



# WAGNER

## *Prelude and Liebestod from Tristan und Isolde*

**Richard Wagner** (22 May 1813 – 13 February 1883) was a German composer, conductor, theatre director and polemicist primarily known for his operas (or "music dramas", as they were later called). Wagner's compositions, particularly those of his later period, are notable for their complex texture, rich harmonies and orchestration, and the elaborate use of leitmotifs: musical themes associated with individual characters, places, ideas or plot elements. Unlike most other opera composers, Wagner wrote both the music and libretto for every one of his stage works. Perhaps the two best-known extracts from his works are the Ride of the Valkyries from the opera *Die Walküre*, and the Bridal Chorus from the opera *Lohengrin*. Initially establishing his reputation as a composer in the romantic traditions of Weber and Meyerbeer, Wagner transformed opera through his concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art). This synthesis of all the poetic, visual, musical and dramatic arts was announced in a series of essays between 1849 and 1852, and realized most fully in the first half of the monumental four-opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Wagner pioneered advances in musical language, such as extreme chromaticism and quickly shifting tonal centres, which greatly influenced the development of European classical music. Wagner's influence spread beyond music into philosophy, literature, the visual arts and theatre. His extensive writings on music, drama and politics have all attracted extensive comment in recent decades, especially where they have anti-Semitic content. His pugnacious personality and often outspoken views on music, politics and society made him a controversial figure, but Wagner's impact can undoubtedly be traced throughout the twentieth century.

Wagner's composition of **Tristan und Isolde** was inspired by the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer and Wagner's affair with Mathilde Wesendonck. Widely acknowledged as one of the peaks of the operatic repertoire, Tristan was notable for Wagner's unprecedented use of chromaticism, tonality, orchestral colour and harmonic suspension. It was enormously influential among Western composers, with many seeing it as the beginning of the move away from common practice harmony and towards atonality. Most notable among Wagner's rich harmonic language is the *Tristan chord*, the very first chord of the prelude which is of great significance to composers and theorists alike. It forms part of the *leitmotif* (leading motive) for Tristan, the main character, which has a distinctive "reaching or aspiring upwards" character. Driven by Schopenhauerian philosophy where the only way for man to achieve inner peace is to renounce his desires (the world as representation), Tristan and Isolde are united in death at the very end of the music drama. Isolde, in particular, sings a final aria (known as the *Liebestod*, literally "love-death") in which she describes her vision of Tristan risen again, before dying herself.