Introduction

Tristan and Isolde, the actual opus metaphysicum of all art.
Nietzsche, 'Richard Wagner in Bayreuth', *Untimely Meditations*

But I am still looking for a work with as dangerous a fascination, with as terrible and sweet an infinity as *Tristan*, – I look through all the arts in vain.
Nietzsche, 'Why I am so clever', *Ecce homo*

Friedrich Nietzsche's comments on *Tristan und Isolde* foreground two elements of its fascination: the intimation of philosophical depths not usually associated with opera, and the 'terrible and sweet infinity' of its musical-poetic language. Wagner himself would certainly have agreed also about the work's singularity: on the day of the second performance he proclaimed in a letter to King Ludwig II that 'nothing similar of this kind can be compared with our *Tristan*, as it will reverberate and resound today'. As if to underscore the assertion, he supplemented the conventional date of 13 June 1865 with another time-reckoning: 'the second day of *Tristan*'.[1] Almost a century and a half into the Age of *Tristan*, almost everyone would agree on the unparalleled intensity and impact of this particular opera, though some might also attempt to resist the vortex of its attraction with distancing tactics made possible by postmodern approaches to the past.

The singular position of *Tristan und Isolde* in Western culture also presents challenges for an opera handbook. We set out with the presupposition that a work as extraordinary and influential as *Tristan* would require a variety of strategies: providing information, of course, but also making sources available in English and – especially – interpreting the opera. The next section, for example, posed the first challenge: a musical synopsis of *Tristan und Isolde*, unlike the overview of a conventional number opera, might be as arduous to read as it would be to write. Indeed, tracking *Tristan*'s narrow

complex of themes might – to borrow a phrase from Vladimir Nabokov – prove as difficult as 'looking for allusions to aquatic mammals in *Moby Dick*'.[2] In the event, I decided to provide a translation of Wagner's own prose synopsis (the first in English, to my knowledge), which will enable beginners to familiarize themselves with the plot, and experienced listeners to spot the nascent libretto or to note details that Wagner later changed in the process of versification and composition.

The genesis of the opera has been recounted many times in the standard literature and also in recent monographs by Roger Scruton and Eric Chafe.[3] For this handbook John Deathridge chose to focus on two salient but often-overlooked 'facts' of this rich complex: the economic constraints that compelled Wagner to produce the score on something resembling an assembly-line schedule (without possibility of revision), and the opera's relationship to the *Wesendonck Lieder*, and thus to a fascinating but often misunderstood nexus of biography and cultural practices. The libretto has also frequently been discussed, usually in the form of a comparison with its Middle High German source, Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan*, but its significance for the opera remains largely unexplored. The libretto chapter attempts to rectify this neglect, making a case for it as a literary text in its own right, one that also engages in a highly sophisticated intertextual dialogue with major texts and genres of German literary culture.

Three chapters pursue diverse approaches to understanding *Tristan und Isolde* as a music-drama. Joseph Kerman's rigorous 'close reading' focuses on the Prelude to Act I and the resonances of its initial measures at crucial points of the ensuing action. Thomas Grey suggests ways in which *Tristan* might be interpreted through structural oppositions – between the visible and invisible, what is heard and what is silent – which are foregrounded through acousmatic effects at the beginning of each act, and lead to a conflation of sensory perceptions in the Act II love-duet that is resolved only with Isolde's death. Jürgen Maehder examines Wagner's use of timbre and innovations in compositional technique that underlie his creation of a 'knowing orchestra', capable not only of elucidating the inner life of the protagonists with a music of presentiment and recollection, but also of providing instrumental sounds with a history of their own.

The last chapters are devoted to the extraordinary reception history of *Tristan und Isolde*. Steven Huebner pursues its musical traces, especially the 'Tristan' chord, from Wagner's own *Meistersinger* to

later Romantic music and modernism, simultaneously examining the methodological problems involved in identifying and interpreting those traces. Even though the opera lacks the political, historical, and religious dimensions so appealing to theatre directors of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, *Die Meistersinger*, and *Parsifal*, Stewart Spencer's history reveals that *Tristan* has nonetheless stimulated a wide variety of interpretative responses, ranging from the realism of early stagings to abstract, symbolist, and mythic revisions in the twentieth century, and even the alienated domesticity of recent productions. The bibliography aims to give readers access to basic areas of *Tristan* scholarship, from studies of the medieval myth to presentations of the opera's genesis, controversial elements such as the 'Tristan' chord and the Prelude, secondary literature on the opera in general, and studies of its performance and reception history.

