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MAY 1, 1882.

G. A. OSBORNE, Esq.,
VICE-PRESIDENT, IN THE CHAIR.

*SOME REMARKS ON RICHARD WAGNER'S MUSIC
DRAMA "TRISTAN UND ISOLDE."*

By H. F. FROST, Esq.

It can neither be expected nor desired that unanimity of opinion should prevail among the members of the Musical Association with regard to the novel views and daring procedure of such an exceptional man as Richard Wagner, whose artistic utterances are at this moment exciting so much attention among us. But because these matters are now being discussed with an earnestness from which the unhealthy warmth of partisanship and prejudice is not altogether absent, no apology is needed for directing the attention of this assemblage to the subject of the present paper. It may be as well, however, to explain that when I undertook to lay before you some of the impressions derived from a patient study of Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde," I was unaware that a still greater work by the same hand would be placed before the London musical public this season. But a little reflection convinced me that the choice I had made would still be the most appropriate. In the first place, the subject of "Der Ring des Nibelungen" is too vast to be dealt with in the scope of a paper of reasonable length. Again, it has already received the most copious treatment by writers of commanding ability, and any additional remarks from me would be scarcely less than an impertinence. And lastly "Tristan und Isolde" is no less representative of its author's genius, presenting the peculiarities of his system in their fullest development, though with greater conciseness and, it may be added, with more undeviating consistency than in the tetralogy. The main features of Wagner's art work are now fairly understood, and it is unnecessary to dilate upon them, at any rate to the present audience. But even now the literary phases of his music-dramas are not fully appreciated, and I may be pardoned for

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deprecating in advance the kind of criticism which "*Tristan und Isolde*" is likely to receive in some quarters. When we are gravely informed that the poem of the "*Nibelungs' Ring*" is merely a fairy story in which giants, dwarfs, dragons, and other ridiculous creatures figure—the philosophical system which is here treated allegorically being ignored—there is danger that the libretto of "*Tristan*" may be termed a hideously immoral book, worthy to compare in mischievous tendencies with the worst drama of Dumas *filis* or his imitators on the modern French stage. For this reason, as well as on account of the intrinsic significance of the poem itself, I must devote a considerable portion of my remarks to considerations other than purely musical. In order to gauge the value of Wagner's treatment of the old legend it is necessary to compare it with other versions of the same subject. The germ of this, as of kindred fables of the Middle Ages, is lost in obscurity; and to trace the multiform varieties of the story which have existed in countries remote from each other would be beside the present purpose. We may content ourselves with commencing from the Welsh Arthurian legends, which have their origin in the fifth century, and after undergoing a process of evolution, growth and condensation, were collected and recapitulated by that most veracious old chronicler Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his "*Historia Britonum*," A.D. 1130 and 1147. Meanwhile, however, the stories concerning Arthur and his knights had crossed the channel into Brittany, where they took deep root; and later still into Germany. Of the French writers the earliest is Chrétien de Troyes, who flourished some time in the eleventh century, and among whose poems was one entitled "*Tristan, ou le Roi Marc et la Reine Iseult*." This, unfortunately, is lost, and we come next to the most important of the German versions, by Gottfried of Strasburg, about 1210. His "*Tristan und Isolt*" is a poem of 19,552 short rhymed lines; but, notwithstanding its length, it is unfinished, the hero being left soliloquising in his home in Brittany. Gottfried was highly esteemed; and, as in other and more modern instances, writers less gifted than himself essayed to take up his parable. But these sequels by Ulrich von Tûrheim (1236) and Heinrich von Freiburg (1270) are greatly inferior to the original. Gottfried's poem has been rendered in modern German, and published both in Leipzig and Stuttgart. The version of Thomas of Ercildoune, or Thomas the Rhymer, will be familiar to readers of Sir Walter Scott. The story of Tristan attributed to Luce de Gast was published at Rouen in 1489, and a copy of this edition is in the British Museum.

I need not stay to mention other writers who have dealt with the subject prior to Sir Thomas Malory, whose grand prose-poem "*La Morte d'Arthur*," printed by Caxton in 1485,

includes a complete biography of the ill-fated lovers, among other personages intimately associated with the Round Table. No fresh material of importance was subsequently engrafted on the primitive legendary matter ; and we can now proceed to gather up the various threads of the narrative, and, by comparing them with Wagner's book, be enabled to form a correct estimate of the poetic and philosophical import of his novel treatment of this time-worn theme. Waving minor differences in points of detail, the main adventures in the career of Tristan and Iseult may be summarised as follows : The knight was the son of Meliodas, King of Liones, and Elizabeth, sister to King Mark of Cornwall. His mother died in giving him birth, and hence his name. Early in life he showed a chivalrous spirit in many ways, and an opportunity quickly presented itself for displaying his valour. King Anguish of Ireland sent Sir Marhaus, brother to his queen, to Cornwall for tithes, but Tristan, indignant at this insult, repaired at once to his uncle's court, was made knight at his own request, and fought Sir Marhaus, mortally wounding him, but receiving also a wound with a poisoned spear. A portion of Tristan's sword was left in the skull of Sir Marhaus, and this was preserved by the Irish queen with the idea of future revenge. Meanwhile Tristan, finding his hurt incurable, journeyed in disguise and under the name of Tramtrist to Ireland, to try the surgical skill of the Princess known as La Beale Isoud. She effected a cure, and a mutual attachment was springing up between physician and patient, when the indignant queen-mother discovered in the pretended Tramtrist the slayer of her kinsman, and he was hardly permitted to depart with his life. His feeling for Iseult could not have been very deep, for he quickly engaged in other amorous adventures, in some of which his conduct cannot be viewed in a favourable light. His uncle Mark, thinking to be rid of him, sent him again to Ireland to demand for himself the hand of La Beale Isoud in marriage. But this time Tristan managed to ingratiate himself with King Anguish by certain acts of valour, and was permitted to take the Princess as bride for his uncle. On the voyage the pair happened to drink, entirely by accident, a love-potion provided by the queen-mother for Iseult and her future husband. The result was to intensify the maiden's passion for Tristan, and to revive his feeble flame for her. After the marriage they continued to meet each other, and eventually they fled from the castle and lived for a while in the forest. But owing to the machinations of Tristan's cousin, Sir Andred, they were discovered, and the guilty knight was again wounded with a poisoned weapon. This time La Beale Isoud could not cure him, but advised him to seek the services of Isoud la Blanche Mains, daughter of King Howel of Brittany. This he did, and after winning favour at the

