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# The Critical Reception of Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in the English-Speaking World

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**The Critical Reception of Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in the  
English-Speaking World**

**Thomas Rizzuto**

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Few operas have sparked as much controversy, in as many places, as Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. History shows that during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century spirited discussion and outright debate followed the work to every new city that dared to produce it. This paper will focus on the critical reception of the Wagner's historic music drama in two such cities: London and New York. By examining newspaper reviews, journal articles, and other musical writings of the time, we will develop an understanding of the divergent reactions to each premiere. We will examine the cultural and musical factors that may have contributed to the vehemence of both sides of the dispute. Most of all, we will evaluate the enduring effect that *Tristan und Isolde*, and Wagner himself, had on the English-speaking world.

### **Prelude: The Music of and Initial Reactions to *Tristan und Isolde***

While still completing the third act of *Tristan und Isolde* in April of 1859, a weary and troubled Richard Wagner wrote a short note to his friend, lover, and confidant Mathilde Wesendonck. The letter, which is translated in Elliot Zuckerman's *The First Hundred Years of Wagner's Tristan*, reads as follows,

Child! This Tristan is turning into something *dreadful*  
[*fruchtbares*]!  
That last act!!! — — — — —  
I'm afraid the opera will be forbidden—unless the whole  
thing is turned into a parody by bad production—: only mediocre  
performances can save me! Completely *good* ones are bound to drive  
people crazy, —I can't imagine what else could happen. To such a  
state have things come!!! Alas! —  
I was just going full steam ahead!<sup>1</sup>

One has to wonder what about his own music had Wagner so worried, even before the work was completed. After all, this goes against so many popular conceptions of the

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<sup>1</sup> Elliot Zuckerman, *The First Hundred Years of Wagner's Tristan*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 33.

composer. We tend to believe that Richard Wagner was completely convinced of his own genius to the point of megalomania. However, this correspondence shows a crack in that self-assured image. It is as if there was something about *Tristan und Isolde* that was so new, so radically different than anything that had been done before that even its very creator found it intimidating at first. As Zuckerman is quick to point out, these doubts of Wagner's would prove to be remarkably prophetic. Owing to the notion that it was simply too hard to produce, it would be six long years before the opera was performed.<sup>2</sup>

So what of the music of *Tristan und Isolde*? What about it caused such a stir from the very beginning? In his book, *A History of Musical Style*, Richard L. Crocker writes, "What gives *Tristan* its special intensity is that keys are not established by direct routes but by indirect ones, by remote modulations."<sup>3</sup> Wagner was uninterested in traditional notions of tonal stability. As Crocker explains, the composer found them unexpressive and discarded them in favor of a more fluid sense of tonality. In fact, Crocker suggests that the music of *Tristan und Isolde* can even be described as atonal. Crocker's image of Wagner casting aside the old harmonic system in his quest for greater expression correlates well with Zuckerman's interpretation that "*Tristan* seemed to present clear signs that the expressive—or overexpressive—possibilities of nineteenth-century harmony had reached a limit." Zuckerman asserts that Wagner's music drama is a clear and specific turning point in musical composition. It is the culmination of all that came before it and the gateway to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>3</sup> Richard L. Crocker, *A History of Musical Style* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 462.

<sup>4</sup> Zuckerman, 169-170.

Faced with how radically different the score to *Tristan* was, it is hardly surprising that nobody wanted to produce it at first. When Wagner finally got the word in 1865 that his opera would be premiered that year in Munich, he must have felt extremely relieved. Little did he know, however, that his problems were just beginning. The world premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* proved extremely problematic. Several of the many obstacles that had to be overcome would follow the opera through time and become part of an enduring folklore surrounding the work. The first of these obstacles was the fact that the premiere, originally scheduled for May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1865 had to be postponed because Malvina Schnorr, the first Isolde, was experiencing hoarseness. Her vocal problems, which were presumably caused by the difficulty of the score, set the production back almost an entire month. During this time, rumors began to circulate about the curious postponement and a parody, called *Tristanderl and Süssholde*, was written and produced. Once the opera was performed on June 10<sup>th</sup>, the performances were fairly well received, but a good deal of damage had already been done. The most tragic and ultimately damning blow to the opera's reputation came when the first Tristan, Ludwig Schnorr, died unexpectedly of an illness that many attributed to the difficulty of the role.<sup>5</sup>

It would be nearly twenty years before *Tristan und Isolde* reached the English speaking world. However, as we will see, the memories of these early difficulties, particularly the death of Schnorr, did not seem to diminish with age. In order to make it in London and New York, the “music of the future” would first need to overcome its past.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 55-57.

## Chapter 1: *Tristan und Isolde* in London

Upon hearing news of the early performances of Richard Wagner's epic opera *Tristan und Isolde* in Germany, at least one London music critic declared that it was "too revolting to permit a chance of it ever being produced in England."<sup>6</sup> However, on June 20, 1882 this reporter and those like him were proven wrong when the opera was produced for the first time at London's Drury Lane Theatre. While history remembers this performance as controversial, even disastrous, a closer look at the critical reviews of the day reveals a more complicated story. This chapter will examine London's critical reception of *Tristan und Isolde*, from both perspectives (those who loved it and those who hated it), and investigate the cultural and aesthetic aspects that may have fueled the controversy.

### The History of Wagner in England

Londoners were well aware of Richard Wagner by 1882. The composer's work had been performed in the city for decades and his music dramas, including *Tristan*, were frequent topics of conversation. Though he had many detractors, British Wagnerians were far from uncommon and his influence can be heard in the work of many English composers, such as Parry, Stanford, and Elgar.<sup>7</sup> Although his reputation in the country is considerable, surprisingly little is known about Wagner's relationship with England in the decades prior to *Tristan's* premiere.

We do know that the composer made three visits to London. The first of these took place in 1838 and lasted for only a few days. The composer's reasons for making the trip were far from professional. During an attempt to flee his creditors, Wagner, his wife,

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<sup>6</sup> "Tristan and Isolde," *The Graphic*, April 8, 1876, Music section.

<sup>7</sup> Barry Millington, *The New Grove Wagner* (New York: Grove Publications, 2002), 44.

and their dog were smuggled into the city where they awaited safe transport to Paris. Despite the fact that his time in London did not advance his career, it did have a lasting effect on his music. The composer later wrote that the perilous sea voyage he endured was the inspiration for *Der fliegende Holländer*.<sup>8</sup>

In 1855, a much more well-established Wagner was invited to conduct a series of eight concerts with the London Philharmonic. Unfortunately, the resulting four-month stay was an unhappy one for the composer. He was routinely attacked in the press and the performances were not well received by the public. To make matters worse, the damp English weather caused him to fall ill, which certainly did not help his conducting. The whole miserable experience left Wagner with a sour impression of the city and he did not return for another two decades.<sup>9</sup>

The next and last time the composer set foot on British soil was in 1876. That year, in hopes of offsetting the debt amassed by the first Bayreuth festival, Wagner returned to the life of a touring conductor. In his honor, a Wagner festival was booked at the Royal Albert Hall. This ambitious endeavor should have signaled a new era of acceptance of his work in England, but that was not to be. Once again, Wagner's attempt to achieve success in Great Britain ended in failure. Of the twenty concerts that were planned, only eight were given, plunging the defeated musical visionary deeper into debt.<sup>10</sup>

Wagner's lack of success in Victorian England is hardly surprising. In their book, *The English Musical Renaissance*, historians Robert Stradling and Meirion Hughes describe the cultural factors that may have contributed to the harsh reception he endured.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Osborne, *Wagner and His World*, (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1977), 109.

According to Stradling and Hughes, the English of this period generally frowned upon art music. Romanticism, and the music it inspired, had no part in the British culture, which took pride in its practicality and sensibility. All of the arts, in fact, were thought by many to be “tainted with eighteenth-century decadence and aristocratic excess.”<sup>11</sup>

In addition to being considered frivolous, music was often seen as a threat to Victorian society. Many in England were highly suspicious not only of art, but of science and philosophy as well. This fear of moral and political corruption was intensified by a distrust of all things foreign. Music, more than any other art form, was imported from other countries and thus soon developed a reputation as the most foreign of all the arts.

Beginning in the 1850s with the rise of Liszt and Wagner, German music inspired the bulk of British suspicion. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the press. Influential journalists, such as *The Athenaeum*'s long-time music critic Henry Chorley, were quick to attack Wagner and his contemporaries. Chorley even went so far as to propose a direct connection between what he called, “Wagner and all his horrors,” and the 1848 “Year of Revolutions” in Europe.<sup>12</sup>

Chorley was not the only critic with a strong dislike for Richard Wagner. J.W. Davis, thirty-year veteran of the *London Times*, described the composer, and his contemporary Liszt, as “enemies of music” and “hateful fungi.”<sup>13</sup> Sir George Grove, creator of the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, also had a lot to say about Wagner. The two actually had lunch together in 1877 during Wagner's final stay in London. Grove, who was working for *The Athenaeum* at the time, reportedly found him to be distasteful as both an artist and a person. According to Stradling and Hughes, Grove

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Stradling and Meirion Hughes, *The English Musical Renaissance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 11.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*



found Wagner's German nationalism and anti-Semitism appalling and regarded him as a fraud.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the vehemence of his detractors, Wagner did have some supporters in the English press. The most notable of these Wagnerian critics was Francis Hueffer who replaced Davis at the *Times*. Hueffer, who was born and educated in Germany, took it upon himself to champion the "music of the future," as well as Beethoven and other German masters. He had a particularly strong affection for *Tristan und Isolde*. To Hueffer, *Tristan* represented the height of the Wagnerian ideals and of Romanticism in music.<sup>15</sup> Though he campaigned tirelessly for Wagner, Hueffer's views were slow to catch on among his peers. Throughout the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most music critics aligned themselves with the conservative views of Grove and Chorley, a trend that may have affected the reception to *Tristan und Isolde* in 1882.

### ***Tristan und Isolde* and the London Press Prior to the Premiere**

Perhaps the most fascinating thing about the story of London's reaction to *Tristan und Isolde* is that it actually begins over a decade before the opera was even produced in England. Reviews of the opera, or at least portions of it, appear in London newspapers as early as 1871 and continue to appear throughout that decade. This suggests that the works were performed with some regularity and were likely familiar to the concert-going public. It is interesting to note that the majority of these early reviews are quite favorable and many, such as the article entitled "Orchestral Compositions by Wagner," which was published in *The Observer*, praise Wagner for his revolutionary approach to composition.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 33.

The author of the article, who remains anonymous, seems to make it his mission to educate his readers about the composer, describing in great detail the history of his work. The critic has also taken the time to analyze the score of *Tristan und Isolde* by comparing the instrumentation to that of *Die Meistersinger*. What makes this article truly important, though, is that it praises Wagner's "experiments in instrumentation." "The infallible success of which," the critic claims, "proves Wagner to have almost miraculous musical instincts." This statement and the author's description of Wagner's "broad and melodious style" stand in sharp contrast to the popular opinion of *Tristan und Isolde*, and indeed its composer, that would develop after the 1882 premiere.<sup>16</sup>

Although this particular journalist's views seem surprising, he was certainly not alone in his sentiment. Another decidedly pro-Wagner article by another anonymous critic appears in the June 1, 1873 issue of *The Musical Times*. It describes a performance of the famous *Prelude und Liebestod* as part of an all-Wagner concert given at the St. James Hall which also featured extracts from *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser*, as well as the Overture to *The Flying Dutchman*. The *Prelude und Liebestod*, which the critic simply calls the "Introduction and Finale to the third act of *Tristan und Isolde*," was conducted by Dr. Hans von Bulow himself and was apparently very well received. The critic showers Wagner with praise, stating that the music was performed, "with a success so decisive as to set at rest all doubt as to the fate of the composer's music in this country."<sup>17</sup> These articles indicate that, contrary to popular belief, the British were open to Wagner's work, at least in small doses. Wagner's name was a common sight on concert programs, possibly because his music was so well-suited for orchestra. Though these excerpts

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<sup>16</sup> "Orchestral Compositions by Wagner," *The Observer*, April 30, 1871, 6.

<sup>17</sup> "Wagner Society," *The Musical Times*, June 1, 1873, 108.

violate the composer's own notions of how his music should be heard, they proved to be instrumental in spreading his work to new audiences. This was probably the best way for the English, with all of their Victorian prejudices, to become accustomed to the dramatically Romantic music of *Tristan und Isolde*.

It is important to note that not all critics of the 1870s were Wagnerites. In fact, an article that was published in *The Observer* in 1875 takes a very different view of Wagner's compositions, including *Tristan und Isolde*. The tone and sentiment of this article is distinctly more conservative and the author seems less willing than his contemporaries to accept Wagner's bending of traditional forms. The journalist only describes the music of *Tristan und Isolde* briefly, but does state an important criticism that will reappear frequently in the work of future critics. The commonly held contention is that the opera, while well composed, contains no real memorable melodies or, as this particular author puts it, "no set melodies capable of being detached."<sup>18</sup> For the British, who had a long infatuation with Italian opera and an even longer history of idolizing singers, this aspect of Wagner's music was probably the hardest to digest.

