

TRISTAN UND ISOLDE
Music and Libretto by Richard Wagner

SYNOPSIS

Act I

The deck of Tristan's ship. Tristan is carrying the Irish princess Isolde to England as a peace prize. She is meant to marry Tristan's uncle, King Marke of Cornwall. Isolde is tormented: Tristan killed her husband Morold in battle and then came back to her in disguise, hoping she would use her healing arts for his wounds. At the moment she recognized him and found a way to kill him, their eyes locked and she fell madly in love. Now she is bitterly resentful; Tristan has ignored her throughout the voyage.

She sends her servant, Brangäne, to command Tristan to appear before her. Tristan refuses. Tristan's squire, Kurwenal, mocks the Irish women with a song in praise of Tristan. Isolde, furious, reminds Brangäne of Morold's death, of Tristan's disguise, of her healing powers, of her old desire for revenge... and of her helpless passion for Tristan. She asks Brangäne to prepare her mother's death potion.

The sailors sight land. Isolde insists she will not accompany Tristan ashore until he apologizes to her. He greets her courteously, saying he had been aloof during the voyage out of respect for another man's wife. She bids him toast to reconciliation, but still reminds him that the murder of Morold has not been avenged.

Knowing she intends to kill them both, he takes the goblet and drinks. Then she drains it ... and they fall into each other's arms. Brangäne has switched the drinks and given them a love-potion. She separates the ecstatic pair just in time for all to disembark.

Act II

Isolde's apartments, opening onto King Marke's palace gardens. Brangäne hears the hunting horns. She is sure that Tristan's enemy Melot has arranged the expedition not to hunt animals ... but to trap Tristan and Isolde themselves. Nevertheless, Isolde urges her to extinguish the torch, giving the signal for Tristan to come. Brangäne warns her again of Melot's treachery. At last Isolde and puts out the torch herself, and sends her servant to stand watch.

Tristan enters. The lovers, enraptured, defy the approach of dawn and the warnings of Brangäne. They welcome night's sweet redeeming oblivion, pledging their love forever, even in death.

Kurwenal rushes in, begging Tristan to save himself. The King's soldiers surround the lovers, still locked in a mad embrace. Tristan helps hide Isolde from view. King Marke is shocked. It was his dearest nephew's idea to bring Marke a bride, and now Tristan has dishonored him.

Tristan makes no defense. He invites Isolde to follow him to the land of night... of death. She accepts. Tristan lets his sword drop and Melot deals Tristan a mighty blow, but doesn't kill him... prevented only by the hand of Marke.

Act III

A ruined castle along the coast of Brittany. Tristan, gravely wounded, is back at his home, Kareol. Kurwenal keeps watch over him. Realizing that only Isolde can save Tristan from death, Kurwenal has sent a ship for her, and now watches over Tristan. A shepherd peers over the wall to ask how Tristan fares, and promises to play his sad tune until he sees a ship approaching.

At the sound of a happier tune, Tristan revives, and asks where he is. Overjoyed, Kurwenal tells him he lies in his own castle. Tristan raves of love and war, imagines he sees Isolde coming towards him. Can Kurwenal not see the approaching ship? he asks.

The shepherd's tune changes again, to a joyous tune. Over the horizon comes the vessel carrying Isolde. Kurwenal goes to bring Isolde ashore. In his frenzy, Tristan rips the bandages from his wound and staggers toward her. No sooner have they uttered each other's names than he dies in her arms.

The shepherd announces the arrival of a second ship, bearing the King and his men. Believing they have come in pursuit of Isolde, Kurwenal and his men attack. He kills Melot to avenge his friend, but is stabbed by the King's men. He dies at Tristan's side.

Brangäne rushes in. She had confessed to giving the potion that made the two fall in love. King Marke has forgiven them, and has only come to give Isolde his blessing.

But Isolde is already far away, lost in contemplation of her dead lover. She sinks upon his corpse in ecstasy, and they are united in death.