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French king's court married the white-handed Isoud, almost forgetting her namesake in Cornwall. When this came to the ears of the latter she was highly indignant, but despatched messengers to her false lover, who then deserted his wife and returned secretly to Cornwall, where at the sight of La Beale Isoud his old feelings were rekindled. Afterwards he went through a variety of adventures of no great import so far as our present purpose is concerned, but eventually he was slain by Mark, and Isoud, it is said, quickly followed him to the grave, dying literally of a broken heart.

Now in this narrative it will be noted that Tristan is by no means an ideal hero; he has some ill-developed notion of honour, but none whatever of morality, nor even of constancy. Wagner's Tristan is, on the contrary, the very soul of chivalry previous to drinking the potion—a knight *sans peur et sans reproche*. Regarding Iseult little change has been deemed necessary; she remains the same proud, passionate, impulsive woman depicted in the old legends. But Wagner has immeasurably heightened these attributes of her nature by causing her to desire death with her secretly beloved enemy rather than tamely live as the consort of King Mark. In the last-named character we note a fundamental alteration. In the ancient versions, with scarcely an exception, he is represented as a treacherous friend, an unscrupulous monarch, and a poltroon. Our modern poet shows him, on the contrary, as a man weak indeed, and in the decay of whatever mental powers he may have ever possessed, but not despicable in any sense; and remarkable for one absorbing feeling—his unbounded affection for and confidence in his nephew Tristan. Through all there pulsates a lofty sense of morality utterly unknown to the characters of the mediæval story, but foiled and nullified by the decrees of a mastering and resistless fate. In saying this I must not be considered as acquiescing in the doctrine of an unconquerable destiny as here laid down. My object is merely to lay bare what I conceive to be the motive and mainspring of the drama as imagined and elaborated by Wagner. The metre of his verse is a curious mixture of the old alliterative style with rhymed lines. As to the advantages of alliterative verse for musical purposes much might be said, and also something on the other side. To my own thinking it is admirable for the expression of force, anger, or strong passion; but less so for the display of tenderness and pathos. I may explain that the extracts from the poem which I shall give you are from a translation by Mr. Alfred Forman, who kindly lent me his manuscript for the purpose. Having thus prepared the ground, it is only necessary further to say a few words on the musical construction of the work before proceeding to analyse it in order and detail. In "Tristan and Isolde" the composer has thrown aside definitely and unflinchingly

the laws of form which were once as carefully observed in opera as in other species of composition. In place thereof we have the system of leading themes adopted in its fullest extent, the music consisting of some thirty motives turned and twisted in every conceivable way. For be it observed that the system does not consist merely in identifying characters and ideas with corresponding musical phrases, and there an end. The meaning and sentiment of a motive may be modified or altered by subjecting it to augmentation or diminution; by changing it from duple to triple measure or from the major to the minor mode. Contrapuntal ingenuity is further exercised by the appearance of two or more of these melodies simultaneously. In fact this score may be said to form a gigantic musical mosaic, every bar of which is finished with the most consummate care—padding, in the usual musical sense of that term, having no place in the scheme. Continuity is strictly preserved, scarcely a full close occurring from the first note to the last of each act. The instruments required are the same as in "Lohengrin," the wood-wind being employed in threes instead of pairs for the sake of obtaining complete harmony in every shade of orchestral colour. The introduction, which has been heard frequently in our concert-rooms, is a curiously constructed piece, apparently rhapsodical and formless, but really teeming with ingenuity and the evidence of forethought. The motive on which it is based is that of the fatal love-potion, but various phrases are engrafted on this, one signifying the personality of Tristan, another the longing of the unfortunate pair, and another fate or death. The music is characterised by intense passionate yearning, gradually rising to a climax when the full orchestra delivers the love theme *fortissimo*, and then dying away in sad throbbing accents, which sink to rest on the dominant of C minor.

