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## [Keeping the Magic Without the Thunder](#)

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David Lang first heard Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde" at the San Francisco Opera in 1974, as an undergraduate student and aspiring composer. This was the first opera ticket — standing room — that he had paid for with his own money, and he arrived well prepared, with a copy of the score and a flashlight to study it by.



"It was a really big deal for me," Mr. Lang said recently, sitting on a sofa in his light-flooded SoHo loft while two parakeets called noisily for attention from another room. "People love 'Tristan' because the story is so great and the music so lush. But composers love it because the relationship of Tristan and Isolde shows us that everything we have known about harmony up until Wagner's time is inadequate for expressing that kind of longing and that kind of intertwining. It's the complete matching of storytelling on a large scale and on the microscopic scale of how two notes relate to each other."

Today Mr. Lang is a fixture on the new-music scene and one of its most prolific and most decorated composers. As a founder of the Bang on a Can composers' collective he has championed and written works that inhabit the border zone between classical music and rock. His chilling oratorio "the little match girl passion" won him the Pulitzer Prize for music in 2008; next year the French government will make him a Chevalier of arts and letters. On Wednesday, Carnegie Hall announced that he is to be its composer in residence for the 2013-14 season.

Mr. Lang still has the "Tristan" score with his ticket stapled in it. His latest vocal work, "love fail," which the early-music vocal quartet Anonymous 4 will present at the Brooklyn Academy of Music beginning on Thursday, is a distillation of the Tristan myth that draws on medieval manuscripts and the contemporary microfiction of Lydia Davis, on the liturgy of the Jewish High Holy Days and, inevitably, on Wagner.

There are no overt traces of Wagner's influence in Mr. Lang's music, in which he studiously avoids anything that could be interpreted as a big gesture. His texts and titles are written in lowercase letters. His music is sparse, quiet and filled with silences.

"I like the idea of making things as direct as possible," Mr. Lang said. "My music never has anything in it that says: 'This moment is really gorgeous. Let's luxuriate in it.' The thing that I'm interested in is the architectural line and how things change over time. Excitement is not the most important thing to me, and neither is beauty."

And yet the resultant music is deeply affecting and commands the listener's attention. In "the little match girl passion" Mr. Lang retells the Hans Christian Andersen tale about a street urchin who freezes to death on a sidewalk as a secular passion play with haunting close harmonies that demand an uncompromisingly pure style of singing from the performers. For "death speaks," which Mr. Lang presented at Zankel Hall in January with a cast of performers partly borrowed from rock bands, he mined Schubert's lieder for instances in which death appears.

"One of the things that music can do is give us the opportunity to concentrate on things that we would normally want to avoid," Mr. Lang said, like "suffering and death." In "love fail" he forces a closer look at the limits of love.

The idea for a reworking of the Tristan myth came to him when the female a cappella ensemble Anonymous 4 approached him for a commission. "What they do so well is sing music by people who have been dead for one thousand years," Mr. Lang said. "So I thought about how interesting it might be to do a piece that would be a confrontation of their world with that of modern people."

As he studied multiple versions of the Tristan story by medieval authors including Gottfried of Strasbourg, Béroul, Marie de France and Thomas of Britain, Mr. Lang said, he was struck by the details that distinguished each one. He began by filtering out the elements they agreed on — dragons, love potions, sorcery and adultery — and took out any references that rooted the story in a specific time. Eventually he even did away with the names of the characters, so that there would only be "he" and "she." ("I'm used to writing my own text," Mr. Lang said, "because that way I can fire my librettist at a moment's notice.") He also inserted miniature short stories by Ms. Davis, a MacArthur award-winning writer known both for her translation of Proust's "Swann's Way" and for "short short" stories, often about relationships, told in a mere handful of sentences.

Thus distilled, the Tristan story loses its narrative drive and takes up residence in a timeless space that nevertheless suggests the possibility of magic. One detail that fascinated Mr. Lang is tucked inside a 13th-century retelling by Marie de France, who describes Tristan carving his name on a stick and leaving it on the road for Isolde to find.

“When she goes down this road and sees this one word, his name, the story says, she knows exactly what he meant from it, and it’s hundreds and hundreds of words,” Mr. Lang said. “It’s famous among Tristan scholars, because it’s just impossible. But it’s this really beautiful way lovers communicate. If I give you a tiny little gesture, you are able to interpret it because we are on such a similar wavelength.”

Another idiosyncratic episode, which appears only in the version by Thomas of Britain, led Mr. Lang to weave words from the Jewish Yom Kippur liturgy into the text. In that episode Isolde sets sail to join the injured Tristan, to fulfill a prophecy that predicted their joint death. A storm comes up, and Isolde is at first dumbstruck by the thought that she might die now, apart from Tristan. Eventually she takes comfort in the thought that if she drowns, Tristan too will have to drown.

“I loved this idea that their fate is so completely intertwined that if one thing happens to the one, it happens to the other,” Mr. Lang said. “Part of the ritual between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur involves reciting all the ways that people can die and that are written in the Book of Life. God is going to determine who is going to die by water, who is going to die by fire and who by sword. I took what Isolde says — if I have to drown, he has to drown — and extended it as liturgy.”

The Tristan tale ultimately interests Mr. Lang on a personal level, he said, not a historical one. The text-message-like brevity of his title, “love fail,” is designed to express the blunt truth of love’s own mortality. He does not subscribe to the concept of “love as a spirit freely floating through the world,” which might exist independently of a specific human being, he said. Nor does he buy into interpretations of the Tristan story that see love triumphing in the cathartic conflagration of Isolde’s Liebestod.

“We like to think of ‘Tristan and Isolde’ as the classic tragic love story, but my story is just as tragic,” he said. “My relationship with my wife and with my kids is as great a love as I can muster as a flawed human being, and it will end. So the thing that makes love precious for all of us, not just for fairy-tale creatures and mythical opera heroes, is that my love is just as meaningful and just as exalted and just as doomed.”

Mr. Lang’s wife, Suzanne Bocanegra, is a visual and performance artist who designed the costumes for “love fail.” The performances will be further enhanced with sets and video projections by Jim Findlay and the lighting design by Jennifer Tipton that will be manipulated in real time during the concert.

The tensions of the text are built into the music, said Jacqueline Horner-Kwiatek, a soprano and member of Anonymous 4.

“There’s a lot of crunchiness, a lot of second intervals, which then resolve,” she added. “There’s lots of intertwining of the vocal lines as we weave in and around each other. I wouldn’t call it word painting, but it’s definitely emotional painting.”

In that sense Mr. Lang's score carries the imprint of Wagner.

“ ‘Tristan und Isolde’ is a high-water mark of what a composer can do,” Mr. Lang said, “a piece of music which ties together all of its levels perfectly. And that’s what we composers are hoping for. You put together two notes, and you hope that it’s not casual, as in, ‘These two notes will do, but any other two would also do.’ These notes represent this fight and this struggle and this eternal truth. And that’s what makes us feel like composition is a noble pursuit.”