



Tristan und Isolde: Passion, Death and Rebirth

By Cindy Battisti

At its heart, *Tristan und Isolde* tells a simple story with complicated consequences. A man and a woman drink a love potion. It works. But she is engaged to his best friend – the king...

The History

The epic story surrounding the creation of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* is itself opera-worthy. The concepts of love, passion, longing, and death flow from the written work directly into the early compositional and performance history of this now-iconic opera.

The story begins in 1849, when Richard Wagner, for political reasons, hastily departed his post at the Dresden Opera, leaving his wife, Minna, behind.

In Zurich in 1852, he met the wealthy Otto Wesendonck. An attraction quickly developed between Wagner and Wesendonck's wife, Mathilde. At the same time, newly rediscovered Germanic medieval poetry was enjoying a popular resurgence. Reflecting on his own romantic situation, Wagner became fascinated by Gottfried von Strassburg's legend of *Tristan und Isolde*.

Meanwhile, Wagner moved into a cottage on the grounds of Otto Wesendonck's villa, and his relationship with Mathilde Wesendonck grew increasingly intense. In September 1857, Wagner read the finished poem (an early libretto) of *Tristan* to an audience that included his wife Minna, his "neighbor" Mathilde, and his future mistress – later wife – Cosima von Bülow.

In the spring of 1858, Minna intercepted correspondence between Wagner and Mathilde and accused them both of unfaithfulness. After months of turmoil, Wagner ultimately separated himself from both women and departed for Venice. It was during this period of solitude in Italy that Wagner completed *Tristan und Isolde*, the tale of forbidden love and longing.

After considering several possible venues for the premiere – including Rio de Janeiro, Strasbourg, and Paris – Wagner settled on Vienna. However, performers struggled to master the demanding roles, and after more than 70 fruitless rehearsals between 1862 and 1864, the opera was deemed “unperformable.”

At last, King Ludwig II of Bavaria became Wagner’s patron. With the influx of royal support and resources, the opera was finally mounted in Munich. Hans von Bülow was chosen to conduct the production, despite the fact that Wagner was by then having an affair with von Bülow’s wife, Cosima, his next muse and eventual wife.

The work finally premiered on 10 June 1865, with Malvina Schnorr and her husband Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld in the title roles. On 21 July 1865, having sung the role of Tristan only four times, Ludwig died suddenly. Many speculated that singing the role had caused his death. Malvina never sang again after the loss of her husband.

For several years thereafter, the roles were performed only by another husband-and-wife team, Heinrich Vogl and Therese Vogl.

Dark drama continued to follow the work: conductors Felix Mottl (1911) and Joseph Keilberth (1968) both collapsed and died during performances of the second act. Nevertheless, the opera became firmly established in the canon, with early productions throughout Germany, at the Royal Opera in London, and at the Metropolitan Opera beginning in 1886.

The Production

Wagner preferred the term *Handlung* for *Tristan und Isolde*, meaning “plot” or “action,” thereby emphasizing the continuous flow of music and narrative. This distinguished the work from the popular operas of the time, which typically alternated recitatives with arias, duets, and other set pieces.

Director Yuval Sharon takes up this challenge in New York this spring with the Metropolitan Opera’s new production of *Tristan und Isolde*. He has been called “the most visionary opera director of his generation” by *The New York Times*, and he is the first American to direct an opera at the exclusive Bayreuth Festival, Wagner’s own theater in Bavaria.

In an interview on the Metropolitan Opera’s website, Sharon states, “I believe in opera’s power to connect with an audience, but I also think the best operas ask their audiences to be courageous and experience something they never have before.”

He goes on to elaborate that he sees the story not only as a tale of love and death, but also as one of rebirth. “Wagner shows us two ways to face death: we see Tristan dying slowly and in agony – terrified and disoriented – then we have Isolde, who dies rapturously, willingly, and completely letting go... Replacing the linear notion of death with the cyclical idea of rebirth is at the heart of our production.”

To represent these concepts of death and rebirth, set designer Es Devlin presents a tunnel evocative of near-death experiences. The larger set incorporates lush video projections that heighten the immersive visual world.

Sharon concludes, "*Tristan und Isolde* is probably the single hardest opera in the entire repertoire. It's hard for the singers, who must sustain these enormous roles. It's hard for the conductor and the orchestra, who endure an extraordinary test of stamina in performing this score. And it's hard for me as a director, as I search for a theatrical language capable of conveying everything Wagner is expressing in this complex musical and dramatic text."

See the final result –bringing Wagner's music and text together with Sharon's vision – live in HD on March 21, 2026, at your preferred movie theater. Lise Davidson and Michael Spyres star as the doomed lovers, while Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducts

Please note the early start time of 12:00 noon to accommodate the exceptional length of this opera.

Sources

"Death becomes her", Metropolitan Opera Website, accessed January 16, 2026 <https://www.metopera.org/discover/articles/death-becomes-her2/>

"Tristan und Isolde", Wikipedia, accessed January 16, 2026 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tristan_und_Isolde



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