The raising of the curtain discloses the veiled retreat of Isolde on board the vessel that is conveying her to King Marke. The handmaid and companion Brangäne, who is an embodiment of light-minded impulsiveness and foolish amiability, is characteristically peering through the curtains watching the sailors at their work, while Isolde's head is buried in her hands as in profound grief. A young sailor (tenor voice) sings a wild unaccompanied melody of his home and his love in Ireland. One phrase of this may be denominated the sea-motive, and is employed sometimes in graceful three-four measure, and at others in more jovial duple time. His song rouses Isolde to transports of rage, much to Brangäne's astonishment, while the sea-motive is worked in the stormiest fashion. At her mistress's request Brangäne draws the curtains aside, and the deck of the vessel is displayed, with the lordly figure of Tristan near the helm. Gazing at him, Isolde invokes death on them both, and a new striking phrase is

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heard for the first time. Then, as if in sudden impulse, she directs her maid to command Tristan to her presence. It may be here noted that whenever Brangäne speaks the music becomes peaceful and soothing, in complete contrast to the agitated strains that accompany Isolde's utterances. The damsel departs on her errand, and Isolde watches the result. The heart-stricken but honourable knight replies that a sense of duty must keep him away from his uncle's bride; but on the request being reiterated in a more commanding tone, his retainer Kurwenal, who maintains throughout a rough, dog-like devotion to his master, springs up, and in a tone of contemptuous banter refers to the fate of the Irish envoy, Morold, whom Tristan slew. The music of this speech is bold and strongly nautical in flavour, the sailors shouting approval of Kurwenal's words. But Isolde has overheard all, and now in a lengthy address unfolds to her attendant the story of her love and wounded pride. Musically this section might almost be termed a *scena*, though it is formed chiefly on a two-bar phrase repeated with numberless modifications, and each time with greater effect. This faculty of growth is one of the most remarkable evidences of Wagner's genius. A motive which may not appear very striking at a first hearing, so far from palling on the ear, becomes more and more eloquent and impressive at every repetition, the present scene affording a salient example of this strange power. In a dramatic and also in a psychological sense the narration is of the highest import. The emotions which sway the heroine may be comprehended as she tells how, when Tristan was at her father's court, wounded and helpless, the notched sword betrayed him as the slayer of her kinsman; and how she rushed with the weapon to avenge herself and her land. She says—

From where he rested
 rose his look,—
 not on the sword,
 not on my hand—
 my eyes were all he heeded.
 With his wretchedness
 reached he my heart :
 the sword, I found, had fallen.

To these words is allotted appropriately enough the motive of longing; but that of rage and anger returns when Isolde complains bitterly how Tristan showed his gratitude for her healing art by returning to claim her, not for himself, but for his uncle. It may be noted that her description of Marke as "Kornwall's müden König" (Cornwall's weary king) indicates the character of that personage, as we shall see further on. The princess ends this magnificent declamatory piece by invoking death upon herself and Tristan. Again Brangäne, in beautifully melodious accents, endeavours to quiet her, referring

to the magic potions provided by her mother for use in case of need. Isolde grimly commands her to prepare one of them—a death-draught—the orchestra of course illustrating this colloquy by reiterations of the love and death-motives. Then Kurwenal enters hurriedly to announce the end of the voyage, while the sea-motive in its liveliest guise, and the cheerful "Ho, heave ho!" of the sailors without, form a sharp contrast to the preceding music. Isolde replies by again requesting the attendance of Tristan, and Kurwenal promises to deliver her message. During his brief absence Brangäne expostulates with her mistress, but without avail, and Tristan is abruptly announced. His entrance is signalled by a striking phrase delivered *fortissimo* by the brass, and evidently suggestive of the heroic nature of the man. This figure, evolved from an idea in the prelude to the work, continues to be heard frequently during the succeeding scene. But the dramatic interest now for the time overpowers the musical, though the latter does not slacken in the slightest degree. While Isolde persuades Tristan that nothing less than his life will atone for the death of Morold, the foregoing themes are used with stormy energy, until at last the knight, influenced of course by his hitherto smothered feelings, agrees to the sacrifice demanded by the enraged princess, and takes from her hand the presumed poisonous cup. But Brangäne, regardless of everything save the life of her beloved mistress, has contrived to substitute the love-philtre. As Tristan lifts the goblet to his lips the death-motive is heard; but when Isolde snatches it from him and drains what is left, the full orchestra delivers the love theme with tremendous force. Then there is an eloquent pause in the action, while the music describes the gradual working of the irresistible potion. Pride and despair are on the faces of both at first as they stand gazing at each other; but the anticipated death comes not; their hearts beat quicker, the hot blood rushes to their cheeks, the feelings which both have hitherto kept under restraint become uncontrollable, and each murmuring the name of the other, they sink into a long embrace. But at this moment shouts are heard without; the vessel has arrived off the coast, and the joyous cries of the sailors mingle with the love melody, now extended and worked up with ever-increasing passion and ecstasy. The curtains are withdrawn, and the castle of Tintagil is seen, while all on board are bustling with preparations for the reception of King Marke, who is coming to greet his bride. Brangäne, stricken with remorse for what she has done, brings her mistress's robes and tries to awaken her to a sense of the situation. No words can describe the thrilling effects of the music of this climax to the act, because nothing resembling it has ever been done before. While the musician must admire the technical skill shown in the employment of several of the leading motives contrapuntally, to the ordinary hearer this

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finale must convey the idea of tremendous emotional power; and a sense of fatigue must ensue when the curtain falls on the combined representation of human passion in its most intense form and the more ordinary sentiments of loyalty and patriotism as here portrayed. Other composers have imagined brilliant and stirring *ensembles*, but in the whole range of opera no episode with which I am acquainted is comparable with this for variety of resource, towering command over every means employed, and surging resistless energy.