Though the initial reaction to *Tristan und Isolde* was mixed, evidence suggests that the announcement of the first full production of the work at London's Drury Lane Theatre was met with great excitement. Several articles from 1881 describe the public's enthusiasm for the following year's opera season, with good reason. 1882 marked the first year that both of London's major opera houses would be exclusively performing the works of German composers in German. A good portion of these works were Wagner's.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "Richard Wagner's 'Lohergrin'," *The Observer*, May 9, 1875, Music, 7.

<sup>19</sup> "Wagner's 'Tristan and Isolde'," *The Times*, June 22, 1882.

The articles that were published during the months leading up to the premiere depict a divide between those who eagerly anticipated London's first encounter with the full opera, and those who were doubtful that it would be a success. An article from the November 20, 1881 issue of *The Observer* states that the opera will "need remodeling," but does not go into what about the work needs to be changed, or how to change it for that matter. The article continues by alluding to the difficulties that Wagner encountered in his previous attempts to have the opera and others from his late period produced by stating: "It will be seen that his latest works have been withheld, and for this cause there appears to be sufficient reason, seeing that in their present form some of these works could not be tolerated by the English stage." This may suggest that Wagner's reputation was preceding him, a factor that may have contributed to the prejudices of this and other writers of the time. To the author's credit, though, he does end the article by encouraging Londoners to see the production and make their own conclusions.<sup>20</sup>

Another article written in 1881, this one from *The Musical Times*, takes a more moralistic view of the music drama. Fascinatingly, the critic actually begins the article by praising the work, calling it "extraordinary" and "its author's most daring and individual effort." He goes into detail about how Wagner "forgot all theory and moved with perfect freedom, the word suggesting the tone without reference to any established rules governing the construction of a musical section or movement." He even goes so far as to define leitmotif or, "Leitmotiv" as he calls it, for his readers and declares that Wagner used it to its full effect. One would expect from the way the article begins that it would continue in its positive tone; however, it is during his definition of "Leitmotiv"

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<sup>20</sup> "German Opera," *The Observer*, November 20, 1881, Music.

that the author takes a surprising and negative turn. The description begins, “One melodic phrase of not more than six or eight notes will be repeated again and again, though with endless variety of detail, so that no sense of monotony is felt, but rather one of weariness at the attempt to grasp the kaleidoscopic changes in the harmony.” The jarring shift in tone continues by comparing Wagner’s work (rather unfavorably) to that of Handel and Beethoven, stating that unlike the uplifting endings of their works, the final sensation of Wagner’s opera is “one of exhaustion rather than that of elevation.” The writer also comments on Wagner’s libretto stating, in no uncertain terms, that it is just as immoral as the music and that the combination of the two can “scarcely fail to be unhealthy.” This statement reveals a hint of Victorian prejudice that may have affected his stance on the work. However, rather than citing these numerous objections as the reason he feels the work can never be performed regularly in England (or anywhere else for that matter), the critic chooses to focus on the difficulty of singing the two title roles. This attitude is another example of the well documented British appreciation for singers and singing.

The article ends with two points that will appear again throughout the critical reception of the opera. First, he compares *Tristan und Isolde* with the well-received *Die Meistersinger*, which the critic describes as having “a more wholesome theme and less extravagant music.” Secondly, he adopts a very nationalistic attitude, stating that “the essentially German nature of the subject may possibly exercise a prejudicial effect on its position in this country.” Although it should be pointed out that the subject in question is *Die Meistersinger*, it still points toward a possible nationalistic obstacle that may have

stood in the way of *Tristan und Isolde* being well received.<sup>21</sup> Further evidence of the role nationalism may have played in the opera's reception can be found in *The English Musical Renaissance*. Many in England, including influential writers such as Grove, had their view of the German people forever altered by the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. By the conclusion of the war, Germans, who had previously been seen as a hard-working, music-loving people, were now associated with militarism and ruthlessness.<sup>22</sup> Given the political climate of the time and Wagner's unapologetic nationalism, it is easy to see the validity of this critic's point.

Even those critics who admired Wagner and were looking forward to the premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* seemed to be doubtful that the public was ready for the radically different piece. An article printed in *The Times* on May 1, 1882 about a month before the opera's London premiere praises the "musical marvels" of both *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger* yet does not display any confidence that it will be well received. This particular article, which like many others of the time has no title and was apparently written anonymously, is valuable as a commentary on the contradictory nature of the British reaction to foreign works of art. On the one hand, the critic praises London and the Drury Lane Theatre in particular, for its broadening demand for entertainment from overseas. He states that in the past the London opera crowd seemed content to amuse itself with exclusively British works. He writes that foreign productions "occasionally forced an entrance, came as a traveler and soon departed." The critic makes it seem as though, contrary to previous articles mentioned in this paper, London had a voracious appetite for operas from other parts of Europe stating that, "An Italian, French, or

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<sup>21</sup> "Royal Academy of Music," *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, 464 (1881): 521.

<sup>22</sup> Stradling and Hughes, 20.

German composer cannot set his dreams to music without London requiring first fruits.” He calls for Londoners to reject their previous attitude that those who sought entertainment from other than British sources were “deserting native genius for foreign.” Though the article seems to paint a progressive picture of the London that would receive *Tristan und Isolde*, the closing remark implies that not even this critic is completely convinced of his own claims. In a decidedly unpatriotic turn, he suggests that the 1882 opera season, which was dominated by German opera, has had a transformative effect on the country declaring,

For London, taken as a living and breathing being, it cannot be denied that the effect of the modern requisition for amusements in the season enough to satisfy the millions instead of the ten thousand has been to transform one of the most somber and grayest cities in existence into one which, if Englishmen could learn to treat their pleasures as though they were not a business, might claim to be one of the liveliest and gayest.<sup>23</sup>

Here we see a reaction, by a British writer, against the Victorian ethos of pragmatic reasoning and practicality. This shows that by 1882 the British were beginning to recognize the negative effect these ideals were having on their artistic culture. In many ways, *Tristan und Isolde* came to London at a time when the society was in flux. Xenophobic notions of nationalism and art were being questioned by some and clung to by others. *Tristan*, just about as foreign a work of art as anyone could have hoped for, was taken up as evidence for both sides.

Of all of the articles to come out of the period leading up to the premiere, the one that stands out as the most overwhelmingly positive is “*Tristan and Isolde An Analysis of Richard Wagner’s Music-Drama*” by Frederick Corder. This article, which combines

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<sup>23</sup> *The Times*, May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1882.

music criticism with theoretical analysis, was published in *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* on the first of March, 1882.<sup>24</sup> Corder begins his article by referring to the opera as “that stupendous, crushing effort of genius, which after twenty years is only now beginning to be appreciated and understood.” He is the first critic to delve into the literary origins of the story, and his apparent desire to educate his readers continues throughout the entire article. The most striking thing about Corder’s review is the care he takes to broach nearly every aspect of the work and the incredible amount of detail he employs in his descriptions. Even the rhyme scheme of the libretto is accurately described and contextualized in relation to what Corder calls “old poetry.” Like other critics, he praises Wagner’s use and development of leitmotifs, referring to them as “leading motives.” Unlike the other critics we have examined, Corder provides his reader with a detailed musical incipit of each theme and even a few of their variations. This proves that he put quite a bit of time into this article and suggests that he had studied the score and very possibly may have attended multiple performances.

Corder’s theoretical analysis of Wagner’s motives is incredibly accurate and eloquently incorporated into an equally detailed summary of the libretto. Rather than just retelling the story, Corder embellishes the plot with his own interpretations of the emotions that the characters may be feeling at several key points in the play and how the composer depicts these emotions in his music. Wagner’s depiction of emotion plays a central role in the review. In fact, Corder goes so far as to declare that “The force of emotional music can no further go than in *Tristan and Isolde*.”

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<sup>24</sup> *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* officially shortened its name to *The Musical Times* in 1903.



Although there are many aspects of Corder’s summary that are of interest, including a poignant commentary on how England’s politically subservient relationship to Ireland, as depicted in the opera, has reversed over the course of 1,400 years, it is his analysis that deserves the most attention. Once again, the detail that Corder goes into is incredible. Every imaginable aspect of the themes from the four chromatic semitones that are associated with Isolde in the first, third, and ninth themes (see below) to the noticeable lack of cadences, which Corder calls “conCORDS,” are described and interpreted. He even goes so far as to point out the exact location of the first C-major chord in the score. One possible explanation for the extremely detailed analysis is that Corder was anticipating England’s difficulty in accepting the relative formlessness (in the traditional sense of the word) of *Tristan und Isolde*. It is possible that the critic hoped that his meticulous categorizing of Wagner’s themes would help Londoners cope with a style of music they were unaccustomed to and did not understand.<sup>25</sup>



<sup>25</sup> F. Corder, “*Tristan und Isolde* An Analysis of Richard Wagner’s Music-Drama,” *The Musical Times* 469 (1882): 126-131.



This article demonstrates a few important commonalities that were to continue to appear in pro-Wagner writing of the period. Firstly, it shows an attempt to educate the public on Wagner’s compositional style to the point that it could, at the very least, appreciate his work, if not enjoy it. This emphasis on education seems to be a defining feature of the Wagnerian movement in Britain. The practice of spreading Wagner’s music through edification was not limited to the press. It also found its way into the curriculum of the Royal Academy of Music, where Corder himself was appointed a professor of composition in 1888. According to Stradling and Hughes, the massively influential writer and educator helped steer the Academy away from the conservatism of the past. This shift in curriculum helped to ensure the influence of Wagner on musicians in England.<sup>27</sup>

The second typically Wagnerian aspect of this article is that it is longer than most anti-Wagner criticism. Corder’s work encompasses several pages, while anti-Wagner writing was usually restricted to a short column. Wagnerian writers of the time seem to have been much more long winded, possibly because they felt they had more to prove. Also, and perhaps most importantly, this article implies that the music drama stood little chance of being well received. Like critics before him, Corder felt that the extremely challenging score would prevent the work from ever being frequently produced. In the last paragraph of the article, he makes another claim which suggests a grim future for the looming premiere stating, “We much doubt the wisdom of producing it to an English

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Illustrations taken directly from Corder’s article.

<sup>27</sup> Stradling and Hughes, 32, 45.

audience, which is as yet wholly unacquainted with the other and comparatively simpler works of Wagner's 'third period.'" His sentiment is similar to the previously discussed, often-made comparison between *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger*. However, Corder's attempt to educate his readers proves that he has not given up on his countrymen.

### **The Premiere**

When *Tristan und Isolde* was finally premiered in London, it was given an extraordinary timeslot in an already unusual season. The 1882 opera season was remarkable because it was absolutely inundated with German opera. In fact, we know from an article written in the *The Times* that during the course of the season every one of Wagner's operas from *Rienzi* to *Gotterdammerung* was performed. *Tristan und Isolde* was given a special place of honor. Not only did the June 20<sup>th</sup> premiere close an eventful week at the Drury Lane Theatre, which included a performance of *Fidelio* as well as two back-to-back nights of *Die Meistersinger*, but it was the last production of the entire season.<sup>28</sup>

We know from secondary sources, such as Ernest Walker's *A History of Music in London*, that the much anticipated premiere was not well received. The audience in attendance, which was made up mostly of London's wealthy upper class, was ill-mannered and apparently unappreciative of Wagner's work.<sup>29</sup> The negative reviews that appeared in London's newspapers in the following days all seem to express a remarkably similar set of complaints. The first, and by far the most prevalent, is the common feeling that the opera contained no memorable and/or "sing-able" melodies. Also, as is often the

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<sup>28</sup> "Wagner's 'Tristan and Isolde'," *The Times*, June 22, 1882.

<sup>29</sup> Ernest Walker, *A History of Music in London*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 340.

case with new works of art, several reviewers took it upon themselves to compare the opera with Wagner's previous successes, such as *Die Meistersinger* and *Lohengrin*. The London correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* actually combines both these points in one sentence, writing, "The occasional lapses into accepted forms of melody admitted into all Wagner's previous works are in this instance rigidly excluded, and this circumstance renders the committal of the music to memory a feat of stupendous difficulty." In the same review, the reporter also comments on the lack of choral singing in the music drama and laments that the volume of the orchestra drowned out the voices of the singers.<sup>30</sup>

The criticisms expressed in these reviews fit extremely well into what we know about the English taste for opera at the end of the nineteenth century. England, after all, was a country that had a long history of appreciation for singers and singing. Although German opera had been performed in England before, the prevailing taste was still for the Italian Bel Canto style. Keeping this in mind, it easy to see how an opera like *Tristan und Isolde*, with its disregard for traditional form, unorthodox melodies, and almost complete lack of choral singing, could be jarring to London at the time. Also, it should not be forgotten that the entire season had been saturated by Wagner's work. It very possibly could be the case that by the time *Tristan und Isolde* was premiered, opera-goers had simply had enough of his revolutionary style.

