

RICHARD WAGNER AND THE PREMIERE OF *TRISTAN UND ISOLDE* BY

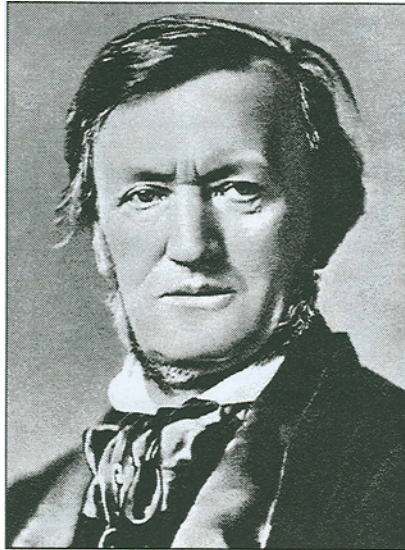
PAUL GRIFFITHS

Some operas still carry about them the aura of their first performances, whether because of some triumph or misadventure at the time, or because they made history. *Tristan und Isolde* belongs in this category on all counts. Its first few bars form the introduction not only to a more than four hour opera but also to everything that has happened in western music during the subsequent century and a half. We are in a new world, afloat. Quite apart from that, at any performance of the opera we meet the ghosts of those who were there when the piece was first done, in Munich in 1865, for those people were caught up in dramas of their own. The conductor, Hans von Billow, had lost his wife, Cosima, to the composer, Wagner. The principal singers were another couple, who cannot have known that the tragedy they were presenting on stage was soon to be mirrored in their own lives.

Wagner, not von Billow, was in charge of the casting, and also of the stage direction. For the central duo he settled on Ludwig and Malvina Schnorr von Carolsfeld; for Kurwenal, he chose Anton Mitterwurzer, who had been his first Wolfram in *Tannhäuser*, 20 years before, and who was also renowned for his portrayal of the title character in *Der fliegende Holländer*. All three of these singers were members of the opera company in Dresden, where the composer had been music director in the 1840s.

By 1865, Wagner and his doings were well known, and much discussed. Comment was only intensified by the invisibility of his latest works-works he was defending in print, but not allowing the world to see. The last new opera of his to reach the stage had been *Lohengrin*, 15 years earlier. Since then, he was known to have composed *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre* and *Tristan*, all of which he was keeping under wraps.

One reason for his secrecy was the need to find the right singers: his music had developed enormously since



Richard Wagner

Lohengrin, but singing technique had not. Then, in 1862, he encountered the Schnorrs, and tried them out in excerpts from the unheard *Tristan*, to his own piano accompaniment. Impressed, he tried to mount a production in Vienna, but this was cancelled after 77 rehearsals. That failure, of course, did more to encourage rumors that the opera was unsingable.

It was the munificence of the Wagner-mad Ludwig II of Bavaria that made possible another attempt, in Munich. The king was just 19 and had only recently succeeded to the throne; throwing his theater open to Wagner was one of his first acts as monarch. As for Ludwig Schnorr, he was only 28, but, as photographs from the time reveal, he was a young man of hefty physique, with a full beard and penetrating, melancholy eyes.

His father was a painter, Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, who had decorated the Munich palace for Ludwig II's grandfather with scenes from the Nibelung legend, and so perhaps prepared the young boy prince for a life of Wagner worship. Now here was the son, back in Munich and preparing to enact *Tristan*.

Ludwig Schnorr, having been a boy chorister, had studied singing in Dresden

and joined the opera company in Karlsruhe at the age of 19. His future wife, the Danish-born soprano Malvina Garrigues, was a decade older and already a member of the company. They married in 1860 and moved together to the Dresden opera the same year.

It was evidently the tenor who appealed particularly to Wagner. He described Ludwig Schnorr's voice as "full, soft and gleaming," and was obviously impressed by a singer who could convey the force of both music and words: "There was not a single moment," the composer wrote, "not a single word of the text, that was met with inattention or distraction; rather, the orchestra completely disappeared beside him or, more accurately, appeared to be subsumed in his delivery."

That is about as far as we can go in imagining the sound of the first *Tristan*. Ludwig Schnorr was young enough that he could have lived into the age of recording, and left us, if in his sixties, some distinct echo of that historic night in Munich. But it was not to be.

In between performances of *Tristan*, Wagner had the young tenor appear before the king to sing excerpts from the *Ring* operas and from his current project; *Die Meistersinger*. Ludwig Schnorr was set to become the first Siegmund, the first Siegfried, and the first Walther, as well as the first *Tristan*. He might have been the first Parsifal, for he would still have been in his forties when that opera had its premiere. However, he caught a chill and died just a few days after the fourth performance of *Tristan*. Those striking photographs are our only mementos.

Paul Griffiths was for ten years the chief music critic of the Tunes of London and then a music critic of the New Yorker and the New York Times. He is also the author of many books and several librettos. He divides his time between southwest Wales and New York City.