Two chapters have appeared previously in the following publications: Chapter 1 in John Deathridge, *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 117–32; Chapter 3 in Joseph Kerman, *Write All These Down: Essays on Music* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 335–49. I would like to conclude with warm thanks to my collaborator-friends for their co-operation and patience.

Synopsis: Wagner's prose draft (1857)

The following synopsis presents Wagner's complete prose draft for *Tristan und Isolde*, the last stage before the elaboration of the verse libretto. Wagner's manuscript has the date 20 August 1857 on the upper right of the first page; a letter of 25 August to Eduard Devrient announces that he has just 'put it down on paper'.[1] Readers will notice familiar libretto lines already imbedded in the prose, but also intriguing divergences, such as the suggestion at the end of Act III that the music Isolde hears during her Transfiguration is an 'alte Liebesweise' ('ancient love melody').

Act I

On the foredeck of a large sea-going ship, closed off like a tent and richly hung with tapestries to represent a cabin erected for Isolde. In the middle are curtains that can be opened. *Isolde* on a couch, her face pressed into the cushions. *Brangaene*, sympathetic and concerned, on a foot-stool in front of the couch. A song from the mast above: 'The heart longs to go westwards, the voyage goes eastwards – a good breeze, easy voyage, calm sea; blue streaks reveal the distant coast of Cornwall, coming ever nearer.' – *Isolde* starts up: *Brangaene* should check on their progress and open the curtains; she is suffocating. *Brangaene* opens the curtains wide: one can see the length of the ship to the helm, and over the stern out to sea and the horizon. Upstage, a small group of sailors at the helm; still further back, at the stern, stands *Tristan* with his arms folded, gazing into the sea. *Brangaene* reports that blue streaks of land can be seen in the distance, probably the coast of Cornwall, which they could reach before evening. *Isolde*: 'Nevermore! The sea should swallow them up!' – *Song* from the mast: 'Safe journey, calm sea!' Isolde 'longs for a storm to hurl the ship into the depths and destroy all living things on it!'

Brangaene, extremely concerned, embraces her mistress: 'She has indeed suspected trouble. Cold, mute, and pale, Isolde boarded ship, listlessly brooding throughout the long voyage; sleepless with a distraught gaze. The faithful servant has almost died of growing anxiety. Now let the storm break. Oh, if only she would finally speak and reveal what is tormenting her.' – *Isolde*, turned away from her, fixes her gaze for a long time on *Tristan*, whom she espies at the furthest end of the ship. Disjointed phrases with sinister and cryptic allusions to her situation. What does Brangaene think of Tristan? – *Brangaene*: praises him and his deeds, his great propriety. *Isolde* mocks her: Tristan is cowardly and timid; he does not even dare to pay his lady the respect due her; he knows very well why he does not dare approach her – fear of punishment for his treachery. – 'Hear him yourself – go there and present my compliments; say that his lady requires his attendance.' – *Brangaene* obeys hesitantly. While *Isolde* follows with her gaze, she approaches Tristan and greets him: he suppresses an upsurge of emotion and listens to her calmly. When she has finished her message, *Kurwenal* leaps up irately and asks *Tristan* for permission to answer in his stead. *Tristan*: what would he answer? – *Kurwenal* gives a haughty response: Tristan is master here and no-one else. Does she know who he is? Lord of Parmenie, and the lawful heir to Marke's kingdom, which he has generously ceded to Isolde: what does it matter to a supremely rich man such as he? Indeed, he is bestowing Isolde on his uncle; – so who here is lord and who servant? *Tristan* tries to restrain him. – *Brangaene*: what should she bring back as his answer? *Tristan* politely but firmly expresses his regret at being unable to obey Isolde's command. While *Brangaene* hesitantly returns, Kurwenal sings after her, as if mocking and very loudly, so Isolde can also hear it, a song celebrating Tristan's battle with the Irishman Morolt, who once came to claim the ancient tribute from Marke's kingdom. Tristan fought and killed him on a desolate island, and – generous as always – he sent the braggart's head back home to Ireland. Embarrassed, *Tristan* has tried to restrain him; he doesn't let him finish and dismisses him rebukingly; Kurwenal descends sullenly into the hold near the helm. Tristan remains as before. – –

