

Prelude from "Tristan und Isolde"

Richard Wagner (1813–1883)

Written: 1857–59

Movements: One

Style: Romantic

Duration: Twelve minutes

The legend of Tristan and Isolde—that tale of intense romantic yearning—is probably of Celtic origin, but it was the decidedly Teutonic composer Richard Wagner who re-invented it for the world of opera. He was in the midst of writing his monumental four-opera *The Ring of the Niebelung* when he first read the legend of Tristan. He was also in the midst of an intense relationship with the very-much-married Mathilde Wesendonk. Soon he was taking a sabbatical from *The Ring* and working on a new opera: *Tristan und Isolde*.

It is difficult to encapsulate all of the psychological sub-texts of the opera, but the basic plot is this: Tristan goes on a journey to bring Isolde back to wed his master, King Marke. Of course, Tristan falls in love with Isolde, and somehow the two drink a love potion that was meant for the King and Isolde. Their eyes are opened and, in the words of Wagner's own synopsis,

For the future they only belong to each other. . . . The World, power, fame, splendor, honor, knighthood, fidelity, friendship, all are dissipated like an empty dream. One thing remains: longing, longing, insatiable longing; forever springing up anew, pining and thirsting. Death, which means passing away, perishing, never awakening, is their only deliverance.

The never resolving harmonies of the *Prelude* themselves imply that insatiable longing. In a long, slow crescendo the tension builds to a tremendous climax and then slowly subsides.

Wagner's affair with Mathilde Wesendonk didn't last. She couldn't leave her husband. But Wagner was soon at it again, this time wooing and eventually marrying Cosima von Bülow, the daughter of Franz Liszt and the wife of the man who conducted the premiere of *Tristan und Isolde*. While Cosima was still married to Hans von Bülow, she and Wagner had two daughters. One of them was named *Isolde*.

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Romeo and Juliet, Fantasy Overture after Shakespeare

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)

Written: 1869 (revised in 1870 and 1880)

Movements: One

Style: Romantic

Duration: Nineteen minutes

Mily Balakirev was the leader of a group of amateur composers known as the “Mighty Five” or simply as the “Heap.” Pyotr Il’yich Tchaikovsky wasn’t a member of that group, but that didn’t prevent Balakirev from critiquing one his pieces:

It is not properly gestated, and seems to have been written in a very slapdash manner.

The seams show, as does all your clumsy stitching. Above all, the form itself just does not work. The whole thing is completely uncoordinated. . .

Balakirev then took it upon himself to mentor Tchaikovsky, encouraging him to write an orchestral piece based on Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and modeled after his own work based on *King Lear*. Balakirev suggested the form and even provided a few melodic themes.

When Tchaikovsky presented him with his *Romeo and Juliet*, Balakirev was full of suggestions:

The first theme is not at all to my taste. Perhaps when it's worked out it achieves some degree of beauty, but when written out unadorned in the way you've sent it to me, it conveys neither beauty nor strength, and doesn't even depict the character of Friar Laurence in the way required. . . . The first D-flat theme is very beautiful, though a bit overripe, but the second D-flat tune is simply delightful. I play it often. . . . There's just one thing I'll say against this theme; there's little in it of inner, spiritual love, and only a passionate physical languor. . .

Tchaikovsky did revise the work, supplying a different opening theme to represent the friar. It met with great success and stands as Tchaikovsky’s first masterpiece. Ten years later,

Tchaikovsky revised the work again. That is the version that audiences know and love.

Romeo and Juliet begins with a solemn introduction: Friar Laurence intoning his forebodings. The body of the work begins with an angry and pointed theme representing the tension between the Montagues and the Capulets. The second theme is the love theme of Romeo. It leads to a gently-rocking theme representing Juliet. After a short development, Tchaikovsky brings back all three themes. This time, the warring first theme engulfs the love themes. The piece ends with a tender statement of the love theme and then tragic, final orchestral chords.

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Mass in C minor, K. 427 (417a)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)

Written: 1783

Movements: Twelve

Style: Classical

Duration: 60 minutes

Free at last! Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart had finally made the break from the stultifying atmosphere of his hometown Salzburg. Even more importantly, he was free from the suffocating control of his father, Leopold. Now he was in Vienna, the most important musical city in Europe, and actually making a go of it. He was happily married to Constanze Weber, and the couple was expecting their first child.

Not all was well. The father was refusing to let go, and demanding that Wolfgang return to Salzburg for a visit. Mozart promised his father that he would make the journey, but he always had a good excuse for not fulfilling it. In a letter dated January 3, 1783, Mozart tried to explain why he had not kept his promise. He also made first mention of the *Mass in C minor* on tonight's program:

It is quite true about my moral obligation and indeed I let the word flow from my pen on purpose. I made the promise in my heart of hearts and hope to be able to keep it. . . .

The score of half of a mass which is still lying here waiting to be finished, is the best proof that I really made the promise.

Mozart and Constanze finally made it to Salzburg and spent three months with his father and sister. Just a few days before they left for Vienna, the still uncompleted *Mass* received its premiere in St. Peter's Church. Constanza sang the soprano solos. In order to present a complete work at the premiere, Mozart apparently filled in the uncompleted sections with movements from earlier works. But he never completed the *Mass*. In the several attempts

at somehow constructing or reconstructing the *Mass*, others have themselves substituted movements from other works by Mozart or actually continued composing in his style where his manuscript ends. Tonight's performance uses an edition made in the 1950s by H. C. Robbins Landon that uses just Mozart's original *Mass in C minor*. The *Kyrie* and *Gloria* are complete, but a significant portion of the *Credo* was never finished. It simply ends nearly halfway through the traditional prayer, after "*And was made incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary and was made man.*" Mozart did not write an *Agnus Dei*.

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