

“What Music expresses is eternal, infinite, and ideal. Music expresses not the passion, love, desire, of this or that individual in this or that condition, but Passion, Love, Desire itself.”

—Richard Wagner

The Ecstasy of Tristan and Isolde

FRANZ WELSER-MÖST discusses Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, and the ideas of ecstasy and transcendence that he explores with the opera and as part of a concert series April 21-29



Q&A

Q: Tell us about *Tristan and Isolde*.

Franz: Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* is, without any question, one of the most important musical milestones in history. And for many different reasons, musically and even philosophically. At one and the same time, it represents the ultimate high point of musical Romanticism and the launch of modern music. In this score, Wagner broke apart the harmonic tonal system to reveal something new. With this opera, Wagner unleashed music from the past and announced the start of our

modern world.

I have long wanted to program this opera with The Cleveland Orchestra — to have the right singers and the right season to include this extraordinary work. With the remarkable soprano Nina Stemme, who we hosted several years ago here at Severance Hall and at Carnegie Hall as Salome, we have the world's greatest living Isolde.

Fundamentally, for the orchestra and for the Cleveland audience, I believe that part of being a great orchestra includes playing and experiencing certain pieces. *Tristan and Isolde* is one of these. The experience of performing it — and of hearing it as an audience member — changes your understanding of what music can be. It is perfect for the Orchestra's Centennial season, as we explore how music literally

makes history and at the same time leaves the past behind, taking us into the future.

Let me add to this the fact that *Tristan and Isolde* is very challenging and difficult to perform. The original production in Munich in 1865 had 142 rehearsals, just to learn this music and get it right. It is a demanding work, but also very rewarding. Audiences will come away having truly experienced a pinnacle in music — almost like climbing Mount Everest in sound. It is breathtaking, perhaps literally, in the “high” feeling, the magnificent feelings that it offers.

Q: *Isn't this opera just a story of star-crossed lovers, who both die in the end?*

Franz: Many operas end in death and tragedy. That doesn't mean they aren't inspiring and filled with insight and understanding. Great works help us understand what it means to be human, to feel, to learn, to grow. Wagner's genius in *Tristan and Isolde* is in creating a musical language of desire, of unending longing. The music does not rest, the harmonic key does not find resolution. Even at the very end, when the opera stops, the music is still unfinished harmonically — continuing on forever. It is thrilling to experience.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said that Wagner's music is like a drug. And he was right. The characters want more, you want more. And you hold on for every phrase, looking for resolution. In a way, Wagner portrays an emotional addiction, a desire that cannot be satisfied except through understanding. In the opera, love is caused by a special or magic potion. But it is really just something that allows two people to admit their feelings,

their attraction for one another. And it is much more than physical, it is a mental state of being whole — of ecstasy and transcendence, of finding meaning and understanding in life.

Q: *You described the “ecstasy” in this opera. How did you expand that idea to create a festival with additional concerts?*

Franz: *Tristan and Isolde*, as I have said, is an ecstatic piece. In the ending, in Isolde's “Love-Death” or *Liebestod*, this woman transcends her own existence, and finds a deep understanding, of love and life, in death. For some people, ecstasy may be easier to understand through the word “transcendence.” Both words have meanings beyond the usual — of “being outside yourself” in ecstasy, or of becoming “more than” or transcending “beyond” the



normal. In planning the season, and with *Tristan and Isolde* already on the calendar, I kept coming back to this idea.

I became excited at thinking about how much other music there is that touches around these ideas, of religious ecstasy, becoming one with god, of personal ecstasy, of being enlightened, of meditation and centering oneself inside. I think for many people, musical performances are often a channel to understanding and transcendence, of being more than yourself and at peace. And so I worked to develop a festival around the opera.

Think back to some of the great music, the great performances you have experienced, and that moment at the end, when there is silence, not even breathing, as the audience and the musicians think not about themselves but simply take in what has been witnessed and shared. That is transcendence — in leaving or forgetting the place where you are physically, for a moment, and of being part of something greater. Ecstasy — whether it is spiritual, or physical, or musical — is

“ The legend of Tristan and Isolde is the symbol of all great loves and for all the great love poems in literature or in music. . . . It transcends even the limitations of the mind, and grows to a cosmic scale. ”

—Olivier Messiaen

the experience of letting go and uniting together all at that same time. This is what we are exploring in these musical performances in April. I believe it will be an unforgettable experience to hear these works, separately and together.

Adding to *Tristan and Isolde*, which opens the festival, we have a performance of Olivier Messiaen's *Turangalila-Symphonie* from 1949. This is all about ec-

static love, even physical love, and directly touches on and re-examines the story of Tristan and Isolde, but in a very different kind of musical language. It is “new age” or modern, mixing instruments and sounds from different times and cultures, with many percussionists and solo piano and the ondes martenot, an early electronic instrument. Much of this music is hypnotic, and it is pre-minimalist and mesmerizing. There is a slow movement, which portrays Tristan and Isolde's love as a garden of delight and ecstatic, calming embrace, and in a different movement Messiaen portrays stars dancing in the celestial heavens.

The second concert centers on religious or spiritual ecstasy, and perhaps touching toward mysticism. Here we are featuring, of course, some music by Bach, and music by an earlier composer, Giovanni Gabrieli. But also more modern works, including Arvo Pärt's *Magnificat*. And a piece of organ music by Franz Liszt, who was so often trying new things and working to expand the language of music.

For this *Divine Ecstasy* concert in particular, we explore music written specifically around religious ecstasy, of music that was written to extend and amplify spiritual or meditative feelings — of music as a means to lose yourself, and to find your way. □

The ECSTASY of TRISTAN AND ISOLDE



This unique Festival April 21-29 features in-concert performances of Richard Wagner's opera **Tristan and Isolde** (April 21, 26, and 29), along with Olivier Messiaen's **Turangalila Symphonie** (April 25), and a program titled **Divine Ecstasy** (April 28), plus a showing of the 2011 film **Melancholia** (April 22) at Cleveland Cinematheque.