

Pappano Conducts Wagner's Tristan und Isolde

Wednesday, July 1, 2026 · 17:00 · Barbican

Antonio Pappano, conductor · Clay Hilley, Tristan · Sara Jakubiak, Isolde ·
Marina Prudenskaya, Brangäne · Franz-Josef Selig, King Marke · Gyula
Orendt, Kurwenal · Neal Cooper, Melot · Michael Gibson, Sailor / Shepherd ·
James Emerson, Steersman · London Symphony Chorus, choir

approximately 230 minutes

Richard Wagner

1813–1883

230 minutes

Tristan und Isolde (complete opera, concert performance)

THE COMPOSER

Richard Wagner transformed opera more radically than any composer before or since. Born in Leipzig in 1813, he grew up in a family steeped in theater and from an early age was drawn to the dramatic rather than the purely musical. Apart from a spell of lessons with the Leipzig cantor Theodor Weinlig, he was largely self-directed as a composer, absorbing Shakespeare, Goethe, and Schiller alongside Beethoven, developing a vision of opera as *Gesamtkunstwerk*: a “total work of art” synthesizing poetry, drama, music, and visual spectacle.

Wagner’s path was turbulent. An active participant in the 1849 Dresden uprising, he spent years in political exile, fleeing creditors and nursing turbulent love affairs. Yet his genius attracted patrons, most notably the eccentric King Ludwig II of Bavaria, whose financial support made possible Wagner’s ultimate achievement: the construction of the Festspielhaus at Bayreuth, a theater designed specifically for his works. There, in 1876, his monumental four-opera cycle *The Ring of the Nibelung* received its first complete performance.

Wagner’s musical innovations (the seamless orchestral flow, the system of *leitmotifs* or recurring themes associated with characters, objects, or ideas, and the extreme chromaticism that strained the boundaries of tonality) influenced virtually every composer who followed, from Strauss and Mahler to Schoenberg and beyond.

ABOUT THE WORK

Tristan und Isolde is one of the most influential and overwhelming works in all of music: the opera with which Wagner pushed harmony to the brink of dissolution and changed the course of Western music.

He composed it between 1857 and 1859, interrupting work on his great Ring cycle, while immersed in the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer and consumed by his passion for Mathilde Wesendonck, the wife of a patron. Out of that crucible came a work that is less a conventional opera than a vast, four-hour meditation on love, longing and death, on the idea that the union the lovers crave is impossible in the daylight world and can only be consummated in night, oblivion and death.

Musically, it begins with the most famous chord in history. The very first bars sound the ‘Tristan chord’, a dissonance that yearns to resolve but refuses to, launching a flood of chromatic harmony that hangs suspended, unresolved, across the entire opera until the final moments. This ‘unending melody,’ this deferral of resolution, is the sound of desire itself, and its influence on later composers (Mahler, Debussy, Schoenberg and the whole of modern music) was incalculable. The opera was so demanding that it was at first declared unperformable; it finally reached the stage in Munich in 1865 under Hans von Bülow (whose own wife, Cosima, was by then Wagner’s lover: life imitating art).

The story is simple: the knight Tristan escorts the Irish princess Isolde to marry his uncle, King Marke; the two unwittingly drink a love potion and are consumed by an irresistible passion; their secret love is betrayed and discovered; Tristan is mortally wounded and dies in delirium as Isolde rushes to him; and Isolde, in the closing ‘Liebestod’ (Love-Death), sings herself into a final transfiguration, dying to join him. Tonight Sir Antonio Pappano, one of the great opera conductors of our time, leads the London Symphony Orchestra and a stellar cast in a complete concert performance.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen, at the very start, for the Prelude and its famous unresolved chord, the seed of everything that follows, establishing the mood of aching, unfulfilled longing that the whole opera sustains. Throughout, notice how Wagner’s orchestra is not mere accompaniment but the true voice of the drama, carrying the surging, endlessly modulating harmony that mirrors the lovers’ desire.

Act I (aboard the ship to Cornwall) builds from Isolde’s furious humiliation to the shattering moment when she and Tristan drink the potion. Listen for the orchestra erupting as the music of death turns suddenly into the music of overwhelming love.

Act II is the great central love scene: a long nocturnal duet (‘O

sink hernieder,' the hymn to night), interrupted by the hunting horns of the returning king and the lovers' discovery. Listen for King Marke's long, grief-stricken monologue, music of profound human sorrow. **Act III** finds the wounded Tristan in delirium, his feverish visions among the opera's most extraordinary music, before Isolde arrives too late. Then comes the **Liebestod**: listen for the way the great surging theme from the Act II duet returns and finally, after four hours of yearning, achieves its resolution, the lovers united in death as the music at last comes home to rest. It is one of the supreme moments in all of opera.

In a concert performance like this, with surtitles, the orchestra is fully visible and central, a chance to hear, in the playing of a great symphony orchestra under a master conductor, the full glory of Wagner's revolutionary score.

Tonight's artists

Clay Hilley *Tristan*

Tristan is one of the most punishing roles ever written for the tenor voice, especially Act III, an extended scene of feverish delirium that can last close to an hour and has defeated many great singers. It demands a true heldentenor of stamina and heft, and Clay Hilley, a Bayreuth Tristan and one of the few genuine Wagner heroic tenors active today, is ideally equipped for its extraordinary vocal and dramatic demands.