Not all of the criticism of the performance was negative. In fact, an article that appeared in *The Times* titled simply "Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*" contains a glowing review. The critic takes particular care to praise the talents of the singers in the two title

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<sup>30</sup> "From Our London Correspondent," *The Manchester Guardian*, June 22, 1882.

roles, Herr Herm Winkelmann and Frau Rosa Sucher.<sup>31</sup> This admiration for the two leads is shared by critic Hermann Klein in his book *Thirty Years of Musical Life in London 1870-1900*. This focus on the principal singers, common for England as a whole, is particularly unsurprising for Klein, given his personal history as a singer and vocal instructor.<sup>32</sup>

Like Klein, it seems that a large portion of those who wrote favorably of the opera were musicians. This is not surprising considering that these were the people who were most likely to have studied Wagner in the past. If any community could be expected to have developed an appreciation, if not professional respect for the composer's work, it would have been them. This approval of *Tristan und Isolde* is demonstrated in H.F. Frost's "Some Remarks on Richard Wagner's Music Drama *Tristan und Isolde*" published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* (1881-1882). This long and incredibly detailed essay is similar to the previously mentioned article by Corder in that it is made up primarily of theoretical analysis woven into a plot summary. However, Frost's summary is even more detailed than Corder's and relies more heavily on key relationships and dramatic elements to get his points across. A remarkable aspect of Frost's writing, which is common in the work of his Wagnerian contemporaries, is his pessimistic attitude about London's ability to appreciate the music drama. Although he sees Wagner's efforts as noble and valuable to future composers, he does not believe that it will catch on anytime soon and declares that it cannot be the "model for the opera of the future." He does, however, encourage the members of the association to see the opera and to study the score in order to prepare themselves for what they were about to

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<sup>31</sup> "Wagner's 'Tristan and Isolde'," *The Times*, June 22, 1882.

<sup>32</sup> Hermann Klein, *Thirty Years of Musical Life in London 1870-1900* (New York: Century Co, 1908), 262.

experience. Once again we see the uniquely British characteristic of a strong desire to educate combined with pessimistic expectations.

Another particularly interesting thing about Frost's paper is that it was published with the minutes of the discussion that took place after it was first presented. This gives us a fascinating window into what was being discussed in musical circles at the time. It seems, from the record of the discussion, that not all members of the Royal Musical Association were as enthusiastic about *Tristan und Isolde* as Frost. One member, known only as Mr. Southgate, shared many of the same views on Wagner's lack of memorable melodies as the anti-Wagnerian critics. He even describes his own experience with *Tristan und Isolde* as "torture." This rare glimpse into the past shows us that Wagner's opera was a polarizing topic even among the musically trained.<sup>33</sup>

Of the many aspects of *Tristan und Isolde* that are agreed upon by the Wagnerian critics, one similarity stands out. They all seem to have enjoyed the second act, particularly the beginning of it, more than any other part of the opera. Once again, I believe this is another instance of the British preferring that which is closest to what they are used to. The second act of *Tristan und Isolde* is arguably the most melodic and action-filled portion of the piece. It also contains a stirring duet that the English seemed to appreciate.

Although most of the critical opinions about the London premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* can be explained by citing well documented British tastes, there are a few other factors that may have contributed to the negative reaction. These factors are raised by music critic and outspoken Wagnerian, Bernard Shaw in his book *London Music in 1888-*

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<sup>33</sup> H.F. Frost, "Some Remarks on Richard Wagner's Music Drama *Tristan und Isolde*," *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, 8 (1881-1882): 147-167.

1889. Shaw writes that a large portion of the audience that night arrived up to an hour late and talked during the performance. It's easy to see how this behavior, which was not uncommon for operas at the time, could make it difficult to understand a work as complicated as *Tristan und Isolde*. Also, the ticket prices for the premiere were apparently extravagantly high, which Shaw believes discouraged a more musically educated crowd from attending.<sup>34</sup> Though Shaw does not present it as such, it is easy to see the discrepancy between Wagnerian stage practice and how the typical opera was presented in England. If there was ever any real threat that Wagner posed to the people of England it can be seen here. Though his music dramas never succeeded in altering British politics or undermining Victorian morality, as many feared, they certainly had an impact on the opera going community. Today in England, as in most other places, no self-respecting opera lover would think to make idle chatter during a performance. It is easy to see how Wagner's work may have helped to bring that particular convention to an end. Shaw's contempt for the noisy box holders can be seen as an indication of changes to come.

### **The Triumph of *Tristan***

It is interesting to note that in the years that followed *Tristan und Isolde* would continue to be produced, quite successfully, in England. In fact, in 1889 it was even performed in cantata fashion over the course of three nights and was very well received.<sup>35</sup> This shift in public opinion can be explained in two ways. The first, brought up by Shaw, is familiarity. As the British were given more opportunities to hear the work, they grew accustomed to Wagner's techniques. Shaw points out that by 1889 Wagner's peculiar

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<sup>34</sup> Bernard Shaw, *London Music in 1888-1889* (Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk: Constable 1937), 146.

<sup>35</sup> "London Theatricals," *The Manchester Guardian*, January 30, 1889.

sense of harmony and structure were considered commonplace among musicians.<sup>36</sup>This could be a result of the teachings of Corder and his contemporaries at the Royal Academy of Music. The second has less to do with music and more to do with British society as a whole. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century came to a close the Victorian era was also in its final years. With its passing, many of the cultural prejudices and irrational fears that stood in Wagner's way in the past were beginning to fade. In addition, it's worth mentioning that although it does not appear in any of the sources, Wagner died the year after the London premiere. It is very possible that, as is so often the case with artists, Wagner's death caused his work to grow in popularity and appreciation.

Although history may remember the 1882 London premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* as a failure, a careful study of the actual critical reaction tells a much more complicated story. It is the story of a changing musical culture, striving to break free of stifling Victorian notions of morality and nationalism. It is the story of dedicated musicians and writers united in the goal of educating a nation. Most of all, one could say it is the story of how Richard Wagner overcame prejudice and misunderstanding to achieve the success he deserved and maybe even helped to expand British musical taste.

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<sup>36</sup> Shaw, 147.



## Chapter 2: *Tristan und Isolde* in New York

By the time *Tristan und Isolde* received its long overdue American debut at New York's Metropolitan Opera House on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1886, the city was already well on its way to becoming a center for Wagnerian music and ideas. While the composer's ascendancy in America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is well documented, the critical reception of *Tristan und Isolde* in New York is curiously far less researched than the reception of Wagner's other works. This is a strange phenomenon considering its legacy as one of the defining works of Wagner's career and the controversy surrounding the premiere itself. This chapter will analyze the critical reception of the historic piece, and its impact on the musical landscape of New York in the late 1800's.

Newspaper articles and other musical writings of the period that deal with *Tristan und Isolde* show the piece at the center of a great deal of debate. Arguments raged over musical topics as varied as the quality of Wagner's vocal writing to the validity of leitmotifs as a compositional technique. However, the cultural implications of Wagnerian opera, rather than the musical innovations, received the bulk of critical attention. The articles examined for this project show that the controversy manifested itself in two ways. The first was the fear that German, particularly Wagnerian, opera would replace the more prevalent Italian style. The second was the dramatic changes that Wagner's music dramas initiated in how operas were produced and seen in America. While these issues weren't exclusive to New York, what sets the city apart is the role that ethnicity played in the rise and eventual fall of Wagner's music and ideas. As we will see, Wagner's ascendancy in

New York has everything to do with the German immigrant's quest for social recognition.

### **Richard Wagner and the Story of the German Immigrant**

One unique aspect of the New York premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* is that the city's musical culture was already largely pro-Wagner. The always-controversial composer was idolized in New York for both his dynamic compositions and as a hero of the highly influential German population, a population that played a huge part in American musical life. Yet, it is important to realize that the Wagnerian zeitgeist paving the way for *Tristan's* eventual success was not an overnight phenomenon. As in other important cultural cities, New York's acceptance of Wagner's music was the result of a hard-fought battle waged by a small, but ever-growing, number of enthusiastic music lovers, an exceptionally musical German immigrant population, and other assorted "Germanophiles" and open-minded appreciators. The efforts of these Wagnerian factions were bolstered by the radical changes in American musical life over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century. Until this point, musical life in America had traditionally been heavily influenced by England. However, as the century wore on, it was beginning to draw more and more inspiration from continental Europe. By far, the most influential material was coming from Italy and Germany. This new music, in large part carried over by immigrants, quickly began to dominate American musical life with the Italians taking over the opera and the Germans finding a place in the nation's concert halls and marching bands. These German musical pioneers attempted, little by little, to introduce Wagner (by that time a national hero in their homeland) to the American consciousness. Still, even with the emergence of German musical culture, by the middle of the century, New York's

critics were not ready to accept the tonal acrobatics and unfamiliar techniques of this most unconventional of composers. Musical reviewer, president of Yale, and legendary American academic, Charles Seymour, writing for the *New York Times* in 1857, described Wagner as “a gentleman who supplies nightmares to the present generation.” In the same year, William Henry Fry, an equally influential figure in American musical criticism and one who will be discussed more throughout this paper, described a performance of the *Faust Overture* as an example of Wagner’s “want of lovely, flowing melody.” In the same article, written for the *New York Tribune*, Fry also comments on the German discussion over Wagner’s reforms and his belief that no such dialogue would be permitted in America, snidely stating, “for we give our public the justice to say that they are absolutely indifferent to all artistic discussions of the kind.”<sup>37</sup>

While these early American reactions to Wagner’s music are fascinating and certainly important, to begin our discussion with them would be to leave out a huge part of the story. Interestingly, Wagner’s journey from foreign curiosity to cultural icon in New York begins not with his music, but with his words. According to historian John Dizikes, Wagner’s writings on his work and on opera in general were very popular with American readers, particularly those of the higher classes. In fact, many Americans were familiar with the composer’s prose long before they became familiar with his music. In 1853, *Putnam’s Magazine* predicted the intense role that the written word would play in the emerging Wagnerian controversy when it reported that “Herr Wagner, the musical revolutionist in Germany,” was championing the notion that “the words are as essential to an opera as the music.” This increased emphasis on text was a new concept to most Americans and helped to spark interest in Wagner’s writing. Ironically, it is unlikely that

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<sup>37</sup> Mark McKnight, “Wagner and the New York Press,” *American Music* 5 no. 2 (Summer, 1987): 145-146.

many of them would have been familiar with Wagner's librettos, which were not published in English for many years.<sup>38</sup> Of course, the operas themselves weren't being performed in America either. Essentially, the argument was centered on Wagner's prose.

Although the words of Wagner's operas may not have been well known, his words about opera were circulating nicely, at least in a sense. In reality, Wagner's numerous books on opera including 1849's *The Work of Art in the Future*, 1851's *Opera and Drama*, and *A Message to My Friends* also written in 1851, were not heavily read in the United States at this time. Years later, in 1875, *Art, Life and Theories of Richard Wagner*, a collection of selected examples of his writing, was published in New York; yet it wasn't until William Ashton Ellis in 1892-1900 that all the major Wagnerian works were translated and published in London, decades after the discussion first commenced in the new world.

So what exactly fueled the war of words that made Wagner a household name in non-German speaking America? Well, for the most part, it was all second-hand material. The American understanding of Wagner's theories was largely cobbled together from foreign news, journal articles (most of which were from France and England), gossip columns, comments by musicians, and word of mouth. This continued through the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the press, which would often print, word for word, articles from English newspapers. While the very idea of Wagner's presumptuousness may have angered many prominent New Yorkers, this controversy had an unintended yet very important effect on the composer's image. Suddenly, Wagner had a certain mystique that was unparalleled by any of his contemporaries, German or otherwise. For the first time in

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<sup>38</sup> John Dizikes, *Opera in America: A Cultural History*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993), 236.

America, a composer of opera was being closely associated with philosophical debate and high-minded ideas about art and language.<sup>39</sup> Even though much of the discussion was ill-informed, largely confused, and likely riddled with English and French prejudices, the fact remained that Wagner was gaining a reputation as being worthy of a level of thought and dialogue previously unheard of in the United States. For the first time, an operatic composer was being linked with a philosophy of art all his own. Curiosity was high.

As Wagner's ideas found recognition in America, the composer's role in the nation's public consciousness began to change. New York's influential critics such as Henry Krehbiel, musical editor for the *New York Tribune*, began to appropriate Wagner's writings to fit the American democratic ideal. Krehbiel writes of the characters in Wagner's *Siegfried*: "In their rude forcefulness and freedom from restrictive conventions they might be said to be representative of the American people." By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Wagner was portrayed as no less than a self-made, democratic, entrepreneur.<sup>40</sup> The composer who described himself as, "the most German of all men," was becoming the embodiment of the American dream.

Wagner, it seemed, possessed a certain force of will that appealed to industrial, post-Civil War America. The press emphasized a heroic Wagner, a man who pulled himself up from meager beginnings and fought through repeated adversities to rise to the top of his field, while simultaneously scrubbing him clean of his various personal indiscretions. Real-life American entrepreneurs such as Andrew Carnegie, who described the composer as "a genius, indeed, differing from all before," and "a new friend," began

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid, 236.