Isolde has heard the song: she commands *Brangaene* to close the curtains, gives herself over to the most intense grief, and demands to know exactly what Tristan answered. Brangaene reports reluctantly, but with a sense of personal insult. *Isolde* asks about the minutest

details, Tristan's facial expressions, etc., then if she considers all this courageous? Brangaene should know everything, and learn that he is merely afraid of Isolde, nothing more than a cowardly, bragging knave. With the greatest emotion and in the most intense agitation she relates what transpired between them. – Mortally ill from a poisoned wound, alone on an empty skiff, he once landed in Ireland. She and her mother took pity on him, treated and healed him – does she still remember Tantris? *Brangaene* answers in the affirmative, and has always thought she recognized him again in Tristan. – *Isolde* relates how she came across his sword while he lay on his sickbed, and found in it a notch that perfectly matched the splinter her mother had removed from the slain Morolt's skull. Thus she identified the murderer of the Irish hero, and – mindful of her oath of vengeance – seized the sword and rushed to slay Tristan; but then took pity on the wretched invalid (here she clearly reveals how a powerfully awakened attraction prevented her). She concealed the incident from her mother and father and, once he was fully recovered, let Tristan escape unpunished; he had sworn eternal gratitude and loyalty to her. But how has he rewarded her now? After a series of battles, in which he broke Ireland's dominion over Cornwall and England, Tristan at last convinced his lord to sue for Isolde's hand. Out of disdain he led the wooing expedition himself, easily obtained peace and reconciliation from her parents, whose power he had humbled, and acquired her from them as a wife for Marke. Weak and concerned about themselves, seeing only the advantage of peace, her father and mother acquiesced without consulting her – thus she has now been sold as hostage to someone who formerly paid tribute to the Irish. And for all this she has Tristan to thank, whom she once had in her power, but whose life she spared. *Brangaene* is shocked; she did not suspect that Marke's proposal was so repugnant to her. *Isolde* pours out her heart in despair at the ignominious fate of being given in marriage to the ageing king; all the pride that once filled every Irishman lives on only in her; she alone feels the disgrace that she alone must suffer. But she will never become Marke's chattel. She must have revenge, and Tristan's blood must be spilt: she has heard how, after she mercifully released him unharmed, he bragged about her beauty upon his return and aroused the king's desire for her – that miserable, base pander, who still mocks her like a servant-girl being taken to market but fears to meet her face to face. – *Brangaene* attempts to put the situation in a different light. Surely, Tristan has

only acted out of loyalty towards his king, and since she as successor to the Irish throne will also become queen of Cornwall and England, Tristan has actually elevated her to the highest rank. Could he have shown his thanks any better for her clemency back then? King Marke is praised as noble, generous, and virtuous. She will be happy at his side. When Isolde fiercely turns away, Brangaene continues by consoling her that she cannot fail to be loved by Marke, since even if he were the coldest of men, she knows a means to kindle the most passionate love in him. Misinterpreting Isolde's aversion, she confides that the queen, considering the risk of marriage for a couple disparate in age and unacquainted with each other, has entrusted her with a love-potion, which she is to administer secretly to Marke. *Isolde* flies into a rage, shows her abhorrence of winning a husband by such means, laments her mother's weakness and praises the former strength of purpose that taught her the art of preparing not only healing potions, but also the most deadly ones. She once prepared such a poisoned draught for her in case the most extreme peril threatened her honour. The poor woman did not realize that she herself was putting her daughter into a situation where no love-potion but only a death-potion could save her. Isolde orders *Brangaene* to bring the chest in which the potions are locked up; she obeys with anxious reluctance. She opens it and Isolde examines the two vials, removes the one containing the poison, and gives it to Brangaene to do with as she will command.

