

Received-Makale Geliş Tarihi 15.11.2024
Published-Yayınlanma Tarihi 31.12.2024
Volume-Cilt (Issue-Sayı), ss/pp 11(114), 2810-2816

Research Article /Araştırma Makalesi
10.5281/zenodo.14585138

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The Musical and the Philosophical Analysis of the Opera *Tristan and Isolde* by Wagner

Wagner'in *Tristan ve Isolde* Operasının Müzikal ve Felsefi Olarak İncelenmesi

ABSTRACT

German composer, theorist, conductor Wagner invented a structure of continuous narrative flow, which is different than the traditional and conventional opera structure. He had a strong influence on the musical world lasting for at least one century. His fascinating opera *Tristan and Isolde* is one of the most interesting and loved ones in music history. In this opera, everything is symbolic and works for the mythic world that Wagner created. The opera is based on a medieval Celtic legend about a romantic tragedy of love and death told by an exceptional music. Wagner, being under the influence of Buddhism via Schopenhauer, composed the opera using the poetry of Gottfried von Strassburg, and touching subjects such as karma, enlightenment, desire, compassion, love and death. Although the use of symbolism and mythology contributes to the feeling of a distant sense from reality, Wagner thinks that it is the most intimate way of mentioning humanity. He mixes elements from different philosophies, religions and beliefs, making his work difficult to understand for an audience without the proper philosophical background and knowledge. The symbolism of day and night at *Tristan and Isolde* breaks the tradition of seeing day as positive representing life and hope, and night as negative representing death and decay according to the tradition in Western literature, and thus surprises the audience. In this study, this opera is evaluated musically and philosophically, with the perspective of well-known philosopher Schopenhauer especially. Musical terms such as leitmotif, suspension, dissonance and Tristan chord are examined. The contribution of these musical terms and philosophy to making Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* one of the most important works in the history of music is emphasized.

Keywords: Wagner, *Tristan ve Isolde*, opera, leitmotif, Schopenhauer.

ÖZET

Alman besteci, teorisyen, orkestra şefi Wagner geleneksel ve klasik opera yapısından farklı, sürekli anlatı akışına sahip bir tür üretmiştir ve böylece müzik dünyasında en az bir asır süren güçlü bir etkisi olmuştur. Büyüleyici operası *Tristan ve Isolde* müzik tarihinin en ilginç ve sevilen operalarından biridir. Bu operada her şey semboliktir ve Wagner'in yarattığı mitolojik dünyaya hizmet etmektedir. Opera, olağanüstü bir müzikle anlatılan romantik bir aşk ve ölüm trajedisini konu alan bir Ortaçağ Kelt efsanesine dayanmaktadır. Schopenhauer aracılığıyla Budizm'in etkisine giren Wagner, operayı Gottfried von Strassburg'un şiirini kullanarak, karma, aydınlanma, arzu, şefkat, aşk ve ölüm gibi konulara dokunarak bestelemiştir. Sembolizm ve mitolojinin kullanımı gerçeklikten uzaklık hissine katkıda bulunsa da Wagner bunun insanlıktan bahsetmenin en samimi yolu olduğunu düşünmektedir. Farklı felsefelerden, dinlerden ve inançlardan unsurları harmanlaması, çalışmasının uygun felsefi altyapı ve bilgiye sahip olmayan bir okuyucu kitlesi için anlaşılmasını zorlaştırmaktadır. *Tristan ve Isolde* operasındaki gece ve gündüz sembolizmi; Batı edebiyatındaki gelenekte ifade edilen gündüzü yaşamı ve umudu temsil eden olumlu görüş, geceyi ise ölümü ve çürümeyi temsil eden olumsuz görüş geleneğini bozarak seyirciyi şaşırmaktadır. Bu çalışmada *Tristan ve Isolde* operası özellikle filozof Schopenhauer'in yaklaşımına göre müzikal ve felsefi açıdan değerlendirilmiştir. Leitmotif, suspension, dissonans ve Tristan akoru gibi müzik terimleri incelenmiştir. Bu müzikal terimlerin ve felsefenin Wagner'in operası *Tristan ve Isolde*'nin müzik tarihinin en önemli eserlerinden biri olmasına yaptığı katkılar vurgulanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Wagner, *Tristan ve Isolde*, opera, leitmotif, Schopenhauer.