<sup>40</sup> Joseph Horowitz, *Classical Music in America: A History of Its Rise and Fall*, (New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 2005), 140-141.

to see themselves in his work. Wagner's entrepreneurial persona may have been aided by the fact that Wagner himself was largely known to Americans for his dealings with American investors, his highly publicized \$10,000 commission for composing an underwhelming march in honor of the American Centennial and making scheduling adjustments during the 1876 Bayreuth festival to accommodate the travel plans of wealthy Americans. From his humble upbringings to his shrewd business sense, Wagner seemed to represent the 19<sup>th</sup>-century American ideal of success through hard work and perseverance.

Consequently, American nationalism also found its way into the debate over Wagner's writings. As Burton W. Peretti describes in his article "Democratic Leitmotifs in the American Reception of Wagner," opposing factions made equally impassioned pleas that the composer was either a champion of American democracy, or a dangerously un-American foreign influence. In truth, the vague and downright incomplete American understanding of Wagner's philosophies made it easy to apply them to either ideology. In fact, the debate over Wagner's true political leanings (if any) was so heated by 1888 that it prompted Walt Whitman, at the time regarded as one of America's most senior and respected cultural figures, to struggle with the so-called "Wagner question" in his final years, asking his secretary Horace Traubel, "Do you figure out Wagner to be a force making for democracy or the opposite?"<sup>41</sup>

Wagner's words may have brought him to the American consciousness, but it was his music that became the cornerstone of his legacy. The story of the emergence and eventual triumph of Wagner's music in the U.S. is linked very closely with the story of

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<sup>41</sup> Burton W. Peretti, "Democratic Leitmotifs in the American Reception of Wagner," *19<sup>th</sup> Century Music* 13 no. 1 (Summer, 1989): 28-29, 34.

German migration to New York in the mid-nineteenth century. In America, German immigrants had been known for their musicianship since colonial times. In a young nation with neither conservatories nor official concert halls, Germans were quickly able to find a niche for themselves performing and teaching music. By the early 1800's German music teachers, serving the wealthy and working classes alike, had become fixtures in many of America's cultural centers, including New York. By the 1840's, small, loosely organized German opera companies had begun to spring up around the country, though none of them achieved any real recognition outside the still relatively small German communities. Although German concert music was gaining steadily in popularity throughout the century, especially in Boston, the Romantic Italian masters, particularly Rossini, dominated the few major opera houses in operation.

While modest, the German population in New York had built an extremely tight community bond through a shared love of art and music. This comparatively small yet influential minority was altered forever in 1848, when German nationals, fed up with the increasingly authoritarian governments in the German states and Europe as a whole, became the center of what would come to be known as "The Year of Revolution." In their quest for national unity and other personal freedoms, the German people endured much bloodshed and repression. When the revolution eventually failed, liberalism was crushed and hundreds of thousands decided it was time to leave the country. The wave of emigration was so great that between 1846 and 1855 over a million German immigrants poured into the cities of America's East Coast, as well as the Midwest, Louisville, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Milwaukee. By 1920, this figure grew to six million. In fact,

the migration was so great that even up until well into the twentieth century Germans constituted the largest ethnic group in the United States.<sup>42</sup>

In a very real way, however, it was not the size of the wave of German migration that made the biggest impact, but rather the social makeup of the immigrants themselves. Far from poor farmers and factory workers, a sizable number of America's new German population was made up of a very socially aware middle class.<sup>43</sup> These skilled professionals, among them journalists, doctors, lawyers, artists, and especially musicians, shared a rich cultural heritage and were all too ready to spread their ideas to anyone who would listen.

The German immigrants were already used to living in urban environments and adapted well to New York City. A number of them even became involved in local, state, and even national politics, taking up the Republican antislavery cause. However, it is in the arts that the German presence was truly felt in America. This was possibly a reaction to the prohibitions against public amusements and entertainment that were periodically enforced throughout the young and still largely puritanical nation. The Germans, who had a deep culturally engrained love for festivals, dancing, singing, and beer drinking, naturally opposed these laws. To the Germans, America was a nation of people who did not know how to have fun and had little regard for the arts, especially music. In defiance of these prohibitions, German cultural societies put on performances combining music, theatre, and public drinking. The fact that they preferred to hold these gatherings on Sundays did not help their public image.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Dizikes, 231-232.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 232.



The year 1848 proved influential to the New York musical community for another reason, besides the general influx of German immigrants. In October of that year, New Yorkers were introduced to the Germania Musical Society, one of the most influential European ensembles to tour the United States. The twenty-five piece ensemble, formed in Berlin, made it their mission to introduce Americans to the great German masters including Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven. The works of these composers were mixed in to their programs with more popular tunes and modern dance pieces. This paved the way for the reception of Wagner's music in New York in two ways. First, the successful touring group brought German music, and perhaps more importantly, the idea of German Music to audiences that may not have been familiar with the classics. Second, the Society's New York debut introduced the city to Carl Bergmann, the man who would become the first great champion of Wagner in the U.S.<sup>45</sup>

Bergmann arrived on the American music scene at the perfect time. He became a free agent in 1854 when the Germania Musical Society broke up for good. That same year, the Bowery Amphitheater was converted to the Stadt Theatre, a new venue dedicated to sung and spoken drama of Germany.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps spurred on by developments such as this, Bergmann took the German zeal for musical indoctrination and focused his efforts on exposing Americans to the great masters of his generation, such as Schumann, Liszt, Berlioz, and especially Wagner. Bergmann was a brave man to even attempt introducing this new music to a country that was only starting to get used to Beethoven. Understandably, his courageous efforts were met with no small amount of opposition by the general public and in the press. John Sullivan Dwight, one of America's first

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<sup>45</sup> Richard Crawford, *America's Musical Life: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), 279, 284.

<sup>46</sup> Dizikes, 233-234.

influential music critics, and tenacious advocate of German music, particularly that of Beethoven, was quick to criticize the young conductor for bombarding American audiences with “the mad musical monstrosities of Berlioz, Liszt, and Wagner.”<sup>47</sup> Many of the problems that American audiences had with Wagner closely resemble the issues raised in other countries. They complained of his lack of memorable melodies and musicians agonized that it was simply too hard to play. Some considered it more of a curiosity than any form of enjoyable entertainment and in Cincinnati, one man described the overture to *Rienzi* as “very much like the performance of a brigade of bedlamites in a rolling mill with a nail factory attachment.”<sup>48</sup>

Many conductors, particularly those trying to make a name for themselves, would have been quick to back down in the face of such vehement criticism. Bergmann, however, seemed only to be strengthened in his fervor. When confronted with the fact that many members of his audience did not like Wagner, he is said to have replied, “Den dey must hear him till dey do.”<sup>49</sup> His tenacity paid off when, in April of 1859, he conducted *Tannhäuser* at the Stadt Theatre. He followed this performance in August of that year with a performance of *Lohengrin*. As important as these achievements were, they went relatively unnoticed outside of the German community and were quickly forgotten.

German music, Wagner’s included, was gaining in popularity even though it wasn’t catching the attention of the non-German population. As frustrating as this must have been for the proud ethnic group, there were advantages to remaining on the fringes

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<sup>47</sup> Dizikes, 234. Quote taken from John Sullivan Dwight. Dwight’s Journal of Music, May 21, 1870: 246-247.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 234. . Quote taken from John Sullivan Dwight. Dwight’s Journal of Music, May 21, 1870: 246-247.

of the musical culture. This low profile allowed German musicians to hone their skills and mount larger and more ambitious programs without incurring the wrath of those who would try to stand in their way. Even when a German opera company took over the Academy of Music in 1863, it attracted little attention. After all, Germans played no role in the more fashionable Italian opera culture of New York at the time and were not seen as a threat. Even in 1870, when Adolf Neuendorff conducted a full performance of *Tannhäuser*, in German, at the Stadt Theatre, the audience was mostly German. However, a wider demographic did attend *Lohengrin*, albeit in Italian, at the Academy of Music in 1873.<sup>50</sup>

### **Wagner on the Concert Stage**

Though these first stage productions were very ambitious, it was on the concert stage that most non-German Americans were first introduced to the music of Richard Wagner. Touring groups such as the aforementioned Germania Musical Society often included overtures by Wagner on their concert programs. These pieces, with their emphasis on tone color and thematic invention were well suited to the concert stage and fit in among the other featured German masters. Also, it should be remembered that, at the time, German musicians dominated the orchestras of New York, making it easier for Wagner's instrumental music to be heard, rather than attempting to infiltrate the very Italian oriented opera scene.

Wagner's music also benefitted greatly from 19<sup>th</sup>-century America's love of military brass bands. Once restricted to the battlefields and military ceremonies of a young nation that seemed to be constantly at war with natives, European invaders, or

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 238.

eventually itself, professional brass bands found their way into the concert hall with increased frequency during the early to midcentury. For a country with few music schools, the military became an excellent proving ground for musically inclined Americans, performers and arrangers alike. This patriotic factor may have also helped the brass bands of the century grow in popularity at a time when the United States was still struggling to find a unique musical identity. By the 1830's ambitious arrangers and band leaders had turned to the operatic stage for inspiration and new material. This interesting phenomenon owes its success to two factors. First, tunes from works by such well-known composers as Bellini, Meyerbeer, and Donizetti had a certain popular appeal and reliability. Secondly, a major characteristic of the concert brass bands of the time was their emphasis on virtuoso soloists playing relatively new instruments, such as the keyed bugle and cornet. The flexibility of these instruments made it possible for talented players to negotiate the complex vocal lines and embellishments that were inherent in the bel canto style. This increased emphasis on musicianship may have led arrangers to seek out more difficult pieces such as the classical orchestral works of Mozart, Verdi, Mendelssohn, and eventually more modern, German composers including Liszt, and in time, Richard Wagner.

As the century progressed, Wagner's music eventually became an integral part of the concert band repertoire. Composer and bandleader Victor Herbert was one of many toward the end of the century who credited the band explosion with raising America's musical knowledge and comfort level with new music, like Wagner's. Herbert himself found Wagner's music to be excellent material for his and other bands due to the composer's skill at writing important parts for wind instruments. Herbert was certainly

not alone in his opinions. John Phillip Sousa, America's most famous bandleader, once said that Wagner's place in the band canon made him, "less of a myth to the people at large than Shakespeare."<sup>51</sup>

Wagner's operas, or at least parts of them, gained acceptance from the majority of Americans in the concert hall. While this was an important chapter in the story of Wagner's rise in the U.S., there is a certain irony about his work being presented in this fashion. After all, extracting individual pieces from his music dramas to be performed on their own is fundamentally opposed to the composer's views on opera and is not how he felt his music should be heard. Yet it was to this version of Wagner, broken down into easily digestible pieces and arranged to fit the popular ensembles of the day, that people responded. The reasons for this phenomenon seem obvious. Wagner's operas are notoriously long and musically difficult to follow. For such an intense listening experience to find favor among the German community, with its deep rooted cultural affection for the composer, a national hero to some, was one thing; to expect America's population at large, especially opera goers who had been raised on the bel canto style, to sit through the likes of The Ring Cycle or even *Tristan und Isolde* was quite another. However, as logical as it may have been, it is interesting that in a country that had spent so much time arguing over Wagner's theories and writings, there was not more discussion on whether or not this was a proper introduction.

Right or wrong, the facts remain that by the middle of the century, the majority of non-German Americans were becoming accustomed to Richard Wagner, though they had never heard his music anywhere but the concert stage. Given this trend, it is somewhat unsurprising that this was the venue for the new world's first tastes of *Tristan und Isolde*.

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<sup>51</sup> Crawford, 284, 279.

Although Americans were familiar with the opera's existence, both from Wagner's writings and overseas correspondence in the press, few outside of German cultural circles had ever heard any of the controversial music. It is somewhat appropriate perhaps, that the first material they heard was the most controversial of all. It was not until 1886 that the Brooklyn Philharmonic Society, led by the young German conductor, and highly influential and tenacious Wagner advocate Theodore Thomas, presented the now infamous prelude to the music drama at the Academy of Music. Thomas must have been well aware of the risk he took by including the piece on his program. After all, he had been the target of much critical backlash in the past for having the audacity to present Wagner's work. However, the *Tristan* prelude seemed to evoke a particularly venomous response, particularly from the *New York Times* reviewer who, in his February 12<sup>th</sup> article, deemed it, "unintelligible to the eye and unnerving to the ear."<sup>52</sup> The fact that the prelude followed a distinctly more familiar Mozart piano concerto on the program could not have helped its chances of being well received. In October, that same year, Thomas's rendition of the overture to *Die Meistersinger* received a similarly cold reception.<sup>53</sup> Interestingly enough, exactly one month after the article panning the *Tristan* prelude's premiere, another performance of the piece by the Philharmonic Society was reviewed in the same publication, but this time more favorably.