Loud shouts from without announce the approach of land. Isolde's growing agitation. *Kurwenal* enters through the curtains and delivers Tristan's command that the ladies prepare to disembark before evening; the coast is only a few hours away; Marke will certainly come to meet them, since a pennant of joy announcing the success of the bridal quest is flying from the mast. Isolde, at first recoiling with a shudder at the news, responds to *Kurwenal*'s impertinent, half-surly tone with a hastily assumed composure and measured dignity, requesting Tristan to appear before her immediately. Kurwenal should ask him if he finds it proper to land in such discord with his king's bride, if he does not fear the reproaches that Marke would have to make him on that account? *Kurwenal* is about to answer haughtily – she continues in a more intense tone that he should inform Tristan that she wishes to land in Cornwall at peace with him; he will surely know what they need to reconcile between themselves; she is ready to make peace with him beforehand. Isolde's expression, dignity, and intense pallor

change *Kurwenal*'s attitude; he hesitates, scarcely believing he can make his lord comply. In response to the question whether he thinks his lord is afraid of her he flares up and promises Tristan's prompt appearance. – *Isolde*: 'He's coming! I know it!' She orders Brangaene to prepare the drink of reconciliation to offer Tristan from a most precious wine that seafarers once brought them from Italy: but in the chalice she should pour the contents of the vial that she has indicated. *Brangaene*, horrified, refuses to obey. *Isolde* implores her by their long-standing affection not to be disloyal, now that mother and father have abandoned her, and she has no other relations. She threatens to throw herself into the sea immediately if she refuses to obey. *Brangaene*: if you want to die, I will keep faith with you, but consider that your fate drags mine along with it: I will perish with you.

Tristan enters. – *Isolde*, extremely upset, staggers to her seat. *Tristan* bows respectfully. Long, silent pause. *Tristan*: 'Lady, your wish is my command.' *Isolde* says she is pleased at long last to see the person into whose protection she has been entrusted, so that she may know in whose hands she is. Why has he never approached her? *Tristan* responds, barely intelligibly and cryptically, that an oath binds him. Could she respect him if she did not find him faithful? *Isolde*: whose trust could he have betrayed by paying his respects to her? *Tristan*, evasively, where he was raised it is the custom for a match-maker to avoid the bride on the return journey. *Isolde*: for what reason? *Tristan*: ask the custom. *Isolde*: since he is so decorous, doesn't he consider how proper it would be to be reconciled with his lady before he hands her over to the king? *Tristan* knows of no fault that requires atonement. *Isolde*: must I remind you, Sir Tantris, that a debt of blood is still pending between us? She tells him how she once recognized him as Morolt's murderer and raised the avenging sword over his head. Or does he think because she spared the patient's life then out of pity that she had forgotten her oath of revenge? What if she had only spared the invalid in order to cut him down in the flower of his strength? And what if she thought that the time had now come when she, having the conqueror of the Irish before her, proud and happy to be taking the last crown-jewel of Ireland to his lord, didn't regard him in her heart any more highly than a pebble on the beach? Now, when he, having refused the crowns of Cornwall and England, was throwing a third crown to the person he deigned, on a whim, to make king of the world? What would he say if it now occurred to her to demand payment for the long-standing blood-guilt? *Tristan* makes