1. INTRODUCTION

Born in Leipzig, Germany in 1813, and died in 1883, in Venice, Italy, the German composer and theorist Wagner was the most impressive musician of his time after Beethoven. He reinvented opera and led the way to modern music by writing unbroken and very long works. He is the most-debated of all composers, among which none had fanatics as much as Wagner, for and against (Kettle, 2020). Some of his major works are *The Flying Dutchman*, *Tannhauser*, *Lohengrin*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Parsifal*, and *The Ring of the Nibelung* (Britannica, 2024). He was under the influence of ancient Greece. He accepted the artist as a prophet and materialization of the future (Kettle, 2020).

Wagner lived in the time of revolution, rise of nationalism and war. He was forced to political exile when he was young. He became a powerful nationalistic in his later years, enthusiastically entering the birth of German nation state (Kettle, 2020).

Wagner was one of the 19th century composers who searched for new routes to write music, new forms, and new ideas about orchestration and harmony. They were open to new instruments, too. He gave enormous artistic effort to write his music, for example *Ring-Cycle* took him more than twenty years to finish (Kettle, 2020). He was successful in making each of his works own a unique emotional world of its own. Thus, he put the harmonic and melodic style of German music to its highest emotional intensity (Britannica, 2024).

Nineteenth-century Europe was shocked by Richard Wagner's radical works. His operas go deep inside human nature, touching fields such as psychiatry, philosophy and politics. Musicians, writers and artists of different fields were affected deeply by his works (UDiscover, 2024). His strong influence on the musical world lasted for at least one century, in which Schoenberg, Debussy, Mahler, Elgar, Strauss, Berg, Britten should be evaluated in a post-Wagnerian context in order to be understood. They all held on to Wagner's musical understanding or tried to be differentiated from it (Kettle, 2020; Britannica, 2024; English National Opera, n.d.).

2. THE OPERA *TRISTAN AND ISOLDE*

Wagner was affected by the socialistic writings of Ludwig Feuerbach in his early works. Then, he agreed with Arthur Schopenhauer who was into Buddhism and who had a negative view of an existence that is saved by sex and art (Kettle, 2020). In his letter to Liszt in 1854 Wagner writes that Schopenhauer, being the greater philosopher since Kant, entered his lonely life like a gift from heaven. Wagner says that Schopenhauer's principal idea about the final denial of the will to live is terribly serious but unique at the same time. Eleven years later, *Tristan and Isolde* (1857-1859) made its premiere in Munich (Henken, 2024). Schopenhauer's pessimistic influence on Wagner can be observed in the longing for death throughout the opera (Kettle, 2020). Being Wagner's one of the most loved operas, *Tristan and Isolde* in three acts was first performed in 1865. It is a romantic tragedy of love and death based on a medieval Celtic legend, presented with supreme music (English National Opera, n.d.). The opera is Wagner's boldest work which had a great influence on Western classical music. It is famous for its overture and the closing "Liebestod" (UDiscover, 2024).

Wagner wrote his own librettos, with deep research on conceptual sources and historical models (Henken, 2024). The story of *Tristan and Isolde* originates in the 6th century and was told in Ireland, England and the north of France. The first appearance of it in writing was in the 12th century. Wagner used the poetry of Gottfried von Strassburg from around 1210 as his source (Weitz, 2003). Wagner points out that he got deep into the soul events, and he built up the outer form of the world from the innermost center. He considered *Tristan and Isolde* as a practical music with modest production requirements. But the proposal of the opera for stages resulted in frustration, as Wagner came to understand that the musical demands on the principals and the orchestra exceeded anything then known. Most of the burden is carried by the two lead singers, who need stamina and extraordinary musicianship besides super acting skills. The large orchestra is also challenged constantly with coloristic effects and chromatic polyphony. The famous prelude includes the yearning for a love hanging between future and past death (Henken, 2024).

One of the most loved pieces in the opera is "Liebesnacht" which is in Act II. It is the "love duet" between Tristan and Isolde. In this duet, they meet at night, where they can tell each other about their love affair without the judgement and the eyes of the outer world. Their romantic rendezvous is cut short by the cruel King (English National Opera, n.d.).

