**Prelude and Liebestod FROM Tristan and Isolde**

**COMPOSED**
October 1857–August 1859 (opera)

**FIRST PERFORMANCE**
March 12, 1859; Prague, Bohemia (prelude only)
June 10, 1865; Munich, Germany (opera)

**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

**APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME**
18 minutes

**FIRST CSO PERFORMANCES**
December 18 and 19, 1891, Auditorium Theatre. Theodore Thomas conducting
July 5, 1936, Ravinia Festival. Rudolph Ganz conducting

**CSO RECORDINGS**
1947. Artur Rodzinski conducting. RCA
1958. Fritz Reiner conducting. CSO (From the Archives, vol. 3: To Honor the 100th Anniversary of the Birth of Fritz Reiner)
1966. Rafael Kubelik conducting. CSO (From the Archives, vol. 16: A Tribute to Rafael Kubelik II)
1994. Daniel Barenboim conducting. Teldec

On January 25, 1860, in Paris, Richard Wagner conducted a concert of his own music, including the prelude to Tristan and Isolde, for an audience that contained Berlioz, Meyerbeer, Gounod, and the poet Baudelaire, who often is said to have launched modern literature just as his contemporary Richard Wagner set the stage for modern music with the first notes of Tristan and Isolde.

Baudelaire was captivated by Wagner’s music that evening and wrote to the composer “of being engulfed, overcome, [with] a really voluptuous sensual pleasure, like rising into the air or being rocked on the sea.” The press, on the other hand, had a field day ridiculing music that was obviously well beyond their understanding, and even Berlioz, whose perception and brilliance as a critic nearly rivaled his vision and genius as a composer, had to admit that he could make no sense whatever of the prelude.

The Paris concert, like those in Zurich in 1853, and others still to come in Vienna, Munich, and London, was devised to raise money—to further the Wagner cause. Wagner willingly played not only the overtures and preludes to his operas, but also salient excerpts (without voices) from the music dramas themselves in order to pay his bills. Even as late as 1877—Wagner was sixty-four and his new Ring cycle— he agreed to conduct eight entire evenings of fragments from the complete opera, be resolved for hours, not in fact until the final cadences of the Liebestod. That music—sung in the opera by Isolde, but often played in the concert hall without a soprano—picks up the thematic material of “. . . a slow piece, beginning pianissimo, rising gradually to fortissimo, and then subsiding into the quiet of the opening, with no other theme than a sort of chromatic moan, but full of dissonances.”

His words are as unfeeling, cautious, and noncommittal as those of many a critic writing today about tough and unusual new music. In 1860, Tristan und Isolde, of course, was tough and unusual new music, and, although it has lost its shock appeal in the past 156 years, it still carries an emotional force virtually unmatched in music. Berlioz was right to point out the chromaticism and dissonance, for Wagner’s treatment of both was startlingly new. The now-famous “Tristan chord”—the first harmony in the prelude—with its heart-rending unresolved dissonance, instantly opened new harmonic horizons for composers, not as an isolated event—similar chords can be found in Mozart, Liszt, and even in music by Bülow—but in the way it unlocks a web of harmonic tensions that will not, in the complete opera, be resolved for hours, not in fact until the final cadences of the Liebestod. That music—sung in the opera by Isolde, but often played in the concert hall without a soprano—picks up and completes the interrupted Liebesnacht, or “night of love” from the second act of the opera; now Tristan lies dead in Isolde’s arms. The Liebestod brings not only resolution but, in Wagner’s words, transfiguration.

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