

## Wagner's *Isolde*: Questions of Female Representation in Opera

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## Wagner's *Isolde*: Questions of Female Representation in Opera

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Women sing. Women suffer. Women die.

Among the musicological community, the perceived value of each of these matters is contingent on whether or not scholars view women as victims or equals in the opera tradition. Opera is built on one of the great natural parities, the equality of male and female voices.<sup>1</sup> This vocal equality, the way “Women sing” so competently and expressively, is said to enforce the idea that women are rarely seen as victims.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, classic *libretti* can be seen to represent a different type of woman, a woman that is often murdered or driven to suicide by men, a woman that is a victim of opera.<sup>3</sup>

*Tristan and Isolde* is one such opera that sees the female protagonist face a dreadful conclusion. However, Isolde is also a woman who shares vocal equality with the male protagonist. In the final scene, the *Liebestod* (love-death scene), Isolde's lover has already died thus leaving Isolde with little reason to live. Instead of life, she yearns for redemption through death. Isolde sings herself to death in this climactic and imperative scene of the opera. Theories of equality and inequality collide here.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Robinson, “It's Not Over Till the Soprano Dies,” *New York Times Book Review*, 1 Jan. 1989.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

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She becomes a victim of opera, whilst displaying vocal equality. When a collision of ideas like this occurs, it is interesting to draw conclusions from in-depth analysis. Both of these ideas appear to be valid, but it is ultimately a question of which represents Isolde best. Is she represented favourably or not? Is she a powerful figure or is she a passive woman?

Each of these ideas is confined to paper, with analysis being restricted to score, *libretto* and plot. Neither idea questions how Isolde is represented in our opera theatres, in performance. Female representation is in the hands of our modern opera companies and their chosen directors. They have the power to interpret, re-work and renew female portrayal in performance. Females can be represented in polar forms under the direction of artistic interpretation. However, successful interpretations and readings are dependent on how individual operas lend themselves to adaptation. Convincing portrayals can be formed if the score, *libretto* and/or plot have ambiguous components. Directors can then choose to emphasize or mask certain traits and ideals. Investigation of how Isolde is represented on paper, how she is represented in the score, *libretto* and plot, will then lead to an investigation of how Isolde fares on stage. Through asking these questions of representation and appropriation, decisions will be made about Isolde's place in the tradition of opera. Is she a victim or an equal?

Opera is a musical phenomenon. Thus, it is inevitable that the score is an integral part of character representation. *Tristan and Isolde* is an opera that is heavily invested in harmonic ambiguity. It is a work that is riddled with points of harmonic deception, where the composer intentionally uses improper approaches to voice leading for dramatic effect. An unresolved half diminished seventh chord looms throughout the musical score, modulating to a diverse range of key areas throughout the work. This chord is commonly known as the Tristan chord.

The *Liebested* is the only part of the opera where the resolution of this Tristan chord occurs. This sonority does not resolve in the key of A-minor, in which it is initially presented to us. Instead the resolution concludes a whole tone higher in a major key.<sup>4</sup> This gives overall closure to a work that appears to be harmonically interminable throughout. It is in Isolde's aria that this resolution of the Tristan Chord is found. She is extensively linked to the music's conclusion. As a result of this, Isolde could be seen as an important character, someone who is empowered through this connection with the resolution. On the other hand, it must be highlighted that Isolde is not singing in this aria when the resolution comes. Furthermore, fragments of the Tristan chord appear in the orchestra after Isolde finishes singing. The presence of the Tristan chord here could be seen as a way of detaching Isolde from the final resolution, leaving her trapped and as a result, defenceless.

The segment where Isolde stops singing in the final moments of the *Liebested* is commonly known as the substitution of voice for orchestra. Michael Pozait claims that the substitution of voice “is the very image of the function of music in opera, which is . . . to avoid that final step where perfect beauty turns to horror.”<sup>5</sup> John Deathridge discusses this quote in relation to *Tristan* in his article entitled “Post-Mortem on Isolde”. He states: “Wagner actually toys with moments of intolerability, only to use music's power to sidestep them in the end.”<sup>6</sup> The music does more than “sidestep” from the drama. It actively tries to disguise the fact that “these moments of

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Scruton, *Death Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's Tristan and Isolde*, (Oxford University Press, 2004), 83.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Pozait, *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, trans. Arthur Denner, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992), 166.

<sup>6</sup> John Deathridge, ‘Post-Mortem on Isolde’, 111.

intolerability” are occurring. This idea ties in with the work of feminist musicologist Catherine Clément.