After the prelude, a sailor sings a song pushing Isolde into talking about Tristan to her maid Brangäne. Wagner's challenge of showing the "lucid exposition of inner motives" is clearly recognized here, as the orchestra interprets the uncertainties of the text. Every time that Isolde mentions about Tristan looking deeply into her eyes, the climaxing tune from the prelude is heard behind her immediately. The orchestra makes her feelings clear although she may not have recognized her love for him or explained her true emotions verbally (Henken, 2024).

2.1. The Synopsis of *Tristan and Isolde*:

Act I:

Being an Irish princess, Isolde, is being taken to Cornwall in Tristan's ship. King Marke, Tristan's uncle, wants to marry her. She tries to question Tristan, who doesn't answer openly. His friend Kurwenal makes fun of Irish women and sings about Isolde's fiancé Morold, killed by Tristan. Isolde gets very angry and tells her maid Brangane that she remembers Tristan when he was wounded by Morold and came in disguise to Isolde in order to ask for her help with magic and herbs. She says that she was very moved by Tristan's pleading eyes so she could not kill him, instead she now wishes his and her death both. Brandane warns her that Tristan did his duty and marrying a king is an honor. Even so, Isolde believes that his behavior is proof of his hatred for her and asks Brangane to prepare her mother's potion of death. She tells Tristan that she wants the revenge of Morold. Tristan offers her his sword, which Isolde cannot use on him. Instead, she offers him to have a drink to make peace. Tristan immediately understands that she wants to poison them both, but drinks it as she does too. Then they exchange a long look of love and fall into each other's arms, while expecting death. Apparently, Brangane has mixed a love potion.

Act II:

Isolde waits for Tristan in the garden of King Marke's castle. The king has departed for a hunting party, but Brangane warns her about the spies, especially a jealous knight Melot, who was caught by Brangane watching Tristan secretly. When Tristan and Isolde meet, they appreciate the darkness which hides the false appearances and they both feel secure at night. Although Brangane warns the couple about the daylight coming soon, they ignore her voice and see the night as death which will unite them at last. Tristan's companion Kurwenal rushes to tell them that the king has returned and that Melot reports their affair to him. Disappointed, Marke says that Tristan himself forced him to marry Isolde. Tristan asks Isolde to follow him to the arms of death. She accepts and Melot attacks Tristan.

Act III

Kurwenal takes care of the mortally ill Tristan in his castle. A shepherd asks about his situation and Kurwenal explains that only Isolde can help him with her magic. The shepherd decides to play a happy music with his pipe as he sees an approaching ship. Tristan imagines to return to the realm of night with Isolde in a hallucinating mode. The sad tune of the shepherd signals that the sea is in fact empty and Isolde's ship is not there. Tristan remembers this music from his childhood. It makes him remember the duel between Morold and him, and he mourns about why Isolde's medicine did not kill him then. The tune of the shepherd turns to a happy music which makes Tristan to get up and tear off his bandages with bleeding wounds. He falls into Isolde's arms as she enters. The shepherd announces another ship entering the scene. While Brangane tries to calm Kurwenal, he does not care and stabs Melot. Marke grieves at the sight of the dying Tristan, and Isolde sinks to Tristan's body uniting him in the world beyond (Metropolitan Opera, n.d.).

3. MUSICAL BACKGROUND OF *TRISTAN AND ISOLDE*

3.1. Leitmotif

Wagner's new form of music is set to a continuous vocal-symphonic texture as a poetic drama. This texture is made up of basic thematic ideas called "leitmotifs" which means "leading motives", brief musical themes related to some characters, ideas or objects. The characters sing these motifs as expressive vocal phrases, which are developed by the orchestra as remembrances to point out the psychological and dramatic development. Studying Beethoven, Wagner learned to keep the wide outlines clear as he developed the leitmotifs to show every changing nuance of the psychological situation. He called the leitmotifs as "carriers of the feeling", functioning as expressions of the changing feelings behind the dramatic symbols. Wagner had the ability to transform, alternate and combine them. These leitmotifs are delicately woven into the greater musical work. Thus the orchestra can illustrate the action on the stage and tell about the consequences and motivations that the characters may be unaware. He gave life to powerful

allegories touching issues such as love, duty, heroism or power with universal resonance. His music carries away the listener along in an endless flow of expressively orchestrated sound. By using this method, Wagner's style became unified and deepened immensely (Britannica, 2024; UDiscover, 2024).

