

# THE ECSTASY OF TRISTAN AND ISOLDE

In *Tristan and Isolde* the 19th century's Romantic era reached its climax. Here, Wagner wrote powerful music of unending longing (and unresolved harmony) — of a doomed love that reaches its full potential only through death. Renowned dramatic soprano Nina Stemme returns to Cleveland to join a cast of internationally acclaimed singers, together with the clarity and power of The Cleveland Orchestra.

“If Beethoven marks the start of the musical Romantic era, which is surely true, there can also be no arguing that Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* represents the ultimate high point of that same Romanticism. In this score, Wagner broke apart the harmonic tonal system to create a sense of longing, a search for rest and peace and home, for the ultimate fulfillment of love. With this opera, in so many ways, Wagner unleashed music from the past and announced the start of our modern world.”

— FRANZ WELSER-MÖST

## Franz Welser-Möst talks about *Tristan and Isolde*, and about finding meaning beyond everyday experience . . .



**Q:** Why is the opera *Tristan and Isolde* so famous?

**Franz:** Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* is 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.

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 and takes us into the future.

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, in the magnificent feelings that it offers.

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

**Franz:** Many operas end in death and tragedy. The great works provide insight into what it means to be human, to feel and learn and 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. 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. And it is much more than physical, it is a mental state of coming together — of ecstasy and transcendence, of finding meaning and understanding in life.

**Q:** Can you talk about how you took the idea of ecstasy and created a festival?

**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 coming to understanding and enlightenment. 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 this idea.

Adding to *Tristan and Isolde*, which opens the festival, we have a performance of Olivier Messiaen's *Turangallila-Symphonie* from 1949. This is about ecstatic 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 like "new age" music, mixing instruments and sounds from different times and cultures, with many percussionists and solo piano and an early electronic instrument. This music is hypnotic, pre-minimalist, and mesmerizing. There is a slow movement which portrays *Tristan and Isolde's* love as a garden of delight, as a place of ecstatically calming and energizing embrace. In a different movement, Messiaen portrays stars dancing in the celestial heavens. Throughout all of it, Messiaen was creating a musical celebration of love and life.

The other concert centers on religious or spiritual ecstasy. Here we are featuring, of course, some music by Bach, and by an earlier composer, Giovanni Gabrieli. And also more modern works, including Arvo Pärt's *Magnificat*. And organ music by Franz Liszt, who studied to be a priest, and became a composer and great concert pianist — and who loved women passionately. I think he was really someone who burned the candle of life at both ends. He was so often trying new things and working to expand the language of music. For this concert in particular, we explore music written specifically around religious ecstasy, of music that was created 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

A two-week festival featuring Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*.  
**APRIL 21-29**

## TRISTAN AND ISOLDE OPERA IN CONCERT

**APR 21** | SAT 6:00 p.m.

**APR 26** | THU 6:00 p.m.

**APR 29** | SUN 3:00 p.m.

Franz Welser-Möst, *conductor*

Gerhard Siegel, *tenor (Tristan)*

Nina Stemme, *soprano (Isolde)*

Okka von der Damerau,

*mezzo-soprano (Brangäne)*

Ain Anger, *bass (König Marke)*

Alan Held, *bass-baritone (Kurwenal)*

Sean Michael Plumb, *baritone (Melot)*

Matthew Plenk, *tenor*

*(Young Sailor and Shepherd)*

Men of the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus

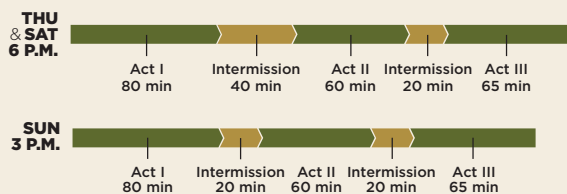
**WAGNER** *Tristan and Isolde* (Opera in concert)

*Sung in German, with English supertitles*

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*Sponsor:* **Jones Day**

### PERFORMANCE AND INTERMISSION SCHEDULES:



*Light food options will be available from bars in Smith Lobby on the street level, in the Grand Foyer, Box Level, and Dress Circle Lobby.*

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## FESTIVAL PROGRAMS

In a special two-week series of concerts revolving around performances of Wagner's ultra-Romantic opera *Tristan and Isolde*, Franz Welser-Möst explores the depths and wonder of ecstasy in a journey toward transcendence and understanding, through music, art, and belief.

## TURANGALÎLA

**APR 25** | WED at 7:30 p.m.

Franz Welser-Möst, *conductor*

Jean-Yves Thibaudet, *piano*

Cynthia Millar, *ondes martenot*

**MESSIAEN** Turangalîla-Symphonie  
(for piano, ondes martenot, orchestra)

*Sponsor:* **Squire Patton Boggs (US) LLP**  
Cleveland's Own Series

## DIVINE ECSTASY

**APR 28** | SAT 8:00 p.m.

Franz Welser-Möst, *conductor*

Vinay Parameswaran, *conductor*

Lisa Wong, *conductor*

Iestyn Davies, *countertenor*

Paul Jacobs, *organ*

Cleveland Orchestra Chorus

**GABRIELI** Canzon per Sonar Septimi Toni no. 2

**GABRIELI** Canzon per Sonar in Echo Duodecimi

**PÄRT** Magnificat

**GABRIELI** O Magnum Mysterium

**KERNIS** "I Cannot Dance, O Lord"

*from Ecstatic Meditations*

**GABRIELI** Omnes gentes plaudite manibus

**BACH** Cantata No. 170 ("Vergnügte Ruh",  
beliebte Seelenlust")

**LISZT** Fantasy and Fugue on the chorale  
"Ad nos, ad salutarem undam" (for solo organ)

## SPECIAL FILM PRESENTATION

## MELANCHOLIA

**APR 22** | SUN 6:30 p.m.

The Cleveland Institute of Art Cinematheque

For more information, go to: [cia.edu/cinematheque](http://cia.edu/cinematheque)

## LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

## CONCERT PREVIEWS

**APR 17** | 10 a.m. Cleveland Hts. — University Hts. Library

**APR 17** | 1:15 p.m. Beachwood Branch of C.C. Public Library

**APR 18** | 1:15 p.m. Fairview Pk. Branch of C.C. Public Library

**APR 19** | 1:15 p.m. Orange Branch of C.C. Public Library

Learn about the history of *Tristan and Isolde*, discuss the life of Richard Wagner, and be guided through musical listening examples with Dr. Rose Breckenridge. **Free!**

Offered as part of The Cleveland Orchestra Music Study Group program.  
For more information, go to: [clevelandorchestra.com/operapreview](http://clevelandorchestra.com/operapreview)