The March 12<sup>th</sup>, 1886 "Amusements" section of the *Times* compared the performance with another of the same work by a Viennese orchestra stating that the Philharmonic Society's rendition was superior. In fact, the review makes it a point to mention that he has, "never heard the piece better played." However, in the sentence

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<sup>52</sup> McKnight, 148. Quote from the *New York Times*, Feb. 12, 1866, p.5.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

before this revelation, the critic's praise of the performance and of Wagner himself seems somewhat more begrudging. He writes, "The too numerous harmonic changes were marked with clearness, and the great technical skill of the composer was amply illustrated." This quote illustrates the still changing feelings about Wagner's music. The critic clearly appreciates the composer's prowess, but even though he claims to have seen the *Tristan* prelude performed at least once before, and seems to have, at the very least, appreciated its merits, he cannot stop himself from attacking the frequency with which the harmonies changed. What's even more telling of the critic's and perhaps even the nation's lingering ill feelings toward Wagner is the explanation he offers for why another piece on the program, Schumann's third symphony, did not live up to his standards. The critic called the majority of the performance, "an incomplete and ill-rehearsed vagary of the conductor," speculating that, "the regular rehearsals, we presume, have been bestowed upon Wagner's introduction to *Tristan und Isolde*."<sup>54</sup>

The New York press often portrayed Wagner's music as unreasonably difficult. On July 22, 1869, the "Minor Topics" column of the *New York Times*, a column dedicated to short, ironic takes on current events, featured a three-sentence blurb on Wagner that read:

Wagner's music is now driving people to insanity and suicide. We learn from Munich that Herr Eberle, the piano-forte conductor, has gone mad over "Tristan and Isolde," and it is known that the rehearsals of this unique opera had previously killed a celebrated German tenor. It is as well, in the present excitable state of the American mind, that we are saved from Wagner.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *New York Times*, March 12, 1866, p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> *New York Times*, July 22, 1869, p.4.

Though it may be brief, this excerpt tells us a lot about the sensationalist way the press treated Wagner at the time. From the first sentence, Wagner's music is depicted as something dangerous, possessing powers over the human psyche that were seldom attributed to that of his contemporaries. Interestingly, though the writer clearly states that the music is driving people to suicide, no specific incident is mentioned to support the claim. It is as if the shock value is more important than the facts themselves. The second sentence is of particular importance to this study for the obvious reason that it mentions *Tristan und Isolde*. Again, no specific details are listed, but the writer tells us that a piano-forte conductor by the name of Eberle has been driven mad by the music of the opera. Once again, sensationalism is the true goal of this statement. Even more important, perhaps, is the fact that the excerpt specifically references the death of Ludwig Schnorr. This supports the assumption that stories of the disastrous Munich premiere of the opera were fresh in the minds of the press and the people of New York, even three years after their first experiences with the music of the prelude. The third sentence sums everything up by expressing a sense of relief that America had not yet been exposed to the amount of Wagner that other countries had endured. The writer's message is abundantly clear: though we don't know very much about Wagner's music in America, particularly *Tristan und Isolde*, we know that we should be wary of it.

We may never know the extent that sensationalist articles like the one we have just discussed impacted America's feelings toward *Tristan und Isolde*. We can speculate that many were driven away, perhaps those who had already been left cold by concert renditions of the prelude. However, it is certainly very possible that anti-Wagnerian propaganda such as this created a sort of morbid curiosity among musically adventurous



New Yorkers. What was it about the music of *Tristan und Isolde* that had the power to strip men of their sanity and drive others to supposed suicide? Could an operatic role really be so hard to sing that it could kill a man? If so, would any of New York's star performers dare to take it? Could such a risk ethically be taken? One must keep in mind that many Americans at the time preferred to get as much, if not more, of their entertainment from the likes of P.T. Barnum as Meyerbeer and Rossini. An article such as this gave the already controversial music drama an appeal that other works couldn't hope to achieve. Even with its new found sense of danger it would be an astounding two decades from the time the prelude was heard in New York to the long awaited American debut. In the meantime, excerpts from the opera continued to enjoy a moderate, yet growing, level of success as concert pieces. In 1872, the final scene to the opera joined the prelude as part of America's Romantic orchestral canon.

As we have seen, perhaps more than any other composer, Wagner's rise in America can be attributed to the hard work and fervent advocacy of German-American musicians. As with most movements, musical or otherwise, a musical lineage of highly influential individuals led the campaign and made great strides that, in one way or another, led to *Tristan und Isolde's* New York premiere. This line of descent can be said to begin in the 1840's with Carl Bergmann and the Germania Musical Society. In 1848, Bergmann's contemporary Theodor Eisfeldt, came to New York and earned a particularly prestigious position as the first full-time conductor of the New York Philharmonic (which up until this point, split the conducting duties of a season amongst several individuals). This position, allowed him to bring Wagner's music out of the German cultural bubble

and to the attention of New York high society right up until the 1865/1866 season, when he finally resigned.

While Eisfelt was busy directing the New York Philharmonic, he somehow also found time to serve as the first conductor of the Brooklyn Philharmonic Society, founded in 1857. During the first half of the 1860's, Eisfelt shared conducting duties with Theodore Thomas, who would eventually take over the ensemble, and use it to premiere the prelude to *Tristan* in New York, as we have already seen. Thomas was an excellent conductor and rabid Wagnerian. He acquired his taste for the composer while performing with Bergmann himself during the 1850's. By the 1870's he had become Wagner's most important advocate in New York City, organizing and conducting a series of extremely popular concerts in Central Park that often featured the composer's work. On occasion, one of these performances would feature an all-Wagner program.<sup>56</sup>

In his article, "Wagner and the New York Press," music historian Mark McKnight, provides a detailed account of the success of Thomas's Central Park concert series. McKnight describes the pleasant atmosphere that may have eased audience members into the sometimes shocking sounds of Wagnerian composition. Thomas made sure his patrons were comfortable, offering them cool drinks and refreshments and balancing the more progressive numbers on the program with lighter pieces by the likes of Strauss and a healthy amount of rousing marches, one of the most popular genres of the period. Thomas's shrewdness in giving his audience what they wanted may have contributed to the overwhelmingly positive reception these programs received in the New York press. Thomas was dubbed a "missionary in the art of amusement," by the *New York Tribune* and an all-Wagner concert in the summer of 1872 received rave reviews.

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<sup>56</sup> Dizikes, 237- 238.

The daring program included selections from *Tristan und Isolde*, alongside other Wagner classics, such as the *Kaisermarsch*, *Huldingsmarsch*, selections from *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, *Rienzi*, and “The Ride of the Valkeries,” which was the clear favorite of the evening. The anonymous reporter for the *Tribune* describes the audience’s reaction as an “emphatic demonstration” and “rare at a summer Garden concert.”<sup>57</sup>

Thomas’s skill at marketing Wagner’s work was not limited to his concert programming. He also used the written word as a means to spread his enthusiasm for the composer. In one interesting excerpt, the conductor recommends Wagner’s music to overworked American businessmen as a means of relaxation, claiming that it has the power to “saturate the whole human system,” stimulating and revitalizing weary entrepreneurs.<sup>58</sup> This claim demonstrates Thomas’s skill for promoting his product to fit the needs and desires of his intended demographic. However, what is even more interesting about this alleged revitalizing property of Wagner’s music is how flagrantly it contradicts so many other assessments of the Wagnerian sound. Writings from both sides of the Atlantic, dating back to Nietzsche, describe this music as exhausting and difficult to comprehend. While we can’t know for sure if this discrepancy is rooted in a simple difference of opinion or an outright example of Wagnerian propaganda, it is interesting that Thomas had the confidence to make such a statement in a country that was well read on the subject of Wagner and his music.

At around the same time that Theodore Thomas was fighting for the Wagnerian cause in New York’s parks and concert halls, the composer’s name was appearing with more frequency in the city’s press. Of course, the fact that his music was being played

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<sup>57</sup> McKnight, 149.

<sup>58</sup> Peretti, 34.

with more frequency had a lot to do with this development, but does not account for the appearance of reviews of Wagner's music dramas being performed overseas. Of particular importance to this study are a few articles that pertain specifically to *Tristan und Isolde*. Some, the "Amusements" column from the May 20, 1876 edition of the *New York Times*, are as small as one sentence, simply stating the success or failure (failure in this case) of a performance of the music drama in Germany.<sup>59</sup> Others, however, are much more extensive. On July 18, 1875, the *New York Times* printed an article that originally appeared in the *London Times* the previous month. The article, presumably written by a British reviewer, describes a performance of the music drama in Weimar, Germany. This article contains critical characteristics that may have seemed unfamiliar to New York readers. The most prominent of these is the detailed description of the plot. This retelling of the story was a common technique used by British critics that was uncommon in New York at the time. The description, in fact, takes up most of the comparatively long article and employs the flowery language and literary prose that was expected of an English man of letters. This is important because it may have been the first time many New Yorkers had a chance to read the story of *Tristan und Isolde* for themselves. The critic, who is not credited by name, also goes into detail about certain musical attributes of the score, such as the "syncopated rhythm and highly original accompaniment, followed by a series of arpeggio chords," in the duet in the second act. This attention to musical detail was not common in newspaper criticism from either side of the pond, but would have been especially novel to New Yorkers, considering the comparative lack of journals specializing in music criticism in this country at the time. The article goes on to praise the "wonderfully elaborate and rich accompaniment of the orchestra" while making familiar

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<sup>59</sup> *New York Times*, May 20, 1876, p.7.

critiques about the lack of singable melodies and Wagner's questionable use of form, stating that "the opera consists almost entirely of declamatory recitative." His bemoaning of the lack of "stage vocalization," chorus numbers, and "airs" is consistent with the British love of singing and vocal virtuosity. However, what makes this review important to this study is its general positivity. Up until this point, all that many New Yorkers knew of *Tristan und Isolde* is that it produced a few concert pieces (which were never intended to be heard as such) and that it apparently caused madness, suicide, and death.<sup>60</sup>

By 1876, the New York press was accustomed to printing reports on Wagner performances overseas. So it comes as no surprise that it was a foreign event that made that year one of the most important to the study of Wagner criticism in this country. This was the year of the first Bayreuth festival in Germany, and consequently the first complete performance of The Ring Cycle. Naturally, excitement among Wagnerians was high all over the world, but in New York, the buzz was particularly intense. Though many of them could not hope to ever travel to Germany and see it first hand, appreciators of Wagner's music had a capital, tangible proof that their cause was a worthy one. This enthusiasm was echoed in the press. In fact, the New York musical press in 1876 was dominated by Wagnerians. Critics such as the seemingly omnipresent Henry T. Finck, who went on to write two books about Wagner, including the first American biography of the composer, and was writing for the *New York World* at the time, seized the opportunity to travel on assignment to the festival in order to send word of the composer's triumph home to the states. Similarly, Frederick W. Schwab, critic for the *New York Times*, chose to cable his reports to New York for publication the morning after each of the four music dramas were performed. Schwab's articles would go down in history as the first time, in

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<sup>60</sup> *New York Times*, July 18, 1875, p.2.

the Western Hemisphere, that a newspaper published cabled work from a music critic.<sup>61</sup> While at Bayreuth, J. R.G. Hassard wrote long and highly positive articles for the *New York Tribune* that were later republished as pamphlets. All of the critics working in Bayreuth were important, yet, in terms of sheer influence on the New York music scene, one journalist stands out from the rest: *The New York Sun's*, Leopold Damrosch.

### **Damrosch, Siedl, and the Metropolitan Opera**

While his criticism was important, Damrosch did far more than just write about music. Born in 1832, in Posen, Germany, Damrosch abandoned a promising career in medicine to pursue his studies of the violin and composition. One of his first big breaks in music came in 1857 when Franz Liszt gave him a position playing violin in the Weimar court orchestra. Damrosch stayed in Weimar for only one year, choosing to spend the next thirteen making a name for himself as a conductor in Breslau. By 1871, he had come to feel frustrated with the German music scene and moved to New York to head the Arion Men's choir in hopes of finding greater success. New to the nation, and approaching middle-age, this was a risky move for Damrosch, but he soon found a niche for himself among German-Americans pushing for the recognition of Wagner. Though he was new to the New York Wagnerian community, the charismatic conductor carried with him a certain authenticity that could not be matched by his peers. The Damrosch family was friends with Richard Wagner back in Germany and could claim to have absorbed the powers of the new music directly from its creator. By the early 1880's he was touring the country with his own orchestra. Armed with progressive programs that included not only Wagner, but other new and unfamiliar music as well, he was able to quickly make a name

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<sup>61</sup> Martin Mayer, *The Met: One Hundred Years of Grand Opera*, (New York, W.W. Simon and Schuster, 1983) 59, 39

for himself in a nation that was beginning to hunger for the dynamic sounds of German Romanticism.