Wagner's optimistic social philosophy turned into a metaphysical pessimism, which aroused from his discovery of the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. He produced the opera *Tristan and Isolde* with this motive, during his hopeless love for a rich woman called Wesendonk, also causing his separation from his wife. The use of leitmotifs changed in this opera compared to *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* in which he used them for explaining the action of the drama. Schopenhauer's theory about the superiority of music above other arts caused him to have a tendency to turn the expressive balance of musical drama more toward music. The leitmotifs were not easily identifiable anymore with their dramatic sources, rather they had greater psychological complexity (Britannica, 2024).

3.2. Suspension, Dissonance and "Tristan Chord"

Wagner's new use of harmony differentiated itself from more formal and older types of musical sentences. The start of musical modernism is described with "Tristan chord" where there is an unresolved dissonance at the beginning of the *Tristan and Isolde* (Kettle, 2020). Every time the potion or its effects are mentioned, Wagner uses the "Tristan chord". As soon the drug is ingested, the Tristan chord changes from one notation to another (Weitz, 2003). The chord is very significant during the move away from traditional tonal harmony, since it resolves to another dissonant chord (Magee, 2001: 208) as can be seen at Figure 1:



Figure 1. The Tristan Chord (Magee, 2001: 208).

One of Wagner's most significant innovations is his frequent use of two consecutive chords containing tritons which are augmented fourth or diminished fifth. Neither of them is a diminished seventh chord. Another notable detail about *Tristan and Isolde* is the harmonic suspension. It is a device used by a composer to create musical tension by presenting the listener a series of prolonged unfinished cadences. Thus, it creates an expectation and desire of a musical resolution for the listener (Magee, 1983: 356).

Although suspension is a common compositional tool which has been used since before the Renaissance, Wagner is one of the first composers to apply harmonic suspension over a whole opera. The cadences presented in the prelude are not resolved until the finale of Act III. Moreover, Wagner prepares the listener for a musical climax a few times in the opera by using a series of tension-building chords. He tries to delay the anticipated resolution deliberately. An example for this is observed at the end of love duet in Act II during the piece "Wie sie fassen, wie sie lassen". Here, Tristan and Isolde build up to a musical climax slowly. The expected resolution is destroyed by the dissonant interruption of Kurwenal singing "Rette Dich, Tristan!". The resolution is not heard until the end of the opera, just after Isolde sings the closing piece known as "Liebestod". After this music, she sinks down onto Tristan's body, dead as if transfigured (Millington, 1992: 252). There is no Tristan chord at the death moment of Tristan. However, the chord is heard while Isolde's acts before her death are explained to be due to the potion. The use of Tristan chord here implies that both death and hallucinations originate from the love potion (Weitz, 2003). Figure 2 is the oil painting "Tristan and Isolde. Death" by the Spanish artist Rogelio de Egusquiza from 1910, depicting the "liebestod" moment in the opera, exhibited at Bilbao Fine Arts Museum (Jiménez, 2016).



Figure 2. “Tristan and Isolde. Death” (Jiménez, 2016).

4. PHILOSOPHY BEHIND *TRISTAN AND ISOLDE*

Love and death are the main subjects of opera, music, literature, painting and other arts. They are the greatest powers in people’s lives. Both are mysterious, awful, and both fill people with fear, awe, despair and dread (Polka, 2013). The metaphysical opera *Tristan and Isolde*, the most original and bravest work of Wagner (Kettle, 2020), symbolizes the themes “death” and “night” through Schopenhauer’s ideas about life being an evil illusion and the withdrawal of the will to live. It also includes the modern psychological discovery of a connection between the wish to die and erotic desire (Britannica, 2024). His characters incorporate both splendor of human nature and uncontrollable desires causing suffering to humans. Besides, they celebrate the most magnificent love ever imagined (Wang, n.d.).

The tradition in Western literature sees day as positive; representing the rising of hope, life, enlightenment, while the night is seen as negative; symbolizing death, the end of life, and decay. However, the symbolism of day and night at *Tristan and Isolde* breaks this tradition. According to Wagner, the day symbolizes false appearance and deception, while the night symbolizes the reality and the enlightenment. Furthermore, it is difficult to understand why Tristan chooses to drink the poison despite his awareness that it can kill him (Wang, n.d.).