Clément considers women to be victims of opera, but feels that the music can often prevent us from seeing this.<sup>7</sup> She believes that music has the power to deceive us, to distract us from what is actually happening.<sup>8</sup> In *Tristan and Isolde*, the extremely luscious orchestral music of the *Liebestod* can allow us to forget the fact that the music is intrinsic to a narrative in which a suicide occurs. The powerful orchestra makes us forget about Isolde and the terrible conclusion that she must face.

Another idea that comes into play in conjunction with the concept of “music as deceiver” is the idea of absolute music: music that is non-representational.<sup>9</sup> Some scholars see *Tristan* as a key stepping-stone in Wagner’s movement towards absolute music in the latter years of his career.<sup>10</sup> But by calling this music non-representational, we free the music from its connections to the actual happenings in the *libretto*. We allow the music to deceive us when we situate it independently, as something abstract. However, is music really non-representational? Susan McClary, a feminist musicologist states that “One of the most important trends in recent musicology has been the demystification of Absolute Music, the demonstration that those compositions long exalted as autonomous rely... on codes of social signification such as affective vocabularies and narrative schemata.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Catherine Clément, *Opera, or The undoing of women*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 22.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> M. C. Horowitz (ed.), *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, vol.1, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Barry Emslie, *Love and Death: Tristan and Isolde*, 151.

<sup>11</sup> Susan McClary, "Narrative Agendas in 'Absolute' Music: Identity and Difference in Brabms's Third Symphony," in *Musicology and Difference*, ed. Ruth A. Solie, 328.

In relation to this argument of Absolute Music being non-existent, Clément states in her book *Opera, or The undoing of women*, that “chromaticism, this art of small intervals, is the law of musical composition in the *Liebestod* and in all of Wagner’s operas chromaticism ... is always associated with affliction, with suffering, with mourning and death.”<sup>12</sup> There is somewhat of a contradiction here. Clément states that the music of the *Liebestod* relates to death, when before she stated the music deceives us, forcing us to forget about the fate of the female protagonist. If Clément’s theory of chromaticism is applied, Wagner does in fact portray death in this section. This then leaves Wagner’s music as a depiction of death rather than an act of concealment. Isolde’s vocal line is riddled with this type of chromaticism that depicts death. Thus, Wagner gives Isolde power by allowing her to be the creator of her own death and in due course, redemption.

We cannot ignore the fact that Clément gives two conflicting arguments alongside each other. As interesting as Clément’s argument about the relation between chromaticism and death may be, it is more important to consider the effect of this staggering *Liebestod* in performance. Even the most enthused listener would not pick up on this association between chromaticism and death. It is only after in-depth analysis that these connections are made. The music is more prone to disguising the action rather than depicting it, leaving Isolde as someone who is disregarded and ignored.

Leonard B. Meyer has conducted extensive research to give reason to see Isolde as an equal, demonstrating that her vocal line is an integral and vital part of the music.<sup>13</sup> If Isolde’s

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<sup>12</sup> Clément, *Opera, or The undoing of women*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 56.

<sup>13</sup> Leonard B. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 99-101, 112-115.

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line is considered to be a key component of such a beloved aria, Isolde must too be considered to be an essential character. However, as integral as Isolde's vocal line may be, Isolde's vocal line is considered to be passive and submissive compared to the *Liebestod's* luscious orchestral part.<sup>14</sup> A passive vocal line implies a submissive woman, who could as a result be considered powerless. The fact that the orchestra begins to overpower Isolde as the *aria* continues, ultimately forcing her into silence, cannot be ignored. This is a weak and submissive Isolde portrayed here. She cannot compete with Wagner's extensive orchestra.

In contrast to this, the *libretto* is unambiguous. Isolde states in the last minutes of the *Liebestod*, "Do you see, friends? Do you not see? How he shines even brighter, soaring on high stars sparkling around him?"<sup>15</sup> Throughout this section, Isolde beckons and encourages the audience. She grasps their attention and engulfs them in her sweet dream-like words. This is undoubtedly a powerful Isolde that is portrayed through the *libretto*.

However, not all musicologists would agree with this interpretation of Isolde as a powerful character. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, a musicologist who specialises in Wagner's work, sees Isolde's place in the *Liebestod* as being "an innocent shell serving only to receive the sounds of Tristan's music."<sup>16</sup> Evidently Nattiez sees Isolde as only being a servant of Tristan, leaving her powerless and perhaps some may even say, transparent. However, Isolde is more than "an innocent shell". She plays a vital role in this section of the opera. She may not be

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<sup>14</sup> Deathridge, 'Post-mortem on Isolde', 110.