Wagner allows the jaded faculties of his audience no immediate repose, for the second act opens in the stormiest fashion. A new motive of four notes only is heard at once, on a crashing major seventh, and signifying the searching light of day, which to the lovers has now become hateful. Then, on the dominant of B flat, another figure appears, suggestive of Tristan's impatience, to which is shortly added a third of a wildly beseeching character, signifying Isolde's love summons. Then abruptly changing to the key of A flat, a fourth theme, restless and agitated, portrays the joy of reunion. At length a dominant pedal in B flat is again reached, and the curtain rises on the garden of Marke's Castle by night, with Isolde's apartments on the left. A torch is burning at the door, the extinction of which is to be the signal that Tristan may approach. While the drum maintains a piano F the horns of Marke and his huntsmen are heard in the distance. There are six horns, all in F, and the effect as the strains ascend from the valley is pleasing to the general hearer, though not so to Isolde, who is impatient for the departure of the chase. Her impulsiveness is checked by Brangäne, who with her womanly quickwittedness has noted the demeanour of Melot, Tristan's false friend, and thus warns her fate-impelled mistress:—

Deem'st thou thy blindness
darkens the world,
And saves your ways from its sight?
When here on board the ship
from Tristan's shivering hand
the bloodless bride
hardly beheld,
Now called her Marke the king;
when all for thy step,
as it staggered, had eyes.
When the king with kindness
mildly was moved,
the toils of the length of sea
thou hadst suffered aloud to soothe—
One watcher alone
I lit upon well,
who for Tristan alone was wakeful.

Isolde, however, is deaf to the voice of warning, and after more converse, in which the themes just named appear in

endless variety of form and modification, together with a new and graceful love-motive, she seizes the torch and bids her attendant haste to the watch-tower. Furious chromatic scales and a *fortissimo* delivery of the death-motive mark the extinguishing of the light, and then there is a momentary lull. The motives of Tristan's impatience and Isolde's love-summons re-enter quietly at first, but with steadily increasing force and agitation. The bewitched princess sees her lover in the distance, and waves her handkerchief to him, while the orchestra is lashed into a state of frantic excitement, one figure of four notes being repeated no less than forty times in succession. At length the enamoured pair rush madly into each other's arms, and then ensues a scene of sheer rhapsody, alike in a literary and musical sense. The lovers indulge in a succession of meaningless and disjointed epithets of endearment, while the orchestra continues its furious course, the new love-theme mentioned above being the basis of this torrent of sound. Here we have a remarkable illustration of the union which according to Wagner should exist between poetry and music. Each constituent of the present scene taken by itself is preposterous in the strongest degree; united they afford an extraordinarily graphic presentment of the situation. Now commences that wonderful duet which has won such unstinted eulogium for its musical beauty, but which has also drawn upon Wagner the most virulent abuse for its alleged immorality. This is not the place to discuss what constitutes a moral or an immoral tendency in dramatic work, but I would beg impartial observers to suspend their judgment until after personal examination into the matter. In the first place, there is absolutely nothing in Wagner's book to show that the marriage between King Marke and Isolde has been consummated, while there is circumstantial evidence to the contrary, as we shall see at the end of the tragedy. Again, the duet is not merely an outpouring of vehement passion; after the first transports its language becomes more subtle in its meaning, more mystical and tragic. The symbolical import of the scene—and, indeed, of the entire drama—is introduced with much skill and delicacy. Naturally the conversation of the lovers turns upon the signal given by Isolde which brings about their reunion—namely, the extinguishing of the torch. Light to them is therefore the symbol of separation, and darkness that of joy in reunion. But Tristan attaches a deeper meaning to the idea: in life they can have no real happiness; only in the darkness of death can their love receive its full and perfect consecration. The expansion of this sentiment occupies a considerable time, and it is necessary to speak of its musical illustration, in which Wagner has risen to heights of ideal expression never imagined by any previous composer. For some time the music consists of a species of magic net-

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work of motives, the analysis of which reveals ingenuity of the most astounding description, though the motion is rapid and continuous; and to the ordinary hearer the idea of mere rhapsodising might be conveyed, rather than of concentration of thought on the minutest details. As it proceeds, the day-motive gradually assumes a quieter and more subdued character, signifying in this modified form the calm and gloom of night. The stream of harmony becomes more and more soothing and melodious, though an occasional burst of passion shows the agitated feelings that still prevail. At last a new and voluptuous treatment of the reunion-motive occurs in the key of A; the basses descend gently semitone by semitone from D to the E flat below, where everything is withdrawn save the violins, violas, and cellos. These, muted and divided into eight parts, commence to pulsate in tender syncopations, while the wood and horns steal in with sustained harmonies in the faintest *pianissimo*. Thus commences that wonderful passage, "O sink hernieder, Nacht der liebe," which occurs to every one who knows the work as the most characteristic feature of the whole scene. The melody, harmonies, and colouring of this episode are equally strange, thrilling, and beautiful. When exhaustion supervenes, and the pair lapse into silence—not on a full close, but on the second inversion of a chord of the major ninth—Brangäne's warning voice is heard from her lonely post. Here the sweeping passages for the harp, the endless divisions of the strings, and the effect of the extreme low notes—some of the basses having their E string tuned down to C sharp—increase the weirdness of the *ensemble*, the mass of sound being extraordinarily full and rich, though dreamy and subdued. When Brangäne's song dies away, a new and very lovely melody, in which the death-motive is blended, is announced by the orchestra. This may be denominated the slumber-motive, though its significance is not so plainly apparent as that of some of the previous figures. It recurs, however, frequently, and eventually gives way to another and most important theme. This is the death-song, which in the form that it appears at the conclusion of the work is already familiar to concert-goers. Here also it is worked up at considerable length, though with simpler accompaniment and less passionate expression. Rising at length to a climax, the dominant seventh of B changes abruptly to the first inversion of the supertonic minor ninth in the same key, with the root in an upper part. This crashing discord, given *fortissimo*, announces the entrance of Marke, the traitor Melot, and a number of retainers, the faithful Kurwenal arriving too late to warn his master of the impending danger. After some subsidiary business comes the lengthy reproving speech of Marke which has formed a stumbling-block for the majority of critics. The only objection that I can see to it is a purely musical one;

in a dramatic, or still more in a psychological sense, it seems appropriate and masterly. It has been said that for the outraged monarch to stand tamely by and expostulate with the betrayer of his honour is absurd and contrary to reason. That may be admitted, as it was equally weak and foolish in King Lear to blind himself to the worth of Cordelia. The character of the Cornish prince is well indicated in these lines, selected from his long address. Speaking of himself he says—