What fascinates musicians and historians the most about *Tristan and Isolde* is that this opera shows a human existence where the ecstatic and the tragic are interlocked. Thus Wagner studied philosophy, myth, Eastern religion and literature. It helped him to understand the quality of “Tristan und Isolt” by the poet Gottfried von Strassburg. Being a link between the two greatest eras in all German literature, this work was known throughout the centuries. It influenced Friedrich Nietzsche and the Western world spreading all over Europe (Chafe, 2005: 3). Friedrich Nietzsche comments on *Tristan and Isolde* that it fascinates the audience with two elements: The sweet and terrible infinity of its poetic-musical language and the philosophical depths not usually associated with opera. Wagner also would have agreed about the singularity of his work (Groos, 2011: 1).

Wagner extended the poem of Gottfried via Schopenhauer’s philosophy using motifs such as a tragic perspective on existence, an elevation of desire, a half-religious dissatisfaction embellished with metaphysical overtones (Chafe, 2005: 3-4). The famous “lovers’ cave scene” became an expression of the inner harmony of music, being parallel with Gottfried’s ideal love conception which includes joy and sorrow together.

Tristan and Isolde represented selfish egotism of the will for some listeners. The appeal that the opera applied on both the admirers and the derogators seemed like an addictive and intoxicating drug. Once the most fanatic of Wagnerites, the philosopher Nietzsche came to evaluate Wagner’s music dramas as sensationally problematic magnetism to ethical degradation (Henken, 2024). However, he never lost his lust for Wagner’s works, as he wrote in 1888 “to this day I am still looking for a work of equally dangerous fascination, of an equally shivery and sweet infinity, as *Tristan* - and I look in all the arts, in vain...”. Leonard Bernstein comments on the opera: “*Tristan and Isolde* is the central work of all music history, the hub of the wheel... I have spent my life since I first read it, trying to solve it. It is incredibly prophetic” (Brenner, 2021).

There is a paradox related to *Tristan and Isolde*. The opera seems like a four-hour-long celebration of self-love and devotion, in contrast to Schopenhauer’s and Buddhism’s ideas of denial of will and designation. However, it expresses Buddhist ideas at its core, indicating that only death or denial of will is the way to salvation. Wagner created *Tristan and Isolde* during a tempestuous period in his life; in which he saw the

failure of the revolution, exile from his country, marital problems, and depression leading to suicidal attempts. Fusion of all these issues caused him to long for love and being loved. He evaluated love as being higher than worldly existence and transcendental. Via the thinking of Buddhism, the two lovers can only unite through death at the end of the story (Wang, n.d.).

In short, after his encounter with Schopenhauer, Wagner's operas started to have more conflicts, complexity and mystery than his earlier works. He includes a visionary and revolutionary ideology that surpass spiritual and intellectual experience, as he uses many elements from religions, myths, beliefs and philosophies (Wang, n.d.).

5. CONCLUSION

Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*, originally a medieval legend, was one of the most breathtaking events in the classical music history. The unfortunate love story of Tristan and Isolde, who fall deeply in love after drinking a love potion accidentally, was transformed into a story of existential themes such as spiritual love, death, transcendence and the unsatisfied struggle of humans by Wagner. Thus, he became one of the earliest Western artists using concepts from Christian mysticism as well as Buddhist metaphysics. Schopenhauer's Buddhist-derived ideas about release from the karmic cycle of suffering through denial of the will deeply influenced Wagner. Besides, Schopenhauer saw music as esthetically higher than any other form of arts, impressing Wagner more (Henken, 2024).

Unlike most opera composers, Wagner wrote both the libretto and the music, since he was a composer as well as a theater director, conductor and essayist. He wrote *Tristan and Isolde* with a continuously flowing structure of narration, which is very different than the conventional opera style including recitatives and arias in between. His compositions are rich in complex textures, orchestration, harmonies and leitmotifs, which are musical phrases related to characters, ideas, places or plot. His usage of quickly shifting tonal centers influenced the development of classical music and led the way to modern music especially via *Tristan and Isolde*. Therefore, both he and his operas, which will be continuously studied in future musical works, are the milestones of musical development in Europe.

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