

Essay title: *“Compare and discuss how the theme of love is treated in Tristan and in Meistersinger: Make references to the different stories, context and musical style of the two operas..*

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Name	Nikolaos-Laonikos Psimikakis-Chalkokondylis
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Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, with its endless suspensions, unresolved cadences and highly chromatic harmony is arguably one of the most influential and controversial pieces of the late 19th century. *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* -Wagner's very next opera- is diametrically different from its predecessor: Wagner has returned to a very conventional kind of harmony, a much less interesting orchestration and the inclusion of rhymed verses, arias, choruses and a ballet¹ are all coming against Wagner's ideas about operas which he expressed in his book *Oper und Drama*². Both of the stories feature the theme of love very strongly, albeit in very different ways and contexts.

To begin with, it is worth mentioning in what aspects the two operas are similar and different, and also placed in a context in Wagner's life. *Tristan* is an opera Wagner wrote when he had fled to Zurich and was supported by Otto Wesendonck and his wife, Mathilde. During his stay there, there was an affair between Wagner and Mathilde Wesendonck which his wife found out about, leading the composer to flee to Venice to finish the second Act of *Tristan*.³ *Die Meistersinger* was finished in 1868, a time when Wagner had lost his initial enthusiastic interest in Schopenhauer's writings and became more focused on a more positive, nationalistic attitude in which anti-semitic references and attitudes found their way in *Die Meistersinger*. Furthermore, Wagner had an affair with Hans von Bulow's wife. Both these operas have references to Wagner's life. In *Tristan*, Wagner sees himself triumphant over his affair with Mathilde Wesendonck, while in *Die Meistersinger* -still proving to himself and those who accused him as having failed to come up to a large German tradition of operatic music with *Tristan*, which wasn't taken very well by a large proportion of the audience- he sees himself as the person who has to abide by what is considered nice by the so called "masters" of the Art, but then succeeds in gaining their favour and being accepted as a

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- 1 Wikipedia. "Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg" <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die_Meistersinger_von_N%C3%BCrnberg> , as of 9th of March 2009
 - 2 Wagner, Richard. "Opera and Drama" (1893) Volume 2, tr. William Ashton Ellis. pp.25-27
 - 3 Gutman, Robert W. (1990), "Wagner - The Man, His Mind and His Music", Harvest Books. pp.180-182

Meistersinger and gets Eva's love.^{4 5}

Love in *Tristan* is something entirely supernatural, something which the characters have no control over – yet this “Love” that seems to dominate the whole opera leads the actions of the characters and seems to make them less able to react to their free will. This, of course, is a major influence from Schopenhauer in which Wagner was deeply interested at the time of *Tristan's* writing.⁶ Schopenhauer's Buddhist-influenced ideas of determinism had found their way into *Tristan und Isolde* via the theme of love – something the characters have no control but has absolute control over them. On the other hand, in *Die Meistersinger* love is very much an earthy thing, something very human. Again, the characters do not choose to fall in love with each other, but they have power over the outcome of the various situations they get into. *Die Meistersinger* is placed on St. John the Baptist's day (Midsummer's day), drawing attention to the magical properties of the day, and how people believe that it's a day of ritualistic significance and folklore⁷ (many people claim that you can see fairies on Midsummers Eve). Coincidentally, Shakespeare's “*A Midsummer Night's Dream*”⁸ is set on the same day of the year, and there are some similarities between *Tristan* and the play - Oberon is annoyed by his wife's reluctance to give him an idol and orders Puck to make her fall in love with an animal in the forest as a lesson. Isolde is annoyed by Tristan being hypocritical and making her marry Marke, so she orders Brangäne to make a poison to kill him. Puck instead of making Titania fall in love makes Lysander fall in love, leading to many more complications in the story. Brangäne instead of making the poison makes the love potion, and the two fall in love leading to further complications in the story; but the main

4 Millington, Barry, et al. "Wagner." *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*. Ed. Stanley Sadie. Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. 9 Mar. 2009

<<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/O905605pg1>>.

5 Wagner, Richard. “My Life” (Meine Leben) (1911). English translation at Project Gutenberg:

<<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/wglf210.txt>>. New York

6 Wagner, Richard. “My Life” (Meine Leben). Ibid

7 Midsummer's Eve. (2009). In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved March 9, 2009, from *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*: <<http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9438708>>

8 Shakespeare, William. “*A Midsummer Night's Dream*” (ca. 1596)

<<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/midsummer/full.html>>

difference is that the complication leads to a very comic situation in Shakespeare's play, while in *Tristan* it leads in a very dramatic situation and a fight between life and death, the unreal and the real, day and night.