Seemed he too little
 thanks to say,
 when what thou hadst won him—
 realm and fame—
 as thy heirdom freely he owned ?
 Whom childless his wife
 had left in woe ;
 he loved thee so
 that never more
 had Mark' a will to marry.
 When fast his folk
 of throne and field,
 with prayers and threats
 upon him pressed
 a queen amid his kingdom :
 a mate by his side to settle.
 When thou thyself
 besought'st him so,
 with craft his heart
 made he not hard
 till, Tristan, thou hadst threatened
 no longer his throne
 and land to heed,
 wert thou thyself
 not sent with speed
 to seek him the bride by sea ?
 And so he bade it be.

These are the utterances of a man who, dead to the ambitions and pleasures of the world, finds himself sorely wounded in the one remaining spot where he was susceptible to pain. He is too much crushed to do more than ask, in deeply pathetic accents, "Why this to me ?" Thus considered, Marke's attitude is both logical and beautiful, and it may be said that he affords one of the best examples of Wagner's powers of characterisation. But from a musical point of view there can be no question that the intrusion of the episode is exceedingly unfortunate. After being thrilled to one's inmost fibres by the preceding music, this declamatory and lugubrious though dignified solo cannot be otherwise regarded than as a serious anticlimax, and a proof of the impossibility of always uniting the poetic and musical interest in a lyric drama. In answer to his uncle's pleading Tristan replies sadly that he can offer no explanation of his conduct, a soft utterance of the love-potion theme meanwhile furnishing the audience with the

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required answer. Turning to Isolde he asks her if she is ready to follow him to the dark and sunless land whither he is going, the slumber and death-motives indicating his meaning. She expresses her willingness, and this arouses the jealous Melot to fury. After a few stern and bitter words from Tristan the two knights engage in combat, but the hero at once drops his guard and falls severely wounded, though Marke makes a move to save him. In this abrupt fashion the act comes to a conclusion, and the dazed listener is left to collect his shattered thoughts. A volume might be written on the wonders and beauties of this act, but I must hurry on to consider the remainder of the tragedy.

The scene is now shifted to Tristan's castle on the coast of Brittany, whither the wounded man has been conveyed by Kurwenal, who when the curtain rises is watching over him as he lies asleep in the garden. Nothing could be more dismal than the opening in F minor, and the effect of gloom and sadness is intensified by the dreary piping of a herdsman without. The instrument used is the noble but melancholy corno inglese, and the time is almost supernaturally weird and dolorous. After forty bars of this, the orchestra steals in and repeats the most prominent figure, while the herdsman appears and inquires how fares the sufferer. In the succeeding conversation we learn that Kurwenal has sent for Isolde, whose skill was the means of saving Tristan's life on a former occasion; and he bids the piper keep watch and announce the approach of a vessel by a lively ditty. Tristan now recovers consciousness, and asks many questions, the tenderness and single-hearted disposition of Kurwenal being shown in his replies. His comforting words are illustrated by a new cheerful and melodious theme in six-four time, the contrast between the unaffected music that accompanies him, and the yearning strains made up of the now familiar love-themes that ebb and flow when the fate-stricken hero speaks, being remarkably striking. The climax of Tristan's passionate outburst is marked by an intensely pathetic recurrence of the reunion motive, an appropriate reply to his agonised question as to when calm and quiet will arrive for him. Later on he raves, fancying he sees the ship approaching, and then the plaintive air of the shepherd returns and reminds him of his childhood and early sorrows, associated as the air was with the death of his parents :—

So to me must thou mean
 thou old bewailing sound
 that ail'st me like sorrow's words?—
 By breath of evening
 idly borne
 in childhood first,
 my father's death it followed;

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in mist of morning
drearily muffled,
later amid
my mother's lot it moaned.
When he begot me and died—
when birth by death she gave.

The accompaniment to these lines, and more in the same vein, is unutterably dismal. The strings maintain a chromatic descending *tremolo*, while the shepherd's theme is persistently heard in the orchestra in a variety of keys, and associated with other motives which are given in more or less distorted fashion. At length Tristan swoons, after delivering a fearful curse on the magic love-potion; but in a brief space he revives and dwells less despairingly on Isolde—another phase of agitation more pleasurable in its nature occurring here, until at last we are landed on a dominant pedal in the key of C, when a joyous phrase is heard without from the shepherd's pipe. It is the signal that the ship is in sight; the wounded man hears the sound and recognises its meaning; the orchestra takes up the figure, and there is a sense of hurry and expectation, rising gradually to a state of delirious excitement. Kurwenal, bidding his master remain quietly on the couch, rushes down to the shore, his departure being the direct cause of the catastrophe. For the longing Tristan when left to himself cannot control his impatience, and with painful realism tears off the bandages that confine his limbs. The orchestra pours forth a rhapsodical torrent of the love themes in three-four, four-four, and five-four measure; the voice of Isolde is heard without; Tristan endeavours to rush forward to meet her, and then with terrible force the death-motive rings out, and the ill-fated knight falls dying in his mistress's arms. His last whispered word is "Isolde," and the orchestra tells us in eloquent tones that love is stronger than death. After a frantic outburst of grief, in which a new theme of lamentation is mingled touchingly with other motives, Isolde swoons on the body, and then the herdsman rushes in to say that another vessel is in sight. Fearing he knows not what, Kurwenal endeavours to bar the gate, and has fairly succeeded, when Marke, Melot, Brangäne, and followers arrive. The King has come with no evil intent, but his men make a forcible entry, and Kurwenal and Melot both fall in the encounter. Gazing upon the prostrate bodies, Marke and the handmaiden explain the purport of their journey. The latter, calling upon Isolde, speaks thus:—