<sup>15</sup> Translation from *Tristan und Isolde*, staged by Heiner Müller, (Unitel Classics), 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Deathridge, 'Post-mortem on Isolde', 110.

independent of the orchestra, but she is indeed independent of Tristan.

This ambiguity gives us further reason to investigate how Isolde is represented elsewhere, away from paper, and instead in performance. In asserting our views in relation to productions and stagings, all of the aspects previously discussed become more meaningful. If we leave our ideas on paper they may appear to be less significant. Opera is after all something that is realised in performance and thus, it must be discussed in this manner.

Ideas and interpretations can become manifested in the artistic standpoints of the people who are infiltrating and permeating the walls of our opera theatres: the directors. Directorial interpretations of operatic classics are being recorded, produced and sold on DVD at an increasing rate. This new media format is a great research tool, as it enables us to view and critique numerous interpretations of classics that incorporate new thoughts and perceptions everyday. These resources open up imaginative possibilities and opportunity for scholarly work to be conducted in new ways.

These DVDs can be used to study the ways in which females are represented on our stages worldwide. Do they come across as equals or victims of opera in the proscenium theatre? Waltraud Mieir, one of the most accomplished singers to fill the role of Isolde, has been recorded in several different productions of *Tristan*. I will discuss three different productions where Mieir sings Isolde, as this allows room to draw on the director's interpretation of Isolde, rather than the individual capabilities of the soprano.

Heiner Müller's staging of *Tristan and Isolde* debuted in 1993 at the 82<sup>nd</sup> Bayreuth Richard Wagner Festival.<sup>17</sup> Müller

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<sup>17</sup> *Tristan und Isolde*, staged by Heiner Müller, (Unitel Classics), 1995.

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presents us with a minimalistic, segmented version of Wagner's beloved work. Through his staging, choreography and costumes, Müller strips the work of its conventional ecstatic passion, leaving the two lovers with what seems to be a mystification of death as redemption.<sup>18</sup>

Müller's interpretation of the final scene underscores the fantastical nature of Wagner's music dramas.<sup>19</sup> Firstly, there is a collision between the appearance of Isolde's golden costume and the grey landscape of the ruins that surround her. This collision is highlighted and concealed at various moments through the use of different camera shots. Interspersed headshots allow for the audience to forget about the dull grey surroundings and instead become engulfed by Isolde, giving her power by making her the singular object of our gaze. However, the use of wide camera angles reveals the desolate appearance of the entire stage. This puts Isolde back into place, back into the reality of her surroundings. The sense of ambiguity that Müller's interpretation creates allows the audience to believe that Isolde will find redemption through death, whilst other moments suggest quite the opposite.

Though Müller hints at the idea that Isolde redemption through death, it becomes apparent towards the end that she will not face this demise. Instead, she stands centre stage as the last curtain falls down, as if trapped inside what Margrit Frolich calls a "utopian void."<sup>20</sup> Through this Müller disrupts any power that Isolde is meant to acquire through dying. He strips

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<sup>18</sup> Margrit Frolich, 'The Void of Utopian Potentials: Heiner Müller's Production of *Tristan und Isolde*', *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (Spring, 1999), (Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the American Association of Teachers of German).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

the work down to its essence: suicide, something that is not considered to be liberalising, in any shape or form.

Although this sparse staging does allow both Isolde's vocal and the orchestration to come to the forefront, it becomes apparent by the end of the production that Mieir's powerful voice is not enough to augment, or even retain the power that Müller once lent to Isolde's character. Isolde is weak, powerless and defenceless in this production of the *Liebestod*.

Another production of *Tristan and Isolde* that showcases innovative and imaginative directional interpretation is Peter Konwitschny's 1998 staging.<sup>21</sup> Konwitschny's approach to the *Liebestod* is quite different than Müller's. First of all, the video director chooses to use a headshot of Isolde for the whole *Liebestod*. This decision is vital to the overall portrayal of Isolde. As a result, Isolde is given supreme command over the recording's audience. The only focus is on her and her singing.

Subsequent to another astounding performance of the *Liebestod* by Mieir, Tristan comes back into the camera shot. It is almost a shock, even an annoyance, to see him appear again. Tristan is the instigator of reality and it feels as if he is at fault for interrupting Isolde's moment of beauty and releasing us from her spell. As they walk off the stage together, Tristan gazes at Isolde in absolute awe. The contrast between his facial expression and Isolde's firm and focused face sums up the production's interpretation of the characters: Isolde is strong and powerful, Tristan is weak.

