Franz Liszt in December 1854.<sup>2</sup> It is not known when the concept changed. In any case, in August 1856 Wagner suddenly described the subject of the work as ‘love as a terrible anguish’,<sup>3</sup> and he then also implemented it accordingly. The first dated sketch stemmed from December 1856. At the same time typically enough it was not a sketch of the text, but a music sketch,<sup>4</sup> concurring with Wagner’s oft-quoted later statement that with *Tristan* he had had the urge ‘to break out musically as if I were writing a symphony’ (28 September 1878).<sup>5</sup> This aspect also plays a part in the ‘programmatic commentary’ given below for the Prelude.

Wagner began steady work on the piece in August 1857. He proceeded as usual: the libretto was written from a draft of the text in prose, followed by the composing which was carried out in three steps. The compositional sketch (first complete draft), the comparatively more extensive orchestral sketch (second complete draft) and the score were written in parallel, but naturally moved along chronologically one after the other. This was finished by 6 August 1859. It was, in fact, printed immediately, yet the work came to first performance only on 10 June 1865 in Munich. The performance re-

habilitated the work that had previously been considered unplayable after an unsuccessful, incomplete rehearsal period in Vienna of several years. *Tristan* had made its way, though only slowly.

Hans von Bülow (1830–1894), conductor of the premiere, was also the first to perform the Prelude for the first time separately, and indeed in a concert on 12 March 1859 in Prague. On this occasion Bülow produced a concert ending,<sup>6</sup> since Wagner himself had refused to furnish such. Bülow’s ending did not however appeal to Wagner; this now led to his composing a concert ending of his own for his Parisian concerts in 1860, in which he himself wanted to conduct the Prelude. It is included in the present edition preceding the stage ending. Wagner characteristically did not leave it at that, but along with the Prelude in the new form still sent a verbal commentary for the audience, a ‘Programmatic Commentary’, as he called it. It reads:<sup>7</sup>

Prelude to *Tristan and Isolde*.

An ancient and original love poem, inexhaustibly varied anew in all languages of medieval Europe, tells us of Tristan and Isolde. The loyal vassal had wooed Isolde for his king, without daring to confess his own love for her who followed him as the betrothed of his Master, because she helplessly had to follow the wooer himself. The Goddess of Love, jealous of her suppressed rights, took revenge: through an ingenious oversight she let the love potion – intended by the cautious mother for the couple betrothed only because of politics, as was the custom of the times – be proffered to the youthful pair, that by its consumption their love, suddenly blazing up in bright flames, made them avow that they belong only to each other. Now there was to be no end to the longing, desiring, the bliss and the misery of love: world, power, fame, praise, radiance, honour, chivalry,

<sup>1</sup> Egon Voss, ‘Die “schwarze und die weiße Flagge”. Zur Entstehung von Wagners “Tristan”’, in: *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* LIV, Vol. 3 (1997), 210–227

<sup>2</sup> Richard Wagner, *Sämtliche Briefe*, Vol. VI, eds. Hans-Joachim Bauer and Johannes Forner, (Leipzig, 1986), 299

<sup>3</sup> Richard Wagner, *Sämtliche Briefe*, Vol. VIII, eds. Hans-Joachim Bauer and Johannes Forner, (Leipzig, 1991), 156

<sup>4</sup> Facsimile and Transcription in: Voss (see note 1), 222f

<sup>5</sup> Cosima Wagner, *Die Tagebücher*, eds. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, Vol. II (Munich/Zurich, 1977), 185

<sup>6</sup> Richard Wagner, *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 27, *Documents and Texts for ‘Tristan and Isolde’*, eds. Gabriele E. Meyer and Egon Voss (Mainz, 2008), 66f (Document No. 155)

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, 93f. (Document No. 238)

## IV

loyalty, friendship, all scattered like an insubstantial dream; only one thing was left alive: longing, longing insatiable, ever renewed yearning, – starved and parched; only one deliverance – death, dying, perishing, nevermore to awaken!

As the musician who chose this subject for the introduction of his drama of love here felt himself entirely within the most characteristic, unrestricted elements of music, he need only be concerned about how to stay within limits, since exhausting the subject is impossible. Thus, he then let the insatiable yearning swell but once, though in broadly-structured stages, from the shy confession of the slightest attraction, through anxious sighing, hoping and fearing, lamenting and wishing, delighting and tormenting, up to the most powerful onrush, to the most forcible effort to find the breach, to disclose to the heart the way into the sea of love's unending bliss. To no avail! Impotently the heart sinks back, languishing in longing, in longing without attaining, since every attaining can only engender new longing, until in the final exhaustion of the refracted glance the presentiment of highest blissful attainment dawns: it is the rapture of dying, of nonbeing henceforth, the final release into that wonderful realm from which we stray the furthest when we with most passionate force strive to force an entry into it. Do we call it death? Or is it the nocturnal wonder world from which, as legend tells us, ivy and vine sprang up in ardent embrace on Tristan's and Isolde's grave?

In this form Wagner performed the Prelude not only several times in Paris, but also in his concert on 8 February 1863 in Prague. But after that he decided in favour of another form, namely, the one used today. In it the stage ending, thus to bar 111 (p17), is joined without transition to the end of the opera, Act III, bb1621–1699. In the process the ending remains instrumentally intact, although the vocal part is dropped. The Prelude was first heard in this form on 26 February 1863 in St Petersburg under Wagner's di-

rection, and time and again the composer drew up a 'Programmatic Commentary' for it:<sup>8</sup>

Tristan and Isolde / Prelude and Transfiguration.

A.) Prelude. (Love Death.)

Tristan, as suitor, brings Isolde to his king and uncle. The two are in love. From the most bashful lament of unquenchable yearning, from gentlest shudder to terrible outbreak, confessing hopeless love, the feeling advances through all phases of the unsuccessful struggle against inner ardour until powerless, it sinks back into itself, seeming to depart into death.

B.) Final Section. (Transfiguration.)

Yet, what Fate parted for life now revives transfigured in death: the gateway of union is opened. Over Tristan's body the dying Isolde becomes aware of the most blessed fulfilment of ardent longing: eternal union in immeasurable space, without limit, without restraint, inseparable!–

It is above all noteworthy that Wagner applied to the Prelude the title 'Liebestod' [Love Death], which is the usual title today for the ending, and characterized the ending as 'Transfiguration'. The Prelude was performed in this version nearly 20 times between 1863 and 1877. Nonetheless, his usage, behind which obviously stood a firm understanding of the matter, did not succeed. Even his contemporaries already called the conclusion 'Liebestod'.

The music text follows the *Richard Wagner Edition, Collected Works*, Vol. 8, I–III, Tristan and Isolde WWV 90, eds. Isolde Vetter and Egon Voss (Mainz, 1990–1993). The accompanying critical report is located in Vol. 8, III, 210–227. For further information, cf. *Richard Wagner, Collected Works, Vol. 27, Documents and Texts for 'Tristan und Isolde'*, eds. Gabriele E. Meyer and Egon Voss (Mainz, 2008).

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Translation: Margit McCorkle

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, 145 (Document No. 419)