In terms of style, *Tristan* was a ground-breaking composition, unique for its time. The extended and highly chromatic harmony, the very extensive use of leitmotifs⁹, orchestration, and the extensive use of suspensions to support this feeling of incompleteness that the characters feel all the time¹⁰. The stream-of-mindedness of the music at points, the level to which all the motifs used in the piece are in the end leit-motifs, and the degree to which the music is such a significant part of the opera itself and plays such an important role in leading the story and supporting/underlining a lot of the libretto and the characters' decisions and behaviours. *Die Meistersinger*, although written directly after *Tristan* couldn't have been more different to the latter one: the return to a very diatonic (the very piece starts on a blatant repeated chorale-like C major – as opposed to the highly complicated, vague and uncertain, never-cadencing Prelude to *Tristan*) and block-like structure seems to be a need by Wagner to prove to others that he can still write in this style.^{11 12}

In *Tristan*, Wagner sees death as the only possible solution (and resolution) of love in this world – this world being associated with the unreal, the pretentious and the fake, while death (and the night) being associated with the unconscious, the true, and love. The characters, from the moment Tristan and Isolde drink the love potion, get entangled in an ever-ending story which constantly brings more and more characters into sadness and misery,

9 (to the point where an analytic study of *Tristan und Isolde* by Roger North¹ is itself about 50 pages more than the orchestral version of the score) // North, Roger. "Wagner's Most Subtle Art" (1996). Roger North, London

10 Very characteristically, in the end of scene 2 of Act II, from the moment Tristan and Isolde start singing "*O ew'ge Nacht*" together, it leads to an incredible flow of constant avoidance of cadences, leading to continuously unresolved suspensions and climaxing more and more and more, until finally the passage reaches its climax on a very dissonant chord which marks the interruption of their affection and singing by Brangane, King Marke and Melot

11 Wagner, Richard. "Tristan und Isolde" (ca.1912) C. F. Peters. Leipzig; Reprint — (1973) Dover Publications. New York.

12 Wagner, Richard. "Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg". (1903) B. Schott's Söhne. Mainz; Reprint — (1904) G. Schirmer. New York

and only those who die eventually are freed from their sorrow. Isolde hates Tristan because he killed her fiancée, Tristan doesn't really want to force Isolde to marry his uncle Marke. Isolde wants to kill Tristan, but Brangäne has switched the poison potion with the love potion, so they end up falling in love with each other. Since then, they have to hide their love in the day and pretend there's nothing between them, while finding themselves in the night. The plot becomes more complicated, until in the last Act, Tristan is dying and all he wants is to see Isolde, who is nowhere to be seen yet. As Isolde finally arrives, Marke and Melot also arrive and Kurwenal -Tristan's best friend- fights Melot and they both end up dead. Tristan breaks his bandages because of his excitement to see Isolde dying the moment she arrives. Finally, King Marke explains that his intentions were to unite them and not separate them, making the whole outcome even sadder for Isolde. In the end, Isolde sings her last song (Liebestod – meaning “love death”, suitably named for the final resolution of the story – and the music) and falls over Tristan's dead body from grief.¹³

On the contrary, in *Die Meistersinger* the story seems to be a joyous one, leading into simply the humiliation of the Beckmesser and the prevalence of Walther who gets together with Eva, both of which have been wanting each other since the beginning of the opera. The sense of completion in *Die Meistersinger* is fulfilled and it is basically what we would now call a Hollywood ending. Love here seems to function as a reward – the best singer will take Eva's hand; whereas in *Tristan* we see that love comes out of despair in the part of Brangäne (who doesn't want Tristan and Isolde to die with the poison) and although in the beginning it seems that there's an “or” choice between the things associated with love and death (they must either drink the poison OR the love potion, they must either hide their love and be safe OR show it and be killed etc), by the end of the opera we come to realise that there is no such thing and to believe the two are separate is an illusion, an unreality – the only real solution is death itself, the night.

¹³ Wagner, Richard. “Tristan und Isolde” *ibid*

To sum up with, the two operas exhibit Wagner's control over his skill in writing operas to the extent where he manages to channel his personal experiences, political beliefs and philosophy into these two works which tell so much about Wagner as a person but also about the audience of the time. *Tristan* is an essay on love, *Die Meistersinger* is an essay on style and mockery of all sorts: the people who disregarded *Tristan*, the critics, and the Meistersingers and their rules. As Mahler himself said in a letter to Liszt about *Tristan und Isolde*,

*“Never in my life having enjoyed the true happiness of love I shall erect a memorial to this loveliest of all dreams in which, from the first to the last, love shall, for once, find utter repletion. I have devised in my mind a Tristan und Isolde, the simplest, yet most full-blooded musical conception imaginable, and with the ‘black flag’ that waves at the end I shall cover myself over – to die.”*¹⁴

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14 Gutman, Robert W. (1990) *ibid* p.163

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