Happy tidings,
have I to tell !
What forbids thee to trust Brangäne ?
On her blindfold blame
forgiveness she brings;
thou hardly wert gone

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when in haste she came to the king:
 the love-water's secret
 soon as he learned,
 with unsparing speed
 to sea he sprang,
 again to get thee,
 then to forego thee,
 and give thee forth to his friend.

To which Marke adds :—

What means, Isolde,
 this to me?
 As soon as clearly I saw,
 what before I could not fathom,
 how blest I felt to find
 my friend from blame was free.
 To him I loved
 wholly to lose thee,
 with brimming sails
 I followed thy boat.

Isolde heeds them not, but, rising to her feet, commences that wonderful death-song which, joined to the prelude of the opera, has been performed as an instrumental piece at the Richter Concerts and elsewhere. It is mainly a repetition of the last section of the great love duet in the second act, but the accompaniment is more diversified, more suggestive of highest ecstasy and yearning. The music rises to a climax on the dominant of B, and then the reunion theme, delivered in a new form and *fortissimo*, gives the key to the scene, and, indeed, to the entire drama. As Isolde's life ebbs gently away this beautiful figure pulsates with diminishing force but increasing tenderness, while the upward arpeggios seem to denote the flight of her spirit to the realms where love is immortal. Those who have only heard this music in the concert-room can have no idea of its overwhelming effect when given in its proper place. It is a worthy crown and peroration to one of the most stupendous efforts of genius in art the world has ever produced.

Some who have followed these remarks with exemplary patience, may not unreasonably be of opinion that in describing certain portions of this phenomenal work the language of extravagant eulogium has been employed, since a lyric drama containing scenes of such unique power and beauty should long ere this have surely won unanimous favour wherever music is cultivated as an art. The answer to this presumed objection must be that the composer has undoubtedly rendered the acceptance of his work exceedingly difficult by his uncompromising adherence to a system involving a continuous strain on the intellectual faculties which very few can bear. When the curtain has fallen, and the last throbs of Isolde's death-song have died away, the hearer is conscious of a mental exhaustion that may have been partly caused by intense emotional pleasure, but

which is in itself more akin to pain. It remains to be asked, then, Can a creation of such vastness and complexity be accepted as a model for the opera of the future? The answer must be unhesitatingly in the negative. The influence of Wagner's art-work may be highly beneficial in teaching composers to adopt more serious views of their duties, to avoid meretricious effects, and to bear in mind that opera is not solely musical in its full realisation, and that the sole end and aim of the artist should be to appeal to the cultured, not to the illiterate. But it would be disastrous were every talented young musician to make it his endeavour to commence where Wagner has left off. It has been my lot to examine several important compositions, not only German but English, in which the aim has been apparently to avoid a lucid eight-bar phrase, a full close, or more than two diatonic harmonies in succession; and these by musicians who might have risen higher than respectable mediocrity with due restraint of their o'erweening ambition. But while deprecating the general employment of the Wagner system in its entirety, as certain to lead to results exceedingly disastrous to the best interests of music, it is surely possible to regard the expression of monumental genius with befitting respect and admiration. To adopt a simple metaphor, those are foolhardy who attempt to scale Mont Blanc without the requisite physical strength and proper training; but the grandeur of the mountain may be acknowledged even by those who contemplate it from a distance. In addressing an audience of musicians I hope I shall not be considered presumptuous in urging any who intend being present at the forthcoming representations of "*Tristan und Isolde*" to devote a portion of their leisure to the perusal of the score. It may safely be said that a feast of wonder and delight awaits any who are sufficiently interested to take this course. Familiarity will in this case certainly not breed contempt, but rather will lead to a realisation of the infinite beauty, subtlety, and exhaustless fertility of device contained in the work. That which seems new, strange, and inexplicable at first, will in time be recognised as essential to the unity and completeness of the one great design; the only danger being that the cool impartiality of the inquirer will give place to the unreasoning enthusiasm of the partisan. I may perhaps be accused, not without reason, of having fallen into this error, and I cannot therefore more fitly conclude than by recommending you not to accept in faith anything that has been said, but to submit the matter to your own independent and more enlightened judgment.

DISCUSSION.