a proud gesture. *Isolde* is pleased at his pride; she has almost thought him timid and cowardly for not daring to approach her. *Tristan* has not imagined that she was still angry with him about the blood-guilt. *Isolde* – but about some recent one? Aren't you aware of another debt to me? *Tristan*, meaningfully, not you? – *Isolde*: but to Marke your feudal lord? *Tristan*: I have served him, loyal and true. *Isolde*: when you wooed me for him? – She turns away from the silent man with deadly bitterness and bids Brangaene to prepare the potion. – 'As you were true to your duty, so shall I be to my oath. I once swore revenge for Morolt's death; only atonement can avert vengeance. Since you have proven yourself so useful to your lord that he would show me little affection if I took vengeance on you for elevating him, I now offer you reconciliation.' (She has observed Brangaene and directed her with a peremptory expression; now she demands the chalice from her; tremblingly, she hands it over.) (From without, shouts of the crew: a stronger wind, speeding up the journey.) *Isolde* holds the chalice. 'Do you hear the shouts? Time is short: in a few moments you will be standing before King Marke; wouldn't it be better to appear before him completely reconciled with me? So that when you hand over his bride to him you can say: lo, sire, though I slew her uncle, wrested land and crown from her, bought her from her relatives, (and) now lead her to your bed, she bears no grudge towards me. Without anger or gall, like a little dove, she forgave me: don't you just adore my good fortune?' *Tristan* impetuously snatches the chalice from her hand. 'I know Ireland's queen and her black arts: she brewed medicinal potions, balms that heal all wounds, even the most deadly. Whatever the properties of this potion you offer me, I drink it in expiation of all guilt.' *Isolde* vehemently: drink to it. – *Tristan* drinks; *Isolde* wrests the chalice from him and drinks the remainder, exclaiming: 'This for you, traitor!' *Brangaene*, in desperation, has leaned over the rail. – *Tristan* and *Isolde* look silently at each other in growing confusion. Increasing agitation; they clutch convulsively at their hearts, shyly hide their glances from each other, then look at each other again with growing fervour. Finally an almost simultaneous cry: 'Tristan!' 'Isolde!' They fall into each other's arms in the full ardour of love. From without, shouts of the crew: Hail King Marke! – *Brangaene*, horrified, rushes towards the embracing couple. She reproaches herself for deliberately exchanging the potions, without suspecting what new and unforeseen misery she would create. Renewed shouts. They start up suddenly, barely in control of their

senses: they seem to have lost all memory. Where were they? What were they dreaming? Where has their mortal enmity gone? Tristan! Isolde! O bliss! O supreme blessedness! 'I am yours alone!' 'Yours alone! – the world forgotten, everything vanquished – only Tristan und Isolde!' The curtains are opened wide, the ship is filled with companions and sailors (on the masts); all waving their hats over the side: Hail, King Marke! Hail Cornwall! – (*Brangaene*) *Kurwenal* reports that the King is casting off from land towards the ship in a richly decorated barge. *Tristan*: which king? Marke? What does he want? *Isolde*: 'What dream? Brangaene, you wretch! What potion?' *Brangaene*: 'The love-potion!' *Isolde* stares aghast in front of her, but soon turns with rapidly returning ardour towards Tristan – 'Tristan' – 'Isolde!' 'Hail, King Marke!' 'Kill me!' She faints into his arms. Brangaene rushes over: 'O most piteous fate!' *Tristan*: 'O most lamentable delight!' 'Help the queen!' – 'Hail! King Marke!' – *The curtain falls rapidly*.

Act II

An orchard. In front is Isolde's chamber with steps leading up to it. Through the open door one can see into the dimly lit interior. Bright, pleasant, moonlit night. Sounds of hunting, at first loud, then fading into the distance. On the steps *Brangaene*, leaning against the doorway, watches the retreating pack of hunters. *Isolde*, ardently excited, stepping out of the chamber – 'Can you still hear them? I think the sound has already died away.' She fervently longs for the moment that will bring Tristan into her arms. *Brangaene*, serious and concerned, attempts to restrain her impetuosity. Isolde's reproaches. Brangaene suspects treachery: she finds this suddenly arranged hunt at night suspicious. *Isolde* dispels all concerns. She knows only one tribulation, separation from Tristan: anything that would avert this, even death, would not terrify her. *Brangaene* reproaches herself as the cause of their unprecedented distress as well as her own disgrace in exchanging the potion. I wanted to prevent your death, and have only changed it into a suffering that will kill us all. – *Isolde* calms her down, praising her action; she has revealed what was destined to be made manifest: death and Tristan, Tristan and life – a higher power has decided. Therefore hurry, open the gate for Tristan. Brangaene hesitates. Isolde besieges her again – finally she leaves, promising to watch faithfully on the tower.