Damrosch's greatest contribution to Wagnerianism in America came in 1884 with his landmark proposal to the Metropolitan Opera House. What he proposed was a German-language season, which would include quite a bit of Wagner. This was a daring idea for sure, but one that could certainly be seen as a natural progression. Though the Met had, since its inception, focused on Italian opera, it was certainly no stranger to Wagner and his ideas. In fact, when the facilities were first constructed, the orchestra pit was designed in the revolutionary style of the famous hidden orchestra at Bayreuth. The pit was sunken so that the musicians were below the level of the parquet and were further obscured by a brick and plaster umbrella-like structure just below stage level. This design caused a now infamous uproar from the inaugural season's Italian conductor, Auguste Vianesi, and his Italian orchestra who demanded to be seen. Vianesi had the entire structure rebuilt, with less than a week to go before opening night, so that he and his musicians were separated from the audience by only a rail. Ironically, Vianesi was forced to concede to the sunken floor (though not the umbrella) due to complaints by the singers of the 1883 Italian performance of *Lohengrin* that they could not project over the orchestra.<sup>62</sup> Perhaps even more telling of the Metropolitan's relationship to Wagner, and German opera in general, is the inscription on the house's original proscenium arch. The inscription included the names of six fine operatic composers: Beethoven, Mozart, Gluck, Meyerbeer, Gounod, and yes, Wagner. One has to wonder, where are the Italian masters? The names of Rossini, Donizetti, and Verdi are nowhere to be found, yet their work dominates the programs of that, and every other opera house in New York. Even stranger

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 39.

is the presence of Wagner, whose work had only been presented once, and not even in the language for which it was written.<sup>63</sup>

It's intriguing to think that Damrosch's proposal was the boost that the Met had been waiting for to finally present the music dramas of Wagner. To assume that New York's increasing acceptance and even desire for the music of Richard Wagner had pushed the newly founded opera house towards this progression would seem a satisfyingly plausible explanation. While these factors certainly may have played their part in prompting the shareholders to work with Damrosch, evidence suggests that the main reason for their decision may have been financial. Damrosch would be heading the season for a salary of only \$10,000. He would also be using his own orchestra, who were familiar with much of the music, cutting down on both rehearsal time and the expenses of holding auditions. The most important financial benefit of programming a German-language season was inherent in the work itself. Unlike in Italian opera, German works were not centered on expensive star singers. In Germany, even the greatest operatic singers worked primarily as year-round employees, with guaranteed pensions rather than exorbitantly high fees for each performance. Even with his hand-picked company of established Wagnerian performers from the fatherland, which included Amelia Materna, who was praised for her performance of Brunnhilde at Bayreuth, and the equally famous Marianne Brandt, Damrosch's payroll would not come anywhere close to the prices paid for comparable Italian names during the previous season. Also many sets and props were purchased cheaply from previous productions in Germany through the influential conductor's connections. These cost-cutting measures allowed Damrosch to cut ticket prices to record lows and still turn a profit. This also had the unintentional effect of

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<sup>63</sup> Dizikes, 239.



making it possible for members of the German working class to afford to fill the house night after night.

Damrosch's German-language season was a resounding success with both critics and the public. This was not only a great victory for the nationalistic German conductor, but for Wagner as well. While only three of his music dramas were performed (*Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, and the wildly successful *Die Walküre*) they were performed a combined 25 times in a 57-performance season. It seemed a given that Damrosch would return to the Met the following season, armed with a portfolio full of Wagnerian masterpieces. Tragically, this triumphant return was not to be. Damrosch, overworked and exhausted, developed pneumonia and died that February, just short of completing the season. His dedication to his mission was so great that he spent the last two days of his life teaching his son Walter how to conduct Wagner in his stead.

Though Damrosch would not live to see it, the second German-language season at the Met would be another historic year. That year, 1886, would see the rise of a new Wagnerian champion, and even more importantly, the long-awaited New York premiere of *Tristan und Isolde*. The new champion was a conductor by the name of Anton Seidl, who was hand picked by Walter Damrosch to continue his father's work. From the start, it appeared that Walter could not have made a better choice. Seidl, like his late predecessor, knew Wagner personally in Germany. In fact, Seidl was his personal secretary during the composer's final six years. He also possessed an incredible amount of knowledge about Wagner's music, impressing his new orchestra by finding no less than 180 errors in the *Lohengrin* score that they had been using. Seidl's success as a conductor stemmed not only from his knowledge, but also from his professional

demeanor. Fair and democratic, it was said that he could hold his tongue in seven languages.<sup>64</sup> As a conductor he possessed a fine balance between his meticulous perfectionism and a fiery passion for the music.

With Siedl firmly in place, it was time to find the cast that would bring Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* to the new world. The performers that Damrosch and Siedl chose seemed to have been ordained by the hand of the master himself. Some were already known to New Yorkers from the previous season. Brandt returned, playing Brangäne, along with bass, Emil Fischer (who was highly acclaimed for his roles in *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Die Walküre*) taking up the role of King Mark. For Tristan, Albert Niemann was an obvious choice, having developed a name for himself as one of Germany's finest Wagnerian tenors, the first Siegmund at Bayreuth, and a personal favorite of Wagner's. Perhaps the greatest acquisition made by the young Damrosch and Siedl was the incomparable Lilli Lehmann, another veteran of the first Bayreuth festival and personal favorite of Wagner's, who brought her expertise and experience to the other title role.<sup>65</sup>

In 1884, critical coverage of *Tristan und Isolde* in New York changed significantly. As we have seen, with the exception of a few foreign correspondences, much of the journalism concerning *Tristan und Isolde*, regarded it as something of a curiosity. Continuously retold stories of agonizing rehearsals, doomed premieres, and vocal lines so hard they could kill a man may have reduced the classic work to no more than a novelty. However, the fruition of Damrosch's vision for Wagner on the New York

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<sup>64</sup> Mayer, 59.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 39, 48, 59.

stage seems to have injected a newfound seriousness into the journalistic discussion. After 1884, many articles portrayed a certain gravity not yet seen until that point. As if in rebuttal to the Met's looming decision to give in to Damrosch's ideas, an article published in the *New York Times* on July 6, 1884, titled "A Surfeit of Wagner," questions the wisdom of presenting a season of Wagnerian music drama. The article seems to refer to the upcoming season in no uncertain terms in the last two sentences,

The latest indications, however, are not to be mistaken, and the assurance of Wagner operatic representations is in contemplation is to be taken with a liberal allowance of salt. If in defiance of warning signals the experiment is made, its projectors will be unaccountably fortunate should they renew their late experience and save themselves from ruin through recourse to Italian and French art and their interpreters.<sup>66</sup>

This excerpt carries with it some very telling commentaries on the public opinion of the time. The critic obviously believes that a series of Wagnerian operas would not be feasible from a financial standpoint. His reasons for these views are explained quite well throughout the article and are surprisingly original. Unlike many of his contemporaries, this critic does not attack Wagner's music with the familiar, almost standardized complaints. Rather, he makes his plea from a more practical standpoint. As the title of the article suggests, the critic claims that New York has simply endured too much Wagner over the previous years for a season of his operas to be a box-office draw. Though he does not find Wagner to be a particularly bad composer, stating that, "modern audiences will not be prevented from hearing what is lovely and intelligible in Wagner's legacy," he simply questions whether or not New York audiences were prepared for complete renditions of Wagner's more mature works. He specifically mentions *Tristan*

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<sup>66</sup> "A Surfeit of Wagner," *The New York Times*, July 6, 1884.

*und Isolde* along with *Gotterdammerung*, and *Parsifal* as “tests of credulity, imagination, and endurance.” This is a particularly intuitive critique when combined with an observation made earlier in the article that most New Yorkers had not yet been exposed to Wagnerian music in its intended format. He is surely referring to performances such as Theodor Thomas’s Central Park concerts, which presented bits and pieces of Wagner, interspersed with lighter, more popular material, or what he calls, “the admixture of more palatable ingredients.” Overall though, what sets this article apart from the more polarized critiques that were popular at the time is the fact that the critic makes several pro-Wagner statements, including an expression of gratitude that the composer’s achievements “were never treated in this country as intolerably as in France or as indifferently as in England.” This position on the part of the critic shows the fairness and intellectualism that Wagner was capable of inspiring in this country.<sup>67</sup>

As the season wore on, not all articles dealing with Wagner were as fair and balanced. Just a few months after it published “A Surfeit of Wagner,” the *New York Times*, as if reacting to its own critic’s open-mindedness, printed a less diplomatic article from the *London World*. The article, printed in New York under the fairly startling title, “Cold Musical Truth: What a London Critic Has to Say about Wagner’s Work,” is a far cry from fair and balanced journalism. For example, the tone of the writing is dramatically inflammatory and at times quite sarcastic. The article, which is essentially a reaction to a recent, particularly Wagner-heavy concert, contains such statements as, “The first part contained five pieces, of which only five were Wagner’s,” and the admittedly amusing, “As Beethoven said of Rossini, ‘What a pity he did not study more!’”

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

one might call out about Wagner, ‘What a pity he learned so much!’,” that demonstrate a lack of the general politeness that was common in British journalism. He goes on to attack Wagner’s compositional skills, particularly the composer’s trademark use of leitmotifs. The critic writes, “intermixing, interweaving, and eternally repeating the same few bars– aye, a few notes– he compels you to admire his learning, although you feel you would rather be without it.” Interestingly, one of the few positive things the critic has to say about Wagner’s work concerns *Tristan und Isolde*, specifically “the few chromatic notes in the ‘Tristan and Isolde’ overture.” Unfortunately, the article makes no attempt to specify which chromatic notes he intends. He does, however, cite them as an example of the great things that Wagner could do with such little material, though he soon catches himself and makes it clear that these melodic inventions are, in his estimation, merely “tricks to cover want of ideas.” As was so often the case, this critic is willing to acknowledge Wagner’s talent to an extent, though it is always begrudgingly. Once again we see Wagner’s work being compared to time-honored favorites of the day. However, what is unique about this critic is that he does not compare Wagner to Rossini, or Meyerbeer, or even Mozart, but to Schubert. He writes,

I hope, however, that while his music will always be recognized and appreciated as it deserves, it will never– never reach the supremacy over the great, the real, the model genius in art that we have revered all our life long. That wonderful symphony of Schubert, the very anti-climax to Wagner, the very buxom girl, with the natural color and no paint or paste on her face, overrich in melody, ideas, and character, the work of a man who wrote 13 songs in one day against the work of a man who chiseled and polished 13 years on one work...<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> “Cold Musical Truth: What a London Critic Has to Say About Wagner’s Work,” *The New York Times*, November 22, 1884.

This comparison to Schubert is unprecedented in the London press, and may tell us something about the critic himself. His problem with Wagner is that his work is essentially too complex. He prefers the simple, emotional songs of Schubert to music “which affects you through great cleverness, splendidly calculated combinations, and well-employed resources of learning.” By choosing another German Romantic composer he adds a new dimension and credibility to his arguments. He is not simply defending a preference for Italianism, nor can it be said that his argument is tinged with nationalism or anti-German sentiment. In this way, though probably unintentionally, this critic treats Wagner with a fairness that many of his contemporaries do not.

For the purposes of this study, we must speculate on the reasons why the *New York Times* chose to reprint the article in the first place. One has to wonder whether or not this was a reaction to the German-language season that had already gotten underway. After all, the season ruffled more than a few feathers in New York. Many opera fans, particularly those who were raised on a steady diet of the Italian bel canto style, felt overwhelmed by the German cultural onslaught and feared that their favorite form of entertainment as they knew it may have been slipping away from them. The printing of this article may have been an attempt on the part of the *Times* to express a similar concern. Though the article does not dwell on the comparison to Italian opera, in a way, it reflects the feeling that Wagner, as foreign an entity in England as he was in the U.S., was being forced upon a musical culture that was doing just fine without him. A fear that Wagnerianism would become the order of the day and that all who may not agree with its

notions of new music would have to, as the critic cleverly remarks, “Lohengrin and bear it.”<sup>69</sup>

The appearance of an article from the *London World* in the *New York Times* may be an indication of more than Wagner’s ability to strike fear into the heart of the entire English speaking world. The decision to reprint the article may be an indication of the great respect that the New York press, particularly the *Times*, possessed for its British counterpart. Or perhaps, the explanation is as simple as a desire to provide the reader with a fresh perspective, a completely different point of view from any American critique. Maybe the editor was specifically looking for an attention-grabbing, shocking headline and there was simply no critic in New York that was willing to attack Wagner quite so viciously. Either of these explanations is plausible, yet I believe there is evidence to suggest a deeper meaning. The success of the first German-language season at the Met, and the looming promise of a similar venture to follow in the coming year irritated many. The box holders and other members of New York high society considered the German influence a threat to their preferred form of musical entertainment, namely, Italian opera. It is reasonable to infer that Wagner, the most extreme of the German composers, and the most foreign to the New York stage, would draw more than his fair share of the negative attention. The fact that his work, and the lower ticket prices it allowed for, attracted an audience of immigrants and other lower-ranking castes of society probably did not help matters. With this in mind, it is also reasonable to infer that those who disapproved of the Wagner-heavy season, and the changes it foretold, would seek the guidance of a culture

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

that lived through a similar event. The most likely candidate was obviously London, which had endured its own Wagner-centered German opera season in 1882.