The CHAIRMAN.—Ladies and gentlemen: I think I may take it for granted, from the applause that has been given to the paper, that you are as much delighted with it as I have been myself. I had the pleasure of seeing Mr. Frost at Bayreuth, for I went to that great festival. I must explain, when I say I saw him, that it was very imperfectly, for my right eye was blinded entirely, owing to the mosquitoes, at Darmstadt. However, I am able to identify him as the gentleman who was there, for we came home together. I heard the music of the “Nibelungen,” and I must say with a great deal of it I was very much delighted. I think I heard about fourteen or fifteen hours of music, and I enjoyed about two-and-a-half hours out of that time. Of course that is my own experience only. I was not able to attain the great height which I could have wished. However, I have already secured my seat for the first cycle of this “Nibelungen Ring,” because I want to see what kind of sympathy I shall have with the giant and the dragon; for I candidly confess I had not much sympathy with them when at Bayreuth. I have no great fondness for mythological subjects—but that, again, is my ignorance. One remark of Mr. Frost's is a very excellent one. He has spoken, as a great friend and admirer of Wagner, with a great deal of modesty; he said that which I perfectly agreed with—that Wagner should not be considered by young musicians as the basis for superstructure. He is to be admired by them, and a great many things taken from him if they can do it; but I must say that I am as yet too much of a conservative—talking of conservatives in a musical sense. I see some Wagnerians here whom I look upon as musical radicals, and some conservatives, and I hope we shall see them breaking their lances while we look on and see fair play. Wagner has certainly been a most prolific writer, as may be seen by a catalogue of his works which are published as well as those which are not; for instance, Mr. Dannreuther, in a volume entitled “Richard Wagner and his Tendencies and Theories,” which I was looking at before I came here, says he projected an immense work which he describes as a concoction made up of “Hamlet” and “King Lear” on an absurdly grand scale. Forty-two of the actors died in the course of it, and he was obliged to make a number of them return as ghosts so as to keep the last act sufficiently stocked with *dramatis personæ*. I happened to take this book down by chance, and being very much amused by this I thought I would bring it here and read it to you. It took him two years and a-half to lay the plan of this great tragedy, and if he had composed music to it, and if

it had been performed, I want to know how long it would have taken. It certainly does take some time to bury forty-two men, and then you must reinter the ghosts. Whether there was to be another "Nibelungen" or not I do not know.

Mr. SHEDLOCK.—I would merely ask Mr. Frost whether, in the few remarks he made at the commencement, I understood him rightly that Sir Walter Scott's poem was by Thomas of Erceldoune. I believe there is a great deal of dispute as to the authorship of that poem. There were three Thomases: there was Thomas, the writer of the French novel, of Kinghorn; there was also Thomas of Britain, and there was also Thomas the Rhymer. To the best of my memory Thomas the Rhymer was the one quoted by Godfrey of Strassburg. There were three of these writers, and there is a good deal of dispute amongst those learned in the subject who was the author of this poem. I fancied Mr. Frost attributed it to Thomas of Erceldoune.

Mr. BARRY.—I can say, with reference to that, that in Scott's preface to "Sir Tristrem" he seems to have proved that Thomas of Erceldoune and Thomas of Britain were synonymous.

Mr. SHEDLOCK.—It was afterwards taken up in 1833 or 1834, and there were some articles published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* about it, but I believe the matter was not considered conclusively settled.

Mr. BARRY.—It is a matter you cannot come to any positive determination about, but I think the arguments Scott brought forward were pretty conclusive. Godfrey von Strassburg makes repeated allusion in his poem to Thomas of Britain, and he says many people have undertaken to recite the story of "Tristan and Isolde," but very few of them have done so aright because they have not followed Thomas of Britain's way of telling it. It seems that Godfrey von Strassburg's version agrees perfectly with that of Thomas of Erceldoune, except that there are seven stanzas in Godfrey's for one in Thomas of Erceldoune's. That seems pretty conclusive proof that Thomas of Erceldoune was synonymous with Thomas of Britain.

Mr. SHEDLOCK.—I only mean that that subject has been discussed since.

Mr. BARRY.—Of course, but it is not a subject on which you can now come to any definite determination. The evidence Scott brought forward seems to me to be pretty conclusive.

Mr. FROST.—I must explain that I have not read anything of later date on this particular point than Sir Walter Scott's preface in his own work.

Mr. FERDINAND PRAEGER.—All those who know me are fully aware that I agree entirely with the eulogy Mr. Frost has pronounced upon our great master, Richard Wagner. There-

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fore, the only thing which might interest this meeting, without discussing whether he is a genius—which I think all Europe is now agreed upon—would be some account of how the opera was first begun. It was some twenty-five years ago. I was staying with Wagner at Zurich. I passed most of my holidays with him, and therefore I knew him intimately. After having worked in the morning we used to walk to the mountains, and one day he spoke of Godfrey von Strassburg, saying, "To-morrow I will read you something"—because my defective eyesight would not allow me to read long—so, sitting before the little Swiss *châlet* in the garden with his former wife, who has since died, he read me the very verses which have formed the groundwork of his new opera. When we sat at breakfast he always read the newspaper to his wife, and told her all kinds of ridiculous things. She was not a woman of very great intellect, but a most excellent, charming person; and she used to listen and say, "Oh, Richard, you are telling me falsehoods again!" All at once he dropped the paper, and I gave her a sign to cease talking. I saw him moving his lips, conning over something. We waited for a long while; I busied myself and did not speak a word, when all at once he began again and took up the paper. I said to him, "I know what you have been doing." "What?" he replied, "how can you?" "Ah," I said, "you have been composing the love-song you were talking of yesterday." "How do you know?" "I saw it by your moving lips." To which he replied, "You are right." Such was the embryo of the idea. I must tell you at the same time that he never looked out for a libretto, because, being so intimate with him, I asked him to write one, when he said, "I cannot; my librettos come only by chance. They all at once strike me." He had no idea previously of his libretto. It formed itself in his mind by degrees; indeed, I may tell you, he had not the slightest idea of making this work as it appeared, because at the same time he received an offer from the Emperor of the Brazils, who was extremely devoted to his music, to write an opera. He did not care for this, but said he would write at some time an opera "in which I will entirely discomfit those who attack me for want of melody" (and this attack was made against Beethoven when a boy, just as much as against Wagner)—"I will write an opera full of melody." This was the opera which he intended, and this shows how his genius would lead him in an entirely different direction; because, although I do not say there is not melody in it, it is melody high above the level of the common understanding, and it will want half a century before the great mass will understand it. In fact, as he once said to me, "I always must do the thing contrary to what I intend." I told him, for consolation, what Goethe says, "The genius is taken by the nape of the neck by the demon who

forces him to do what he must do." That is the surest proof of genius.

