

## TRISTAN UND ISOLDE

'One felt overwhelmed, ravished, and enraptured all at the same time – in several places one could only weep!' He added: 'After so poignant a work I do not know what will be left for our opera composers to do.' Which brings us back to the question raised implicitly by *Kobbé*: how did *Tristan* change opera? Certainly for composers producing operas there was a difficulty of stepping out of Wagner's shadow, and that of *Tristan*, perhaps best exemplified by the fact that even while at work on *Turandot* well over half a century after that Munich premiere, Puccini felt the pressure. He reportedly picked up his score of *Tristan*, before swiftly putting it back down, exclaiming: 'Enough of this music! We're mandolinists, amateurs: woe to him who gets caught by it! This tremendous music destroys one and renders one incapable of composing any more!'

### TRISTAN ON STAGE

No opera produced in a spirit of direct emulation of *Tristan* has survived in the repertory, while the ramped-up chromaticism of works by Schreker and Korngold – music which perhaps took up the *Tristan* mantle more than that of any others – often leaves one longing for Wagner's economy of means. Eventually Strauss found his way of dealing with it through parody, overt or subtle, in the mockingly *Tristan*-esque duet of *Feuersnot*, the 'perverted Liebestod' of *Salome* (as Michael Kennedy described the final scene in his *Master Musicians* volume on Strauss), or the knowing references in *Der Rosenkavalier*, such as in Octavian and the Marschallin's own musing on the phrase 'du und ich' ('you and I') in their post-coital first scene.

*Tristan* also changed forever what opera could be expected to do, and how it was to be performed. The expectations on the singers are unprecedented, and still to this day Tristans, in particular, seem rarely to be judged by how *good* they are. The greatest, it seems, are those whose inevitable shortfall in realising Wagner's unrealistic demands – one is reminded of Wagner's promise to his publisher that the work would be easy to stage and economically favourable – is the least. In terms of staging, it certainly became clear at the premiere that



Kirsten Flagstad recorded Isolde with Furtwängler for EMI in 1952



'World-leading Isolde': Nina Stemme in David McVicar's Vienna State Opera production, 2013

King Ludwig's penchant for pseudo-medieval costumes and decorations – given concrete form in the Disney-esque folly of his castle at Neuschwanstein – was fundamentally ill-suited to a work which, according to the German critic Paul Bekker, put 'sounds not people' on the stage. Ever since Alfred Roller started to introduce expressionistic touches to his famous designs for Mahler's 1903 Vienna Opera staging,

productions have moved increasingly into the realm of 'suggestion' rather than 'illusion', to borrow the distinction by the Swiss stage designer and theorist Adolphe Appia. One could spend a lifetime watching *Tristan* in the opera house today without seeing so much as a ship or castle on the stage.

Here the libretto plays an important part, too: laconic and ambiguous, it often consists of language that writhes tortuously to express the inexpressible, threatening, in the vast love duet of Act 2, to collapse into something like nonsense. Even Isolde's Narration in the First Act seems to tell a nebulous, dreamlike

story. The basics of the plot – putative adultery between Tristan and Isolde, their discovery by King Marke, Tristan's injury and death – can seem like little more than a simple scaffold around which Wagner was able to build an expression of the negative Schopenhauerian philosophy under whose spell he composed the work in the 1850s. For once, Wagner's definition of 'music drama' – formulated less in seriousness than in a spirit of mocking jest – as 'deeds of music made visible' seems appropriate.



Herbert von Karajan with his Tristan and Isolde, Jon Vickers and Helga Dernesch