The idea that New York, through the press, may have attempted to look across the pond for answers makes a great deal of sense. Not only was London's German language season very recent, but the two cities shared many cultural similarities. The most obvious of these similarities being the English language. Also, as in New York, the majority of London's regular patrons of the opera were well-to-do society types who enjoyed the melodious arias and superstar singers of the Italian style. The theory that the *New York Times* was looking to London for insight is supported by an article published by the paper on July 12, 1885. This article, titled simply "Wagner's Music," makes frequent references to the failure of Wagnerian music drama to catch on outside of Germany. While the presumably American writer does make mention of other European countries, such as France and Belgium, England is the clear focus of the article. From the very first sentence, he describes how these operas are "in England, scarcely appreciated, except by musicians and a certain number of studious amateurs."<sup>70</sup> This statement not only betrays the critic's anti-Wagnerian position, but also the fact that he considers England to be an authority on the validity of his work. He goes on to make several more intriguing statements on what he feels the role of Wagner's music should be including:

"Through more than one composer the influence of Wagner makes itself intensely felt in places where his music is to the general public, scarcely known. But it may all the same be fairly said that though his works are studied by musicians everywhere, they have in their complete dramatic form no existence out of Germany."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> "Wagner's Music," *The New York Times*, July 12, 1885.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*



The critic seems to admit that the musical community has much to learn from Wagner's music, so why would he take such a strong stance against it? This question is particularly puzzling when considering the fact that nowhere in the article does the critic cite any of the typical critiques of Wagner's work (too long, no memorable melodies, etc.). I believe the answer lies in the fear that Wagnerian music drama would replace the much-loved Italian style. The sentence that directly follows the preceding quote begins, "It seems a massive mistake to say that Wagner's works have destroyed Italian opera," suggesting that people were already making that assumption. Both the writer's desire to preserve Italian opera and his quest to show deference to England come across in the last few sentences. He states that Wagner's work will not catch on in America for the same reason that it did not catch on in England: "not so much for want of singers as because there is not in this country a sufficiently large public to support operas performed in the German language."<sup>72</sup> Clearly, the success of the first German-language season at the Met proved this particular critic wrong, but his article is important because it provides us with an understanding of how many New Yorkers may have been feeling at the time.

There is one fact that must be remembered when considering the critical coverage of *Tristan und Isolde* in the years leading up to its New York premiere: nearly all of the information was secondhand. It is sometimes easy to forget that nobody, critic or otherwise, had ever seen the opera performed in America. This trend towards blind criticism is addressed in a remarkable article that was published in the *New-York Daily Tribune* on Sunday, August 15, 1886. The article, simply titled "Wagner's 'Tristan und Isolde'," tackles the issue head on from the first sentence, "After all that had been said in

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

praise or in condemnation of “Tristan und Isolde” that can be said from a study of the printed page its best advocate and severest judge must in the end derive their conclusive arguments from a stage representation.”<sup>73</sup> The critic offers his readers a balanced assessment of the opera which covers both positive and negative aspects of the work. Perhaps in the interest of full disclosure, he even mentions the disastrous road to the world premiere in Munich, the series of events that led to the quarter decade of folklore surrounding the piece. Fairness notwithstanding, he is clearly a fan of the music and praises it in some interesting and original ways. For instance, the often-lauded duet in the second act is covered extensively in this article. Like many of his contemporaries, the critic goes into the musical merits of the work, but also takes a more emotional view, writing, “It is the composer’s boldest and most successful effort to give musical expression to hot, unbridled passion, which puts itself into antagonism with all the world.”<sup>74</sup> He not only praises Wagner’s command over emotion, a rarity for a critic of his time, but seems to suggest that his depiction of “hot, unbridled passion,” may have simply been too much for the puritanical world to handle. This emotional take on Wagner’s compositions is a defining feature of this article. It also contradicts much of the Wagner criticism in the English speaking world at the time. While most critics were chastising the composer for being too technical and scientific with his themes and harmonies, this critic takes the complete opposite view stating, “The music with its tumultuous lava current attacks one’s emotional part more than the intellect or the judgment,” and that, “Appreciation of ‘Tristan’ is more than anything else a matter of emotion.” The critic does warn that *Tristan und Isolde* may not be for everyone, advising

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<sup>73</sup> “Wagner’s ‘Tristan und Isolde’,” *The New-York Daily Tribune*, August 15, 1886.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

that, “enthusiasm and endurance are both wanted,” for those who would attend a performance. He also fully acknowledges the vocal difficulty of the piece, calling it a “defect” in the work which he attributes to Wagner’s “well known indifference to the limits of vocal possibility.” For this critic though, what is truly important is that before one judges the music drama, one must first see it as it was originally intended, a surprisingly rare argument in a country that knew Wagner’s philosophies so well.<sup>75</sup>

On December 1<sup>st</sup>, when *Tristan und Isolde* finally was performed, it received a great deal of attention from the New York press. This is particularly true of the *Times* which reported on several performances of the work throughout the month. While these reviews varied in their opinions on Wagner’s epic music drama, the announcement printed on the day of the first performance projects a feeling of optimism about the premiere. More than a mere announcement or advertisement, this excerpt titled “Metropolitan Opera House” lists the names and roles of all of the principle performers and even mentions a rehearsal that took place the previous day. The writer explains that this was a full rehearsal, “except as to the artists’ costumes,” and goes on to say that, “its smoothness and impressiveness gave promises that tonight’s representation will be at all points an admirable one.”<sup>76</sup>

Given the excitement and optimism displayed in the *Times* on December 1<sup>st</sup>, one might expect to find a rave review in the December 2<sup>nd</sup> issue. However, the official *New York Times* reviewer that covered the opening night seemed rather undecided as to how he wanted to view the performance. The article, “*Tristan and Isolde*” appeared with a very long and telling subheading that read, “For Once Wagnerites Have It All Their Own

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> “Metropolitan Opera House,” *The New York Times*, December 1, 1886.

Way. First Performance in America of a Work Not Wanted Outside of Germany, and Not Too Often There— Beginning of the End of the Craze for Symphonic Music in Opera.” Those two sentences, right at the beginning of the article, immediately set a harsh tone. The critic is insistent on reminding his readers that Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* had a history of unpopularity in Europe. Even more important is the reviewer’s specific reference to the “Craze for Symphonic Music in Opera.” This is clearly referring to German opera and its dominance over the Italian style in New York. After an opening like that, the reader is understandably shocked when the next few sentences actually praise Wagner and his work. They also describe the large audience’s “sustained attention,” and how their “approval of the production was attested by recalls after the first, the second, and the third acts.” The critic goes on to say that “the initial hearing in America of one of the most exacting of lyric achievements, was, on the whole, a notable one, and its brilliancy was to have been expected.”<sup>77</sup>

In his first few sentences, the critic very nearly reveals himself as a Wagnerian, or at least one with a great appreciation for Wagner’s work. This is why it is surprising that he chooses to immediately follow these statements by asserting his belief that it would be “absurd” to view this work as a turning point in operatic culture in the United States. The critic is quite aware of the growing influence of New York Wagnerians and wastes little time in denouncing them. He writes that the outspoken, almost evangelistic quality of Wagner’s New York supporters presents what he calls a “slight danger,” that they will attract too many converts and “the eternal laws of beauty and the dictates of common sense will be disregarded in deference to either will power or clamor.”<sup>78</sup> Unlike many of

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<sup>77</sup> “Tristan And Isolde,” *The New York Times*, December 2, 1886.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

his contemporaries, this critic did not see Wagner's work as the music of the future; rather, he predicted that it and the movement it inspired was destined to die out with the composer himself.

Regardless of the critic's views on Wagner's music, it cannot be denied that he was apparently well studied on the matter. The middle of the article consists of a detailed account of the history of *Tristan und Isolde*'s composition and reception. A brief explanation of the plot follows, within which he takes the time to describe how the acts are separated. The critic then cleverly uses his discussion of form to segue into a more philosophical question about Wagner's ideals. He admits that it is true "that in 'Tristan and Isolde' Italian conventionalities have no existence; true also, that the score is free from triviality and commonplace, and that it contains many passages of undeniable beauty and eloquence."<sup>79</sup> However, the question he poses to his readers is whether or not these innovations, significant as they may be, should really be regarded as steps in the right direction. Or as the critic puts it, "whether Wagner supplies an equivalent for what he casts away." He adds, "and as he casts away well-nigh everything except Wagner, it must be conceded that the equivalent which may be claimed is somewhat formidable."<sup>80</sup> The critic seems willing to admit that Wagner's music is important. He even mentions *Tristan und Isolde* specifically as a "matchless achievement" in "the musical growth or development of a thought or considered as an exemplar of orchestration."<sup>81</sup> He goes on to praise Wagner's technique and use of tone color but feels that the emotional component of the composer's work is severely lacking. He mentions the use of "leading motives" but considers many of them to be "shapeless, unsuggestive, and wholly arbitrary in their

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

significance.”<sup>82</sup> The rest of the critic’s qualms with the piece are somewhat predictable, including the ever-popular belief that Wagner either did not know how, or simply did not care to write melodies conducive to singing. While these complaints are notable, it is his attacks on the opera’s form and the symphonic quality of the music which are most important. This critic does not seem to dislike Wagner’s music, or even discredit its importance. In fact, he considered the composer a genius. However, he simply felt that this music should not have been considered the future of opera in America. This article is remarkable because it manages to put the somewhat contradictory feeling that many New Yorkers had about Wagner’s operas into words. They appreciated, even enjoyed them, but were uncomfortable with the notion of forsaking the old style completely.

While the *Times* critic may have wavered in his Wagnerianism, the reporter for the *New York Sun* showed nothing short of complete devotion to Wagner in his December 2<sup>nd</sup> review. The critic opens his article, “German Opera— First Production of ‘Tristan and Isolde’,” by definitively stating that the premiere, “may perhaps be justly considered the most important single musical event not only of this season but of any time in our country’s musical career.” Unlike many of his contemporaries, he is completely comfortable with, even supportive of the idea of Wagner’s new music overtaking the New York opera scene. In fact, he praises *Tristan und Isolde* for giving his city “a glimpse” into the “new world” that Wagner had created. The composer is depicted as a heroic figure and *Tristan* as the greatest realization of his ideals. He supports his opinions by making many bold statements about the work including: “In ‘Tristan’ beyond all other of his operas, Wagner makes bold use of that freedom for which he continuously fought.” He also states that: “The influence which Wagner exerts upon the present generation

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

cannot be overstated.” These two quotes show how closely aligned the critic’s views are with that of the German immigrant population, and like those early advocates, he seeks to educate as well as propagate. Rather than avoiding the complicated history of the opera, he provides a brief, yet very detailed account of its composition and reception in German. He does not, however, reference the death of Ludwig Schnorr or the difficulties leading up to the first performance. He also describes the plot in detail, possibly to make the stage action more comprehensible to readers who may be planning to attend a future performance. Though he is convinced of the significance of *Tristan*, he seems less sure that it will be well received. However, he is not as concerned with the opera being popular as one might expect. He does not neglect the criticisms of the opera, nor does he overlook the fact that it had failed elsewhere. He chooses instead to attack these details head on stating, “it doesn’t matter whether the general public here, as has happened almost invariably in other places fails to find intelligible or appreciative phrases... one cannot hear Wagner’s great work without going home wiser than when he came.”<sup>83</sup> With its unflinching support of the composer and his work, this article gives a voice to New York’s diehard Wagnerian population who were, for whatever reason, underrepresented in the major newspapers of the time.

*The Sun* was far from the only publication to report favorably on the work. The *Times* review of the second performance of the opera on December 6<sup>th</sup> is much more positive and focuses on the opera itself, rather than its perceived implications. We see from the first few sentences that the audience on the second night reacted much in the same way as the first. As well as being attentive and numerous, the audience members once again showed their approval of the lead performers by recalling them to the stage

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<sup>83</sup> “German Opera– First Production of Tristan and Isolde,” *The New York Sun*, December 2, 1886.

after each act. This display of gratitude is somewhat ironic given the nature of German opera, and Wagner's operas in particular. This was certainly more a convention of the Italian stage, and its persistence can be seen as signs of a culture in transition. Another vestigial tradition of opera in America, and in most of Europe as well, was the tendency of the wealthier audience members in the boxes to talk during the performance. This article makes it quite clear that during this performance, such "sundry interruptions" were "resented with something akin to fierceness."<sup>84</sup> This quote, though small, could be evidence of one possible effect that Wagner's operas had on the opera going culture of New York.

Before Wagnerian music drama hit the Met, a night at the opera bared little resemblance to how we think of it today. The rapt attention and respectful silence that we have come to expect from opera audiences was only represented by the patrons who occupied the relatively inexpensive orchestra and balcony seats. These audience members were often Italian or German immigrant-workers. The etiquette displayed by these working-class music lovers stood in stark contrast to that of the wealthier subscribers. During this time period, the upper-class considered it fashionable to be seen at the opera and filled the box seats with endless chatter, even as the piece was being performed. To accommodate the activities of the subscription holders, who were often also investors, it was decided that all opera would be performed with the house lights on. At the Met, this policy was changed for the German language seasons. Wagner's music dramas, including *Tristan und Isolde*, would be produced with the house in total darkness.<sup>85</sup> This Wagnerian innovation must have come as a shock to subscribers who were not aware of the

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<sup>84</sup> "Metropolitan Opera House," *The New York Times*, December 7, 1886.