Mr. SOUTHGATE.—I am hardly prepared to speak on the subject, although perhaps if I had looked at some note-books of mine, I might have been able to say a few words upon it. It was my fortune or misfortune to have heard "Tristan und Isolde" in Berlin some five or six years ago. I had perhaps better say very little on the opera itself, because it has been so carefully and ably dissected by Mr. Frost, and his impressions of it are no doubt more correct than mine; but with his concluding remarks I entirely agree—it did produce on me a feeling of extreme weariness, though I fancy it was not exactly the kind of weariness to which our friend Mr. Frost alluded. When the opera began I tried to follow it as carefully as one usually does, and in the opening scene I succeeded pretty well; but very quickly that intense restlessness, of which Mr. Frost has spoken, seemed to infuse itself into me. I missed the full closes—I wanted the cadences of which he has spoken as being absent; and the music, I think I may say, instead of giving one a definite impression of a completed subject, went on in what one can only call a rambling way—the various motives were so jumbled up in the laborious orchestration that I could no longer detect them; eventually, indeed, I did not try to do so, and my only feeling was, that the sooner it was over the sooner my torture would be at an end. It was my misfortune, and possibly my fault also, but I can only say that before the end of the opera was reached I felt that the weariness of which he has spoken was complete, and I desired to hear no more. With regard to the work itself and its elaborate construction, I endeavoured to penetrate the mysteries of it, but did not succeed. No doubt that was likewise my misfortune; but I retired, certainly without being impressed with Wagner's power to illustrate a subject by means of these *leit-motives* or continuous *melos*. However that may be, I think we can find other works which do this, and yet are distinctly melodious. The restless harmonic progressions and ugly unvocal declamations of this opera certainly produced on me the weariness of which Mr. Frost has spoken. On the following day I proposed to go to the opera-house, but my wife, who was with me, said, "I think we have had enough." However, I did go—I was rash, perhaps—and I heard Spohr's "Jessonda"; the feeling which occurred at the end of that charming work was not weariness by any means.

The CHAIRMAN.—I think I may now ask for a few words from a solid conservative, and I will call on Mr. Stephens.

Mr. C. STEPHENS.—I think the matter has been so ably dealt with that I would rather not say much. I have not had sufficient opportunity to study the works of Wagner. That opportunity is

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now about to arise, and I shall avail myself of it to endeavour to understand, and to enter fully into the beauties which I think may possibly be found below the surface. Those who dislike at first hearing the works of Wagner must nevertheless feel that when he is speaking they are listening to the utterances of a great mind. I think there can be not the least doubt that the enormous work that we are about to hear—this “*Nibelungen*”—on examination will be found to be masterly in every line of it, and even if the result may not be satisfactory altogether to some listeners, it must be that they have not yet quite penetrated into the inner meaning and full design of the author. I think a great work of art, if it is really a great work of art, requires great application to understand it. Its great merit is that it is exalted, and it requires an exalted understanding to do it justice.

The CHAIRMAN.—I think I will now ask you to give a vote of thanks to Mr. Frost for the paper he has given us; and I hope that all those who will probably hear for the first time on the operatic stage the works of Wagner will come out of the ordeal as I did at Bayreuth. I heard there some of the most delicious music I ever wish to hear, and I hope to hear much more of it when I become more acquainted with it.

The vote of thanks having been carried,

Mr. FROST said: I fully expected to have had a very great deal to answer, if indeed I had the power to answer the objections which I presumed would pour down on me, from all parts of the room, for the subject of my paper and the opinions I have expressed on this work of Wagner's. But I find that I have really very little to say indeed in reply to what has been expressed in the discussion. With regard to Mr. Southgate's impressions, derived from the performance of “*Tristan*” at Berlin, I can quite comprehend that, if he went to the opera on that occasion without having made a profound study of this work beforehand, his experiences must be as he stated. I may state that, when I heard this work for the first time, in Munich, in September, I had been through the score carefully two or three times beforehand, as a musician generally does, and I thought I knew all about it, but I found I really knew very little; and when I undertook to read a paper on the subject here, my intention at the outset was to treat the subject from a very conservative point of view—indeed, to speak of it as an extreme work—a strange, original work—having extraordinary beauties here and there, but so covered up and smothered with ugliness and incomprehensibilities of every description that it must be looked upon, not as a masterpiece, but as the mistake of a great man. But in preparing myself to read this paper, I of course took the score in hand, and the more I read the more I was amazed at its wonders. I have never opened it once without having discovered something

new, something marvellous in every page of it. Of course very few can give the same time and patience to a work as I have had to do in this instance, and for that reason I hope those who do hear "*Tristan*" at Drury Lane will not go away with the idea that the impression derived on that particular occasion will be lasting, and so lose the opportunity of hearing the work again. I beg to acknowledge, most sincerely, the vote of thanks you have accorded to me.