Clay Hilley is an American heldentenor, one of the very small number of singers worldwide capable of the heroic Wagner tenor roles. From Statham, Georgia, he trained at the University of Georgia, Georgia State University, the Manhattan School of Music and Boston University's Opera Institute, and had his international breakthrough at the Bayreuth Festival in 2022, stepping in as Siegfried in *Götterdämmerung* with a single day's notice; he returned to Bayreuth as Tristan in 2023. He won the Richard Tucker Award in 2024 and has become one of the most sought-after Wagner and Strauss tenors of his generation.

Sara Jakubiak *Isolde*

Isolde is one of the supreme challenges for the dramatic soprano, from the furious pride of Act I through the rapturous love music of Act II to the transfiguring ‘Liebestod’ that crowns the entire opera. It asks for power, stamina and radiant beauty of tone across a four-hour span. Sara Jakubiak, admired for the warmth and beauty of her dramatic soprano, takes on one of opera’s Everest roles.

Sara Jakubiak is an American soprano from Bay City, Michigan, who trained at Yale and the Cleveland Institute of Music. After making her name in Europe as Marie in Wozzeck at English National Opera and in the ensemble of Frankfurt Opera, she built an international career in a dramatic repertoire including Chrysothemis (Elektra), Ariadne, the title role of Korngold’s Das Wunder der Heliane, and Tatyana (Eugene Onegin). Praised for the warm, beautiful colour of her dramatic soprano, she brings warmth and dramatic intensity to the great Strauss and Wagner roles.

Marina Prudenskaya *Brangäne*

Brangäne, Isolde’s devoted confidante (and the one who, fatefully, substitutes the love potion for the death potion), has some of the opera’s most beautiful music, above all her offstage ‘Watch’ in Act II, warning the lovers as dawn approaches, floating over the orchestra. Marina Prudenskaya brings her rich dramatic mezzo to this pivotal role.

Marina Prudenskaya is a Russian mezzo-soprano who trained in St Petersburg and has been a member of the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin since 2013. A winner of the ARD Competition, her repertoire spans the dramatic mezzo roles of Wagner and Strauss and the great Verdi parts (Amneris, Eboli). She is a noted Brangäne, Fricka and Eboli on the international stage.

Franz-Josef Selig *King Marke*

King Marke, the betrayed uncle whose long Act II monologue of grief and bewilderment is one of the most moving passages in the opera, needs a bass of nobility and pathos rather than villainy. Franz-Josef Selig, perhaps the leading Marke of his generation, brings exactly the gravity and humanity the role demands.

Franz-Josef Selig, born in Mayen in 1962, is one of the most distinguished German basses of his generation, celebrated above all in the noble Wagner bass roles (King Marke in *Tristan und Isolde* and Gurnemanz in *Parsifal* foremost among them) as well as Sarastro, Rocco and Fiesco. Trained in Cologne, he has sung at the world's leading houses and festivals, prized for the warmth, depth and dignity of his voice.

Gyula Orendt *Kurwenal*

Kurwenal, Tristan's loyal retainer, is the faithful companion who tends the dying hero through the long agony of Act III. The role asks for a strong, warm baritone and real dramatic commitment, both of which Gyula Orendt brings.

Gyula Orendt is a Hungarian-Romanian baritone, born in Transylvania and trained in Braşov and at the Liszt Academy in Budapest. He began his career at the Vienna Volksoper and the Berlin State Opera's opera studio, becoming an ensemble member there, and has built an international career in Mozart, baroque and contemporary repertoire, admired for his warm tone and vivid stage presence.

Neal Cooper *Melot*

Melot, the courtier who betrays the lovers to King Marke and wounds Tristan, is a smaller but dramatically crucial role, sung here by tenor Neal Cooper.

Michael Gibson *Sailor / Shepherd*

The Young Sailor whose offstage song opens the opera, and the Shepherd whose plaintive pipe-tune haunts Act III, are sung here by Michael Gibson: small roles that frame the drama.

James Emerson *Steersman*

The Steersman is a brief but characterful role in Act I, taken here by James Emerson.

London Symphony Chorus *choir*

Tristan und Isolde uses its male chorus sparingly, above all for the sailors in Act I, but tellingly. The London Symphony Chorus, the orchestra's long-standing partner chorus, supplies these voices.

The London Symphony Chorus was founded in 1966 as the chorus of the London Symphony Orchestra. Now an independent, self-governing choir, it keeps a close association with the LSO, performing and recording the great choral-orchestral repertoire with the orchestra at the Barbican and elsewhere, and also working with other orchestras.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Richard Wagner: The Sorcerer of Bayreuth**

Barry Millington, Oxford University Press 2012

A readable, illustrated life of Wagner that tells the story of Tristan und Isolde's composition and its link to his love for Mathilde Wesendonck.

ACCESSIBLE **The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy**

Bryan Magee, Owl Books 2002

A clear account of Wagner's thought, with a central discussion of how Schopenhauer's philosophy shaped Tristan und Isolde.

DEEPER **Death-Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's Tristan und Isolde**

Roger Scruton, Oxford University Press 2012

A book-length study of Tristan und Isolde, reading the opera's love and death through philosophy and religion.

SOURCES

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Richard Wagner ·Tristan und Isolde (complete opera, concert performance)

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