<sup>85</sup> Dizikes, 243.



composer's stipulation for how his work should be performed. Surprising or not, there is a deeper significance to the adoption of this and other Wagnerian performance practices. They are all indicative of the ascendancy of German immigrant culture through Wagner. Whether it be the dimming of the lights, the holding of applause until the end of an act, or the sunken orchestra pit we can easily see the validity of comparisons to Bayreuth. Siedl, and Damrosch before him, were doing more than introducing New Yorkers to German opera; they were immersing them in the experience of German musical life. These changes impaired the abilities of the box holders to socialize during performances. For many of them, this was more than an irritation; it virtually eliminated their reason for attending the opera in the first place.

It is also possible that the complicated works of Wagner drew an audience that was more inclined to pay close attention and was not pleased by those who would break their concentration. The fact that *Tristan und Isolde*, as well as many of the composer's other music dramas, were being studied as theoretical and philosophical materials in this country long before they were actually heard as music, probably added to the desire to listen carefully. The author of this article actually mentions the debt that both English and American Wagnerites owed to the German writers and critics that helped them understand the significance of the work. He even goes so far as to mention one such writer, Hans von Wolzogen, by name, citing him as the single largest contributor of *Tristan und Isolde* literature to the United States. Wolzogen is perhaps best known as the man who coined the term leitmotif. In 1880, he wrote a companion to *Tristan und Isolde*

in which he listed all of the motives Wagner used and what they represented. An English translation of the book was published in 1902.<sup>86</sup>

This reviewer clearly has a great appreciation of Wagner and his music. He specifically lauds the score of *Tristan und Isolde* as “a marvel of scientific workmanship,” yet even he admits that it is “more remarkable as symphonic music than as lyric drama, more noteworthy as a genial technical accomplishment than as the product of creative power or originality, and better calculated to appeal to the intellect than to the emotions.”<sup>87</sup> It seems that no matter how Wagnerian the critic, the same criticisms still appear. Incidentally, this also true of many of the more popular aspects of the work. For instance, in this review just as in previous American reviews and those from other countries (most notably Britain) the critic mentions the duet in the second act, and Isolde’s death scene as the best music of the opera. Also, just as in similar articles, the talents of the main performers are praised even though it is stated that the orchestra is the “all-important” element of the piece.

One can easily see a trend in the reviews from the first half of December 1882. It seems that the majority of the critics focus more on the opera and its composer than the performance. While most articles do mention the principal leads and the skill of the orchestra, these observations are often secondary to the reviewer’s personal feelings about the validity of Wagner’s work. This can be seen as an understandable reaction given both the folklore surrounding *Tristan und Isolde* and the polarizing nature of Wagner himself. However, as the month continued, reviews of subsequent performances became shorter and significantly less inflammatory. The passionate arguments for and

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<sup>86</sup>

<sup>87</sup> “Metropolitan Opera House,” *The New York Times*, December 7, 1886.

against the composer's innovations began to disappear and the articles began to focus more on the performances and the performers themselves. One such article appeared in the *New York Times* on December 21, 1882. Though much shorter than many earlier reviews, it provides us with a great deal of insight into how the work was actually received by the public. The critic begins by informing us that the previous night's performance drew "the usual large, attentive, and, when the opportunity permitted, enthusiastic audience." This sentence proves that, despite the best efforts of his detractors, Wagner's music drama was well received in New York. The critic goes on to describe how the audience recalled Niemann and Lehmann after the first act and twice after the second. He then tells us that the audience held their applause until the end of each act "as at Bayreuth," proving once more that they knew what was expected of them at a Wagnerian music drama.<sup>88</sup> Once again, we see evidence of Wagner's effect on New York musical culture.

As we have seen, the controversy surrounding the New York premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* can be broken down into two issues: the threat that German opera posed to the Italian style, and the changes in stage practice brought about by Wagnerian music drama. Today, commentaries on these issues from the time seem highly reactionary, even sensational. This observation is particularly true concerning the rivalry between the Italian and German styles. However, there is evidence to suggest that those who feared Wagnerian influence may have had reason to be worried.

We begin our conclusion by examining the perceived danger of German opera overtaking the culturally ingrained Italian equivalent. In a way, their trepidation is

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<sup>88</sup> "Metropolitan Opera House," *The New York Times*, December 21, 1886.

somewhat understandable given Wagner's well-known notions of the role that his "artwork of the future" would come to play in society. This, combined with how radically different his music dramas were from Italian opera was bound to cause some uneasiness. Another reason for the rift between appreciators of the two genres is mentioned by John Dizikes in his book *Opera in America: A Cultural History*. According to Dizikes, the German language seasons at the Met came at the height of the feud between the new opera house and its biggest rival, The Academy of Music. The Academy was the established opera house in New York and built a loyal following by producing Italian and only Italian opera. The success of Damrosch's first German season had the unintended effect of putting the two styles of opera in direct competition with each other.<sup>89</sup>

Regardless of the reasons behind them, history seems to prove that these feelings of dread were legitimate. In 1886, the year of *Tristan's* premiere, the Academy's opera season failed and closed its doors forever. The Met continued to produce exclusively German programs that were unapologetically heavy on Wagner. As Martin Mayer points out in his book, *The Met: One Hundred Years of Grand Opera*, the composer's music dramas made up at least half of every season's performances from the years 1886 to 1890. Many thought that the dominance of German opera would be permanent. Henry T. Finck, echoed the feelings of many New Yorkers when he wrote, "There is no hope for the Italianissimi." However, Finck and those who shared his beliefs were proved wrong in 1891. That year, spurred by the demands of the box holders and emboldened by several years of financial prosperity, the Met announced that it would no longer be

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<sup>89</sup> Dizikes, 242.

presenting German-language opera. For the next four years, only Italian and French would be sung at the Met.<sup>90</sup>

With the 1891 ban on the German language at the Met, the battle for supremacy between Italian and German opera seemed to have been won. The box holders wanted their Italian opera back, and pressured the Met into returning it. But why get rid of the alternative completely? The easy answer is that the influential investors were simply sick of Wagner and his contemporaries. After all, with the Academy of Music gone, the Met was the only major opera house left in New York. This was certainly reason enough to reintroduce the likes of Verdi and Rossini, but did it justify the abandonment of their German counterparts? Financial reasons certainly played a role in the decision. The Met's newfound success provided them with the funds to put on the more expensive Italian masterpieces.<sup>91</sup> However, this move wasn't really necessary. After all, it was the German programs that brought that revenue. There must have been another reason for the ban.

Another likely suspect is how radically different German opera was musically. Was the absence of arias, bending of forms, and symphonic accompaniment simply too much for the box holders to bear? Probably not, considering the long history of success Wagner's music had in the city. Also, the ban on German language opera did not mean a ban on German opera as a whole. Even Wagner's music dramas were produced in Italian with *Die Meistersinger* being performed under the name *I Maestri Cantori*.<sup>92</sup> Clearly the music itself could not be blamed completely.

All of the reasons I have mentioned are plausible, but there is still one factor that has not yet been suggested. I believe that the matter of ethnicity played a large part in the

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<sup>90</sup> Mayer, 63-64.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 72.

backlash against German opera and may have contributed to the ban. It is logical to expect many New Yorkers, especially the upper class, to be weary and even disdainful of the German population. As historian Tyler Anbinder points out in his book, *Five Points*, even before the great migration of 1848, Germans were the second largest ethnic group in New York. Trailing only the Irish in numbers, they were also the largest non-English speaking minority group. Unlike the Irish though, the German immigrants refused to be marginalized by working menial jobs. As Anbinder states, “More than half the Irish were unskilled workers, compared to only one in twenty-five Germans.”<sup>93</sup> These figures must have been unsettling to the more xenophobic members of higher society. Also, as we have already seen, the German immigrants were skilled workers and artisans with a deep desire to spread their culture to native New Yorkers. Perhaps the German language seasons at the Met were the tipping point for a society that felt overwhelmed with German influence. The most likely explanation though, is that there is no single reason, rather a combination of them all.

While the controversy surrounding German opera’s looming takeover of the New York stage was often addressed in the press, one must read between lines to find evidence of our other main issue. The influence of Wagnerian ideas on stage practice in New York may not be directly mentioned, but descriptions of the audience waiting until the ends of acts to applaud and chastising noisy box holders are proof in themselves. Suddenly a night at the opera was an occasion to behold art, not to gossip and show off. While the 1891 ban may have silenced the German language, it could not eliminate the changes that had taken place in the culture. And though these innovations may have been resented by

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<sup>93</sup> Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points*, (New York, The free press, 2001), 113.

some, history suggests that many, including the press, saw them as a great step forward.<sup>94</sup> Today, all operas enjoy the kind of devoted audience that Wagner demanded for his. This, more than anything else, is the enduring legacy of Wagner's music dramas in the United States.

Though many tried to stand in his way, Richard Wagner got the last laugh in New York. After four years of restriction, the German language made its triumphant return to the Met in 1895 with a revival of *Tristan und Isolde*. Once again Walter Damrosch was the producer. Anton Siedl, who had been busy promoting Wagner through his work with the New York Philharmonic and a series of highly successful Coney Island concerts, jumped at the chance to conduct. Just as it was in 1886, the work was well received and cemented German opera's place on the New York stage.<sup>95</sup> The success of this performance proves that *Tristan und Isolde*, like Wagner's legacy, endures. Whether it be as a fine work of art, an instrument of change, or simply as a topic of discussion, it cannot be denied that the music drama left an indelible mark on the city of New York.

## Comparisons and Conclusions

It is easy to see the many similarities between musical life in London in 1882 and New York in 1886. In both cities, opera played a vital role in high society. Our sources show that before the arrival of Richard Wagner's music dramas, music was seldom the main attraction at most opera houses. At least this was true of the wealthy box holders who would spend the evening talking and socializing even as the performers took the stage. As we've seen, Wagner's own ideals of how his operas should be viewed clashed

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<sup>94</sup> Peretti, 31.

<sup>95</sup> Mayer, 72.

with this convention. This clash became one of the principal sources of controversy surrounding the opera in both cities. However, in New York the rude activities of the upper classes were offset and actually discouraged by the presence of a large number music-loving immigrants in the cheaper seats. The situation was different in London, where the ticket prices were far too high to permit such a diverse crowd.

In addition to the similar opera-going cultures, Wagner's detractors in the two cities had many of the same complaints about *Tristan und Isolde*. Anti-Wagnerians on both sides of the pond shared the feeling that the opera lacked memorable melodies and that the composer's musical techniques were no substitute for the traditional forms he was attempting to replace. In New York these feelings manifested themselves in a bitter feud between German opera and its Italian counterpart. This dichotomy was fueled by many social factors as well, including the rivalry between the exclusively German Metropolitan Opera and the exclusively Italian Academy of Music. However, even more important than this historic rivalry was the issue of ethnicity in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Manhattan.

If there is one element that is unique to the New York reception of *Tristan und Isolde*, and Richard Wagner himself, it is the story of the German immigrant. All of the figures who were instrumental in bringing the music drama to the United States including Damrosch and Siedl belonged to this large and influential ethnic group. In the years following the great migration of 1848, Wagner's *Tristan* became a rallying point for the immigrant population who had already been promoting Wagnerianism in the city for decades.



In London, ethnicity played a different role. For Victorian England, the year 1848 did not bring with it an influx of talented, well educated German immigrants, as it did to New York. Rather, it led to a period of increased paranoia about the effects that German art would have on the British ideals of morality and practicality. As a result of this xenophobic attitude, Wagnerianism was spread more subtly through education and the press. Influential critics and educators, most notably Corder, gradually introduced Wagnerian ideas and music into the minds of a new generation of British musicians.

Today, a night at the Metropolitan Opera House always begins the same way. The lights gradually dim until the room is in complete darkness. By the time the first strains of the prelude are emitted from the barely visible orchestra pit the entire audience, regardless of the section they are sitting in, is silent. Most people arrive on time, any talking is quickly hushed, and all socialization is saved for the intermission. Everyone there is assembled for one purpose, to hear the music. It is the same way in Bayreuth. It is the same way in Paris. And although the Royal Theatre at Drury Lane now houses musicals rather than opera, it is the same way there too. Richard Wagner may be as controversial today as ever, but love him or hate, it is impossible to deny his influence.

With *Tristan und Isolde*, Wagner not only changed the way that music is composed, but also the way that it is received. Through the hard work and dedication of his ardent supporters, his philosophies were able to find a new home in the English-speaking world and forever alter our culture. As we have seen, by studying the critical reception of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* we can truly appreciate the impact this progressive work had on the musical evolution of our two cities.

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