Konwitschny, unlike Müller, grants Isolde redemption and salvation through death. As the curtains open (rather than close) at the end we see two coffins side by side. This image

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<sup>21</sup> *Tristan und Isolde*, directed by Peter Konwitschny, accessed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RL0HcB8A63M>

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evokes a sense of resolution and peace. The two lovers are about to exit this world together, quite literally, hand in hand. This more “honourable” version of suicide gives Isolde the moral power derived from a poetic, even heroic death. Isolde is represented well in this production. She gains power through her strong character representation and her redemption through death.

By contrast, Patrice Chéreau’s 2007 production in La Scala<sup>22</sup> is more ambivalent in its direction. During this performance of the *Liebestod*, the video director decides to just concentrate on Isolde, rather than the whole stage. However, it does not have the same effect as Konwitschny’s production, as he does not use the same close up on Isolde’s face for the entire aria. Instead, for the most part of it, he uses a shot of her whole body.

This framing device allows choreography and props to be utilised in a way that the other productions don’t. For example, as the aria continues, blood starts to drip down Isolde’s head onto her body. The use of the blood is very effective for several reasons. Firstly, this is the only production of the three to show Isolde’s death as an actual fatality. The blood brings veracity to the situation. As we witness Isolde’s gruesome death on stage, the horror of the death is revealed. It is not disguised or concealed. Sorrow, sympathy and pity are evoked, as Isolde’s suicide is shown as a real death, rather than a fantastical one.

Additionally, choreography is used in a way that allows the music to be subordinate to her death. Isolde is meant to commit suicide, but blood appears from nowhere as she tries to sing her last aria. This wound is not self-inflicted; it appears and

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<sup>22</sup> *Tristan und Isolde*, directed by Patrice Chéreau, accessed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOGs8TtnwoI>

worsens as the orchestral part become extensively involved with the melody, forcing Isolde to compete for her place on stage. As the aria progresses, Isolde's health diminishes. She starts to look feeble, weak and frail. She raises her arms at the end of the aria, as if she's submitting herself to the orchestra, as if she has no choice but to become silent. There is no sense of her drowning, like the *libretto* suggests; instead this melodramatic production gives the sense that Wagner, his plot, and his chromatic melodies are drowning Isolde. Chéreau, quite simply, does not allow the music to deceive us; it is not allowed to make us forget about what is actually happening on stage.

Patrice Chéreau's production is the only one in which Isolde dies on stage in an un-glorified manner. It is unclear what affect this has on Isolde. In one way it reveals her to be a weak character that ultimately succumbs to her own death; on the other hand it conveys her to be someone empowered by the reality Chéreau grants her. That is, a meaningful place in an opera that is brutal and gruesome. By doing this, he evokes sympathy for Isolde, and awakens us to the actual happenings within opera.

From a discussion of these productions, it is evident that Isolde can be realised in many different forms on stage. In the case of Müller and Konwitschny, they have chosen to highlight opposite traits of Isolde, and hence have created two conflicting characters. However, the portrayal of their ideas work individually, and thus, both readings are equally valuable and justifiable. Chéreau's ambivalence should be something that doesn't work, but instead it leaves us pondering and questioning an entire art form.

From all of this, we can see that directors have the power to represent women as either equals or victims of opera. In *Tristan and Isolde*, there is room to manipulate power relations and female representation. There is space for us to engage

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successfully and artistically with the work in the twenty-first century.

The power of interpretation and revitalisation is one that must keep paving the way forward. Females are traditionally victims of opera. We cannot ignore the fact that they are made suffer, forced to commit suicide and are murdered so habitually. Although we cannot change the *libretti* of our operas, we can change how a work is both staged and realised. Directorial opera can allow females of the classic repertoire to be witnessed in new, conflicting and exciting ways. Interpretations can ultimately allow us to forget about a woman's fate, highlight a woman's fate, or change a woman's fate. Interpretation can revolutionize and modernize female representation in opera.

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### Filmography

*Tristan und Isolde*, directed by Peter Konwitschny, accessed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLoHcB8A63M>

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*Tristan und Isolde*, directed by Patrice Chéreau, accessed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOGs8TtnwoI>

*Tristan und Isolde*, staged by Heiner Müller, (Unitel Classics), 1995