

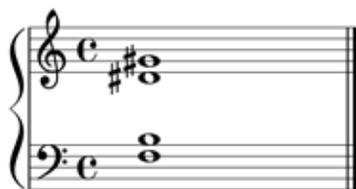
RICHARD WAGNER (1813–1883)

Prelude and Liebestod from *Tristan und Isolde* (1857–1859)

Wagner’s opera, *Tristan und Isolde*, is one of the most intense examples of the power of music to convey drama and emotion in all of history. The titular characters, taken from a medieval Germanic legend, are often compared to Romeo and Juliet—doomed lovers who can only truly be together in death. Wagner’s music does not simply carry the words of the **libretto** (literally “little book,” the entire sung text of an opera); it conveys and reflects inner turmoil, anguish, ecstasy, and longing.

Despite this richness of expression, Richard Wagner has always been a polarizing figure in the history of music. Pianist and composer Clara Schumann’s reaction to *Tristan und Isolde* is a perfect example of the loathing Wagner could engender: “It is the most repulsive thing I ever saw or heard in my life. To have to sit through a whole evening watching, listening to such love-lunacy till every feeling of decency was outraged, and to see not only the audience but also the musicians delighted with it was — I may well say — the saddest experience of my whole artistic career.” Johannes Brahms seemed to share this opinion, when he wrote: “If I look at the score in the morning, I am cross for the rest of the day.”

Perhaps one of the reasons Brahms was so cross is at the very beginning of the work. The cellos open on a held note approached by an upward leap, then slide languidly downward, joined by oboes, bassoons, and English horn on the third note. The resulting chord is neither quite consonant nor grotesquely dissonant, a sonority so famous that it is called the **Tristan chord** to this day.



The chord is full of yearning—seemingly wanting to go somewhere. Yet Wagner consistently moves laterally, instead of coming to a satisfying resolution—continual searching instead of relief. Notice how immediately after the first chord, the “resolution” seems like an open-ended question mark rather than a period to close the sentence. The **Tristan chord** only finds closure at the very end of the opera—the closing Liebestod (Love-Death).

Tristan has suffered a fatal blow by a knight’s sword, and returns to his fortress to die in peace. Isolde arrives to find him, and dreams of reuniting with Tristan in death (though the libretto is ambiguous on this front—she does not appear to try to take her own life, but seems to pass away of a broken heart instead). The music swells with her lovesick images of death as sinking into supreme bliss, because she will join her beloved. The resolution of the chord takes place at the moment of Isolde’s death, and leaves the breathless listeners to reflect on the meaning of the tragedy—and of resolution.

Recommended Recording:
Tristan und Isolde, Bayreuth
Festival Orchestra, Birgit Nilsson,
conducting



2017-18 CENTENNIAL SEASON



LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1927)

Symphony No. 3 (“Eroica”) (1803)

The title, “Heroic Symphony, Composed to Celebrate the Memory of a Great Man,” sets listeners up to expect grandeur, triumph, and military marches, and Beethoven’s third symphony does not disappoint. Beethoven originally dedicated the work to Napoleon Bonaparte, but the dictator’s lust for power was too great — when he crowned himself Emperor, an angry and disillusioned Beethoven tore up the title page and gave it its more generic moniker (or name). Yet the triumph over adversity we hear in the symphonic texture may not have been purely military — Beethoven composed the work only a few short months after writing the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, a document which details his near-suicidal despair at his growing deafness and his decision to persevere and continue to dedicate his life to music. The triumph in this symphony is Beethoven’s triumph more than it is some idealized military hero.

Recommended Recording:

Beethoven: Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op. 55 — Eroica The Cleveland Orchestra, George Szell, conducting

- 1. Allegro con Brio:** This movement is notable for its scope — lasting longer than some classical symphonies. Everything was scaled up in proportion — including the massive development section which seemingly refuses to come home for the recapitulation. **Listen for:** The opening motive in the cellos. It’s not much of a melody — merely outlining the E-flat major triad — but it takes an unexpected stumble to C# which is then left without resolution to close the phrase, almost as if the note were a mistake. The C# is only “explained” in the development, where it’s appearance marks the introduction of an entirely new theme — a resolution that comes far later in the music, and a device that no doubt inspired Wagner half a century later.
- 2. Marcia funebre — Adagio assai:** This second movement has an unusual sense of finality and somber weight — we have a funeral march, but what great man do we commemorate? How are we to interpret the placement — followed by two more symphonic movements — rather than as a sobering end to the work? **Listen for:** Two interludes that introduce other elements to our gloom and grief — the first seems to part the clouds for a moment to let a ray of sunlight shine on the procession. The second takes a melodic thread and spins it into a vast, complex, intricately-woven fugue.
- 3. Allegro vivace:** The third movement is shocking after the previous mood — moving into a brilliant scherzo movement. **Listen for:** The perpetual motion of the opening, and the way the themes seem to chase each other around the orchestra before a spectacular statement of the same material. This is a signature of Beethoven’s style — taking a deceptively simple motive and transforming it into something remarkably grand.
- 4. Allegro molto:** For the finale, Beethoven breathlessly sweeps us into the movement proper, a theme and variations built on a sweet, simple bassline given in pizzicato strings and winds, punctuated with a few surprising loud, bold knocks. The variations create dense, complex, intricately woven textures with staggered entrances, virtuosic flute playing, a dancelike section in a major key, and a hymn full of splendor. **Listen for:** The final coda (tag or tail), which continues to explore new ideas even as it tries to wrap things up.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Before the Concert

1. What are some musical devices that allow a composer to tell the story of an opera without words?

After the Concert

1. Is the resolution of the suspended musical material apparent in these two works, or does it only become clear after analysis of the score?
2. Do you hear a story in the Eroica? Does the placement of the funeral march disrupt a sense of plot?